

# UNCOVERAGE

Asking After Recent Poetry

interviews by H. L. Hix



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asking after recent poetry

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H. L. HIX



#45

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## ESSAY PRESS EP SERIES

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## IN MEMORIAM

**Jake Adam York,** whose vision of a poetry and a polity built on justice lives on in his work.

# INTRODUCTION

– H. L. Hix

It seems fitting to let this introduction mimic what it introduces, so: into this gathering of three-question interviews, I extend you welcome by means of a three-question interview.

**Q:** Why conduct, and collect, so many interviews?

**A:** My highfalutin rationale would appeal to “global” principles of *sophos* and *civitas*, such as Hans-Georg Gadamer’s assertion in *Truth and Method* that the posing of questions is a necessity of thought: “To understand a question means to ask it,” he says, and “to understand an opinion is to understand it as the answer to a question.” Or again, more recently, Chantal Mouffe proposes in *Agonistics* that the public space is not ultimately monological (not “the terrain where one aims at creating consensus”) but interrogative and dialogical (the place “where conflicting points of view are confronted without

any possibility of a final reconciliation"). I wouldn't pretend that conducting interviews is adequate to *realize* such principles, but I do believe that it *aligns* with them.

There is also, though, a more "local" and personal rationale. I think of poetry as not only an intensified form of *speaking*, but also an intensified form of *listening*. Poetry may result *in* a speaking, but it results *from* a listening. That's enough to make the alliance between poetry and the interview feel strong to me: I want to listen to the Listeners, and I take interviewing poets as a form of listening that complements the form of listening we engage in by reading poems.

**Q:** But these poets don't all subscribe to one aesthetic or belong to one group: they don't all look alike, and they're not all doing the same thing. What makes these interviews belong together?

**A:** That they *don't* all share some obvious common feature is precisely why they are together here. I want to resist, rather than capitulate to, the tendency (so strong, it appears to me, in "the poetry world") to model poetry affiliations on the economic concept of property, which is a principle of exclusion: we and only we have a right to the designation "formal" or "new" or "experimental" or "avant-garde" or

whatever. I find more apt the model of the commons: poetry, like water, belongs to us all. Which is to say that poetry is bigger than the conception that any one of us has of it. I have tried not to let any one of those conceptions tell me who I can and can't listen to.

That includes my own conception, which of course is no less limited and limiting than others' conceptions are. It means I want to listen to those poets I already know how to listen to, *and* those I must learn how to listen to. I want to listen to poets who write poetry that resembles my own, and poets who write otherwise. I want to listen to poets whose ambitions and purposes for their poetry resembles the ambitions and purposes I embrace for my own poetry, and poets whose ambitions and purposes I must learn to recognize. I know that makes even a collection on this scale only a gesture: I can't *in fact* listen to all poets. But I can (again following Sara Ahmed's notion of *alignment*) point myself toward rather than away from doing so.

The personal and "local" version of that "global" aim is that I am trying to rectify, or compensate for, a personal lack. My formal schooling in poetry was (this is an understatement!) incomplete. I was taught how to listen to one poetic lineage, to poetry that fulfilled one ideal and gave voice to one subject

position. I hope to teach myself how to listen also to other lineages, to poetries that fulfill various ideals and articulate various subject positions. Again, conducting a few interviews doesn't magically accomplish that aim, but does, I hope, align with it.

**Q:** We've talked about the book's origins and motivations. What about its *results*?

**A:** Let me respond to that in two ways. One is to note that poetry is something to *talk about*. To read in solitude, yes, but also to talk about together. Interviews such as the ones gathered here are a talking-together.

The other response is simply to celebrate the luminosity of what the interviewees say. They offer in these interviews insights to resonate with the wisdom and pleasures and challenges of the books about which they are interviewed. Those insights pervade the book, from the very first response in the very first interview, Ali Alizadeh's reflection on the repressed Real "that undermines/subverts the 'official,' conscious layer of discourse, and...could have revolutionary implications," to the very last, Linda Stern Zisquit's observation of Yona Wallach's shift near the end of her life from an earlier interest in swirling, almost manic language "towards a point

of stillness—to get to the source, not to be swayed anymore by appearances."

Many of the insights offered by the interviewees here have mattered a great deal to me. I hope that each reader of the book will find that many of them matter to her.



ALI ALIZADEH  
on

## EYES IN TIMES OF WAR

**H. L. Hix:** As I read the book, it was around the time I got to “Your Terrorist” that I began to identify, as one element of your poetic and political stance in these poems, a mode of address. Readers in colonizing countries (e.g., England and the U.S.) are accustomed (without always recognizing or acknowledging it) to addressing one another, and being addressed by others, as representatives of universality. Am I right to regard these poems as questioning and resisting that presumption, by addressing a “you” who is all-too-particular, who is inadequate to its claims of universality?

**Ali Alizadeh:** Very interesting observation. I’ve always been interested in the repressed, the psychoanalytic Real. It’s something that undermines/subverts the “official,” conscious layer of discourse, and I think it could have revolutionary implications. My initial intention with this poem was, precisely as you put it, to directly address/confront the colonizer (White Australians, initially) when I wrote and performed this poem (from memory) at a literary event in Melbourne

in 2003 with the theme of “Who Are the True Barbarians?” The event was organized by a great multicultural arts collective (Saloni Mediterranean) and it was, as one might expect, an attempt at providing an alternative to the official (xenophobic) narratives of that time like the “War on Terror,” “illegal refugees,” etc. So my initial desire was to make the Australians face the Real: the monstrous, the abject terrorist, created by the very repressions of the Western mind. The response to the poem was mixed. Some thought it was naughty, and a few found it (particularly, if I remember it correctly, in the immediate aftermath of some Islamist terrorist atrocity or other) rather unpleasant. A few years later, however, as I was including it in *Eyes in Times of War*, it occurred to me that the poem could also be what Lacan might see as the *imago* of the terrorist. On the one hand, the poem is a destabilizing articulation of the (Western) addressee’s Real; on the other hand, however, it’s an expression of the fantasy of the (Middle Eastern) speaker to see himself as a victim, and to see his terror as some kind of heroic struggle against the addressee’s injustice. This latter view is as delusional (and monstrous) as the myth of Western progress. I’d like to think the poem can be open to both interpretations.

**HLH:** Questions seem important in your poetry. In light of Adorno’s often-cited claim about the impossibility

of poetry after Auschwitz, I am especially struck by one of the questions in your book: “What // does it take to overcome the logic / of the Third Reich?” Is there any sense in which this can be construed as the guiding question of your book?

**AA:** Most definitely. The title of the book actually refers to a poem by Adom Yarjanian, Armenian poet and eyewitness to what Robert Fisk has called the “First Holocaust.” My entire book was constructed in a way to argue that the earlier horrors of the twentieth century were not (as Fukuyama said at the end of the Cold War) mere anomalies along the path of political advancement and ideological perfection, but that the earlier atrocities established the tone and logic for the decades to come. So, I was/am strongly against silly notions of history ending, and was, drawing on Derrida’s *Specter of Marx*, trying to refute neoconservative triumphalism in most of the book’s poems (most directly, I think, in “The Incinerator”).

**HLH:** Poets in the U.S. seem to long for a world in which private and public can be separated, and in which therefore poems can be purely private. But I take it that your poems contest that possibility. Is it a premise of your work that, in a world in which most of the people from “the localities // that cultivated my senses / of placement” are dead, and the rest

“form a diaspora / of regret and disillusionment,” “confessions” such as “Immigration” or “This Thing” are necessarily both public and private, both personal and political?

**AA:** I think you’re totally right about U.S. poets wanting to, as it were, have their private cake and eat it publically. This was in fact my main criticism of Simic’s *That Little Something* (in a review I wrote last year). On the other hand, however, you’ve got figures like Maya Angelou and Carolyn Forché (to name a few) who seem to be doing everything they can to elide this divide, if I’m not mistaken.

Things, at any rate, do get more complicated when one is an immigrant, when the purely private past/identity is erased in one fell swoop, and it’s how the public (of the new/host country) views the individual that comes to matter a lot more than, say, familial bonds, personal tastes or childhood memories. All immigration is, I think, about the eradication of private and the imposition of public. I don’t want to sound gloomy, however. All things considered, I think the tendency for immigrants to eschew the great freedom that comes with such a radical rupture, and the propensity to indulge in “identity politics,” are rather facile. I do consider myself a political poet (of sorts), but I’d much rather deconstruct hegemony and berate inequality, say, than get chauvinistic and

nostalgic about my lost “Persian identity” (a rather problematic notion, actually).

I think, all in all, *Eyes in Times of War* came across as too topical, too preoccupied with responding to the “post-9/11 world.” In reality, my own feelings were/are a lot more ambivalent about our “times of war.” What I’ve seen, and (mis)represented in my poems, should not be believed. I’m particularly happy that you’ve cited “This Thing,” a poem that is about the very impossibility of articulating, believably, the way I feel about my wife. I really wanted to write a passionate love poem for her, but simply couldn’t find the right words and found my metaphors wanting. So I resorted to asking her to finish the poem for me. There certainly are limits to how private things can be signified in the public language of poetry.

DAN BEACHY-QUICK

on

## THIS NEST, SWIFT PASSERINE

**H. L. Hix:** I haven't found yet an etymology for the word "passerine," but I assume that since it refers to perching birds, it must derive ultimately from the Latin "*pes*," meaning foot, and so be related to such other English words as "pediment." But I want to make up a false etymology for it, deriving it from "pass-/pati" and therefore from the Greek "*patheo*," to suffer, so that "passerine" would be related to such English words as "passion" and "pathology." I think also of "*passer mortuus est*" by Millay and Catullus. Are there associations you want your reader to bring to the work, prompted by that unusual word in the title? Or associations you hope the reader will *not* bring?

**Dan Beachy-Quick:** Passerines are perching birds of the largest order of birds, Passeriformes. My interest in them, as a bird-watcher and as a poet, is not so much in their perching, but in their being the largest order of migrating birds as well as birds notable for their singing. Those three issues, migration, nesting/dwelling/perching and singing, are in many ways the

deepest themes in the book: themes that cross the boundary of species and, at least in my mind, are also our human themes. It feels like a mythic pattern to me: the journey, the founding of a home and the song of that journey that can be sung only in a home. I had hoped that the word "passerine" would work in a variety of ways: that the "this nest, swift" leading up to it feels addressed to the reader in such a way that the reader holding the book is somehow directly implicated in being the "passerine," as if the book is making a claim for how the person exists. I also hoped there would be something disarming in being identified not as a person, not as an individual, but as a species: a generalization that hints at patterns and orders of being outside the realm of choice and personality, this order of our life that includes us and over which we have no will that can alter the fact. I think there is nice, if jarring, syllabic pattern in the title, from the ambivalent iamb or trochee or spondee of "this nest," to the slow stress of "swift" at odds with the word's meaning, into a matching three syllables in "passerine," whose first two syllables quickly fly into the drawn-out stress of the final beat. There is a music in the scientific that releases the stress of the first three syllables, a kind of catharsis at the sonic level, and one that occurs in the least sensual word. As to worries: I would only hope that it doesn't sound pretentious.

