NEW VERSE REVIEW

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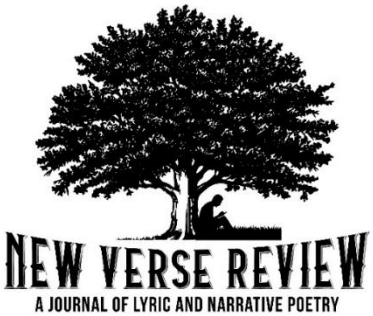

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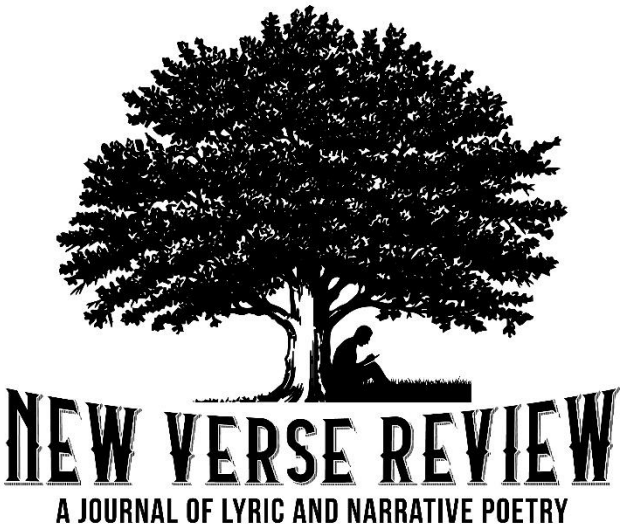
New Verse Review: A Journal of Lyric and Narrative Poetry features work that renews the ancient affinities among poetry, song, and story.



New Verse Review 2.3

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Summer 2025

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Amit Majmudar

The Only Holy War

Oh what a glorious war we waged on time,
you in your peacock pleats and jasmine braid
and ankle bells portraying a warrior goddess,
me at my laptop redeploying rhyme
like roving arrows on a map of fate.
We fought our Passchendaele, entrenched in bodies,
my dugout deep in yours. We woke up, ate,
went on our morning walks, we made love, played
old board games, ditched our iPhones, stormed the beachhead,
kamikazed straight into the sun
while knowing we would likely never reach it,
while knowing no Great War was ever won,
each night, each decade together one more mission
prolonging this timeline, this lifegiving war of attrition.

The Great American Novel

Bataan Death March in off-rhymed terza rima, as a nod
to Dante, linebreaks taken out to hide the feat in prose.
Sidebar on dysentery's role in war. A catalogue
of sexual fantasies aboard the USS *Juneau*.

The first of five Morehead brothers arrives in Chapter 9:
As Orrin swabs the deck, he has a flashback (Ashland) in
a flashback (Caldwell County, graduation year). But then
cut to Osaka, 1910: Hiroshi baits his line....

Okay, but what's the takeaway?
Tighten the story. Shrink the cast.
The era of Madcap Fantastic Abundance has passed.

Lobotomized to MFA,
its wanderlust and wonder banished,
it won a Pulitzer and vanished.

A.Z. Foreman

Arma Virumque

My bones were a Yamnayan's prize in battle.
He wore my metatarsals round his neck.
A Saxon gored my eyes and took my cattle.
My heart was chopped out of a Tlaxcaltec.
Bartatua glugged my blood out of a bowl.
Others just took my corpse and cooked it whole.
I was a helot at Thermopylae.
I was a bowman on Megiddo's wall.
I was a *wichasha* at Wounded Knee.
I died at the Alamo and Azovstal.
I fell with Masada and Tenochtitlan.
My vomit stains the beard of Genghis Khan.
I fell in war's incessant muzacked shriek
six and six hundred and six thousand years
ago, in desert, jungle, trench and creek,
to phosgene gas and slingrock, gagged on spears
of steppeland horsemen hunting deathless fame
and lost my molecules to drone-shot flame.
Katana, crossbow, mace and M16
pestled a billion bodies that I wore.
My widowed wives were raped in Busanjin.
My captains shot me on Corregidor.
This species' kleat has kicked into my bone
a hideous virtue. Heroes can't atone.
Armadas flagged with destiny have beached
my death in Carthage and the Yucatán
where they watched sunset glorious, on bleached
bones, as a song of weapons and a man
while I looked upon sworded history
through rotting eyes of hominid debris.
I watched tribes whirled to nations into states,
bartering blood for flags that gently lied,
saw death industrialize itself with hates
that clanked efficiently to genocide.
From Wormhout to the shores of Tripoli,

morale is stronger than morality.
My mothers' wombing anguish cannot chill
the burning gloat of peace. Man's habit is
to launch the Bandeirantes through Brazil
and citify my beetled carcasses.
Do not insult me with apology.
I only tell you to remember me.
I am the vanquished soldier. I recall
how bills of human rights are paid in wrongs.
I am the carvings on the stomach wall
of sane men sick at patriotic songs.
My unlaid ghost will devil till the sun
falls on the final war and I have won.

Daniel Galef

Fabergé to Nicholas

The last completed Fabergé Egg was delivered during the Revolution to an empty palace. Unsure how to address an ex-sovereign, instead of "Tsar of All the Russians" the jeweller Fabergé addressed the bill simply to "Mr. Romanov."

Dear
Mr. Romanov
(I can't say "Tsar"),
Please find, enclosed, your Egg—
invoice attached. I hope this last creation
is well-matched to add to your collection.
Every star is a cut diamond, set in heavens hatched
on crystal black as sturgeon caviar, the craftsmanship superb;
no seam or scar betrays the labor (invoice is attached). Apologies
if this last bill has rambled; address and protocol have got so…
sticky. Your power has been poached; your Empire, scrambled;
Now should I call you "Comrade"? Or just "Nicky"?
Us, Nick, we both are fragments of something lost—
Now shells litter the streets (as for the cost,
you'll find my detailed invoice here attached).
I wonder just what is it that has
hatched?

Erica Reid

Gyotaku

Gyotaku is a traditional form of Japanese art that began over 100 years ago as a way for fishermen to keep a record of the fish they caught. They would apply sumi ink to one side of a freshly caught fish, then cover the fish with rice paper and rub to create an exact image of the fish. —Smithsonian Institution

Remember,
the fish says.
Eat
with your eyes.
I was wild
once,
warlike,
a sword-mouthed
dancer from your deepest
imaginings.

—

Imagine:
this dancer from the deep,
her mouthed words—
a warlock.
Once
she was wild
in the eyes.
Eat
this fish, say you
remember.

Shane McCrae

James the Brother of Jesus Confronts His Heavenly Double at the Gates

It was generally believed that one's guardian angel is also one's heavenly double.
—David Bentley Hart

The gates of Heaven slide
Apart and I'm in Heaven
Smiling on the other side
But colorless the color

Of now I've seen goats slaughtered
And dressed and open wounds
Glistening like just-watered
Roses in human bellies

But through the angel's skin
Whose body is my body
I see the blue of when
A freshet runs in the brown

Of its brown bed I see
The brown of branches leafing
The green of pottery
Glimpsed through swaying moss

Nothing that looks like lungs
A stomach or a heart
But something like the rungs
Of a white ladder stretches

Across the angel's face
Behind his eyes and teeth
I do not leave my place
The angel smiles and waits

But what will he become
When I am where he is
I hear a distant hum
That sounds like angry wasps

I speak *When I was small*
I envied him my brother
The rest of us we all
Were trapped together like

Like symptoms in a body
Bodies the flimsy houses
We chipped and cracked and God He
Seemed to speak less to us

Than others other boys
Bragged that their fathers heard
The terrifying voice
Daily He told them what

To tell their wives to do
Not Joseph never Joseph
Never and Jesus knew
We all knew why but Jesus

Knew like a river knows
The stone it drowns forever
We were all stones in those
Long flowing silences

Of his as if he were
Practicing his dominion
On us but no I'm sure
Now he would not have been

Messiah if he could
Have chosen not to be
I know that God is good
But I hear wings behind

You buzzing and I hear
The wings of great wasps buzzing
O angel and I fear
A Heaven of wasps hatched

From eggs that look like men
He throws his head back laugh-
ing eyes shut through his skin
I see him watching me

Darlene Young

To Hope

When you pray, do not hope—it would be hope for the wrong thing.
—T.S. Eliot ("East Coker" in Four Quartets)

Those feathers have given you an awfully big head.

I see you, flitting around like a gnat, full
of yourself. I know it's you who lurks
at the back of refrigerators, plays hide-and-seek
with stock-brokers and psychiatrists. Your fingerprints

are all over every home pregnancy test. Sleazy siren,
you walk every woman to the door of her salon,
but often abandon her there.
The fitness equipment market is your church.

For you, old ladies and writers still hike to their mailboxes,
bachelors vacuum their cars.
Cheat, you stole whole months of my childhood,
not to mention all of puberty. Turns out

it was you I was in love with at sixteen
and not my boyfriend Mike. Shameless,
the way you haunt waiting rooms and singles' bars.

You siphon my focus from my teenager to his grades,
from my work to a browser. You are only
what isn't there, and I'm tired of squinting,
finished with feathers. I'm here now,

looking for something solid to stub my toe on,
something smooth and chunky like a pumpkin
that won't drift away with each exhale.
Here. Now.

M.I. Devine

Everyone says I look like Brad Pitt

When I get down on my knees with my kids
And put up my dukes and scream real loud, “Hit
Me! Hit me! *HIT ME*!” just like Brad Pitt did
In *The Tree of Life,* where he does what he can,
’50s made man, though one son doesn’t make it,
And the other one turns into Sean Penn.
Nothing’s so fragile that we won’t break it,

And God, Penn looks awful, like, *What film am I in?*
You know that feeling? Jessica Chastain,
Meanwhile, Pitt’s wife, floats–*floats*–off of the ground.
Earth angel. Cars like boats just bob around.

You say life ends at death like that is it.
Everyone else says I look like Brad Pitt.

Suzanne M. Yuskiw

Fragment

Shall we consider broken things? Unfinned?
Unwinged. The torn. The crocus petals, sundered.
A thought that dies before the tongue can bend
to give it shape? Have you ever wondered
how to mend a shining toy, the pieces missing?
Or seen a flight of tongueless yellow birds?
Shall I tell you all the tongueless dreams I'm wishing?
Shall I write a foolish sonnet, lacking words?

I have not known you long, in truth, or deeply:
only quips and casual flights our talk.
The dreams you shape, the songs you sing alone
are treasure for some other soul to reap.
Yet leaving now, I know the sting of blade through bone,
the ghost that stays after the hand is gone.

Carla Sarett

Don't Worry Baby

for Brian Wilson

America loses my
beautiful beach boy my
Caroline No
deuce-coupe dreams on
East Coast
frost-bitten days I hear
guitars & learn the
hurt in a boy's eyes as he
imagines a place that's
joyful & nothing's quite the same after
knowing it's never only that
locking the rest out on
mornings playing The Beach Boys in
New Jersey
on a snowy day hearing
Pet Sounds with my brother & after
quiet together in his neat
room we're happy as
surfers U.S.A as secret
Thunderbirds we ride
under super-hot sand & Brian's
voice sings *don't*
worry baby, *don't worry baby*
Xanax or any god I invent
you understand not even
Zeus can make everything turn out all right

Angela Alaimo O'Donnell

Paradiso

Atlantic City, NJ

We didn't know it was seedy. But still
we should have guessed—the hawkers, the barkers,
the lewd souvenirs, the dank boardwalk smell,
the sand studded with cigarette butts,
these the sad and certain markers
of decay and decline we were blind to.
We loved the pleasures of the place,
the wild and briny sea, the sun that burnt
us brown, ice cream and roasted nuts,
long nights and longer days
we lived a carnival life, then learned
that all of it was cheap, left it behind to
find a paradise that wasn't wrecked.
So long ago. We haven't found it yet.

The View from Childhood

“Lucy the Elephant is a six-story elephant-shaped example
of novelty architecture, constructed of wood and clad in tin in 1882
by James Lafferty in Margate City, NJ, five miles south of Atlantic City.”
—Wikipedia

Lucy was huge. Towered above us
like some weird Victorian dream
of the exotic, set here by this
practical shore of rum runners
and whores, amblers and gamblers
out to make a buck however they can.
My cousins and I would climb the stairs and scream
with delight when we reached her eye, scan
the ground for our mothers who stood beneath,
her big gray legs, her platter-sized feet
dwarfing them. They were not small women,
but Lucy made them so. The world seemed
as if we could hold it in our hands,
their little lives below some foreign land.

The Pershing Hotel

Atlantic City, NJ
1965

The rooming house was exotic to us.
The iron headboards on the two big beds.
The narrow stove with its black gas jets.
The hotplate where our Mom would set the pot
of meatballs and *sugo* she brought from home
for our supper five nights in a row.
We would sit on the bed, plates of pasta
balanced on our ten tanned knees, chunks of bread
to wipe up the sweet and salty sauce.
Then trips to the bathroom down the hall,
the tank with its pull chain hung from the wall.
We loved it. We loved it all.
Slept in the same room. Breathed the same air.
Back home I would wish we were still there.

Karen D'Anselmi

Tilt-A-Whirl

The Tilt-A-Whirl has seven spinning cars
each painted with a horoscope of stars

that swirl above the boardwalk and the beach
with room inside for several riders each.

The cars, attached at central pivot points,
rotate and rise like aching human joints.

Like humans, too, their upward speed is various
and often their descent becomes precarious,

depending on the distribution of
the riders and if they will fall in love

and grasp each other causing an imbalance
of rumble-tumble chaos or a slam dance,

increasing centrifugal force until
only a fight or break up can fulfill

the passion that the Tilt-A-Whirl provokes.
Or it may lead to marriage for some folks.

Anna Lewis

My Country

I. ‘Tis of Thee

sweet land of
high-yield hawk,
of white dove,
out of stock,

of red south,
of blue north,
of loud mouth
wet with Fourth

of July’s
bitter tea,
brewed by
detained liberty—

II. Of Thee I

livestream free,
from ocean
to prairie,
data-woven

web on wind
that blows what’s
far off in.
Worldwide gusts

howl close by,
cloud computing
lullabies
for us to sing.

III. Land Where My

father died,
old-world seed
sown stateside,
first burial deed

in our line
to bind us—
graveyard vine—
assign us

new-world heirs,
bona fide,
of fresh shares
in pilgrims' pride.

IV. From Every

mountainside,
where scanned
and digitized
deer and

antelope
play, let one
ray of hope—
heartspun,

rare asset,
yet real—spring
eternal; let
freedom ring.

Zina Gomez-Liss

The Gamblers

In memoriam Eric Liwanag

When we were babies we crawled by their seats.
They gave us Coke in nippled bottles, sweets
To keep us happy while they talked all night
And filled the room with smoke and drank Bud Light.
The men would groan and hand their hard-earned pay
To lucky wives who'd laugh the night away,
And as we heard the rumble of the tiles
They'd speak of what they missed across those miles:
The scent of blooming sampaguita flowers,
The fear they felt from summer monsoon showers,
The funerals of parents that they missed
And all the little cousins, never kissed.
And as the years went by we ceased to care
About this game they played, but it was there
That we grew up and all of them grew old,
And now their numbers shrink. Are they consoled,
The few of them still left to play mahjong,
With what they risked and gained? No longer strong,
They sit at noon instead of late at night
To spend their time together, all despite
Complaints of aching hands and curving backs.
They play for pennies now. The rules relax.
We watch them in a room all gold with sun.
"Just one more game," they say. "And then we're done."

Shalmi Barman

Souvenirs

Armor's not enough: you will need ballast
to shore against the flood. These walls we built
can weather outbreaks, repulse UV flares,
pump disinfected particles of air
until the next all clear. Real hazard lies
within. In need of object permanence,
we fill the space through creeping days and weeks
with handmade terracotta fishermen,
botanic tapestries, a bullock cart
rendered in tribal print. Arrange with care
six painted elephants in dwindling ranks,
a turtle hungry for our cigarette stubs,
a sinuous pink-eyed heron taking wing
lightbulb clenched in its beak. Menagerie
or museum? Designed to occupy
or soothe the eye, spur after-dinner chat,
the CCTV mutely blinking while
outside the crows drop dead. Last summer when
the water index spiked, remember how
our guavas, never ripening, grew to rot?
The curfews grounding flights? That's when you found
these soup bowls glazed in speckled indigo
with river reeds patterned around the rim.
I almost see the shallow thickets swarm
with bullfrogs fatly glistening by dusk,
their droppings mixed into this heavy clay
scooped up and sculpted, packed with paper curls
in boxes labeled FRAGILE. Still unchipped,
and, at this price, a steal. Let no one say
there are no marvels in a dying world.

Katie Beswick

Three Teenage Girls: 1997

(or, a rebuttal to Steve Orlen's "Three Teenage Girls: 1956")

Three teenage girls in pink boob tubes and strappy plastic platform shoes
and hair split by zig-zag partings, tied high in bunches
are walking down the high street, swearing and laughing.
Swinging half-drunk bottles of wine by the neck
they sashay in the light drizzle, the closest to the road
sticks her thumb out to hail any passing bus.

Every Friday night they rave, and wet or dry
they'll make a riot of it; on the back of the bus or a in a nightclub.
And now they're standing outside the off-licence, pulses pounding
beneath the bare meat of their necks. Night closes around them like a circle.
The prettiest asks some bearded guy to buy them a bottle of vodka
and a packet of B&H. He appraises them with a thin, predatory grin
and the third, the boldest, famous for her misspelt shoulder tattoo,
says, *it's alright mate, we'll ask someone else, we ain't that desperate.*

A.A. Gunther

Song of the Mall Rats

We're drinking drinking Jamba Juice
Out of a plastic cup,
Wouldn't it be great if this could
    All
    Blow
    Up?
We're standing by the Spencer's we admire the supply,
Can you just *imagine* if it
    Blew
    Sky-
    High?
That straw you use is killing all the turtles every day,
But shit, your teeth are sensitive, I guess that it's okay.
And on the escalators we pretended and pretended:
Wouldn't you just *love* to see the whole damn thing upended?
We'd sleep in the IKEA and we'd meet inside the Sears,
We'd eat the deer that wandered in, for years and years and years.
We looked at movie posters and we tilled the seed we'd planted,
We stood above the food court and we wove our bleak enchantment.
And way out in the parking lot, our voices did resound:
Wouldn't you feel FREE if it could
    All
    Fall
    Down?

***

We're lying wide-eyed in the dark and texting from in bed.
Wouldn't it be shitty if it
    All
    Stayed
    Dead?

J.M. Jordan

Overheard Whisper from a Backyard Fort

Quick now, quiet. Keep it down low,
here in this hidden place of our making.
Secret spot, remnant of night-time,
blessed arbor, child-whispered secret,
nursery-rhyme riddle, forgotten by wolves,
unknown by grown-ups, usurpers of thrones.

Well-armed we are, war-ready, willing,
country-side scoured for weapons to wield:
alley cans tilted, rummaged and rifled,
spider-web sheds unlocked and looted,
dank cellars raided, robbed of old secret
things in the shadows, in the dust and the dark.

Now we have piles, good-gotten, gathered,
weapons of war and makings of mayhem:
magic mop-handle lances and halberds,
cane-pole spears, rubbery swords,
a rusty toy musket and five pocket knives.

And armour enough we have here in heaps:
clanging shields from lids of trash cans,
skateboard helmets, broad shoulder pads,
musty shin guards, old goalie gloves,
beach towel capes and crowns of bright tin-foil.

So send not your spells accursed to call us,
Your threats of famine or feasts without flavor,
Or castings to exile in cruel quiet corners,
Or threats of books and early-to-beds.
Ring out no bells. Call out no names
we scarce remember, forsaken, forgotten.

For the time is at hand, the hour is here,
for we are now gathered, the noble assembled,
the last knights of late afternoon light,
forever rebels of every lost cause,
of the Sacred Heart, the final stand.
For we are olde friends, the fellowship strange,
the keepers of secrets who last and alone
will rise and restore the King to his throne.

