

# MARSH HAWK REVIEW

Spring 2022

Editor: Daniel Morris

Prose Editor: Burt Kimmelman

## Editor's Note

*If you don't like the world you're living in  
Take a look around you at least you got friends*  
— Prince "Let's Go Crazy"

I begin with the wisdom of Prince because what follows represents a note to self: you are not going through this mess of a world on your own. Far from it. The truth is I exist on this hurt planet in relationship with sustaining, and, at times, intersecting, creative communities. Informal memberships remind me to have some faith in our collective better angels. With these thoughts in mind, I set myself a bit of a procedural task as guest editor: my policy would be that every time I had a contact (email/phone/in person) with someone who partakes in one or another of my creative communities, I would ask them for a poem or two for this issue. After Oppen, this issue represents a case of "being numerous."

I go way back with some poets you'll meet in this issue. One was a housemate in a legendary off campus dwelling in Waltham, MA. — Abbie Hoffman crashed there before our time — when the poet and I studied for our PhDs in literature at Brandeis with Allen Grossman over thirty years ago. Two studied with me decades ago as they worked towards their PhDs in literature at Purdue. These two are now, like me, middle aged teachers; we are peers, friends in the art. I met two others on the conference circuit in Louisville and I've become a student of their poetry and prose. Another is the son in law of my favorite tennis doubles partner. Two helped found my current writing group in Rockville, Maryland, The Tragic Theater. Quite a few put in the hard yards over the years to make Marsh Hawk Press into an indy press collective that is sustainably innovative. Others are talented scholar/poets who have worked with me over the last two difficult years on an essay collection about American poetry and politics. I hope you'll notice the variety of styles, shapes, voices, personalities, and approaches to poetry. Take a look around. We get by with a little help.

— D.M.

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Poetry

Russ Brickey

*King Peligro Is Dead*

And it's kind of funny,  
the way his body slapped  
the mat, arms and legs a splash  
of flesh—a piece of meat suddenly

not so unlike the daily special  
(but for the grand regard we give the species).

And what a representative of Man he was too:  
Mask like a skull, side-of-beef torso, skin  
smooth as a ripe apple, hands broad as a king crabs.

The King is Dead! Long Live the King!

Who knew how many  
descends from the stratosphere  
he successfully negotiated before  
tonight, certainly enough to

bring them to their feet when  
he entered, shining and angry, a gladiator  
of schlock with nuggets of gold  
gleaming on each braised iron fist?

Now they've brought up the lights  
and a titter runs through the  
crowd. It's a sight,

all those suits skidding into the ring  
to crouch next to the paramedics  
while beneath us all

the great beast lies motionless upon  
the bloody white apron,  
unable to pretend any longer.

His opponent, Dangerous Jimmy Blue,  
kneels in the ring,  
sobbing, praying. Inconsolable.  
Later, the play-by-play commentator,  
Gorilla Starmasher, will gaze into the camera  
and intone through the tears,

“He died doing what he loved,”  
but that’s just what we say  
when death  
is not proud. We have no good way  
to deal with the aftermath—the rubble,  
the white tsunami  
of milky dust washing  
over our city streets, the unveiled faces  
of those fleeing the horror. How

little we end up trusting  
even ourselves.

“We want the show!” some mountain man  
howls. His voice is hot like wind  
from a jet blast. Great



beard, mushroom cloud

of netted curls falling from the rain  
damaged leather fedora. He's ranting.  
He's raging. Soon he will charge  
the perimeter, overalls flapping,  
giant boots hammering, to  
menace the nation of security

while outside the arena,  
the night is at peace. Kids  
are out, underhill, overhill—  
so we might reflect,  
just for the moment, how little  
has actually changed.

There are forces here at work here,  
folks, just as old  
as the crowd that fuels them.

You know. So do I.

No one says anything  
as the King is carted away  
in his canoe of wild lights.  
No one can.

Some are simply too dangerous  
for the rest of us to shout down.

## Stephanie Burt

### *Laura Kasischke, Go to the Dentist*

You don't *have* to do anything.  
I know. Sometimes you have that day:  
the sky serpentine, the humidity awful,  
kids unable, or else too busy. It may not be lawful,  
let alone lawful good, to regard this world  
through the lens of its inevitable decay,  
its future heat-  
death, or advancing near-worth-  
lessness, as if you  
could tally the value  
of every entity: half-dollar life, nickel moon, penny sun.  
Sometimes you can't help it. But if you think there's no use  
in getting out of the house, in fighting the grief  
that goes nowhere, the sads  
that could fell elephants  
or render all literature confessional,  
let us—no, let me-- consider keeping you busy  
with some extravagant irrelevance  
dressed up as trivial pleasure: strawberry mousse,  
gooseberries, or Cape gooseberries, or fizzy  
water in flavors previously obscure  
like "disaster rose" and "tea with Alfred, Lord Tennyson,"  
and Gala apples, and an apple core  
to pitch at a malefactor, and collages with school glue  
and bicycle pictures, and tapioca pearls  
in black or milk tea, and kids  
who really grew up to be astronauts, in near-Earth

orbit, making a kind of rotating procession:  
seen from up there or  
down here, the whole of life  
can taste so bitter and so sweet  
it's worth saving your teeth for,  
even worth getting them seen by a professional.

## *Opposite Days*

Is the opposite of unicorn a dick?

What if the opposite of hard work

Is just leaning into the mystery? What if a nap?

The opposite of anxiety is too real

For anyone to even imagine, although

The opposite of the internet is sleep,

Uninterrupted sleep. I hear

There's a children's book that lists such things, except

It was never for children. What is the inverse

Of a good time? Is anyone having one now?

Are any of you adults? Speak up, if so

Or forever hold on to your hats. What they conceal

Is the opposite of your business, and as for me

I'm just all out here in the ether, waiting for someone

To tell me the opposite of what it is.

That way I can live without knowing. As one does.

## Michael Collins

### *The Birth of the Modern*

Satan wagered with God, knowing  
he would lose, and God, really grieved,  
let his brimstone-burned favorite go  
to pluck the joys off Job.

Job's vast chewing flocks  
bit the dust, and so did his every last  
child. And Satan, intent as a tailor,  
covered Job's skin with sores  
and lifted his brain on a hook of pain.  
And Job's wife went to him and said,  
"why are you alive?"

And Satan knew he was losing badly  
as he'd ever lost because Job's heart  
kept beating like a drum of faith till  
Satan's own grief-infested head ached.  
And yet the losing was not the point.  
It was the making God break  
a blameless man. It was seeing fright alive  
in Job's bright eyes though God heaped  
new gold inside his house, and his mad wife  
birthed him babies every year  
and long life twisted inside him like a worm  
that only in dreams did he dare tear out.

"That Job," Satan told God, "is really something.  
He never gave me a single thought."

But back down among his demons, flying  
over brimstone rivers where  
a drizzle of bad souls was  
falling, Satan said, "never you mind.  
The world from now on is mine."

## *The Census Taker Thinks of Love*

In the end I grew cynical and started  
pronouncing on people like a mushroom  
farmer I knew, who classified them  
as edible or poisonous or “not recommended” . . .

Still, even a cynic, especially a cynic,  
has got to persist, and try to believe a little  
longer that war’s no match for love in shaping of populations,  
that the great plagues have no ingenuity like love’s.  
that the discovery of the kiss, and the language of love notes  
equal all warcraft. For to travel too far, even in thought,  
and to look round the circumference of history  
from a rooftop in a bombed-out town is to see  
that love does not grow larger but must be  
stretched over ever larger and more complicated  
things, over whole peoples and the battles between them,  
over gods put to the torch.

## David Epstein

### *Fall up on Mahoosuc*

Were the bees so frantic at the blossoms  
—you could pet them as they worked—  
or was it all projection? And they, same  
as spring and summer long, work rote  
and steadily? If you only live a year  
and your hive is all you have,  
and you've never known a winter  
and do not know a snow or even  
that you have a self beyond your task—  
Oh honey, bring me back, fit  
what passes for a soul into a bee,  
who cannot read the headlines,  
who, buffeted by breeze, divines nothing:  
not the queen, not the structure of a nerve.  
Who flies among the trees and, unless  
part of a swarm, never ventures high,  
although wingèd and capable,  
the bottom-dweller of a sky.



## *Giving Chase*

*True Poems flee*

— Dickinson

It fled ahead of wanderlust.  
It fled ahead of bee,  
It lost itself beneath my shirt  
then said it couldn't stay.

I asked it could I eat of it,  
—the Tree of Knowledge thing,  
It only twisted on its stem  
and reddened in its skin.

I followed it along a berm,  
I followed it to peak.  
It walked me home right to my door  
and tucked me in to sleep.

Nights I hear it clatter in  
the gutter by the eave.  
I throw the window wide for it,  
anticipatingly.

I thought I saw it cross the moon,  
a spark that shot through air,  
a star that slid behind a limb  
that didn't reappear.

Tom Fink

*Kickass Pedagogy*

The headmistress  
reenters the speakeasy  
with an authoritative handgun.

                    Snow  
                    is no  
deterrent now.

Our search can encompass.

Budget cuts earn  
our disdain.

My pupils  
wisely  
endure  
a structure  
that  
does not fit  
their lusts. Shortly,  
raw joy of discipline may ripen.  
Rethinking inevitable.

## Thomas Fink and Maya D. Mason

### *CRIME BLOTTER 6*

Unsung underwear model  
caught exposing himself at  
laundromat. Patron in booth at sex

shoppe issued parking ticket.

Vehicular assault: 16 tricyclists converging

on conjoined twin pedestrians. Out-of-  
state grandchild hijacks grandparent's go  
cart, overturns vehicle during mid-

speed chase. Handyman waving  
screwdriver around in rattled train  
car. Skydiver gets bumped after

2 blimps collide.

Vulture activity suspected. Bald

eagle holding court on midtown  
subway stairs. Whale or shark  
washed ashore. Frightens seagulls.

Guard's water gun blinds would-be dolphin  
thief at aquarium. Stuffed albino

tiger thrown from taxi in cold  
blood. Suspect abandons his

ostentatious Cadillac after uprooting  
hydrant, sprints into night.

## Ann Fisher-Wirth

### *Nebraska 1880. Caroline Casper*

Her sons were so lithe and quick,  
racing with salt to catch the tailfeathers of birds.  
They even laughed when they fell.  
And the whole bright sky around them,  
every branch and leaf in that high windy arch,  
shook like gypsy tambourines against the blue.

But she was a woman. Dressed in brown or blue,  
she worked by the kitchen window. Things were not  
for her like those gypsy spangles. No lover came  
to meet her, no white feather drifted down  
from Canada geese as they soared screaming  
in leavetaking above the stinging water,

the whole wintry flight of them strong and fierce  
and free. Yes, she was a woman and her level blue eyes  
left no water mark unnoticed on the table.  
Her hands learned to be quick at gathering fruit  
or sewing seams or plucking the feathers  
from birds. Home was her church, and she the arch—

*for women are the keystone*, the preacher said.  
Her whole life, she learned pleasure was flimsy  
as feathers. Like rivers she could not travel,  
the thick blue veins rose up in her hands. Her nails  
broke to the quick. Up to the elbows in work,  
she could not leave.

But once, as she stood washing, great dark leaves  
began to sway outside the window.

Her back pricked as if somebody watched her.

Drying her hands, she turned. Though no one was there,  
the whole sky darkened. From the shadows,  
a deeper blue gathered up in a rustle of feathers.

## *The Wanderer*

*After Andreas Rentsch's video piece*

The loneliest man wanders through cross-hatched  
thorns at the edge of night  
is there a path there? where the sudden slash of light is?  
is he the hunted or the hunter  
looming in the moonlight  
larger for the way the darkness falls upon him?

he is not dangerous though you may wish him so  
for then he could fit all your nightmares  
look  
how the moon rises between the blackened trees  
as if  
to guide him

now he is running again  
through the stubble field Joe Christmas  
or fleeing the flame thrower  
jumping the ditch  
saluting  
the unseen that follows him look  
he throws his arms up

defiant blest cursed wanderer you wear history  
stand and confront them find peace  
in the shattered moonlight

## Edgar Garcia

*From Cantares Mexicanos (16th century)*

Author's note:

These are contextual, interpretive translations of the third and thirty-third songs in the sixteenth-century, Nahuatl-language anthology called *Cantares Mexicanos*. The 91 songs of this manuscript were transcribed in colonial New Spain—hence they look back, from that vantage, at the pre-colonial world of the multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, geopolitically complex central valley of Mexico (aka Anahuac). In these songs the difficulty and humor of politics and social worlds reflect not just Spanish and Mexica conflict; they also reveal that a broader world of Mesoamerica filled with nuances of Tenochcas, Texcocans, Tlaxcalans, Huexotzincos, Azcapotzalcons, and others still confidently encompassed the singers' memories and imaginations. For the most part, the singers' names have been lost to time—although in his book *Fifteen Poets of the Aztec World*, Miguel León-Portilla does a magisterial job of speculating on some possible identities, while also evoking the milieu in which these musical works were carried from heart to heart and performed amid drum tap and dance (in later days, often in hiding from Spanish authorities). To get at their context and music, which is my aim, John Bierhorst's erudite literal and annotated translation of these songs is also helpful. The third song is about a singer who recognizes that the new Christian religion has displaced the old Mexica beliefs. In singing out to his friends to join him in those old devotional songs he finds himself singing alone—sadly, bitterly, but not entirely without sweetness—in the shadows of shadows that seemed, at one time, to be the intellectual traces of an everlasting and indomitable light. The thirty third song similarly tries to reconcile the irreconcilable presence of Christianity in a Mesoamerican world; seeing the symbols of the new religion in every direction on which perspective is shaped, still, by the memories and religious practices of Anahuac (the geographical and cultural core of ancient Mexico). The homophony of the *soap-apple* with its etymon in the Spanish *sapodilla*, itself derived from the Nahuatl *tzapotl*, should remind us of the Mesoamerican origins for much today (*coyotl*, *ahuacatl*, *tomatl*, *chocolatl*, *chilli*, and, of course, *cinctli* aka maize, among many other things)—a world whose continuance is palpable and present yet, as it is in this song, tinged with a bite of the bitter fruit of colonial displacements.

III.

What singer but I chooses still to mollify  
Old lords, still sniffy with jade? Fie! Fie!  
What singer but I chooses still to mollify  
Old lords, still drunk in their lies? Fie! Fie!

What singer but I still spreads the copal  
    To deify, and shouts to flunkies—Hie! Hie!  
What singer but I still spreads the pine needles  
To edify, and shouts to pupils—Hie! Hie!



What am I doing here, an old dominie  
    Chasing kelpies and other such diablerie?  
It's a terrible condition, please sympathize;  
Even you wouldn't wish me such a demise.

Even the shadows quit me these days.  
Perhaps it's no surprise: it's in my face.  
The quetzal plumes beam bright as days  
In whose shadow I stand despised.

What singer today would choose to mollify  
A stolen bracelet, a pilfered gem? Fie! Fie!  
What singer today would try to modify  
What is beyond all recovery? Hie! Hie!

XXXIII

Imagine yourself in a soap-apple  
Squished in its whorled buttonhole,  
Dappled with its tintured principle,  
Its branches peopled with quetzals,  
eagle, and Christianly owl.  
How will you make your way back  
From that to the valley of Anahuac?  
You're singing there, today,  
But even the trace of your jingle,  
This way, is marked by a tingle  
Of being somewhat unaware  
You are born there, shine there,  
And somehow your mind there  
Is caught still in the cavernous, winding,  
Impersonal grapple of the soap-apple  
    That ensanguines there.