**HLH:** The process of anthologizing makes it easy to think of the individual poem as the basic unit of lyric, and to think of a book of lyric poetry as a "collection." But *This Nest, Swift Passerine* seems a clear instance of the book as the unit, carefully structured, given an "architecture." How do such aspects of the work as its inclusion of passages from various sources depend on this architecture?

**DBQ:** The basic thought underlying the entire book is a long meditation on nesting and language as parallel activities. I thought about how a bird does not create a nest out of original material, but of what is at hand, what is available: grass, spider webs, grocery lists, tinsel, mud. I realized at some basic level that for the poet language presents a similar dilemma: how build a dwelling out of material that is not one's own? I get my own language not from some singular source, but from a language radically in common, words available to everyone, and words that have been available for much longer than my life. I have gained my own language by pulling strands from the authors I love, among many other places. *This Nest, Swift Passerine* is meant, in some way, to show what one year of nesting in song might be like, how it might be constructed, and how that construction speaks within the problem it considers—language and world and self, each of which depend upon one another as deeply as

they question one another. I am fascinated by the way in which a poetry of multitude secretly makes an effort toward unity, and paying attention to that quality of being "a many and a one" was also one of my driving curiosities. So those passages that are quoted from other authors, interwoven with my own words, don't depend on the architecture so much as make the architecture possible.

**HLH:** On the one hand, this book seems very cerebral: twined (to borrow your word) with Buber and Weil and Heidegger. But it is also very physical and sensual, full of such images as monarchs feeding on marigolds, water ripples in a wooden barrel, the texture of the inside of three-thousand-year-old coil pots. How centrally does that twining of the cerebral and the sensual figure for you as a poet?

**DBQ:** It becomes, more and more, the central figure for me. I have come to hold intelligence in a certain kind of skeptical light, not knowing what its genuine worth is. I often feel like poetry does its best work when it uses the guise of intelligence to do what may be a gloriously stupid work, tricking the mind into being again part of the body it tries so strenuously to be different from. Perception feels to me like the bedrock of reason, and so reason that is true is often less than reasonable. I want to find those moments in experience when the cerebral and the sensual

are felt simultaneously and indecipherably. I love a poetry devoted to a necessary confusion, a needed confounding, and it feels to me as if one of the most necessary of such is to make thinking felt and feeling thoughtful.

SHERWIN BITSUI  
on  
**SHAPESHIFT**

**H. L. Hix:** The very last page of this book contains two denials: “And no, this is not about sadness” and “This is not about the rejection of our skin.” The very first page of the book contains two imperatives: “But look” and “Remember.” For a reader who wants to be alert to what’s in between those pages, what might attention to those denials and imperatives help him or her see?

**Sherwin Bitsui:** “And no, this is not about sadness” might very well have been inside conversation, a statement used to hold the torch up to an approaching century (an early version of the poem was written in 1998) when the history of Western expansion into my tribe’s land and consciousness were beginning to be made more distant from contemporary memory. The imperatives, I suppose, guide the reader to prepare and reflect on the journey within the body of the book. There are flights of imagined scenes, some strange meanderings, dream/visions, but ultimately, the book attempts to share historical/cultural memory I inherited from my people.

Ultimately, one enters the book, having some contextual lens to use as a tool. The imperatives are there to bridle the book, to pull it back to what is important. Ultimately, there is not resolve—there is still the clinical aspect of being studied or probed by a linguist at the very end of the book.

**HLH:** On at least two occasions crickets crawl toward a doorway at 5 a.m. This recurrence leads me to attribute importance to it, but it is not obvious to me what that importance is. Does it refer to or symbolize something particular? Is it associated with other images and themes? Is this an image you are willing to comment on?

**SB:** Crickets were ever-present in my childhood. I've always linked them to moments of transition, day to evening to night, quiet moments of reflection and peace. Although I do have some memory of crickets in the early morning, the timetable in my mind for the poem had been switched, displaced if you will. There really is no deep mythological meaning associated with crickets. They are simply there as music. Their presence might have something to do with Navajo creation stories. If so, I did not intentionally mean for that to occur. I allowed them to be present within the text. They are there as agents of nature, insect, other, making beautiful mysterious music.

**HLH:** In readings of poetry that occur within a certain context, a “trickster” might be called an “unreliable narrator.” But the line “it was that simple,” toward the end of “Trickster,” seems to critique such an approach in advance—implying that a reliable narrator was a pipe dream, anyway, a way of pretending that some things (fourteen ninety-something) are reliably good. Is that too heavy-handed a reading of the poem?

**SB:** Trickster is again not choosing sides. The line “it was that simple” could simply mean that he is, in your words, an “unreliable narrator” or guest, a “frenemy” of some sort, teaching by conspiring against the wishes of a community, but ultimately serving the purpose of the whole. I don't think this is a heavy-handed reading of the poem at all. I think you're right on the mark.

REBECCA BLACK

on

## COTTONLANDIA

**H. L. Hix:** The last section of the book features Mephisto: what is the importance of creating, depicting and then renouncing her? What does this character, with all its resonances (Faust, Berryman's Henry, et al.), allow these poems to get at that they couldn't get at otherwise?

**Rebecca Black:** Mephisto is a female golem, a rare species. The golem is the Jewish Frankenstein, summoned from river mud to avenge its people. (The only other significant female golem I've found recently is in Cynthia Ozick's *Puttermessa Papers*. And these poems were written before Michael Chabon popularized the golem in *The Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*.) My Mephisto has a complex relationship with her maker, "Miss B." She is both architect and destroyer, like Shiva, a fury and an imaginary daughter, a parse of gender stereotypes and a vaudevillian burlesque star.

The golem poems arrived during a feverish period of writing as a graduate student in the winter of 2000 when I was 25. Often I was unsure who was speaking

to whom in a poem: voices overlapped. Berryman's *Dream Songs* are a clear source. Less clear are the visual sources: photographs of Francesca Woodman and surrealist Claude Cahun, the ethnographic scrapbooks of Hannah Hoch, Louise Bourgeois's drawings. I was also reading psychologist Karen Horney's 1945 classic "Our Inner Conflicts" at the time. Horney posits that neurosis involves a constant dynamic of moving towards and moving away from others. (The kind of peekaboo the human animal plays with others. Like Lacan's "fort/da": now I'm here; now I'm gone.)

The idea of summoning and vanishing another being was attractive to me at the time. The way in which art both creates and devours the entire world seemed problematic to me—the simple idea that imagination begins in some primal need to control uncontrollable circumstance. The golem series is also about fashioning a dramatic mask to wear to get at painful subjects: my mother's mental and emotional decline into clinical narcissism, her mother's inability to help her, my piecing together bits of childhood memory into a cohesive scene.

This is all quite heavy, but I also loved using dialogic principles in these poems to pun, using the anarchy of language to explode old perceptions. For instance, around my tenth birthday I was in



love with the Barnum & Bailey circus dog trainer, himself the son of the famous lion tamer. I wrote him love letter after love letter, and mailed them off to some circus post office box. I loved getting that sort of silly autobiography into the golem poems.

Later golem poems get political, when Mephista angrily tells Miss B. that she will no longer be Miss B.'s domestic servant, but must fulfill her destiny as an avenging angel of history. She tells Miss B. to iron her own shirts, and then has the audacity to submit an expense report (detailing the procurement of a thermos of margaritas and five cheese sandwiches) for her on-the-clock investigations of secret government tests in the desert.

Oddly, this poem cross-pollinates Robert Lowell's *For the Union Dead* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* comic books: the high and the low.

**HLH:** The three sections of the book seem to focus on different subjects: something like photography, region/place and literature itself (as character). Yet a deep sense of history runs through all three—for example, the inquiry into place seems to be about the current manifestations of historical events and presences. Am I right to read these poems as basing their poetic perspective in historical perspective?

**RB:** I'm not sure that historical perspective precedes poetic perspective for me. I was raised in the South by history-obsessed parents, so never distinguished between private and public history. We'd take family trips to hunt down an ancestor, a Rebel soldier, buried in an unmarked grave, or go visit the plantation house where my orphaned great-grandmother was raised by her mean aunt. My dad was on a state commission that reviewed evidence determining the route of Hernando De Soto through South Georgia. We were always visiting some new archeological site. For years, I imagined De Soto and all his men and pigs tramping across the orange shag carpet in our den, because my father had said, somewhat irresponsibly, "De Soto may have made a camp right under our feet!"

My new manuscript, now in progress, is about the benefits and problems of forgetting the past. I suppose my move to California in 2001, and the historical isolation I felt in a new region, as well as the speed of life in the city of San Francisco, all contribute to this interest. "When life was full there was no history," writes Chuang Zhu, Zen poet translated by Thomas Merton in the 1960s.

**HLH:** I read as one of the poems' urgencies the attempt to steer between embracing one's history and renouncing it: the attempt to *acknowledge* one's heritage but also to elect an alternative present/

future, to make a pathogenic past into a seed, to “opt out / of that cussed parentage.” Am I way off track?

**RB:** Yes, exactly. If you’re the child of history-obsessed liberal Southern parents, then heritage often feels spirit-crushing. For example, I agreed to be a debutante at the age of 19 because I knew it would be a “literary experience.” Even fortified with a healthy dose of irony, this experience was demeaning. To be “given” from one man to another (father to escort) is perverse in contemporary life. So “opting out of that cussed parentage” (my mother’s narcissistic obsession with status and being “better” than the neighbors) seems a healthy mental choice. I think most people struggle with some version of this need to escape from parental expectation.

SHANE BOOK  
on  
**CEILING OF STICKS**

**H. L. Hix:** What is the difference for you between a first-person narrator speaking from an essentially public space (a space more others’ than his own) and such a narrator speaking from an essentially private space? Assuming you would agree that this collection emphasizes the former over the latter (I began to formulate this question in response to “Homecoming”), why is it important to you to maintain that emphasis?

**Shane Book:** In thinking about your question about space, it seems important to first define the terms. Public space to me is the space of the commons. It is a space for community, the default setting for human activity. We’re social animals and when not alienated from our species we function best in such space. Private space is the territory cut off from the realm of the community. Not only is it at odds with our best interests but private space is basically a fiction. At bottom, the distinction between public and private strikes me as ideology.

In material terms, many of the poems in this book take place in the developing world, in cultural spaces where people's notions of private space differ from North American conceptions. Village life in say, West Africa, circumscribed by familial and clan and tribal relations, means the individual's behavior, down to what foods are combined with other foods, is often dictated by custom, i.e., the group's dictates. One owns so little (maybe a T-shirt or a pair of flip-flops, with life lived outdoors, largely in front of other people) that our ideas of "the private" perhaps don't translate in quite the same way.

OK. So then maybe you mean "to speak from a private space" as a sort of inwardly sourced gesture? In poetry, particularly, I think there are opportunities for us to speak of and from personal languages (as Paul Celan did, a sort of highly stylized and specific language existing within a larger language family), but I don't understand the public antipode to such language: would it be for example the language of advertising?