Jesse Graves

Two Stones

When gods were young/This wind was old.
-Edward Thomas

Even in bright noontime, we never walked
beyond the ridgeline where the babies' graves
were marked by two stones and a blue placard.
Pinewoods made rich understory, with caves,
fault lines, and fissures pock-marking the ground.
They were Johnson children, born with two years
between them and died before they found
their footing, fulfilling their parents' fears.
No matter how mild the day in yard and field,
howling wind topped the ridge and shook tall trees.
My cousins and I kept eyes and ears peeled
for some movement that might cause us to freeze,
any sound that could signal a hushed weep,
or the cooing a baby makes before long sleep.

Carla Schwartz

Playing blind man's bluff I tripped on a sprinkler and got

the cut
to beat
all cuts
the blade
slices
the flesh
down
to bone
of hock
all pink
before
the blood
the shock
the Doc
the stitches—
34 out
in 17—
the scar
I wore
at 10
like a badge
shown off
to anyone
who asked
or didn't
aged now
barely seen
but look
close—
my calf
the smooth
once gaping
opening

now filled in
a river
of skin.

T.O. Brandon

Constriction: A Manifesto

Knotwork
is the art
of folding
something
on itself
until it holds.

Through cunning, matter
changeling as a rope
can double backward
past its path and twine
through self-
enlooping shapes
until the pattern's
traction pulls
it taut to trace
a line into a truss.

Just so, the anaconda
finds its surest brace
against its bones,
enwinding
all its length
through bowline
and half-hitch
to purl a coiling
labyrinth
of strength.

Some dream in grand excursions of unfolding endlessly…
It's not for me.

Give me a net, or mesh
of latticed bars to press
my weight against.

Bind me with form.
Grant me the knot's
hard art of finding friction
in the self: the spot
where meaning catches
on the crux
of contradiction.

Let every line re-weave
Arachne's loomwork like a spider:
the web that's woven right
when every struggle pulls it tighter.

Alexis Sears

When the Woman at Chase Bank Suspects I'm a Criminal

The fog and I feel especially hazy this morning.
I trudge through errands, (stir) crazy this morning.

At the ATM, a woman in a zebra jacket watches. She grips her
cash, gum wrapped around her pinky. Her hair? Clearly, she felt lazy this morning.

"Watcha doin' there?" She leans against the wall. My dress is calf-length with
a sunflower. I should have worn the less suspicious one, with the daisy, this morning.

The answer's pretty obvious. What do we all do at the ATM?
We plan our lunches. I want focaccia, a caprese this morning.

We plan splitting our sandwiches in half with someone new, giggling and flustered.
I think *she's* planning 911. Would men with guns actually tase me this morning?

She follows me in her Buick as I walk home. I know my love (at last! Can you believe it?),
movie buff, would gently rub my arm, laugh at this hiccup, watching Scorsese this
morning.

Has she ever danced, clumsy and wine drunk, with anyone she'd be happy
to be happy with? Asked "Etta James, Cher, or Jay-Z this morning?"

Maybe she dreamt a robber had my face. Or I stole something else,
slow-dancing with her once-love in Italy—tongues spicy, Calabrese—this morning.

I reach my porch. She leaves. I want to chuck my phone at her back windshield,
make rings from the shattering glass. Beauty would amaze me this morning.

"Alexis, learn to let things go," I whisper. Later, at home, I nibble on tomato
and basil. There's a decadent sliver of sun. What more could faze me this morning?

Leslie Williams

The Ring

A cloudless snowfall outside the boxing gym.
Red gloves ready in periphery. *Protect your face.*
Give it your all. The problem is the wish
to be better than we are. The problem is the failures
on repeat, winter afternoons I always enter
late: starting cold, hovering inside the ropes
with untold repetitions of *now and at the hour*
of our death, which makes me think of chariots
or a stony beach, stepping into waves when all I want
to talk about is grief, searching every face
for someone with a burning heart till I'm KOed,
struck bell resounding behind my head, lorded over
by victorious opponents—ocean, mirror, lover—
all within the wheel of sorrow's gilded spokes.

Betzi Richardson

Double Play

for my father

Summer. I used to sit and keep my Dad
company. I read while he watched TV.
Baseball grew on me. Male bodies beautifully
muscled, but not too much; the steroid scandal had
blown over. I came to love the secret codes,
the touches, taps, studied glances – the flexes
and swings of the home run hitters, those apex
predators contrasting with the leaping, mountain goat
outfielders, flinging their bodies through air.

Meanwhile, my Dad lingered. How many more
at bats will he have? Who or what's keeping score?
Top of the ninth. I steal a glance at him warily.
Dozing. His white hair softly breaks in a wave
over his forehead. In sleep his face has gone opaque.

Midge Goldberg

To the Young Woman in the Restroom at the Wedding

So sweet of you to think that I'd been weeping
For joy over the vows the couple shared.
You'd sat in the row behind me, kindly keeping
An eye on me, enthralled with how I cared.

Beautiful girl, photographer's ideal,
You touched me on the arm, leaned on the tile—
My emotional reactions "were so real,"
I'd helped you "feel them too." And with a smile

Pasted on, I nodded, headed out.

> *My daughter and her beau would not have wed*
> *Anyway. She talked of serious doubt—*
> *They weren't "a perfect match," as these vows said.*

O bathroom confidante, please know I cried
That wedding day for a lovely man who died.

Christopher Scalia

Singing Along to Billy Joel at My Roommate's First Wedding

We gathered in a circle, holding hands—
So young, just weeks from college graduation—
To sing together with "Piano Man."

The newlyweds would fight but had big plans,
An open bar—just cause to tie one on
And gather in a circle, holding hands.

I stood beside her mom, who held a can
And did not seem impressed with her new son,
But swayed with us to sing "Piano Man."

Flashbacks of junior high, when no one danced
Until the deejay played that old slow song.
We gathered in a circle, holding hands.

Like flipping through found faded photographs,
A pang of sadness waltzed in with the fun
Of la-dee-da-ing with "Piano Man."

Now "Scenes from An Italian Restaurant"
Seems apt: kids marry, split, go home again.
That hadn't happened yet, so we held hands
And celebrated with "Piano Man."

River Run

You run along the rocky, wooded path
that overlooks the river you've long loved.
The view is irresistible—slow down,
look down, appreciate the peaceful scene:
the oaks with thick green leaves that shade you here,
the bone-white sycamores along the bank,
the water's broad and steady run that cuts
beneath the distant, looming highway bridge—
familiar sights you recollect on days
you're trapped between your dreary office walls.
That's why you notice that the water's flow
seems higher, faster, wilder than last month,
although there's been no rain in weeks. That's odd.
You run upstream a quarter mile or so
to get a better view of the riverscape
and see, wedged in against the river's flow,
a wall of stones. Waist high, slipshod, it spans
across Virginia's banks to Maryland.

Above these rocks, the water stalls, collects,
and swirls impatiently, awaiting its
descent between the cracks. What trickles through
now gathers in a calmer flow—then speeds
downstream, much grander for the obstacle.
You understand the park is not maintained
by elves or magic spells; it's something else
that clears the fallen trees from paths, repairs
wood steps. But this odd wall is not the work
of park rangers or eager Eagle Scouts.

Jog further up the path to where your ken
includes the river's width, its curious
cascade—and now a man, undressed, who wades
against the water's strength. His tan skin dangles
from his bones, a garment he's too slight to fill.
A long gray beard drips from his chin. He walks
on guard against unsteady stones, sharp rocks,

slick lurking snakes, then stops midstream to crouch
and run his hands along the river bed.
His fingers dig into the gritty muck
until they pry a rock loose from the sand.
He grasps, now lifts, now pauses—heaves the stone
from underwater, to his thighs. The rock
is smooth and slippery so he adjusts
his grip, then lugs it to the shallow flow
beneath his river-changing wall. He fits
it on a ledge of other stones. They slow
this body's passage to the Chesapeake.

Some years from now, you'll drive
along the highway bridge, point to those rocks,
and tell this story to your passengers.
But now you redirect your course along
these less familiar trails that lead you home.

Sunil Iyengar

The Omission

If no one has any questions, we'll proceed.
The wedding had been marred—an altercation
at the rehearsal dinner. Seems Joe Lydoff,
in a dry run of a wet toast, presumed
to read a list of Stephen's paramours.
More like a list of grievances it struck
everyone in the banquet hall. Close friends,
none closer than Joe, beamed in recognition
only to check themselves abruptly. Clare,
proud Clare, avoided looking at her parents.
She knew the names too well, but hadn't known
just who would be excluded. Not many,
it so happened. But one would not let go
of the omission. Rosie Langeford
stomped down the aisle to Joe there on the dais,
and right before he capped the litany
with words like "now, nobody ever could
match up to all these triumphs but ole Clare—"
she (Rosie) flung the contents of her wineglass
into his face.
Which set the whole thing off.
Roger got up—as he was Rosie's husband—
and gently pleaded. Even he could not,
however, brook the inventive nouns that flowed
from Joe's contorted lips. So Roger made
to the front, all-deliberate-like, as if
about to broker peace, only to deck
Joe outright. Not that he was in the mood
to countenance his wife's implicit boast—
and so, the second target of his wrath was
Rosie herself. He jabbed her here and there
until she did that guttural sobbing thing,
with catches in the throat and every word
a broken chest-heave. This was just too much,
finally, for the groom. So Stephen lunged

forward, and—well, you know the rest. Clare bowed
her head in silence, which was rare to see
someone as loudly secular as she
do in a social gathering. But it wasn't
social at all, this one. It came down to
a list of individuals: Stephen, Clare,
Rosie and Roger, and Joe, who, to avoid
controversy, had made one last omission
from the list-reading.
                His own self?
                    Why, yes.
My client asks for suitable redress.

Tamarah Rockwood

Calypso Crying in the Produce Section

I'm tired. Again, the dawn is bright with truth,
and wild the child divides, as wide as time.
Let time, then, rest my brow, persuade a chime
To release the heated new stars from youth.

These fresh fruits, silent, firm, and wet with tears.
Which face of mine will he refuse to see,
Is it the face of fire when we disagree?
Many skins have I shed throughout his years.

I wish rage would leave his troubled heart; those
Sour thoughts that point his grazing gaze grows
For death, for roads, for war, for ships, for bows:

Screw the dawn and fuck the sin;
Let me keep him, keep him, keep him, keep him.

Carter Johnson

Pelican

A pelican is hanging
Above the milk green sea,
Watching the rounded backs of waves
Gather in heaps of liquid muscle,
Opaque except to his dark eyes
That see the fish that swim inside
The rounded muscles before its nerves
Dissolve into the salted froth.
With five quick strokes the pelican
Ascends a little higher still
And hangs his hollow bones on air.
His wings are taut against the wind
Like billowed sails drawn fast before
The tempest's howling homily
That tells the sailors on the ship,
"You are not kings upon the deep,
Nor the regents of your fate."
But to the pelican, the wind
Discloses different wordless songs.
Then from its lifted perch it marks
The silver-bellied flash of scales
And snaps the strings suspending flight.
Its wings half-cocked in Cubist lines;
Its torso turning twice before
His form smashes into the surf,
And disappears between the troughs.
He hunts and hunts and knows no time,
But beats against the sea and sky
And kisses salt and tastes cold blood,
Beneath the red and reddening sun.

Niloufar Behrooz

Zayandehrood: A Ghazal

Every year, they decide to bring you back to life,
restoring your failing organs to artificial life.

The veins open and dark blood water labors out
then slowly crawls in your cracked skin, bereft of life.

Your ailing body struggles to embrace the crowd
who kiss your feet, Zayandehrood "Giver of Life".

There was a time when your cheerful spirit burbled
in every brook and stream, full of music & life.

Do you recall my young forefathers laugh and splash?
Surely rivers, too, have memories of past life.

I can still close my eyes and see the seagulls soar.
Such tragedy to yearn for what was normal life!

Isfahan "Nesf-e Jahan", my Persian Paris
When did you succumb to this silent barren life?

The mirrored bridges who shimmered in your moonshine
now rust in dust guarding the path for your half-life.

Foam at your breath as they drain your heart once again;
You're sentenced to comatose existence for life.

"No swimming!" The sign reads as the sun sets on your
remains: "Here's to a river who lives death in life."

*To Zayandehrood ("zayandeh" means life-giver and "rood" river) the largest river in central Iran located in Isfahan (nicknamed "Nesf-e Jahan" which literally translates as half of the world).

Zayandehrood has lost its permanent flow since 2006 and is only opened for no more than two weeks each year.

Daniel Fitzpatrick

Tackle

Along the brackish wall
rot crab nets,
cuts of braided line.
A cork squats in the brown water.
Someone s left a trap intact. The clean cord
comes up taut, hauls sixteen fizzing shells
into the unfiltered sun, lets them
swim again so beautifully.
You wander off imagining the crisis
that could leave such fruits unplucked:
a heart attack, dog s death, divorce,
imagining the morning in the birth of June
your father taught you how to crab,
to knot the turkey necks in nylon,
let the nets down through the dark
and give it fifteen minutes,
a good fifteen minutes,
and pull up tenderly, hand over hand,
and shake the shining claws into the bushel.
How they d menace you, then, raising
pincers to a sky that paled against
the azure of their shells.
That summer saw the record mako caught,
the one that hit a hundred pound tuna
at the midnight lump and bowed the bright rod
not to be unbent till the spool shone
and the knot popped,
feckless as a dandelion root.
And the ragged jaws ranged off
dragging a hundred fathoms' monofilament.
A charter trolled the loose end from the dark,
felt the flickering life, spliced it
to the heavy reel and saw,
hours later in the wasting sun,
the cold blue back, the black eyes

staring as they lashed the body to port
and labored up the heaving green of the Gulf.
The record books won t show its thousand pounds.
But then again it s often that the best
of what we do begins in accident,
in plucking up an unimagined thread
and taking its terrible revelation to the grave
like the hearse you saw later at the sea wall,
its silver snub nose staring over the waves
at a band of sky come round again
like dawn beneath the April storms.

Isabella Hsu

The King of Los Angeles County

He grows tomato vines in gallon jugs.
In plastic tubs, potatoes sprout out through
their million eyes. He's even planted stalks
of corn in plaintive rows in his backyard
between the carport and garage. His wife's
dismayed by all this growth—by all this green,
a better sight in someone else’s yard.
Even the house meanders year by year;
additions born in quiet winters burst
through summer's lengthened days—a shanty town
behind their sunbleached fence. She cannot grudge
his potent hands or his resourcefulness.

O Makeshift Midas, O Suburban King,
beneath your gnarled thumb grows everything.

Victoria Moul

I.m. Andrew, October 2024

Cozen me then, my restive Lord:
The candles in the church blow out
After only an hour or more.
I have forgotten now which saint
Was in which niche and in what stand
I set my candle, when I paid
A few coins, not quite the allotted price,
Or even whom I named
Sidelong while wondering too
Whether the man who knelt
Across from me was married; how
We might afford that flat; or if
I should buy leeks or aubergine.
                Attention is
So short and slight a thing, a flame
Snuffed as soon as lit, but all the same
Someone, I think, heard the name I named.

*This poem is in memory of Andrew Hurley, who died in Paris on 11th October 2024. Andrew's encyclopaedic knowledge of, and unrelenting enthusiasm for French poetry are much missed by all who knew him.

J.S. Absher

A Life: The Topical Index

1926 – 1977

> *It is said that sometimes even fear*
> *drops away....*
> *Geoffrey Hill*

he couldn't talk

about his mama put away for years
about my sister he abused for years
about suicide—s*on, would you swear*
above me a little square of light
aches with brightness fading from the room?

after an early killer frost
after the years he lost
before he calmed himself by singing
before he could change his mind
before he could make it plumb and square

before he testified and cursed
before he went first, machete swinging
eyes wide, nostrils flared
took the pills and made it worse

he loved

his daughter in leotards
how dew turned to haze in summer heat
repo'ing cars from shiftless bastards
slaughtering hogs for meat
the butter in his molasses
the cigar in his mouth sweet with honey
the hardest apples Mama could buy

the mottled yellow of Gloria Mundi's
the rhythm of swinging a scythe
through the leaning grasses
to pay old Adam's tithe
to redeem with sweat his sins

women in the dark
yellow ears sunbursting from the shuck

he owned

a Masonic Bible and a ring
cigar boxes he brought from Costa Rica
frying pan he cleaned in river sand
hatchet scar's thin lips, thick-fingered hands'
knack for spilling full to empty
lovely days in the woods lugging
machete, theodolite, and candy stick

mic in his head so God could hear
midnights singing for his walking cane
the way he could whistle a blackbird's note
whatever he muttered, joked, or lied
when he left on the midnight train
when pills effaced the green and yellow grief
when whetstone ground his blade too fine

he threw away

a hard-earned career and friendships in ruin
blood and vomit in the kitchen sink
forgiveness as if it were a threadbare blanket
his good name for a trifling wage
lightning flash and thunder stone
money jingling in both pockets
old age at rest, honors to crown old age
prayers, despairing, to be left alone

submerged in the green noise of the world
the chatter-jawing of a bird
the drone of bees glutting the comb
the old man shaking with belly laughter
the young man striding into a room
to bring joy to his sons and daughter

he told his children

dogs whipped by desire will bay
I lent good money to Clonch's and McAdoo's
I rode my thumb to Colorado
I was a sure-fired double-action buckaroo

life's a dead heat with dying
life's a series of disappointments
living's a morning glory in the hay
noon and the scythe kill it by appointment

nothing taught me life's a bronc tornado
say thank you while you're still able
two things don't matter in the slightest
where you are and what the time is

wonder why the dead tree's shadow
yearns for the weight of green apples

he wanted to know

how a man leaves a room
under cross examination
where it rains Virginia Beauties
where the dauber's mud is blue
where the deer graze in peace
where trees bleed from whitlows on each bloom
where yellow dogs can't bark at him or run
who swapped his life for short and cheap

why a man can never explain
why he must play a bitter part
why his best days fly
why his better days do not stanch the pain
why his children will grieve and cry
why love raises welts across the heart

he will sing at the resurrection

apples flecked with yellow
birdie birdie birdie the cardinal
calling his mate, the cow's lonesome bellow
dirging the loss of her calf
    jubilate deo

each night I cast bait into the water
for the pleasure of being with my sons
gazing together at heaven's stars
hovering in the river's reflection
    jubilate deo

independence denied me in this world
jolly days in scantling packets
king salmon and pike and pollock
little boy in his blankets curled
    jubilate deo

mornings dozing hidden in the hay
nights Mama woke me from bad dreams
oranges and nuts on Christmas Day
preacher preaching the blood redeems
    jubilate deo

questions I got no answers to, not in
reasons that made sense to a boy
sulking under a white oak when
the world had lost its joy

jubilate deo

usual beauties you only sometimes notice
vees of wild geese and winter solstice
when cloudless day is cold and light
x-rays you with its knives so bright
jubilate deo

you can see your own white bones
zipped up in your flesh and fear comes on
jubilate deo

Laura Wang

Sick Day's Delirium

in memory of Michael LaGory

I thought I saw you, late beloved friend,
come through the door and stride with artless grace
and certainty of welcome on your face
into the room where our joint students bend
with half-closed eyes over screens or problem sets.
You looked a dream: new-shaven, fitted smart
in crisp celestial blue, such that my heart
(always more gullible than my eyes) could yet
exult that yours did beat again. I sprang
up, running to embrace you—that's the last
sensation I recall, because just then
the alarm I'd set an hour beforehand rang,
jolting me where I lay in febrile rest
with a new sick feeling, cure unknown to men.

James Matthew Wilson

Last Words for Jason

That I did not foresee it, when I set
Your name and life within my poems—that I
Had done what those who plant a landmine do—
Is no surprise. We speak of death with ease,
When it is someone we don't know that's dead.
And when we write or say a brother's name,
The name itself stands out so singular,
We can't conceive that in a breath that breath
Might cease to be. We think of those we love,
Rather, as free from change (at least *that* change),
As if the simple speaking of their name
Appointed them among the constellations.
They will be always circling above,
Their presence even logged on ancient maps
And taken for a lasting point of reference
By which all moving courses may be measured
With nothing but the raising of our eyes.
But you have proved us wrong. And now I see.

