NEW VERSE REVIEW

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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.

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Winter 2026

Issue Edited by Steven Knepper, Mary Grace Mangano, and D.A. Cooper

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I.

Stephen Kampa

Who Only Stand and Wait

Back to the door, the open door, one foot
Out in the wallop of a winter storm
And one foot in the inn's lit room, I know

Only to hold it open,
To call out in the night and find the cold
Lost travelers who might be searching

For somewhere warm; and standing
Bisected in this doorway,
Half of me not uncozy, half half-frozen,

Stationed so close
To all the cheers I can't but feel impatient,
I don't know why it has become my job

To hold this door and feel the winter air
Scraping my face except that I'm not sure
The room is really there,

And that means I can never really enter,
Only stand and call
As I've been called to do, the one who holds

Open the door he can't himself walk through—
(And who's to say he wastes his time
Who faithfully devotes

His life to standing on the threshold, holding
The door for others while his arms
Ache, cradling their long discarded coats?) . . .

Maya Venters

Clockwork

I shiver. Through the frosted window, I
can see the narrow path into the woods.
Behind my house, beyond the trees, the dusk
begins to settle as two girls go by,
taking turns pulling one another on
a bright red sled. I have known teens to take
the trail, their bootprints sunk in snow betraying
the place they went astray. And men on snow-
mobiles, racing toward their wives who stir
deep pots of something warm and meaty, stoking
the fire. Snowshoes and skis, rabbits and bears:
All do their part to wear the path down well.
My breath expands the clearing at the window
just as the last warm glimpse of light burns out.
My unattended pot of soup boils over.
Water sizzles at the flame. And Time,
shy, drags his body bag into the woods.

Jared Carter

Time

We hurry through, in disbelief
        that it will end—
This paradise, this coral reef
        where waves rush in

But only point one way. A stone,
        encountering
Brief levitation, finds, once thrown,
        it cannot bring

Itself to stop, but sinking fast
        through all that air,
Sets up a whispering that lasts
        a moment there.

Space

I saw it for a moment there
above the trees,
Composed of nothing more than air—
those clouds that crease

The autumn sky, but soon move on
without a trace.
For what might stay, and what is gone
from that far place,

One cannot know—except that when
the wind sifts through
A last few leaves, there seems no end
to that pale blue.

Students

Some still believe. They ask sometimes—
        polite, staying
After class—how do words and lines
        keep from straying

Into prose? Is what someone feels
        all that matters?
Learn a trade, I suggest, the real
        world is shattered,

And only craft can put it back
        together. Go
Where some already have left tracks
        in the deep snow.

Snowfall

A whiteness will obscure these lines
        some winter day—
All will be still, and crystalline,
        though she will say

"I’d rather scan the way the wind
        hollows the drifts . . . "
Her mother had maintained that in
        the farther lift

And fall of snow, a last few thin
        lines reappear
For spring to know, when it begins
        to make things clear.

Henry Hart

My Grandfather's Ice House

Didn't your studio once hold blocks of ice
sawed from a pond beneath Mohawk Mountain?

Today wind hums through mildewed eaves
and a bent stove pipe. Behind a loose pane

in your one window, a chestnut branch
shadows the keys on your Royal typewriter,

pages of onionskin smudged with corrections,
books in ash spilling through holes

in your rusted woodstove. I walk back
to my car on the path you wore down to dirt

for 50 years. High in a maple by your house
bought by a New Yorker, a woodpecker hits

a dead branch like a pick chipping an ice block
or your typewriter tapping out another story.

Marie Burdett

Snowdrops at Monticello

Galanthus nivalis

With razored *hori-hori* knives we cut
into the gentle earth beneath the trunks
of aging oaks, although we knew the ground
was made of graves. Between the clods of clay
that flew like anvil-sparks, we found a shard
of pottery, a rose-head nail, a button
broken in half. They seemed like seeds that failed
to germinate, like words that disappear
from dictionaries, never being said.
Tacit admission, Jefferson forgot
to mention where some several hundred souls
were born, lived life, and had their bodies buried.
In all the papers, notes, and records that
he kept, he didn't care to write their names.
Forgetfulness excuses most abuse.
At first, the weeds grow over like a scab.
That empty space becomes a parking lot
for tourists' cars.
                A softer age unearths
the graves and catalogues the dead within,
preserving them with newer, nicer forms
of negligence. And when the snowdrop bulbs
came up within the burial ground, we thought
we'd dig some up.
                "How nice to see the white
fill up the oval beds, against the brick,"
we said.
            "How nice," they thought, "a flower to
memorialize our dead." Because who else
remembered slaves except their families,
except the mothers, daughters, nephews, sons
who keenly felt the knifing of their loss?
One autumn burial, they must have placed

those snowdrop bulbs within the crumbled clay.
Come February, grief would bleach the ground
with ghosts, commemorating vanished life.
Each shoot burst up, defying death's decay.
Then, giving in to grief, the snowdrops bloomed.
Lachrymal petals pealed in winter wind.

This year, we dropped the exhumed bulbs into
a plastic bucket, carting them to where
the ghost of Jefferson could see them from
his study window. Guests would ask about
the flower and be told their origins,
the way museum curators explain
a dusty mummy stolen from its tomb.
As pretty as the snowdrops are, their charm
can hide old scars. They knit the ground together,
roots waiting for the mend of Judgment Day.
They hope that, through the natural mending of
the earth, all death and grief would find rebirth.
Instead, we thieves came, thinking pain a prize,
and wrenched the falling teardrops from their eyes.

Sydney Lea

December Incident

He described some yellow birds he loved
and from the description,
I figured *goldfinches*. He said those birds–
only thinking about how they looked,

well, it helped him sleep. Sometimes at night,
his mom and her boyfriend
could be pretty noisy. I wondered why
he was sharing all of this with me.

One cheek showed a small white scar. “There’s times,
Mom and you know”–
he jerked his head at the truck behind us–
“sounds like they’re breaking stuff downstairs.”

He’d just turned nine, he said, and why
was he moved to tell me
what he told me next? “I never seen nothin’!
The ocean or some big town or nothin’!”

We stood in an inland hillside village.
We each had trash
for bins at the transfer station. Behind us
the man who sat in his beater pickup

cracked a window so we could hear
a song by George Jones:
“If Drinkin’ Don’t Kill Me.” He thumped his horn
and roughly barked at the boy, “Hey, Howie!”

So the kid picked up his sack and went on
to the row of containers.
The man stared at me and, grimacing, grunted
“We ain’t here to play.” He was young and burly,

I’m an old man. The morning was windy.
Clouds galloped by.
I looked upward as if something bright might be flying
to lighten up a sullen sky.

Erin Murphy

Ella

Maantaurqaqina unuamek; tang, ella ayaganailnguq
[Trans. from Yup'ik: Stay put today—look, the weather is not good for traveling.]

All day the mountains come and go—
sun, then snow, then a blue bowl

of sky before another mini-blizzard.
When I was young, my family lived in a village

by the Bering Sea where the word *ella*
meant *weather* and *world* and *awareness*.

> *Ellakegciuq: The weather is nice* and *He is in a pleasant frame of mind.*
>
> *Ellaculnguuq*: *He is feeling poorly.*

Here on the East Coast, we are not used
to sudden swings. There's a proper place

for everything—our keys, our gloves,
our feelings. *Mother Nature is schiz—*

I start to say but stop myself. This condition
has afflicted so many I've known, mostly men

just old enough to grow beards. *In their prime*,
as if they're steaks or real estate.

I watched the windows of a student's
hazel eyes shutter in one semester. I watched

my father. So I say *fickle*. I say *capricious.*
I say *volatile*. Outside, the flakes

are nickel-sized. Someone has gutted
a down coat and sifts its innards,

feather by feather. I stay put, at home
with the mind’s dark weather.

David Leightty

The Moonbow of Cumberland River Falls

Cumberland Falls State Park, Kentucky

A wisp of spectral light, its unsure presence
Tremulous as a small bird in a hand;
Utterly subject to the coincidence
Of full moon, crystalline night sky, and pace
Of flow that lets the Falls churn up a spray
To suit refraction of these pale moonbeams.
Best viewed at midnight in late winter's slant
Moon point, so mostly seen in bitter cold,
After the half-mile trail to the viewing deck—
An easy jaunt made trepid by the dark.
The crowd, assembled early on, will dwindle,
Shivering cold, boredom, and sleep's allure
Combining to cull out the less determined.
All you can tender to entice the moonbow forth
Are sturdy perseverance, watchfulness,
And the fond graces of that lady, Luck.
And even so, some requisite may fail,
And all the best of efforts come to nought.
But—if the elements align in favor,
The moonbow all at once will just be there
Before your eyes, a tuft of lost sunlight
The moon has recast through a bank of mist
To form a lucent beauty, mysterious,
Transient, and a wonder to behold.

Loving v. Virginia

Mildred and Richard Loving,
before the U.S. Supreme Court, 1967

The scene: Virginia's high court has proclaimed
The Loving couple must serve prison time
For marrying while black and white; and named
This sacrament a grave, immoral crime.

Our highest Court, though, viewed it differently;
In reasoned phrases named the marriage ban
A blatant "incident to slavery,"
And ruled the racial metric could not stand.

And so—*this time*, great statesmen held steadfast;
And so, *this time*, love triumphed over hate.
But one clear shining moment can't foretell
A next; the fiefs of hate may just outlast
Great statesmanship, 'til poison dominate—
As past and present times show all too well.

Devon Balwit

Kabloona

[after Gontran de Poncins]

Out on the glacier, I am worse than useless—
unable to read even the deepest tracks,
the direction of the wind, the thickness

of the ice. The natives marvel that I lack
all skill and yet survive. How does my family
bear such a burden? I hoist my pack

along with their judgment. Poetry
is a luxury of the soft. At night, I fall into sleep
like one clubbed, my journal empty.

The time to make sense of these days
will be later. Now is a novitiate of humble
silence, me staying out of the way

and hoping to move beyond fumble.
On the horizon, the returning sun trembles.

Mary Giudice

Winter Solstice With Grapefruit

I sit at the table in front of a chipped plate,
    alone and only half awake.
The sun goes down too early, and I'm going
down too. My eyelashes alight on my cheeks
and build nests. Why not let them rest
    there for a while? Food can wait.
I haven't been hungry in years.

But this fruit is more friend than food,
    my first food: a cut half on a highchair tray
to play with. I only had four teeth,
but I put my face down upon its face
    and a quiet hour later— a scraped bowl
of cottony peel. I've craved bitter brightness ever since.

Now, when I peek, it's not merely ruby
    but incarnadine, like salmon meat,
with spiderweb spokes from a white navel,
fuzzy with lint and a drop of dew.
I lower my tongue to touch the drop—
the scent stings my jaw and provokes
    saliva in a tingling spring.

Resurrection is too strong a word
for what is simply caring a little again,
    when you haven't for a long time.
But it's almost a new life,
isn't it—to look at the world and to want it again?
And even to write it down?

Katie Dozier

New Year

I wish we wished like six-year-olds;
for frogs that sing and ice cream rain—
as if the world could ever be controlled

anyway; another rainbow lollipop to hold.
A mother laughed confetti; called me insane
to wish. But I know we wished like six-year-olds

when the latest news was barely a breeze, untold
to us. Silent bruises. But I could jump on any plane,
as if the white-chocolate wings could be controlled

when the hurricane brings so many toads and trolls—
how age flips our wishes *for* to wishes *against*. Train
us again to rattle off wishes like six-year-olds, to ride

a unicorn to the castle; to never blame the old
for what is new. To let the snow swirl; champagne.
We drink as if the world could ever be controlled.

But the moon is still ours to toothpick; to hold
on a cocktail napkin. Love the sprinkles, love the rain.
Love the candles, all aflame. Now, we wish like six-year-olds;
we make the words the world. How we love the uncontrolled.

Richard Wakefield

Fence Mending

A rainy winter left the pasture chill
and boggy over hardpan two feet down.
Far from prime, impossible to till,
at least it wasn't deep enough to drown
the wobbly April calves. The grass grew dense
and, no small matter to our father, free,
but in that undrained soil the shallow fence
blew flat and tangled in spring's first southerly:
an invitation to the herd to stray.
In a downpour we two brothers set it right.
We drove the posts through mud and stony clay,
then ratcheted the wires and cinched them tight.
A long, slow chore. Wet through, knee-deep in muck,
we slogged from dawn to dinner, then afternoon
to supper, and not a post we drove but struck
a rock and rang a loud metallic tune
to our frustrated curses. No cattle lost,
our father nodded when the job was done.
We figured by our teenage lights it cost
as much as sweet alfalfa by the ton.
I wonder if the old man could explain
his deeper need to keep the pasture fenced --
that cows, unruly boys, and wind and rain
are things a farm must hold the line against.

Benjamin Myers

Retirement

Like hounds that bark
when harrowing prey—
The hare in its den
hunkered with fear—
The stars on the silver
seem to be howling
Above the old barn
abandoned and shredded
By wind and foul weather,
by washings in frost.
Gone are the barn-guests
who grazed in the pasture.
Long culled are the cattle.
The cows and the steers
are taken to market.
The tractor is rusted.
The kids, all grown,
cannot be bothered
To help with the homestead
or hold down the land.

The man I remember
was midlife or past,
A friend of my father.
Farming for pay,
I saw him one summer
in searing June heat
Hawing and shooing
his Herefords to run
Up ramps to a trailer
for the ride to the sale.
One steer misstepped
to the side of the ramp
And rolled on the rancher
right there beside me.

The steer on its feet,
he stood up, that farmer,
Spit blood and tobacco
by his boots in the dirt,
Then loaded the laggers
lacked from the herd.

Fence building for years,
forcing posts into dirt,
Will make a man
all muscle and wire,
Barely breakable,
though battered as prairie.
Yet seasons of raising
and selling his cattle
Will skin a man slowly,
slim him until
He's down to a dried up
and derelict thing,
Suddenly something
self doesn't know.

Then fields hit foreclosure,
a foregone conclusion.
The pasture is cut
into parcels and sold
For ranch houses built
for raising of nothing
But tons of new taxes
for town and for state.

By highway a facility
houses the aged,
They stare while they spoon
applesauce and they wait
For someone to come,
to stop for a visit.
And outside the heavens
through air that is frozen

Howl in the stillness
like hounds maddened
By the presence of something
that’s prey to the stars.

James Matthew Wilson

Good Friday

The church stood silent, there, a century,
While all the houses ranged across the street
Rose to prosperity, let forth to play
The children they had sheltered, sent them off
To worse or better places, and then sank
Again, unfashionable, outworn, and shabby.
In later years, the hippies and the cranks
Moved in. They hung out rainbow flags from drooping
Gutters or posted signs for some new cause,
As if to stare the church's steeple down
And preach to it another sort of gospel.
Everyone noticed, to be sure: dog walkers
With earbuds leaking out a tinny rhythm;
The college students biking toward downtown;
To them it was just one of many clues
The neighborhood was hip but on the slide.
And those who came to pray within the church
Would read those signs and sigh or shake their head,
And pass within. That was the way the world
Was headed, they would think: paint chips, wood rots,
And sidewalks spiderweb with cracks; so all things
Find in the end they were not built to last.
There's nothing, really, anyone can do.
The church had lasted, true, although the park
Adjoining it lay overgrown in thistle,
Its fields turned patchy from the stale of dogs;
Its swings left squeaking only for the wind;
And slide become a warped and rusted sheet
That mirrored vaguely what passed overhead.
The church's brick endured, but mortar cracked.
Rainwater ferreted its way within
And left the starry ceiling stained and blistered;
One darkened corner drew the eye from prayer.
It was to such a place the old still came
With quaking limbs; the idiots with their smiles,

The sick, the idle came, and those who, after,
Would disappear into the skirt of woods
Behind the park to fetch their vagrant treasures.
    It was the place where I had found myself,
That Friday in the early spring, the sky
A pewter plate of low-borne clouds, the ground
Raw mud, save for a few stray crocuses.
    How could I, staring at the stripped bare cross
Before that altar stripped and bare, believe
That there is any path a thing may take
Besides the graveled road that slopes to darkness?
Even the ones who'd walk beside us there
Will fade into the branching web of shadows
That mark their slow descent before and after.
    But there, the naked wood and naked stone—
Those silent, stubborn means of sacrifice,
Splintered and cracked in shards of forenoon light—
Conceded nothing to my questioning.
It is not nature that directs our ends.

Jane Zwart

Truth Windows

If you ask me, a house's magic
is in its not-quite-cupboards—
clothes chutes and dumbwaiters.

Its magic and its beseeching:
trust me, that I won't lose
what I vanish. Trust me,

to this trick there's a second act.
A house's magic is in its milk door—
I mean, in opening it,

the repeated proof of divine order,
the bottle back and full again—
and its beseeching

is in its truth windows.
Mira writes, *This kind of thing*
is meat and drink. The break

in the plaster, an attestation
of straw, a door fit for a porthole
or grandfather clock.

It used to be like this, a parley
of sincerities. Once we built
reassurance into our walls.

Lenore M. Myers

At the Window

Inscrutable tangle
of fir and thicket, almost
concealing the barn
across the field, those greens
and golds of nearly summer
and the single door, barely
visible—here,
she's partway out
the window, half-
way to the world
beyond the sill. She reclines
headfirst into the green,
one thick leg
braced upon the chair, good
and bare for climbing up and out
and running far . . .
                But no,
most of her remains
in here, cramped
and cool and gray, so gray
it dulls the blouse, the hair.
Why linger in a room
so cold and narrow?
                Outside the window
grows a world resinous
and evergreen, deepening
its roots, the shrubbery
with its newly yellow
shoots, the tumultuous
thicket, virtually unseen—oh
let it be my own, the distant barn,
the waiting door, quit
this patient, unnatural
wondering!

II.

Ange Mlinko

The ‘Tragic’ Symphony

Crystals are known to refract sounds as well as lights,
hence chandeliers are a part of the symphony.
These were my thoughts as the aircraft swayed,
cleaving the sky, which, thanks to other flights,
was filled with convolutions that we couldn’t see—
a shaken sense that I was being played.

It’s something, that an edifice so sensitively built
would hold every sound accountable. The air trembled;
you could hear a tear fall, on some ellipsoid principle
of Pythagorean acoustics. Was there no scintilla of guilt
when he bought me a solo ticket? The music hall resembled
this Boeing: tolerances were small, the seats were full.

Postcards from the Karpas Peninsula, 2010

1.
Ayia Napa, autumn. One wandered
from pool to beach like a dazed wasp,
tasting the new coldness with a gasp,
the village dwindled as a herd.
One drifter on the island had by way
of introduction a sea horse on one calf,
a tentacled medusa gone astray
across a bicep, eloquent as a paragraph.
Over the mountain ridge, toward the west,
was Aphrodite's birthplace, where a shrine
decked in shells and wrack met the sea crest
head-on. Foam dispersed in purple wine
amid shadowed rocks and algae, snails
that leaked an ancient dye from heads or tails.