Perhaps if I tackle the question from a craft perspective I'll be better able to provide an answer. Some of the events recounted in these poems are charged, at times graphic, and I wanted those events to speak for themselves with as little adornment as possible. This is the old trick of cinema, wherein the most unsettling performance in for example a crime

drama is often the one given by the most outwardly affectless actor. We call such a person the sociopath, the cold one, but we certainly remember what he says and does. Now having said that, I don't want to imply that I am striving for or have achieved a lack of artifice. The very act of working at creating this stripped-down poem is of course highly artificial. In a sense, nothing could be more constructed, mannered, than a supposedly "mannerless" poem.

I wonder if what you identify as "public" space is in fact a tonal dimension, brought about by my relationship toward the language, namely my use of diction and syntax?

Here it seems prudent to speak of precursors. Part way into writing this book I came upon Objectivist poet Charles Reznikoff's *Testimony*, his book of poems made from court records. Reading that book gave me a sense that I could continue doing what I was doing. I had an ancestor. In the end I hope to take his often-quoted definition of an Objectivist poet as one "who is restricted to the testimony of a witness in a court of law," and expand it to include testimony from the twin courts of "conscience" and "experience." Reznikoff's poems are dispassionate, factual and thus their power is intensified. Some of the poems in my collection share this dispassionate approach.

I was also thinking quite literally of mainstream journalism and its myriad failures over the last couple of decades (the time during which many of these poems take place) to report much of anything useful or actually new, and how instead such reporters have seemed content to act as mouthpieces for governments. My hope was to use a documentary poetics to track global histories alongside personal histories (which are often affected by the former) in distilled moments, thereby collapsing private-public distinctions, which seem to me, as I said earlier in other words, to comprise the vestiges of a disreputable humanism, bestowing human rights to select groups of people and no rights to everyone else. I see these poems as advocating an unfashionable, yet unconditional universalism, where all people are included. In this way the poems seek to reclaim individuals otherwise lost to history.

What you detect as public spaces are perhaps the places where the language feels more distant, thieving as it does from journalism's so-called "objective" language stance. With these moments of spare, nearly austere reportage I was attempting to mirror the indifference large historical events (civil wars, famine, economic collapse, coup d'états, etc.) exhibit toward individuals. This reducing, stripping, leaves the bare "facts" as it were, naked to the reader (strange to speak of facts in a poem, perhaps). And

in other places the language is more poeticized, what we might call lyrical, to give the reader a vantage point to contextualize the barer spaces of documentary testimony. It was my hope that by taking this tact I could employ Pound's definition of poetry as "news that stays news."

If I do "maintain a distinction" I think it is strictly formal. As I am a formal writer, this makes sense. I think of all poems, free-verse or otherwise, as formal constructions. My distinctions may be thought of as a reclamation of antagonisms: the antagonisms of the late-twentieth century and early-twenty-first century. If we think of the twentieth century's project as that of the creation of a "new man," these poems are documenting the effects of those large political projects and also, in their formal variety (you'll recall the sestina, pantoum, alongside the discursive, more Whitmanian lines and the lean reportage), paying homage to poetics in vogue during the times in which the poem's "inciting incidents," to borrow a screenwriting term, took place. Of course when I speak of formal fashions, I speak of those poetic strategies employed in poetry's mainstream (from the discursive poem of the '70s, with its long meandering lines, to Deep Imagist works, to the return of olde forme in New Formalism's resurgent 1980s incarnation), all this coexisting in a stew whose broth base is an older Objectivist reportage written

in the Great Depression. In this way I hope the poems pay respects to their originating epochs. The book is in some way a formal homage to era, both in terms of content (i.e., the actual news from the 1980s developing world: famine, drought, famine) and form (the familial narratives of mainstream American poetry and its styles). These poems have subjects and they maintain their allegiance to these subjects.

**HLH:** I think this is a follow-up to the first question. When I arrive at "Uganda, 1997" and "Mistakes," I begin to notice the objectivity or detachment of these narrators, their reportorial stance, their understatement. Why do these speakers deliver the poems in such a way?

**SB:** Another way to answer your question is to say I am uncomfortable with a sort of guts-spilling Confessionalism, therefore the reportorial stance. Craft-wise in "Mistakes," for example, I wanted the emotional quality of the piece to come through, rushing in to fill the vacuum left by the dispassionate retelling of the scene. It is also a formally constructed poem, written in syllabics and adhering to a (roughly) 10-syllable line so that it would echo blank verse, though it is not written in strict blank verse.

"Uganda, 1997" is written in a journalistic style for the reasons I mention in response to your first

question: to let the "facts" speak for themselves, to echo journalism's "objective stance" and point up this stance's artificiality in that it can be used in poems (of all things!) to reduce the affect with which the story's told and thus increase its effect on the reader, to collapse the distinction between large historical events and individual events, the margin and center dichotomy and in a sense the public/private distinctions you find here, all with the aim of highlighting the origins of these as real-world outcomes of our supposed helpful humanism, our neoliberal ideology. And in a sense to provide testimony.

Now for this piece in particular there is also the reason that the poem is based on a photograph. The photographic image contains all the poem needs. There's no necessity to comment on it. And by not providing a lot of window dressing, the image is there, speaking volumes. The other side of it is that, as I said earlier, there's a lot of work, craft, artifice, that goes into "unadorning" an image, and that is perhaps a statement in itself.

**HLH:** The "But" that follows the lines "Some people say what we are is representation / and that representation is a lie" seems crucial not only to this poem but also to the whole collection. Is there any sense in which one could legitimately construe as

a kind of synopsis or thesis of the collection those three lines, the two about representation and “But someone touches your arm and you shiver”?

**SB:** Yes, I think so.

In those lines I guess I wanted to counter the claims of many that representation as an artistic form is a dead end, unworthy. I am not interested in aesthetic schools—ultimately I am interested only in poetry. Just as we cannot deny history, so we cannot deny representation as one way in which we make sense of our world. Poetry is at bottom not representational, because it uses language, because language is its only material. And yet, the state of exception is that language is all we have. As we write with it, language writes us. The imperfection or perhaps imprecision, the gap in our tool called language, is where poetry lies in wait.

These poems were, in a lot of ways, the first style I learned to write in. They’re a form, just like representational painting can be seen as iterating a form. I am inspired by painter Gerhard Richter, who works in all styles/kinds of painting. Some would argue he’s less successful in his abstract paintings, but what I love is his willingness to work in all available regions of his medium. If I were a piano player I would want to use the whole keyboard, not

just the middle keys. This first book shows where I come from: it is my little sheaf of representational paintings. In subsequent work I move into different territory, an aesthetic landscape some might call vanguardist, experimental, etc., however I dislike labels.

In some ways this book is also a nod to documentary photography and the language of cinema, which, as some have called it, is a language of dreams. I have long held that poetry and cinema share much (as one who works in both disciplines, it is in my interest to make such a claim!). Film is often representational and, even when it is abstract, it has trouble escaping its “realist” debts. The mode of some of these poems is cinematic, especially in the longer poems, and then also the mode is lyric and then also it loosens the line at times toward prose. Genre means little here. Hybridity is in full effect. I hope that’s one of the things that make these poems contemporary. I am writing from a generation that is not as interested in laying claim to categories or camps. “Multiplicity” is one of our watchwords.

Finally, I guess I want to challenge this notion of relativism in terms of historical events and their effects on peoples’ lives. I am saying the evidence is clear. Cause, effect: the direct touch of something as large as history or as small as a person’s finger

on your arm can make you shiver, or wipe you and your family out. Again I am concerned with what Agamben calls *homo sacer*. I hope the poems provide some testament toward inclusiveness. The earth may be, as geologists have taken to saying, an “open system,” but we can try to find evidences, chart outcomes. Poetry is one way to do these things.

JERICO BROWN  
on  
PLEASE

**H. L. Hix:** When I reach the end of “Pause” I can’t help but hear the slang usage of “the man” resonating, which leads me to variant readings of the sentence that composes the last three–and-a-half lines of the poem. For instance, reading the last clause as “if I hide [then] inside the man I must be cold” is different from reading it as “if I hide / Inside the man [then] I must be cold.” And so on. How important are such ambiguities (those created by echoes “external” to the poem, and those created “within” the poem itself) to the aims of your poetry?

**Jericho Brown:** Ambiguity seems to me the ultimate aim of any line of poetry. It is part of what excites both the reader and the writer as, contrary to the beliefs of anyone who fears art, ambiguity allows for meanings that enhance clarity, that make known the absolute complexity of an idea or experience the artist attempts to name.

The poems in *Please* definitely make much of what Stephen Henderson calls mascon words and images,

and I do mean for a term like “the man” to highlight the power dynamics (oppression?) ever-present in the lover/beloved relationship. Doing so allows me to write what I hope are poems that are at once black and gay, poems which have at their heart a voice which belongs to a complicated personality readers come to know as they read each line.

**HLH:** If I had to identify a single polarity as the axis on which the book turns, it would be the hand vs. the tongue/mouth/voice. From the first poem (“Speak to me in a lover’s tongue”) through the last (“my mouth plays / Now as it did then”), from lament (“Forgive us, Father, the use of our hands”) to praise (“his hand opens like the hand of God above me”), the hand and the mouth strive with one another. Would I be right to read this as your book’s version of the body and the spirit?

**JB:** Yes, Harvey. I suspect this makes you an ideal reader for me, as you’re so good at asking these questions that you leave little for me to say in response! The most I can add is that I’ve always been taken with Plato’s reasons for throwing poets out of the city. They are overtaken and possessed. Their bodies are not their own. For Plato, the definition of a poet is the same as the definition many of us have for a person in love. My work concerns itself with the

ways love leads to touch, and the fact that touch may well be an invasion.

What I really like about your question is the phrase, “this as your book’s version of the body and the spirit.” It seems to suggest that every book of poetry has as its underlying purpose some set of comments about the body and the spirit. Does each poet have a version of the body and the spirit he or she means to convey? Can we begin to judge work based on how well body and spirit are rendered? What a wonderful way to think of poetry and to approach books! Wouldn’t it be lovely for us to teach our students to read in search of body and spirit? I am under the strange impression that words last and that my body won’t. I think about this every day.

**HLH:** Obviously music informs your work. Would it be reading too much into the poems, because of the frequent Biblical/religious references (the burning bush, Joshua/Jericho, et al.), to hear, behind the work of Coltrane, Strayhorn, Ross, Joplin and others, the spiritual at work in these poems?

**JB:** Music (and popular music in particular) is one of the few embodiments of the spirit we allow ourselves to enjoy without feeling fear or shame. Indeed, I think of the book’s singers, bands, musicians and



songwriters as vehicles for questions and musings I have about the spirit.

Isn't the spiritual at work in every poem? I hope so. I hope that, whether or not we believe in any god, we return to good art because it enlivens in us and makes us aware of some part of the self we cannot completely name. Art is not simply stimulation for our emotions; it is the recognition and acknowledgment of the depths of our beings.