Tuhin Bhowal

Hallucinations at Hell's Cliff

I
Nights illiterate. The city hackneyed us through
Processions of habit. We, in stolid strides
Fled north-west, witnessed summer stew like a roux;
Trees, shacks, tarred participles of sweat to guide
Both our uncalloused mouths, allied as the tides—
Full anchors, half ocean, new shade. Never rain.
The coast, dwindled, swayed against the crops, stone-eyed
Like weed. We stood. Beneath, the Arabian vain
And defeated. And suddenly, passing, the rain.—

II
Aloof the cliffs, we took turns counting ships. Now,
Men, meandering fields for three thousand years, laid
Blistered. What a bargain it was, that time, how
Once allowed so much for so little, decades
At once, snagged back all, again. Ferries arrayed;
Boats jerked their limpid sails. Rafts, kayaks, canoes.
Good at gestures, we got greedy, we got made.
The pink prawns—when lunch was induced to us, who's
To say—were abused; squid-rings burnt; the sauce so loose.

III
As the surrogate sea snorted high on your face,
I strolled along, sketching the trapezoidal
Bottoms of dogs midair. Flies posed still. Maizes
And maizes of women stood leaned, conical—
Went nowhere, their corn ears heard nothing at all.
Puny cows, chuck-marked, kept yawning as if sleep
Could only be their dream. Hawks, and the seagulls
Killed for fun, while lobsters buried themselves meek.
The beach made men out of men; a cat kissed your feet.

IV
Roads stretched everywhere, relentless as dirt. Keats
Blushed more than he could love, or prove, embarrassed
By the sober beauty of corn. A conceit—
I, too, dreamt of lost vocabularies, dusting
Most between nostrils. Sublime my madnesses,
Like joy, spiralled me, and I spun. I spun blue.
We could not meet again—hills in the distance
Squealed—*not even as strangers*. This much was true.
We gouged each other's eyes: Our private rendezvous.

V
On our way back, we could've left some vision
Behind. We were too wise. The sea, your hammock
Lulled you to sleep, again and again. Dylan
Said the songs came to him, that the voices spoke.
We heard so much for awhile—my desires weak;
Stale, my desire merely a handful of sand;
My desire was six hundred seagulls choking
On the bones of arid fish, all at once—and
The coastline stood etherised, as fear-stricken hands.

VI
The sky belligerent, glimmered, as a snark
Of elephants crossed the jungle. My desire's
One of their trunks, drinking water, in the dark.
We couldn't meet again, not even as strangers.
The night a crab, clawing, barely live, dead dire,
Barely smart. What my body never required
Of your body will be sung. Longing is the one
Apology we manage, the way mute sand
Still slipping my pockets, untranslatable as stars.—

Jonathan Chibuike Ukah

The Year My Wife Arrived

A woman planted a tree in Africa,
in Kenya, Mozambique and Uganda,
as rivers flooded debris into the abyss,
where everything turned green in summer.
The weather forecasters had grim faith in the sun,
and had pronounced the year a deluge,
short of declaring a famine or a disaster.
It was the year the flood killed dreams
and rendered hope homeless and boneless.
A child was born on the top of a palm tree,
so, he decided to stay closer to Heaven.
The year the climate snapped raw,
and tugged at the anguish of the people,
who were remnants of the slices of war,
although some said it had been in the making
long before the sky prepared for the flood.
Some pains have no origin and no end.
We see them occur like secret needles,
roving through the grooves of our life.
My wife arrived for the first time in London,
and it was like we had a date in a distant land,
from a continent where everything took place
after we met face to face for the first time.
I didn't know how to mend my wife’s place,
to know her history and pedigree,
to wipe out the black holes on her cheeks.
I decided to use her body as a tool, a brush
to turn the hour green, the second red,
and invited guts and nerves to strike a deal.
I bought a green toilet seat, a green foot mat;
I painted my toilet sink and bathtub green.
I rushed to Argos and bought a green towel,
and painted my bathroom and toilet green.
My furniture, television sets and house phone
glittered in green like a field in Greenland;

the curtains on my door and windows
swayed and shimmered with green linens.
The shoe rack, side table and the dining table,
all became museums of green grandeur.
My kitchen had green woven into the smoke,
the often-suffocating air of an oven or chimney.
When my wife arrived, I showed her around
like a first lady at a factory inspection.
Was that a bewildered look in her eyes,
as though a shark was devouring her tears?
But she smiled and kissed me on the forehead
after I confessed to her love of green,
and green was the shot on the arm of my baby
who slapped my wrist with indignation,
her painful smile going nowhere beyond
the macabre of a changing climate mood.
I rushed out of my house in the navel of sorrow
when galaxies collided against one another.
I returned from work and preened into my room,
to see everywhere was glittering and snowy.
Nothing green stayed in our flat anymore.
I turned to her with regret in my eyes.
"Climate changed, baby, climate changed!"

Brian Palmer

Gibbous

πάντα ῥεῖ
—Heraclitus

The gibbous moons' expectant shapes are vexing.
I'd rather they were always full, or half, or crescent:
potential reached, or on the fence, or nothing much to lose.

That one full moon I carried in the pocket
of my faded jeans with scraps of poems, sketches,
maps that took me down the road of being who I was.

That half-moon I held tightly one cold midnight,
timberline, spring equinox, when I half-longed
for winter on the mountain, half for summer down below.

That crescent moon with its bright scimitar
of light I wielded for protection on my wild
flight, arcing, sublimating like a comet towards the sun.

Perhaps it's time to lose those moons, the heaviness of needing
the certainty of steadfast things, the desperation
for an ageless time. Stop the ponderous thinking

I can be immutable as tides (though even moonless,
I might lie at night and look for comfort in
the constancy of circumpolar stars),

embrace the truth that I, like months and moons, move on unfazed,
(though secretly I bet with Thoth for silver shards
to make more days to bear my same old self).

The shape of gibbous—both in waxing and in waning—proves
the moon is always whole, unchanging always changing. Me?
Yes. Change is all I had, and have, and all I'll ever have.

Andrew Frisardi

I

Yo non soy yo. —Juan Ramón Jiménez

How odd to find I am not what I am
And can't take off my own disguise.

I'm soluble in what I crystalize:
A waterway of me, a dam.

Who wrote *Be nothing and you'll be with God*?
Oh, I remember: Me. How odd.

Eric Colburn

The Buddha doesn't lie

The Buddha doesn't "lie", or "rest", he *sits*,
A verb implying something more of will,
A verb whose sibilant curt sound fits
The simple satisfaction of staying still,
And, too, that sitting can sometimes be hard.
Asana, sit-in, babysitting—pose,
Protest, or care—the Buddha in my yard
Blends and transcends these meanings. Buddha shows
What the trees show, what the soil knows, the weight
Of our existence. Trace it in the plumb line
That runs from the tip of his head down his spine
To sit-bones where he rests his own weight while
Weighing the world... The Buddha doesn't wait,
He *sits*. Life may be suffering. Sit with it. Smile.

Nothing in Nature

Nothing in nature is ugly. The sky like a bruise
Has a lividly beautiful bronze-black hue, and the dead
Rat in the street spills its guts in a gross but engrossing
Way, and the purples and blues of its veins, and the red
Of its blood on its fur, and even its beady dark eye
Seeming to see me—it's… lovely? Black pearl of the muse,
Unlovely orb in a rodent's sharp face, there is no thing
Less charming than you, but you teach me, still, that my I
Has a presence and, too, an illusory quality. Time
Will arrive when the best of our comrades will rot like this rat,
But for now, in this part of a second that sways like a tree
In a storm, we stand proud, like a sailor aloft on the mast,
Hearing the thunder afar like the ominous chimes
Of a midnight that hasn’t arrived. For now, let us be.

Liv Ross

An Annihilation of the Self

The iron wedge and sloping grip
Rests easy in my hands and swings
A sloping arc.

The strike lands true at my own roots.
A shudder runs along my trunk,
And sap runs red.

Rachel Hadas

Wire and Vine

I'm weeding. But more stubborn than the roots
of dandelions or goutweed are the stalks
of last year's morning glories, which have wound
themselves around the chicken wire fence
much too tightly to be disentangled.
That fence, whose function is to separate
nature from cultivation, to protect
spinach, kale, arugula, lettuce, herbs,
has become less a barrier than a trellis.
Intimate as lovers, vines now dry
have twisted themselves over strands of wire.
To extricate them now would feel like vandalism,
despoliation of some artifact,
and anyway would take too long to do.
Those clippers rusting in the barn—but no.
They're too blunt for this purpose. Let it go.
Besides, why even try to separate
partners inextricably intertwined?
Years teach acceptance, which, today, I'm learning,
parsing every twist and every turning,
boundaries, binary, form and content twinned
like vines and wires I cannot unwind.

Devon Balwit

Becoming

> *The whole earth from a great distance means less than one long look into a pair of human eyes. Even the eyes of the enemy.*
>
> *—Carson McCullers*

We plant hatred in furrows, but before it fruits,
our enemy says something that sounds like what
we might say, a thing as startling as the view
of our mirrored face in good light, not
nearly as hideous as imagined. Unnerved,
we let our small plot revert to a tangle,
a gift for mouse or bird. Once swerved,
no longer habit-caught, we angle
off in unforeseen directions. The view
is beautiful, though strange. To speak of it
seems ill-advised, too new—
like an untested love or baptism. Better
to steep awhile, becoming what invites
a linger, a twisted wick blossoming into light.

Joshua Coben

Bust

Ham-fisted time's to blame for all my flaws:
that maker who once toiled to chip me free
of shapeless stone now lets the chisel slip,
impatient to have done with me. His eye
is off: he tonsures me and roughs my cheek.
Wherever I walk, I show his shoddy work
and call him fraud, defying him to gouge
my tongue or pound my wits to froth.
                                Mother
of life, before I break like chalk and weep
with dust, sculpt me a bust impervious
to blast and fault, polish me to a gloss
that cudgels cannot craze, and I will sip
the dross of age through my sole chink—a smile—
to toast the hammer poised to strike my face.

Andrew Lustig

The Owl is Wise:

because he is a monk on a high pew
cooing lauds to the gray morning;

because he knows the sun is rising soon
and that waiting is already worship;

because he does not rush things
but offers stillness as an act of devotion;

because he turns his head in an arc of intention,
watching the twilight through slow blinking eyes;

because he does not find hope necessary
nor fortitude a virtue;

because he does not need to stay or go,
but only to live faithfully in time.

Ted Charnley

Baltimore Cats

We Baltimore cats, bearing our young
soon after coming in heat,
yowl obscenities, prowl tiny yards,
spit on back-alley streets.

We Baltimore cats, napping off lunch
panhandled outside cafés,
stir with aromas of roofer's tar,
yesterday's fish and Old Bay.

We Baltimore cats, rousing when sun
serves us that fish on concrete,
dance with our kittens soon after dark,
arch upon six-toed feet.

We Baltimore cats, cool for tonight,
curl up in crawlspaces, close and tight.

Daniel Patrick Sheehan

Groundhogs

In summer we stretched and stapled wire mesh
Over the holes gnawed in the old shed walls.
The mother hadn’t shown herself for weeks
And we’d trapped the kits, a half-dozen or so,
Hauling them one at a time to the creek
Where they bolted through the cage door to flash
Tooth and tail into the feathering brush.
Imagine them now as they wind back again,
Evading the bobcat, hawk, and coyote,
Sniffing the maze of miles between there and home,
Moving by night along curbs, across sewers,
Undulating under the sodium lights,
Only to find their old doors webbed with steel,
Their mother missing and no track or scent
To guide them from one garden to another.
For all the creatures of God it’s the same:
Tipped into a new world, the old sealed shut,
No one but you remembering how it was.
In homes to come, the rooms are never warm.
Something blazes in the dark beyond the walls
And means you no good. It means no good at all.

Sarah Ashbach

Leaves Below Giants

Outside, we left our rushed and petty things—
gift shops, a rental car which scraped the ground,
days cheaply lost. In red groves, silence brings
time's woody notes to something like a sound,
even as time, unnoticed as a ghost,
slips by and shivers past the road-wide trees,
sometimes as eel-quick as the river, but most
often, as slow as fog. We stopped to seize
our own impermanence there, though outside,
the tired world wheeled along its noisy way,
and though, returning to it, we might hide
from knowledge of our bondage to each day.
But in the woods, sun-tossed, a brown leaf fell
to rest, more quietly than I might tell.

Chelsea McClellan

One Subjective Day

Another slow-paced walk.
The woods, the place we go
to yawn—catch up on air,
to hold each flower's name
as loosely as the stalk,
to kiss what's nearly dead.

How delicate, the dead
that decorate our walk,
the almost-off-their-stalk,
the can't-quite-let-it-go,
the Spring Beauties we named
and then forgot like air.

Spring, as Winter's heir,
has heard the tales of death
too much. She wants her name
unhindered by such talk,
but don't we all? We go
off-trail, and think we stalk

an extra day—we stalk
a squirrel, or the air
it's made to walk. You go
on that air—and find you dead.
And hungry. Acres to walk.
No one calling your name.

At least you know one name:
for wild carrot, stalks
like ferny salad, walk
until they cloud the air,
white flowers nearly dead,
but the roots are ready to go.

You eat. It's time to go.
But poison's in its name,
and Hemlock wants you dead.
Armed with purpling stalks
but Queen Anne's Lace's air,
it seizes first: your walk.

Your walk, your talk, both go.
Your air expelled, your name.
The wavering stalk is dead.

John Talbot

Envieth Not

Some spirit must have whispered: Pay
A visit to an obsolete
Old woman. Let young smiles defeat
The tedium of her vacant day,

And let her marvel that with all
The pressures of their wedding soon
Approaching, they found time to loan
An hour to housebound her. She'll tell

Her friends (those that survive) how wrong
It would have been to criticize
Young people for their modern ways.
They made her, for that hour, belong

Once more to the panache of youth.
The zest of her grand-nephew groom,
The bride's high spirits, warmed the room.
– All this she told me. But the truth,

I'm pretty sure, is otherwise.
My guess is that his mother meant
To gratify a maiden aunt
And ordered them to compromise.

So off they went, the groom and bride,
And paid their due respects – but watched
The time, and when the slow hand touched
The twelve, they deemed that they'd complied,

And showered their polite regrets,
And left the tall clock in the hall
To keep her company, and toll
The barren afternoon. And yet

I do not pity her. A *please,*
A *thanks,* a grudging niece who brings
A birthday card – those little things
That I'd call bare civilities –

Her heart mistranslates into love
And gallantry. Each caller leaves
Endowed with virtue she perceives
Gone out of them they didn't have.

Her cup runs over with such strong
Mistaken gratitude. So say
She's blind to bitter truth. You may
Be right, but you'd be in the wrong.

Epitaph of Menophilos

Such days as were my lot I passed in joy
Buoyed in the quickening flux of poetry.
Bacchus was never very far away,
Or Aphrodite either. As to friends:
Not one of them can tell of an offense
I ever did them. I am Menophilos,
A son of Asia, till I left to settle
Far from home in the sundown hills of Italy.
Here I held my ground, and now am held
Among the dead. I never did grow old.

Betsy Howard

Full Term, Mid-July

My sundress clings around my middle damp.
A fetus pees inside. But does it sweat?
Today it must. For all the shade my taut
abdomen gives, I know I am set to broil.
I've left behind that basal body temp
with modest peaks. Unmitigated heat,
like mother earth, I'm magma at my core.
An outstretched heel imprints my sticky skin
within, to breathe by suffocating me.

Lisa Barnett

Little Bud, Unready

for my newborn granddaughter

Little bud, unready to unfold
into the brilliant world at once unscrolled;
to open eyes and fists at one day old
is more than you signed up for. No one told
you how your new life would commence in cold
and light and noise. A stark surprise unrolled,
as though from paradise you'd been paroled,
undersized, unready to unfold—
reluctant little bud, just one day old.

Katherine Spadaro

When He Created You

My child, if you should close one eye
and just look down, you see a view
which no one else can see but you –

That sideways vista of your nose
is known to none but God and you,
and this will, all your life, be true:

Though you may share your heart and life,
no lover gets that close to you,
no doctor can quite share that view;

No matter how old you will get -
while you receive great accolades,
or wait until they sentence you -

Whatever layers you accrue,
you'll always be the person that
God made, when he created you.

Richard Newman

Madonna with Tattooed Face

Oh, let her bare her breast in the public square,
that bit of skin not inked. Inside the fountain
bare naked naiads laugh and do not care.

Suckling her child, she can't be unaware
of gawkers bundled up against the forbidden,
but let her bare her breast in the public square.

Her piercings glint in morning sun, her hair
like black steeples, shards of obsidian.
Pubescent naiads laugh and do not care.

Her tattooed face is an angry mask she wears
to keep her tenderness and kindness hidden,
so let her bare her breast in the public square.

Her black rose, daggers, and winged demons scare
tourists—self-mutilation stinks of sin!
The mold-rashed naiads have more urgent cares.

Let her have this moment, a suckled prayer—
a child, the best means to self-oblivion—
and let her bare her breast in the public square
where ancient naiads laugh and do not care.

David Rosenthal

Chagall's *Midsummer Night's Dream, 1939*

Titania wears eternity in white
as she receives her unexpected groom.
Her love will only last a spell, a night,
before her blue fan sweeps it like a broom
to fairy dust, and Bottom's head returns
to its rough weaver's homeliness. How strange
he seems more worthy as an ass – one learns
to be with whom one's with, to rearrange
the elements of habit, drive, and mind
in line with love. He never was all boor
and brute, but all his tenderness resigned
itself to roles he felt unsuited for.
Now, fiddler behind and angel above
will ratify this temporary love.

Timothy Kleiser

Lost John

– Mammoth Cave, c. 445 B.C.

Autumn.
Sun-sink and shadow.
Wind,
and the bobbing, browning heads of
rattlesnake master.
Cricket whine.
Wingflap and stir.
A pregnant deer
edges toward a moss-strewn rill, drinks,
pauses to consider a sound,
and drinks again.
Haltingly, the
water navigates an outcrop
of shale, then slips the edge and bursts
below.
A limestone mouth.
Cave breeze.
The tang of dampstone and guano.
Deep inside, blind beetles.
Spiders.
Cane-reed torches weave braids of smoke,
tell light-riddles to the dark.
Chert
and gypsum.
A hand wipes a face,
then brings a pinch of sunflower
seeds and hickory nuts to a
mouth.

The mouth receives the blessing,
humming.
Seed-chew and sigh and song,
as the hand continues mining.
A sudden crack, a cry, a crash
of stolid limestone.
Then silence.
Somewhere nearby, a stagnant pool
of water is upset.
Startled
cavefish briefly dart, then go still.
Torch-flames choke and expire.
Darkness
settles, blacker than Mammoth black.

Jared Carter

Shelter

Next to the summerhouse, a winding way
brought water to this chamber underground—
a shelter in the earth, a quiet stay

against dry weather. On-site brick and clay
walled up a hidden place, entirely round,
next to the summerhouse. A winding way

led out beneath the garden walk. Most days
the slightest rain by evening would have found
a shelter in the earth. A quiet stay,

until a bucket, lowered down, conveyed
another rainfall to the rows and mounds.
Next to the summerhouse, a winding way

converged, near where the wooden cover's graze
across the rim now makes a hollow sound.
A shelter in the earth—a quiet stay

of darkness—echoes still, as if to say
this long-forgotten room remains, spellbound,
next to the summerhouse—a winding way,
a shelter in the earth. A quiet stay.

Petoskey

Lifted from the shallows along
that narrow shore
Of yellow sand, where one is wrong
sometimes, the more

The pattern beckons. Will it hold
the coral's clear
Imprint, immeasurably old,
but rising near

At hand, its hexagons complete?
Or should the waves
Hide it away, for those who seek
on other days?