## Ethan Goffman

### *Call Out My Name*

And then there was the woman who changed her name to a silent prayer. People called out her name, but she could not hear to answer.

There was the man who had his name legally changed to the entire text of the *Mahabharata*, the longest book in existence. His wife called out his name, but he has not answered because she is calling it out still.

A cat's owner loved her so that he changed her name to all the divinities dreamed up by the human imagination, from Amun-Ra to Jehovah to Zeus, including ones blasphemous and unsayable. To make life easier, he just calls her Cat.

A woman married 1001 times, the world record, adding a new hyphenated portion to her last name with each marriage. Her latest husband called out her name in anger. But he got it wrong and had to correct himself. He is correcting himself still—whether his anger has subsided or grown is impossible to determine.

A nonbinary person changed their name to a string of all the slurs they had ever suffered. I am too ashamed for humanity to call out their name.

Our names are, after all, just shorthand for the unsayable complexities of our beings.

## Willard Greenwood

### *the trestle at sebage's lower bay*

when fog and night breed a jellyfish moon  
floating to the wine-dark side,  
we wake with blue snow  
so early we meet returning  
decadents and their secret faces

all go opposite us today  
and like truant milkmen  
we have tripped away  
from mothers and their young

old logging engines sunken in woods  
have cleared the tracks for us  
and the only boxcars  
are the rattling dice of hypothermia

we gather fly-line  
hanging from our bitten hands  
like stricken mortals  
collecting viscera

## Burt Kimmelman

### *aurora borealis*

Lines in my head all my adult life  
Blown-dust texts pulled from shelves

*Shorter Poems*  
("Hear her clear mirror"  
"Come shadow come")

*Bottom*  
"A"  
*Catullus*  
("Miserable Catullus" to "Miss her, Catullus?"  
Paradigm of his speech/song poetics)

— Hugh Seidman

Poems to others become  
requiems in time. Jackson  
Mac Low charted the forms of

light: "radiance," "refulgence,"  
"resplendence," etc.  
Verses he composed honored

people who entered into  
light's language. Open letter  
to Armand Schwerner: "Is this

making excuses / trying  
to see / a near-friend / in the  
best light?" Dirge for Paul Blackburn:

“Let me choose the kinds of light  
to light the passing of my  
friend.” Barbara Henning’s new

book, her inscription, arrives  
in the mail: “The whole thing so  
swift blink & it’s over.” His

“57<sup>th</sup> Light Poem,  
To John Taggart”: “A jewel-  
like light gleams at the end of

a passage.” His “58<sup>th</sup>  
Light Poem For Anne Tardos”:  
“I know when I’ve fallen in

love I start to write love songs /  
love’s actinism.” Ardor  
in “Silent as curtains of

aurora borealis.”  
His dislike of the common:  
never Austin’s “how to do

things with words” or Hamlet’s “words,  
words, words” to Polonius.  
Walk in rain. Words like water.

*July Morning, Lake Aeroflex*

*The Poconos, Mid July*

Water bears the light  
to shore, cold current  
below the surface — green  
lily pads — bright at  
dawn under the trees.

Some sway easily,  
their leaves — still, silent,  
upright pines — bird's song  
in the distance, then  
another nearby.

## Basil King

### *The Green Man Comes to 4th Street (1)*

To Emily's sidewalk

To Danny's garden

My forte

My steps

My ladder

Leads to

A description of Green

To Emily's sidewalk

To Danny's garden

My forte

My steps

My ladder

Leads to

Where

There are

Signs of wealth

Cats

Wear

Bow Ties

Beans

And

Candle Sticks

Run

Like

Water

To Emily's sidewalk

To Danny's garden

My forte

My steps

My ladder

Leads to

The Green Man

Empties his pockets

Of the things

He has accumulated

And distributes

Them to a population

That will never

Know

That he was

Once one

Of them



## Stephen Paul Miller

### *HEAVEN*

There's always something falling out of my sandwich.

But this is a landslide.

My heart is crammed with

Smallminded paths which

Veer toward apartheid.

There's always something falling out of my sandwich.

It's now on a ground which

Has nothing it can hide.

Its heart is crammed with

Lettuce and land which

Died inside. At least Gandhi tried

But there's always something falling out of my sandwich.

Even if it's sign language

Souls die

Crammed with

A Spanish

Heaven that cannot be denied.

There's always something falling out of my sandwich.

## *DATING BUDDHA*

On her date she confronted  
the fundamental problems  
of suffering and death  
and sought a solution.

Effortlessly moving in heaven, she says:

This is a familiar heaven. But it challenges me. I see a standard dictionary definition of heaven but can't find God anywhere. Did he go to the bathroom? Who made this heaven, and what does it mean for this heaven to be real? Does heaven love me? Heaven is a bit like a river. You can't stop it. But there are no boats in this river. The river is constantly changing and so am I. Is the river an illusion? The question comes up like vomit. These are the questions. Live with it. Take some guidance from heaven. Take refuge in it again and again and again. Take three steps into heaven. First set the river in motion. To do this you must be very still—stay silly in that very still posture as you experience the starting point of awakening. You better wake up anyway. You're driving. Keep your eyes on the road as you creep down the interstate. After all, the highway is very attractive. You can't help but get out and walk through northern India. Eventually I'll bond with you and carry on to the present, and heaven, walking funny comes to the heavenly streams of suffering, skipping onto the path of the institutions of life, literary canons, art classes, Silk Road, great vehicle, tundra, kundalini, power lines it serves, Indonesian echoes, and heaven.

## Daniel Morris

### *Covid Confessional*

*For the Batpoet, SPM, and the Tragic Theater*

25 years and still I forget if I remembered  
to take my morning med.

Does Paxil even work?

Doctor Jeremy says,  
“If you’re functioning—  
and you are—  
It's working.”

But I'm still here after covid and Trump,  
with “only” mostly Low-grade Panic/Dread,  
3-4 on a scale of 10.

They say withdrawal is worse than smack!  
I freak and Jeremy ups my dose.  
Is it just me?  
Or is the Cold War more hair-raising than ever?

Causing me anxiety – so I put my pills in one of those pink plastic  
Trays that have little cubicles with S-M-T-W-TH-F-S in raised type  
And so today I know was Sunday, because all of the other days' pill  
Beds were empty. And so I lifted the Sunday section up  
And there it was: the last blue 37.5 controlled release treat of the week,  
Waiting for me just like it is supposed to. Glad at the little gift, I lift  
The pill from its pink plastic drawer and bring myself to the sink

Where I bend my head to the faucet to wash it down.

When David needed an army to go against the Philistines—again,

He had 1200 men drink from the stream. A thousand scooped up water

With their hands. 200 put their faces in. Those he took, and with only those, he won.

With few ritual ways to mark panic pandemic days,

One of the few anchors to time still left

Is shaking my white plastic bottle of 100 pills into my palm

and then carefully Dropping one in each of the daily slots

and then Clicking closed the top to each dose.

I seal them with a confidence that my pill box is not empty

as I realize somehow I have emptied out one week

and will unempty another.

Gail Newman

*Agnostic Prayer*

In a lost time, I too  
am lost. In my mind

and in my words  
and in the way I touch—

or do not touch—others  
and myself. My knees too old

for kneeling, my hands arthritic  
and cramped. I petition

for compassion. But that  
is not prayer. My hands darken

like wet bark. My hair  
grows coarse and thin.

It is winter. What am I waiting for?

## *Hours*

Virginia Woolf knew how memories appear  
like minnows' flickers under water—

As I shift in my seat and rain falls on the pavement  
my father dips an oar into a lake, and I am born

in another country. Then I am building a city  
of twigs in the backyard while my mother spills salt

on the tablecloth and my father pedals a Singer  
sewing machine in the hall closet.

In another house I call mine, I'm combing  
my gray hair while outside frogs sing

as they mate in the pond, and bees  
glide on flowers' runways.

And now, a new moment appears—  
My father bending his face to the garden, saying,

*It's just like a painting*  
and life is like that—Yes.

Except a painting remains on the wall,  
and if I leave the room and come back,

is still there—the thick landscape, the luscious trees.

While on the street, leaves have fallen.

It's winter, my father's body is under the earth,  
and my son is coming home.

My husband is frying fish and boiling water for pasta.  
We go to bed together and sleep,

toes touching in the dark, and in the morning,  
the radiant wings of birds flashing by—

winter—the branches are bare—  
and all grief has run like a river into the sea.

Wanda O'Connor

*Dark Choral*

*Day 81*

I.

Fire in the sky

starry skied animals of incandescent infantry  
falling back, pressed down  
into small articulations of rest

I follow the road to Waun Mawn  
passing common gorse and bracken  
counting the distance between stations, observing  
the world lean into rock

spotted stone in a pool  
wedge of dolerite  
its mealy fabric  
cracked through to the sill

bow-coo in the distance  
a soft bark a blow of wind across an empty opening

green breast of ground elder emerging  
brought over by the Romans to eat  
dig down deep, disturb the roots  
get it all or it will overtake you

when I look up, the weeds have reached us



II.

When my mother died my heart fell into my stomach  
making no more room for hunger,

    a flatness in the chest I cannot reposition  
    nor an absence

they say one must move through dwelling  
acknowledging what is there  
refusing what limits us, such extraordinary shapes  
    but it is a blank hope

the heart is leaking  
pushed into forms too quick,  
pressured to alteration

this has happened before  
the eyes release their histories  
    beloved, keep your nerve

these cold water conditions  
new vehicle of the body

rivers in basements  
the city weds the sea

III.

Wailing wakes me

red kites gathering  
in the lay-by,  
a murmur  
or vocalisation from the impulse  
of flight

a song that forms in the  
waste heat

hesitant, alarming

the smaller birds  
devour barley seeds  
in the fine plain

I bear witness to the marriage of rock doves  
who amble, resistant to straying

a woman roots through her former life  
seven etudes in a flat

a voice lumbers  
in the trapped air beneath a city

fog on the hill  
rain like glitter

## Lee Parpart

### *Sunday*

I go looking for a spell.  
Something to quell desire.  
Something to calibrate me  
to this day of rest.

Soon I'm in the kitchen,  
locus of passion, staring at a citrus.  
Wondering how many of its cousins are  
immortalized in oils.

A good artist can capture the play  
of light on puckered rind,  
the way a sculptor reveals the  
lover inside stone.

My husband lingers in the shower.  
We'll meet, clean, and undress —  
two pairs of hands  
peeling the same orange.

He'll explore my dents  
and imperfections the way  
a painter analyzes a piece of fruit—  
dispassionately, with an eye  
to creation.

## *Amber*

We think of trees as pacifists  
enduring swing of axe  
or innocently standing by  
while foxes rip out throats.  
But what of bark as armament,  
or treacle's slow advance?  
How guileless can a pine tree be  
when trapping clans of gnats,  
and separating siblings into  
glowing amber graves  
whose tableaux hint at massacre:  
each frieze a small Pompeii?

# Marianne Szlyk

## *Family Portrait*

*After Alexey Shlyk, "The Chicken House" (2016)*

My ninth or tenth cousin from Belarus  
has built a wooden shed, nearly life-sized  
replica of one his grandmother built  
in the shadow of a concrete tower  
beside a street wider than a river.

His shed is rough, blond, smells of lumber yards  
where he cut and bought this wood, the humid  
room where it stands empty. No one enters.  
It waits in a Brussels art gallery  
beside toy hills as plush as the forest

that his grandmother would often walk through  
as a girl too young to recall the Tsar  
whose empire so many families fled.  
But she remembered the woods, the home  
her father built before they had to move

to the city of cigarettes, cheap shoes,  
and the factories where everyone worked.  
All her life she missed chickens and cabbages,  
bare feet black with dirt, nights spent under stars,  
outdoor sounds, no clang or clank then, she said.

My cousin recalls sheds rising beside  
concrete towers in any space they found,  
like the young trees his grandmother once knew,  
like the mushrooms she gathered on Sunday,  
like the stories she told each orange night

in the place that had not yet left Russia.

*The First Time I Shopped at Smitty's on the Levee*

*January 1997*

Today I kid myself that food is love  
as I seek out the lemon-almond cookies  
that I bought in September.

I will settle for peanut butter Chips  
Ahoy, not exotic, even at this store.

You wouldn't have bought them.

You thought them stale.

I'll dip them into instant coffee, not  
hot but strong, too strong, as I sit up past  
our bedtime in the city of tofu.

I kidded myself once that love is food  
as I walked two miles to buy greens, ramen  
noodles, and bruised fruit from the food co-op.  
I cooked with them on the nights you swung by.  
I walk past bags of Roundy's frozen greens,  
food I will not cook in this city.

Eileen R. Tabios

*Birthmark: A Back Story*

*A map forms itself—  
an avatar for a past  
of black iced winters*

~~It's futile to erase the past.~~

She rubbed her neck where, once, a country blossomed. The country did not treat her well, but it would be foolish to ignore or run away from it. It would be foolish to deny its truth: a certain history implacably occurred. She shot out from a succoring womb into a world where to live is to deteriorate. Unlike other babies, she did not cry out the anguish that foretold the future's unavoidable cruelties. Those cries had been smothered into the burgundy country unfolding like a wool carpet across the left side of her jawbone before plummeting to cover the Hyoid bone, then the Thyroid and Oricoid cartilages. The country continued falling to cover her throat's jugular notch before finally ending, its edge a lace profile grazing her right clavicle. Later, a new father would peel that country from her flesh because its terrain was a minefield of hibernating cancer cells. But a certain history occurred, and her hands kept finding their way back to the area where her birthland remained stubbornly alive in memory—the birthmark that became invisible but stayed palpably real. Wet days made her fingers itch unless she rubbed that mark of ex-danger. Dry days made her fingers itch unless she rubbed that mark of ex-danger. Still, the past can be fondled or smacked, but can't be rubbed away—even when invisible, it lingers with the potential of a different cancer. That cancer might be called *Loss*, and its possibility must keep pushing back at what was unbearable and, worse, occasionally evaporate compassion from certain days. Pushing back... until a father who'd held on to kindness despite experience gently but insistently advised: *Don't push back. Just push through to the other side of this black iced Winter.*

Susan Terris

*Why We Want to Turn into Statues*

Mud. Not mud-pies. Not a mud puddle to stomp  
in boots. Instead, a river of mud flowing into

a shallow lake thick with it. Look, we have  
abandoned our softballs and bats, our rackets

with the shredded strings. You're on your knees,  
have already plastered mud over every inch

of your skinny self, buried your boy-hands into  
the slick, while I've made my feet into

shining flippers, my jeans into rotting pipes  
and just begun to smear this pink sweater into

a work of dark art. Soon you'll mud-paint my face  
as I do the same to yours. But why, and what is

it we are wishing? To be. To stay. To become deep  
shadowed statues, be stopped

at twelve for all time. Never to grow past this year,  
this month, this day, this hour, this minute. . . .



*The Past Is Never Dead. It's Not Even the Past.*

— *William Faulkner*

In the rental house opposite the bed, an abstract painting  
signed by the owner.