JULIE CARR  
on

## 100 NOTES ON VIOLENCE

**H. L. Hix:** Regarding note 31: *why must? Why here?* (I don't mean this only/primarily as an interrogation of the particular words in this sentence, but as one way of enriching my sense of the whole book's structure.) The contrast between what "we" were (truthfully?) told and what the boy was (deceptively) told also seems significant and "structural."

**Julie Carr:** While writing this project I found myself avoiding (out of fear) certain stories that felt too close to home. The story of the Capitol Hill Rapist was one such story. I knew I had to confront it/him because my intention was precisely to confront fears, and to examine the violence that was nearest to me. It had to be "here," that is, placed one-third of the way into the book, because it was there that such avoidance became obvious. But it also has to be "here" in the sense that my challenge in this book was not to pretend that violence is always elsewhere, but to see into the ways in which it is always right "here."

Throughout the process of writing and then constructing the book I tried to balance the lyrical with more objective and descriptive moments. I did not only want to “tell it like it is.” I also wanted to explore the inner states of the person who is attempting to see and to describe. And I wanted to write from the particular music of the states of mind or of emotion that arose. Some sections demanded a narrative or more flatly descriptive mode, while others needed to remain lyrical and open—even fragmentary.

The boy in this poem is a real boy and what his parents said was also real. Obviously, any child would know that “she had an ow-y and she fell down,” was not an accurate way of describing what he saw. The utter failure of the parents to explain what he saw speaks to me about one of the central and anguishing aspects of this project. We do not want our children to know what they know. We do not want to tell them what we cannot help but tell them. And thus, protection fails; innocence is false. Something else must be taught to them, which is to say, something else must be taught to us. And that something else is, I think, that we must live within the paradox of our awareness of suffering coupled with our experiences of pleasure, hope, even joy. This is not an easy or even stable realization. The parents lie to the child in order for him to go on living. He knows they are lying, but he knows also that they

are lying out of love and that love is powerfully contrasting and coexisting with the woman’s death.

**HLH:** As long as I’m approaching the book through words that seem to have broad implications for the book, in both notes 82 and 88 “whereas” is obviously crucial to the individual poem. If my intuition about its “larger” importance is right, how would you talk about that importance?

**JC:** “Whereas” means “although” or “in contrast to” or “at the same time as” or “in view of the fact that.” In note 82 I speak of my body’s openings: “*whereas my mouth. whereas my vagina. whereas my nipples. whereas my ears. whereas my eyes.*” These are the permeable spaces, the holes through which the world can enter or through which I create (give life, speak, feed, see or hear and thus understand the world). The poem references an earlier moment in which I allude to a series of rapes and consequent births. The body, but especially the female body, is vulnerable to penetration and thus to violence (violation), but it is also capable of expression (in both senses). The little poem is a love song for the self’s vulnerability and the self’s creative capacity. The “whereas” could be translated as “despite all that has been discussed in the preceding pages.” Thus the poem could mean, “despite all the harm that could come to me and has come to others, I

still praise my own vulnerability which is also my reproductive and creative power and therefore my strength.”

The word grew in importance as I continued to write, because it speaks of paradox. It says, despite that, this is also true. While one thing is happening, so is something else. The more I opened my eyes to the violence that was occurring in intimate spaces all around me (and within me), the more I had to believe that harm, violence and rage did not negate the other truths that we live by: that we are protected and can protect others, that our lives are worth living, that our lives can and should be joyous. “Whereas” simply points to these competing truths.

**HLH:** Note 47 seems to me to invite a lot of “mirroring”: seeing it as a kind of parable of this book (which, like the doctor, tries to see not only the violence per se but the backstory behind it), of poetry in general (similarly looking through effect to cause), and so on. Am I reading too much into this poem? If such readings of this poem aren’t too absurd, should I be alert to such readings of other poems in the book? Of *all* the other poems?

**JC:** Yes, note 47 is very important to the whole book. The doctor is right to look closely at the parent. Any injured child could potentially signal wrongdoing.

And of course, when your own child is injured you look at yourself too, wondering if it is in some way your fault. The book is about this sense of self-implication, which, I’d guess, we all carry around with us. Even if we ourselves seem innocent, how can it not be in some way our fault that others perpetrate or experience violence? We did nothing to stop it. We were not there where we should have been. I don’t think you have to be a parent to feel this ongoing sense of guilt, but I suspect that being a parent contributes to it, or makes it more apparent. The doctor in that poem is, in a sense, the book itself, which is asking if you, the reader, are the cause of. It asks the same of me, the writer.

Are there other moments in the book that can be read in this allegorical manner? Yes.

I found a piece of writing by my daughter (then six) that read, “I want a horse. But I am a horse.” I placed this at the end of the paragraphs taken from the online firearm store in note 58, titled “More Shopping.” For me these sentences say, “I want that violent thing, but in fact, I am that violent thing.” (The horse here is metonymic for the gun because of a horse’s martial implications). Thus, when we project the source of violence outward onto an object or another person, we are ignoring the truth, which is that we are the violence we desire, and we

are the violence that we fear. My daughter's private realization was that she was wanting something she already had inside of her. This became a kind of mantra for the book.

Another such moment occurs in note 27, "Blind," in which I describe kneading bread dough. Here I am meditating on the one out of every 100 Americans who are at any given time incarcerated. I write, "Imagine bread dough. To knead it you must flatten and fold, flatten and fold. // Always much is hidden within the fold. / But the outside and the inside keep trading places, / under your hands." I am thinking here about how we create nourishment, how we feed ourselves a nourishing life, but how in order to do this we have to hide the truths of our violent culture. And yet, we can't hide these truths: inasmuch as we are one society, we are not other than those who are incarcerated. Our nourishment is blended with the culpability of the guilty and the suffering of the innocent. If the bread dough is this culture we are always in the act of creating, then kneading is a metaphor for how perpetrators and victims (in which category I include many prisoners) are enfolded within the same substance, under our hands.

JENNIFER CHANG  
on

## THE HISTORY OF ANONYMITY

**H. L. Hix:** In the first few lines of the first poem, the word "unctuous" appears; the final section of the book is "A Move to Unction." What about unction makes it important to these poems?

**Jennifer Chang:** I wrote the title poem, "The History of Anonymity" roughly three years after writing "A Move to Unction." At first, I hadn't intended to put the poems in the same manuscript, but as I revised "The History of Anonymity" I realized that both lyric sequences are preoccupied with the process of emotional and existential recovery, and both express an almost spiritual fervor. I settled on the word "unction" because of its religious and sacred connotations, but I wanted a secularized "unction," which I hope in my poems connotes a state of heightened attention that enables healing and restorative contemplation.

I also realized that to put two long lyric sequences in one book would be challenging, so when I was revising "The History of Anonymity" I decided that

the language had to work harder for the poems to connect to each other. I used “unctuous” because it anticipates the “unction” of the book’s conclusion, but, unlike “unction,” the word “unctuous,” as a descriptor, is more tactile and sensual. If we think of the shift from the words “unctuous” to “unction” as a sort of miniscule drama or narrative arc within the book, it could suggest a shift from the bodied to the disembodied, the material to the spiritual.

**HLH:** The speaker in “*And the night illuminated the night*” uses the term “dark curiosity” to refer to the “you” of the poem. Would you agree with me that the term could be reflected back on the speaker, and that the poems in this book arise out of a dark curiosity? If so, what would you be taking “dark curiosity” to mean?

**JC:** In that poem, “dark curiosity” figures as a guide; it is “dark curiosity” that leads the “you” to the forest, to the unknown. I suppose that’s an apt description of my own approach to writing the poems of *The History of Anonymity*. Or any poem. For me, every poem begins as (and, I hope, enacts) a process of inquiry. As with the “dark curiosity” of “*And the night illuminated the night*,” I am led by the dark curiosity of my question(s), of the unknown answer or resolution that I seek to make knowable. Dark curiosity, I think, is integral to any artistic or

intellectual process, any inquiry, but I think in the phrase itself there’s also the suggestion of one’s attraction to the unknown, the attraction to the act of questioning itself.

**HLH:** The sister is a strong presence, and also a “strong absence,” in the last section. So the speaker’s writing postcards and then tossing them off the cliff seems a pivotal moment in the sequence. Is it also in some sense a representation more generally of the situation of the poet?

**JC:** In working on a first book of poems I often felt like I was writing to an audience of no one. In a sense, I was writing poems and tossing them off the cliff. That’s the great suspense of the young writer, isn’t it? Whether or not there will be a reader. Will anyone want to read what I’ve written? Will anyone care? Will anyone respond, write back? I remember feeling a powerful loneliness while writing the poems of *The History of Anonymity*. That sounds odd, I know, but if no one is paying attention, then you feel like you can do anything, that you can get away with anything. I don’t know if the lack of an audience, or the fear of never having either a book or a reader, constituted a “strong absence” at the time; there was certainly an absence, but I largely ignored it then and I still try to ignore it. If I gave too much credence to the absences surrounding my writing and my poems,

then, like the speaker of that last section, I'd have to run away from everything and everyone.

That said, I'm not inclined to think of the situation of the poet as especially unique or distinct from the situation of any human being. A poet's questions are hardly different from anyone else's. What does it mean to be free? How am I responsible to others, to the world? Who am I? How one answers these universal questions informs how one lives. They are questions not just of poets, but of all human beings. If there's a difference in the situation of the poet, then, I think, it's only in the difference of orientation. Poets (or certainly the vast majority of poets, myself included) are above all language-oriented; my attention is skewed towards what words do to experience in rendering experience, how words express, mediate and interrogate our place in the world. Others, I believe, manage their experiences, ask their questions, through different orientations or foci.

JUSTIN CHIN  
on

## GUTTED

**H. L. Hix:** The very first poem places the speaker (and by extension the reader) in an ongoing present by its repetition of "again tonight." Why is that ongoing present so important to the book?

**Justin Chin:** A chronic illness or a terminal illness (in fact any state of unwellness, really) is largely about managing time, or the remaining time. When to take pills, how far apart, when to change dressing, how long since last symptom or red flag, how long more, how much more. Being in the present is a means of delaying that final stroke. However, being in the present also involves dealing with the procedural of healing, health care, of responsibility, of emotional and mental health, all of which are so repetitive, requiring so much of the same cycle again and again. Not only is being in this present exhausting and tedious but also deteriorating on all barrels.

**HLH:** One of my favorite moments in the book is the meditation on page 73: funny, sad, absurd. If the first poem puts us in an ongoing present, this poem

seems to remind us (in this case, to be one of many reminders throughout the book) that grief takes us out of the realm of reasoning. Are we all always the second most miserable person in the world?

**JC:** Only if we're extremely lucky! Top one hundred would even be good. No, we'll usually end up somewhere in the high-hundred-thousands or even the mid-millions. Once at the (then) INS, I received a ticket that said, "Your wait time is 6 hours and 23 minutes." It's somewhat like that; it might never get to your place in line.