2.
In winter the cyclamen blooms, leaves
in flat rosettes like a patterned carpet.
Rainclouds skim across the Med on winds
with antique names, wetting the aromatic fennel
bursting out in feather fronds that cast a spell
on battered Mercs negotiating bends
of road that turns to rutted stone and grit.
Through abandoned wrecks the sorrel weaves.
At monastery ruins, feral cats provide
occasion to snap and gawk. A ragged man
with his sons puts up a stall of Evil Eyes,
Hands of Fatima, jars of honey. Who decried
the Turks' incursions now complain
that tourists blacken holy places. *Like flies.*

Laura Reece Hogan

Trail of Many Pools

In Zion, the striations of the rock
stripe maroon, moon-gold, meteor-crash pink,
undulate across miles and do not relent

> the rigidity breaks and falls, the cracks uneven,
> streaks of scars to scramble and I shamble
> through the tests and trials of tripping

on the trail of many pools water pocks the rock
and I follow the basins like stars, as if punctures
from your hand—

> in my hand a stone, heart-shaped,
> rust-colored, broken at the edges, why
> do I carry it except the shade sings

secret red notes slicing strangely across the rock-
cropped puddles, the phrasing of a cosmic
register, calling for release from flesh,

> to plunge to the murky bottom and rest,
> the cliff a pitiless grit of tripwire, a tightrope—
> when I sent my hardened cry across canyons:

Mary Grace called this the night of the spirit—when
I threw my sandstone into the barren pool
it left an emptiness, barely rippling

Sarah Cortez

Black and White Photograph, Sophia Loren

Naples, 1948

Sophia smiles a shadowed grin
That people say leads men to sin;
Those liquid eyes, that coiling hair
Are beauty's promise and its snare
As near as breath upon the skin.

Despite her heartbreak borne within,
She grins. The man adjusts, zooms in.
His cautious fingers reach with care.
        Sophia smiles.

Unsure, she stands dead still. He grins
And winks, then has her lift her chin.
He seems to care and smooths her hair,
then compliments her dress, its flair.
Seen under lights too bright for sin,
        Sophia smiles.

Maria Grech Ganado

Stranger

Your first glimpse of a stranger you will later love
is even stranger—perplexingly new, and yet a *déjà vu*,
a slight thread of hostility perhaps,
because the danger of adventure can usurp
the cosy numbness you've grown accustomed to.

And you seek reasons for going back to sleep—
you're tired, disenchanted, and far too old now
for this kind of thing.
                But your soul begins to sing
because he wears a short-sleeved shirt, and the blood
in his arm throbs next to yours, and the wine
you are sipping ferments as the glimpse
becomes a stare at the hair on his skin
living a life of its own, golden and spare, while he,
discussing something of supreme importance with a friend,
isn't even aware you're there.

If your first glimpse of a stranger wakes you
and shakes you and stays with you when he's gone,
it's for that you will love him, later on.

Alice Allan

Verlaine, years later

That afternoon I pulled my gun on you,
you didn't flinch. You barely looked surprised.
The bullet did what it was made to do.
Pressed up against the blood, I recognised
the trap my idiot heart had led me to.
A boy, with all the beauty he's been given,
can charm your life, can hold it by the throat.
He doesn't need to ask to be forgiven.
The days distort as reason disappears,
and ordinary warmth becomes remote.
They'll tell our little history of tears,
each repetition deepening your mark.
These memories have rotted out the years.
I close my eyes. You're waiting in the dark.

Cameron Clark

Blank-Verse Sonnet Beginning with a Line & a Half of Shakespeare

I am all the daughters of my father's house,
& all the brothers too, since the like-
lihood of blindness blossoming again
in the next child came in at 30%,
& my parents are logical people, are risk
averse & stringent: & above all, kind
to the unborn who ghost against that stretched
pond-film of possibility which scrims
their murky & unrealized world from ours.

It is a subtle kindness, which demands
a certain taut, trapeze-imagining: think
of them vaguely & their possible-faces blur
to pure statistics; but give each blank dark eyes,
a smile: & you have seen a picture of the missing.

Timothy Sandefur

Undelivered Letters

The museum hangs an empty frame;
the candle wick neglects the flame;

Ursids score the sky with gold,
then evanesce in the cold;

a piano silent on a vacant stage,
keys as still as the unturned page;

cherry petals turning brown;
a wife alone in an airport lounge;

dawn behind a fog at sea;
Eden with no apple tree.

Kimberly Gibson-Tran

Mother

The best definition of mother I've heard
is the one where the name isn't earned
from squeezing out a squat body; actually,
it's when you catch (ungloved) some nastiness
oozing from the little one. I'm not a mother
but I offer the name to those on the other
end, receivers of my horrors, my ingratitude
spewed from an unclean tongue. You'd
know if you were one. I hesitate to babysit
my stepson, but I try it, taste the helplessness
of faking someone else's job. Mother is another
way of saying saint. To say Saint Mother
Theresa feels embarrassing, redundant,
doesn't it? I wouldn't say I have abundant
faith. I feel a little like I'm in a play, clapping
frantically for Tinkerbell. After his nap,
my stepson asked to color a gory scene in crayon,
the one of Mary cradling dead Jesus, the pietà.
I catch myself explaining crucifixion. Mother Theresa's
journal was riddled with doubts, terrible depressions.
She never witnessed any intercessions from God
in the slums of Calcutta. Still, she pushed on
with her thankless mission. Years ago in Europe
I trekked through the town of her birth: Skopje.
In her parents' house, I stared at the beat-up
Bible. These days I don't wonder at the retreat of
everything holy, but I help my stepson shake
the dust from his butt when we head inside, take
off his shoes. Mother Theresa let the kids choose
from donated shoes, then kicked into pairs that would
bruise her. Mother—short of fucker—is a word
I thought was hurled in sacrifice, a fetal curl.
So it comes as a surprise—this gift.
I even start to like the word, the sound of it.

Caleb Hill

My Younger Brother Doing Chores

Through the cotton-colored silence,
of box fan blades and treadmill-muted steps,
I hear the honey-gold of song swell up
beneath my feet and coat the stairwell
in my youngest brother's voice, sticky
with late breakfast, half-hesitant but sweet
and syrupy in search of clear acoustics
as he dries the dishes.
        One wrong word, one cracked note, a verse starts over;
brown-bone hands reach for ivory plates
which clang like humble church bells as he bends
to send a line of deep, deliberate breaths to dip
his thin-ribbed lungs in wells of resonance
and come up with hymns; his voice drips
with variations of a tune a century old,
straining like a sunrise through his adolescent chest,
a wound like a chrysalis of new wings
that open while he sings and puts away a spoon.

Cecil Morris

This Morning's Podcast Teaches Me about the Heart

The podcast tells me how fast the hummingbird's heart beats
and I think that's nothing. My heart beats faster than that
when my two children, fledgling adults, go out at night.
It tells me a child could stand upright and walk without
bumping his head in the chambers of the blue whale's
capacious heart, could, by bending slightly, step through
the blue whale's giant valves as if they were those doors
on a submarine. Big deal, I think. My children,
even now, even grown, still stand in my human heart,
that tired fist clenching and clenching inside my rib cage
still knock at and sometimes slam the doors of my heart's valves.
It tells me earthworms have five pairs of pseudo hearts—
that's 10 aortic arches, 10 hearts, pumping blood
through its dark body in its dark world, and I think
that's what I need, some back up hearts, some hearts on stand by
for those days my children accidentally break my heart.

K. E. Duffin

My Revenant, My Other Self

Like a character on sabbatical from a finished story,
she appears some nights, on an old, completed errand,
retracing a path she took in life, not quite friend,
but something more, a blurred category

never clarified that now seems an allegory
for nameless regret. She returns, but to what end?
And I follow, trying to catch up, to amend
the past, bend it toward another story.

We stood on this street decades ago,
and she said, “It’s a beautiful night, isn’t it?”
Two question mark figures in bituminous shadow.

She turns, and is lost to my moonlit
forever. I don’t know whether it’s now or then,
or if I’ll ever see her again.

Lesley Wheeler

Ghost Triskelion

Everyone's helical. You can pretend
you're a sealed package, reflective, hard,
separate from those other boxes, free.
Yet secretly (involute as space-time) people
gape open at one end, whirling and shining,
absorbing ghost-scents they then can't shake.
Imagine resin at the back of your throat—

pine-bark sharp, a sticky, lingering threat.
When death hits the body's emergency brake,
energy spins off, the way twining
winds (tornado-mouthed) spit out bicycles
or decayed farmhouses, centrifugally.
But ghosts aren't whirlpools; the living are.
So call it nightmare. Best to believe we end.

•

So call me a liar. (Nightmares can be doors.)
For half my life, I chose to emulate
my father, the god of skeptical martinis
and ice-slick cash. I used his powers to
escape his power and learned that braininess
is the skeleton key. All feelings, sham.
Meanwhile, impossible voices murmured

into my ear's coiled vestibule. I heard
the dead, including him. I felt such shame
at becoming my mother: powerless
despite my cash, a woman beholden to
underlove; immobilized in memories
of her locked cabinet life, an ill-lit
(spiral) four-score span—though she endures.

•

She’s settling scores with a spiral hand,
touching the back of my scalp with a tingle
as bright as a shrilling phone. Why didn’t
I call to her that uncanny night when a dead
man grabbed hold, tripped and shook me, followed
me, sick and braceleted by bruises, home?
(Trapped in parentheses.) But I believe

in spirits now (my mother always believed).
Why was I slow? You can’t cast out your shame
before uncloseting it. Salt at the crossroad.
Ask a shimmer for directions when the red
needle of your compass jitters. Hidden
windows. No one’s alone; we have people.
Repeat it: you’re a helix, open-ended.

III.

Stephanie McCarter

Creation

hanc deus et melior litem natura diremit (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1.21)

Not till the god created mortal things
did time commence its ceaseless sundering.
He yearned to fracture, contradict himself,
and to contain uncounted multitudes,
all things he could not be but might beget,
all things apart from him, yet part of him.
So now to everything there is a season.
Death, life, flesh, soul, light, darkness, you and I:
all human things reside within the cracks
and interludes that formed the world's first day.
We love, my friend, inside of those divides.
You were a burst of golden curls and song.
You were my girlhood. We were parted too,
and it was autumn when earth buried you.

Dick Davis

Nature doesn't do free verse

R.W.

The Fibonacci series
Puts paid to all pet theories
Of a random universe
Where nature does free verse

Whorls in each shell and cone
Spell symmetries that clone
Abundance that's averse
To inadvertent verse

The branches' golden angle
Arranges leaves that dangle
In patterns that disperse
The daydreams of free verse

How petals are arranged
Means that you'd be deranged
Or willfully perverse
To see in them free verse

No, nature is a nurse
Whose overflowing purse
Of mysteries must converse
In meter, not free verse.

Diasporas

Exiles go home and find
The language that defined
Their sense of who they were
Is now a baffling blur

As if a cataract
Clouded each childhood fact,
And peering puzzled eyes
Turned substance to surmise

As if the house where they
First saw the light of day
Were rubble now, or claimed
By strangers, and renamed.

Carol Light

Mad Gardener's Verses

She thought she saw a waterfall
        suspended from a cliff.
She looked again and found it was
        an interrogative.
What if the sky were blue, it sang
        What if, what if, what if?

She thought she saw a nautilus
        winding round her hand.
She looked again and found it was
        a swiveled ampersand.
Come here, come follow me—give up
        your solitary stand.

She thought she saw a trail of crumbs
        bespeckling the road.
She looked again and found that now
        her sentences had slowed.
Her thoughts, her words had stopped, had dropped
        ellipses in the snow…

Diagramming the Sentence

Please don't attempt to speak to me right now.
There's courtesy in please, an interjection.
The subject (you), implied, goes without saying.
Don't: a verb contracted and negated.
Attempt: the time is trying; can't you tell?
To speak: too little sleep, too many words.
To me: it's that it's personal, this pronoun,
pushed into place, positioned and pronounced.
Demand? Request? Irked, or fragile? Absurd
to deconstruct this; buck the impulse. Quell
it. Call it both. Dichotomies are fated
to be false. Right now, a cactus facing
the window blooms. Fuchsia, the future, injects
love in the imperative, somehow.

Andrew Hudgins

The Eye-of-the-Needle Problem

Let me repeat myself. The emperor
wishes to know how a camel can,
in fact, pass through a needle's eye, not *if*.

Because the emperor's new priest proclaimed
a rich man passing into paradise
is like a camel passing through a needle.
Therefore, three elements must be considered:
a camel, needle, and the patent transit
of the first object through the second one.
I pondered a great needle, one so large
a camel could stroll through it easily,
but if no one can sew a stitch with it,
it isn't plausibly a needle, is it?

Because he's never been this ill before.
You've heard a version with an elephant?
Oh, gods. At least we're spared the elephant.
I see a problem though with your proposal.
A camel simmered to a broth might drip,
though slowly, through a carpet weaver's needle,
but all the filtered remnants—bones and hair--
would still be on the wrong side of the needle.
What? Some mush-brained prophet out of Judah.

I hadn't pondered that, but it appears
the rich aren't welcome in their afterlife,
which seems shortsighted and most surely wrong.
What God would favor cripples and the poor?
They don't have anything to offer gods
but penury, disease, and supplication.

How so? A gate beside the main gate—small,
and called the Needle's Eye? Let's build on that.
A night gate—tiny, tight and only used

for people, but a camel might, with care,
squeeze through, but not so crooked and constricted
they'd have to break its knees and drag it through.
The camel is, in this one case, remember,
the emperor—in metaphor, I mean.
Let's say you strip the cargo off the camel,
and ease it through, maybe a scrape or two
against the walls to make the metaphor
less metaphorical. He understands,
at least His Highness claims to understand,
no passage into paradise is painless
and free of complications. I bow my head.
Your cunning is superior to mine.
He'll accept it. Yes? Because he must.
And I'm convinced already, thank gods. You?
No? Not yet? Don't worry, you will be.

Robert Morgan

Alexander

My fury was to eat the world
and gulp the mighty oceans.
My body was a sculptor's dream
and model for anatomists.
The highest mountains to the east
were merely steps into the kingdoms
of the sun. But even I contracted
illness from the foreign soil
and air, and would return to hands
I trust. A Persian princess in
my bed was not the bliss I hoped
as a reward for bringing light
to continents of sorcery.
Even faithful Bucephalus
grew tired of victories repeated
like endless chains of holidays.
I languished where the waters of
the Nile taste salt and shifting tides.
Empires were my toys and kings
my pets and game. Beyond the limits
of my years I sought to conquer both
Elysium and the Underworld.
As dust I conquer ages.

Marly Youmans

The Fabled Rightnesses of Wu Tao Tzu

In golden Tang, a nomad painter made
Handscrolls and murals for an emperor,
And his facility and grace were praised
By seers of his work—likewise the man
Was famous for devotion to the craft,
Obedience to the laws of ink and brush,
So much that over time his secret self
Became close-wed to sacred energies
Because he learned to ink—in love—all things,
And in him the delight of rule-led skill
And high rejoicing in pictorials
Were blent, and all who faced his images
Felt some uncanny sense of coming-to-be,
And those who chanced upon the painter found
No trace of worship for the gaudy new:
    For years he strove to catch the spill
    Of falling leaf and petal,
    Studied the windings of a rill—
    Here silk, and there metal.

His dragons reveled in the mountain mist,
His tigers lolled on pennywort and flowers,
His black-inked earth and heaven met and danced
Because of bell-notes in the woods and skies
That chimed with something nestled deep in him.
The evanescent mayflies wooed his eye
As much as any angled, antique pine,
The painter being like each in his way,
Content to bend and bow to destiny,
To be the maker he was meant to be,
A votary of ancient treatises
That detailed methods so minute and strict
As if to ban all quirks of character
And lead to scapes appearing methodless,
Leaping freely from the painter's mind

Like dragons vaulting from their scrolls
And spiraling on air,
Or a dragonfly that rockets, rolls,
Alights on lacquerware…

The palace chronicles recount the night
The painter gave his emperor a wall
Of cloud and mountain, torrent, path, and cave—
His patron marveled how some undercurrent
Served to animate the scene with vigor,
Until he could have sworn the nightingales
Were caroling in princess trees that stirred
Their roots in earth and rang their bell-shaped blooms
When the flirtatious wind lord toyed with scent.
The children shooting marbles in the shade,
A coiled-up labyrinth of sleeping wyrm,
Three tigers basking on a sun-baked ledge:
All seemed procession from divinity,
A muraled miracle—the painter called
And beckoned, stepped into the breathing work
And disappeared in greenery
That died away like dreams;
The bright, immortal scenery
Fell to dust and moonbeams.

*** This poem was shortlisted for The English-Speaking Union [Victoria Branch, Australia] Formal Verse Contest, 2024.**

Seth Wieck

The Laureate's Lament

No, Virgil, no…— W.H. Auden, Secondary Epic

Anchises handled the humbled hearthgods;
Ascanius shouldered his mother's hearthflame;
Virgil bobbled them all when he fled earth clods
to beat plowshares into Octavian's name.
Pilate could recite the Mantuan's tale
while scrubbing his fingers in the basin.
Dante may have trailed Virgil out of hell,
but the Schutzstaffel followed him back in.
The morning rays of dawn's rosy light
are couplet with cries mourners raised at night.
A scythe can sigh through grass as softly as a sough
can lay the green sward over, and over the shoulder
the sword can sweetly sing the head from the soldier.
Should sterling words proceed from sterile mouths:
cough cough cough.

Daniel Brown

Of All the Luck

1. *In a bar in the future*

Gold drams still glow on polished oak
(Though it's centuries since smoke).
Several regulars
Are bruiting thoughts of theirs
On our master-wishes having been fulfilled:
One need no longer die
And we've cracked the cosmic Why.
They're wondering which of these
Erstwhile impossibilities

It might be deemed the greater woe
To have lived too soon to know;
Worse still, to have joined the gone
In sight of either one.
An aspect left unsaid (conceivably
Because unspeakable)?
What equity would call
The essence of these woes:
Their being but the way it goes.

2.

Think of the pagan greats who dwell
In a multilevel hell
(Although no lower than
On level one of—ten?)
Where Dante felt doctrīnally compelled
To put them. Antiquity's
Titans—Socrates,

Homer, Horace . . . the whole
Contingent made re-seeable

(If through a scrim of limbic mists);
Phantoms D. enlists
His powers to portray
As—how is one to say
It per their state's equivocality—
Diaphanously damned?
Sinless souls condemned
Never to get to rise
A quarter inch towards Paradise—

And only because they lived before
A blazing meteor
Called Christ. Of all the luck . . .
Injustice run amok.
Leaving D. to ask how one installed
On as much as a bench in heaven
(Far less a throne) could even
Begin to countenance
So undeserved a circumstance.