Blake Campbell

Crystal-hunting

for Rachael Dait

The March thaw having loosed
A load of shattered slate
Intermixed with quartz
(Erosion's old retorts
As freezing nights abate
And owls return to roost),

We scratched like turkeys, scored
The dirt with ungloved claws.
Protruding from ground we cleared,
The wayward stones appeared
To us, for all their flaws,
Like antique jewels restored,

Although there was no sun
To showcase the refraction
Of facets still defined
Despite earth's constant grind,
Despite those of their faction
Still buried, seen by none.

I packed my sweatshirt pockets
And you your bag—a ruck
Already stuffed with bones
And feathers, duller stones—
Both savoring the suck
Of rocks pulled from their sockets.

You noticed what I noticed
And more. You never left
For dead the discards. Still,
As the bag continued to fill,
I foresaw in its heft
Your mother's gentle protest

As we spread out our haul
Across her kitchen table:
Dirt-caked, coyote-gnawed
Offerings to a god
Unknowable, unstable,
And absent since last fall.

Weighed down, we had to choose
The best, our close inspection
Leading us down the path
Of winter's aftermath,
Searching for near perfection
Among the dross and druse.

Sydney Lea

Eclipses

–April 9, 2024

I sat in the wood-and-canvas canoe
with my friend Alan and his blond son Billy,
a child– now 61! His father
and I had wondered what might happen
if we fished through the sun's dramatic retreat.

We wanted something, I guess, some rite
to etch the total eclipse in our minds,
especially Billy's. We'd had no luck
with the perch, but just as dark settled in,
the boy's line went taut as a fiddle-string,

his rod bowing deep. I could tell what had preyed
on the minnow-bait by the power of the pull
and the fact that the fish made no lateral run,
merely went on hauling in the same direction
–toward bottom. Wistfulness wouldn't turn up,

of course, until much later, and never
to Alan, who heartbreakingly died
of cancer only a few months after.
I haven't seen his son since the funeral.
The darkness came on, but not so full

as to hide the glint off the eel's slick skin
as I lifted it high enough to yank
the hook and drop it back into water,
whose surface now looked like oxidized brass.
Since that afternoon, a lifetime has passed,

and a newer eclipse is due here in hours.
Why should I envision a sprawl
of seedling flowers in a glassed-in frame?
You can start them in winter. When they're ready to bloom
in an April like this, you should take them out

and plant them where they'll get better attention.
Ardent eclipse-watchers swarm our state,
but for me that odd aggregation arrives:
flower, eel, boy, rescinded daylight.
There's wide-eyed wonder on the young angler's face,

a fleeting flicker from the serpentine creature,
three small souls rocking in the frail canoe.
And these small words– they coalesce
on a wisp of paper in tenuous sunlight,
which pauses a moment on my worn oak desk.

Her Husband Told Me

He told me that just a few hours
after they brought their baby home
she insisted he find some old letters

from people he'd never known,
and he'd known *her* since both were children,
since well before they married.

At one point she studied fruit that had fallen
from their window-tree and declared,
I just counted eighty rotten apples.

Although he searched everywhere,
he never managed to find any letters.
If there were some, where could they be hidden?

He said her brother and two of her sisters
kept wondering what to do next.
They watched her writhe on her twisted sheets

until she teemed with sweat.
Who are the letters from? someone asked,
and that instantly turned her nasty.

They'd never seen her face like that.
She'd always been sweet, almost docile
but now for days she snarled and spat

words that weren't even sequential:
scourge fame moon cow-dung.
He considered institutions,

but no. For that year he fed the newborn
whenever the poor thing got hungry.
That infant's a grown man now and she claims

she’s never been more happy.
When we’re with her we don’t recall that time.
I mean, after all, why would we?

Jennifer Reeser

The Legend of Leech Place

The place on this Great Smoky ridge
Just east of Tennessee,
My people all with awe now call
the town of Tsanushi.

Here Valley River meets Hiwassee,
Where beauty throbs with gore,
And every week, like driftwood teak,
Some dead thing bobs ashore.

Viewed from above, the confluence
Looks like a living arrow
Where wraiths with quivers race the rivers
Past owl and brown hawk sparrow.

A natural stone bridge connects
The river's lonely sides
But something troubles these bright bubbles,
Underneath them, slides.

Beneath the long, low, rocky ledge
Where waters boil and hiss,
The currents clear then disappear
Down to profound abyss.

At times a body washes up,
Blistered and badly beaten.
How water warps a bloated corpse!
Ears, nose and mouth half-eaten.

I raise my gaze and see the monster
Massive as a house,
Whose red-striped hide perhaps I'd ride
If I weren't such a mouse.

It has two hearts which crudely show
This mammoth favors me:
Human daughter, fish out of water.
I give it sympathy.

The elders tell us, “Stay away.
Swift, dead men here have swum,”
So that most wild of any child
Knows better than to come.

It sleeps in this remote abyss,
Then rising from the deep,
It shakes the soil. The waters boil.
You’re lost with one vast sweep.

Huge, fuming, spouted waves, they warn,
And off the bridge you blow –
Frail as a flower the leech will devour.
I doubted this was so.

One day I heard my elders, ran,
Withdrawing out of reach,
Slim as a splinter. It was winter
When I first saw the leech.

That chilling chat was haunted, see.
I understood their talk
About the brave who wanted me,
The arrogant Corn Stalk.

Most every member of our tribe
Revered that awful creature
Except for him, who laughed with dim
Contempt on every feature.

“I’ll dare, I’ll go, and I’ll return,
Its hide tied to my shins,”
Atop the crag, Corn Stalk would brag,
Between his foolish grins.

And this was who they planned for me.
I needed to escape
Into the forest, seek the poorest
Woods of wild grape.

To worry, weep, work schemes to win
More independent ends,
With clinging vines of muscadines
Around me for my friends.

Instead, I stopped atop the bridge,
Gazed down and thought, “What if…?”
But through the air, I felt it stare,
There perched above the cliff.

Deferring to my shy despair,
Unrolling from a bead,
Descending the peak, it dove, to seek
Some foredoomed fish to bleed;

Some shelter on a sunken shelf;
Some ship in ruins, wrecked.
I shook with awe at what I saw –
This beast had shown respect!

I hesitated, fascinated,
Prepared myself to dive
Into that cease which promised peace –
And to be bled alive.

Scant moments passed while Long Man River
Received my last confession.
I held my breath, intent on death.
Abruptly a procession

Of girls and huntsmen armed with blowguns
Appeared and fired a dart,
Rudely intruding on my brooding,

Broken, hopeless heart.

A handful danced in full regalia,
Their faces painted red.
They followed after cruel laughter –
Corn Stalk at the head.

And as I scurried off the bridge,
Replaced by that bad actor,
It heard me cry, the Great Leech, my
Behemoth benefactor.

It heard my would-be husband shout,
Stopping at mid-ledge,
“I take the name, ‘He Knows No Shame!’”
As he approached the edge.

The placid surface roiled then
As froth spewed higher, higher –
My self-assured warrior lured
Like a rash moth into fire.

The hunters with their dancing girls
Fussed dumbly while he fumed
And wagged bare toes. Huge waves arose –
And Corn Stalk was consumed.

The Leech Place is my haven now.
The line and hook are cast.
From bridge to dam I drift. I am
A No Man’s Land, at last.

I daydream while my Great Leech basks.
Hiwassee goes on streaming.
I glide. I gloat. I gladly float
Where Corn Stalk went down screaming.

James Owens

A Translation from the French of “The Unhappy Ones” by Louise Ackermann

The trump has sounded. In each gaping tomb
The faded corpses' hearts have suddenly leapt.
They rise, fast emptying the graves whose gloom
And quiet have sheltered their dust as it slept.
But some of the dead hold still to that charnel place;
They've heard, but neither the blast of divine breath
Nor the angel urging them home to holy grace
Persuades them from their earth.

“What? Live again? See sky and sun again,
Those witnesses of unforgotten grief,
Who smiled upon our sorrows and our pain
And offered no relief?

“No! Rather Night, the dark, Night everlasting!
Old Chaos's daughter, shield us beneath your wing,
And Death, sister of Sleep, who grants childlike rest,
Do not deliver us, but let us cling,
Held close, against your breast.

“That hour when you, Death, came we forever bless.
How sweet to our brow was your healing kiss!
Both life and the void had been equally barred,
But sympathetic arms opened for us;
Our only friend appeared.

“Wind-beaten and gasping, ill with every harm,
We had a long voyage to where you were.
Hope herself, at the worst hour of the storm,
Turned and left us there.

“We met only despair and doubt, astray
Where an uncaring world's waves surged and tossed;
Where others lingered, enchanted on their way,
We wandered, weeping and lost.

“Youth passed us by, empty-handed, no first,
Festive joys for us, for us no smile of greeting.
The springs of love retreated from our thirst,
As if springtime water failed, desired but fleeting.
Along our burning paths, no bloom ever woke.
And if, to ease our steps, some cherished thing
Offered support en route, how soon it broke
Beneath our touch; our hearts' lonesome need
Transformed every staff to a collapsing reed.
A sightless hand pushed always, relentless,
Toward the pit that Fate had dug for us.
Ever at our sides marched inflexible Sorrow,
Like a hangman fearing to see us escape.
Each place that could feel felt a wound gape,
And blind Chance knew where to aim a blow.

“Perhaps we have a right to heaven's pleasures?
But no, Hell can offer us little to dread,
For our sins have not merited our tortures:
If we have fallen short, we have already paid.
Lord, we renounce even our last ambition
Of seeing the glories of your holy reign.
We must refuse to seek your consolation,
And want no reward for earthly pain.

“We know that you can give wings to souls
That bent beneath a weight too heavy to bear,
Raise them to you, released from mortal coils—
You can, at will, in grace and loving care.
You could install even us in the first round
Of those at your feet, the choirs that sound your praise,
Dress us in your transfiguring glory, crowned
By angels at your command, beneath your gaze.
You could pierce us with new vitality,
Restore to us the lost desire for life...
Yes, but that undying thorn of Memory
That wounds our hearts, will you remove that grief?

“If the sacred order of cherubim should greet
Us as your elect, open the gates in their keeping,
We would cry out in a voice thick with weeping:
'We—elect? Happy? These eyes explain our plight:
Tears flow there, bitter tears; unnumbered they fall.
No matter what you may do, this thick, dark pall
Hides heaven from our sight.'

“Why would you, against its will, revive this dust?
What have we been to you? What would you gain?
Your gifts no longer seem welcome or just,
After a lifetime of pain.

“You bore down too hard in your cruel rage,
And now our suffering has vanquished Faith.
Eternal power, let us sleep an endless age.
Let us forget that we ever drew breath.”

Kevin Rainbow

A Translation from the Russian of “Love” by Vyacheslav Ivanov

We are two storm-ignited tree-trunks, we
Two blazes of a single midnight forest;
We are two night-transpiercing meteors,
An arrow of two points - one destiny.
We are two horses reined unfailingly
By just one hand, pricked by a single spur.
Two eyes that with a single vision stare,
Two fluttering pinions of one fantasy.

We are two shades - a pair who mourn a loss
Over the marble of a grave divine,
Where ancient Beauty lies in deep repose.
The two-voiced lips of single-secret troths,
The single Sphinx of our own selves' design.
We are two arms upon a single cross.

David J. Rothman

Sonnets from the Sequence “Keep the Harp” in *Orpheus Looks Back*

In memoriam Emily Desire Gaynor Rothman, 1967-2020.

Erect No Monument

Yes—*Errichtet keinen Denkstein*. What’s more,
However, don’t you see? Stop praising me
At all. Praise what you should. Praise her. Don’t bore
Me with more roses in my memory.
I loved Eurydice, a love I proved
By making her immortal though she died.
If you loved Em, then you’ll sing what she loved
Because she loved it. Sing about yóur bride.
Here, take my harp. It’s tuned. Put into words
The way that she could imitate the whinny
Of a horse, the flash of spring bluebirds
That brought her joy, her MA thesis on
Arts education, love of Chai made skinny.
Sing what only you can sing, now that she’s gone.

“Come avrebbe potuto dire Dante, anche se in italiano, ‘Innamorarsi’”

With you was like that moment few if any
Have ever seen, when a slender root,
Grown fat and purposeful across its many
Summers, muscles up into a brute
Vitality that will not be denied,
And, growing, pushing in the rich darkness,
One little battle against stone that’s tried
To pave our lives into the straight and narrow,
Cracks the concrete some think has contained
The messiness of life, but can’t, because
Time may be slow but cannot be restrained
By any stone that will be, is, or was.
Who can know the change a small seed makes?
Roots grow silently. Then pavement breaks.”

“A Note of Thanks from the Head of Crested Butte Academy, Expressing Gratitude to a Major Donor for the Support of David Chodounsky, NCAA DI Slalom Champion, U.S. Super G Champion, Four-Time U.S. Slalom Champion and Two-Time Olympian”

He was the best young slalom skier I
Had ever seen. Just twelve, but when he ran
Gates anyone who had a racer’s eye
Could see that he had talent and a plan.
Out of the scores of students at the school,
Ambitious athletes all, he still stood out.
Quiet, intense, he mastered every rule.
Great kid. Of course the other schools found out.
When he began to win some bigger races
Those schools came calling, gushing cash like fountains.
It was impossible to match such places.
It looked like he’d leave us for other mountains.
“Em,” I said, “this boy deserves this bet…”
OK, she said, and never once expressed regret.

Tsunamis

There are some poets who have captured lovers
Fighting. I don't mean the humor in
Kat and Petruchio, or Beatrice
And Benedict, but the distress that hovers
Behind what makes no sense at first, our thin-
Voiced reason powerless to keep the peace.
I don't mean talking in bed. I mean the slow
Burn of some monstrous resentment that lingers
And eats away at everything that's good.
You know the way that these things tend to go:
Some small remark that seems like nothing triggers
Tsunamis from earthquakes of childhood.
There were moments when she seemed to lose her mind.
Me too. But look, we did come through. Eros is blind.

M.I. Devine

A BOMB IN A CATHEDRAL

“At the trial of God, we will ask: why did you allow all this?
And the answer will be an echo: why did you allow all this?”
–Ilya Kaminksy, *Deaf Republic*

November 14, 1940: here’s the church, and here’s the steeple. Here’s Coventry’s medieval cathedral. See the Luftwaffe drop the bombs; see them fall on top of the people.

Or, as an eyewitness told the BBC, a mere fourteen-year-old girl: “I saw a dog running down the street with a child’s arm in its mouth. There were lines of bodies stretched out on blankets.”

Lines of bodies: they make me think of the poet Philip Larkin. Eighteen years old, his lines of poetry. Larkin: this was your town. You saw it go. The end of the old forms (a cathedral), and the birth of the new (lines of bodies).

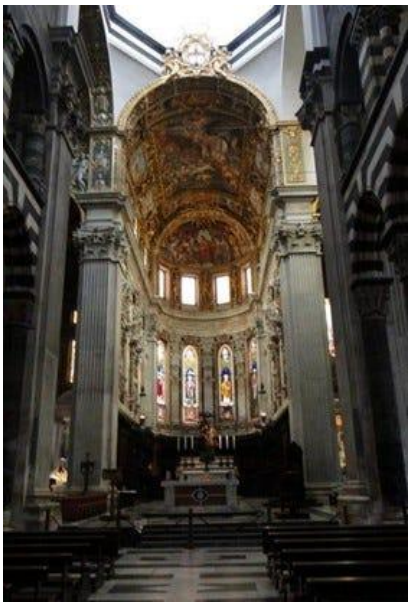
Even a child can see: Obliteration has its own geometry, its echoes of shape and form.

How does one write among the rubble? How do you even begin to try? Larkin, did you ask the girl: What shall we do with all these lines?

Maybe that's art. A way to save a world we know will fall apart.

*

I think of another church. Another time.



I'm in a cafe in Genoa. Fall, 2019. A tourist, I tour the Italian city's famous cathedral, Duomo di Genova, Cattedrale di San Lorenzo, and say a prayer to a bomb that stands unexploded there. The British Navy delivered it here three months after Coventry was broken, blown up, and burned. The bomb tore open a wall in the cathedral but did not explode. Call it a miracle. People do. Quiet it stands like a saint in its niche, stands like a sentinel.

(*This bomb, launched by the British Navy, though breaking through the walls of this great cathedral, fell here unexploded on February 9, 1941. In perpetual gratitude, Genoa, the City of Mary, desired to engrave in stone the memory of such grace.)*

Tonight we hear music.

A band covers Pearl Jam and Italians sing along and we do, too. Things change by not changing at all, sings this Eddie Vedder, in "Elderly Woman Behind the Counter in a Small Town." And though he's singing about a woman behind a counter, like a painting by Hopper, I think of forms and how they're not their former.

And for the first time in a long time that I can remember, I think about how a poem, or a song, is like a bomb that is still a bomb and not a bomb at all. (It's a miracle.)

The bomb is shaped like the roof of a church, or the shape of your hands forming a steeple.

*

Pray to the unexploded bomb in the Genoa cathedral because it's a miracle, because it's a form for measuring time like a sonnet; and it lets time do what time does to every form, which is simply this: It makes forms legible. That's what happens to forms over time: Change by not changing at all. You read them and read them again and they are not as they were and you are not as you were. All things become new and possible. A sonnet. A bomb. A bomb in a cathedral.

*

Make it new! says Ezra Pound, repeating the Shang dynasty's first king (1766-1753 BC). Things change by not changing. A modernist manifesto; a slogan on the washbasin of a king.

But here's the thing: When I think of Larkin at eighteen writing sonnets while a city explodes and the dog makes off with the child's arm in its mouth and the bodies are lined up and history will not turn, will not turn like a volta, and will not end like a sonnet with the comfort of a couplet, I think of a poet practicing an elegy for form's failure; the balding young man will write a song of loss for what art cannot save, cannot protect (and maybe never could), no matter its dream, no matter the glory it entertained; I think of him looking up at high windows (which used to be there) and looking higher and even higher; and all that I mean is that I think of poetry of endurance and failure. Endurance and failure. That poets build little rooms in houses on fire: To show you not that it burns but to show you instead the shape of the fire.

*

"The little room of the sonnet serves as an echo chamber and amplifier." That's Adam Kirsch. And here's Larkin, in his famous church, in "Church Going," the one he enters once "I am sure there is nothing going on":

> Mounting the lectern I peruse a few
> Hectoring large-scale verses and pronounce
> 'Here endeth' much more loudly than I'd meant.

> The echoes snigger briefly.

Is this the end? The echo chamber of the poem mocks the question. Someone like you has been here before. Has mounted and pronounced more loudly than he meant. Sure, maybe the church, now empty, has changed. But maybe it's better to set the darkness echoing. Things change by not changing at all.

Or as I put it in my own recent homage to "Church Going" at *Literary Matters*:

> You'd think that absence is one way to know
> for sure there's nothing going on. You're wrong.

Friedrich Kittler rewrites Barthes: "Record grooves dig the grave of the author." But it's surely the other way around: The author turns every grave into a new groove. The needle falls, the echo resounds: yes yes y'all.

Above, you'll find James Joyce, Michael Robbins, and Seamus Heaney in the queue. But don't blame me, dear reader; I'm but a discourse network.

(I don't mean to but I do.)

*

Larkin the teenager trained in the sonnet form, a tutor text for him in how forms change by not changing: little rooms, often literal waiting rooms, where the speaker finds himself in conflict. With time. With the stinging awareness of being human. Human limits.

Larkin's at his best in bedroom poems like "Aubade" and "Sad Steps," where he refuses to look at the light (but then doesn't refuse). Old man poems came to him, more or less, as a teenager. Perhaps he was bemused, and that's surely not the right word, by his body (a cage), his country (a cage), and his family (ditto). "Why aren't they screaming?" Larkin asked about the elderly in his fifties. But the question was a selfie of sorts for the poet long before, a ringing in the ears, an echo in his sonnets.