About page 73 (and such): the book is designed so that the white spaces are meant to be used by the reader to write responses, notes, thoughts, meditations, to make lists, collect mementos, clippings, gossip, jokes, lyrics, lines of poems, to doodle, draw sea monsters, whatever. And so, my own palaver is worked into, "guttled along" the page margins, and within.

**HLH:** The first signal in the first poem in Book Two is the change from "I" to "We," from private to public. In its incantatory rhythm and broad scope and tone of lamentation, Book Two reminds me of Ginsberg's "Howl." Do you see "The Unholy Ghost" as related to "Howl" in any way? Are there other antecedents with which it shares ambitions?

**JC:** Actually, I see it more aligned with "Kaddish" than with "Howl." All this came about when, for whatever reason, I was thinking about the absence of prophets at work today. Psychics, mystics, assorted bullshitters, yes, but prophets, not so much. Pundits and media experts seem to be making a play for the position. It would seem that the poet would find the most natural and obvious direction to that post. An internship for it almost. And this was all happening during the early-/mid- Bush years, and there had been a fair amount of belly-gazing and hand-wringing and bluster about the role of the poet/poetry in the political situation: "news that stays news," "unacknowledged legislators of the world," blah blah de blah. So the brief I had for myself was to assume a prophetic voice (persona maybe, or is it a stance?). On top of that, with good lefty training and indoctrination, we're conditioned to not speak for others, to shun the dominant narrative, etc. etc. And so, part of that brief involved very consciously and deliberately using that collective pronoun. The thing about using "we" is the dread that the reader will respond with "what do you mean, we?" Yep, there were quite a few things that had to be quelled or suspended to do the work.

How I got there (off the top of my head, and in no particular order): Césaire's *Return to Native Land*, Mahmoud Darwish, the King James Bible cross-

read with the (apparently satanic) New International Version, (the Books of Ezekiel, and Revelation, along with assorted bits and pieces mostly from the Old Testament), Whitman, technically (i.e., without his pagan hippy vibe), Zagajewski (I know there's more, tho'...).

DON MEE CHOI  
on KIM HYESOON'S

## MOMMY MUST BE A FOUNTAIN OF FEATHERS

**H. L. Hix:** The speaker in "Face" speculates that "Maybe I am the hostage of an absent being." I suspect it's always misleading to seize on one moment in a poem and seek in it some "message" about the whole poem or collection, but is there some meaningful sense in which one might take this as a characterization of the state all the poems resist, a figure for the "blackened space" your introduction identifies as the space in which all Koreans, but especially Korean women, live? Given the neocolonial relationship you note, in what ways would you expect American readers to find in the poems similarities with their own experience, and in what ways would you expect them to find contrasts to their own experience?

**Don Mee Choi:** I think it might be best for me to begin by saying something about Kim Hyesoon's hell. I often think of Kim Hyesoon's poems being played out on a theatrical stage that has no regards for the conventions of linear narrative time. There is



no before or after hell. All is hell. Each poem may be a single miniature stage platform that piles up like “teeth with teeth, fingernails with fingernails.” Kim’s hell is rooted in the Korean shaman narrative *The Abandoned* [*paridegi*], in which a daughter is abandoned for being a daughter—the seventh daughter to be born in a row. *Paridegi* goes on a journey to the realm of death and returns to her place of origin to save her dying parents, and becomes a spirit that guides the dead to another realm. Kim Hyesoon’s feminist reading of this narrative is that *Paridegi*’s realm of death is not an oppressed space but a counter-patriarchal space where a woman can redefine herself. In this realm, “a woman is darkness, is empty, and she does not abide to the law of ownership.” According to Kim, *Paridegi*’s hell is a “black mirror.” And Kim Hyesoon’s hell extends from this black mirror, remaining counter-patriarchal, possessing nothing, reflecting and resisting “Mr. Military Officers with black ink.” Hence, “the darkness inside Seoul’s intestine is dense.” Forever empty, Kim’s stage platforms stack up and shatter with their weight of emptiness the controlled, militarized borders inside and outside of us. In Shohei Imamura’s *Black Rain* time never really moves beyond the time of the atom-bomb explosion, because the image of the clock persists throughout the film. This is how we know the black rain is still falling inside the survivors. And this is why translation must continue to remind

us of the hell within and outside of the U.S. empire. Whether we are here in the U.S. or there in South Korea or in-between, we can also find something outstandingly white in Kim’s poetry: “White mother. White cough. White sigh. White breasts.... White snow is falling. Young white woman’s white smile.... White sea. White needle. White snow fills up.... Hell of tenderness.”

**HLH:** Kim’s poems are populated by animals: rats especially, but also chickens, horses, foxes and others. You talk in your introduction about “surviving hell” as a point of commonality that allows rats to stand in as the poet’s alter ego. There are other ways to depict hell (e.g., with angels and demons in another world, as, say, Milton does in *Paradise Lost*). Why is Kim’s choice of animals instructive?

**DMC:** I think Kim Hyesoon’s animals are instructive because they are given allegorical roles like the roles many animals have in Korean fables. According to many stories I heard as a child, a hundred-year-old fox can turn into a human, or in some cases a fox that devours one hundred humans (some aim for human livers) can transform into a woman. These fox-women often trick children and seduce men in order to consume them. Men often encounter them in the darkness of the night, during their travels away from the safety of their home village. The fox-women

stand for evil women who are not fit to be dutiful wives—the fear of falling into danger, violence and ingestion. In “Father Is Heavy, What Do I Do?” a woman poet plays the role of a fox and “devour[s] one hundred fathers / and become[s] a father.” And “Father became a father because he’d killed father, his father’s father.” The margin consumes the center and becomes the center. Kim Hyesoon’s rats feast on human babies, adorable white rabbits, and also one another and become rats again. In “Seoul’s Dinner” Seoul, a non-animal, is given the functions of consumption and excretion: “Pigs enter. The pigs oink and suck on Seoul’s lips.... Seoul, which is simultaneously a mouth and an anus.” Everything in the landscape enters and exists in Seoul. Hence Seoul is always in the flux of becoming itself. I thought one of the most fantastic scenes in Shohei Imamura’s *Pigs and Battleship* is when several thugs involved in raising pigs in Yokosuka, a G. I. town where United States naval ships are stationed, are eating a cooked pig. This pig had previously consumed the body of a man the thugs killed and disposed of at the pig farm. So when Imamura says he wanted to show the “power of pigs” in the film by releasing hundreds of pigs into the G. I. streets of Yokosuka, the pigs become powerful pigs, filling every alley, crushing everything in their way, and the thugs who have eaten the pigs are pigs, and the prostituted women who prepare pigs for their Japanese male customers

and G. I.s and who eat pigs are also pigs. Yokosuka becomes a pig town. Both Kim’s and Imamura’s animals instruct us how to subvert the order of power.

**HLH:** “Why Can’t We” ends, “why do we go near [Buddha] and bow on our knees till they are raw and look once into his eyes then return home with our downcast faces?” Is there a form of attention that readers of the translations might seek in order to register the “two different realities” you note in your introduction—without merely returning home with downcast faces?

**DMC:** On August 11, 2009, I interpret for a woman at a shelter, downstairs from where I work. She came from South Korea four months ago. She stayed in Los Angeles for two months, and when she could no longer pay her \$350 rent, she took a bus up to Seattle and has been living on the street. She is not certain if she has ever been arrested. She remembers that she shouted something loud on the street in Los Angeles and was approached by a police officer. She is not certain if that means she was arrested. She is surrounded by people who are given orders to stalk her—by someone hiding in the darkness. Whenever she decides to do something, the people who follow orders prevent her from doing what she wants to do. They have no basic knowledge about being human. She feels they may be bad people, capable of doing

something harmful. Her parents are deceased and her siblings have their own families and lives. She has worked in factories. She is divorced. She would like to enroll at a school to study ESL. She would like to know if she can really start studying English on September 16. As a translator of Kim Hyesoon's poetry, I am preoccupied with home—my first home, South Korea—and things that are dislocated from home. I think of translation as a process of constant displacement, a set of linguistic signs displaced by another. And this displacement takes place under specific historical conditions, sometimes acting out the orders from the darkness. I like to think that my translation takes orders from Kim Hyesoon's hell that defies neocolonial orders. My hope is that the displaced poetic or narrative identity manages to persist in its dislocation, translating itself out of the orders of darkness alone or with assistance from the translator who must also translate herself. On August 13, 2009, I find her at the lunchroom of the shelter. Spaghetti and garlic bread. She is very troubled by the people who follow her. She told them they were worthless beings, yet they didn't react at all. She didn't understand how they could be so indifferent to such a remark. She repeated, "Worthless beings? Worthless beings?" When translation fails, that is when we take orders from the darkness—displaced identities easily become worthless beings.

ALLISON ADELLE HEDGE COKE  
on  
**EFFIGIES: AN  
ANTHOLOGY OF NEW  
INDIGENOUS WRITING,  
PACIFIC RIM, 2009**

**H. L. Hix:** Your book calls itself an anthology of "new Indigenous writing," and calls the poetry gathered in it "a significant statement as to the changing state of the world." I assume you mean by "new" something more than "recent." How do the poets and poems you have selected challenge views of poetry and of the Indigenous that would construe both as archaic, static artifacts rather than as guides through rapid change?

**Allison Adelle Hedge Coke:** Well the concept of Indigenous is neither static nor archaic actually—simply Aboriginal/Native. These poems are indeed most recent poems by four terrific Indigenous poets who are all new to publishing book-length works, new to the widely published poetic field.

The vibrant and compelling poems included do, in fact, challenge all sorts of preconceived notions as to what has been categorically believed to be (represented as)

“typical” Indigenous poetry in some poetry circles. Thus the strategic compilation is certainly capable of revolutionary act.

These poems present precise plucks and timelessly new persuasions unhindered by anticipatory reasoning and unaltered by weary expectations. The wholly evocative image-ridden hurtle of this read slows itself intentionally to coalesce and invoke the contemplative ambler. Thus the quadruped volume of four chapbooks runs its ungulate course from horses holding branding calves in Hawaiian round-up nights, to caribou scrambling on hooves with driftwood pact.

This is poetic Indigenous disclosure, a new collection in a revelatory sense of the word.

One for you: can a book call itself something, or did we title the book to represent the hitherto?

**HLH:** Well I have not been able to get out of my head this phrase from your brief “Editor’s Note”: “a tactile relationship made immense.” I wonder whether you intend the phrase as restricted fairly tightly to the work in this anthology, or whether you think of it as more broadly applicable to other poetry (poetries) as well?

**AAHC:** The tangible expansive relativity niched within these amalgamated works spreads like a winged message across Pacific-rimmed horizons, engaging and coercing us, as readers, to attempt touch (perceptible) sans self-conscious expression. Both Ha’i and throat singing signal what intensifies in somatosensory modalities: epithelia, muscle, bone impressions mapping homunculus in pathways beyond physical. The poetic process embodied in invoked image and sounded stimuli impresses the reader with a relative physiological experience realized in a sensory manner, continually expanding with each layer afforded this book. This is a muscle spindle of a read, serving as introduction to the new series and as the resistant stretch-reflex to the newly (now) non-existent colonial pull of canonical literature, previously inhibiting public display of Indigenous genius.