"WHO QUESTIONS *ME*?": an argument
With which D., hugely bent
On setting doubts aside,
Is wholly satisfied.
His Maker? Rather less, imaginably:
A monarch known to take
An unexpected break
From thundering commands
To cup his head within his hands.

Forester McClatchey

The Opportunist

Inferno*, Canto III*

Hornets stung my face until the skin
split open, releasing fluids white and clear.
Droplets drummed my pumping knees. My shins
churned through slime as maggots anchored there
twisted in the mud. Sometimes my vision
cleared, and Hell was almost beautiful:
pale and ribbed, mouths clean as incisions,
worms reached for clots of blood, then pulled
back into burrows; smooth-ribbed human forms
leaped and sprinted and arched; voices yelped
as hornets swiveled faceted eyes and flowed
across my face to sting my tongue. Years before,
a living man rushed past. I begged for help.
He flinched. He did not know. He could not know.

Peggy Landsman

Aubade

Philip Larkin
sensed the dark in
even the sunniest days.
Shadows rarely failed to lengthen underneath his gaze.

Rough Drafts

Elizabeth Barrett Browning,
knitting her brows and frowning,
kept losing count of the ways….
She'd be counting and counting for days!

The Road Not Taken

Robert Frost
will ponder lost
chances from days gone by
as long as those with ears to hear will listen to him sigh.

Jane Satterfield

Wolf Girl

walks a wayward track of parted
branches, still aims a smoky eye, can strike
a pose in retro dress & bonnet. Constraint or
deft disguise?—that fabric hue: sun-warmed
hydrangea-blue. Some days she hears
the echoes of another life—flower fests & meet-ups
behind the farmer's market, mushroom morsels
of maitake & barbequed lion's mane
before the quick kiss of a stranger.
Who can she count among her friends?
She's fluent in fables, brushfires & fear,
a forest she dares not leave for long crossed
by footfalls & suspicions. You keep the wolf
outside your gates. To kill a wolf
will earn rewards, the wolf is an outlaw,
someone of no account…What was it the dream
raven told her outside the raptor rescue
as she neared? Wolf Girl walks a mythic route,
at home with her hunger, sounding out
the full-throated call of kin.

*Kiki Smith, from the Blue Prints series, 1999; etching and aquatint on paper

Katie Hartsock

The Fisherman's Wife

I must pay attention to the things I remember
this time of year, for the fairies
are at work even there,
getting into mischief
as if memory were canisters
of flour or oregano,
or spools of thread that lost their lead
in my housedress's hidden pockets.

Once I cared for a child of theirs; they'd heard
I had a way with wind
and brought him to my stable door.
Their trust was my reward.
I portioned cures of pear syrups,
apple cider vinegar balm,
anchovy eye salve.
I sat him at a seahorse skeleton table,

bent his head down close
to a steaming walnut bowl,
and draped a handkerchief over
his coughing up:
silvery sweat, snot, spit shot into
the steeped chamomile.
And I let him sleep, and skip his fiddle lessons;
soon he breathed deep again.

After that I saw his people everywhere
for just a few days,
and understood how things go missing—
how accidents fill more
than befall us. The missing figurine;
the green glass pitcher broken
in a market tent; a pillar
of pier ready to swim; a woman

possessed by a demon begging
to drink the hottest water; another
afflicted asking for cold,
colder than the sea, she said,
looking out. My husband sails
tonight, and that is good. He'll return
tomorrow; better. Sleeping
alone, my heart can thump so loud

I think someone's at the door:
a neighbor with an unexpected guest
just arrived this late at night
and her pantry is bare, sorry
to ask, but could she have a loaf, please,
and I wonder, what gospel is this?
As a girl I heard tales
about those who marry fish and fishermen.

One, so tired of being poor
and smelly, left her man.
The next day, he caught a magic halibut
with one of those offers
of any wish granted: sand into gold,
a full belly bowl, a net
of never-ending catches. I'm not saying
I'm the one who'd loved him all along.
But I know how to wait.

Jesse Keith Butler

The Last of the Longships

When the last of the legions left the city
their boots rang hollow through the square
toward the longships. We waited there,
observing this last indignity,
as the soldiers marched lockstep up the ramps
of the vessels, their bellies sagging full
of plunder. They'd gleaned the city bare.

I was still a child that day. I saw
all this, but didn't understand
how the lean years leaned in over us
with withering expectation. My hand
clung to my master's wizened claw
of a hand—gaunt fingers stained with simples—
as if I could absorb from him
the wisdom to see out past the dim
horizons closing in on us.
Just then, just then, his ancient eyes
took on the milky distant sheen
they took whenever he prophesied
(and they might still). His voice stretched, keen
and shrill, across the clustered causeway—

The empire is folding back on itself,
withdrawing its frayed edges. The lamps
of civilization are winking out
around us, leaving darkness and
disjointed constellations. We wait
for the coming night on this windy shore,
far from the live and glowing core
of Byzantium. But there's still a grace
that's ours. There's still a grace that's ours.
We live in the land of sleeping lords.
Before the night encroaches much farther,
you'll see one rise. Watch, watch for Arthur

in Logris—the island surrounded by stars.

The while my master spoke, his voice
was slowly overridden by
the building conflagration all
around—the longships' ramps retracting,
the crowd dispersing out to loot
the rubble the legions left. I clasped
my muttering master's hand, and hauled
him off, across the tilting stones
that littered the gutted public square
and into the darkening heap we called
the City of Legions (and do to this day).

And the last of the longships pulled away,
taking whatever there was to take.
They groaned down the line, as their lumbering grasp
swung clear of the ransacked city, and eddies
of fire burst through their wasted wake.

Elijah Perseus Blumov

The Young Mages

To Hyperborea we two embarked,
and on our way, among the many marvels—
the floating islands and the purple palms,
the savage psalms and even stranger gods—
by foreign firelight of foreign stars,
fell very much in love. Now, she is gone.
Yet easily enough we reached the North,
the frost so white it shimmers freaked with blue,
and easily enough we found the tomb
wherefrom the silver serpent rose uncoiled
upon the word the shade Marsyas shared
to lay the skull of Aesculapius
beaten in gold and garlanded with laurel,
down at our trembling feet; that horrid relic
which you, lord hierophant, had bade us fetch
because you wish to rot alive forever.
And in that moment, what triumphant joy!
Our quest so soon accomplished, and our love
so warm beneath sepulchral Arctic skies...
So, I forgot—just once, forgot your word.
I howled with happiness, and doomed my love.
For in that frigid silence, such loud life
could not escape unhunted. Through the mists,
we heard The Beast the Living Cannot See
wail for the blood it craves like molten rubies.
There was no time. *Go, take the skull!* she cried,
and even as I fought to take her place—
for once the Beast awakes, it must take life—
her conjured ravens swept me from the graves.
And there her bones shall lie, the greater relic,
and you shall have your life. And I? And I
shall sail once more for Hyperborea,
and clutch her skull, and scream and scream and scream.

On Seeing the Elgin Marbles, I Think of Keats

My spirit is too weak—or else, too strong.
You, a few years younger when you saw
that shade of death that trembled you with awe
in these old, blasted monuments. I long
to feel Philomela's seductive song
with you, but do not have the knack: the raw
and fervid soul, the morbid streak. The flaw
is yours, I think, but wonder if I'm wrong.
The *Ubi Sunt* of it of course is clear:
both life and legacy are all too brief
for noble beasts in love with being here.
But being here, I feel, instead of grief,
a pride for what we do spurred on by fear:
we strive to last. We die. It's a relief.

IV.

Mary R. Finnegan

Out of the Mouth of God

I'm sent to Granny's every Samhain, going
with Daddy in the cart he's piled with turf
to give to old ones left behind by children
who have gone off, away to foreign lands—
London and Perth, Brisbane and Birmingham,
Chicago, New York City, Philadelphia—
places I only know from maps and stamps.
At every house, we have a cup of tea,
a long chat. Daddy jokes that like a priest
who leaves the Virgin's statue for a time,
we also bring a bit of warmth and lessen
loneliness with our listening and looking,
and all our tales and tunes and songs and stories.
Da also brings the post to the old ones—
letters and parcels filled with store bought clothes
and fancy foods, with dollar bills and banknotes
with the Queen looking very cross on them.
It serves her right, says Da, ruling these lands
to which she has no right. Tucked in the letters,
there are now photographs of people that
the old ones will not ever see again
and ones of those they'll never meet. They hold
these pictures tight and run their fingers over
them, crying all the time. Da has a glass
that makes things look large, larger than they are,
so you can see the smallest things—blue flecks
in a brown eye, the pattern in a sweater,
a baby's new tooth jutting from his gum.
For the ones who've no reading, Da reads out
the letter, then he'll do the writing back.
Sometimes, he makes me leave the house for this,
to feed the chickens or to shift the cattle.

He says this giving and receiving is
the only comfort left to the old ones.
That and Daddy's turf, and with it, our visit.
    The journey is much lengthened by these stops
and so we keep on, even as the darkness
settles and stars appear in the black sky.
And when the Hunter's Moon is hidden, back
behind a thatch of clouds, we know the way
and will not wander long. The horses trot
along while Daddy sings. I stay awake
as long as I can, listening to his songs.
He says I am his nightingale because
I sing while I'm asleep.
                Each year, the woods
and groves have more and bigger gaps where trees
once stood and still belong, looking like faces
gouged of an eye, fearsome and sinister
as Balor. Daddy says trees should be cut
only for what is most essential—roofs,
and churches, cradles, curraghs, carts, and cudgels—
except for the three trees that mustn't ever
be cut for any reason: hazel, hawthorn,
and elder. Daddy says a lady saint
in England held a hazelnut in hand.
Within it was the whole world being loved
by God, and so I carry one with me
always and look upon it when I need
to think of Him. Sometimes He speaks to me,
and His voice wrecks me like a long day and night
spent on the stormy sea.
                As we near Granny's,
Daddy reminds me to be good and say
my prayers and not to fret about the fairies
and druids, or the rest of Granny's talk,
for haven't they all left us to ourselves,
the druids and the fairies, and we've only
the Devil and his demons running loose,
taxmen and wicked neighbors we must battle.
All told, the world is good, and we are God's,

he says, and nature's glories are laid out
for us to love and cherish like a child.
Granny and Mam, when they aren't on about
which is the right way, old or new, agree
that Daddy's tribe are naught but silver-tongued
poets who sing the stars down from the skies,
the fish from lakes, and songs from stones. All well
and good, but what of this world and its darkness,
asks one, or of man's darkness asks the other?
And with his words, they will not be content.
But I don't care, Da sings the finest songs.
Afeared of the unknown, Mam and Gran seek
a secret knowing of the mind or spirit,
they grasp for facts or magic, but, Da says,
there is no secret knowing, only truth,
the mystery of the world, formed in the mouth
of God from naught but chaos so I need
only be quiet and listen to the waves
strafing the rocks at Malin Head to know
I need not fear—the world belongs to God.
    Each year, Mam packs for me, deep in my sack:
the caul, wrapped thrice in silk, my rosary beads,
a bag of salt, blessed by our priest, not Granny's
because, Mam says, he is more superstitious
than an old woman, and water from Doon Well.
I also bring a book of Scottish verse
that Da was given when he was a child,
some Gartan clay, four toffees, and two flies
so I can fish with cousin Declan who,
with his eyes closed, does make the finest flies.
There's some that say he's mad, touched in the head,
that he's *fear dearg* or himself a changeling
because he seems to understand the trees
and plants and other creatures, heals by touch,
and sleepwalks to the sea but never drowns.
But, I know Declan and believe them wrong
because I've seen his guardian angel walking
beside him, their two heads bent close together.
Oh, how I wish I could make flies like his,

for salmon leap at them as if they were
gifts from the heavens.
Journeying to Granny's
takes three whole days and two whole nights, at least.
We sleep beneath a tent if there's no rain.
If there's rain, we've one cousin and two aunts
along the way. I'd rather we not stay
with him, the cousin, for he's shifty-eyed.
Nudging my pack, he tries to look inside,
to steal my caul, to sell or trade or keep,
so I must sleep with it, wrapped in my arms.
We slept beneath the sky once, that was lovely—
to hear the sighs and murmurs of the earth,
and the soft breathing sounds stars make at night
as Daddy sang, *réalta beag téigh a chodladh*.
When we arrive at Granny's, she wants Daddy
to leave. She tells of weather plaguing home—
hailstorms and gale force winds, floodings of loughs
and rivers—but he pays no mind to her
and sets to thatching, mending, digging autumn
potatoes so she's fed through winter's dearth.
Mornings, we walk with Granny to the Chapel.
Three times, she makes me cross myself before
I'm let in through the heavy door that shuts,
tight as a lid, behind me. Next, she makes
me dip three fingers into holy water
and cross myself again, for Father, Son,
and Holy Ghost. I genuflect and try
to pay attention during Mass instead
of dreaming, always dreaming.
Granny says
be careful with my dreaming. Babies born
veiled with a caul at second harvest must
be wary and protect ourselves from fairies
and fishermen, rogue priests, and heathen druids.
My mammy says that Granny's nothing but
a silly, superstitious woman stuck
in the past. Mammy seems stuck somewhere, too.
They both remind me of a half-birthed calf.

To get them out would take some wile hard pulls.
    Still, like each child born caul-veiled, I know God,
but tell of this to neither Mam nor Gran,
for they both want assertions I can't give.
It's only Daddy I tell on our journey—
the scent of seaweed gathered from the coast
filling my nose, the horses hurtling home
under the dwindling light of the year's dark end—
for he puts what I say into his songs
so that no words will be gone by or lost.
and when I'm old, and those I love are dead,
and I no longer know what's true, and am
caul-veiled and empty as a treeless grove,
I will sing Daddy's stories and remember.

TRANSLATIONS

Michael Lavers

A Translation from the Russian of “The Mermaid” by Alexander Pushkin

It was a hidden lake, in green shade,
where once an ancient monk escaped.
He studied constantly, and prayed,
and in harsh fasts groveled and scraped,
then, using half of a broken shovel,
dug a grave under the open sky,
and spent each minute in his hovel,
begging the saints to let him die.

One day, out in the summer air
beside the doorframe of his shack,
the anchorite stood lost in prayer.
The oaks were turning slowly black.
The mist above the lake lifted
like smoke, which whorled and spread,
up where the red moon slowly drifted.
The monk stared at the lake instead.

He stood, and watched, and grew afraid;
even himself he didn’t understand,
but noticed how the small waves sprayed
and fell and lapped against the sand.
Then, whiter than the hills’ first snow,
as smoothly as the spreading night,
a naked girl crawled from the undertow
into the stark moonlight.

She glanced at the old man, and stroked
her moonwhite arms, her soaking hair,
while he stood quivering and looked
right back, not moving out of fear.
At last she waived her hand and beckoned

with a sudden nod, and then—
quick as a falling star, gone in a second—
disappeared into the waves again.

All night the hermit couldn't sleep.
A full day passed—he hadn't prayed.
His whole world had begun to creep
with mystifying maiden-shade.
Darkness disguised the oaks. The owls called.
The moon hid in the clouds' dark sail,
and once again the strange girl crawled
up on the shore, lovely and pale.

She looked at him and tossed her hair,
and blew a playful kiss, and smiled,
and, rousing waves through midnight air,
now laughed, now whimpered like a child.
She moaned and called toward the bank
"Come here, dear monk, to me, to me,"
then down into the clear waves sank.
The whole world waited silently.

Still our poor recluse, on day three,
sat waiting by that moonstruck shore.
But on the fourth, when oaks sat silently,
the monk was not there anymore.
With him the darkness disappeared.
The sun rose up, the day grew hotter.
The lake was calm. Only a greying beard
that a few boys saw, bobbed on the water.

Ethan McGuire

A Translation of Two Poems from the Chinese of Yue Fei

A Face Toward Snow

The willow trees stand green;
the tranquil river runs snow-clear.

Among the warbling orioles,
the youthful Spring's returning.

Without a thought, I sit
upon the bank and shed a tear…

How can it be? Invading dusk
creeps down the hills still burning.

Living for the Sacred Things

As countless Autumns pass, Mount Lushan watches his great empire.
Beneath his gaze, the Yangtze River winds forever east.
Beside these rides a warrior, young, who's sworn to serve his emperor
And lead his men in war, to vanquish the invading beast.

If he can find a way to carve his deeds on marble tablets,
He'll sheath his sword, to walk the sacred path beneath the pine,
And send his kind regards to any rural temple abbots:
"Your humble servant comes this way to study the divine."

INTERVIEWS

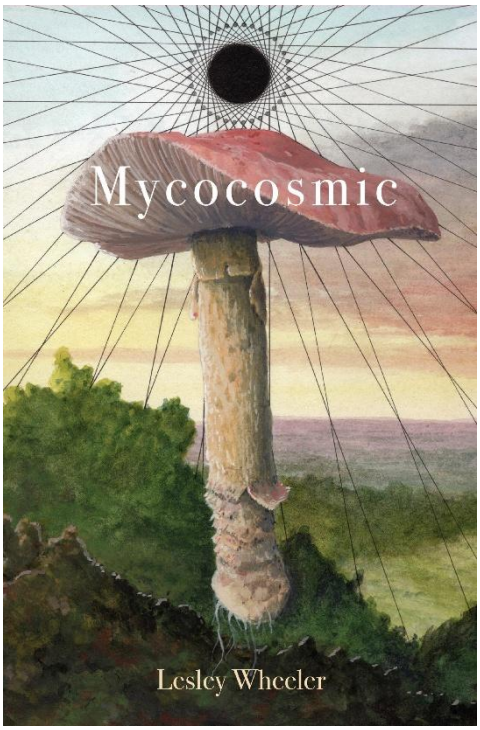
Jane Satterfield and Lesley Wheeler

Poetic Ecologies: A Conversation

Jane Satterfield: Lesley, congratulations on *Mycocosmic*—it's a stellar collection of mourning and transformation that explores the wild and wonderful world of fungi. At the same time, the poems pay witness to time's passage, ecological collapse, and—to borrow a phrase from mycologist Merlin Sheldrake—the entanglements of our lives.

I'm struck by the way your books—poetry and prose—share a specific constellation of energies and yet, in terms of structure and approach, they're consistently innovative and surprising. One of the first poems of yours I read was "The Calderstones," a finely honed sonnet crown referencing a ruined megalithic monument in your mother's native Liverpool. It's a poem that moves straight past your basic bit of "stone bothering" to build a powerful meditation on inheritance and the need to break through the silences of the past.

But back to the present book with that visually striking cover of a levitating mushroom. The title's a neologism of your invention, right? Is there a story behind your choice of artwork?