Fierce slashes of forest colors, those of sun, of dirt and  
tufted pampas grass,

yet no image, as if the woods have exploded to choke  
the real canvas of

this shingled house, its shake roof and the car in front  
now only

pale glints of light. The owner has killed her own art,  
left it raw

and violent as her girl, the one she could never control  
or redeem,

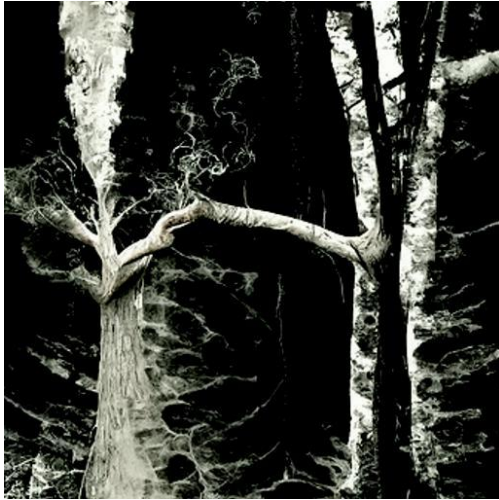
the girl who deserted the house, her car, her parent, so  
this mad forest came

to ease pain, blot memory. *How could you?* the owner  
was howling.

*And why this. . . you rash, reckless, thoughtless, and now  
gone child of mine?*

## Orchid Tierney

*a tree is like a server farm*



is like a family. is like furnishings, is like a door. is like a clock to reckon time with. is like a storage tank. is like a bank. likes to bank. is like a bank executive. is like an executive. is like an NFT—as in: Natural First-class Thirst-trap. is like dry tree or deity, or holy rood, or boot-tree, or wooden horse. is like a lung or a stump speech. is like grassroots or a root system. is like SC—as in: Shady Clime. is like a peaker plant. is like judiciary. is like legal agencies. is like root of the problem. is like BTE—as in: forest, Big Tree Energy.

Tony Trigilio

*The Steeplejack*

*a man in scarlet lets / down a rope as a spider spins a thread*

— Marianne Moore

What about the steeplejack malingering  
on the spire? Easy to dismiss his low-key  
fanfare—just another private rhapsody  
above the chapel. Pour him the widest  
tablespoon of scotch. He’s earned it,  
picking briars from the rough bell tower,  
a captain perched on the quarterdeck.  
Someone tell the seagull sailing around  
the lighthouse that work has gone digital.  
Our imps spin profits en masse and you  
better hope it’s never enough. Necessity  
and coercion feel like freedom, like we  
can live beyond what was unbelievable.  
Like we create our own enormity.

## *Poem in Praise of My Wife*

Another Saturday morning with coffee, reading our latest drafts to each other. Gossiping about the neighbors,

tossing tinfoil balls down the hall for the cats, listening to records. You stopped my poem to ask what Saturdays

I'm free to make our tax appointment with Tom, who talks so much I can't ask him questions. I have no stamina

for his answers. Once, when I said IRAs versus mutual funds bewildered me, he launched into a story

about the asteroid that wiped out the dinosaurs.

I interrupted your essay to schedule the house call for our washer repair, used my boy-voice to sound innocent, steering the conversation

into a corner so it seemed utterly organic and inevitable the appliance shop could only come

on a day I teach. You'll be forced to stay home.

Your writing, not mine, disrupted. My bottomless

need for solitude, hard to believe I'm the same person who once introduced myself to new neighbors

at four in the morning after someone tripped the fire alarm. Everyone in my building

shivering and falling asleep at once, waiting for the fire-fighters' all-clear in the predawn cold. I couldn't

resist handshakes and *Nice to meet you—hey, you know, I live two floors above, let's have a drink sometime,*

which sounded good until the night they actually  
followed through and expected me to drag

myself to meet them at a noisy, overcrowded bar.

We blunder together through dark Chicago afternoons,

hunched forward against the cold. We walk the lake shore  
in summer, watch passenger jets descend toward us, one plane

after another popping out of the horizon. Seen head-on  
and so far away, they're nothing but floating spots of light

until they get closer and we can make out the lines  
and angles of fuselage and wings. All these people

about whom we know nothing hurtling through the sky.  
You and I watching them to figure out where we're going.

— *after Diane di Prima's "Poem in Praise of My Husband"*

## Barrett Watten

### *From Notzeit (After Hannah Höch)*

XIV

“The fatalism by which incomprehensible death was sanctioned in primeval times has now passed over into utterly comprehensible life . . .

“The noonday panic fear in which nature suddenly appeared to humans as an all-encompassing power has found its counterpart in our panic . . .

“Ready to break out at any moment today: human beings expect the world, which is without issue, to be set ablaze by a universal power . . .

“They themselves are and over which they are powerless.” We reserve a final lesson until judgment of their deficit understanding, you insist.

“In early 20th century the American South was ravaged by pellagra, a nasty disease that produced the ‘four D’s’: dermatitis, diarrhea . . .

“Dementia and death. At first, pellagra’s nature was uncertain, but it was caused by nutritional deficits especially with a corn-based diet . . .

“However, for decades many Southern citizens and politicians refused to accept this diagnosis, saying both that the epidemic was a fiction . . .

“Created to insult Southerners, and that the nutritional theory was an attack on Southern culture. Deaths from pellagra continued to climb.”

“Last week alone, a crowd set fire to a statue of George Washington in

Portland, Oregon, before pulling it to the ground. Gunfire broke out . . .

“In a protest in Albuquerque to demand removal of a statue of Juan de Oñate, the despotic 16th-century conquistador of New Mexico . . .

“And New York City Council members demanded a statue of Thomas Jefferson be removed from City Hall, all that is left of his memory . . .”

And Theodore Roosevelt remains on a White stallion flanked by the decimated and enslaved, familiar of the Museum of Natural History.”

Atrophied and diseased, our historical memory is a series of uniform ciphers distributed through space and time at measurable distances.

Accelerated obsolescence and advancing age render the far side of a bell curve into disposable imbeciles, waiting for my substitute to come.

# Tyrone Williams

## *Wapakoneta*

?

half a chance in a half-hearted fist

v.

the subtracted partner of a pair of dice

tumbleweeds, unseen, a ghost-bush  
tinder-dry as the little table—milk  
bottles, long division—it crosses, blown  
back, driven forward, or dealt out,  
first card of a bad hand, a cardinal  
seat at the big table with the folks  
running bostons on one another, or eating  
elbow to elbow with add-on grown-ups, a spread-  
eagled turkey as the centerpiece,  
herald of a gilded bounty, quick-  
silver slowing to mere mercury, one  
giant leap, a small step, at stand-  
still, a half-moon museum in Ohio,  
flat as those color photographs in *Life*,  
*Look*, the first men besides themselves  
in their happy suits atop a moon  
uneclipsed by Minerva's wings.



Prose

## Eileen Tabios

### *How a Poet Writes a Novel*

What if, instead of having an idea for a story, you decide to let the world write your novel? After over 25 years of failing to write a novel, this approach worked for me, and resulted in the 2021 release of my first novel: *DoveLion: A Fairy Tale for Our Times* (AC Books, New York).

Replacing myself with the “world” as author was a familiar approach when I began writing a novel on January 1, 2016. I’m a poet and, as a poet, I’ve long wanted to write past the limits of my imagination and, thus, was accustomed to starting a poem with no idea of how that poem would end. Often, I began with a word sparked by some feeling and from there just wrote until the poem ended itself. “The poem ended itself” reflects a not uncommon saying among poets of how, at times, “a poem writes itself.”

Nor is the notion of a poem writing itself as mysterious as it may seem. Attuned to sound (since a poem is also a sonic creation), I was used to having each word in a poem surface as a result of the prior word(s); my job was simply to come up with that very first word.

I thought of writing a novel the way I wrote most of my poems for one reason: desperation. I’d been trying to write a novel for all of the years I’d been a writer. Indeed, I began my writing life as an aspiring novelist; in 1995, I’d switched careers from banking to writing when I was able to write “The End” to a novel manuscript I’d worked on during evenings and weekends away from my day-job. A few months later, I was able to be objective enough about that novel to know that it, bluntly, sucked. I didn’t expect that, thereafter for years, I would write mostly poems.

I don’t begrudge the turn to poetry—I do feel that poetry is my ideal form for best manifesting my love for language. But I never stopped longing for the novel and didn’t consider that form lost to me by being a poet. For, as a poet, I created in multiple genres besides the verse poem, from asemic visual poetry to experimental prose to public performances to poetry sculptures ... and several failed attempts at the novel. My novel drafts consistently failed to reach completion. After realizing a draft wasn’t succeeding, I usually excised the better chapters to turn into stand-alone short stories (in the process, I’ve published 2 short story collections). My floundering attempts at the novel mostly remained invisible to the world; publicly, I was a prolific writer and today can point to over 60 collections of poetry, fiction, essays, and experimental biographies from publishers in ten countries and cyberspace.

But, with hindsight, I realize that I was building up a frustration over my failure to write the novel. Unsuccessful with the long-form novel, in 2009 I assigned myself “short novels” and generated 12 seven-chapter novels that would become my book *SILK EGG: Collected Novels 2009-2009*. The mischief of *SILK EGG*’s subtitle hid my frustration over my inability to create a longer novel. More recently in 2019, I released a Selected Visual Poetry collection of works from 2001-2019 entitled *THE GREAT AMERICAN NOVEL* whose cover featured a red Valentine’s

Day box of chocolates in a trash can. I was reminding myself that no matter how many books I was able to publish, I had not successfully created the long-form novel.

Thus, two decades after I began my writing career by consigning to the circular bin my first and only successfully completed first draft of a novel, I took a deeeeeeeep breath, and assigned myself my first New Year's Resolution. A few weeks before 2016, I decided that I would begin and end a novel in the next year. I resolved that I would write every day that year on the novel—it could be one word or 10,000 words but I had to write every day. I wasn't concerned about word count. I was concerned about maintaining focus for which I thought even one word would do; in order to write that single word, I had to think about the novel. I didn't want my focus to falter over the prolonged period of a year.

Before January 1, 2016, it'd been a few years since my prior novel attempt. As such, I didn't have a particular idea for my novel's tale. That's when I fell back on my training and experience as a poet. With no story idea in mind, I thought of a phrase that begins numerous tales around the world: "Once upon a time..."

I decided that every day's writing effort would begin with "Once upon a time..." With that decision, as well as the goal that the novel had to be finished in one year, I was reminded of constraints-based writing and specifically Oulipo, founded by Raymond Queneau and Francois Le Lionnais. Oulipo's membership of writers and mathematicians sought to create structures and patterns through which they would create new works. Queneau once called Oulipians "rats who construct the labyrinth from which they plan to escape."

As a fan of constraint-based writing, I'd previously invented a poetry form known as "hay(na)ku." Variations to the form are allowed but the hay(na)ku's core is a tercet with the first line being one word, the second line being two words, and the third line being three words. The form has been used by poets and artists worldwide since its release in 2003.

For the novel, I determined I needed another constraint besides beginning each daily writing with the phrase "Once upon a time." One of the paradoxes of constraint-based writing (and constraints in other contexts) is how limits can enhance freedom. While freedom is desired by creatives, too much can have a deleterious effect by creating a void in which the artist/writer might flounder. I often think of Baudelaire observing how skyscrapers help facilitate the imagined wide span of the sky because the edges of the buildings through which the sky is discerned make the image more inhabitable by the witness. I thought two constraints would be more helpful than one as I imagined myself exercising freedom but within the scaffolding of two points that would stabilize my efforts.

As I thought about what the second constraint might be, I recalled that my first efforts at writing the novel took place in New York City, long before I moved to my current residence of Napa Valley. I decided my second constraint will be that the novel's primary protagonist would be featured coming out of a Manhattan subway station, which is to say, leaving the underground darkness to come out into daylight. Obviously, I was hoping that the novel long held within me would finally surface. Or as an early sentence in the novel states:

"Once upon a time, I left ... dimness ... to break out into light."

Thus, with 366 days of 2016, a leap year, the novel became fashioned from 366 sections which all begin with “Once upon a time.” In subsequent editing, the sections were shaped into 25 chapters. Eight chapters begin with the protagonist leaving a New York City subway station before subsequent sections moved to other introductory contexts, from “an emerald island set atop a sapphire ocean” to old age to “a child who was insignificant to the machinations of the power-hungry,” among others. Nonetheless, all sections start with “Once upon a time” and would influence the final title to include the phrase “Fairy Tale.” None of these developments occurred from (my) authorial intent. The story unfolded as it did because that’s what the “world” wanted.

Obviously, it’s now time for me to define or explain “world” as author. Reflecting my poetics, I believe my job as a writer is to educate myself about as much of the world as possible, whether or not I’m actually interested in the topics I’m learning. My job as a writer is to manifest education for education’s sake for knowledge for knowledge’s sake.

When it’s time for me to put pen on paper—or fingers to keyboard—to write, hopefully I would have done my job well enough so that I can be a good root source for information to apply to poems and the novel. In poetry, the approach can create fresh metaphors. In the novel, the story becomes deeper and more wide-ranging. In both cases, the work is not (unduly) limited by the limits of my imagination, including conscious interests. I’m not well versed in the sciences, for example, but my reading for education’s sake has allowed me to reference the blue event horizon (related to black holes) in poems. In my novel *DoveLion*, educating myself about trans culture resulted in incorporating Lakapati, an indigenous transgender god of fertility and agriculture from Tagalog mythology. *DoveLion*, indeed, is published with 15 pages of notes and acknowledgements, reflecting my pre-writing job of education for education’s sake. Many of these notes do not reflect research done directly for the novel but were elements that later became incorporated into the novel as its writing unfolded.

As I look at the novel’s notes, I identify aspects I’d learned but not initially intended for the novel: flamenco, cataract surgery, Christian Louboutin’s red-soled high heels, Kazimir Malevich’s black squares, Filipino psychology, Madeleine Knobloch (Georges Seurat’s long-anonymous mistress), development strategies for young nations, “pagpag” as the practice of scavenging food from garbage dumps, Randy Dudley’s superb paintings, U.S. foreign policies, Kali martial art, the Romanian orphan crisis, shibari (a Japanese bondage technique), various diamond clarities, the inspiring movie *Das Leben der Anderen (The Lives of Others)* written and directed by Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, dictatorships, the dark side of beauty pageants, and so on. I love how the list reflects the diversity of what exists in the world. It is that diversity that I wish to author my writings and for which I must always work to enable by maximizing my education on anything and everything.

Today, when I consider my publisher’s book summary for *DoveLion*—

Poet Elena Theeland overcomes the trauma of her past to raise a family who overthrows the dictatorship in Pacifica. She is aided by artist Ernst Blazer whose father, a CIA spy, instigated the murder of Elena’s father, a rebel leader. As her family frees Pacifica from the dictator’s dynastic regime, Elena discovers herself a member of an indigenous tribe

once thought to be erased through genocide. The discovery reveals her life to epitomize the birth of a modern-day “Baybay” modeled after the “Babaylan,” an indigenous spiritual and community leader of the Philippines. // Unfolding through lyrical and spare vignettes as well as the disruption of linear time, *DoveLion* presents the effects of colonialism and empire while incorporating meditations on poetry and poetics, art and aesthetics, history, orphanhood, and indigenous values and tribal citizenships. Glimpses are provided of spy warfare, internet-based rebellions, and the insidious effects of beauty pageants. Relief is provided through Elena’s love of Wikipedia and the world’s most simple but delicious recipe for adobo. Ultimately, *DoveLion* bespeaks the unavoidable nature of humanity: a prevailing interconnection that can cancel past, present, and future into a singular *Now*.