Also applicable, whether in a broad sense or slimly significant to the nature of this read: the immense physiologically experiential possibility opened through devouring sensory embrace is certainly culled within tangible periphery within these works.

MARY DALTON  
on

## MERRYBEGOT

**H. L. Hix:** A poem such as “Down the Bay” seems to me to exemplify with particular vividness a feature present in all the poems, namely a “found” character to them. Does it matter to you if a reader views these poems as found or views them as made?

**Mary Dalton:** It may be that my comments in a note on the acknowledgements page and at the back of *Merrybegot* have misled readers. Very few of the poems can be called found poems. Most of them are fictions that I made. My raw material is a variety of English other than Standard English, but that does not make me more indebted to the source than any writer who draws upon the resources of language.

Perhaps 20 percent of the poems might be said to have some element of the found in them, insofar as they incorporate quotations from the *Dictionary of Newfoundland English*. I’m not certain that would characterize even those twelve or so pieces as found poems, however. The *Dictionary of Newfoundland English* was, in addition to being a catalyst because

of its bringing into print recorded speech, a direct source for some lines. But in these pieces it was often a matter of knitting lines into fictions of my own making. “Sterricky” is one such piece; “Old Roman Candle” is another.

Far more of these poems have no element of the found. They are small monologues, small fictions which aim to evoke a world, in themselves and in their interrelations. While a scrap of incident or speech (overheard speech, not that in a dictionary) might have served as a springboard, that is a case only of the usual workings of the imagination. As I leaf through *Merrybegot* (“Stark-Naked Tea,” “The School of Hard Knocks,” “Rosella and Bride,” “The Ragged Jacket”) I’m noting that the poems are entirely invention, with no quotations included.

What distinguishes the poems of *Merrybegot*, perhaps, is their lusty transactions with speech—whether that preserved in the *Dictionary of Newfoundland English*, or that rippling and fizzing in my daily life. Sometimes those transactions are complicated ones, shifting back and forth between the oral and the written.

“Down the Bay” is without a doubt a double or a triple agent, if we think of the oral and written as territories with their own imperatives. It had

its beginnings in a quip made by a man who was speaking of the north shore of Conception Bay, a coast more rugged, more exposed to the Atlantic Ocean than the sheltered head of the bay where he lives and now farms on family land. His phrasing struck me as a perfect little language-jig, and also as characteristic of a certain playful exaggeration common in Newfoundland speech and stories. Also, it expressed neatly a longstanding attitude of condescension on the part of the Irish-Catholic head of the bay to the rockier English-Protestant north shore. Form and content seemed to fuse beautifully.

Soon afterwards a historian friend told me that the scenario in this dandy riff was an echo of Union General Philip Sheridan's assertion about Georgia: that when he was through with it, it was so devastated "A crow flying over it would have to carry its own provender." I then assumed that the image was part of a common stock of images suggesting utter barrenness, that it was carried here and to America from the Old World. It was even possible, I considered, that the deft talker had tucked away somewhere in his mind General Sheridan's statement; after all, he was a university-educated man, a former teacher who had returned to his family's land to farm.

I decided to include "Down the Bay" in the collection for its gusto, for its revelling equally in the wild conceit and in its power as an insult, for its musical shape, with its interweaving of consonance and assonance (those thin "l" sounds evoking the slimness of the pickings in that forsaken place). And because, whether oral or written in its immediate origin, on the lips of J.E.B. and on my page, it embodied the shifting relations between the two.

The poem is, then, a found one. I found it in speech; J. E. B., to whom it's dedicated, may have found it on the lips of his father or in a book on the American South. The oral in bed with the written, and the goings-on are slippery.

**HLH:** A follow-up question. In some contexts, it is taken for granted that a poet's first ideal is to find/create her or his own voice. Is *Merrybegot* a counterargument, to the effect that a poet's first ideal may be instead to hear, with accuracy and attention, the voices of others?

**MD:** An intriguing question, like those Russian dolls with a doll inside the largest one, and another inside that one, and so on. It would take a book to answer this question adequately, it seems to me. What is one's own voice? How does dramatic poetry fit into this? The plays of Shakespeare? The dramatic

monologues of Robert Browning? Donne's love poems?

I see no contradiction in the idea that developing one's own voice may mean the creation of particular speakers in one's poems. Notions of the poet's own voice involve complex matters of technique, of relation to traditions artistic and cultural, of the life lived. All of these come into play in considerations of how a poet achieves authenticity, somehow arriving at his or her own unique vision and method. Here "voice" seems to be a metonymy for a cluster of notions. Inventing voices or characters, as a novelist or a playwright would, is one of the technical possibilities available to the writer in pursuit of his or her own distinctive making.

So, no, I don't see *Merrybegot* as any kind of counterargument to certain ideas about the poet's voice. The book is one manifestation of my individuality as an artist; in it I found that I was able to write in the cadences and idioms of my particular place, to recover in my writing life a music that had been subdued in the course of a bookish life. This is not to dismiss or understate the importance to me of other richly satisfying cadences, those absorbed from reading canonical English literature. My voice in the larger sense is some confluence of the oral and written.

Of course, your question might be taken another way, as enquiring about the power to be found in an aesthetic that moves beyond a sense of the lyric as confessional or autobiographical in some way, to embrace the possibilities available to the play and novel and short story.

**HLH:** A poem such as "That One" draws attention to the frequency with which these poems are judgments of one person by another (or by others). Is *gossip* an under-recognized source of linguistic energy and poetic invention?

**MD:** The word "gossip" comes from the Old English *godsib*, a person related to one in God. At one stage it came to mean "neighbour." Gossip now is generally considered negative, but at its root is the idea of relation to others, of one's life being inevitably bound up with that of others, of community and communal concerns. *Merrybegot* is a portrait of a clan, a tribe, a group of people whose lives are intertwined and who must get along with one another somehow. Language is a main resource for these people; they enact their anger or admiration or resentment or longing in lively arabesques of insult and/or narrative. Their griefs and grievances, even their praises, become subordinate to the act of talking. The talk itself changes things, perhaps because there is a listener.

The common thread in the gossip, whether the impulse of the speaker is denunciation or admiration, is story. There is in the culture I'm depicting a relishing of language itself, and, in particular, a relishing of language set to dancing in the service of a story. Until relatively recently, most people in Newfoundland didn't have much in the way of material goods, but they had a wealth of linguistic resources: songs, stories, riddles, proverbs, prayers, hymns, curses.

In considering your question about gossip, I think again of Robert Browning. Does the power of his "Soliloquy of a Spanish Cloister" or "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St. Praxed's Church" arise from the roiling psychic energy of his monk and bishop, of their being entangled with others—or does it come from Browning's ability to render the shifts and strategems of the mind through his mastery of syntax, sound, lineation, image and so on? Or is this an impossible distinction to make?

SESSHU FOSTER  
on

## WORLD BALL NOTEBOOK

**H. L. Hix:** Of the four lists that compose "Game 95," three are attributed to other people (Lisa Chen, Ruben Mendoza, Jen Hofer). A widespread view of poetry treats it as primarily private and personal, but such participation in your work by others draws attention to an alternative conception. Am I right to view this book as contesting separation of self from community?

**Sesshu Foster:** Yes, that's a motif and sometime theme, also in *City Terrace Field Manual* for example.

**HLH:** Some of the other poems in the book (e.g., Games 5, 20, 26, et al.) are structured as lists. What is the role of *listing* in (your) poetry? Is there something particular that appeals to you about the way listing focuses the attention?

**SF:** Listing seems the most crude or essential metaphor: any half-purposive or merely associative list defines by implication the secret or unfamiliar tenor. It implies that Buddhist note John Muir struck, in



finding any one thing, when selected out (and listed),  
“hitched to everything else in the Universe.”

**HLH:** “Game 55” seems to me an especially satisfying example of a short narrative that honors a temporary community, in this case a community of two people. Is it fair to identify as one purpose of your poetry to honor, by sustaining or memorializing, such small, provisional communities?

**SF:** Oh, continually sustaining. “The poet is the joiner, he sees how they join” (Whitman). Not only small, provisional communities, and not only official, state and national bodies politic either. Democratically, from the bottom up.

SANTEE FRAZIER  
on  
**DARK THIRTY**

**H. L. Hix:** “Ripped on a Friday Night” strikes me as depicting, in very compact form, something that seems central to the whole collection, namely a sense of circularity or cyclicity. The characters in these poems seem to repeat themselves, and the events recur. Is there an implicit critique (“Mangled never learns”) in describing these characters in this way, or an implicit respect (“Mangled’s way is who he is, and it’s as good as your way or mine”)? Or some more complex combination of those two?

**Santee Frazier:** The term “circularity” fits that particular moment best I think. Mangled, by all accounts a subhuman-type figure, is not helpless, or unaware of his actions. He wants to fit in, to be human like everyone else is human. The Ringmaster, LuLu, the circus audience are all figures he aspires to be, and the only way this is possible in this particular time in America is to behave the way society sees folks like Mangled—as a spectacle, or in the case of this poem, a distributor of violence. In a way, cutting the man in Tuxy’s validates his existence. So going

back into Tuxy's after a year in jail reaffirms the act, his existence.

**HLH:** "Firecracker" seems to me to depict something else about these characters: that their energies and actions don't defer to society's value judgments. The same boys who carry M-80s also feed strays and dance. If that is a characteristic shared by (a number of) these characters, to what degree is that characteristic a determining factor in selecting what becomes part of the book, and to what extent are the characters themselves the determining factors? In other words: did these characters get depicted because they show something larger that you're interested in, or does the something larger appear because you chose to depict these characters? I think this may be the same thing as asking: is this book a story that happens to be composed largely of portraits, or are these portraits that happen to cohere into a story (or, again, some combination)?

**SF:** I look at the book as a story of sorts. The poems are like spotlights during a performance, while the light is only illuminating one element of the production. What is not in the light still exists, for instance the musical accompaniment or the props. So in this case the light is shined on certain events and characters. In "Firecracker," the boys who were playing with fireworks that day, to me, while guilty of blowing

up a cat via Ladyfingers, did not, in my mind, hurt Paul purposely. In a way it's like Mangled, except the knives have been replaced by fireworks, or the beer coolie and fly swatter of the bystander. Young boys left to themselves finding ways to destroy other ignored and neglected elements of their environment. Yet they are capable of beautiful acts like the dancing or mixing music (which also proves they exist). The poems have always dictated to me what they want to do, so to the characters. As I became aware of what the poems and characters were doing, in book form, I realized the collection began to fit together as a larger narrative and I choreographed accordingly.

**HLH:** The qualification "But I realize it may not even be the same girl" casts a shadow back over what has gone before. At first, it seems like a limiting qualification: maybe I didn't get this right. But then it comes to seem (to me, anyway) an expansive qualification: this particular girl might be anybody; she is you and me. Is that too much weight to lay on that one line?