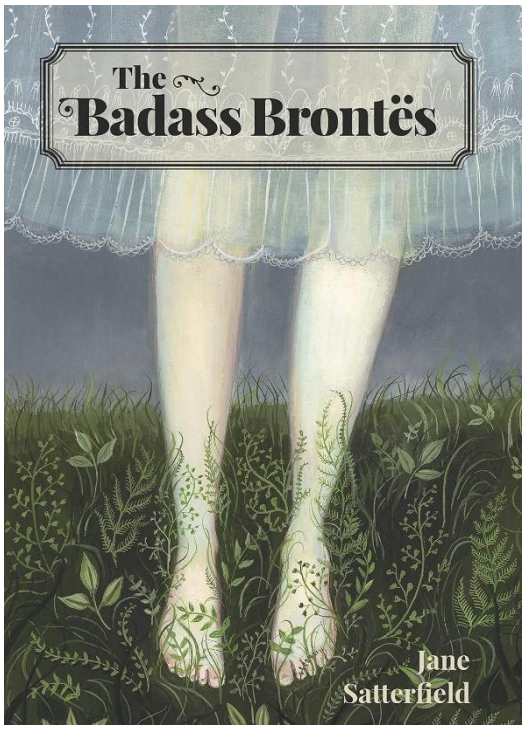
Lesley Wheeler: Thank you for the kind words about *Mycocosmic* and for the phrase "stone bothering"—that's new to me and brilliant. I love how it implies consciousness in ancient megaliths. It also led me to the "Ancient Stone Bothering" Facebook page. Who knew?

Yes, "mycocosmic" is a neologism, which means that people can pronounce it however they like. (I've been noticing how many different pronunciations exist of "fungi" and related terms, contributing to mycology's lovely weirdness.) I wanted a word suggesting the book's mycelial underpinning, but "mycoverse" and "mycotopia," for example, already exists in book, podcast, and brand names. One advantage of "-cosmic" is its woo-woo associations, since the book contains so many poems about divination. The second half of my invented word also implies other worlds and afterlives. I'd noticed how most of my poetry book titles evoke place in an uncanny or psychological way: *Heathen*, *Heterotopia*, *Radioland*, *The State She's In*. Spacetime might be my flood subject, to use Emily Dickinson's phrase.

As far as the cover, lots of botanical images of fungi are muted and brown, and I like color, so I went looking for photography and art with a vibrant take on either mushrooms or mycelium. Finally I asked a talented colleague, Emma Steinkraus—a mycophiliac who has painted foraging scenes—if she knew of anything that might work. She pointed me to the "Radiant Void" series by Pearl Cowan. I adore how these watercolors are beautiful, botanical, and spiritual all at once.

Speaking of which, your sentence about paying "witness to time's passage, ecological collapse, and…the entanglements of our lives" describes your collection *The Badass Brontës* equally as well as *Mycocosmic*. Addressing temporality first: your erudite, moving, and yet somehow playful collection (Emily's tattoos!) rhymes the Brontës' time with our own, especially through pandemic and toxic technologies, documenting those resemblances as well as the complexities of their literary reception over the years. You're part of that reception, through this book, but your poems and epigraphs reference responses by biographers, painters, poets, and so many more, expanding the Brontëverse.

I knew long before this book saw print that you were a passionate reader. At what point did you realize that your specific fascination with the Brontës would become a collection? How did your title and cover come into focus? I'm thinking about the adjective "badass" in tension with that distinctively literary name, as well as those ghostly feet in the grass. The translucent hem in the cover art puts me in mind of your poem "Emily's Apocrypha," the tease of a history that's partly visible, partly lost.



JS: "Stone bothering" is a fantastic term—I agree. And I love the lore, the petrification myths, surrounding them, that the stones are actually people. At some sites, they're said to slip from the circle once a year and head to nearby streams, or they're maidens who were punished for dancing. Visit a stone circle and you're halfway to an *ubi sunt*. Megaliths do feel alive with the imprint of deep time, plus they're peppered with forest-like blooms of lichen—whole ecosystems are clinging there. With the Brontës, I followed a winding track through a long fascination with their lives and works. They appeared elsewhere in my work, then gradually took over. As with many books, you write a few poems, then a few more poems, and then you've gone beyond a sequence or a chapbook into a kind of fever dream.

Apocalypse Mix, my previous book, centered on war and the ways it infiltrates our lives and language; it was a deep dive into family history. By the time it came out, in 2017, I was already writing biographical poems about Emily, which felt risky and possibly retro, maybe too self-consciously literary.

But the more I spent time with these sisters the more I found "rhymes" with our own era. The wanton environmental destruction in the name of progress that's about profit for some, poverty for others, was central. The way the Brontës adhered to or rebelled against gender expectations of their time was another element—working as ill-paid teachers and governesses, or, in Emily's case,

deciding she'd rather stay home with her father and take on domestic duties, if it meant she could live mostly in her own head.

My original title centered on fire and frost, motifs that recur in Emily's poems, but it didn't really capture the sisters' gritty determination to speak their minds in print—which required some serious badassery. In the title poem, I imagined the sisters as contemporary superheroes striding across the moor. The cover image you described so well is called "Sinking In." It's a painting by artist and illustrator Kelly Louise Judd, whose work has a playful neo-Victorian quality—elemental, folkloric, filled with woodland creatures. All very Emily.

Your own book, *Mycocosmic*, is also centered on ecology—specifically the lore around mushrooms, which are, of course, the fruiting body of decay, but bring to mind associations of sustenance and magic rituals, decay and transformation. You dive into complex underworlds of sex, motherhood, mortality, and the fraught spaces of submerged memory. Did the book start out intentionally, like a concept album? Or did poems emerge in a less consciously strategized way?

LW: *Heterotopia*, exploring my mother's childhood in Liverpool during World War Two, was a concept album. *Mycocosmic* developed differently. On the one hand, I'd become a student of mycelium, the underground organism from which mushrooms sprout. That preoccupation was emerging in my poems. Then, in late winter 2021, my mother's lymphoma recurred, and she died a few weeks later. That crisis loosed a spate of poems, first about her death, then about the submerged memories you mention. My mother always read my books. I hadn't realized how much I was holding back with her in mind, especially material about childhood violence, mental health, and sexuality.

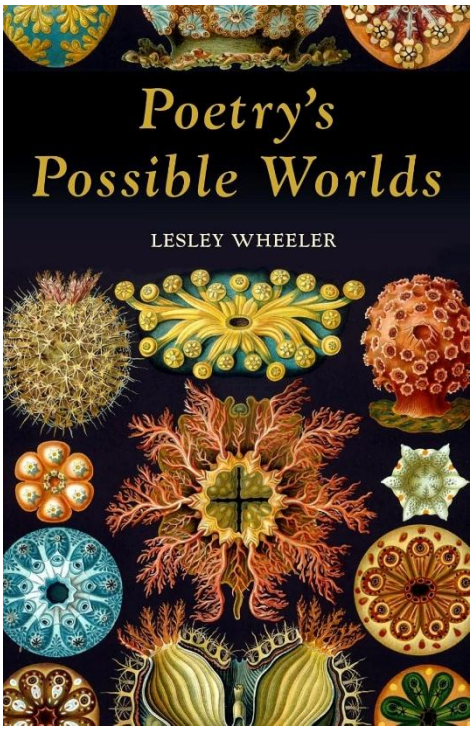
In 2023 I knew I had more than enough new work for a collection, but I had no clue how those pieces fit together. Then it hit me that fungus metabolizes death, breaking down the toughest cell walls to help make new soil. I had been writing toward transformation for a while, the midlife transitions of menopause and empty nests and dying parents, and mycelium could be a muse for the process.

To what extent did your rereading of the Brontës feel like a medium for or parallel to other questions you wanted to address? There's so much here about ecological crisis.

JS: Great question. I think mourning and lament are necessary aspects of our work in the Anthropocene and I was lucky to have a trinity of muses for this strand. The Brontës lived in an unsanitary, overcrowded town and were familiar with disease, particularly TB which took a heavy toll on the family (only Charlotte

outlived her siblings). But the sisters' love of the larger-than-human world is evident—their work is so rich in terms of its naturalistic description, so absolutely jam-packed with word pictures, they practically provide a baseline for tracking climate change.

I'd like to mention *Poetry's Possible Worlds*, your recent essay collection, a hybrid memoir that fuses creative nonfiction with literary analysis. I see aspects of this hybridization in "Underpoem," the cento (or lyric essay) that runs beneath *Mycocosmic*'s individual poems, a connective thread that mirrors the understory of a forest. I'm curious how this piece came to be and where it fit into your drafting process?



LW: Thanks for revealing that echo between my books—you're right that I'm more and more attracted to genre-crossing. "Underpoem [Fire Fungus]" was the last poem I wrote for the book, and it feels hybrid in method as well as subject matter to me, too. I had done so much research, and in the underpoem I could finally be scholarly and discursive about it, documenting some of the sources that inspired me even as I made certain associative, emotional connections explicit. The "fire fungus" element calls back to an early vision, too. A Tarot reader told me at a key moment that "good things come to you through fire," and I had a dream about a stone goddess telling me my next book should be about dragons, so transformation through fire was a motif from the start. I had become uneasy, though, about my working title *Good Things Come Through Fire.* The

Anthropocene has brought frequent, devastating wildfires, and I didn't want to sound cavalier about that, although fire does play a crucial role in the renewal of many ecosystems.

There's plenty of fire in the Brontë novels (and in their lives), as well as in your poems about them—as well as thunder, letters, and real and imagined landscapes. Is there a motif or metaphor that became especially salient to you as your research deepened, or as you considered your own relationship to these figures? I'm also really interested in the role of research in your poetry life.

JS: I thought about weather a lot, for sure, not least because of the word *wuthering* that Emily uses, a Northern English word, for the sound of the roaring currents on the moor. She might have been a keen meteorologist: in the midst of December, she wrote one of her most ecstatic nature poems, "High Waving Heather," which is a stunning response to seeing the moors in full summer dress—the vibrant purple heather withstanding the storms, the wind itself "Roaring like thunder, like soft music sighing." Like the Romantics, the Brontës are as attentive to inner weather as to the atmospherics of place.

I find research brews poetry. With this book, I read a lot of biographies, a lot of critical and other reading for social/political context. But I also followed random trails. When a poem's getting stuck, I look things up—a process that led to "Self-Portrait as Thunder and Lightning" where curiosity about Victorian-era fashion led to the fact that Emily actually wore a dress with lightning bolts—recent screen Emilys Chloe Pirrie (*To Walk Invisible*) and Emma Mackey (*Emily*) wear colorful reinventions, but you can see a replica of the actual dress in the Brontë Parsonage Museum.

Archival research played into the book as well. "Emily Inked" was inspired by spending time with manuscript pages held in the Berg Collection at the New York Public Library. Her curious doodles made me think she'd have been enchanted by tattoos. So one minute you're doing your homework, then the investigations reveal unexpected gifts. I love site visits as well. The spectral imprint of a place lodges in your brain, this book being a prime example of how that happens.

Your own passion for research is evident in *Mycocosmic*. Some poems find ways to incorporate a scientific or environmental strand into more personal narratives, while others reflect a more documentary-historical focus. "Harrowing" is a chilling look at the isolation and privations brought about by a global pandemic. And "You Know Where the Smithy Stood by the Clinkers" incorporates conversations with colleagues in other disciplines who share insights about our nation's darker legacies, including the role of enslaved labor in

your university's history. I wondered if your archival work precedes the poems or vice versa? Do you see the process of writing the more confessional poems as challenging as those poems whose subjects may be only tangentially related to autobiography? Has your scholarly training in Modernist Poetics pushed you toward (or against) one mode or the other?

LW: Sometimes I set out to research a subject before I write about it, but chance finds can send you in unexpected directions. A couple of summers ago I began work toward a lyric essay on H.D.'s use of Tarot by visiting Yale's Beinecke Library. I ended up spending a lot of time with what most would consider a minor exchange of letters between H.D. and an old friend who led a conventional life in suburban New Jersey, very near where I grew up. You never know what random discovery will ignite an idea. The same goes for a lecture or reading you attend, a reference in an article you read, a mural you spot—anything can send you down a rabbit hole into a refreshed world.

Research has rigors, but I find conducting it easier than writing about high-stakes personal material. Vulnerability, a sense that an artist is willing to look bad or expose a tender spot, makes art moving and urgent. I'm stunned in the best way when I encounter it in poetry by others, but it's hard to face your own hurt and shame.

Modernism definitely inspires me with its experimental textures and intellectual breadth. But Confessional-era poetry, and later work with a similar take-no-prisoners fierceness, inspires me too. For a long time, trained in my PhD program that first-person poetry conveys a naïve understanding of identity, I resisted autobiographical writing. Now I suspect that prejudice undercut my early poetry's power. I mean, look at Plath, one of our mutual favorite poets. Her poetic "I" could not be more multiple, unstable, and crafty. Verse can be confessional *and* immensely complex.

What I do find challenging about research-driven poetry—and poetry of political and ecological witness—is the transmutation of information and argument into sensory detail and sonically dense lines. In "Harrowing" and "You Know Where the Smithy Stood by the Clinkers," you've pinpointed two poems I revised many, many times, trying to boil polemic down to poetry. You're so good at this branch of witchcraft. "Letter to Emily Brontë," for example, is jam-packed with facts about her time, our time, Covid protocols, animal extinctions, Brontë family lore, and more—while maintaining lyric intensity. Do you have composition strategies or processes that help you achieve this?

JS: Thanks for your kind words about that poem—it's one of my favorites. You're right: revision is key—often it's about voice and scale. Sometimes more than a brushstroke of research will sink a poem. I love epistolary poems. Letters give you permission to shift rapidly between worlds and registers.

Earlier you mentioned Plath, but I also think about Bishop here, in terms of subtle or surprising shifts in voice and tone that are consistent with the chattiness of letters. Your work is filled with rich description of the natural world and infused with a deep ecological vision. Animals—birds and other creatures—appear with striking frequency as beings in their right, and often as ambassadors or messengers. Do you see your poems as a part of an otherworldly tradition that incorporates the spectral and/or the uncanny?

LW: Totally. For me, reality shimmers. Sometimes you can glimpse other realities behind it. I've many times felt that the sudden appearance of a bird, animal, or insect delivered a message. An epiphany behind *Mycocosmic* was a moment I stood barefoot in my yard next to an old maple tree. My quarter acre had once contained two other maples of about the same age. I suddenly wondered if they had been communicating with each other, sending nutrients and warnings back and forth through mycelial networks. Then I wondered if the surviving tree and the mycelium beneath us were aware of me, as I had just become aware of their secret lives. Were they calling me to notice them, even? I felt myself as one node in a longstanding ecosystem. It was numinous.

Surely you feel similarly, as did Emily Brontë, I gather, especially about animals.

JS: Absolutely! When I started writing about Emily, I remembered that she rescued a hawk. Living in a suburban neighborhood rather than a village that backed onto the moors, I saw foxes and the occasional deer materializing in the yards and alleys. It felt magical, but was part of a larger story of habitat loss and resilience. So the book is a bit of an urban bestiary. And Emily and Anne kept a quite menagerie—beloved dogs and some rescued birds—an endearing quality.

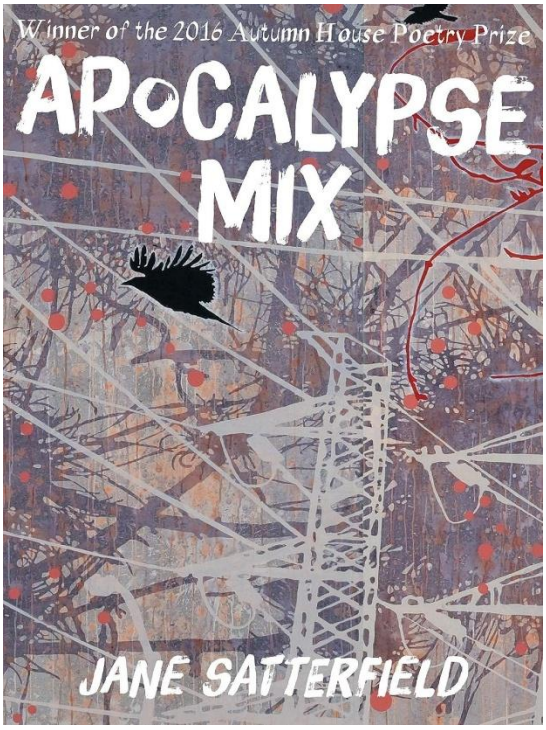
With *Mycocosmic*, you've joined the ranks of poets who engage in divinatory practices—Yeats with automatic writing, Plath with tarot, Merrill with the Ouija, Harjo with ritual invocations, and others I'm not thinking of. What drew you to explore tarot and the tradition of spell casting—is it a source of inspiration, healing, or something else?

LW: Like you, I love intricate sonic patterning in poetry, an oral or musical quality that tends to characterize spells and prayers, too. Plus, in looking to transform myself—and thinking about how transmutation happens in the other-

than-human world—I was wondering what role language can play in metamorphosis. Petitions to nature and to supernatural beings have long been a way to seek change.

I'm using abstract language, though, and it's more than that. As I say in "Flammable Almanac," "I picked up the cards as a kind of game." Tarot was a pandemic hobby, a new way to play around, but at another level I was desperate. The world had shut down and I was longing to imagine life after Covid (ha!). I'm no expert in Tarot or any other kind of divination, but sometimes when I lay out a spread, I catch glimpses of understanding. It's rewarding but also unsettling; inspiring and healing but, for me, a font of confusion as well.

You and I were once on a conference panel together about poems as prayers, spells, charms, and curses. I don't remember what poem you read—was it one of these? There are certainly supernatural threads in *The Badass Brontës*, in your séance poem for example, and of course there are in their novels, too. *Jane Eyre* has been my favorite novel since the age of nine in part because of its gothic elements. Where is your thinking, these days, about poetry as spellcasting?



JS: Spells, charm, and prayer poems carry the weight of ritual and tradition for sure. They feel endlessly resonant, especially in dark times. Not long after that conference we all swerved into lockdowns, but our panel conversations stayed close in mind. I actually read "Malediction," one of a pair of defixiones (curse tablets) from *Apocalypse Mix,* where I'm thinking about the impulse behind

malefic requests to the gods. But in "Spellcasters," the Brontë sisters are speaking for weird sisters everywhere, climbing precipices and reciting Prospero-like charms to "roll back the besmirching smoke / that the ancient forest might rise again" and to "summon a sisterhood of destiny."

From traditional received forms like the sonnet and villanelle to the gigan and golden shovel and more, *Mycocosmic* is form-rich. Do you see formal experimentation as an essential part of your poetics? Do forms open doors in terms of subject matter or tonal variety?