— I marvel over how my 300-page novel was birthed from simply the idea of repeatedly using the phrase “Once upon a time” and seeing how many ways the phrase can engender some meaning or tale. That phrase was a portal to the world which is much larger than myself and, thus, would be the author I would prefer for creating my works. It’s a strategy reflecting what many artists and writers know: the work is larger than one’s self. So why not be an author larger than one’s self?

## M. G. Stephens

### *Times Three: Brooklyn*

#### Floaters

It was Easter Sunday and, by their dress, you could tell it was cold out. They wore coats and had on ear-muffed hats, well, the boys did, not the old man, who was not all that old. Like Christ on the Cross, he was thirty-three years old. He did not wear earmuffs; tough guys wouldn't, would they? He was a tough guy, not exactly a mobster, but those were the people with whom he spent his week-day daylight hours. Down the piers, he said, he called it, Hell's Kitchen, a world away. They stood that Sunday in Highland Park. It is a park on the cusp of Brooklyn bleeding into Queens. Uncle Eddie took the photo of the old man and his three oldest boys, ages five, four, and two years old. The sun was out, the war had ended three years earlier, people were no longer in the military, and America was young, even if Brooklyn felt old and tired, damp and rusty, mildewy and pewy. The photograph was a slide, a color slide, which had to be a new thing, it being 1948. The two older boys wore their hats pulled over their ears to keep warm, but the little fellow wore a kind of Harpo Marx hat, looking serious and/or grumpy (hard to say which), and standing apart from his father and brothers. The old man held the youngest one's hand with three beefy fingers. He had fists like ham hocks, a bull neck, and massive arms, even though he was on the short side—five feet six inches—wearing a long tweed overcoat and a fedora. He looked like he needed a shave once again, even though he had shaved within the last hour at his home on Marion Street, a few minutes away by car from the park. Petey, the second oldest, had blond hair and he wore a kind of baseball cap with earmuffs, and to be a wiseguy, he wore the bill of the cap to the right side of his head. Jimmy, the oldest, looked more seriously forward at the camera, his uncle, a car mechanic and a good amateur photographer. Stewart, the father, had a strong jaw-line and a distinct cleft chin. It was not like Burt Lancaster or Kirk Douglas; his darkness was more in the range of John Garfield. The old man was a hot-tempered immigrant Celt, though everyone took him for a guinea, his word, meaning, an Italian. The little guy was dark too, brooding, and standing apart, always standing apart from the rest of his family. Many more would be born after this photograph was taken. Some would die, some live to adulthood. It is the little guy's first memory because right after the photograph, they went up to the reservoir to see the water, and there was a body floating in the reservoir. The father quickly got them to the car and took them to an ice cream parlor, even though it was not yet noon.

## Brooklyn Journey

The others had gone off to Flatbush, where they were staying; they had taken the Long Island Railroad further into the borough, to its last stop. Then they hopped a Flatbush Avenue bus for Flatlands Avenue, until they got to Avenue L. The two of us were separated from our other siblings—our parents had ten or twelve or fifteen or sixteen children, some impossible number we could not even imagine—and were relegated to another part of Brooklyn. We were brother and sister closest in age to each other, so adventures often involved us in tandem. We could take the Long Island Railroad train and get off at East New York, and then walk the grim half-mile or so through an urban landscape of abandoned warehouses and deserted, often fire-bombed cars, or we could take the less fractious route by bus and subway. That day we chose the latter journey, taking a Schenk bus at Hillside Avenue into the City, not getting off at 179<sup>th</sup> Street, which I would do in my teens when I went off to the Village for folk music, poetry, and adventures. We took the bus nearly to its end, when it turned off Hillside and deposited us at the beginning of the elevated subway line deeper in Queens, getting off the bus and going up the stairs for the BMT Jamaica Line, the B train, that would take us to East New York.

I paid for both of us.

“How old are you?” the token seller asked me.

“Thirteen,” I lied.

I was eight or nine years old. My little sister was six or seven.

“Okay,” he said. “I’m just askin’. I gotta do my job.”

“No problem,” I said, because I had heard some tough guy say that, and it seemed to put an end to conversation.

We walked further up the stairs to the train platform, holding each other’s hand. We didn’t want one or the other of us to fall down or over the rail, although my sister was so tiny, I don’t think she could reach the railing, much less fall over it. She had a bushy head of curly hair, what later might be called an Afro, though then people said she either looked like Nancy or Shirley Temple. That left me the option to think of myself as Sluggo or, I don’t know, maybe a character out of Moon Mullins. We were going to the eastern edge of Bedford-Stuyvesant, but in those days it was known by the white people (mostly immigrant Italians whose numbers were quickly disappearing) as East New York, although that name was stretching the geographical reach of our neighborhood quite a bit. I thought of it as Bed-Stuy, and that was the end of it, because that name allowed us to be connected to our mother’s past, and the long history of her family in the borough, i.e., it made us less immigrant to think like that. Our connection to the place where we were going was our paternal grandmother’s house which, like characters in a fairy tale, we were headed towards, not confronted by a wolf, but rather gangs (teenagers) or older men (perverts, gangsters, troublemakers, you name it, my mind was filled with them confronting us and me having to defend our lives against their advances). The

walk from the East New York el station was closer than the East New York stop on the LIRR. But the journey still involved having to walk past crowds of men, grabbing their crotches and shouting things our way. Luckily the bocci ball players under the el were occupied with their game and didn't even see us slip past them. We turned down McDougal Street, and within a block and a half we arrived at our grandmothers, unscathed yet again. We walked up the stairs into the vestibule and rang her bell. The building had two floors, and she and my aunts lived on the first. Our grandmother owned the building, and a bag lady rented the rooms on the second floor. Already a couple of the kids on the street were calling to us to play with them. First we had to say hello to grandma and our aunts. Then we could go to PS 73 and play with the kids who lived in this part of the borough. All of us were as poor as dirt. My sister and I were the only white kids; they were black and Spanish, though mostly black, coming from the islands and the South. None of us knew a thing about race; that would all come later.



## Eulogy for a Brooklyn Cousin

There are more people alive today on this Earth than all the dead people that were here since the beginning of time for us sorry-assed humans. I just don't understand why you can't simply be one of the quick. A lifetime ago, we cousins all played in your garden in Flatbush, your father reveling us with ghost stories as the night came over Brooklyn. Other times, you visited our family on Long Island. Our mothers were sisters, the dearest of friends, talking constantly on the telephone to each other until, one day, like you, only a long time ago, your own mother died, still a young woman. You were in your early sixties, hardly old. They used to say that the women in our family lived into ripe old age, pushing one hundred. So why is it lately I am feeling as though everyone I know is dead? My parents, classmates, neighbors, and now you, my cousin, only a few years older than I am, and so full of life, you were sober all these years, living out in Colorado, the snow falling endlessly on the ground, they could not bury you because of the blizzard and the frozen ground. I will remember you for ferocious tantrums and anger, a fierce Brooklyn beauty about you, as you stormed about your father's house in Flatbush, the headquarters of our extended family. There was nothing frozen in you then, and the life poured from you as if it would never end. But it did end for you in Colorado, and now all that is left is for us, the living, to remember you. I remember enormous gatherings in your house in Brooklyn, cousins flowing out of the rooms, the noise, the food, the adults drinking beer. We had thirty-eight first cousins, and nearly all of them were present for those parties that were organized by our mothers mostly, and their errant husbands, all salt of the earth. You were one of the oldest cousins, beautiful and intense, both streetwise and sensible, and I recall that, first, we all stayed at your house, my brothers and sisters, and then you came out to Long Island to visit us, staying parts of the summer, going off to the beach with my older brothers, your friends. Your youngest brother Magee was my friend, my best friend, my closest cousin. He held that position throughout our lives, only replaced years later in London, meeting my cousin Joe again, another family from those days out in Brooklyn, only now a Shakespearian scholar, and back in those days, his family were the posh relatives from Rockville Center. Your family were not only our cousins, it was almost like we were one big family, and your own mother, when she was alive, was at the center of it all, making food for the children, coffee to sober the adults before they drove off for their homes in Brooklyn and beyond, out on the Island mostly, and I remember your father served them condensed milk for their coffee, and he regaled everyone with his stories. You had your older sister Jeannie, and all of you attended St. Thomas Aquinas School up Flatlands Avenue near Flatbush Avenue, across from the theatre where I saw my first movie ever, *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, with John Wayne starring, the whole experience more vivid than Technicolor, and all our lives were filled with the possible, with great wonder, years before your own mother died prematurely, at least well before her time, and once she was gone the lovely coherence of that extended family seemed to dissolve around us, until we all drifted away into our lives, you in Colorado, the others in Staten Island and New Jersey, some other cousins drifting away forever, never to be heard from again, and even my own siblings sometimes missing for years before I heard anything about them, so that I didn't see you again until a family reunion on your brother's suburban lawn, where we all swapped

photographs of each other, all of us middleaged now or even older, our children everywhere wondering who these people were, and why we were there, and the next thing I knew, you were gone, a bad heart, I was told, though Lord knows you had a good heart but bad health, bad luck, though a great life with children, sober, one day at a time, blessed, one of the lucky ones not to die from alcohol but something else. I hear from a cousin in New England, from another one in Ohio. Occasionally I hear from a brother or sister about matters concerning our old extended family, none of whom any longer live in Brooklyn, which apparently is now a haven for writers and artists, at least no longer the home for our likes, though we inhabited its streets for centuries, Flatbush to Bay Ridge, East New York to Brooklyn Heights, and then drifted away, one after the other, casualties of war, ambitions, upwardly mobile, tired of its streets, we left until one by one each cousin was gone.

## Patrick Pritchett

### *Solaris or, The Problem with Aliens*

*“Reading Solaris makes Solarists of us all” – Istvan Csicsery-Ronay*

In the beginning there was *Solaris*, the 1972 film by Andrei Tarkovsky, and it was good.

To submit to the full immersion in the optical-temporal distension of which the film demands, and of which Tarkovsky is the peculiar master, is to undergo certain demands with the promise of enigmatic rewards. At the time, I hadn't read the Stanislaw Lem novel it was based on. I merely accepted on good faith the occult genius of Tarkovsky, wholly prepared to take his gnostic cinema as something verging on mystical experience.

But that was then—sometime in the late 80s /early 90s—and now, re-watching the film as I prep my SF class for the fall, some small doubt has begun to creep in. Is this ghost story, this tale of spiritual affliction, a work of genius, or a lot of hokum? Or have I, somewhere along the way, lost my own faith and begun to mistrust Tarkovsky's obsessions with the innocent rituals of childhood and his naïve nature mysticism, as Fredric Jameson once called it? What has changed?

For one thing, I've now read the Lem novel, which is obviously brilliant, perhaps the greatest SF novel ever written. It grounds the experience of Kelvin, the fraught psychologist and protagonist, through a mordant, yet deeply intimate and humane, first-person narrative. The film's abstractions don't come close to this. Kelvin, in Tarkovsky, is maddeningly opaque. For another thing—and this is more to the point—what once struck me as profound and enigmatic now seems closer to stilted and even camp. It's bad Bergman or Antonioni, or what New Yorker film critic Pauline Kael used to mock as "the sick soul of Europe"—a stunningly insensitive remark to make about what, after all, is really a post-Auschwitz cinema. (Profundity always runs the risk of seeming merely pretentious.)

And, at the level of character, *Solaris* is inhabited by little more than strained silences and darting cryptic glances; everyone looks distraught, isolated, leached of all discernible affect save exhaustion and alienation. At least this seems true of the first two thirds of the film. The final third, however, unexpectedly, builds on much of that tedium; it accretes into a frisson of melancholy glory that marks Tarkovsky's work at its most penetrating, even if it deviates wildly from its source material.

The sense of paralysis, of lassitude, of confusion and ambiguity, that seemed like spiritual values in themselves (or the necessary preconditions for them) is still there, conveyed, not through a denuded storyline, but by Tarkovsky's elliptical style: the richness of his slow absorptive eye that invests the most ordinary surfaces—the metallic sheen of the station, the worn leather of its couches—with the uncanny threat of some impossible meaning.

Hari's suicide and resurrection still contain an awesome power—all the pain of mortality exudes out of her violent recovery from rigor mortis. (When I ask my students what her violent

spasmodic revival most resembles, many of them respond: “an orgasm.”) Resurrection makes her more vulnerable and even more lonely than she was before. Yet what’s missing is the deep, unbridgeable sense the novel gives off of a Total and Alien Otherness that is the planet Solaris itself. Without that, the rest teeters on the edge of elliptical Cold War allegory, as merely a moving story of the human overcoming seemingly implacable, inscrutable, Kafkaseque forces (i.e., the State), of love triumphing over duty.

The resolution to Kelvin’s dilemma remains problematic: he retreats, unequivocally, into the limpid island of the past, undergoing a kind of regression that Tarkovsky orchestrates as transcendence. This does not signal rescue but rather surrender. It’s the defeat of mortal knowledge—the awareness that some things can never be made right or whole again, that the bitter logic of life is not about innocence regained, but instead learning how to live with loss, with exile and failure. In Lem, the ending is ambiguous, haunted—as everything in the novel is.

He refuses to quiet the ghost, choosing the more difficult commitment—to wait in abeyance for the possibility of redemption. Lem’s finale is truly messianic, Tarkovsky’s theologically overdetermined. Lem writes of Kelvin, who has left the station for the planet’s uncanny liquid surface to wait for the return of Hari: “Must I go on living here, among the objects we both had touched, in the air she had breathed? In the name of what? In the hope of her return? I hoped for nothing. And yet I lived in expectation.... I persisted in the hope that the time of cruel miracles had not passed.”

The discipline of *Solaristics* (which Lem discusses at length in chapters 2 and 11) undergirds the novel’s philosophical architecture, but the films of Tarkovsky, and Soderbergh, elide the book’s complex, witty and satirical reflections on the limits of the scientific method and humanity’s inability to comprehend the ineffable. Both Tarkovsky’s and Soderbergh’s versions refuse Lem’s more adult and brutal conclusion: that redemption is usually what eludes us. Both films in this regard are profound disappointments, despite their manifold beauties and evocations of cosmic mysteries. This refusal was no doubt a wise decision in the end, however, though failing to address or even gesture toward the ocean planet’s mimoids (i.e., formations thrown up by the Solaris ocean, discovered originally by Giese)—a phenomenon residing at the core of Lem’s novel. As Lem put it, when expressing his disappointment in the Soderbergh film:

the book was not dedicated to erotic problems of people in outer space.... As *Solaris*' author I shall allow myself to repeat that I only wanted to create a vision of a human encounter with something that certainly exists, in a mighty manner perhaps, but cannot be reduced to human concepts, ideas or images. This is why the book was entitled *Solaris* and not *Love in Outer Space*.

Lem’s thesis is best expressed near the novel’s end by Kelvin, in a conversation with his fellow astronaut, Snow:

Somewhere in its development it [Solaris] turned back into itself too soon.... It is more like an anchorite, a hermit of the cosmos, not a god. Solaris could be the first phase of the despairing [God ... that] is the only god I could imagine believing in, a god whose passion is not a redemption, who saves nothing, fulfills no purpose—a god who simply is.