**SF:** When I was writing the poem I kept trying to recall the event, how it happened, and began to imagine the girl's story, making it up. I remembered the actual robbery, and the little girl, who was actually taken by the cops that night (I never saw

her again). So I decided to connect the two. By splicing them together the poem became something larger. The poem then became about voice, and it began asking some interesting questions about memory and storytelling. I feel the line speaks for the “Aerosol” section of the book, if not the entire collection. In the end the girl could be anyone of the other mother figures depicted in the book—a witness to harm, cruelty, who experienced it for so long it takes the act of doing harm to break free of it. This act is possible for any of the characters in the book, though it never really happens for Mangled or Paul.

ASHER GHAFFAR  
on  
**WASPS IN A  
GOLDEN DREAM HUM  
A STRANGE MUSIC**

**H. L. Hix:** It is impossible for me (whose literary education took place in the U.S., and began with late-'70s Norton anthologies) to read “Home is where wrought iron can melt into mirages or finally open if you have your documentation” without hearing it as contesting Robert Frost’s “Home is the place where, when you have to go there, / They have to take you in.” To what degree is such a resonance an accident of my background, and to what degree is it an essential part of the project of your book?

**Asher Ghaffar:** I’ve never read Frost seriously, although he sits on my bookcase gathering dust. I think my Mum might have put a laminated Frost poster on the basement wall in Thunder Bay. These Frost posters might have sold at Zellers stores across the country, where my uncles worked before they returned to Pakistan. Perhaps they brought the posters home. Perhaps they stole them on Easter. Nonetheless Frost became part of and parcel of our stucco walls. He sat right beside the poster that said “Dare to be different.” All I recollect now is

eating mushrooms in the '90s and hallucinating a bright, autumnal image and seeing the letters move and sway with the branches on the same poster.

Tropes of home and the presumption of belonging resonate throughout canonical American poetry (in addition to those other poems where home is an uncanny space, where the threshold grows expansive—can a home be simply an expansive threshold?), and my book is an attempt to ask whether such canonical assertions of home are not presumptuous. Shouldn't the door be open if it is a home, if it is your home, presumably? If you were born in a country, why do "they have" to take you in? I don't recollect reading it. Does this mean that I have not read it? I am not interested in erasing place, or going to epistemology of place, in so much as I am interested in finding a place that does not fix me. But it is comforting to sit in the hollow trunk of a dying tree that might set down aerial roots. I have troubles with my base center.

It doesn't sound like Frost's understanding of home is very comforting. To be home in a body that has been made uncanny, that has been made unstable, that has undergone atmospheric death, that has been fixed. How does one enter into the body of those names, those monoliths built out of a furious absence? Isn't this place where we walk now a place of terror?

**HLH:** In that same poem, "Introduction to a Home," the word "border" recurs several times, as it does throughout the book (especially in the first half). Am I right to take as central to the book the project of speaking and listening across borders, not only from securely within them? Is your book "the pledge, anthem to an unnamable country"?

**AG:** I struggled with "anthem," but I wondered whether there might be an anthem or a country if there was an unnamable space, a negative space within myself that could not be inscribed. I wanted there to be an anthem, a negative space; I mean a space that I could clearly see despite the border. That was not a frontier. I desperately wanted to write a deeply lyrical poem that positioned me in a place. I wanted to be stationed there. It wasn't possible, so I had to resort to a few abstractions. I am interested in borders. Spaces between spaces. Political borders. Borders between states of consciousness. Borders between differently marked bodies. Revolving doors. I'm not sure if one simply listens into them. Borders invade you. They destroy the continuity between inside/outside. They break the relationship that one might have created between the body and inside/outside. And then they start to create a new relationship. (I'm not certain I have crossed.) They constitute what is inside and outside. Is one ever securely within a place, and how does one achieve this sense of security? Is one ever securely inside?

**HLH:** Does your book attempt to fulfill the imperative to “Lean into the tongue of unknowing”?

**AG:** I don’t think it attempts to fulfill anything that I had consciously intended. I was trying to write a story, and every time I tried to write it I encountered a wall. Things broke down in that space between intention and story, and this is the book that came out of it.

I’ve been interested in various forms of apophatic thought for some time now, but after having numerous conversations with people, I have come to the conclusion that unless you encounter Marxism, feminism, postcolonial theory, etc., the same traces of racism, sexism, etc. will reappear, even in the most ostensibly “free” individuals. More often than not, I wanted to know. I returned from a trip to India, and was bewildered for three years. Something occurred upon returning that I have not grasped. To move toward the elusive form, to shape it. I am now writing a novel that places what I started in another fixed form. I am interested in shaping what started, in order to understand what emerged. I am moving to the outside. Perhaps when I reach the outside the poem will call me back.

FERIAL GHAZOUL  
on MUHAMMAD AFIFI MATAR’S  
**QUARTET OF JOY**

**H. L. Hix:** It would be hard for an American reader of *Quartet of Joy* not to think of T. S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, which some would describe as “difficult, ambiguous, hermetic,” just like Matar, and which shares Matar’s attention to the spiritual. But *Four Quartets* is, in relation to its cultural context, spiritually conservative and traditional. I take it that *Quartet of Joy* would *not* be regarded as either traditional or conservative in its cultural context. Are there particular spiritual questions raised by its difficulty and hermeticism, or would you describe the poem’s questioning as more general?

**Ferial Ghazoul:** This is so not only for American readers, but for any reader. There was a review in the Cairo-based *Al-Ahram Weekly* of *Quartet of Joy*, and the Egyptian reviewer’s central point was the affinity between Matar’s collection and T. S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets*. Without denying such correspondence, we can also read *Quartet of Joy* as a counterpoint to T. S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets*. Unlike Eliot’s reference to redemption in the Christian sense (what one might

call Eliot's late style), Matar celebrates a rebirth and a revival through the elements. Matar's use of scripture is cultural rather than religious. After all, the Quran—besides being a divine revelation—is a sublime text from the literary point of view. Sufis have used words and phrases from the Quran to construct a discourse that is anti-orthodox. The mystic lining of Matar's poetry offers a radical and innovative practice. The very structure of *Quartet of Joy* is based on an Empedoclean universe made up of plurality (earth, fire, water, air), but that worldview that marked pre-Socratic thought is integrated in an Arab-Islamic poetic discourse.

**HLH:** At various points in the poem, Matar pays particular attention to the letters of the alphabet. The relation between poetry and calligraphy is much stronger in Arabic tradition; I wonder if there is a special sense that Matar's attention to letters has that American readers might not normally be alert to.

**FG:** While in the West the image was used to articulate the divine message to the public, in the Arab-Islamic world the sacred word was disseminated through calligraphy. Arabic calligraphers developed principles based on geometry and aesthetics for the different scripts. Some of the chapters in the Quran open with letters that stand by themselves. Ibn 'Arabi, the medieval Andalusian philosopher,

mystic and poet, identified letters as "nations"; and among Sufis, the letter *alif* (the first letter in the Arabic alphabet) stands for God. Calligraphy tapped the artistic energy of Arab-Islamic people and came to represent visually and conceptually the artistic rendering of the Word.

**HLH:** I was especially struck by the moment at which Matar writes "It is passion in the Book / of the cosmos / and it is the *qasida* in the mud / of creation... / so listen." Is this a representative moment, in the sense that it exemplifies a complexity in Matar's view of things: disorder (passion) pervading order (the Book), and order (*qasida*) pervading disorder (mud)?

**FG:** Matar often refers to disorder/disassociation and order/harmony as two forces, sometimes intersecting and sometimes one within the other, so your reading makes sense. In this passionate dialogue between a woman and a man in "Air Joy," the female voice calls on her beloved to "invoke the wind and be silent." She is calling on his poetic power to make an appeal and then wait, "for the mercy of the clouds will descend / on no one save he who perfects silence / and waiting." She wants him to listen to the "birth" about to happen, and "birth" here stands for fulfillment in the personal, national and cosmic sense. It is precisely this silence that will make him hear the passionate impulses becoming

an orderly Book, and hear the very beginning of the *qasida*/poem as it is formed. In other words, what is formless becomes formed, taking the status of the sublime. But one needs to listen to those hushed voices of creation and beauty as they emerge and at the moment of their formation. This is looking forward to something that is taking shape. It is the promise not yet perceived except by those who are attentive. At least this is how I read this beautifully complex love poem.

JOHANNES GÖRANSSON  
on AASE BERG'S **REMAINLAND**

**H. L. Hix:** Would it be in the spirit of your concluding observation in the translator's note (that Berg "shows how every language may be foreign, even to its native speakers") to take the ending of "In Dovre Slate Mill" as one example of such a made-foreign language—when the speaker's "stiff hands cupped around the surface of your black cranium," could one take this as a kind of translation of a gesture of love into a foreign language?

**Johannes Göransson:** What I mean, in a very general sense, is the way Berg amplifies certain features of the Swedish language (the brutal consonants, the awkward sentence structures, the neologisms, the violent and physical phrases) to a degree that makes me feel the way a foreigner might feel trying to learn Swedish. As I point out in the introduction, there are so many weird neologisms that I begin to read regular compound words (such as "*spackhuggare*," killer whale) as strange neologisms ("*spack*" = blubber, "*huggare*" = biter, thus "blubber biter" in my translation). Or the way her odd phrases make me

see how strange regular idioms are. For example, in *Uppland* she uses the phrase “*halla sig i skinn*,” which means “calm down” (what you say to an unruly kid), but with strange variations of it calling attention to the literal meaning, “hold on to your skin” (she uses variations of this throughout).

**HLH:** Things seem overwhelmingly slimy and mushy and wet and warm until “Glass Deer,” in which suddenly all is brittle and crystalline and cold. How do you (how might I) take that sudden change?

**JG:** *Remainland* is a selection of poetry spanning four books (Berg has since then published yet another). “Glass Deer” is, in addition, part of *Dark Matter*, a long book-length gothic/sci-fi work that cannibalizes a variety of source texts, ranging from Harry Martinsson’s 1950s national sci-fi epic *Aniara* to the 1970s slasher movie *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. Both the “overwhelmingly slimy and mushy” aspect and this cannibalism I think pertain to your question.

To begin with, I think of Berg’s early work as having a kind of poetics of exhaustion. A lot of the source texts as well as the “action” (I wouldn’t call it plot because, though things happen, there is not a strong sense of causality) has to do with images of the denaturalized body, which are driven over the top into a state of exhaustion (or, to use Bataille, of

expenditure). If there’s an arc, then that’s the arc: from excess to exhaustion. When the “dark matter” is exhausted what are left are perhaps more bony, clearer, line-based poems. In the Swedish these are also very sing-songy or lullaby-esque.