LW: To so many of these insightful questions, I'm answering yes, yes, yes. Reading about a form that's new to me, such as the gigan (invented by Ruth Ellen Kocher) or LaCharta (from Laura Lamarca), gets me thinking about what kind of material might be amplified or complicated by it. Form is generative. The underpoem structure that came to me in a brainstorm seemed to necessitate a discursive voice. "Rhapsodomantic" wanted cryptic little prose blurbs like those in Tarot guides. I do keep returning to free verse as well, because sometimes I need to relearn what strangeness can happen when you play tennis without a net.

The Badass Brontës encompasses a wild range of forms and tones, too: your book contains a gigan plus triolets and a cento and prose poetry and so much more. I'd be curious to hear your answer to the same form questions, and also whether there's a mode that feels particularly congenial to you. I notice I fall into triple meters often, even when I'm trying for iambs in a sonnet.

I also have one more question, raised by your poem about the internet quiz, "Which Brontë Sister Are You?" Your poem gives three answers in the second person, but aren't you Emily, the sister at the heart of this project? (I'm Charlotte, duh.)

JS: It sounds like we both found that established forms really open up tonal variety and become solutions to tricky narrative problems. The trio of triolets in the quiz form was a quick way of giving thumbnail bios of the sisters in a way that revealed why they still hold the attention of readers. Villanelles are dynamic yet constrained—a perfect space to pay tribute to The Most *Wuthering Heights* Day Ever dance celebrations that recreate Kate Bush's 1978 video. Like Charlotte, I have my ambitions; like Anne I'm sometimes working quietly, tuning out my inner weather. Most days, yes, I am Emily, walking out into whatever open space I can find or create.

Walking, I know, is also part of your own literary practice, so my last question is about mushrooms in the wild. Have you ventured into foraging or found any culinary tips to share?

LW: I took a foraging class and have been trying to get into the woods as often as possible, eyes peeled, but embodiment gets in the way: I've been battling sciatica all year. I've been nibbling wild stuff all my life, starting with onion grass in the backyard where I played "orphans," a game inspired by *Jane Eyre.* (I just looked up "onion grass," and it's also called "crow garlic"—nice.) When I've got specimens I'm sure are safe, frying in butter will be my first go-to, but I do love a wild mushroom risotto made with grated pecorino and broth from dried porcini. I also hear "crab cakes" with lion's mane mushrooms are pretty fab.

JS: Those dishes sound amazing, Lesley. Thanks for this glimpse into world of wild stuff that is *Mycocosmic*'s origin.

Jason Guriel

“Stubbornness Is Essential”: An Interview with Daniel Cowper

Earlier this year, Daniel Cowper landed on the Island of Misfit Verse Novelists with aplomb. His excellent *Kingdom of the Clock* (McGill-Queen’s UP 2025), a novel in couplets, takes place in an unnamed city that contains twenty-first-century multitudes: an artist-cum-barista, a gambling addict whose wife tracks him by way of app, a con artist armed with a pitch deck, and more. The couplets are blank, and the characters, convincing; Cowper has a way with details and dialogue that earns the reader’s trust.

And he has a way with words that earns the poet’s; his writing is “often envy-inducing,” an adjective I use in the blurb I was happy to compose for *Kingdom of the Clock*. (Us verse novelists have to stick together, right?)

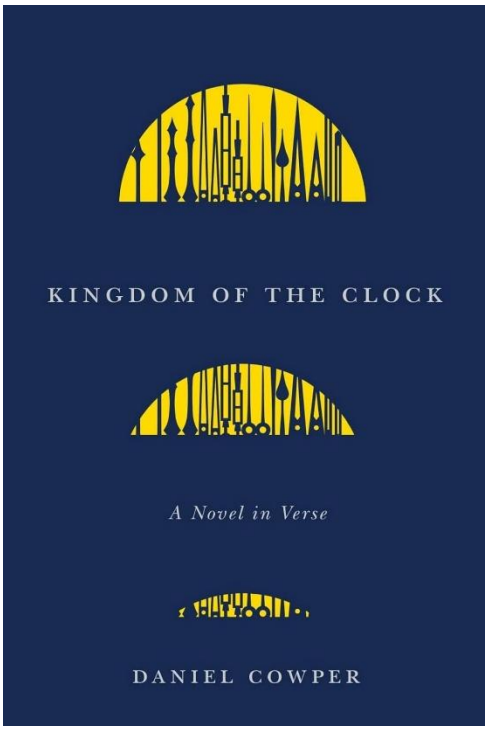
We talk about all of this, and a lot more, in the interview below, including the limitations of lyric poems, what it takes to go long in verse, how to kill an opera, a life-changing William Logan poem, an anxiety-inducing P.T. Anderson picture, why you should give your character a pipe, and the intersection between poetry and spreadsheet.

—Jason Guriel

Jason Guriel: Why a verse novel? I mean, I know why I dabble in the form, but it takes a lot of work to pull off a book like *Kingdom of the Clock*.

Daniel Cowper: I started working on this book just after deciding to chuck urban life and move back to the rural island where I grew up. I wanted to write a love letter to the idea of the city; and I thought I had learned something about what makes a city tick that would be worth sharing. I didn't set out to write a verse novel at all—the poem started as a long flow of description, but I figured if I wanted to describe the city properly, I had to write about the people who live there, their struggles, and how they get through the day.

Wanting to do justice to those characters and their problems forced me into a novelistic approach: the central characters and their narratives overwhelmed the descriptive elements of the poem, so that, eventually, I had to admit to myself that I was writing a verse novel.



JG: So is it fair to say you find the mindset required to write a lyric poem differs from the mindset required to mint lots and lots (and *lots*) of lines in service of a story?

DC: From my perspective, the critical difference between approaching a lyric poem and a narrative poem is openness to failure or (as you might say) pigheadedness. Not finishing poems is an important part of the lyric practice, so

you can avoid either battering yourself against them or accepting their mediocrity.

A poet can fail to pull off a lyric poem because of problems with the poem, problems with the poet, or problems which are entirely mysterious. When that happens, the poem can be set aside; but it's often better to loot the draft for parts and forget it. In my early 20s, for example, I wrote a poetry sequence about Cleopatra, heavily influenced by William Logan poetry sequences like "Punchinello in Chains." I worked on the Cleopatra poems for a while, then walked away and never looked back.

Narrative poetry, on the other hand, requires commitment. When you work on a big enough scale, you set out knowing that you won't have all the resources you'll need to accomplish the goal. You know you'll need to do research, develop new skills and tools, and write and rewrite, in order to complete the work. You can cut passages that aren't working or aren't contributing to the whole, but you can't give up. Stubbornness is essential.

JG: "Stubbornness is essential"—I love that, and I agree. When talking about my own verse novels, I used to say that there was a certain point where the draft had become too big to give up on. It had become a small moon with its own unavoidable gravity.

Tell me more about "commitment." How did you stay committed? I used to wake early, before the rest of the house was up, to bang out couplets. What did your practice or process look like?

DC: Working on something the size of a verse novel forced me to be more proactive with my writing than I used to be: I portioned off writing time at the start of workdays and going into the evenings knowing I'd write after everyone else had gone to sleep. My wife and I are raising two small Visigoths, and their barbarisms would have my wife asleep by 9pm—leaving me able to work after that for three or four hours.

That schedule let me work in the times of day I feel most creatively energized (breakfast to lunch, late at night), while leaving the bulk of the "work day" to attend to tasks that make ends meet and get the chores done.

In addition, I pride myself on getting little bits of writing done here and there, in the cracks of the day. That was something I got a lot of practice with while

working downtown, and that habit of flexibility is still very valuable now that I parent and work from home. But there's no getting around the requirement for stamina: as T.S. Eliot said, anyone who aspires to literary work must do the work of two or starve.

JG: Writing in the "cracks of the day" (nice line) is essential. Who are your influences?

DC: Well, William Logan was the first contemporary poet who proved to me the English language was still latent with magic. It sounds pretentious, but when I was young I genuinely suspected that English, in its present condition, was not a good medium for poetry. A friend showed me Logan's poem "The Saint and the Crab" in *The New Yorker*, and my doubts were dispelled.

Logan got me through university; after I started working in an office, Joachim du Bellay kept me going. Over lunch breaks, I'd translate sonnets from his *Regrets*. I loved his direct tone and identified with how he felt about having to direct much of his energy into a demanding day job. Those are great poems to live with.

I'd also be remiss not to mention the video essay series *Every Frame A Painting*, by Tony Zhou and Taylor Ramos. Tony and Taylor discuss filmmaking, but much of what they say about images, scenes, narration, and character was very inspiring to me when I was writing *Kingdom of the Clock*. Thanks to them, I have come to think that, in a shared need for succinctness, vividness, and emotional structure, cinema and narrative poetry have much in common.

It's difficult to disentangle what's influenced me as a reader from what's influenced me as a poet, and I've had too many formative enthusiasms to name them all. Those are three that I think would be rude not to mention.

JG: Reading your book, I thought about P.T. Anderson's *Magnolia*—a picture that unspools across a single day. And then I thought about *Ulysses*, *Mrs Dalloway*, and other classics of day-in-the-life lit. How did you arrive at the book's structure, the temporal conceit—the "clock" in the title? And did you have any predecessors in mind?

DC: Even when I first conceived of the poem as a description of a city, I intended its action to fill a twenty-four-hour period, thinking it was essential to comply with how the sequence of hours defines urban life. In the countryside other temporal cycles play a big role in people's lives: the weeks, seasons, moons, and

even tides are all very important. On my island, the ferry schedule, in a very real sense, takes the place of the clock. If the ferry schedule shifts, as it does once in a while, even the hours when a school day begins and ends are shifted. In cities, the clock itself reigns unrivalled.

In other words, I felt bound by that temporal conceit, which is built into some of the other structural details. Not only is there a canto for each hour, but the closing line of each hour is echoed in the opening line of the next, as if they were gears whose teeth fit together.

When I had made the central decision to let the city express itself through the dramas of individual citizens, the temporal unity I had begun building on served a secondary function of offsetting the complexity of the poem's action.

When I was writing *Kingdom of the Clock*, I actively tried to avoid thinking of any models or predecessors, except, to some extent, so far as I had to monitor myself to avoid falling into inadvertent imitation. I have since thought with a little anxiousness about *Magnolia*, which (if I recall correctly, not having seen it since it came out) is also concerned with affirming the value of individual humanity. *Magnolia's* famous climax, with frogs raining from the sky, also seems to me to gesture towards a spiritual reality that in *Kingdom of the Clock* is represented by the amorphous spirits "cycling on solar winds."

JG: T.S. Eliot says somewhere that "the business of the poet was to make poetry out of the unexplored resources of the unpoetical." I've always liked that line, and when I read *Kingdom of the Clock*, I feel like I'm seeing a poet making poetry out of the unpoetical. For example, there's the scene where "Connor's guiding // prospective investors through his pitch deck." Now, I've developed pitch decks for my day job, but I don't think I've seen pitch decks in poetry before.

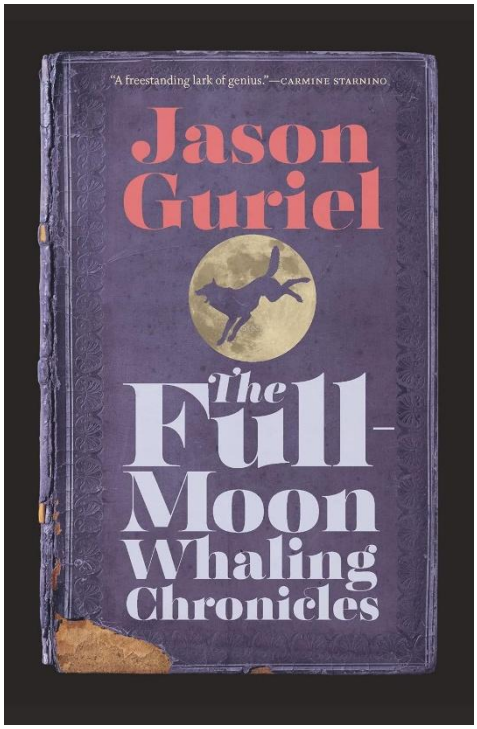
Maybe this is a leading question, but do you see narrative verse as opening up opportunities for poets to plumb the unpoetical? What does narrative verse allow, subject-wise, that lyric poetry doesn't necessarily encourage? Are lyric poems resistant to pitch decks?

DC: I think so. A lyric can only assume a limited amount of context on the part of a reader — it can be difficult to introduce things that aren't familiar to most readers. As a result, lyric poetry can often be doubly limited: limited by the poet's

own experience and limited by the poet's expectations about what readers will be able to relate to.

Within a larger narrative, the reader can be given enough context to relate to nearly anything with understanding. If you have characters and plot, you have a framework within which all manner of things can be established and set up. In *The Full-Moon Whaling Chronicles*, you make the description of future technology not only engrossing but entertaining — while as someone or other said, it's a challenge even to get a microwave oven into a lyric poem without it feeling forced. It's a shame, but so much of real life doesn't fit within the constraints of a lyric poem.

Pitch decks are a great example. People put a lot of effort into pitch decks. And pitch decks move mountains of money; lives are built up and broken by pitch decks every day. Not to bring up trauma you may have experienced in your day job, but some people have multi-hour meetings about pitch decks. In *Kingdom of the Clock*, I wanted to talk about real life, and pitch decks are as much a part of real life as coffee or chess, a child's birth or a friend's death.



JG: You're a dab hand with alliteration and internal rhyme. There are so many micro-moments in your novel that wow me: "cared-for kids," "steam // rising from the seams of tinfoil crimped / round salmon filets," "To chase / the chalice of art," "Landlords make their rounds, push slips // through mail

slots whose metal flaps fall back," "her bank // account blank," "Armin's canary, // singing pertly from perch to perch, / offensively alive," "Adanac's // overdraft is still untapped, held back / for payroll. He drains it, dreaming it'll double // by dawn." (Oh, and that crimped tinfoil seems to me yet more poetry extracted from the seemingly unpoetical!)

But anyway, I do have a question. I think one challenge for the verse novelist is keeping the verse vibrant even as they try to push the plot forward and amass pages. In other words, it's easy to stockpile a lot of less-than-stunning lines. But you have a high success rate, which, I think, is what makes the book itself a success. As you were writing, were you conscious of trying to maintain a certain density of sonically rich poetry? How did you balance the novelist's need to advance the plot or develop a character against the poet's need to make music?

DC: I've seen a lot of opera, and it has convinced me that the narrative must be effective in order for the music to be heard. I've seen Carmen so dowdily staged that "L'amour est un oiseau rebelle" was a snooze-fest; I've seen *Don Giovanni* killed by a staging that undermined the narrative.

But when opera is musically *and* dramatically effective? In a good production, "La donna é mobile" makes us cry at the end of *Rigoletto*, and then, as we hum the tune homeward, our feet and hearts feel lighter.

That's what I aimed for in *Kingdom of the Clock:* memorable verse that "sang" on its own but also intensified the interest of characters, the vividness of scenes, and emotional resonance of the narrative. That meant harmonizing what I think of as the micropoetic level (the qualities of writing that you'd also find in a lyric poem) and the macropoetic (the qualities of writing you'd also find in a prose novel).

How do you orchestrate that harmonization? For me, it was a labour-intensive process. One method was to copy out by hand the entire poem (a practice Auden recommends, on the grounds that the fingers are bored more easily than eye or ear) and to use the slow pace of pen and paper to assess whether each moment was receiving exactly the right amount of weight both poetically and dramatically. Inevitably, I added and subtracted quite a lot. I doubt there are any short cuts: if you find one, let me know.

JG: Ha, I have no shortcuts. I love that you copy things by hand. I used to do a lot of longhand writing—especially at the beginning of a project. I liked that it slowed me down.

I often reach for that other Eliot saw, "There is no method but to be very intelligent." Comically unhelpful, but true. For me, it's about writing good lines, one by one. "Good," though, means a lot of things: maintaining the meter, satisfying the rhyme scheme, coming up with original but precise similes and metaphors, avoiding cliché, making sure the characters are revealing themselves through believable dialogue and interesting actions—and trying to do all of this at once! Occasionally, I try to take a drone's-eye view, but there's so much to do, on a line-by-line basis, that I tend to stay pretty micro. I think my thinking is something like: if I take care of the details, the bigger picture will take care of itself. A verse novelist is someone who's digging themselves out from under a whole heap of constraints.

Speaking of detail, you have an eye for hi-def images: the artist Viro's "one enamelled Creuset poet," "the padlocked // pre-fab shed" that holds a public chessboard's pieces, "raindrops // hopping on the hood," characters flipping "rattan chairs" onto a café's tabletops at closing time. The world of your novel seems thought out and thoroughly textured. It seems real. Is it safe to say a commitment to realism, to the texture and grain of reality, is important to you?

DC: *Kingdom of the Clock* was intended to make some accurate observations about contemporary urban life, and in so doing, to make a case for what urban living does, and doesn't do, for and to urbanites. There's a documentary dimension to *Kingdom of the Clock* that I felt imposed on me a duty to avoid the concocted or unrealistic.

There are always practical reasons to write with commitment to detail. I think one aim of art, as a mimetic undertaking, is to persuade the reader of a new reality: to make it "seem real." In pursuit of that undertaking, the vivid detail is persuasive. I used to spend a lot of time in the Metropolitan Museum in New York, and I loved Ingres' stylized portrait of the Princesse de Broglie. It is a very idealized portrait, but I have overheard remarks that it "looks just like a photograph." It looks nothing like a photo, but I understand why they're persuaded that it does: the level of detail is so rich and precise.

Lastly, I personally believe in writing from a posture of love. The loving eye naturally takes joy in absorbing the details of the beloved, and celebrating those details expresses that love implicitly. You know how in *Graceland*, Paul Simon recalls his wife telling him their marriage was over as if he'd never loved her, "as if I'd never noticed // the way she brushed her hair from her forehead."

JG: "The vivid detail is persuasive"—yes. I'm thinking about the part in your book where Mehrdad—who's telling friends about a grandson who's due to arrive—"waves to ward off their congratulations." Mehrdad goes on to explain that there's a chance the baby won't survive. Again, I love the alliteration ("waves to ward"), but I also love the "vivid detail," the way we see this character in that waved arm. He's anxious about the birth, and he's trying to lower expectations—in a kind of stoic, stiff-upper-lip style.

That's a small moment, but would you talk a little bit about how you create believable characters? Do they exist in your mind prior to writing—or are you writing them into existence through details like the "waved arm?"

DC: Often I start with the idea of a character that makes an interesting mistake, and try to imagine why they'd do so. If I can get my mind around why a character might do something they know is wrong, or how that same character could find redemption, usually I'll start to automatically imagine aspects of appearance or mannerism that go with the inner self. If not, I will force myself to think about different ways the character might be individuated.