Soderbergh's film is in many ways more satisfying than Tarkovsky's even if it, too, fails to represent Lem's vision. Among its many virtues is its brevity, a narrative concision that sacrifices none of the mystery of the story. The sentimental node of the dacha is erased, with no ill effects. (Of course, dilation and distension, what Tarkovsky refers to as "sculpting in time," are the whole point of his cinematic philosophy. The camera becomes the aperture of duration, a mechanism that erases its mediation.)

Seeing George Clooney, in this film, you realize that it enabled him to play the title role in his best performance, *Michael Clayton*. There are very few leading men among American actors capable of conveying the moral fatigue and spiritual emptiness of midlife with such desolate austerity. As for Natascha McElhone (here I fall prey to mere idolatry), I wish we saw more of her in major film roles, and not just because she possesses the most arresting face of any female actor of her generation. (Of late she is appearing in the surprisingly good SF series *Halo*, on Paramount Plus, as a seductive, sinister mad scientist.)

Soderbergh's *Solaris*, like Tarkovsky's, is concerned with the sublimity of memory—the dream of forgiveness, of redeeming one's mistakes—in effect the erasure of the very conditions that endow mortality with meaning. His ending, beautifully wrought (his signature play with temporal sequence is masterful here), nevertheless succumbs to the temptation, negated by Lem, of making over the donation of *Solaris* into a form of grace. The central idea of the novel—that of the failed god, the weak god who resides solely in matter—is beyond the imaginative capacity of either filmmaker. The final enigma goes begging.

The real Other, for either Tarkovsky or Soderbergh, is not the alien planet that invades the unconscious, but Woman. The resort to binaries is tiresome. Both versions—Lem's, too, for that matter—cast Hari/Rheya as emotionally unstable and suicidal, while Kelvin is the rationalist par excellence (for all the good it does him). Following the hoariest of traditions, Rheya as insane muse is also the *via negativa*, the opening of the way to the Beyond. Soderbergh makes this explicit in the dinner party scene (one of Kelvin's flashbacks) where he and Gibarian debunk consciousness as epiphenomenal, a mere mathematical probability, overriding and silencing Rheya's impassioned defense of an informing Logos. The medium-range close up of her face as she falls silent is harrowing; her withdrawal from Kelvin becomes metaphysical at this point. All this is recovered in the denouement, when Rheya becomes the rescuing angel of history, leading Kris to heaven/haven, even if it's only the eternal recurrence of the domestic same. As she puts it: "we don't have to think that way anymore."

In Tarkovsky's *Solaris*, the persistence of memory-as-symptom leads to some unintentionally parodic moments in which Kelvin tries to rid himself of this unwelcome—clinging?—lover. Poor Hari/Rheya, in both films, suffers some grotesque punishments at the hands of men. Her immortality becomes a source of horror—a perversion of the Christic promise, or else the final expression of its logic. Yet, as with Rachael in *Blade Runner*, she also proves herself more faithful to her own ontology; she's more fully human because she does not reject her doubt about who she is, instead embracing the uncertainty. At the dramatic level, she grows to become more than she is, so that by the end her example leads Kelvin to an act of transcendent empathy.

All the same, Lem's conclusion is stronger—it rejects the ease offered by vulgar theological solutions with their hope for rescue, opting instead to stay true to the complicated doubt of a messianic hope that may never be fulfilled. The tragic lovers are only “alive” inside Solaris. Solaris, one might say, is art itself—a profound form of consolation against our paltry mortal days. It is a poem writing the lovers into its deep structures.

## Richard Peabody

### *Surviving Slaughter*

I'm standing on Slaughter Beach near Cape Henlopen, Delaware, in chilly late May, to watch horseshoe crabs mate. We're a couple days after the Blood Moon and high tide won't happen for a few hours, but they're already arriving.

The name of the town and beach does give one pause.

Crossing the dunes from the car, the sand was littered with the broken brown shells and remaining stench of those who came before. Piles scattered along the wrack line.

Before the beautiful sunset fades at 8pm we see countless horseshoe crabs that didn't make the shore, stuck in clumps of seaweed as far as the eye can see.

I hoped this would be a lesson in evolution, how life always finds a way. I'm shaking my head. Here in the early darkness, I can see the tide surging a little stronger with every passing minute.

I'd expected to see dinosaur insects mating. Shiny and wet they remind me of the facehuggers from *Alien*. Somehow befitting the word "slaughter."

When the first wave hits the beach it's obvious the tide is too low to move the seaweed out of the way and give them room to move, a tide too powerful for the crabs to get beyond the crush at the shoreline.

It's like a scene out of D-Day. Bodies bobbing in the white foam. Crab shells tipped sideways, upside down. Me bending over and grasping the surprising thickness of their shells in my slick fingers, turning them over, so powerful legs can dig into the sand, and charge up the beach, only to be trapped in the thick seaweed.

And here they come in pairs and trios, locked in their embrace, smacked upside down, writhing in the salt watery muck, the sluice, that looks like foam or perhaps horseshoe crab spunk, swirling clouds on the surface of the black water.

We shine our flashlights, and flip crabs over.

A tiny male is clawing his way up the beach. Clicking and clacking.

A huge barnacle-covered female the width of a frying pan, with a tiny male following close behind, is entwined in chunks of seaweed that the waves continuously plough into her underside, clogging up the works, her legs trying to kick free, until another wave sprawls her sideways like a dark ashtray turned up on its side.

The crabs are everywhere in the dark tide. Legs sticking up like the branches of downed trees, disappearing, slapped onto the shore, forgotten.

My heart breaks. It's a wonder any kind of life manages to procreate given the scale of disaster I'm witnessing.

They're giving everything to the procreative drive. They kick, they try to flip over, they get stuck. Their energy sapped, it's easy to see them giving up. Such a grueling process, a gauntlet. They're doomed.

Why did this batch come too early? Before the highest tide. If they had waited until 10:55 the tide would have been at 6' and they'd have glided right over this madness and laid their eggs without littering the beach with their corpses.

It's like some game of evolutionary fate. Perfect timing is everything. Or is it totally random? A horny teenager in car with it's now or never driving them to extinction? Do they ever listen? Do they ever learn?

They really should have waited.



Jim Natal

*Insider Poetry from Deep Inside*

*NYC from the Inside: NYC through the Eyes of the Poets Who Live Here*

Edited and with an Introduction by George Wallace

Blue Light Press, 2022; ISBN: 978-1-4218-3717-8

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I've never lived in New York City. Back in the long corporate phase of my life I got to visit on a regular basis, occasionally extending those trips to experience the exceptional cultural and culinary pleasures, the nerve-jangling sensory onslaught of Manhattan and environs that I swore I could never inhabit for more than two weeks at a time. I always had to remind myself when arriving from my tranquil (by comparison) Los Angeles home that I was in an American city unlike any other now, had to remember to put on the surly emotional body armor necessary to successfully engage with its residents. But then they would always surprise me somehow, disarm me, with their kindness, their in-your-faceness, the vigor and trudge of their pace as they navigated upstream on the crowded sidewalks like two-way lanes of spawning urban salmon.

*NYC from the Inside* is a new, sprawling poetry anthology befitting the city that is its subject. Curated, edited, with an Introduction by poet George Wallace, the book gives readers just what its subtitle promises and more: NYC through the eyes of the poets who live there. The 179 contributors include poets lauded, familiar, and unknown, some having reached the heights of literary achievement and others who work day jobs and night shifts, toiling in the poetry mines, on their own dimes and gumption, for the love of the art. It's a MRI image of New York poetry in 2022, one that allows for shifting dimensional views as the reader focuses in and zooms out of the work.

This is an anti-Michelin guide to the all-hours metropolis frequented only by residents. Oh sure, the iconic locations are scouted, attractions mentioned: Times Square, the Met, the Villages East and West, etc. but never in rote or expected ways. There are back-to-back poems in the voice of the Statue of Liberty, world-weary and full of soured nostalgia. In another poem Lady Liberty gains "awareness of herself" during a lightning storm.

But mostly there are bodegas and dive bars, hole-in-the wall storefronts like "Rick's Liquors" and "the South Asian sweet shop," myriad poetry open-mic venues and used bookstores, and other settings not to be encountered unless compelled by law or family to be there, such as described in "The Cannoli Machine at the Brooklyn Detention Center." And

looming over, behind, and beneath it all are the specters of the fallen Twin Towers and the ghost of Whitman, the still-reverberating echoes of Ginsberg's "Howl," and unceasing pandemic sirens.

The poets are presented alphabetically, appropriate for work so filled with references to the alphabet soup of New York's avenues and trains. This arrangement sometimes results in serendipitous juxtapositions where adjacent poems bring together poets not usually associated with each other; their respective poems may share topic, theme and/or tone, but they also engage in dialogue with the others. Frank X. Gaspar's stunning prose poem "Late Rapturous," and Kat George's wonderfully titled "I Want to Marvel at the Universe But All I See Are Bricks," make revealing contrasts between camping in California's Sierras and looking out on a New York cityscape. Gaspar reminisces about writing haiku by candlelight in his tent in the snow, while observing "winter dusk ... running to silver against the high roofs and towers." George cites Yosemite Falls, mosquitos, bears, and millions of stars as she confronts her current vista, its "brick, five stories high, interrupted by/windows reflecting the movement below...."

Like the streets of Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens, the Bronx, and Staten Island, these poems are teeming not with people inhabiting lead roles but instead street-smart character actors populating the city's asphalt sidewalks, subway cars and busses—who live their lives with dignity, grit, sometimes desperation. There's the protagonist in Hettie Jones's lovely sketch "For Margaret of Sixth Street" ("I took the plunge / and kissed her cheek // then watched her grin/ around her three/ remaining teeth.), and there's the egg man in Sandra Alcosser's "Under the Bas Relief of Marx" ("An ancient overcoat whistled behind / As I turned to watch a naked thumb slide / A box of lucifers open"); they share cameos with Baba Ngoma Hill's T-bone, in "Zoology 19/30," who "does the baboon / pants hanging off his ass..." thing. Many entries feature poets loving the city in the first-person, musing, baring themselves, just trying to get by, to forge a semblance of an existence, or finessing their wry way through failed romantic entanglements and screwball encounters, such as in Michael Puzzo's "Almost Brooklyn" ("It was the tone that I recognized before the words / All Chipmunk, chainsaw, and child of the damned") and Joe Weil's "Fishing the East River off the Night Shift, August, 1994" ("She rides away leaving me kneeling there, caught by my own diamond jig").

Wallace has proven himself up to the challenge of shaping a volume of poetry so multi-cultural, so diverse in form (see especially Janet Hamill's pantoum "The Hudson's White Medusa Moon"), in voice, language, and immediacy, that it almost defies the city's enduring constraints—its rivers, bridges, train lines, tunnels, and traffic jams. This anthology is a collection hung with the art of de Kooning, Warhol, and Basquiat's "jazzy hieroglyphics," and includes complementary original collages by Steve Dalachinsky, and a photo by B. A. Van Sise. Speaking of jazz, there's plenty of that, too, supplied by Ellington and Monk, Powell and Lateef, among others.

Initially, I didn't embrace this anthology's somewhat matter-of-fact title, thought it should have been something more striking. But by the time I finished reading it through, overcome with that same neural overload as on my aforementioned visits to the city, I had changed my mind. This anthology isn't a volume by and about hip NYC poetry *insiders*; it's poetry shared from deep inside the hearts of its contributors, an offering—and invitation—to those of us who live elsewhere.

## Sandy McIntosh

### *Coaxing the Hangman*

David Ignatow had been at his kitchen table reading an article in *The New York Times*. “Did you ever hear of ‘Drop Weight?’ he asked, pointing to the newspaper. “Drop weight is how they measure the strength of a rope needed to hang a man. If the man is too heavy, a thin rope will unravel. And, if he’s fat, and they measured wrong, the whole gallows will split apart, and the guy will drop down and still be alive. So, maybe a way to think of a good poem is like a man who’s hanged: the rope must be just right, and the apparatus strong enough, so the body drops, and the neck is snapped. One clean motion.”

We’d both been invited to read our poems at the home of H. R. Hays. “So, don’t read that Vietnam poem,” Ignatow continued, “unless you cut out all that adolescent bullshit about getting drafted and write something concise. Make your poem clean and make it snap!”

H. R. Hays was a poet and the early translator of Bertolt Brecht, and Spanish-American poets much praised by Robert Bly and others. Invited also were his neighbors, members of the Hamptons, Long Island poetry community, including Harvey Shapiro, editor of *The New York Times Book Review*, Allan Planz, poetry editor of *The Nation* and others. Ignatow warned: “You don’t want them thinking less of you, spoiling your reputation before you have one. Read the poem Hays asked for, the one about Eisenhower’s funeral.”

But, at Hays’ party, after I’d read the Eisenhower poem, the writers applauded and asked me to read an encore. I flipped through my notebook in a panic looking for something fit to read. Under the harsh light of the audience’s attention, the horrible realization settled on me that all the notebook poems I was so proud of were terrible! I’d been carrying around an impressive, overstuffed valise, showing off, but there was little good in it. All were truly bad except that poem about Vietnam Ignatow had criticized. I was certain if I found it, I’d prove Ignatow wrong.

I couldn’t find it. I flipped through the pages sensing the audience’s disquiet. At last, in a bid to keep their attention I recited it from memory.

The reaction was gratifying laughter and applause. Allan Planz came up to me and asked if he could publish the poem in *The Nation*. My first thought was that I had been right and Ignatow wrong: it was a great poem.

Later, in the car driving home, I recalled my triumph. I heard the applause, but as I played back my recitation, I noticed that the poem was quite short—much shorter than the one I’d shown to Ignatow, which must have been about seventy or eighty lines. What had happened?

I had titled it: “America Before the Revolution” and dedicated it to the “Bomb-Them-Back-to-the- Stone Age” general Curtis LeMay.

Driving along, I recited the poem as I remembered reciting it:

Sir:  
How I enjoyed  
Your words last night  
About this being God's war. I was so excited  
That I didn't notice eating my mother  
Who had fallen into her own apple pie.

What I recited had been only six lines long. What happened to the other seventy?

At home, I found the original version and read it through. Ignatow had been correct. Except for those first six lines, everything else was self-indulgent crap. It was as if, having written those lines and realizing that I had something there, I decided to take the opportunity to cash in on the listener's attention by delivering a sermon.

Idiotic as my assumption had been, I realized that there was something inside me that had known the score all along. A silent editor who, if listened, would guide me in the right direction. Propelled by panic, I had recited only the necessary lines that, as Ignatow pointed out, would open the trapdoor to let the body fall and the neck snap. One clean motion. The invisible hangman: the better maker.

## Susan Lewis

### *Four Short Fictions after Thomas Bernhard from Idem*

#### No Accounting

The friends had been inseparable since youth. Their bond was based on parity as much as confluence: not only were they horrified by many if not most of the same deficits, they were excited by many of the same felicities, to remarkably similar degrees. This unusual and effortless synchronicity continued until one of them became involved with a young woman whose mere mention caused his entire face to animate as if awakened from what appeared to have been an idling state of waiting, and to whom he was determined to entrust his future — although she elicited in his best friend not just an intuitive distrust, but a visceral revulsion which would remain undiminished by either a lifetime of familiarity or his longing for their former accord.