Take, for example, the unpublished "Autobiography at an Air-Station" (1953), a summary of his apprentice years. Airplanes could be triggering for someone who lived through the 1940s, but not here. Here is modern deliverance, its promise

and threat, which is just another way to say, in Larkin's world: Behold, the dream of bureaucracy.

"Autobiography" reminds us the sonnet was "the first lyric form since the fall of the Roman Empire intended not for music or performance but for silent reading. As such, it is the first lyric of self-consciousness, or of the self in conflict." That's Paul Oppenheimer in *The Birth of the Modern Mind*. And here's Larkin at the airport, waiting, waiting, ordered and orderly, like a modern man: We "sit in steel chairs, buy cigarettes and sweets."

For Larkin the sonnet is a form for mapping a modern logic onto the page: its coordinates modern forms, like the steel chair, lines of people, lines of bodies, repetition, incomprehensibility, and, of course, quiet rage. Look around, Larkin seems to say, it's hard to get started, it's hard to even begin.

> Delay, well, travelers must expect
> Delay. For how long? No one seems to know.
> With all the luggage weighed, the tickets checked,
> It can't be long… We amble to and fro,
> Sit in steel chairs, buy cigarettes and sweets
> And tea, unfold the papers. Ought we to smile,
> Perhaps make friends? No: in the race for seats
> You're best alone. Friendship is not worth while.

No "I" is present here. You're a traveler, you're at their (whose?) mercy, and, please, try not to make a fuss. There's a way of doing things, you guess (though no one seems to really know).

The English sonnet is a way of doing things: proxy for safety and a semblance of order that always in Larkin unravels. "We" gives way soon enough, questions pile up, and delaying caesuras of each line finally hit a roadblock "No" in line seven right at the sonnet's turn.

Sonnets of the air are not such rare birds. There's W.B. Yeats's "Leda and the Swan." Like Yeats, Larkin opts for an Italian sestet (efg/efg) to advance the second part in a poem where no one goes anywhere at all. It's how you make things fall apart, in a way, or do what bombs do by undoing what we think can't be undone. From English to Italian form, Larkin plays with forms, to unspool, disrupt, and

scramble. What, exactly? Hope for progress: for comfort, closure, the couplet. Lines of words, lines of bodies that might go somewhere turn instead into dimmer and dimmer versions of themselves, echoes like a stepping into sleep, into darkness, into night. Couple(t)s get erased, grow distant, paler. “The thousands of marriages,” writes Larkin elsewhere, “lasting a little while longer.”

What do you do in the face of this?

Delay, delay: That is the name of the modern game after all. The machine breaks down. Delay. Delay. Repetition as endlessness, as alienation. “Literature,” writes Chris Forster in *Modernism and Its Media*, “is that which is expunged from the bureaucratized realms….”

But what if lines can overcome lines through lines? What if, in the poet’s hands, the old forms help us discover something new? Something true?

To put it another way: morning is coming, light is breaking. And the poem becomes a form to beat them at their own game. Art makes nothing happen, the lines of bodies stay lines of bodies, but can it at least help you save your life? Is that too much to ask? Perhaps. But you can give it a shot.

What’s it mean to delay, to write a sonnet, to create, to find a new groove, when you know you can’t make anything stop? No one seems to know how, seems to know anything at all. But still we try and in trying try to keep it all at bay. We wait for it. We write in handcuffs. We live that way.

*

Old things turn into something new, a bomb, a sonnet, a cathedral. Forms, it’s true, can parody what we think we can get out of them (protection, security) in a world where fire drops from the sky and no one, not one person is safe. The dog runs down the street and takes the child’s arm away. The little girl sees it all.

Bodies line the street, parody of geometry.

Larkin’s is a poetry of killing time, in every sense of the word. Of course, that’s what art does. Here comes the morning, and another day. The sonnet, in Larkin’s hand, becomes an app for measuring that: anticipating, remembering, dreading, forgetting. Ignoring. Is there a better definition of art? It’s a way of enduring.

In Larkin's "Autobiography at an Air-Station," life is a race for seats, the looking ahead to your own transcendence, your flight, the god-machine that will ravish you, salvage you, transform you, the modern form that will snatch you up like a swan.

No. No such luck.

Here's the volta, the sonnet's turn into, what else?, time and what ifs.

> Six hours pass: if I'd gone by boat last night
> I'd be there now. Well, it's too late for that.
> The kiosk girl is yawning. I feel staled,
> Stupified, by inaction - and, as light
> Begins to ebb outside, by fear; I set
> So much on this Assumption. Now it's failed.

We're brought through the sestet into the sixth hour of delay; six lines are left, and you're at sixes (and then at sevens). We are in real time here, not unlike waking at 4 a.m. in "Sad Steps" in line four of the poem ("Four o'clock: wedge shadowed gardens lie / Under a cavernous, a wind-picked sky").

Aubade: obey. Time is a cage, and this preoccupies Larkin from his teen years to his final "Aubade," half a century, the idea of time and form, art as a system of deliverables that never quite does deliver. But it tries. Endures. Measures. Waits for. We wait for what, precisely?

Darkness swarms; travelers yawn; the doodling poet, feeling "staled," will repeat the theme of time's chains that hold him fast for the rest of his career:

> I set
> So much on this Assumption. Now it's failed.

It's a powerful conclusion in "Autobiography," no doubt, like Stevie Smith's own famous ending for her most famous poem, "I was much too far out all my life / And not waving but drowning." Larkin, raised among ruins that were once for prayer, and high windows (that used to be there), knew something about endings.

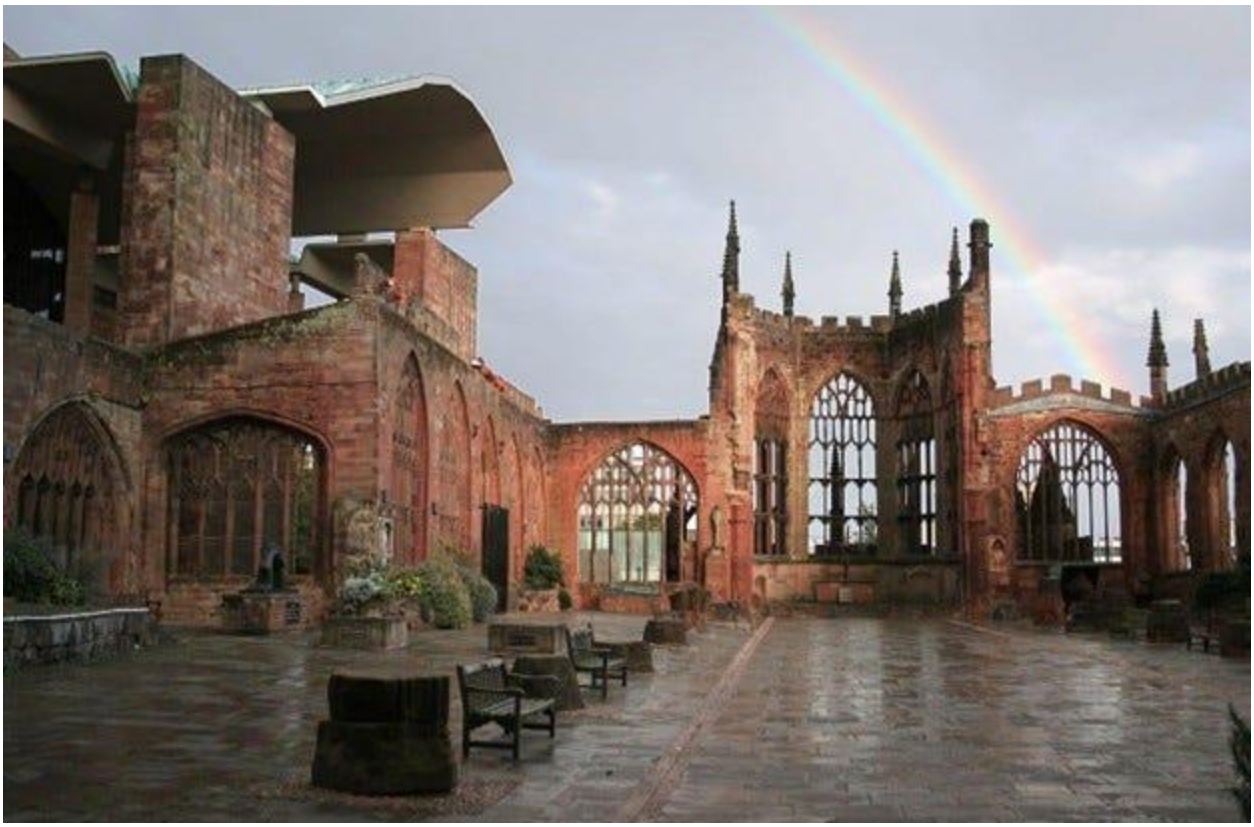
*

His critical writing, mostly, is a fight for formal bonds that bind us together in mutual survival and struggle. He's against those who are against that. It's why he elegizes (the past? churches? belief?) in "Church Going," and why you feel a sonnet haunting "Sad Steps," which takes, it turns out, its title from a sonnet by Sidney.

Though he'd soon leave the sonnet behind, too practiced in its deflations and counterpoints, it's where he learned to measure time, lighten its weight, and wait for the light.

Both Larkin and poetic forms–the tradition passed down to us; in short, what we can do with lines–grew up and were revised in a time of war. It's important to remember that. How fire fell from air. How high windows were windows that were no longer there. It's important to remember that. Every poem is a cathedral with its unexploded bomb–like a saint in a niche. In "Autobiography," nothing happens, which is what's most terrifying. There is no sudden realization. No explosion. No apparition at the air-station. Or not yet.

To write in form today is merely–is always and only–to be a self calling out, "Here endeth." Maybe it's what it's like to be a bat. (Robbins, again, real quick: "Augustine cautions against taking this / literally… // But still. What's it like to be a bat?"). To sound the depths. To echolocate. Or maybe a bomb. Like bombs, we seek to declare, pronounce, decide, and destroy. To say life ends at death like that is it. And we call out, we call out much louder than we thought. That we might be louder than bombs. Here endeth. That's the kind of poem I want to read. Here endeth. And that's the kind of poem I want to write. A poem that's tragic, for sure, something to grow wise in. After all, the echo says, "death." Here endeth: the echo says "death." But no (here's the volta): I want a poem that's not just tragic, but something more, something grander, stranger, funnier, wilder, something deeply obsolete, which is to say, true. Because somewhere someone–a child, a witness, a poet–will forever be surprised by a hunger that "Here endeth" is not enough. That it simply will not–cannot, must not–do.



Claudia Gary

The Dance of a Breeze: Auditory Imagery in Rhina P. Espaillat's Sonnet "As If Some Jaded Reader"

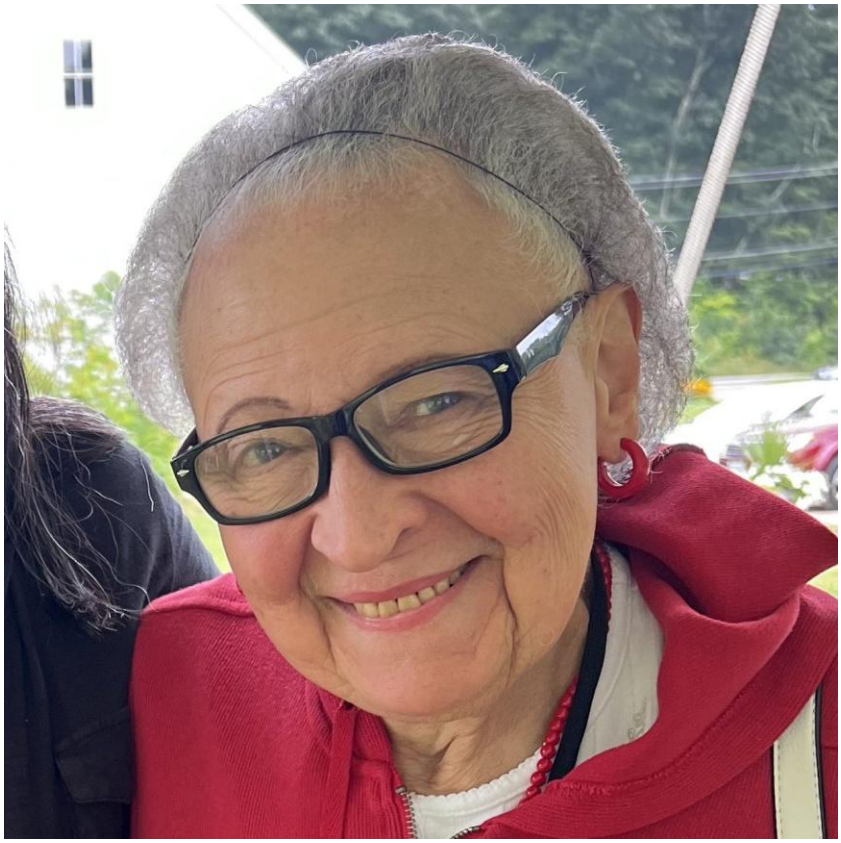


Photo of Rhina Espaillat Courtesy of Zina Gomez-Liss

Claudia Gary presented an earlier version of this essay at the 2024 conference of the Association of Literary Scholars, Critics, and Writers.

In her sonnets and other poems, Rhina P. Espaillat often combines visual imagery with sound so dynamically that she recreates in the reader the motion she describes on the page. Espaillat, originally from the Dominican Republic, has spent her entire adult life in the USA as a teacher and poet, writing in both English and Spanish as well as translating between the two. As a translator, besides bringing such masters as Richard Wilbur and Robert Frost into Spanish, she has introduced a number of treasured Spanish poets to English-speaking readers. But in the present poem, "As If Some Jaded Reader," Espaillat's use of the word "translate" vividly demonstrates her understanding that translation involves more than language.

As If Some Jaded Reader*
by Rhina P. Espaillat

As if some jaded reader browsed the air,
riffled the pages of our summer trees,
and finding nothing worth perusing there
tossed every folio aside, the breeze
dismisses lightly what the light translates
from soil and water into each green tongue
the maple speaks. Its passing agitates
the leaves, but leaves them in their softly sung
monotony, impatient with the way
they, too, repeat themselves, like earthly hours.
This wind turns and returns, worries the day,
exhorting it to harness greater powers,
contrive a darker plot, matter less thin,
confront some story eager to begin.

Espaillat begins: "As if some jaded reader browsed the air…." Harnessing the tension inherent in a compact form such as the sonnet (which she has described elsewhere as an opportunity to "dance in a box"), she describes a breeze that "riffled the pages of our summer trees." This personified breeze at first found "nothing worth perusing there [and] tossed every folio aside…." But the trees, defying the wind's bored agitation, remain monotonous. This remark, which appears at the sonnet's volta, seemingly taunts the wind to intensify.

Throughout the poem, Espaillat goes beyond narrative, using auditory and visual qualities in tandem to create a wild dance of the senses and intellect. In her orchestration, the imagery interacts with the sound of the poem itself — a clear iambic pentameter but with metrical variations that track the wind's drive through the scene, portraying it as a specific rhythmic pattern. This pattern of trochee-iamb first appears at the beginning of line 2 ("riffled the pag[es]"), then twice in succession on line 11 ("turns and returns, worries the day"), and finally at the end of line 13 ("matter less thin"). True to personification as a reader, the wind—in sonic form—follows the path a reader would take through this poem, making a graceful entrance on the upper left side, later assuming center stage, and finally departing on the lower right.

Between the wind's first auditory appearance on line 2 and its main performance on line 11, we experience instances in which Espaillat's images refuse to stand still. Her playful use of repetition and homonyms—including between adverbs and nouns, and between nouns and verbs —guarantees that even the slightest motion becomes a transformation: "the breeze / dismisses lightly what the light translates" and soon afterward "Its passing agitates / the leaves, but leaves them in their softly sung / monotony…" Throughout the poem there is a continuous rippling motion, thanks to the ongoing interplay between sound and image.

At the end, after "This wind turns and returns, worries the day," it seeks to "contrive a darker plot, matter less thin, / confront some story eager to begin." By the time we reach this final couplet, the reader has experienced these sights, sounds, and concepts in such a way as to question whether such everyday occurrences in nature can possibly be ordinary. And in Rhina Espaillat's eyes, ears, and voice, nothing is ever ordinary.

**NVR thanks Rhina Espaillat for the permission to republish her sonnet "As If Some Jaded Reader." It originally appeared in the Winter 2006 issue of The Dark Horse.*

Susan Delaney Spear

Ad Fontes: Measure By Measure

Susan Delaney Spear originally presented this essay at *Think*'s Critical Paths Symposium in 2023.

The Common Core State Standards (corestandards.org. 2010) for the English Language Arts define what students should understand and be able to do by the end of each grade. They correspond to the skills needed for college and career readiness. All public-school teachers are expected to create lessons that will ensure their students meet the standards. For example: "L.7.1c. Place phrases and clauses within a sentence, recognizing and correcting misplaced and dangling modifiers" means that English teachers must teach phrases, clauses, and modifiers beginning in seventh grade. The standards are a scaffolded guide for what to teach, not how to teach. The standards for reading, writing, speaking, and listening increase in complexity each year. Reading and writing verse is a highly effective means to teach students to read more closely and to write more precisely, but the standards do not mention poetry as a stand-alone genre. While we teach the classical tools of rhetoric and composition, the study and writing of poetry has devolved into a scattershot of random classroom activities. Skim this mash-up list of classroom suggestions from the Poetry Society UK and Edutopia, a respected teacher website.

- Draw on students' life experiences.
- Encourage students to close their eyes to imagine.
- Teach the importance of drafting.
- Use free writing exercises.
- Write your own poems and share them.
- Teach the terms of poetry [notice this does not say "practice writing"].
- Encourage students to be specific.
- Encourage students to put themselves in their poems.
- Create a school poem and ask each student to contribute one line.
- Give students a list of words and ask them to create a poem using those words.
- Encourage students to write in the voice of someone else—a parent, friend, or teacher.
- Hold poetry workshops where students discuss one another's work.

- Have your students write short poems, put them in balloons, and set them free.
- Have students write a poem in the style of a particular poet.

However well-intentioned, these suggestions preclude the heart of the matter. Would a good teacher in any discipline, say social studies, geometry, or dance teach in this way? These activities emphasize classroom fun, students' feelings, and a misunderstood sense of freedom.

When I taught high school English from 2002-2011, teachers introduced poems purely to discuss their meaning, and poetry pedagogy had been like that for decades. Except for a brief poetry unit during students' ninth grade year, poems were absent or at best taught as an introduction to a novel, a short story, or a unit in a social studies' classroom to enhance the theme of the main lesson. I used poems this way, too. The more poetry, the better. Right? But, the craft of poetry was rarely, if ever, discussed. The notable exception was the nod to iambic pentameter when reading Shakespeare, explained merely as ka-Thump ka-Thump ka-Thump ka-Thump ka-Thump.

English teachers, excellent ones, even those who love poetry, do not know how to teach the craft. I was one of them. To my knowledge, there are no required courses in a Secondary English Education Major concerning poetry pedagogy. Therefore, most English teachers do not fully understand meter and form. English literature textbooks include famous poems and list poetry terms in a glossary, and these may help teachers and students to identify a particular form and meter, but in no way are they sufficient to teach a student to write in verse because they do not provide a curriculum or a method. Teachers are left to flounder. The result is that English Language Arts classrooms have forfeited their role in teaching the pulse of poetry: measure.

Recently while traveling by airplane, I listened to a conversation among three passengers behind me: a mother, her young daughter, and another woman whom they had just met. The daughter prattled on and on about her cat, and I was digging in my bag for my earbuds when the girl said with song-like enthusiasm: *When she was an itty, bitty, kitty*…. Before she could finish the thought the two older women (and I) were laughing. The women could not have explained their laughter, and I couldn't have explained mine either without reflection. The young girl had described her cat in a perfect line of trochaic pentameter that contained three rhyming words. Later that same day I listened as

Dana Gioia explained the ability of poetry to cast a spell. The girl's banal banter had suddenly cast a glittering feline spell. We were instantly charmed, not by the storied cat, but by the rhythm and rhyme of words. If I had turned around and congratulated the girl on her perfect line of trochaic pentameter that included three rhyming words, I would have spoiled the charm of the moment.