"If you don't know what to do with a character, give him a pipe," someone said, and that's good advice, though it needn't be literally a pipe. Sometimes you need an arbitrary detail for the rest of the character to coalesce around. It might be a habitual gesture, or something the character has been meaning to do but is avoiding, or some troubling memory the character is still trying to understand. Details like that have implications, and working out those implications can take you a long way.

JG: While directing the western *Rio Bravo*, Howard Hawks instructed Ricky Nelson—a pop star who wasn't much of an actor—to occasionally rub the side of his nose, a little gesture that the cowboy's character seems to coalesce around. A pipe by other means, I guess.

DC: It's funny you mention film: in one of their *Every Frame A Painting* videos, Zhou and Ramos say Akira Kurosawa also liked to give each actor a tick: telling

one to rub his forehead as if trying to smooth the wrinkles out, telling another to shrug his shoulders as if working out a kink.

JG: Your characters are vivid, but sometimes the general inhabitants of the book's unnamed city (Vancouver, I assume?) congeal into a kind of mass, as if the city is a machine, and its citizens, hapless cogs. At noon, for instance:

> **All hierarchies**
> **of labour cease: statisticians pause analyses**
>
> **of per-user-hour spend on fremium games –**
> **designers leave designs half-limned –**
>
> **draft emails gleam unsent on a million screens**
> **while workers on break run the seawall or read,**
>
> **flip tractor tires to slog through sand**
> **for exercise. Hungry queues watch pork sliced,**
>
> **crackling diced, and salsa verde grease**
> **both block and knife.**

Passages like this reminded me of modernist poems—for instance, Pound's "In a Station of the Metro" or Sandburg's "Chicago." But it's as if you've installed an update and Pound's subway riders—"petals on a wet black bough"—are now knowledge economy workers. Would you talk a little bit about the importance of the contemporary city in *Kingdom of the Clock*?

DC: Although I've spent most of my adult life in cities—Vancouver, Toronto, New York—I've always seen the urban environment through a stranger's eyes, and it does seem strange to me. I grew up in quite rural circumstances: drawing our water from our creek, eating our own apples; buying eggs from one neighbour, and meat from another. Doing for ourselves and our neighbours, in the way country people do.

Contemporary cities are a bit of a paradox, to my mind: on the one hand, they are the places most shaped by human desires and human ingenuity. They hold the finest artifacts of the human spirit and offer exciting opportunities for human

beings to develop and express their talents. In that sense, cities are the most "human" environments.

In another sense, a city is a very inhuman environment. Life in a modern urban environment—a stony, canyon-like landscape teeming with strangers—isn't something that human beings are naturally fitted for. They literally drive us crazy: mental health is much worse in cities than in small towns, despite the vastly superior mental health care in cities.

The presence of myriads of other people creates the opportunities that make cities so exciting; but on a day-to-day basis, city dwellers encounter other individuals most commonly as obstructions: moving obstacles on sidewalks; taking up seats on buses and trains; driving cars that block our own, or which we have to watch out for when crossing the street; standing in front of us in queues for coffee or an elevator.

What does city life involve these days? How does a city work? What does it give its citizens, and what does it demand in return? *Kingdom of the Clock* is all about exploring these questions.

JG: How did you keep all the plotlines straight in your head? Did you track them in a notebook or something? Did you write any of the plotlines in one go—and then disperse them into the MS?

DC: I tried a few different techniques. I made flowcharts and spreadsheets, but because of the way the various plot threads interact, those approaches didn't get me very far. The cells didn't line up; the arrows tangled.

Later in the process, the main technique I followed was to periodically remove all the portions of the poem concerning a particular plot thread, and paste them into a single document so I could consider that thread as a standalone story. Thinking about whether the story was missing something, or contained lines that were either flabby or superfluous, I'd make revisions and additions, then paste them back into the main text. I did that several times for each plot line.

JG: I was actually going to ask you if you'd used a spreadsheet. What are you working on now? Are you feeling the itch to go long again?

DC: There are three projects I need to finish (or abandon in despair) before I can embark on another long poem: a prose novel; a children's novel, which is what my wife thinks I should focus on; and a book of lyrics.

There are two ideas for long poems I've been doing research for and would like to get cracking on when the decks have been cleared: one a retelling of the Tom Thumb legend, and the other about the Pont St. Esprit poisoning.

For the latter, I really ought to do a lot of on-the-ground research in the south of France, and for the former—well, I've always wanted to see Japan, whose own versions of Tom Thumb have a remarkably rich mythos around them. If I'm tweeting from one of those two locales over a sustained period, you'll know what I'm working on.

JG: My wife is always trying to get me to do a children's book. Tell me about these projects.

DC: It feels like bad luck to talk about unfinished projects: these are fish on the line but not yet in the boat. But I'll risk it.

The children's novel is a fairy tale about a pandemic: there's a disease everyone is frightened of, and no one understands; there are unloved children; sad women; angry men; and an escape to a fantasy world which is more comprehensible, but less forgiving than our own.

The prose novel is about the ambivalence that arises in adulthood towards a childhood home: a contemporary Brideshead Revisited of sorts.

The lyric poems I've been writing recently have been mainly seasonal—some have even been festive—so I've been putting them together into a calendar sequence. Unfortunately, I've made it hard on myself by wrapping those poems up in a tissue of an imaginary calendar poem (a 3rd hand translation of the completed version of Ovid's Fasti, now lost)—fabricating those fragments is a lot of fun, but I suspect a poetry publisher would want them discarded. So there is fun, but absurdity in the labour.

Each project is "nearly" done, but there's such a gulf between "nearly done" and "done."

Sunil Iyengar

A Conversation with Jared Carter

Photograph of Jared Carter by Roger Pfingston.

Sunil Iyengar: To get us started, can you say something about your family life and childhood in rural Indiana? How did those factors shape your beginnings as a poet?

Jared Carter: I was born in the Midwestern state of Indiana and still live there. Indiana today is surprisingly wired and industrialized, but, in places apart from its few large cities, much of it remains rural and conservative. It has a fascinating Civil War history, and was an important swing state during the Populist and Progressive eras.

It has produced national political figures such as Eugene Debs and Wendell Willkie, and writers and artists ranging from Ambrose Bierce and Theodore Dreiser to Cole Porter and Twyla Tharp. (For good measure, toss in Kurt Vonnegut, James Dean, Larry Bird, Michael Jackson, Joshua Bell, Little Orphan Annie, and Garfield.)

An important distinction that should be made for this interview is that I grew up not on a farm, but in a small town—the same sort of close-knit, kinship-oriented, inwardly turned community, with agricultural and artisanal roots, that can still be found almost anywhere in the world. The place of my birth wasn't exactly *rural;* a more precise word might be *traditional.*

To reimagine my early years, then, think not of someone like Wendell Berry, with a team of draft horses, out plowing the "back 40"—although such activity certainly possesses dignity, and has a continent's history behind it. Think, instead, of Sherwood Anderson, wandering on some windy night out beyond the streetlights of some small Midwestern town.

SI: Got it. Were you read poetry as a child, or made to memorize it in school? For that matter, when you began writing poetry, who were your models?

JC: I have memorized poems, certainly, but always of my own volition. My mother read children's poetry to me and my siblings when we were very young—James Whitcomb Riley, Robert Louis Stevenson, Eugene Fields, A. A. Milne.

My paternal grandmother preferred the Fireside Poets, Browning, Tennyson. She was born in 1878 and could remember the Blizzard of 1888. Every winter, after the first really good snow, she would get out her copy of Whittier's *Snow-Bound* and read it aloud to us. (I still have that book.)

SI: Were there notable storytellers in your family? Artists? Great readers?

JC: There was a decent amount of books in the house. I first began reading Ray Bradbury after finding a paperback copy of *The Martian Chronicles* on my mother's shelf of books. I discovered Ruskin—*The King of the Golden River*—among my grandparents' volumes. Along with Burns.

Everybody in my family read. My father was a small-town contractor, skilled in carpentry and masonry, just as his father had been. Both of them were excellent chess-players, as my older brother would prove to be. Both of them were good with any project involving concrete. My brother and I grew up lending an occasional hand at our father's various building sites.

SI: What kind of work did that entail?

JC: Easy things—shoveling gravel, pounding nails—but we were the boss's sons, after all. The workmen were kind to us. It was mostly a lot of fun, and always changing. As I got older, I particularly enjoyed those times when we set off some dynamite.

Every summer there was a concrete slab or an old bridge pier that had to be taken out. When I was still relatively small, at nine or ten years, and after the holes had been drilled, if there were close quarters, my father would have me squeeze in between the old slabs to set the charge and string the wire.

After we had retreated a safe distance, he would let me twist the detonator handle. I would shout "Fire in the hole!" and everybody would duck for cover. It was a "John Wayne" sort of thing to be doing, and the envy of the neighborhood kids. (For more dynamite foolishness, see my poem "Transmigration.")

SI: Amazing. Clearly your father gave you a lot of responsibility for your age. What was your mother like?

JC: My mother was a homemaker, a church lady, and an excellent singer, with a fine contralto voice. She made her pin money by singing for local weddings and funerals. She partnered with a pianist from her church. They were the first artists I ever knew who made money from their art—something I've never been very good at.

But the most significant influence of all turned out to be that of a paternal great-uncle, who went off to Paris in 1903 to study art and had a fascinating life. His name was Glen Cooper Henshaw. He died in 1946. There were several of his oils and pastels in the house where I grew up.

It took a long time for me to understand what he had achieved, but it was to be extremely important for my interest in trying to become a writer. Someone in my family had already found his way to the Belle Epoque of Rodin, Rilke, and Loie Fuller. Maybe I could do something like that.

Certain of my poems pay tribute to this great-uncle—"Configuration" for instance, in my second book, which begins, "What I first knew of a life of art / was what he touched last." (When I was at Bread Loaf in 1981, in Howard Nemerov's seminar,

Howard was particularly taken with that poem, and told the class it reminded him of Proust.)

SI: You attended Yale. Were there faculty or students who made an impression on you when it comes to poetry and the arts?

JC: In those days Yale College had not yet become coeducational. There were no classes in grammar or remedial English. If you hadn't already learned how to write in secondary school, you wouldn't have been admitted in the first place.

The majority of freshmen did not show up there expecting to be taught how to write, but to be introduced to Western culture. "We are far from able to instruct you about everything of importance," the professors said, "but we can help you practice reasoning and the examination of evidence and sources. For the rest of your life, you'll have to decide things on your own—everything from issues of war and peace to the art and literature of your own generation. Yale can get you started."

I was a raw youth from the provinces. It was a wonderful place to be—excellent classes, great professors. At every turn there were dazzling visiting lecturers. I got to hear Frost, MacLeish, Styron, Bellow, Mailer, Ginsberg, Corso, dozens more. What B. F. Skinner, Ayn Rand, and Herman Kahn had to say still haunts me. But what Dwight Macdonald had to say about contemporary writers was eye-opening.

I remember listening to Robert Oppenheimer, introduced by Margaret Mead. They seemed to have stepped out from the chorus of a Greek tragedy. At lunchtime in my college, Saybrook, I might suddenly find myself sitting across from Robert Penn Warren or Harold Bloom.

I also had undergraduate friends at Harvard, Columbia, and Brown, who could put me up in their dorms. This enabled me to attend lectures by people on the order of Edmund Wilson, Alfred Kazin, and Lionel Trilling. If I kept quiet, I could sit in on a seminar with someone like C. Wright Mills or John Kenneth Galbraith.

I took the train to Manhattan every chance I got, and saw plays and musicals: *Dark at the Top of the Stairs*, *Long Day's Journey into Night*, *My Fair La*dy, *The Iceman Cometh*. At the 92nd Street Y I heard Isak Dinesen read (I sat behind Marianne Moore). My friendship with Terrence McNally, at Columbia,

who was already beginning to explore the NY theater scene, led to my meeting Edward Albee and John Steinbeck.

At a 1961 bon voyage party for the Steinbecks—Edward Albee, Terrence McNally, Susan Burack, Jared Carter.

Another friend took me to dinner with his friend, Jason Robards, Jr., who played in both *Long Day's Journey* and *The Iceman Cometh*. Jason brought along his father, Jason Robards, Sr., a prominent actor in the 1920s, who told me how he and Tom Mix used to get some horses together and go out in the desert near L.A., where there were all kinds of abandoned movie sets, and shoot silent-film westerns. "We never had a script," he said. "We made it up as we went along."

In those days I was making it up as I went along, from New Haven and New York, to Boston and Providence. "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, / But to be young was very heaven."

SI: It sounds idyllic. And yet you seem to have left Yale, and enrolled at Goddard College, a place renowned for experimentation. How did this move come about?

JC: Like Shelley and so many others, eventually I had to "come down," not to London, but to the real world. I simply hadn't kept up with the work. (Oddly, I remember passing a class in logic, and failing one in existentialism.)

In those days, what would happen next was quite clear. Not staying in college or grad school, or not having majored in a hard science, meant that you were basically cannon fodder. You could be called up anytime the draft board back home needed a few more bodies to meet its monthly quota.

SI: So, before you even went to Goddard, the military called you. How long did you serve, and in what capacity? And how did this experience affect your writing journey?

JC: Shortly after I left Yale for the last time, in the early summer of 1961, things were heating up. Vietnam had been wobbling since the fall of Dien Bien Phu in 1954, the Berlin Wall was going up, and Khrushchev was pounding his shoe at the UN.

Bomb-shelter directions were posted in the subway stations; schoolkids were being taught how to duck. The future had never been so bleak. My first wife and I were married in December 1961. To tell the truth, things seemed so bad that we were not sure there would even be a future. We had just driven cross-country to San Francisco when my draft notice arrived. Remarkably, we were able to skate through those next few years and come out reasonably well. Chalk it up to Dame Fortune. I certainly sweated through a few spins of the wheel.

After boot camp at Fort Leonard Wood, and additional training in Georgia, I found myself in the Signal Corps, and unbelievably lucky to have been assigned to a company stationed in Fontainebleau, France. Not long after I got there, my wife was able to come over.

The two of us suddenly being together in France was like a fairy tale. Or a classic Hollywood film about garrison duty in your father's old regiment in some romantic country. Maybe like the early pages of Joseph Roth's *The Radetzky March*.

Amazingly, I was not in Vietnam, on the other side of the world, where so many of my high-school classmates, and so many Army friends I had trained with, in Missouri and Georgia, had already been sent. Instead I was in what seemed to be, on first glance, some sort of laid-back, peacetime army. The sergeant of my platoon was a Korean War veteran; one of the older men had fought in World War Two.

More than that was the fact that suddenly, *voilà*, I was inadvertently following in my great-uncle's footsteps. *Incroyable!* I can still remember that summer day the train from Bremerhaven pulled into the Gare du Nord, and I had my first glimpse

of the streets of Paris. *Lafayette, nous sommes ici!*

The truth about being in the Army in France was more sobering. I had become an infinitely tiny, expendable cog in the enormous Cold War standoff between NATO and the Warsaw Pact nations. If the balloon had gone up in Europe on the day I arrived (as it almost did a few months later, in October 1962, during the Cuban Missile Crisis), my signal company would probably have been vaporized. But it never happened.

I was assigned a desk job and quickly learned what was expected of me. Things went well. My wife and I were able to live off post, in a small apartment in the village of By-Thomery, overlooking the Seine, at the edge of the Forest of Fontainebleau. It was heavenly.

Baguettes at ten paces. In Paris in 1963, Carter duels with Yale classmate Richard Greeman, who later became a prominent translator of Victor Serge. Photograph by S. Burack.

SI: I bet it was! Tell us more about your experiences in Paris from that time.

JC: A few doors up the street was a boarded-up chateau that had once been the studio of Rosa Bonheur, the celebrated nineteenth-century painter of animals. We managed to get the key. All of her things were still there, as though she had just put down her brush, and gone out into the garden.

In a cemetery nearby were the graves of Katherine Mansfield and the mysterious

Armenian mage, Georges Gurdjieff, mentor of Margaret Anderson, Jane Heap, and Jean Toomer. A short drive through the forest took one to Barbizon, a cradle of pre-Impressionism, much loved by Millet, Corot, and Rousseau, and later frequented by Monet, Renoir, and Sisley.

Almost every Saturday morning we walked through the forest to the local station and boarded the train to Paris, to visit the churches and museums. For dinner that evening, in some small Algerian cafe on the Left Bank, we could each have a *pris fixe* of couscous, demi baguette, and wine, for five francs—about one American dollar.

In the winter, sometimes on an early Sunday morning, there seemed to be no one else in Louvre except the attendants. We could enter the completely empty Grande Gallerie, nod to the guard, and come up to within a few feet of the Mona Lisa.

I remember one time we were walking along with an elderly couple from San Francisco, friends and aficionados of Paris who were trying to find the storefront where the original Shakespeare and Company had been. They had known Sylvia Beach back in the 1920s. Coming along the sidewalk was this man about their age, with flowing white hair, in a white toga, and sandals made from flattened sections of a truck tire. “Raymond!” they called out. It was Raymond Duncan, Isadora’s older brother, who must have been in his eighties, and whom they seemed to have known in San Francisco back in the old days. They had not seen him since the war ended.

Raymond was delighted to see them, and to meet us, and began explaining that on August 24, 1944, the night before the Allies liberated Paris, he and a friend had gotten a couple of revolvers and climbed to the top “of that building, over there,” and had taken potshots at the frantic German soldiers moiling below. (He may have said the other person was either Jean Paulhan or Jean Cocteau, but I can’t remember now.)

On another occasion, in a different country, one morning in Venice we had taken a boat to the Palazzo Venier dei Leoni on the Grand Canal, hoping to be admitted to the Guggenheim Collection of Art. Out front was Marino Marini’s large bronze sculpture, “The Angel of the City,” consisting of a nude male figure, with outstretched arms, astride a horse. When we knocked on the door, Peggy Guggenheim herself appeared; the museum was just opening. She was holding a large metal phallus and proceeded to fit it into the correct place on the male figure. “I can’t leave it out here overnight,” she said. “Someone would steal it.” Then she invited us inside to see her collection.

Such adventures and encounters seemed never-ending. During scheduled military leaves, we managed to explore the Ile de France, the Lowlands, Italy, and the UK. In our last year we acquired a 1949 Citroen Quinze, a classic French automobile with front-wheel drive. (It was the getaway vehicle of choice in French gangster movies.) The crankcase held nine quarts of oil, the fenders were solid chrome, and two could sleep quite comfortably in the back seat. We drove it to Amsterdam and back, and from one cathedral town to the next.

Carter with cat and 1949 Citreon Quinze.

When my time was up in early 1964, we didn't return to the States, Instead, the two of us, carrying knapsacks and staying in youth hostels, hitch-hiked all over Europe—down the length of Italy and around Sicily, and from Greece and Spain to Edinburgh, Glasgow, and the Lake Country.