#### Butcher

Back when this world was another, her grandfather had been a butcher. Although she never saw him attack the flesh that was his livelihood or traffic in the bloody parts that sustained her mother and his disgusted wife, she witnessed the submission with which he bore that disgust decades after the fearsome blades, having served their brutal purpose, had been permanently sheaved. Having in this way learned that violence hides behind the most unexpected of guises, the girl resolved never again to relax her vigilance, which proved hugely useful during her lengthy, anxiety-ridden life.

#### Which Bird

In one trajectory, the bird captured in the young dog's jaws was just what the man had hoped to cook for dinner. Showered with praise and marveling at life's rewards, the dog went on to repeat his success, native enthusiasm boosted by his freshly-minted confidence. In another scenario the fluttering creature stilled by the puppy's innocent teeth was no delicacy but a pet prized by the man who met the dog's innocent mistake with a disappointment whose condemnation hovered like a curse over the poor fellow's every choice, engendering a lifetime of discouragement he could only grimly endure.

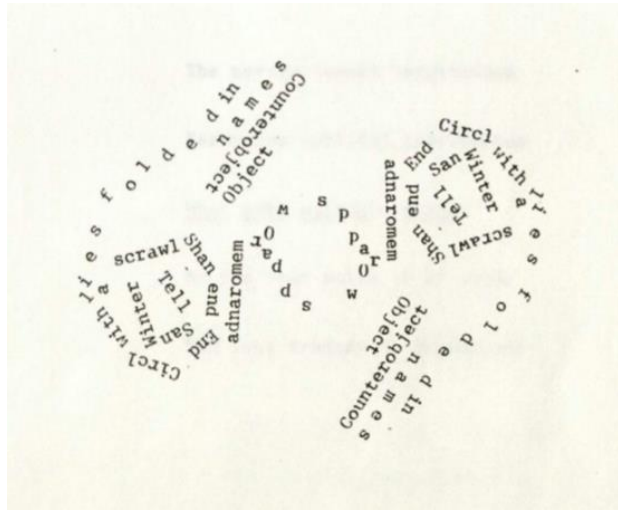
## No Escape

After an adulthood tethered to a spouse whose military service had soured his taste for travel, the widow wasted no time scheduling her first trip. Although her husband's intransigence had hardly been the only source of her disappointment, regret having long been a dependable companion, travel promised to deliver her from the trap of her life. Burdened by decisions she recognized as seeds of more regret, she was relieved of the need to choose a destination by the birth of a granddaughter. On the day of her departure, she locked the door behind her with a sense of liberation. What a relief it would be not to see any of it again! But no sooner had she arrived at her son's home than she felt the urge to bolt. The baby herself was a beacon of hope, but the grandmother was appalled by the new parents' failure to appreciate the threat posed by the world to this fragile new being. Obviously, it had been a terrible mistake to visit, one she set about scrambling to undo. But the warm weight of the baby in her arms gave comfort to them both, presenting her with a new crisis of ambivalence. With no idea if she should leave or stay, but aware that she would regret either choice, she took comfort in the familiarity of her predicament.

W. Scott Howard

*“Ariadne’s thread”*: Susan Howe’s *“Spinoza’s Cloak”* @ UCSD, ca. 1985 - 1990

This essay documents my research process during two visits to the Susan Howe Papers collection at UCSD (December 2021 and May 2022). When I arrived for my first visit, my plans were to study *The Liberties* (b6f14, b7f1, b41f19, b57f10). However, upon opening box 41, I noticed folder 16, “Spinoza’s Cloak 1973,” which was listed in the finding aid among Howe’s published writings. I became enchanted by this sequential work that was new to me—this



unfamiliar poem of one dozen pages that includes four pages of Howe’s cut & paste word collages, such as these mirrored spirals nested in palindromic sparrows’ songs: “sparow adnaromem [memoranda] / Tell San Winter a scrawl / Shan and End / Circl with a lies folded in names / Counterobject Object.” After a long moment of wonderment, I asked myself: How could this be from 1973? These spirals reminded me of Howe’s word collages from *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time* (1987), *Thorow* (1987), and *a bibliography of the king’s book; or, eikon basilike* (1989). My colleague George Life was also working at the

archives, following Howe’s *Federalist 10* and *Heliopathy* for his dissertation research. George was also unfamiliar with “Spinoza’s Cloak” and also thought that these collage poems were most likely from the late-1980s.

There are 26 folders in box 41, beginning with “Early Writings & drawings, ca. 1942 – 1953 ” and concluding with “My Emily Dickinson (1985) correspondence re. French translation / publication by P.O.L., 1992.” However, the titles written on the folder tabs occasionally deviate from a chronological sequence; for example, folder 10 says, “Hearts in Space, by Maureen Owen, ca. 1980” while folder 13 says, “Julius Tobias at the Alessandra Gallery, 1976.” I searched the finding aid and found a second listing for “Spinoza’s Cloak” in box 9, folder 9 (with no date) in the working manuscripts section. Box 9 includes 19 folders, most of which collect Howe’s papers from the 1980s. The copy of “Spinoza’s Cloak” in box 9, folder 9 is identical to the copy in box 41, folder 16. Questions began swirling in my mind: Could there be other copies in other folders not listed in the finding aid? How was this sequential poem connected to Howe’s working contexts during the 1970s and 1980s? Were any parts of this poem published?

What followed from those initial moments in December to my recent visit has become a spellbinding journey guided by Ariadne’s thread, and I’m grateful beyond measure to the research librarians at UCSD Special Collections for their expert advice for my research



strategies: Lynda Claassen, Jennifer Donovan, Miriam Kastner, Nina Mamikunian, Kate Saeed, and Heather Smedberg. I'm equally grateful to my friend, George, who has generously shared research notes and ideas via our ongoing conversations and correspondence. And of course, my deepest thanks go to Susan Howe for our correspondence and for permission to include in this essay images from "Spinoza's Cloak" and passages from her materials at UCSD.

As I've learned, "Spinoza's Cloak" is an unpublished sequential poem that intersects with Howe's correspondence, working papers, typescripts, and publications across a sequence of years (1985 – 1990) with particular emphasis during 1987 and 1988. The Howe Papers at UCSD include numerous unpublished collections of her poetry, prose, and hybrid compositions; however, compared to those other works-in-progress (such as "The Morphology of Landscape" ca. 1987), "Spinoza's Cloak" lives in several boxes and folders, usually appearing with title pages and in a remarkably consistent sequence of twelve pages, as if the poem were ready to move forward. In fact, in a Notebook / Personal Diary from 1988, Howe listed a sequence of her works, imagining what could have been collected into one manuscript for publication in book form: "MS, quote, Then S Cloak, Then Rowlandson, Articulation, Federalist 10, Thorow, Olson, Heliopathy" (b37f5). (In this notation, "Olson" refers to Howe's essay, "Where Should the Commander Be.") Placing "Spinoza's Cloak" as the first poem in this proposed sequence of works that were individually published between 1985 and 1990 speaks volumes; if this nearly forgotten poem had been published in such a collection, then "Spinoza's Cloak" would have had a paradigm-shifting influence upon our understanding of Howe's legacy since the late-1980s. But that didn't happen: "Spinoza's Cloak" was not published in the assemblages that were gathered into *Singularities* (1990) and *The Nonconformist's Memorial* (1993). And yet, this remarkable sequential poem of hybrid forms and word collages lives in the midst of working papers and typescripts at UCSD for individual works that would be published in those pivotal collections from Wesleyan and New Directions. For example, box 9 includes a copy of "Spinoza's Cloak" in folder 9, and also includes, in folder 12, an early draft of a collage poem of radical typographic splicing, "took on a [ p ... / Scattering As A Behavior Toward Risk," that would appear in *Singularities*. This is a poignant reminder that Howe's working title for that collection, when first submitted to Wesleyan, was "Scattering of Behavior Toward Risk: Writing 1983 – 1988" (e-mail from George Life, 19 May 2022). Given Howe's 1988 Notebook / Personal Diary sketch (which does not mention "Scattering") might we imagine an alternate provisional title, "Spinoza's Cloak" instead of *Singularities*?

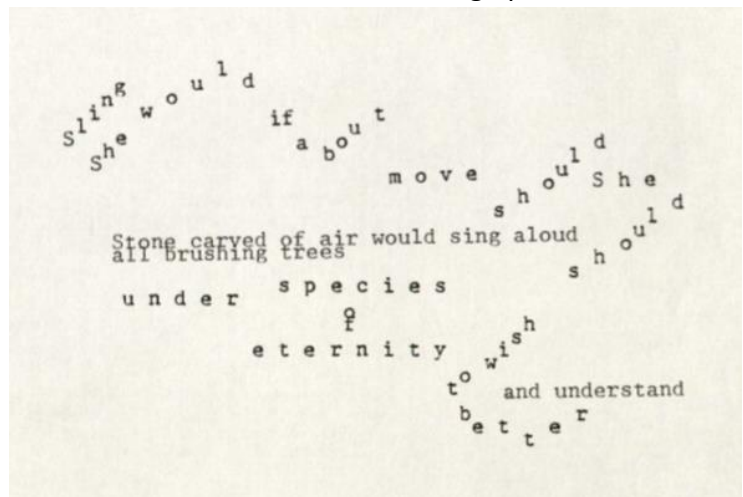
In a 1986 Notebook, Howe wrote "Melville sees that democracy is merely a philosophical theory – Spinoza – America shows how it founders in practice" (b37f1). Within a more limited scope, "Spinoza's Cloak" underscores the context of Howe's energetic research and prolific writing during 1987 and 1988 when she was working simultaneously on several projects. In addition to the UCSD Howe Papers locations noted above, as I've found, "Spinoza's Cloak" also dwells in box 6, folder 3 ("Federalist 10 and Some Heliopathy"); box 6, folder 10 ("Habermone, odd poem" / "The Morphology of Landscape"); box 6, folder 11 ("Heliopathy"); box 42, folder 5 ("Heliopathy" — original manuscript and reading copy, 1985"); box 42, folder 6 ("Heliopathy" (1987) reading copy, date unknown"); box 42, folder 11 ("Federalist 10 (1987) –

printout, ca. 1995"); and box 56, folder 9 ("Fragments, ca. 1988"). None of these interstitial locations of "Spinoza's Cloak" are currently listed in the UCSD Howe Papers finding aid; and although these locations could be included, the rhizomatic intertextual synergies among Howe's working papers and typescripts are like skeins of Ariadne's thread or flocks of starlings windswept over wheat. Murmurations of "Spinoza's Cloak" may yet be surging through other boxes and folders: *adnaromem memoranda* ad infinitum.

Although the typescripts for "Spinoza's Cloak" located in box 41, folder 16 and in box 9, folder 9 are identical, there are numerous variations in the poem's representative pages that may be found in the other boxes and folders noted above that collectively document swerving intersections among "Spinoza's Cloak" and Howe's working papers for *Federalist 10*, *Heliopathy*, "The Morphology of Landscape," and various "Fragments, ca. 1988." A detailed account of those countless differentiations lies beyond the scope of this brief essay.

However, these nine locations @ UCSD for "Spinoza's Cloak" document Howe's research context (ca. 1987 – 88) that illuminates the significance of at least two of the work's cut & paste word collages. For example, box 6, folder 3 ("Federalist 10 and Some Heliopathy") charts Howe's search for H.D.'s maternal grandfather, Francis Wolfe, who was a Moravian minister, ca. 1820. Howe was following Moravian missionary history in Pennsylvania and was fascinated by Moravian headstone inscriptions, especially Gotlob Buttner's. One of her research volumes written by John Gottlieb Ernestus Heckewelder was *History, Manners, and Customs of The Indian Nations who once Inhabited Pennsylvania and the Neighbouring States*. The first three pages (in b6f3) present Howe's transcription from pages 191 – 192 concerning this story: "In the winter of 1739 – 40, ever since remembered as the hard winter, when the ground was covered with a very deep snow, a woman with three children, was coming from beyond the Allegheny mountains on a visit to her friends or relations residing at the great island on the west branch of the Susquehannah." They became trapped in the storm overnight without food. In utter desperation, the mother decided to sacrifice her baby so that her older children might survive.

My telepathic sense about Howe's work tells me that the two collage poems featured in this essay are nested arias / cloaks / headstone inscriptions for this unnamed mother's sacrificed child. Howe reworks these two collages several times through the nine UCSD locations for these typescripts. The second of these collages invokes several readings, including: "Stone carved of air would sing aloud / all brushing trees / under species of eternity / to wish better and understand / should She should move about / if would She



Sling.” The first of these collages (discussed above) connects the sparrow’s palindromic “Winter scrawl / Counterobject Object” to Howe’s reflections upon H.D.: “her sense that the air we breathe is filled with presences we cannot understand or explain that were once men and women and children has been a great inspiration to me. Thought is a thread leading back. Ariadne’s thread ... Ecstasy is outside time. Collapse of every fixed object. Person with a name. In Europe Moravians were the stateless ones. Compelled by a *Faith* I must disentangle the ghost from the corpse” (b6f3).

Howe’s correspondence with John Taggart and Norman O. Brown during these years provides more context about the emergence of “Spinoza’s Cloak.” During May 1987, Howe sent a copy of the Awede press edition of *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time* to Taggart. Taggart responded with keen attention in his “Memorial Day” letter (Taggart Papers, b2f10), enclosing six meticulously handwritten pages of commentary corresponding to numerous passages, noting the poem’s lines, “Spinoza the lens grinder / Lenses and language” (*Articulation*, np.). Howe replied, “Do you know that [Spinoza] always wore a cloak that had the stab holes in it made by people who tried to assassinate him as he left the Temple one day. I always want to call a poem *Spinoza’s Cloak*. N. O. Brown has got me very interested in Spinoza” (29 May 1987, Howe Papers, b27f22). Brown’s letters to Howe between 1985 and 1988 tell a rich story of mutual admiration and intellectual confrontations; one of Brown’s resonant compliments was his description of Howe’s poetry read aloud as *Spinoziotic* (7 May 1987, Howe Papers, b18f24).

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## Matt Hill

### *David Meltzer's Book of Himself: A Review of Rock Tao*

*Rock Tao* by David Meltzer

Edited by Patrick James Dunagan; Afterword by Marina Lazarra

ISBN: 9781946583246

Paperback; 176 pages

Price: \$20.00

If one of the tasks of a writer is to weave the tapestry of the universal in with the particular, then David Meltzer has certainly done that as we watch him cut & paste his way through this textual collage. It has lain dormant for five decades. In *Rock Tao*, an eclectic text tenuously created, scholarly quotations alternate with the pop rock lyrics of the sixties, both bracketed by Meltzer's keen and at times pungent observations of that pivotal period.

These chronicles and critiques open a window onto the music tsunami that flooded our lives with such exuberant *wows* and *whoas* of those turbo-charged years. Meltzer follows the cultural expressways of rock n' roll lyrics, marketing ads, found texts, pretty much anything he hears on the street—this would be for him his Tao, ringing and resonating along the polymathic journey he takes us on in his chronicling of mid-60s zeitgeist.

"*Rock Tao*, then, ... is a book of myself, made with the self-invented tools of romantic scholarship" (RT, 28). In Marina Lazzara's Afterword, Meltzer is quoted as saying "Everything I write is poetry.... If it's all poetry, then let it be. If you hear poetry, then write a poem" (162). This echoes Norman O. Brown in *Love's Body*, where in the last line of the book, he says "Everything is a metaphor; there is only poetry."