However, this is precisely what we must do in the classroom. Not spoil the pleasure of language—teach measure. This is the most direct way to let the English language with all her charms appear again and again. This morning I listened to Kevin Young, Poetry Editor of *The New Yorker*, and Vijay Seshadri, a Pulitzer Prize-winning poet, discuss Sylvia Plath's poem "The Moon and the Yew Tree" on the *New Yorker Poetry Podcast*. Seshadri shared that he has read Plath's work for many years and has realized that the spots that "dazzle" him are the spots where "he hears the music" of the language. The question is: Why does that require a moment of realization? Because for far too long, we have focused primarily on what poems mean rather than what they do or on how we can teach students the tools of writing them. Various names have been used for these tools—prosody, versification, form, but I will use the word versecraft.

Today, we muddle the difference between "poetry" and "verse." We tend to conflate the terms. In his *Defense of Poesy*, though, Sir Philip Sidney (1554-1586, remember him?) differentiates between verse and true poetry.

> …I speak to show that it is not riming and versing that makes a poet—no more than a long gown makes an advocate, who, though he pleaded in armor, should be an advocate and no soldier—but it is that feigning notable images of virtues, vices, or what else, with that delightful teaching, which must be the right describing note to know a poet by. Although indeed the *senate of poets has chosen verse as their fittest raiment*, meaning, as in matter they passed all in all, so in manner to go beyond them; not speaking, table-talk fashion, or like men in a dream, words as they chanceably fall from the mouth, but peizing [weighing—ed.] each syllable of each word by just proportion, according to the dignity of the subject.

Sidney argues that in addition to well-ordered words a true poem includes "delightful teaching" of virtue. (Nota bene: this also has fallen out of favor.) We cannot teach students to write poems so stunning in content and craft that they "make (our) whole bodies so cold that no fire will ever warm (us)," which is Emily Dickinson's definition of poetry, but we can teach students to write verse. As

Sidney says: “The senate of poets has chosen verse as their fittest raiment.” So, we teach students the tools of the craft. The rest is up to the students’ talent, hard work, and ultimately their aesthetic choices in service of their own craft.

Likewise, in *A Poet’s Glossary* (2014), Edward Hirsch defines poetry as: “an inexplicable (though not incomprehensible event in language through words.” Note the difference between Hirsch’s definition of poetry and his definition of verse: “a metrical composition.... the poet disturbs language, arranging words into lines, into rows, turning them over, turning them toward each other, shaping them into patterns. Metrical writing is a way of charging sound, of energizing syllables and marking words, of rhythmically marking time.” According to Hirsch’s definition, verse is easily identified, but poetry eludes definition. Again, the former is much more readily taught.

The line of demarcation between prose and verse is measure. Meter is inherent in verse but not in prose. A poet is a maker. A poet makes poems. The raw materials are syllables, words, lines, and for millennia, meter and rhyme. If we fail to teach the rudiments of measure, we deprive students of meter, arguably the most powerful tool of the poet’s craft. I once heard Ernest Hilbert remark that A.E. Stallings “is a fully weaponized poet.” We laugh. And yet, where would the poets of the ages be without measure in their arsenals?

In the 20th and 21st centuries, metrical verse has fallen far from favor. There are a few journals, like *Think*, *Able Muse*, and *The Hudson Review* and others which consider versecraft as important as content, but for the most part, poems for journals such as *The Sun*, as strong as they may be rhetorically, are selected for their content, and however delightful, they read as prose. My use of the word “prose” is not a value judgment, for who would ever say in a derogatory fashion that Leo Tolstoy or Cormac McCarthy “only” wrote “prose”?

To equip future creative writers, we must teach them the tools poets have used throughout the ages. All of them. In addition to teaching rhyme in all its forms, enjambment, line breaks, caesura, all figures of speech, and rhetorical devices, for art’s sake, we must not ignore measure. Terry Brogan (*The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*) begins his long definition of poetry: “A poem is an instance of verbal art, a text set in verse, bound speech. More generally, a poem conveys heightened forms of perception, experience, meaning, or consciousness in heightened language, i.e. a heightened mode of discourse. Ends require means: to convey heightened consciousness requires heightened

resources.” Measure is one fundamental means to the end of verbal art. Once the students have understood and practiced writing measured verse, their aesthetic sensibilities will be sharpened. They can then decide for themselves what best serves their craft.

Imagine: a music lesson with no explanation of time signatures, a drawing class with no study of line or form, a painting course with no instruction in color, a dance class with no basic steps or counting. Solid instruction in the arts always begins with the fundamentals. The art of poetry predates prose, literacy, and the printing press. For art’s sake, let’s travel back to the future, measure by measure. Ad fontes!

Most English teachers don’t need to be convinced of the importance of teaching metrics in the classroom, but their response is often “How?” Classroom teachers need both encouragement and guidance. I floundered around in the deep end for a few years myself before I studied meter in depth, beginning at Lighthouse Writers in Denver, then in the MFA Poetry Program at Western State University from 2010-2012. However, after many years of music lessons, I always knew counting was important, and I deeply regretted that my own early education did not include meter. So, I tried to bring it to my students.

“In medias res” is a great way to begin an epic, but not an effective strategy for teaching measure. My typical failure was to write the rudimentary scansion of a line of iambic pentameter on the whiteboard, then read a sonnet and ask the students to find the stresses. There were usually a few correct answers. But then…there were students who could not “hear” the stresses at all. They became frustrated and checked out. I spoke louder. I failed louder. Then there was always one bright student who asked, “What about this….” pointing to a headless line, a feminine ending, or a tri-syllabic substitution. I would explain as best I could, and the bright student would still be confused. The “in medias res” method was tilting at windmills.

Teaching students to write poetry requires a scaffolded curriculum and tried and true teaching methods. Here I offer a curriculum that begins at the beginning, literally, and a pedagogy that dismisses the popular “writers’ workshop.” These workshops are often no more than the blind leading the blind, and when students are honest, they will say they do not learn from them.

In 2010, through the Writers in the Schools Program, David Rothman visited Chatfield Senior High once a week. I invited him to present verse forms to students in three separate classes: freshmen honors English, Creative Writing, and AP English Language. Each week he presented a different form, in roughly the sequence they appeared in English: Anglo-Saxon Strong Stress Alliterative Meter, Ballad Meter, Classical Imitation such as sapphics and hendecasyllables, Iambic Tetrameter, Iambic Pentameter, Blank Verse, Triple Meters, Free Verse, Stanza Forms (three weeks), French and Italian Repeating Forms, finishing with The Sonnet. He introduced a brief history of the form and a poem. During the ensuing week, students wrote an exercise in the form. The weekly exercises were low stakes and presented to the students in that way. I would scan their exercises and add comments. When David returned the next week, he went over an exercise or two that I had commented upon, made copies of, and given to him and the students. The students did not earn the typical A, B, or C on these exercises. I marked their papers, circling mistakes in meter only, and recorded a check, check +, or check -. At the end of the semester, I averaged all the checks and assigned a number to figure into a percentage of their final grade. Each exercise was truly low stakes. All the exercises together comprised only a small portion of each student's final grade. No one's GPA suffered. The first epiphany was the value of teaching meter from its inception.

Think about it. In Anglo Saxon, the students had to identify three alliterating accents and one other accent, no counting syllables required. Their common mistakes were putting the accent on the wrong syllable of an alliterated word. (ex. Alliterating "transparent" with "tucked" when it is the "par" syllable in "transparent" that is accented.) This laid the groundwork for finding the lexical stressed syllables in lines. In Ballad Meter, the students had to recognize the accented syllables, but they still didn't have to count the total number of syllables per line. The end-rhyme in this form tends to promote the accented syllables a slight bit more, helping the students hear the accents.

Imitations of Classical Meter is admittedly an outlier, as it was in history. More students struggled with this form. I helped them during the week by writing the abstract form on a piece of paper and asking them to fill the line with any words they could to fit the pattern. No exceptions! At this early stage, sense does not matter as much as developing the students' sense of accented syllables in lines. Rejoice when a student matches words with the abstract metrical pattern. As one student wrote: "Love felt like lectures, lifeless, limpy noodles?" Well, alrighty then, I think you've got it. Perhaps not love, but a sapphic line.

Before we moved into actual accentual syllabics, we spent a week explaining the Robert Fitzgerald system of scansion. To this point we simply marked accents with a forward slash and S's and U's for stressed and unstressed in Classical Imitations. Scansion is the English class equivalent to the math class question: Do I have to show my work? Yes. Absolutely. It is imperative for students to scan the exemplar poems and their own work. These are the scales, arpeggios, and finger exercises of poetry. How does it seep into our systems? By careful attention to what previous artists have written.

The pathway into iambic tetrameter had been paved. And the transition was easy. Most students grew into hearing and counting accents and syllables with ease. I found this was the strategic time to explain headless lines and feminine endings. They were beginning to grasp the rhythms of English and the transitions from line to line. We celebrated their successes, but we also celebrated their mistakes. When I read through the students' exercises, I found one or two that contained common mistakes among the entire class. When David went over the poem the next week in class, he discussed the "hot" issue. On other days, I reviewed the "mistake of the week." I wrote a line on the board, and we brainstormed metrical solutions. Did I mention that the students were having fun? There was hard work and laughter. Well, one complained, but he's now 30 with a Ph.D. in the medical field and still jokes with me on Facebook about poetry. No harm done.

The transition into iambic pentameter was a tad rougher than I thought for an unexpected reason. Their ears for meter were now tuned enough to hear when a line began to cave in, and after the relative ease of a four-foot line, they told me they struggled to write what they considered to be a "good" five-foot line. But they also had successes. Here are the first five lines of one student poem—"Soliloquy of Annabel Lee":

> The sea, it washed upon my toes and legs
> As darkness crept and slithered down my spine.
> The cold of blankets not of wool but wind—
> The wind was not but breath—caressed my skin
> With death. The sun went down and I—I wept.

This student wrote a lovely blank verse exercise. We moved on into triple meter, and when one student said, "I don't get it," another responded, "Think Dr. Seuss." We were off and running.

The move into stanza forms of various lines then became a deeper study of the rhythm of each line and how lines formed the stanzas. How different a tercet from a quatrain! The French and Italian repeating forms were easier to tackle when the students had already studied how verse in English had evolved from measuring stresses and alliteration to counting accents and syllables. This is the pedagogical revelation: teaching meter to the uninitiated is significantly more effective if taught as the meter and forms developed chronologically in English.

Teaching meter offered an insight into all writing pedagogy: the workshop model, touted as best practice by educators, does not work. Putting students into groups and telling them to critique each other's poems or essays is effective only for the exceptionally advanced students. Far more effective is for the teacher to select several student drafts and go over them with the entire class. When the teacher explains the strengths and weaknesses of a piece of writing, the students can look at their own drafts with fresh understanding. Again, the focus must be on craft before content. As I used this whole group practice more and more, I learned to skim through the week's exercises and select pieces that contained common mistakes. All the students learned from one another's mistakes. I stressed the importance of mistakes. In verse, as in life, looking at mistakes is how we learn. Mistakes are a means of growth.

I taught verse in this manner for ten years at Colorado Christian University. To reduce anxiety in the classroom, I created a schedule. Each student knew which day his or her exercise would be critiqued. If there was time left over on a particular day, students would often ask if we could look at their draft too. When they understood that it was craft, not content, on which I was commenting, they were able to separate their feelings from their exercises and learn.

This worked so well in my creative writing class that I eventually carried it over into my composition courses. Likewise, I strategically selected several essay drafts according to the strengths and weaknesses of each class and looked at them with the group. If the class struggled to develop a strong thesis, I went over a strong and weak paper, making suggestions. I asked permission of the students ahead of time or blocked the names. I came to depend entirely on models rather than workshops.

Teachers often ask me what to do when students "push back" against studying meter. I front load the curriculum by explaining that we are studying verse which

contains the fundamentals of poetry. I point out that everyone who studies a musical instrument plays scales, every runner puts in the miles, and on and on. Students understand, and it frees them from thinking that they must write like Shakespeare or share their deepest longings in their exercises.

Teachers without a background in verse may be reluctant. But they need not fear. With the proper materials and methods, they can guide the students and learn with them. At Chatfield Senior High, two other teachers were willing to do so. I dare say both teachers and their students had positive learning experiences. Public school teachers also may have concerns about covering all the curriculum before students take state and national tests. When I devoted time to versecraft in my public high school classroom, parents and students alike expressed anxiety about future test scores. In fact, scores went up. Studying meter is nothing if it is not intense, sustained focus on language—precisely what students need to succeed on the language portions of these high-stakes tests.

So I am calling for courses about versecraft in the Secondary English Education major. I am calling for teaching meter in public and private schools alike. It is not merely a part of a classical education. I am calling for a curriculum that builds sequentially and a pedagogy that is teacher-driven and whole class centered. I am advocating for young students, who like me at that age, recognized the rhythm and burnished beauty of a poem, but had no idea where to begin.

Let’s begin at the beginning. Ad Fontes.

Brian Brodeur

A Gnat's Horizon: On Brief Lyrics in Meter and Rhyme

In American poetry, lulls between esthetic achievements tend to encourage decadence rather than merciful silence. But brief lyrics can relieve poetic glut. As the young United States prospected for a literary identity distinct from its British forebears, Walt Whitman prepared ever-expanding editions of *Leaves of Grass* (1855-1892). While sections of "Song of Myself" and other long poems are indelible, much of Whitman's work suffers from diffuseness, a mania for protracted catalogs, which leaves the poet's famous yawp sounding logorrheic.

By contrast, Emily Dickinson composed the most abrupt and unsettling lyrics that this country has ever produced, often within a few jagged hymnal stanzas. Written between 1850 and 1886, these metaphysical dirges ring with savage economy, confronting both eros and agape. Dickinson's compression feels tectonic, as if she'd packed each phrase with radioactive ore. Enigmatic, terse, and terrifying, Dickinson was in her formidable prime when she wrote poem 714:

> No Man can compass a Despair –
> As round a Goalless Road
> No faster than a Mile at once
> The Traveller proceed –
>
> Unconscious of the Width –
> Unconscious that the Sun
> Be setting on His progress –
> So accurate the One
>
> At estimating Pain –
> Whose own – has just begun –
> His ignorance – the Angel
> That pilot Him along –

Misunderstood by even the most astute critics (John Crowe Ransom once dismissed her as "a little home-keeping person"), Dickinson developed her own method of truth-telling that, though slant, can induce a jolt of frisson cold enough to freeze the corpus callosum. She wrote this poem in 1863, her most prolific year, following a personal crisis about which scholars still speculate. Regardless

of its source, this crisis manifests in the poet's characterization of "a Despair" as a psychological condition no one can outpace. Faced with this "Goalless Road," one must "proceed" mile by mile, like an inmate circling a penitentiary yard.

Nor can one "Man" understand another's "Pain," not even Christ. If "He" is a representative Everyman capable only of "estimating" the despair of another, Dickinson's poem posits a vision of humanity bereft of empathy. But if "He" is God or God's son, then this poem confronts a cosmic snag beyond human understanding. Given Dickinson's invocation of two homophonic puns ("Sun"/"Son" and "pilot"/"Pilate"), Christ in the second stanza appears to be "setting" out on his own "progress" through the haphazard trials of earthly existence. Dispatched by "the One" (God), Christ no longer serves as redeemer but as an instrument through which God may experience pain. Like a voodoo doll in reverse, Christ embodies God's solution to "ignorance," his way of apperceiving human suffering as more than an abstract concept. A Calvinist might assume that revelation or salvation would result from such knowledge. But Dickinson, who repeatedly chose agnostic doubt over the delusions of pious certainties, was hardly orthodox in her beliefs.

Though subsequent generations did not realize the scope of Dickinson's achievement until Thomas H. Johnson published *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1955), early modernists looked to the brief lyric to lift poetry out of its nineteenth-century doldrums. Reacting against the vestigial Puritanism and vague idealism of the genteel tradition, Ezra Pound, HD, and other Imagists rescued poetry from Victorian frills, producing succinct lyrics with roots in Attic song and Japanese haiku:

> IN A STATION AT THE METRO
>
> The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
> Petals on a wet, black bough.

Pound's roughed-up couplet, with its loose tetrameters and assonant slant-rhyme, exemplifies the mechanistic efficiency then infiltrating so many areas of human activity. "Use no superfluous word," Pound scolded in 1913, three years before the Battle of the Somme.

After modernism gave way to postmodernism's long fallout, American poetry began again to wobble. During this period, which still informs poetry today, the

default modes became hermeticism (language poetry), populism (new formalism), self-obsession (confessionalism), incoherence (elliptical poetry), partisanship (identity poetics), and grievance (protest poetry). Midcentury masters were imitated without mastery; Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop, Gwendolyn Brooks, John Ashbery, Adrienne Rich and others were idolized in the church of academe by creative writing professors more interested in perpetuating mediocrity than in celebrating excellence. Seduced by French theorists like Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, and Jacques Derrida, many English Departments abandoned literature for philosophy. As a result, poetry drifted further from American life.

Now, a particularly aggressive symptom of poetic decadence is overabundance. Like compulsive shoppers clamoring through Costco, many of the most celebrated contemporary American poets display an almost pathological urge to pack individual poems with disjointed fragments, flabby backstory, sloppy commonplaces, fuzzy abstractions, gushing pathos, and pointless leaps. Poems and books of poems often feel bloated. (Of the twenty most recent Pulitzer Prize winning volumes, twelve contain more than ninety pages.) In the absence of meter and rhyme, many poems sound prolix, indifferent to the melic possibilities of formal play. Plagued by chatter and lax rhythms, much of what one finds in today's literary periodicals resembles notes for poems the poet lacked the discipline to write.

Thankfully, a few outliers continue to stimulate the ear with succinct forms. The poems I have in mind are epigrammatic without being epigrams. These poems are not satires or *vers de société*. They are not aphorisms, proverbs, or apothegms. These poems do not seek closure. Nor do they sprawl in shapeless strophes. As Dana Gioia wrote in an introductory piece on Robert Frost's "Nothing Gold Can Stay" (as fine a modern example as one can find), this type of lyric "usually tries to describe a single scene or develop a single idea with evocative finality." Brevity, in other words, becomes a means of achieving expansiveness. These lyrics are typically meditative, impersonal, metaphysical—chipping away at a complex idea until it breaks open. Longer than an epigram and shorter than a sonnet, these poems achieve in five to twelve lines what much bulkier poems attempt in larger forms, doing more with less.

To illustrate, I'll look at three midcentury touchstones before considering contemporary work. My first example appeared in Robert Hayden's third book, *A Ballad of Remembrance* (1962). This book also featured "Those Winter Sundays,"

the only poem many readers know by this undervalued poet capable of producing narratives as disturbing as “Night, Death, Mississippi,” historical sequences like “Middle Passage,” and visionary lyrics like “Frederick Douglass.” Here is that book’s briefest poem:

SNOW

Smooths and burdens,
Dangers, hardens.

Erases, revises.
Extemporizes

Vistas of lunar solitude.
Builds, embellishes a mood.

A harsh critic of “race poetry” in which “art is displaced by argument,” Hayden nevertheless adopts a racial metaphor as his central conceit. Without ever using the words “white” or “whiteness,” Hayden presents a variation on a theme less overtly naturalistic than Herman Melville’s whale or Frost’s spider. Yet Hayden’s poem in rhymed dimeter and tetrameter couplets proves more threatening than these prior figures. As an atmospheric condition, snow “burdens” a landscape. As a symbol of oppression devised in the middle of the Civil Rights Movement, snow’s whiteness suppresses its chromatic opposite, threatening to erase an entire race.