We had rolled the dice, then, during an extremely troubling, nerve-wracking time. When called, I had served my country; fortunately, my time in the military had turned out to be unbelievably positive. If only every aspiring writer might have such good fortune.

SI: Indeed. What brought you back to the States and to Indiana?

JC: We had managed our Grand Tour of seven months on a remarkable $5 a day for the two of us, but by mid-October we were broke, and we needed a rest. As for

returning to Indiana, I think I had hoped to follow in the footsteps of William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, and Flannery O'Connor, who had done all right by sticking fairly close to home and writing about what they found there.

SI: Many aspiring writers of your generation pursued jobs in academia by enrolling in MFA programs, which were starting to appear on the nation's campuses at about the time you left college. Were you ever interested in doing that?

JC: Mark Strand, originally from Canada, was a grad student in the art school when I was at Yale College. He and a former roommate and pal of mine, Al Lee, were active in poetry circles on campus, and in 1960 they decided to go out to Iowa City and do poetry. They roomed together for a while out there. There was no way I could have gone with them. I had no money, and in those days I was trying to write fiction. I had won a nice poetry prize at Yale in my last year there, but poetry was far from my mind. My models back then were Faulkner, Hemingway, and Nelson Algren, none of whom had ever spent much time in a classroom.

Earlier, you asked about how I had enrolled at Goddard College. By 1967, back from Europe, I had G.I. Bill benefits, and thought I ought to finish up and at least get a B.A. degree. I was involved in protesting the war in Vietnam and had little free time. It made sense to enroll in Goddard's non-residential program. I had to do three six-month cycles; it took a year and a half.

Goddard, with its emphasis on individual course of study and group discussion, was a marvelous place. Every six months one spent a couple of weeks in the Vermont woods, sitting in a circle with people who were seeking alternatives—in life, in learning, in service to others. It was definitely worthwhile. But I had to put food on the table. By the time I graduated, in early 1969, I had already found a job in book publishing in Indianapolis.

SI: What did you do in the publishing industry? Was the work congenial? Did you do any writing?

JC: I had already worked for a daily newspaper, so becoming an apprentice in the world of book publishing was not difficult. It turned out to be a wonderful place to learn. Bobbs-Merrill was an old-line publishing house, traceable to the 1850s, and the first such establishment west of the Alleghenies. By the 1970s it was the only publishing house in the country that conducted all phases of book production—raw manuscript to warehouse, and everything in between (except

for typesetting)—in a modern, centralized plant in northwest Indianapolis.

Initially, I spent a couple of years in the boiler room, blue-penciling manuscripts. By 1973 I had another stroke of luck and was hired as managing editor of Bobbs-Merrill's college division. I supervised the copyediting, proofreading, design, and production of texts primarily in the arts and humanities. The college division published about a book a week, and the entire company, called Howard Sams—consisting of college, law, children's, technical, and trade divisions—published about a book a day. It was a great place to be, with a proud tradition of making books—books that had won Pulitzer prizes, and books that had sold in the millions. In the 1950s, the New York office had employed people like Hiram Hadyn, Louis Simpson, and Edward Gorey. It was a wonderful tradition to be part of.

In the Indianapolis plant, I could step out of the front office, wander across the factory floor past all kinds of web and flatbed presses, stapling- and perfect-binding machines, paper cutters and trimmers, all of which would be thundering away—and even a quiet, old-fashioned hand bookbindery—and go on out to the warehouse, and chat with the fork-truck drivers, who were stacking skids of finished books I had worked on.

It was an extremely rewarding job, one that involved a lot of writing—internal reports and recommendations, jacket copy, endless memos, correspondence with the authors, queries to copyright holders. I learned a great deal about writing and publishing from a host of talented colleagues—especially the director, a Marine Corps veteran and old publishing hand, who had gone to Harvard with the Kennedys.

SI: Did you come into contact with other poets who encouraged you or read or commented on your work in those days?

JC: My first day at Bobbs-Merrill in 1969 I wrote the dustjacket copy for the trade edition of *Naked Poetry*, and a few years later I supervised the production of a companion volume, *New Naked Poetry*, both compiled by Steve Berg and Robert Mezey.

There were trade and textbook editions of both books. They had silly titles but were serious collections, and quite successful. I got to know Steve Berg, Mezey less so. One day when I was in Philadelphia, Berg mentioned that he was going to launch a tabloid-sized magazine called *American Poetry Review*. He did, and it was a smash hit. (I never published in it, though.) By this time I had pretty much

given up on fiction, after an agent in New Jersey had lost the original manuscripts of a bunch of short stories I had trusted him with. (I still have the carbons.)

This was in the early 1970s, right about the time of the fall of Saigon, and Nixon's resignation. While working to produce those two poetry anthologies, and a third one compiled by Bill Heyen, I was in contact with a considerable number of contemporary American poets—Ginsberg, Bly, Kinnell, Levine, Levertov, Stafford, Creeley, Knight, Levis, McGrath, *et al*. I didn't really get to know them at the time, although I was to meet most of them later on, in the 1980s. But I got a close look at their different manuscripts, with all their corrections and squiggles and marginal notes.

I should mention here, too, that I had become a father in 1969, that my marriage was on the skids, and that there was considerable conflict at home. Which led, eventually, to a divorce in late 1974. I didn't do much writing of my own during those Watergate years, but at odd moments I kept trying. And things really weren't all that discouraging.

By the time Gerald Ford was president, I was writing more, and beginning to read a few of my poems at a local hang-out in Indianapolis called the Hummingbird Cafe. I gradually became acquainted with two very different poets, Jim White and Etheridge Knight, who were already publishing their own books, and who gave me encouragement and advice—about writing, and about reading in public.

Such connections and influences increased my interest in moving from fiction to poetry. That impulse got a big boost in 1975 when *The Nation* published my poem "Early Warning." After that, it was off to the races. The Walt Whitman award came five years later.

Another important part of that transitional decade was my meeting the young woman who became my present wife, Diane Haston. Her father, grandfather, and great-grandfather, as it turned out, had all been builders and contractors. (Their specialty, following the Civil War, had been barn-building.)

In 1976, with her support and encouragement, I left Bobbs-Merrill to try my luck as a freelance copyeditor and interior book designer. I gigged around for a few years in greater Indianapolis, and was fortunate to find part-time work with the newly formed Hackett Publishing Company.

By this time I had settled down somewhat, become a weekend father, and bought an old Victorian house (a fixer-upper, in the heart of the inner city, on the Near

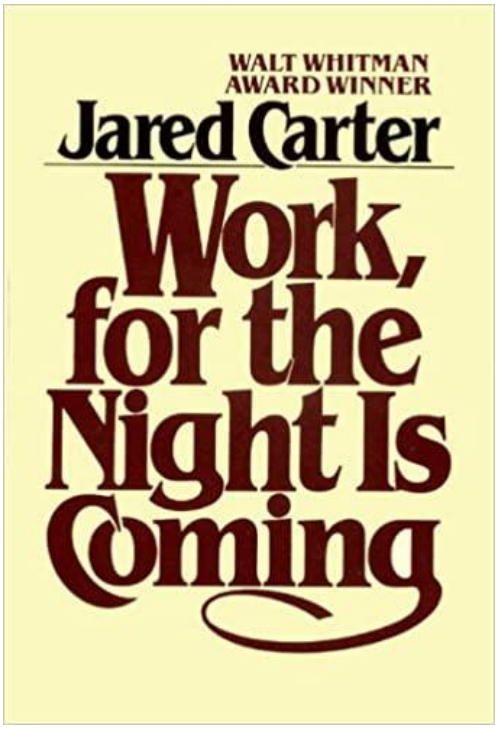
Eastside)—all of which may have had some sort of stabilizing effect. I had begun to think about writing what I hoped might be considered serious poetry.

Writer at Work—Carter writes in the "old Victorian house." Photograph by Chris Minnick.

SI: **Now we get down to it. Please describe the process leading up to publication of your first book, *Work, for the Night is Coming* (1981), by Macmillan, and to its receipt of the Walt Whitman Award.**

JC: It was simple. Laura Gilpin, whom I didn't know and never met, had won the Whitman Award for a first book in 1976, and she was from Indianapolis. So it was possible. I entered the contest three years in a row, and kept trying to improve the manuscript, adding new poems and taking out inferior ones. The third time, in 1980, it was selected, from among 1,100 other entries, by Galway Kinnell.

Enormous changes followed. It was like shifting to warp drive. There were over a hundred different reviews, all favorable, notably in the *New York Times Book Review* and the *New York Review of Books*. (The latter by Helen Vendler, whom I was to meet later on, when she arranged to fly me out for lunch at the Harvard Faculty Club, to interview for a job at Harvard.)



SI: And right here, with this first volume, Mississinewa County is born. The book is full of what we have to assume are local references, in poems based on clear and direct observation, but often with a discursive quality. At this early stage as a poet, why were you so compelled to give your surroundings a "local habitation and a name"?

JC: There were precedents, definitely. Think Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha County. Ross Lockridge, Jr. and *Raintree County*. Goldsmith's deserted village.

SI: But how important should rootedness, or a sense of place, be to a working poet?

JC: For a few developing writers the old home place is important, for some, not so much, for others not at all. It's hard to predict. In my case, professors at Yale, on learning of my writing ambition, advised me to go out into the world and experience something first-hand. They really didn't say anything about going home again.

"It doesn't matter," they said. "Go find something to do. Anything. Anything at all, as long as it's a safe distance from this campus." They pointed at the gothic windows of the Saybrook College dining hall. "Go out west and work on a ranch," they suggested. "Become a war correspondent. Start a mushroom farm. Whatever you do, whatever happens to you, that will be your material," they said.

SI: Poems like "For Jack Chatham," "The Madhouse," "The Undertaker," from that first book—were they all based on real events?

JC: Maybe what you're asking about is the authenticity of such poems. They seem effortless and natural, so did the events they describe "actually" occur? But that's the very illusion one must learn how to create. Somewhere Auden says that too many poets concern themselves with originality, when they ought to be concerned with authenticity. But how is it achieved?

I'm certainly no expert. In my own case, largely because I had been trying to write fiction for so long, I had already invented and populated Mississinewa County, many years before, even when I was living in France. In my mind, it was already a "local habitation." There was a lot in the pipeline.

So my archives already contained this backlog—the submerged part of the iceberg—of names, places, tales, stories, genealogies, biographies, even a map, all intended for the fictional evocation of that Mississinewa world. I had been making notes on that sort of thing ever since I left New Haven. It was, in a word, very Faulknerian.

I realized, thanks to my long apprenticeship, that when I finally had a bit of success with free verse—which everyone else was writing at the time, all those well-known, successful poets in those three anthologies—I could use some of that stuff in my poems. By this time, of course, I was forty years old. Half my life was already over. It was time to do something.

SI: You sure did. And then, twelve years later, your next book came out: *After the Rain* (1993), which won the Poets' Prize. Just as Frost made an advance on American narrative poetry between *A Boy's Will* (1913) and *North of Boston* (1914), so, in your second book, you achieve full maturity in this form. You also showed what can be done with the extended meditative lyric.

Because I've included "Barn Siding" in my anthology for Franciscan University Press (*The Colosseum Book of Contemporary Narrative Verse*, 2025), naturally I must ask you about it. How did you get the idea to write about the incident in the poem? Can you describe the form you chose, and how you arrived at it?

JC: As with any writer, it's not so much "where do you get your ideas." If one can be said to "get" ideas at all, it's mainly from having read a mountain of books, and from paying attention to what other people say. When it comes to technicalities,

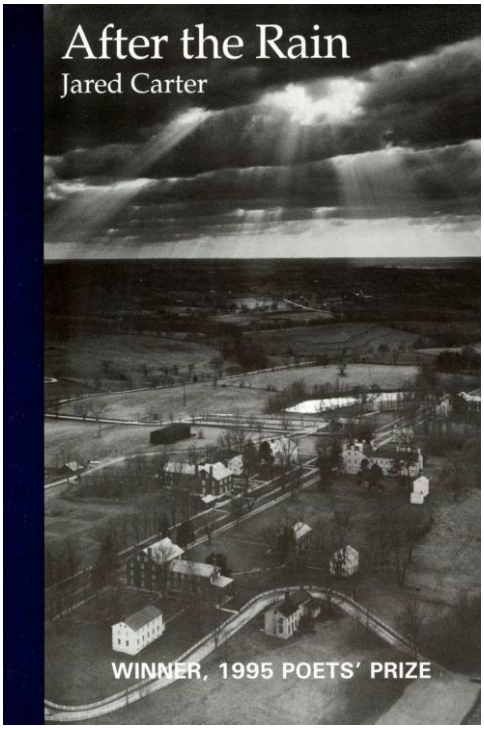
however, I will acknowledge that if you look closely at “Barn Siding,” which is a fairly long poem of 650 lines, you’ll notice that every line contains nine syllables. Why did I do that? Where did I get that idea? Why not ten? Or eight? Is it some sort of structuring device? Not likely.

It’s nothing, really. It wasn’t an idea that I “got” somewhere, in a workshop or out of a manual. It was just something I decided to do, maybe to see how it would turn out. Technically, it’s simply syllabics. There’s natural speech rhythm in those lines, but no meter. I may have chosen nine because I was bored from counting pentameter lines to see if they all contained ten syllables. Usually, then, the answer to the question, where or how did you get this idea, or that feature, is—someone told me. Or, I just made it up, on the of the spur of the moment. It’s nothing special.

As for the “idea” or “concept” of “Barn Siding,” there again, it was simply the result of having listened to someone else. I had this favorite uncle—my mother’s older brother. A defrocked Nazarene Church minister who for a second career had established a shop filled with farm antiques in a pole-barn in the unincorporated crossroads hamlet of Plumtree, in the south of Huntington County, not far from the reservoirs.

This uncle had always been a storyteller. He told me once that he had climbed up to the loft of an abandoned barn and was sliding out the floorboards when the whole thing began to shake and started to collapse, and almost killed him. I took that incident and developed it.

(Had my uncle been stealing those loose boards, like the narrator in the poem? One must be cautious with such terms. My uncle did in fact have many fabulous things in that King Tut’s Tomb of a shop in Plumtree. My father, who in his retirement refinished furniture and sold a few antiques of his own, bought several remarkable things from his brother-in-law in Plumtree. I, too, managed to “relieve” that uncle of—and most certainly did not “steal” from him—a museum-quality Jacquard coverlet dated 1846. It just happened to be there, in his barn, and I just sort of slid it out, for a few hundred dollars.)



SI: Wonderful. Now, can you talk about how form corresponds with meaning in your narrative poems? Does form help you find what you want to say, or is it more that you go in with a clear vision or outline of what you want to accomplish with each poem—topically and structurally?

JC: With all due respect, none of that. I may sense notions, or clues, or whisperings, but I don't begin with ideas. The truth is that I make poems the same way my father built houses and bridges, and the same way my mother made a few dollars by standing near the casket, or next to the bride and groom, and singing her heart out.

I just find a way to fit different words together, and when starting out, almost anything will do. I build poems out of bits and pieces, recollections, country tales, ghost stories, paving bricks, and old zinc canning-jar lids used for ashtrays.

On many occasions, as a youth, I watched my father and his workmen walk out into an empty field, and three months later, in that same field, there would be a small factory or a pumping station. I try to do something similar with each new poem. Not from the top down, but from the ground up.

SI: I do have a few Paris Review-style questions. What is your process for writing—do you do it longhand, by computer, or both? When and how often do you write? Do you go through many drafts?

JC: With digital equipment, it's easy to generate as many drafts as needed. Word-processing is a wonderful invention. I try to have the newest and most powerful desktop computer possible, fitted out with the latest and most sophisticated word-processing program available.

SI: Do you share your poems with anyone while they are in embryo? Friends, family, other poets?

JC: Now and then I show a poem to a close friend. But mostly I don't show anything to anyone unless it has already been published. My wife Diane is the exception. Sometimes she reads and comments on what I've just written. She's a retired teacher of English literature, speech, technical writing, and English as a Second Language. Invariably she notices details I've gotten wrong. For example, anytime something involving food or cooking appears in my work, she checks it out. She's a fine chef, and knows far more about such matters than I ever did.

Diane Carter in 2015 with Cormac the Magnificent.

SI: Even with some of your meditative lyrics, I often wonder how much is real and how much imagined. In *After the Rain*, in a poem such as "The Believers," executed in rhyme-royal, there is an elegiac mood that resolves effortlessly with a biblical reference at the end. The poem describes the speaker's vision while on a guided tour of a meeting-hall in a Shaker village. Care to comment on this one?

JC: That meeting-hall is in a place called Shaker Village of Pleasant Hill, a beautiful, otherworldly, historically recreated site forty miles west of Lexington, that I first discovered in 1968 while driving through Kentucky. An aerial view of that site appears on the cover of my second book, *After the Rain*. For me, all these years, Pleasant Hill has been an extremely holy and reverential place.

I have lots of unfinished, unpublished work involving the Shakers. "The Believers" is not my only published poem about them, but probably my favorite. Another such poem is "The Sprinkle House at Busro Creek," which came about after I investigated the fact that the Shakers once had an outpost in Indiana. All of that writing is a product of my having visited a number of Shaker sites, owning a great many books about them, and realizing that their legacy has much to pass on to the rest of us.

SI: *After the Rain* introduces us to two natural creatures to which you seem to be especially attentive—the cicada and the mourning dove. This is a useful springboard for me to ask not only about your fascination with those creatures, but also about how you may have cultivated your powers of observing and rendering natural phenomena. Do you keep a journal? Consult reference books?

JC: I have kept a journal since I was eighteen, in one form or another. Nothing special or particularly scientific, just everyday thoughts and observations. Millions of words by now, handwritten, typewritten, digital. Some of the oldest entries, typed on newsprint and squirreled away in the garage, I haven't looked at in fifty years. (All destined for the landfill, I'm afraid.)

During that summer in 1964 when we were hitch-hiking around Europe, I carried a very small portable Olympia typewriter. Every evening in the youth hostel I would type up the day's events, churches seen, art museums visited. My first wife helped. As the entries built up, I would mail them back to Indiana. We called the cumulative manuscript *The Summer of a Hundred Cities*.

Unfortunately, I have no idea where it is now. Maybe out in the garage. Cumulatively, from about 1983 on, in what I call "my archives," there are maybe 15 or 20 gigabytes of drafts, correspondence, and abandoned literary projects that have been transferred from one desktop to the next, and now reside in the latest machine's solid-state storage. (A single nuclear electromagnetic pulse overhead, and it vanishes, along with your bank account.)

Reference books? In my house there is a bookshelf in the stairwell, on the first landing, entirely devoted to books about ancient Egypt. There is another shelf on

the next landing containing 40 or 50 of those marvelous state guidebooks published in the late 1930s by FDR's Works Progress Administration. Ask my wife. You cannot take more than a step or two in this house without knocking over a stack of books.