The age-old question of how poetry can speak toward the realm of the Unsayable gets an appropriate answer here in Meltzer's text-collage, where the kaleidoscopic perceptions reach towards the mythic horizons embedded in cultural pulsation. "I attempt to re-discover. To seek & to see the order of things. To look & re-see what has been seen often enough yet never recognized by my eyes, my heart. To find my face, my form, to bridge the dark & face the light, take my chances & continue the learning" (51). Meltzer was a leaper, drawing back and taking his leaps across the chasms between textural elements. This is his cultural poetics diary-juiced by the pop lyrics of the early rock n' roll tunes, by interview and news clips, music flyers, various random quotes and self-musings.

*Rock Tao* is an amalgam, as in amalgamated process, mortared by the musical phenomena that engulfed us as a society in the sixties. The book comes layered in six parts, with phrases and quotations in flux, freely associating with each other like jazz riffs undulating throughout the pages. "David was a mirror and receptor, a reflector and a sponge" (from the Afterword, 161).

He was an avid synthesist, assembling the flotsam of the subconscious which he found on the cultural beach into his own poetic nebulae—a repurposed foundness for the common material that we all shared in that most turbulent of times. “Wherever you see yourself,” he tells us, “you see something of the hero, something of yourself made final” (34). And then the most cryptic line in the whole book: “All myth begins in news” (35). The thematic of the hero and the requisite mythic journey that ensues, by discursive and wandering twists and turns, appears in the first section. The way of the hero’s Tao is also the way of the poet. So *Rock Tao* is a poetic manifest of the deep springs from which the Tao of modern life flows; this would be where our poetry abides and gestates.

And this is the path, full of the tests and trials, of the wayfarer. Meltzer is a pilgrim chronicling his way through the Sargasso Sea of the social and cultural morass of his times: “The Tao of it” (46). His diligent notetaking that comprises this first book of his, was followed over the decades by many other books, a prolific literary output including work published by City Lights and Black Sparrow Press.

In Part 2 of the book, Meltzer unleashes his scathing take, almost an indictment, of the consumer and marketing explosion that infused the various media portals from those years, which bombarded our lives unceasingly:

“America! land of everyone’s democratic despair ... “ (82),

“... advertising’s need to sell the impossible over and over again” (90).

A musician and guitarist, Meltzer reflected the sounds and rhythms of his performances and recordings into his writings, which you can sense in the cadence that infuses the lines in this book. It is a “seduction by visual sound,” as Lazzara says (in her Afterword, 164). The homage to Motown, Brian Wilson, Chuck Berry, James Brown, The Beatles, The Stones, and Dylan in Part 5 is a rolling litany of exuberant sixties youth obsessions, in passages like this one: “Dylan was ... a tough kid with lean shanks & the innocent hero’s heart whose soul contains all the ancient terror.... As a poet he realizes the importance of continuity, of evolving” (131). Meltzer understood that “our popular culture reveals more than it conceals.... I began examining what is famous in America as a way to sight those archetypical inventions peculiar to the land” (26).

*Rock Tao’s* cultural collage is really an appropriate introduction to the corpus of David Metzger’s work. He is the wayfarer on his path here, experimenting with the content and direction of so much diverse material (one might note the influence of the Dada poets upon his collage method, how he reports what he has seen and heard). Patrick Dunagan has done an excellent job in bringing focus on *Rock Tao*, wrangling the manifold disparate elements of the original text as it appeared on galley sheets from Oyez press in 1965, these same galleys that never made it into publication, extant only as photocopies in Meltzer’s posthumous papers. Also, the layout and design of *Rock Tao* is beautifully done, reflective of all the books arriving from Lithic Press. These multiple efforts have brought to fruition long dormant creations, in this instance one bespeaking a singular Tao that encompasses the way of the cosmic meshed within the mundane.

# Barbara Henning

## *Four Stories*

2018-2020

### Gather

In Gather Cafe, a tall thin woman is sitting beside me eating a big green salad while nursing a tiny baby. She looks up and smiles. "Enjoy it while you can," I say. "Soon you won't be able to go into cafes. The baby will start tearing around the room and then you'll have to stay home." *I know, she says. I have three others.* She smiles again. Kind of gorgeous, young. long blond hair, quiet eyes, very calm. Then I say, "My mother had four and it killed her." I correct papers while she nurses her baby. Then I think, that was a mean thing to say, Barbara. "Are you having anymore?" I ask. *No this is it.* "Are you home with them?" *Yes, I used to work in fashion, but not possible now.* As she talks, she moves her hand and arm in a very graceful way. "I am glad I had my children," I say. "It goes by fast and then its over and you wish you were back there." We smile at each other. Then she disconnects the baby, buttons her blouse, puts on the baby's hood and her coat and away they go.

### Mother

For Maureen Owen

De's hair is snow white and her blue eyes are a little blurry. She's 96, about the age my mother would be if she had lived. De never smoked and she was physically active her whole life. Born on a farm, she had three children, rode a tractor, worked many jobs, including at the racetrack, riding and walking the horses after a race to calm them down and stretch their legs. She grew up without electricity, telephone, running water, cars and now at 96 she's living in digital Denver. Holding my hands in hers, she looks into my eyes and tells me how Truckee where she lived in the Sierras for the last 30 years, has changed. So many people now. I watch her with Maureen making dinner and talking. Later when I walk into the living room, Maureen's sitting on the couch fast asleep with her head leaning on her mother's shoulder, and De is sitting still, gazing out the window.

### Politely

In a dream this morning, I was standing a little off balance at the sink, repotting an old spider plant with lots of babies, dangling over the edge. The floors were sloping downward, and I had to stoop down because my head kept hitting the ceiling. If I have to stoop like this all the time, I said to my sister Patti who was standing there watching me, I'll ruin my body. The floor was creaking. Maybe it would collapse. Eventually it *will* collapse, she said. I hung the mother plant in one corner and then in another. Then I moved her out to the yard. It was my childhood yard without trees or bushes, just weeds. I dug a hole too deep for the plant, then I stood there, helpless, bereft, the loss of my young mother so deep, it never disappeared, even now as I sit in the corner of the funeral parlor as far away as I can manage, from my stepmother's body, her hands lying one over the other, a slight smile arranged on her face, my brother and sisters politely engaging with the guests. I can't help but remember how in 1961, like a soldier she marched into the house, I am mother, she said. Not my mother, I said, retreating. And I kept that up, on and off, for sixty years.

### Identical

I take a few drops of CBD oil and fall into a dream. I'm at D.'s house with an overnight bag. He is surprised to see me. His wife looks a bit like my stepmother, and she's standing in the doorway scowling at me. I'm wearing a black slip. Sitting down on the couch in the living room, I say to him I want to talk to you alone. We can go on the porch, he says. His wife is sitting at a sewing machine. There are other women there, too. They are all sewing. We went out the front door. I could hear the sewing machines buzzing behind me. Why did you wear that? he whispers. I find a big grey shirt in my bag and put it over the slip. When I look at him again, I'm surprised. He is now an old white man with only a glimmer of the good looks he used to have. In fact, he resembles my father. I could never live somewhere like this, I say. The house is a 1950 type frame house, each house on the block identical to the next. "I took that into consideration when I married her and left you," he says. I hear the hum of the machine. Then he tells me to write down some days and times when she is working so I can return. I have to get going, I say. It's time to go. Upon turning over, I wake up in a restless night sweat. Here I am again, leaving that which I desire, but don't really desire and will never have, one way or the other.

# Charles Borkhuis

## *Barely There*

*(a one-act play)*

### Cast of Characters

WOMAN                      35 years old, an actress

Place

A white “inner cave”

Time

Present

*Setting: White room. White chair facing audience.*

*At Rise:            A woman in a dress and heels carrying a purse walks across stage. She stops midway, noticing audience.*

WOMAN *(cautious, apologetic)*

Hi there . . . No need to get up; I’m just passing through. No really, I’ll be gone before you realize I was here . . . Well, almost. Ha, ha – It feels like I’m talking to myself but that can’t be true, can it? I know you’re there, I just can’t see you. It’s the lights.

*(She notices the chair.)*

What’s this?

*(She sits hesitantly, putting her purse down.)*

Ahh . . . So good to get off your dogs for a while.

*(Rubbing foot)*

Recharge inside your inner cave. Secure in the presence of your power animal . . . Hey, where is my power animal? Roar-shock? Here, boy -- Roar-shock! Must be out taking a pee. Risky business. Never know what’s out there waiting for you. One moment you’re a ladybug sitting on a leaf doing your nails, whatever. And the next, a long red tongue unravels from out of nowhere and snaps you up. Tales of the reptilian brain. Please, don’t let me disturb you -- frogs on lily pads. Go back to mating or whatever you were doing. You won’t remember a thing I’ve said. It doesn’t matter anyway ... Ever notice, talking to a dog is like talking to yourself? Roar-shock? Ah, let him wander, sniffing others’ pee. I’m happy to be here with you even if you can’t speak. I’ll fill in your part. I’m used to talking to myself. Still, time is ticking.



*(Checking watch)*

I've already begun to disappear. I don't know whether you've noticed, but actors tend to treat their inner lives like a stage.

*(Smiles, crossing legs provocatively)*

Alright, I admit, it gives me a thrill to be looked at. So what? You think the emperor didn't know he wasn't wearing any clothes? Wake up, will you? He was just playing the fool to disguise his exhibitionist tendencies. End of fairy tale.

*(Searches purse)*

Accursed prop bag.

*(Holding up a black bra)*

Hmm . . . party favors? Always carry an extra just in case.

*(Returns bra and searches through purse)*

Whoops – what's this?

*(She removes a green apple from purse and holds it over her head.)*

Could be the Earth ... from a distance. Once upon a time.

There's a story there somewhere.

*(She returns the apple to her bag.)*

Let's just let it ripen.

*(She searches her bag.)*

Ah . . . there they are.

*(Pulls out '50s shades)*

If you're cool the sun is always shining.

*(Putting on shades)*

Perhaps I'm only partially here. Still, I'm more real than film, aren't I? More present. Don't you think? The stage and all that. The old boards.

*(Small laugh)*

Of course, that's not to say, I'm not absent in my own way.

*(Beat)*

Sometimes I think . . . when I'm not on stage, I don't really exist.

*(Becoming nervous)*

Actually . . . I'm becoming quite uncomfortable, talking to you like this and knowing that I'm . . . you know . . . disappearing as we speak . . . I speak.

*(To light booth)*

Could you start taking the lights down, slowly.

*(Lights dim to total darkness.)*

Not that far!

*(Lights fade up.)*

Stop!

*(Lights stop.)*

Right there is fine. Thanks.

*(To audience)*

The *God of Light*. It's important to keep on the good side of these people.

*(Removing shades)*

I told you I'm fading. But not that fast. Still, my time here *is* limited.

Please, excuse me . . . there seems to be a little . . .

*(Coughs)*

static in my "ecstasy" tonight.

*(Examining audience)*

Oh, my God . . . Wait a minute.

*(She removes hand mirror from her purse and walks towards audience. She holds mirror out at arm's length to audience member.)*

Breathe.

*(She checks the mirror and smiles.)*

Still got some steam left, have you?

*(She walks back to chair and sits, putting mirror in purse.)*

There we are, all together again as if nothing had happened . . . Actually, nothing has happened. But how I do so enjoy your presence. (beat) You'll never know what it means to me to perform before you. *For* you. That's why I keep checking every so often just to make sure you're still there. Because if you weren't . . .

*(Uncomfortable smile)*

I know we're only connected by the thinnest of threads. Not even that, just the space between us. Which means we must leap over the abyss from time to time. Is that art? Who knows? I prefer life, actually. But finally, it's proved to be . . . insufficient.

*(Private moment)*

Dearest strangers, whom I don't know, can't know, by definition. You seem light years away, yet as close as the next. . . .

Truth is, I'm not really even a character. I wasn't given a back-story or anything. Just some disconnected images floating around in a mood puddle.

*(Deep breath, forced smile)*

I haven't got anything to say. I'm an ACTRESS! For God's sake. I have a name! Stage name – what does it matter?

*(Emotional, ending in tears)*

Now, you're making me . . . I'd just . . . like to leave a mark, do something memorable. Is that a crime? I'd just like to do something that means something to you, something that makes you *feel* something . . . for yourself and for others because damn it! That's the kind of person I am.

*(Blows nose in hanky)*

But this is not about me. I'm hardly here at all. I'm the kind of person that wonders if she's going to wake up the same person the next day.

*(She stands and paces, suddenly stops.)*

Oh, I could make up a story. Who couldn't? Where I spent the night. Why the red bra is in my purse, etcetera, etcetera. But you see, I don't have a story. I'm sorry to disappoint you . . . Well, I am!

*(Disgusted)*

Give them what they want with a little . . .

*(Imaginary knife twist)*

*twist.*

*(She smiles and sits, searching through purse. She removes a compact with mirror, and dabs her face with powder. She puts compact back in purse, stands and slowly walks around stage.)*

Let's imagine . . . for the moment that I have a past. I don't, of course. I was just born ...

*(Checks watch)*

7 minutes and 20 seconds ago, but who's counting? OK, let's imagine that I'm a woman with a past. Ouu – that's sounds smutty. So ... I'm basically a good girl, but I've done some things in my life I'm not proud of. Sound familiar? Let's say, I have a husband. I'm happily married. There's a kid – no, two kids: a girl and a boy. And a dog — Roar-shock? Anyway, We all live in this cute little house in a small town — No wait! . . . in the country. We're rural. We live in a farmhouse. There's, let's see . . . chickens and goats and cornfields, rolling hills, and ah . . . you know, blue-gray forests in the distance. Anyway, we're all very happy. We're ordinary and we like it like that, OK? Except that I had this . . . former life, see?

*(Starts pacing slowly)*

Before my husband knew me. I was a . . . kind of, well . . . dancer in a club — bar. OK, stripper. Don't ask me why. Anyway, It's just a story, right? I mean, I was brought up on the wrong side of the tracks. I had an abusive father. Behind the shed, you know the drill. I was starved for attention, approval. I learned to trade sex for intimacy at an early age, you fill in the blanks. OK, so I've got this past, see? But I've hidden it. I've covered it up with a normal life. Then one night, we take the kids to this Fourth of July shindig at a nearby town. Lots of families, fireworks reflecting off the creek, stuff like that . . . So, my daughter — she's — seven, ah . . . make that five. She runs down the hill for an ice cream cone and trips. A dark-haired man picks her up. He smiles at me. Chrrr-ist! He's like . . . this John from my former life. Still lives in the city. Just passing through, he says. Wants to start something up with me. Lingerie salesman. This town's on his route. He keeps calling me, weird hours. My husband's getting suspicious.

*(Stops pacing)*

Finally, I meet the guy, try to get rid of him, but he's not having it. If I don't have sex with him, he'll expose me to my husband. I try to laugh it off, but he's dead serious. So . . . what am I gonna do? What would you do?

*(Stares at audience)*

Don't say the thought of killing him didn't cross your mind. We're not so different, you and me, when it comes down to it. Course, I could never murder anyone. I don't have enough Barbara Stanwick in me. I'm not so sure about you. You probably feel the same way about me. Anyway, now we know something about each other. Even if I did make the whole thing up, what I chose to tell might be telling . . . it could be symptomatic of . . . God knows what. A happily married woman runs into a ghost from her smutty past. Could be on this afternoon's soap opera.