But, considering Hegel’s *Herrschaft und Knechtschaft*, Hayden’s conception of whiteness, as it dominates and suppresses, also cancels itself out. If the whole landscape “smooths” to white, there is no way to discriminate one object from another. Monochrome, the world becomes a void. Even the Romantic sonority of “lunar solitude” is tempered by the barren climate it engenders. Yet Hayden, through his extemporizing art, transforms this suffocation into something beautiful. The Latin root of “embellish” is *bellus* (handsome, pretty, fine)—an aesthetic condition which Hayden echoes through his clandestine slant-rhyming of “mood” with “moon.” Through the assonance of “lunar solitude,” which already has readers hearing “oo,” Hayden plants the word “moon” in the mind without ever saying it.

A generation after Hayden, Donald Justice shared the earlier poet's talent for devising subtly devastating tropes. Justice's second book *Night Light* (1962) also provides many examples of mimetic form, including an elegiac curtal villanelle ("Variation for Two Pianos") and a playful Horatian paean ("Ode to a Dressmaker's Dummy"). Justice's briefest poem consists of two syllabic tercets with five syllables per line:

> THE THIN MAN
>
> I indulge myself
> In rich refusals.
> Nothing suffices.
>
> I hone myself to
> This edge. Asleep, I
> Am a horizon.

Responding in 1978 to the erroneous notion that artifice of any kind in poetry should be considered "bogus," Justice reminded readers that "it was never the obligation of words […] to imitate conditions so reflexively." Yet this is exactly what Justice does in "The Thin Man," albeit from the opposite perspective; Justice would never conflate compositional sloppiness with naturalness of speech. Instead, the poet compresses a meditation about compression, stretching himself so thin that he becomes "a horizon": a honed line that spans an entire vista. Surely Justice had in mind the misapplication of Whitmanian sprawl by Justice's own contemporaries, the Beats. Allen Ginsberg, for example, in his most slapdash "First thought, best thought" poems, mistakes verbal exhibitionism for ecstatic vision. In "Footnote to Howl," which begins with multiple iterations of "Holy! Holy! Holy!," one wishes that Ginsberg had indulged in restraint rather than crowding his lines with the faux-mystical yammering and fatuous exclamations that afflict his most widely anthologized poems.

James Merrill shares with Justice a proclivity for formal play and elegant concision. Merrill routinely opened and closed individual volumes with brief lyrics such as "Nightgown," "Log," "Grass," and "Little Fallacy." These poems range from the elegiac "Dedication," which concluded Merrill's first mature book, *A Country of a Thousand Years of Peace* (1959), to "A Downward Look," which opened his last, *A Scattering of Salts* (1995). Perhaps the most memorable

of these poems is this quietly devastating lyric that extrapolates an entire cosmology from the typographical features of a single four-letter word:

> b o d y
>
> Look closely at the letters. Can you see,
> entering (stage right), then floating full,
> then heading off—so soon—
> how like a little kohl-rimmed moon
> *o* plots her course from *b* to *d*
>
> —as *y*, unanswered, knocks at the stage door?
> Looked at too long, words fail,
> phase out. Ask, now that body shines
> no longer, by what light you learn these lines
> and what the *b* and *d* stood for.

Merrill has often been criticized for emotional reserve. The same reticence can be found in other queer poets of his generation such as Bishop and Ashbery, each of whom avoided writing directly about their sexuality, perhaps in an effort to deflect what Langdon Hammer identifies in his magisterial biography of Merrill as the "scorn, social exclusion, blackmail, political suspicion, arrest, bullying, or worse brutality" that often resulted from being outed in the 1940s and 50s.

Merrill's restraint in "b o d y," however, conceals a deep despondency. The poet places both "b o d y" and spirit on the proverbial stage of life where the "*o*" of experience (the "O!" of ecstasy and "oh" of tedium) struts and frets from birth to death without an answer to that most fundamental question "*y*." The painful unrequitedness of this query is compounded by Merrill's having asked it while suffering from HIV/AIDS, the disease that would claim his life weeks before the publication of the book in which this poem appeared. As if removing his hand from a Ouija board's pointer, Merrill scrutinizes his own *b*[irth] and *d*[eath], letters and events that mirror each other, unsure what either sign might signify. Still, given the poem's implied love cry ("Oh!"), the source of life's "light" seems erotic—a notion that encourages us to read "b o d y" as a kind of non-confessional *confessio amantis*.

Though rare among the decadent bluster of contemporary work, brief lyrics continue to enliven American poetry, providing subsequent generations with

esthetic palate cleansers amid so much sugar and fat. In opposition to the hegemony of free verse, brief lyrics celebrate the felicities of traditional form. These poems also value impersonality, discursiveness, and linguistic ulteriority over the confession, obfuscation, and easy earnestness that dominates the current scene.

Kay Ryan shares Merrill's reticence. She takes W. B. Yeats's remark "all that is personal soon rots; it must be packed in ice or salt" and recasts it this way: "All feelings must go through the chillifier for us to feel them in that aesthetically thrilling way that we do in poetry." The ice that Ryan uses to chillify is threefold: allusion, restraint, and rhyme. In the following poem, Ryan never divulges which event occasioned this meditation-in-miniature from her fifth collection, *Say Uncle* (2000). She simply leans in:

> CROWN
>
> Too much rain
> loosens trees.
> In the hills giant oaks
> fall upon their knees.
> You can touch parts
> you have no right to—
> places only birds
> should fly to.

What occasioned this rumination on violations of privacy? Characteristically, Ryan never specifies. But "crown," "giant," and "fall" impart a biblical tone, suggesting great power struck down. This is Ryan's version of David's lament for Saul and Jonathan in 2 Samuel 1 after Israel's war against the Philistines: "How are the mighty fallen in the midst of battle." The touching of the giant's "knees" by an unnamed "you" suggests intimacy and nonconsent. But, rather than sexual desire, the touching of "parts" seems postmortem, like a snarl of traffic rubbernecking around a wreck.

Though I have no evidence to support this claim, the composition date of Ryan's poem in the late 1990s recalls the national media frenzy surrounding Bill Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky, which led to Clinton's 1998 impeachment. In contrast to the general mood of the United States during this period, Ryan's sympathies are not with the Philistine congress or the philistine paparazzi but

with the fallen giant, whose plight, Ryan suggests with the buried pun of “birds”/“bards,” can only be understood by poets as lofty as David.

*A*nother slyly political lyric appears in Frederick Seidel’s twelfth book, *Widening Income Inequality* (2016). Seidel has become a punching bag for critics deaf to the contrapuntal pleasures of satire and irony. Dismissed by many as imprecise, indulgent, and “historically tenuous,” Seidel thrives on the ire of a literary culture quick to deem him “the poet laureate of the enlarged prostate.” But every zeitgeist deserves its gadflies, its doubters, its cranks, especially a contemporary scene lulled by political consensus and deluded by dubious claims of moral superiority.

In his self-appointed role of *poète maudit* of Hudson Yards, Seidel is more ostensibly offensive than genuinely insulting. Throughout the 500 pages of his *Poems 1959-2009* (2009), Seidel’s persona brags about narcissism (“I’ll look good in my black chalk-stripe suit, Savile Row”), condescends to the lower classes (“I get the maid to mop the floor”), flexes his misogyny (“Girls found the sweet-and-sour of being spanked awesome”), celebrates agism (“I hate the old”), and revels in vulgarity (“stool cards pinch a smidge from a fecal specimen”). But, like Beelzebub boasting in some chthonic sauna, Seidel confesses his cartoonish exploits too exaggeratedly to be taken seriously.

It's strange for contemporary readers to think of poetry as providing a service. But Seidel’s work holds a smudged mirror up to American obsessions with violence, cruelty, voyeurism, ignorance, power, and greed. In Seidel’s poems, we glimpse our collective depravities. Readers too myopic to recognize themselves in Seidel’s funhouse self-portraits might point a self-righteous finger and close the book. The more clear-eyed will wince at the veracity of the likeness, reading on.

After the masturbatory shudder of “Dick and Fred” and the mock-Scotch babytalk of “Fred Seidel,” the following poem disarms with its uncomfortable sincerity:

> CITY
>
> Right now, a dog tied up in the street is barking
> With the grief of being left,
> A dog bereft.
> Right now, a car is parking.
>
> The dog emits
> Petals of a barking flower and barking flakes of snow
> That float upward from the street below

To where another victim sits:

Who listens to the whole city
And the dog honking like a car alarm,
And doesn't mean the dog any harm,
And doesn't feel any pity.

Like Baudelaire's "*Le Crepuscule du Soir*," "City" provides a particularly dark take on the urban nocturne. Seidel borrows from his symbolist precursors the method of synesthesia; the sound of the bark transmogrifies, through the wintry plumes of the dog's breath, into the visual image of a snowy flower, with its attendant odors, to which the anonymous "victim" (Seidel's stand-in) "listens." Seidel's insistence on repeating "barking" suggests mental illness: that dog and "victim" seem barking mad. But, if we define madness as an inability to empathize with others, the opposite is true. Seidel's antisocial leanings burgeon into sympathetic "grief," despite the poet's claim of apathy.

This admission recalls the more robust Romantic sympathies for ruined maids, idiot boys, chimney sweeps, clouds, rocks and trees. Unlike Wordsworth and his jocund daffodils, however, Seidel realizes the shadow falsity lurking behind even the most earnest claim. Irony, which Seidel achieves through tossed-off rhymes and the ostensible simplicity of too many "to be" verbs, allows the poet to unsay whatever he says. A voluntary scapegoat, Seidel plays the pathological self-saboteur, goading readers to direct their outrage at his persona, which serves as a kind of anti-chorus praising the ills that liberal society purports to abhor.

Heather McHugh approaches the brief lyric with less braggadocio, favoring linguistic responsiveness over Seidel's side-eyed belligerence. McHugh writes mesmerizing lyrics addicted to puns; she once opened an essay on Dickinson with the line, "It is no accident that book, sentence, and pen are the terms not only of artistic profession, but of penal containment." McHugh bridges the rhetorical gap between the disjunctive Language poets and New Formalism's wistful rationality. Yet McHugh sounds like no one else. The first two sentences of "Fastener" (2009) will serve as a representative *entré:*

One as is as another as.
One with is with another with;

one against's against all others and one of
of all the ofs on earth feels chosen.

McHugh plays the apparent reasonableness of the LSAT analogy against a syntax perilously difficult to parse. But parsing and integration are the subjects of this poem, especially as they relate to eros. Conjunctions like “as” and “with” fasten disparate words together, creating a tenuous relation between distinct ideas. Similarly, the preposition “against” links by opposing, whereas “of” establishes connections between objects through qualification. It’s vexing to begin a love poem with a grammarian’s byzantine primer on parts of speech. But what’s more vexing for a poet than language, love, and the language of love poetry?

Author of thirteen collections of verse, a book of criticism, and several translations from Greek, French, and German, McHugh recognizes that words can only ever indicate; language points rather than means, represents rather than incarnates. As McHugh wrote in an essay on Rainer Maria Rilke, poetry attempts to contain or express the “uncontainable or inexpressible experience of consciousness” through an alchemical reaction between world and word. Or, as we see in the following lyric from *Upgraded to Serious* (2009), world and Word:

> UNTO HIGH HEAVEN
>
> Most people trust in will
> and dream of power.
> The man of the moment would kill
> to be Man of the Hour.
>
> Most people live by asking
> daylight’s worth.
> My God, they’re multitasking
> everywhere on Earth.
>
> But to inherit it—
> my Liege!—don’t stoop
> to seek. Pass up the privilege
> of being meek.

The poem’s damned-if-you-do paradox yokes Matthew 5:5 with Nietzsche’s *der Will zur Macht.* To inherit the Earth, the meek must remain so; the moment they “stoop / to seek,” exercising a will to power, they no longer qualify and therefore forfeit their heavenly reward. McHugh slyly pins Schopenhauer’s *der Wille zum Leben* (will to live) against Nietzsche’s subsequent idea. Where Schopenhauer saw

an unconscious striving to survive as the primary motivation of human behavior, Nietzsche theorized a conscious channeling of strength to creative ends. In other words, Schopenhauer's *Wille* is egoless and undesigning (meek); Nietzsche's requires artful, egocentric contrivance (not meek). For McHugh, "most people" follow Nietzsche, "multitasking" through life to monetize each daylight hour. Even humility is a disguised form of willed striving, a state of being that curses the humble to Heavenly disinheritance.

The tidiness of this paraphrase begins to tangle in McHugh's third stanza. According to the logic of Matthew 5:5, if God and Christ rule as "Liege" over Earth in Heaven, then God, who experienced meekness through Christ's incarnation, could be brought low Himself. After McHugh's "will to power" allusion in the first stanza, the ghost statement lurking behind these lines is Nietzsche's *"Gott ist tot."* And what happens, McHugh seems to ask, once God is dead or usurped? In lieu of a definitive answer, she advises retention of the status quo: "Pass up the privilege / of being meek." In other words, as long as God practices a Nietzschean will to power, humanity can avoid whatever rough beast a second coming might bring.

McHugh's disruption of form in her last stanza suggests a further snag. Is the intentional disordering of an otherwise orderly pattern more or less artful? Does interrupted form constitute an esthetic hiccup (will to live) or a shrewd maneuver (will to power)? For McHugh, the answer is *All of the above*, an outcome that emphasizes the agnostic arbitrariness of the whole conceit, which vibrates with an unresolved euphony.

Daniel Brown is another discursive poet who works best in miniature. Though some readers might consider pensiveness and humor incompatible, the fusion of these elements brings freshness and surprise to Brown's poems and prose. His uncommonly useful book of criticism *Subjects in Poetry* (2021) covers several topics anathema to most poets writing today. One such topic is the utility of poems. Disparaging the limits of the mimetic fallacy with which elliptical poets feebly justify an incoherent style, Brown concludes that "another thing a poem can do is override the messiness of the mind's 'actual' workings by providing a sense—also a feature of our mental life—of a certain order to things." Here Brown marries two modern poets usually regarded as antagonistic. As Wallace Stevens cited the poet's "rage for order" against the pressure of reality, Frost sought a "momentary stay against confusion." Poems order the disorderly mind

of poet and reader alike, thus distracting us from the messiness of both internal and external realities, at least for the duration of the poem.

A perilously literal reader might misinterpret Brown as some latter-day Augustan. But what he has in mind is more whimsical, subtle, and heartfelt than those eighteenth-century satirists would've credited. The following poem remains one of Brown's most remarkable meditative lyrics, if only because of the unlikeliness of its subject and the stick-shift efficiency of its turn. The poem recounts two different seasonal views from a seventh-story Manhattan apartment:

> ISN'T THAT THE WAY
>
> A river's winter-silver
> Discerned through screening trees
> Takes on a certain sorrow
> From the barrenness of these;
>
> Of these whose summer glory
> Can seem a little sad,
> There being not a glimmer
> Of river to be had.

This poem considers the impossibility of having everything at once. Presented with a glimmering river view through a mesh of bare trees, the poet longs for green. Obscured by the fullness of summer, he wants the river back. He can only achieve both prospects through writing the poem.

Brown's talent for economy (rendering an entire world view in eight trimeter lines) is surpassed only by his skill for counterpointing syntax and meter. Like other poets who utilize the spoken-ness of language, Brown's speech rhythms sound both authentically idiomatic and completely his own. Think of the way Wordsworth or Frost seem to have caught their best poems fresh from talk. Yet no one actually *speaks* like Leonard in "The Brothers" or the inconsolable couple in "Home Burial," not even Wordsworth and Frost. For a formalist like Brown, a regular pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables enables the poet to activate inflections latent within the language itself. Frost put it this way: "The possibilities for tune from the dramatic tones of meaning struck across the rigidity of a limited metre are endless." Whether seeking the sound of sense or

the tune of tones, formal and free-verse poets who ignore these tensions risk either lulling the reader to sleep with metronomic regularity or deafening us with ear-piercing feedback.

A fellow formalist, Rhina P. Espaillat charges everyday language with a sense of the sacred. Having immigrated from the Dominican Republic during the Trujillo dictatorship, Espaillat has written in both English and her native Spanish, including prize-winning translations of Frost. At eighty-six, Espaillat published her tenth book of original poems, *And After All* (2018), which includes some of her finest work not only with condensed lyric forms such as the ballade, haiku, and rondeau, but with longer forms and genres like the sonnet sequence ("Trinacria"), dramatic monologue ("Rosario on Sunday Morning"), and blank-verse narrative ("Nothing"). Like Bishop, Espaillat urges poet and reader alike to look closer, think harder, and feel deeper about those people, places, and things we might otherwise take for granted. Espaillat is especially drawn to subjects with the potential to repulse: gall bladders, error messages, bathtub scum, literary critics.

Espaillat also understands the uses of carefully calibrated pathos, her knack for approaching sentimentality without breaching its threshold. Here is one of Espaillat's briefest and most emotionally compelling lyrics:

> THE WIDOW CONSIDERS GRIEF
>
> Should this grief abate—
> as I'm told it will—
> let that happen late,
> when I've mourned my fill.
>
> Let no comfort fall
> on my lips like rain
> until I've paid all
> the full toll of pain
>
> levied on our dust
> for its first desire,
> and pronounced it just,
> were it even higher.

Since the *Time Literary Supplement* published T. S. Eliot's "The Metaphysical Poets" (1921), difficulty has remained a pet topic for writers who fancy themselves avant-garde. But the difficulty that interests Espaillat has little to do with the stylistic allusiveness, obscure vocabulary, and fragmentary surfaces that Eliot and his acolytes coveted one hundred years ago. Espaillat's difficulty concerns form, feeling, and the dramatic interplay of these.

Formally, this poem is an Olympic sprint: three quatrains of trochaic trimeter rhyming ABAB. Espaillat only departs from her trochaic meter in two of twelve lines—and she does so to illustrate a point. The poet resists the "comfort" of regularity to suggest "the full toll" of her grief, which she illustrates through catalectic disruption. Unlike elliptical or language poets, Espaillat realizes that discordance can't be achieved without first introducing a pattern. One can enact syntactic irregularity, for example, by abandoning the declarative sentence. But after more than a century of free verse as normative practice, a poem cannot suggest a departure from meter by avoiding metrical patterns altogether.

In 2025, it's rarer and more subversive to write a poem in form than in unrhyming free verse, especially for younger practitioners educated by academics either indifferent or openly hostile to meter and rhyme. I'll end by considering three brief lyrics composed in form by poets under fifty, to illuminate the challenges and possibilities facing this genre right now.

George David Clark's second book, *Newly Not Eternal* (2024), represents something of a trend among younger formalists in that it includes several poems that conceal their formalism. Most of the lyrics that comprise the book's central sequence are hidden sonnets similar to Joshua Mehigan's "Fire Safety" (2014) or Matthew Buckley Smith's "The End" (2024). Clark's fourteen-line poems in iambic pentameter rhyme according to English and Italian prototypes. But the poet has broken these into twenty-eight short-lined couplets that a less-attentive reader might mistake for free verse (or duple, triple, and quadruple mixed-meters). As Clark has noted on several occasions, he performs this benign deception to place greater pressure on his abundant internal rhymes. So the Shakespearean couplet that ends the sequence in "Ultrasound: Your Image" gets broken into four lines and two stanzas:

> our half-filled stroller
> is a double-seater.
>
> We framed the ultrasound

of you and Peter.

Clark's use of concealed form also gives these poems an airy ethereality tragically apropos of their occasion: apostrophizing a stillborn son. That discerning readers may be able to hear each poem's form but are discouraged from seeing it evokes the mystery of Clark's religious faith; a believer trusts in the presence of what he cannot see. Given that Clark is a Christian formalist writing during a secular age of free verse, the clandestine formalism of these poems seems one way of coexisting amid a poetic culture of opposing views.

The poem I'd like to consider, however, versifies more openly:

MOSQUITO

God was only acting godly
when he strapped a dirty needle
to the fly
and taught it how to curtsy
on our knees and elbows

on our necks and earlobes
so politely that it hardly
stirs an eye.
God was hard but speaking softly
when He told us we should die.