SI: Your next volume, chronologically, is *Les Barricades Mystérieuses* (1999). Composed entirely of villanelles, it showcases your lyrical mastery. (There also are some outstanding love poems!) I know you've spoken about this elsewhere, but can you tell us about the title, how you came up with this sequence, and what you intended with the volume? For example, did you intend for the poems to be in conversation with each other, and, if so, how?

JC: Back before the internet, in the 1990s, I occasionally spoke by phone with different people around the country who were interested in my work. One wise and helpful person in particular pointed out something I took to heart. He claimed to have noticed that most American poets who have any success with a first book almost always write about the same thing in their second book.

That's certainly what I had done with *After the Rain*. By the time they get to a third book, he said, they're mostly repeating themselves. They have nothing new to say, and nobody wants to hear it anyway. The moral: a third book of poems should avoid repeating what made the first two worth reading. I thought he was onto something, and I tried to make my third book different.

That third one consists of 32 villanelles, out of the 100 or more that I composed. It's completely different from the first two books, and some people think it's my best book. This could be credited to the influence of my editor at Cleveland State, Leonard Trawick, a soft-spoken Southerner from Alabama, with a Ph.D. from Harvard.

I had already edited and designed a number of books while at Bobb-Merrill, and later for Hackett Publishing. Especially when it came to design, I had strong opinions about how my own books should look, inside and out. Leonard Trawick, with whom I had already worked on *After the Rain*, not only listened to what I had to say, but also improved on some of my ideas. (Charlie Hughes, of Wind Publications in Kentucky, the publisher of my next two books, had that same flexibility and inventiveness.)

The poems in *Barricades* are intended as a sequence. If you look closely, there's a submerged narrative. We're still in Mississinewa County, sort of. Two former lovers, now much older, both fairly well-educated, have arranged a tryst in an old farmhouse located at the crest of a glacial moraine somewhere in the Midwestern

boondocks. Together once more, they celebrate their past, and re-explore the surrounding countryside. But that's not all they're into, if you check out the front-cover art.

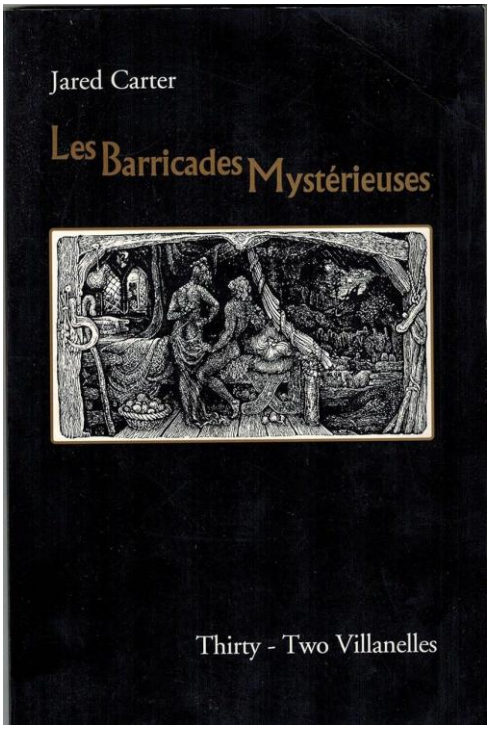
As for the title—the villanelle is a French form, hence a title in French. When I began writing villanelles, I expected them to be difficult, some kind of barrier or barricade. Not at all. Almost the opposite. Once you establish the first stanza, the rest almost follows. From start to finish, it took me about an uninterrupted week of work to come up with a halfway decent villanelle. (A finished Alexandroid averages about a day, but only one out of ten is worth keeping.)

One other curious thing: a lot of the time I was writing villanelles, in the 1990s, I was listening to CDs of different pianists and harpsichordists play "The Well-Tempered Clavier" and other keyboard works by Bach. I'm a clutzy amateur pianist, and happened to have the Schirmer volume on hand. I found I could play a few of the easier ones, and I memorized the Fugue Number 2 in C Minor, which I particularly liked.

Strangely, in the years since, and while I've been working on Alexandroids, I seem to prefer listening to Scarlatti. I'm not sure why. (Bach and Scarlatti were born in the same year, however, along with Handel. Does that signify anything?)

I suspect this came about because a villanelle, like a fugue, contains repetitive elements that progress through increasingly intricate and contrasting counterpoint variations and yet still manage to come together effortlessly at the close. Bach locates such marvelous inventions within a much larger, completely comprehensive, architectonic framework. Evidently, while working on the villanelles, and not possessing Bach's mastery, I still hoped to imitate his approach, on a far smaller scale, in a book of formal poems.

When, years later, I began writing Alexandroids, I found that I wanted them to be more like Scarlatti's sonatas, which are brief, can begin in any way or any key, develop in inconceivable ways, do just about anything imaginable, and close like the lid of a jeweler's box. A sonata by Scarlatti is not part of a vast system, but more like some rare moth circling and landing on an exotic flower. I wanted the Alexandroids to be like that. Hearkening back to Bach, however, I have put 100 Alexandroids into a sequential and thematic framework in my next book.



SI*:* Just two technical notes that your villanelles elicited from me about your formal poetry. You often employ half-rhymes or assonance in lieu of exact rhymes. Yet once you choose a meter for a given poem, you follow it meticulously, amid artful variations. Is this a fair assessment, and does it suggest anything about your working methods?

JC: Well, after you've read Emily Dickinson and Wilfred Owen, you're licensed to employ all the half-rhymes you like. The meter in those villanelles is pretty much iambic pentameter. What distinguishes them from most other poems in that form is, first, that the repeating lines do not vary in word sequence, although, when broken into different phrases, they can vary in capitalization and punctuation. In this way they differ from the vast majority of contemporary villanelles I encounter these days, in which it seems that *approximating* the repeating lines is acceptable.

Second, those poems exhibit considerable enjambment throughout, which sometimes runs from one triad to the next. The enjambment contributes to an onrushing effect. The entire poem becomes not so much a series of statements with repeating end rhymes, but rather a series of events that keep occurring in different ways within a repetitive, rhyming structure.

By the way, a new villanelle of mine called "Shelter" recently appeared in *New Verse Review*, and might help to illustrate what I'm trying to explain here. (It's a

sequel to the much earlier "Palimpsest.") In my own experience the villanelle has been an extremely liberating form. It is not so much a structure as a system of opportunity. Recently I ran across an excellent summary of such opportunity in François Cheng's *Chinese Poetic Writing:*

> . . . the idea that the poem inhabits not only a time but a space as well. This space is not an abstracted, limited, or confined space, but rather a place where human signs and signified things are taken in a continuous multidirectional play.

SI: Another technical note, from reading your villanelles in particular—again, I think it applies to many of your poems as a whole. Your diction has, to me, a fine blend of concrete and abstract nouns, and of mono- and multisyllabic words. The language, while being supple, does not call attention to itself. Do you have any reflections on this score? Is something consciously at work here in these stylistic choices?

JC: Yes, definitely. Clarity above all. Short, everyday, Anglo-Saxon words are essential in the quest for clarity. (I make up for this minimal obsession in the Alexandroids, where I try to sneak in all kinds of jaw-breakers and fifty-cent words.)

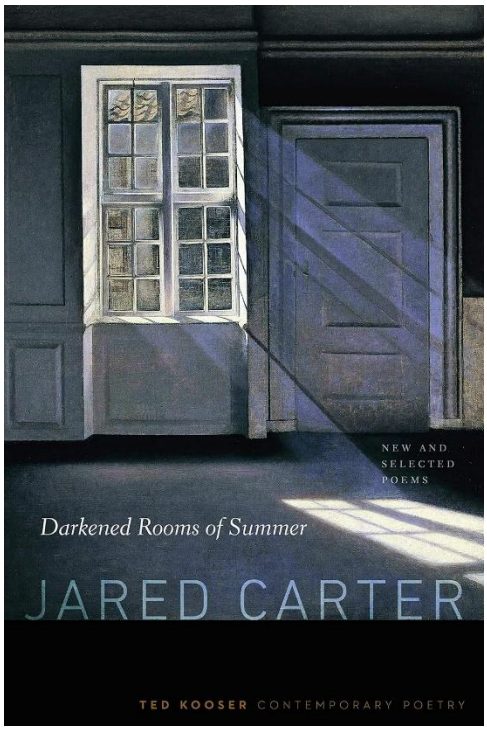
SI: In your next volume, *Cross This Bridge at a Walk* (2006), you feature a narrative poem I regret not having included in my anthology: "Covered Bridge." To what extent was the incident real as described? Your great-great-grandfather did fight in Sherman's army, correct?

JC: You're correct, the protagonist in that poem is not the same person as my great-great grandfather, Elias Baxter Decker, who actually served in one of General Sherman's three armies on the march to Savannah and the sea. That main character, Barnabas Decker, is sort of an imaginary cousin, who did not go off to the war, but stayed on the home front.

The real Elias Baxter Decker was of course one of the family patriarchs, with a splendid monument in the country cemetery at New Lancaster, containing a majority of my ancestors on my mother's side. When I was five, his daughter, Cleva Honor Decker, a retired schoolteacher, long ago interred out there with the rest of them, taught me how to read and write. She also regaled me with stories her father had told her about what it was like marching through Georgia. (For back-up, I have fifty letters he sent home to his wife, Lavinia, in Tipton County.)

SI: A poem in your next volume, *A Dance in the Street* (2012), I find excruciatingly moving. I'm referring to "At the Art Institute." The poem entices the reader via shrewdly enjambed lines of two or three beats each, in telling a short anecdote, rather like Bishop's "In the Waiting Room." Unlike most of your other poem, it interacts—even fleetingly—with other works of art. Yet other poems of yours also center on objects, natural or human-made. Tell us about the kinds of visual artworks or artists who have strongly affected you.

JC: I'm a fine-arts groupie, for sure. I've done my share of gawking in museums of art, ever since art-history class at Yale and "darkness at noon" at Harvard. In turn this takes us back to that great-uncle of mine, Henshaw, and his legacy, and also, for example, to my uncollected poem, "Hawkbill Knife," Or to the prose poem "Summer Studio." And of course to the much earlier poem, "Configuration."



SI: By the time we get to, say, the "New Poems" in *Darkened Rooms of Summer* (2014), your "New and Selected," introduced by Ted Kooser, it's startling to find a departure from your longer and longer-lined poems. You use a verse form that you note you have invented, and which already has come up in this interview: the Alexandroid.

JC: I invented it with some posthumous support from Swinburne's tribute to Landor, and with the encouragement of Mr. C. B. "Kip" Anderson, a poet friend based in Concord, Mass. As a newly introduced form, the Alexandroid has been a

lot of fun, but it hasn't caught on much. I do seem to be getting a few more of them published these days, and that's been gratifying.

Carter at Landor's grave, with the inscription by Swinburne. Photograph by Diane Carter.

SI: As others have remarked, these poems are concise, like haiku or tanka. Can you tell us how the form came about, and is the correspondence with Chinese and Japanese poetry apt in your opinion?

JC: I thought up the Alexandroid because, as with the earlier villanelles, I wanted to try something different. And yes, I'm crazy about Du Fu, Li Bai, and Wang Wei, but they're not particularly known for writing concisely. Rather, they wrote extremely complicated rhyming poems that in some English translations seem marvelously direct and moving.

In developing the Alexandroid, I was striving for compression and brevity. A sonnet in iambic pentameter has, theoretically, 140 syllables; an Alexandroid has 72, about half that many. As with the traditional brief Japanese forms, haiku and tanka, one is forced to get to the point.

My recent Alexandroid "November," in the 2025 Halloween issue of *New Verse Review*, attempts to achieve such compression. If you look closely at that poem, certain elements associated with Florence—the Duomo and the Ponte Vecchio, Dante, the ghosts of the city's political past, the city's longtime fear of the French

military, the flood of 1967—flash for milliseconds in the oncoming twilight. A lot is implied.

As I was working on that poem I had a hunch that somewhere it had a predecessor, and later I found it—lines 60-62 of *The Waste Land*, describing a shadowy city with figures crossing crossing a bridge.

> Unreal City,
> Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
> A crowd flowed over London Bridge . . .

In my poem "November" it is a gray fog of an autumnal dusk, and a different city and bridge, but the parallels and contrasts are noticeable.

SI: I don't want to leave readers with the impression that you write only three-stanza rhyming poems these days. *The Land Itself* (2019), superbly edited by BJ Omanson, includes some of your older poems, but also several new ones in various forms and line lengths.

JC: No, perish the thought, that anyone would assume that these days I'm producing only poems in traditional forms. I still write free verse and prose. I have in storage two completed manuscripts of free-verse poems, and two more consisting of Alexandroids.

SI: One of my favorite poems in *The Land Itself* is "Dowser." It's in iambic pentameter and a tricky rhyme scheme, about an undertaker who needs to find a dowser to help him locate a coffin underground. Again, this poem speaks with the authority of first-hand knowledge. But is the incident invented?

JC: The three stanzas are sonnet-like; the incident is entirely invented. Whoever I happen to be seated next to—undertaker, housewife, student, stockbroker—I ask a lot of questions.

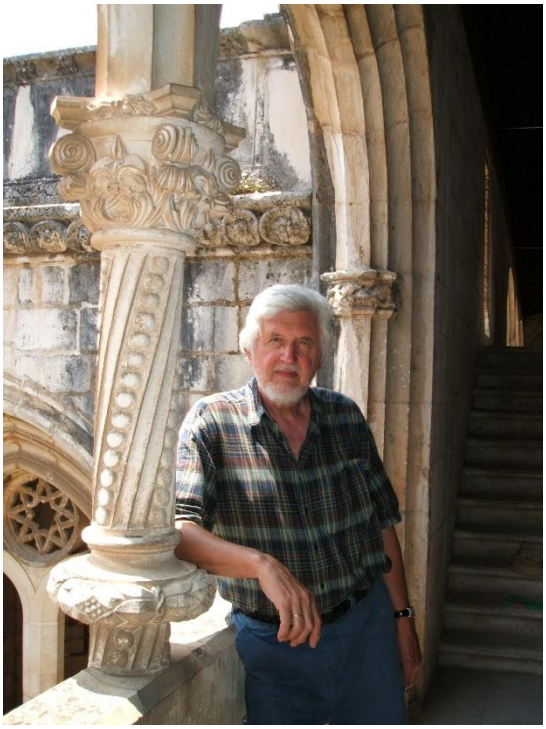
SI: What are some of the biggest risks you have taken as a working poet? Any regrets?

JC: I try to avoid risk. Regret never changes what brought about the regret. As for bonehead mistakes, wasted opportunities, and assorted *faux pas*, in real life and in my writing, there have been dozens, if not hundreds—actual and figurative moments when I couldn't haul in the bullet pass, or watched my buzzer-beater clank off the rim. (For example, after that interview with Helen Vendler, Harvard hired somebody else.)

SI: Can you comment on the current scene for emerging poets and publishers of poetry?

JC: No, not really. I've been pretty much self-exiled from that sort of thing all along. Back before Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans Saints fans delighted in shouting "Who dat?" at visiting teams and players. When it comes to the current crop of contemporary poets, I often find myself wondering *Who dat*?

But that remark only shows how out of it I am. Seriously, I wish the new poets well, and I hope their dreams all come true. I myself have been extremely fortunate. I've been able to keep writing, and my wife and I have been able to travel. As an educator, she's a world traveler in her own right, but together we've visited Germany and Brazil, and spent time in Portugal and Spain. I finally managed to get back to Florence a few years ago. You can't do any better than that.



Carter in Portugal. Photograph by Diane Carter.

One of the things I learned from living in a village in France is that you can go just about anywhere—metropolis, small town, mountain chalet, nearby dairy farm—and if you're an observant writer, there's always something worth investigating and checking out. So it really doesn't matter where you are, as long as you keep asking questions. That's why I continue to appreciate the Midwest.

It's near at hand and every bit as interesting as anywhere else, and besides, everybody speaks English.

SI: What are you working on these days?

JC: I'm sorting through possible additions to a manuscript a longtime friend, H. L. Hix, helped me assemble few years ago, called *A Constant Grace.* It's a compendium of various reviews, articles, and interviews that have considered my work. He's already written an introduction, but new stuff keeps appearing.

SI: What are you reading?

JC: In bed at night, I'm reading R. Carlyle Bulley's *The Old Northwest*, which won the Pulitzer for history in 1950. It's a two-volume set published by Indiana University Press, and designed—of all people—by my favorite book designer, Bruce Rogers. (Who was, of course, a Hoosier.) For the one or two days each week when Diane and I drive cross-town for coffee and croissants, I'm slowly plowing through the first volume of the Library of America's edition of Henry Adams's history of Jefferson's administration.

SI: How is that going for you?

JC: I'm beginning to agree with Garry Wills, who thinks it's the greatest work of history ever written by an American. I'm terribly impressed by Adams, a genuine weirdo, but a brilliant scholar. And what a writer! Consider this passage, early on, where he's talking about what it was like to approach Jefferson's inscrutability:

> A few broad strokes of the brush would paint the portraits of all the early presidents . . . but Jefferson could only be painted touch by touch, with a fine pencil, and the perfection of the likeness depended on the shifting and uncertain flicker of its semi-transparent shadows.

People who haven't read him assume his magnum opus will be slow and stodgy; not at all. It's brilliant, panoramic, and quite trenchant in places. Among native skeptics, he's right up there with Bierce, Twain, and Vidal. (Would that any of us might prefer to be remembered as the target of wit, rather than be forgotten altogether.)

Henry Adams is the protagonist in one of my finished projects, *A Task for Bronze*. It consists of 21 Alexandroids, with photographs and notes, and focuses on the Adams Memorial in Washington, DC. There have been no takers. (But my wife likes it.)

SI: Fast forward from the 1880s, when Henry Adams began publishing his true magnum opus, as you call it. Do you have any general advice for poets now writing?

JC: I can only repeat advice I was fortunate to have inherited from others. A few aphorisms have guided me during the long haul:

- To the destructive element submit yourself, and with the exertions of your hands and feet in the water make the deep, deep sea keep you up.
- From a certain point onward there is no longer any turning back. That is the point that must be reached.
- The writer's task is not to judge, but to understand.
- The way is not difficult. Only cease to cherish opinion.

SI: Thank you, Jared. It's been a privilege. We haven't met in person, but I've attempted an Alexandroid in your honor:

Straight Talk

How bracing to have met you twice—
first through your work,
An open book that will entice
all but the block-

Heads who resent a poetry
they understand.
Or think they do. Straight talk, you see,
is not on brand

These days—not at least since the moderns.
The second time
We met through emails. Yours, like Auden's
jokes, wax sublime.

JC: A first-rate Alexandroid! What a thoughtful way of ending our talk. Thank you, Sunil, and thank you for inviting me to be part of this discussion.

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