*(She winks at audience, removes a flask from purse, sits and takes a belt.)*

I don't know . . . Perhaps my ingénue days are ending. I guess I could go for character roles, if I had some character. Truth is . . . I'm losing my life here. Does that count for anything? Guess not. I'm sorry, I'm just wasting your time. I'd like to entertain you, make you laugh, make you cry, but I've lost my energy somehow. How did that happen? I just want you to know that . . .

*(Sniffs, weak smile)*

when I look at you with all your little foibles and defects, all your cravings for attention — you just, seem so . . . I don't know . . . loveable to me.

*(She takes another belt from flask and screws on cap. She puts flask in purse and stands.)*

Well, you do! . . . What? You don't believe me? You think this is easy, getting up here and spilling your guts out to a bunch of clowns? Sorry, sorry — I didn't mean that. Honestly, I don't know what, I . . . No listen. Don't leave. What just happened, forget about it. Let's just . . . can we go back to the story, please? Where was I?

*(She starts walking around room.)*

OK, Ok . . . Let's just say the lingerie salesman went back to the city. Why? I don't remember. I might have threatened to stuff him in one of those, you know, bailing machines? Turn on the motor and uh . . . keep it running all night. He comes out next morning flatter than a pancake. He got the message. Never heard from him again. So anyway . . . I'm back with my husband who never put any of this together. It was all long walks, nights under the stars. Love in a rowboat floating on the lake, looking up at the clouds moving past us. Simple man, simple pleasures; good dream or so it seemed. Then I wake up one morning and he's gone. Left me for some slut he'd met in the city. Business trip, right? One-night stand turned into the real thing — the bitch. He finally found the whore he was looking for. And I'm stuck playing the "good girl." I finally went back to acting, but . . . it's complicated.

*(Deflated, losing energy, she sits.*

*Lights fade slowly. She looks up at Light Booth.)*

Alright, stop! Just stop that light fade!

*(Lights stop fading, return to normal.)*

Enough of this . . .

*(picks up apple, deep breath)*

OK . . . jump-cut to the Garden of Eden.

*(She smiles, stands, and pulls herself together. She opens her purse and removes the green apple.)*

Still with me?

*(She holds up the apple.)*

God gave me this. He said I should have it. I was completely naked at the time. He floated down on a cloud and he handed me this. He smiled, I smiled. We had a little moment. The only condition was . . .

*(She bites the apple.)*

The only condition . . .

*(Chewing)*

was that it — *this* —

*(She holds up apple.)*

should remain . . . unnamed. Then he went back up on his elevator cloud. I never saw him again. My partner was around somewhere, swinging from a tree or something. He must have seen me chewing from a distance, so he swung down, you know how men are, big entrance and all that, and he said, he asked me "What that?" Well, he didn't have much of an education. All that time in the trees and so on. Anyway, I thought about it, what God had said, blah, blah, blah . . . and then it just came to me.

*(Smiling at audience)*

Ap . . . ple . . . ap . . . ple . . . apple. How cleanly it rolls off the tongue.

*(She rolls the bitten green apple toward the audience. It wobbles and stops.)*

*(Pointing to apple)*

Go on, take it home with you in a little doggie bag if you like. Give it to your children. It's called an ap . . . ple. Don't worry, it's not poisoned.

*(beat)*

It's a cockeyed world now. They've got names for everything under the sun. Knowledge — it's a wonderful thing. I mean, it's better to know than not know, isn't it? Sometimes I wonder, though . . . we know just enough to know we'll never know enough, and it haunts us — this not knowing what any of it means.

*(She sits. Her smile fades.)*

Dogs, of course, don't know they're going to die and are the happier for it. Roar-Shock! Here, boy . . . Where are you? Roar-shock?

*(Lights fade slowly. She becomes frightened.)*

ROAR-SHOCK!

*(To Light Booth)*

HEY! Stop that light fade! I'm still here, Goddammit!

*(Lights return.)*

Got to watch them every minute.

*(To audience)*

Sorry, where were we? . . . *(playful)* Listen, can you keep a secret? I have a phobia . . . Actually, phobias. Anyway, it's . . . nothing, really. Just . . . I get this fear, sometimes . . . of keeping my clothes on in a roomful of people. I get this choking sensation as if my clothes were actually smothering me — ha, ha. Ridiculous, I know.

*(Fidgeting with clothes)*

How can I go anywhere? I'm sure you understand. Everyone's got their little . . .

*(More serious fidgeting)*

you know. Anyway, it's a *Culture of Fear*, right? Don't get me started. You have your fear, then you have your . . . diversions, escapisms.

*(She slowly unbuttons her dress.)*

Cheap thrills, walls of home entertainment, immediate gratification, I may be fading, but . . .

*(She exposes her breasts and breathes deeply, released.)*

At least now you'll remember me.

*(Beat)*

Not what I say. Of course, that'll be gone long before I will. But what am I saying? It's hard to tell. Perhaps some of you are having trouble concentrating on what's being said. Some of you may think that my breasts are talking to you, personally. That would be a mistake. Breasts don't talk . . . they stare.

*(Beat)*

Hey! This is not a movie. I am here with you now. This moment will pass. You cannot replay it. You are live. These breasts are live, but are they real? Never mind.

Enjoying yourselves? Should I take something else off? Or put it back on? Do I become more present by taking something off, or am I disappearing behind my breasts? Well, which is it? This isn't funny anymore. Was it ever funny? What's the matter? You losing interest already?

*(Deflated, losing energy)*

Excuse me . . . suddenly, I'm feeling a bit naked. Maybe if I were a real character at a time like this, I'd know what to say. But I'm not. Actually, it's embarrassing, the lengths some people will go to — I'm sorry, I guess . . . I'm not loveable. *(Beat)* But there are other things, more important things in this world than being lovable. I just can't think right now . . . of what they are. I'm sorry, everything seems so . . . perishable.

*(Beat)*

I think I'll just . . . put these away, unless someone objects.

*(She pulls her dress up, covering her breasts. She smiles uncertainly.)*

Now . . . let's see how long you remember me.

*(Two beats)*

*Blackout)*

CURTAIN

## Dennis Barone

### *The Possible Impossible*

In my book *North Arrow*, the opening story entitled “The Common Good” describes an Italian-American police chief in a small New Jersey town who investigates the death of a member of a Native-American group (recognized by the State of New Jersey, but not by the federal government). Questions of borders are important to this tale. The last story in the book “What Difference” relates the life of an African-American insurance executive. And the long title narrative I tell from the perspective of a Dutch woman. I don’t know about you, but to read about the controversy regarding the translation of Amanda Gorman’s poem – that some believe only a Black person can do so – surprised and perturb me. As *The New York Times* asked at that time: “Should a white writer translate a Black poet’s work?” (March 26, 2021). Isn’t the whole point of translation to carry across something (doomed to failure as it might be) from one nation to another, from one person to another as well as from one language to another. Is imagination empathic or imperialistic? If I try to put myself in another’s shoes, is that arrogance or an attempt to arrive at some sort of understanding?

I speak here of three of my fictions from *North Arrow*. The three stories of which I will speak attempt to delineate bias and inequality. In this essay I try to answer where am I in the current cultural discussion. In an article published in 2019, “Praying Toward Acceptance,” I outline the results of a test-case I made to see if I could find cooperation between Black Americans and Italian Americans. I looked at the African, Anglo, and Italian Baptist Church in Hartford, Connecticut during the early twentieth-century. Surely, I reasoned, if we “are all one in Christ,” as any Baptist believes, then there had to be cooperation between these groups of like-minded believers in the same place, at the same time. While I found cooperation between Black and Anglo and Italian and Anglo, I found none between Black and Italian.

Perhaps as a person, a creative writer, and a scholar, I am if not exactly an optimist, one who wishes for the best; and, yes, for the common good. As a graduate student I wrote my dissertation in part on the expressed belief by male members of elite society in Revolutionary-era America in the common good. As a child in New Jersey, I attended school in the first voluntarily integrated school system in America – Teaneck. Such experiences leave their mark on one’s thinking and soul. So when my sister sent me a story from the *Bergen Record* about the violent death of a member of the Ramapo people of Northern, New Jersey and Southern, New York, I was saddened to read it, and moved to write a fictionalized account.

This is the first story in *North Arrow* published by Gian Lombardo’s Quale Press in 2008. There are seventeen works in this book. The title story, the opening story, and the last one, most explicitly consider aspects of race and gender. I am not female. I am not Black. In 2008, I don’t think this would have been as much of an issue as it is now. What does a creative writer do, after all? The first story in this volume I titled “The Common Good” and I tell it in first person focusing on the perspective of the town police chief. Again, this isn’t autobiography, but



let's say it is familiar geography. In the real world I grew up in this region and in my summer-time job worked with a young Ramapo man. In the real world, the town police chief and I were on the cross-country team during our high school years. The common good is an Enlightenment ideal and I suppose like American fiction of the 1790s – *Weiland* by Charles Brockden Brown or *Charlotte Temple* by Susanna Rowson – this story critiques the notion of the common good.

By the end of the book my story title “What Difference” has a nihilistic ring. So much for optimism. The long middle story's title refers literally to the point of orientation on a compass: north arrow. By the way, years later I updated the story “North Arrow” with one called “Point of Orientation” in which the characters from the earlier narrative meet again years later in Milan, Italy.

“North Arrow,” the story, and perhaps it is just long enough to be called a novella, narrates the education and early career of a woman in the Netherlands who becomes a veterinarian working with large animals. The story takes place at the end of the last century. If a woman were to become a vet at that time, the stereotype dictated that she must care for house pets, and not farm animals. This story includes a number of oppositions that I wrote in my notebook before commencing it: city and country, young and old, poor and rich, male and female, and north and south. Boundaries and borders are central to this story as to “The Common Good.” In the latter story, the police chief worries about jurisdiction: did the tragic event take place in New York or New Jersey, in a county park or a state park? In “North Arrow” the main character, Jacqueline, first takes a job in the south of the Netherlands, but at the end of the tale ends up on the island of Terschelling. This is a coming of age story that I wanted to end on a positive note. And yet, from my perspective today, does the end perpetuate a prejudice that assumes things are always better in the north: New York instead of Atlanta, Milan instead of Naples, and Terschelling instead of Wouw?

The final story I would like to talk about and the final story in the book – “What Difference” – might be the most problematic in our present moment. The unnamed first person narrator and protagonist of the story grew up in Hartford, but attended a suburban high school. He works for one of the insurance companies and owns an historic property in rural and affluent Norfolk, Connecticut – the town where literary publishers such as James Laughlin and Jonathan Galassi resided.

So this is the story of a young man who does well in the world – as defined by White America. It is a story like “North Arrow” and “The Common Good” about jurisdictions; in this case, Hartford and West Hartford and Norfolk, Connecticut. I think this narrative, written and published long before the Black Lives Matter movement and years after the Connecticut Black Panthers, yearns for some sort of significant social stance by someone.

At about the same time as I wrote the story “What Difference,” I wrote a commentary piece for *The Hartford Courant* called “A Memorial To Murdered Youth” and you can add to that title the two words “Of Hartford.” During the first month of 2006 three commemorative public sculpture projects had been completed: one for the victims of the Circus Fire, one a tribute to Abraham Lincoln, and one – that I had helped along – the Wallace Stevens Walk. The fourth memorial, I proposed, “would be to remember and acknowledge that the murdered young

people of Hartford are part of America, and by that acknowledgement and remembrance to create a sense of belonging for the surviving youths.” I wrote: “if estrangement is a normal condition of contemporary life, then memory is its only therapy. Let us pray, but let us also remember.” I meant this gesture to be an act of healing. I wrote: “You can’t heal if you don’t even know there’s a wound.” It perturbed me that outside city limits – and it is such a small city, only eighteen square miles – no one knew these young people’s names. This proposed memorial, I said, “should symbolize the burden of our recent urban history and our shared guilt and responsibility. It should be a way to bear witness. It would be there to remind us that our communal moral failure should dominate public attention, not an ice hockey team or million-dollar condos.” “Brutal facts,” I said, “rendered in stone are much harder to forget than one night’s report on the local news.” If this commemorative act had come to fruition it would have been located on Columbus Boulevard. Oh, well, there must be some irony in that. As W. E. B. Du Bois said, “Progress, I understand, is necessarily ugly” (72).

Another story in the book *North Arrow* takes place during a moment of social unrest. And in this tale the model for the protagonist might have been the author himself. I don’t think I know all the answers; at best, maybe one or two. And so here the story ends in a sort of self-deprecation. Perhaps due to the unrest, the main character’s family moves farther out of urban America and deeper into suburban America. I do not want to impugn or indict my parents here, but after the grand Teaneck experiment, after the assassination of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. our family moved northwest in New Jersey to the town of Ramsey. And so my story “Sharks and Wolves” ends:

His father said that’s it. We’re moving. And his mother said nothing, not even a nod of her head.

And so they did. To a town without any busy streets, without buses and bus routes, without a junior high school, and without a Negro, a Jew, or a Dad who earned less than four times the national average.

And here the boy set about walking in the state forest, hoping to find the answer to make Planet Earth a Better World. But instead what he found was a beautiful Princess and together they lived Happily Ever After. Or so he liked to believe. (109)

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## *Silent Partner*

By the time we left the clock chimed midnight. The evening had been so large, so many dishes, endless. We waved goodbye and waved once more. I started the engine and off we went to return the rental car and meet the ferry to the mainland. But after a few moments, a hundred feet or so and no more, I realized we had a flat tire. I stopped the car. Our relatives engulfed us and argued amongst themselves what to do. I searched the trunk for a spare and a cousin explained that rental cars do not come with spares. One of the older women took control and took my hand and led me to a neighbor's house. She rang the bell; waited a moment and then pounded on the door and shouted for Allen. No one answered. "Come," she commanded me and we walked to the rear of the house. She opened the back door, pulled me in behind her, and again called for Allen. He answered the summons this time, though unhappily. He appeared to have a lady-friend with him this evening. He said there was nothing to be done about the flat tire until morning. He turned to leave, to return to his lady-friend, but then turned again and told us to try Peter at the end of the road. Now as it neared one o'clock, three of us entered the car and slowly descended the hill. After our hobble, my father's ancient and obese cousin led us to the door of a stone cabin. She knocked; waited a moment, and then pounded on the door while she shouted his name into the night. He answered and invited us inside for tea. We pleaded our case: told him of our flat and the urgency of meeting our ferry. He shrugged his shoulders. We passed on the tea and tried one last hope, a mechanic just this side of the village. He seemed aware of our situation – answered his front door even before an initial knock. He told me to bring the car around back to his barn. There he had a lift. He patched the tire. Good enough, he told us. But take it easy, he warned us. He offered to take our elderly protector and guide home. She accepted his offer, hugged us, and told us to visit again. We thanked her and waved goodbye. Off into the night they went. Alice offered to drive. Three a.m. fast approached. I got in the passenger seat and slept all the way to the ferry. Upon arrival, Alice beeped the obnoxious horn at something unseen; at least, by me. I awoke, opened my eyes, and saw a tall woman standing by her parked car and holding a leash. Alice turned off the engine, applied the handbrake, and opened her door. I followed. She smiled at the dog owner and petted the rotund little creature. The dog moved toward me. Alice said to the woman or the dog or the world, I'm the one you want to greet.