The trochaic pulse of this brief lyric echoes the witches' spell in Act Four of *Macbeth*. Metrically, Clark's poem mimics the first two and a half lines of Shakespeare's song with a journeyman's proficiency (minus the punctuated caesuras of Shakespeare's first line):

Double, double, toil and trouble,
Fire burn and cauldron bubble . . .
Eye of newt

But Clark's use of form is quieter, "speaking softly" to deliver the "hard" news of contact with the mosquito's "dirty needle." The "godly" act of modifying the face of the fly suggests a cruel or indifferent creator who takes pleasure in the pain of his creations. Clark's representation of God resolves the hardness of the Old

Testament Jehovah with the “Love thy neighbor” of the New Testament Christ. Clark’s God, though, displays the manners of the Southern gentry, politely curtsying, offering a sideways *Bless your heart* while He metes out disease and death as casually as a mosquito drinks.

The word “should” provides the coup de grâce. Clark could’ve easily opted for “would,” which would’ve implied the simple inevitability of death. “Should” suggests that death is the proper, reasonable, and best outcome of earthly life. This emphasis on the auxiliary shifts the focus from the physical fact of death to a moral dimension accounting for the wages of sin: death as a divinely sanctioned—or divinely desired—punishment for life. But a punishment without which redemption remains impossible.

Another younger, Southern poet with metaphysical preoccupations, Caki Wilkinson writes from a more materialistic point of view. Wilkinson’s third collection, *The Survival Expo* (2021), distills public subjects through the poet’s oddball sensibility, plucky diction, and formal play. Wilkinson juxtaposes difficult domestic issues like spousal abuse and date rape with broader socio-political topics like doomsday prepping, Title IX, and gun violence.

Whether formal or free, Wilkinson’s work is informed by the compression and musicality she’s acquired from decades of writing in meter and rhyme. During a 2021 podcast interview with *The Sewanee Review*, Wilkinson summarized her perspective on tradition and experiment this way: “If you were taught in the formalist tradition as I was, you’re taught everything needs to be very clear. It should be neat—a well-wrought urn of a poem.” About writing *The Survival Expo*, she adds, “I was really interested in these forms that kind of break down.” Accomplished in forms like the sonnet (“Rite Performed with the Aid of High School Exes”) and elegiac quatrains (“Testimony”), Wilkinson also manipulates traditional poetics in work that strains against the constraints of unwieldier forms like the reverse abecedarian, the anagram poem, and mock georgics.

Her most trenchant innovations include lyrics on metaphysical themes. In poems such as “Obstinate Gospel,” “Suppositions for Skeptics,” and “Mansplaining Oracle,” Wilkinson sings her “semi-hymns” to an “untrue god,” calling out “another myth we live against.” The following brief lyric posits an apophatic notion of God attained through a kind of unknowing of the self:

VIA NEGATIVA

In kingdoms
where God's not
a factor—

multiplied,
divided—
I decide

all that counts.
There will be
no sermons

and no mounts,
just airfields,
stretched out, blue,

says a voice
who reminds
you of you.

The form of this poem can be said to embody or at least suggest a tripartite God through tercets comprised of three-syllable lines. This kind of formalism "counts" what accentual-syllabic verse would allow the reader to hear. In a secular landscape of kingdoms with neither king nor King, God's absence is filled by "I" and "you" who get to "decide" for ourselves what "will be." Crucially, this realm without God is not godless; "will be" could allude to this world, the next, or both. Endowed with choice, inhabitants are free to enter into dialogic relation with ourselves and all manner of others (trees, animals, places, objects, ideas), including a divine "you"—or "Thou," as Martin Buber would have it.

But the most conspicuous "factor" of Wilkinson's poem is its compression. Contained within forty-five syllables (fifty-one with the title), "Via Negativa" either asserts or implies the following fundamental theological quandaries: Does God exist ("God's not / a factor")? Does "God" include *everything* ("multiplied")? If God exists, does the Devil ("divided")? Does free will exist ("I decide")? If God is conscious of the world, does He pay attention to what happens here ("all that counts")? If he does pay attention, does He despair as we suffer ("blue")? Is God eternal ("stretched out")? Or is God merely a human invention ("reminds / you of

you")? Wilkinson's poem shuffles through these ancient unanswerables with such a light touch that one wonders if a more concise mode of poetic inquiry beside the brief lyric has ever been devised. Perhaps the Zen koan.

As with Wilkinson, Armen Davoudian applies a consummately light touch to heavy material. Davoudian's subjects range from political assassination, travel bans, and genocide to the ethics of translation, family nostalgia, and growing up Armenian and queer in a Persian culture. Throughout his first collection, *The Palace of Forty Pillars* (2024), Davoudian writes poems preoccupied by reflections and refractions; the title sequence, for example, depicts a palace in Isfahan in which the structure's twenty pillars become forty in a reflecting pool. This doubling doubles as a kind of formal principle in Davoudian's sly use of rhyme. In "Passage," for example, Davoudian links "ammo" and *"te amo,"* a devastating sonic pairing.

This formal experimentation finds its most concise articulation in the following brief lyric. This poem takes advantage of echo rhyme, sighing with an exile's dolor, as if the poet were corresponding from Tomis:

> MIRROR
>
> Whose eyes are those that glisten *Listen*
> behind my darker eyes? *Cries*
>
> Whose silent lips that part *Heart*
> like fish in that silvered lake? *Ache*
>
> Who writes across your page? *Age*
> Who stirs behind your gloss? *Loss*

Davoudian alludes here to the Dickinsonian riddle poem. But, unlike Dickinson, whose answers she only teasingly provided in the form of objects enclosed within letters (a cocoon, a leaf, a pine needle), Davoudian's solutions are sonically embedded within the questions themselves ("page": *Age;* "gloss": *Loss*). The poet's use of echo rhyme recalls precedents as far-reaching as George Herbert's "Heaven" in the seventeenth century and Jonathan Swift's "A Gentle Echo on Woman" in the eighteenth, as well as twentieth century examples like Louis MacNeice's "Sunlight on the Garden" (1937) and Mark Strand's "Sleeping with One Eye Open" (1962).

As in Fred Chappell's "Narcissus and Echo" (1983), Davoudian composes a reverse acrostic that provides a "gloss" for the questions that the poem asks. Though Davoudian's telestich is sparser than Chappell's, a prose version of Davoudian's would read, "*Listen*, cries Heartache: *Age* = *Loss*." Reflecting on his reflection, the poet becomes his own muse. Like Narcissus, whom Tiresias prophesied would lead a good life only if Narcissus could manage never to know himself, Davoudian's narrator scrutinizes his likeness for what lies "behind" external appearances. Such a stubbornly fixed gaze engenders suffering. As time passes, the "silvered lake" of the mirror dooms Narcissus and Davoudian alike to witness their own diminishment: Narcissus withering with incurable self-love; Davoudian aging alone with each passing decade.

As Davoudian noted in a 2024 interview with Academy of American Poets, poetry not only slows the process of loss, it makes something new out of it, allowing writer and reader "not just to preserve what was there to begin with but to supply what is missing." Davoudian answers his own questions, parsing the double riddle of the self as if reading a parallel text. He also nudges the reader beyond his poem's call-and-response to the source of the cry that "Mirror" answers: James Merrill's 1959 poem of the same title.

Davoudian's "The Yellow Swan," the poem that follows "Mirror" in *Forty Pillars*, cribs the rhyme scheme and mixed-metrical pattern of Merrill's "The Black Swan" (1946) to elaborate the older poet's theme of nascent queer sexuality. Similarly, Davoudian's "Mirror" mirrors Merrill's idea that the poet can only see outwardly by first looking inwardly. Davoudian's echo rhymes allude to Merrill's apocopated couplets—a complex method of rhyming in which the penultimate or antepenultimate syllable of each odd line repeats in the ultimate syllable of each even line. So the last syllable of "nonsense" rhymes with the third-to-last syllable of "in-*tens*-i-ty" and "change" rhymes with the next-to-last syllable of "ar-*range*-ment." (Merrill utilizes the same method in "Octopus" and "Saint," all three poems appearing in *The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace*.)

A dramatic monologue spoken by a mirror apostrophizing a window, Merrill's "Mirror" condescends to its auditor for remaining "wide open, sunny, everything I am / not." The verse here has it both ways through Merrill's wry enjambment; the mirror, reflecting the window's "wide open" prospect on the exterior world, contains only the illusion of openness. Merrill and Davoudian equate self-consciousness with conscious technique; both poems are *ars poeticas* that

privilege interiority and artifice over artless exteriority. Both poets also recognize the narcissistic temptation inherent within the artist's self-delineating temperament. But, where Davoudian seeks the image "behind" his reflection—the prototype latent within the duplicate—Merrill desires the superior amusement of poetry's ironic surfaces, reflecting only the "conceit" of the window's undiscriminating eye.

This window-versus-mirror trope reflects a competing view of poetry still relevant today. Poets writing the kind of brief lyric covered in this essay eschew the casual, democratic "I" epitomized by Whitman, favoring the economy of Dickinson's exacting vision. The impersonality (or trans-personality) of these poems, as well as their innovations with meter and rhyme, assert the notion of lyric as artful artifact rather than self-expressive performance.

My contention has been that the fastidiousness, wit, formal play, and musicality of these brief lyrics oppose the excesses of the decadent age in which they were composed. Even when writing about tragic subject matter, Espaillat, Clark, and Davoudian refuse the sentimentalism that has become standard operating procedure among their contemporaries. Ryan, McHugh, Brown, and others utilize humor and a tone of bemused equivocation to confront serious metaphysical and sociopolitical topics. Where most contemporary practitioners default to a kind of cloying earnestness (the tone *de jure*), these poets mix idiomatic speech, irony, and familiar poetic forms in lyrics that transcend merely autobiographical concerns.

The most interesting poets writing today appreciate that the richest monuments have often been the sparest. By valuing the evocative attenuations of Alberto Giacometti's *Le Chien* (1951), for example, over the zany excesses of Jeff Koons's *Balloon Dog* series (1994), brief lyrics lodge in the imagination with a force that belies their miniature dimensions. The redolent distillations of these poems render their more decadent counterparts forgettable. Yet, as Dickinson reminds us in poem 574, such lesser losses "a Gnat's Horizon / Could easily outgrow."

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Chelsea McClellan *is a poet writing from a small homestead in Northwest Ohio. You can find her recent poetry at* THINK, Rattle, One Art 2025 Haiku Anthology, *and* Native Fruit *(Sheila-Na-Gig editions, 2024).*

Shane McCrae*'s most recent book is* New and Collected Hell. *He has edited a volume of John Berryman's uncollected* Dream Songs, *which will be published in December of 2025. McCrae's awards include a Lannan Literary Award and a Whiting Writer's Award. He lives in New York City.*

Victoria Moul *is a poet, critic and translator living in Paris. Recent poetry and essays have appeared in the* TLS, The Dark Horse, PN Review, *and* Poetry London, *among others. She writes about poetry and translation (from various languages) on her Substack, "Horace & friends."*

Richard Newman *is the author of four books of poetry, most recently* Blues at the End of the World. *His work has appeared in* Best American Poetry, Innisfree Poetry Journal, Literary Matters, Poetry East, Rattle, Tar River Poetry, *and many other magazines and anthologies.*

Angela Alaimo O'Donnell*, PhD, is a professor, poet, scholar, and writer at Fordham University, where she serves as Associate Director of the Curran Center for American Catholic Studies. Her publications include two chapbooks and nine full-length collections of poems. Her book* Holy Land *(2022) won the Paraclete Press Poetry Prize. O'Donnell's eleventh book of poems,* Dear Dante, *was published in Spring 2024. She is currently at work on the manuscripts of two new collections, one tentatively titled* Body Songs, *poems on embodiment, and* The View from Childhood, *poems about family, coming of age, and the place(s) we call home.*

***James Owens**'s poems and translations appear widely in literary journals, including recent or upcoming publications in* Poetry Ireland Review, Christianity & Literature, *and* The Classical Outlook. *He earned an MFA at the University of Alabama and lives in a small town in northern Ontario.*

***Brian Palmer** is inspired by the natural world which continues to have a formative effect on his life and poetry. His recent chapbook* Prairiehead *was released in 2023. His work appears regularly in various journals, and he is the editor of the literary journal* THINK. *He lives in Juneau, Alaska.*

***Kevin Rainbow** has produced translations of great Russian poets such as Gavrila Derzhavin and Fyodor Tyutchev, as well as of Russian and Ukrainian traditional and modern folk songs. He resides in Regina, SK; Canada.*

***Jennifer Reeser** is the author of seven books of poetry. She is an author with Penguin Random House, London's "Everyman's Library" series, and Able Muse. Her poems, translations, essays and critical reviews have appeared internationally in* POETRY, The Hudson Review, RATTLE, Nimrod, *and elsewhere. She divides her time between her Gulf Coast estate and home on the Cherokee reservation in Indian Country, Oklahoma.* (*https://reeserjennifer8.wixsite.com/jennifer-reeser*)

***Erica Reid** is the author of* Ghost Man on Second, *winner of the Donald Justice Poetry Prize (Autumn House Press, 2024). Erica's poems appear in* Rattle, Cherry Tree, Colorado Review, *and more.* (*ericareidpoet.com/*)

***Betzi Richardson** is a visual artist and poet, living in LA. She taught at Santa Monica College and has a Masters in English. Her poems have been published in her chapbook,* This Desert Inclination, *and in journals:* Antioch Review, Slant, Artlife, Pinyon, Upstairs at Duroc, Transformation, Nantahala Review, *and others.*

***David Rosenthal** is a public school teacher in Berkeley, California. His poems and translations have appeared in* Rattle, HAD, Rust & Moth, Birmingham Poetry Review, Cosmic Daffodil, Teachers & Writers Magazine, Measure, *and many other journals. He has been a Howard Nemerov Sonnet Award Finalist and a Pushcart Prize Nominee. His collection,* The Wild Geography of Misplaced Things, *was published by White Violet Press (Kelsay Books).*

Tamarah Rockwood *obtained her degree in Creative Writing and Literature from Harvard University and is the Founder and CEO of Bainbridge Island Press. She lives on Bainbridge Island, WA, with her husband and five children, and their flock of ducks.*

Liv Ross *is an urban monk, a poet, and a student of Christian Spirituality. She has practiced writing more or less consistently for two decades and poetry is her primary medium. When she's not writing, Liv practices gardening, pipe-smoking, leather-working, and mischief. She has been published in* The Way Back to Ourselves, Silence and Starsong, Solum Journal, Vessels of Light, *and* VoeglinView. *She lurks on Instagram @liv_ross_poetry, or her Substack, https://substack.com/@theabbeyofcuriosity.*

David J. Rothman*'s most recent books are* Learning the Secrets of English Verse *(Springer 2022), a textbook coauthored with Susan Delaney Spear, and* My Brother's Keeper *(Lithic 2019), a Finalist for the Colorado Book Award in poetry. In 2019 he won a Pushcart for the poem "Kernels," which originally appeared in* The New Criterion.

Carla Sarett *is a contributing editor at* New Verse Review. *She writes poetry, fiction and, occasionally, essays. She has been nominated for the Pushcart, Best American Essays, Best Microfictions, and Best of the Net. Her latest poetry chapbook,* Any Excuse for a Party, *is out from Bainbridge Island Press. Carla has a PhD from University of Pennsylvania and is based in San Francisco.*

Christopher J. Scalia *is a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. His poems and stories have appeared in* Measure, First Things, Raintown Review, *and elsewhere. He is the author of* 13 Novels Conservatives Will Love (but Probably Haven't Read) *(Regnery, 2025).*

Carla Schwartz's *poems have appeared in her collections* Signs of Marriage; Mother, One More Thing; *and* Intimacy with the Wind. *Learn more at https://carlapoet.com, or on all social media @cb99videos. Recent curations:* Autumn Sky Poetry, Contemporary Haibun Online, MacQueen's Quinterly, Modern Haiku, North Dakota Quarterly, One Art, *and* Rattle. Carla Schwartz received the NEPC E.E. Cummings Prize.

Alexis Sears *is the author of* Out of Order*, winner of the 2021 Donald Justice Poetry Prize and the Poetry by the Sea Book Award: Best Book of 2022. Her work appears in* Best American Poetry, Poet Lore, Cortland Review, Cimarron Review, Rattle*, and elsewhere. She earned her MFA in poetry from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and her BA in Writing Seminars from Johns Hopkins University. Sears lives in Los Angeles.*

Daniel Patrick Sheehan *is a poet and journalist in eastern Pennsylvania. His poems have appeared in* First Things, Dappled Things, Modern Age, Nimrod*, and other journals.*

Katherine Spadaro *was born in Scotland, has lived for many years in Australia, and is now in Turin, Italy with her husband. Poetry happens for (to?) her when the familiar suddenly seems strange and momentous—and wondering how that moment can be expressed is the work of writing. Occasionally a poem gets accepted on its first outing but most of them get edited in a dungeon for years.*

Susan Delaney Spear *is the author of two collections of poetry:* Beyond All Bearing *and* On Earth...*, the 2025 American Legacy Book Award for poetry/religious. She is the co-author, with David J. Rothman, of* Learning the Secrets of English Verse*, a poetry textbook that teaches meter and form. She lives and writes in Tampa, Florida. You can find her at www.susandelaneyspear.com.*

John Talbot*'s poems have appeared in* Poetry, The Yale Review, The New Criterion, The Spectator, The Dark Horse, First Things, The American Scholar, New Verse Review*, and many others, as well as in anthologies from W. W. Norton, Yale University Press, and Waywiser. He has published two volumes of poems and many articles, reviews, chapters, and books on English, Greek, and Latin literature—most recently a volume on C. H. Sisson, co-edited with the scholar and poet Victoria Moul.*

Jonathan Chibuike Ukah *is a Pushcart-nominated poet from the United Kingdom. His poems have been featured in* Ariel Chart Press, Atticus Review, Zoetic Press, Unleash Lit, Down in the Dirt*, and elsewhere. He won the Voices of Lincoln Poetry Contest in 2022 and The Alexander Pope Poetry Award in 2023. He won the Unleash Creatives' Editor's Choice Prize in Poetry in 2024 and was shortlisted for the Minds Shine Bright Poetry Prize in 2024. His poetry collection,* Blame the Gods*, published by Kingsman Quarterly in 2023, was a finalist at the Black Diaspora Award in 2023, as well as the Grand Winner of the Wingless Dreamer Poetry Prize in 2024.*

Laura Wang *is a high school English teacher in Honolulu, Hawaii, the city where she grew up. Some of her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in* The Christian Century, The Windhover, Pulsebeat Poetry Journal, *and* Bamboo Ridge. *Originally trained as a medievalist, she has also published scholarship on Chaucer and on the fifteenth-century Scottish poet Robert Henryson.*

Leslie Williams' *most recent of three poetry collections is* Matters for You Alone *(Slant Books, 2024), just longlisted for the Massachusetts Book Awards. Her work has appeared in* Poetry, The Southern Review, Image, Verse Daily, Kenyon Review, America, *and elsewhere. Honors include the Poetry Society of America's Robert Winner Award.*

James Matthew Wilson*'s most recent book of poems is* Saint Thomas and the Forbidden Birds.

Darlene Young *is the author of three poetry collections (most recently,* Count Me In *from Signature Press, 2024). She teaches writing at Brigham Young University and has served as poetry editor for* Dialogue *and* Segullah *journals. Her work has been noted in* Best American Essays *and nominated for Pushcart Prizes. She lives in South Jordan, Utah. Find more about her at* darlene-young.com *and @darlylar.*

Suzanne M. Yuskiw*, a Boston native, now living in Aiken, South Carolina, has been published in* Kaleidoscope*, and has recently won top prize for her poem "D-Day 2024" in Aiken's poetry celebration. She enjoys the challenge of making new the tried and true old forms.*