I should mention too that I think one text *Dark Matter* cannibalizes is Sylvia Plath’s “Lady Lazarus.” Berg picks up on the way Plath uses excessive cinematic montage to bring about a state of exhaustion (where you can just imagine eating men like air). In *Dark Matter* there is an extensive imagining of getting the snail out of the shell (I rocked shut as a seashell) in order to “pull the plug” on the whole machinery. So *Death* is certainly one answer to your above question.

Another answer can be seen in *Remainland* in the move toward this kind of sing-songy lullaby-esque lyric in the next two books, *Forsla Fett* and *Uppland*. The “mushy” (or, as Berg calls it in a few interviews, “fat”) poetry is replaced by a more aural, less imagistically based writing.

In the overall arc of her career, this change can be said to signify a number of changes. She got pregnant (thus had to change her lifestyle); she severed herself from the politically radical Stockholm Surrealist Group, and a bunch of other stuff.



As in *Dark Matter*, *Remainland* uses various source texts—notably *Solaris* instead of *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, string theory instead of biological and anatomical science. In addition, Berg purposely (mis)translated string-theory articles from English into Swedish, creating many of the very ambiguous, multi-vectored repetends (strings/cords, vibrations etc.). The book in many ways offers the fusion of abstract science and grotesque maternal body (the meaning of “strings,” for example, is very ambiguous in this regard).

On the whole then this to me seems like a very deathly, exhausted book. That’s in large part what makes it so beautiful. But it’s also a poem about the maternal body and (unexpectedly perhaps) “love.”

*Upland* takes this lullaby mode in a different direction with its often infantile language (mixed with “cockviolence”).

**HLH:** The “whisper” that states “Mustn’t think we are something / Either heavier or lighter // We hang in the air / hover between life and death” recalls (for me) W. S. Merwin’s “Men think they are better than grass,” and the transition from a world view in which the earth is held up by Atlas to one in which it is held in orbit by the force of gravity. Does it also exemplify the linguistic transition you describe

in your translator’s note, that Berg’s “dynamic referentiality is more important than her actual reference”?

**JG:** There is a pun in this excerpt: “Mustn’t think we are something” refers to a common put-down in Swedish society—to think one is “something” (or to think one is special). This insult doesn’t exactly make sense in the U.S., where the insult we use is “loser” (i.e., the very opposite!). But the Merwin line does give it an interesting spin. I like your idea of “gravity,” because the entire book takes place in up-land, the in-between space: not flying and not landing, not floating away and not firmly planted on the ground (which I guess would be the Atlas-based worldview).

As for the “referentiality” quote: yes, I think this is an example of her vibrant, vibrating use of language. It doesn’t sever all ties with reference, but it doesn’t believe in some kind of natural language either. I think it’s also a change from the “exhaustion” of the earlier pieces, into a worldview that doesn’t exhaust—it just hovers.

NOAH ELI GORDON

on

## A FIDDLE PULLED FROM THE THROAT OF A SPARROW

**H. L. Hix:** The explicit subject of “An exact comprehension of the composer’s intent” is music, of course, but I am inclined also to take “not by voice / but what precedes it” as one formulation of an aesthetic ideal that the poems in your book pursue. Is that too great a liberty to take with the poem?

**Noah Eli Gordon:** Explicit subject: music; implicit subject: poetry. I like that you say “one formulation” rather than *the* formulation, as I believe in the total liberation of the poem as well as the poem of total liberation, but not in the liberty of the poet’s relationship to the poem. Poems govern poets through control and restriction; even the poem trumpeting radical liberation is restrictively fascist. It might love you, its reader, but it doesn’t believe in any god other than itself. It doesn’t understand that there is such a thing as *the poet*, which means, effectively, there isn’t. I don’t really believe this, yet I’m irrelevant: the poem thinks “authorial intention” is a nonsense phrase. If I weren’t already

completely disenfranchised here, I’d nod my head in disagreement. This is all another way of saying: take whatever liberties you like with the poem; it certainly wouldn’t grant me any.

That said, this ideal might be the question: does thinking occur before one is able to find the language with which one might house it? And, if so, is this language then continually playing catch-up, and merely a poor substitute, or false approximation of thought? And is the poem what arises from the lag time between thought and its articulation? Or is the poem a constructivist attempt to simulate this space? These questions seem to hover over this particular book for me, which I think of as an homage not to the instrument or the amplifier but to the cord connecting the two.

**HLH:** The short phrase “refusal of silhouettes” stays with me. What are the implications of refusing silhouettes?

**NEG:** Plato’s Cave meets Wittgenstein’s Case: Positive Capability; thus, implication itself, although inadequate, is often all there is. Poetry is to \_\_\_\_\_ as Play-Doh is to \_\_\_\_\_. (Note: any words work here.) Late at night, the voyeur watches a figure in the window across the way. In the previous sentence, we’re implicated as well. One has to fill in the rest.

Poetry gives us only ever part of the story. When Hitchcock's shadow turns to fit into a spare, line drawing of his face, replication meets implication, and we're relieved—there's some sort of illumination. The silhouette is more complex, the detritus of modernism par excellence. Electricity unfettered us, but it also brought about the burden of agency. Midnight is irrelevant to the poem written at midnight.

According to Wikipedia, *The Real Thing* is a play by Tom Stoppard, a short story by Henry James, a U.K. pop group, a Norwegian jazz quartet, a French-language Canadian television show, a 1980 collection of humorous essays by Kurt Andersen, an episode of the British television series *Lovejoy*, a 1971 blues album by Taj Mahal, an album and song by Faith No More, a compilation album by Midnight Oil, the debut album of Bo Diddley, an album by Jill Scott, an anthology video album by Marvin Gaye, the debut album of The Higgins, the 2009 album from Vanessa Williams, the fifth album by contemporary Christian group pureNRG, a song by Russell Morris, 2 Unlimited, Tony Di Bart, Gwen Stefani, Kenny Loggins, ABC, Kingston Wall, Lisa Stansfield, Jellybean, Alice In Chains, Angela Winbush, Pearl Jam and Cypress Hill, and may also be a slogan used by The Coca-Cola Company. I accept.

**HLH:** Your lines "an element / of discourse // arranging a house / into a house whose / arrangement is elemental" recalls for me *Tractatus* 1.1: "The world is the totality of facts, not of things." Is this poem (this book, poetry, for you) an assertion (whatever else it is also doing) that the world is the totality of arrangements, not of elements?

**NEG:** Why not a God forever oscillating between Word and Deed? Is there such a thing as a boulderless Sisyphus? I admire Hölderlin's fragments because they give us a window into the inchoate poetic impulse, one freed from the constraints the conventions of the day might have saddled him with. Richard Sieburth, in the introduction to his translation of the *Hymns and Fragments*, explains that he'd based his translations on the complex "reading texts" proposed by D. E. Sattler, texts which include multiple variants in different typefaces. "By presenting Hölderlin's texts as events rather than objects," writes Sieburth, "as processes rather than products, it converts the reader from passive consumer into active participant in the genesis of the poem, while at the same time calling attention to the fundamentally historical character of both reader's and writer's activity."

I bring this up because the lines you quote are missing (here's much of that "whatever else" this

poem is “also doing”) an important antecedent: “& the ghostlike / stone face of Hölderlin / disappearing // into an iron sky / into an element / of discourse // arranging a house / into a house whose / arrangement is elemental.” I’m not all that sure I’d advocate an “either/or” here; instead, I prefer a “both/then,” a constant becoming. Just as a fact might become a thing if its ubiquity is solidified into a foundation for further building, so an arrangement becomes an element once its origins are so remote and muddled as to seem nonexistent. The river is the same; the step is different. I like a poetry that espouses the space between “seem” and “seam.”

KIMIKO HAHN

on

## THE NARROW ROAD TO THE INTERIOR

**H. L. Hix:** It seems to me important that “Compass,” a poem that by title and placement first in the book nominates itself as a guide to what follows, ends not with imperatives but with questions. Is the relationship between those two questions part of the “compass”? I.e., is a fragment really the whole when it provokes in the reader the question “What do you think?”

**Kimiko Hahn:** Yes, “Compass” is meant as a guide for the prose-like sections, my versions of the *zuihitsu*. I close with a question, in part, because I cannot put my finger on a clear definition of this Japanese genre. So working in it, trying to figure out what it is, trying to subvert it from my own Western/Eurasian points of view—this is all a quest. I would like the reader to join me. I like *your* answer. Thank you.

**HLH:** In the middle of the book the *zuihitsu* is described as relying less on narrative than on “sensibility and spatiality.” If the “hint of narrative”

in the book is the mother/daughter relationship, is “sensibility and spatiality” given by the speaker’s being both daughter to her mother and mother to her daughter? Or is “sensibility and spatiality” added to that? In other words: is the sensibility and spatiality given by the speaker to the subject matter, or by the subject matter to the speaker? (Or is this simply a wrong-headed way of looking at things?)

**KH:** I tend to view things dialectically, so I would like to think that there is a back-and-forth between coming up with subject matter (the more conscious mode) and the subject matter rising from play (unconscious raw material). I also tend to believe that our themes are pretty well set early on in life, and that we just address this/those in various ways. My theme of loss might come up, say, as jealousy as well as grief. First as one of two daughters, then as a mother of two daughters. But perhaps the hint of narrative is less the relationship and more the story of grief. Spatial because grief may be the organizing principle rather than a chronological retelling—which, by the way, I am not at all opposed to.

**HLH:** The *zuihitsu* approach in the book has a strong aspect of chronicling throughout, but the three-poem sequence “Firsts in No Particular Order,” “Things That Make Me Cry Instantly—” and “Things That Are Full of Pleasure—” are *lists*. Are the chronicling and

listing complementary but more or less separate in this book, or are they interwoven in ways that might not be apparent at first glance?

**KH:** Here is where I have to admit to playing a bit fast and loose with the *zuihitsu* and its non-definition. In Sei Shōnagon’s *The Pillow Book* (the most well-known example) there are dozens of lists. So that is one of the most identifiable formats of the genre. But she also has essays and journal-like pieces. Any of these formats can range from one sentence to several pages. I know I have taken great liberties in my book. Probably those three “lists” (they are not a sequence) are the most conventional. In the future I will probably move more toward convention and write pieces that are less collage-like and a bit more essay-like. Here is one of Sei Shōnagon’s *zuihitsu* in its entirety (translated by Ivan Morris and published as No. 125 in the Penguin Classics edition):

When crossing a river in bright moonlight, I  
love to see the water scatter in showers of  
crystals under the oxen’s feet.

I am also increasingly interested in the *haibun*, which in some descriptions has been included in the realm of the *zuihitsu*. Ultimately, these are a view into what we in the West would call hybrid forms. In Japan they are canonical.

SAM HAMILL  
on  
**AVOCATIONS**

**H. L. Hix:** Two of the (many) passages I underlined while I was reading seem (though one occurs as part of a discussion of W. S. Merwin and the other of Olga Broumas) related to one another: "Poetry and language are not self-originating," and, "If the traditions upon which a poet draws are shallow and sentimental and self-serving, the poetry he or she adds to such a tradition will be equally so." How does treating poetry as a *practice* help incline work toward origination in a healthier, more profound tradition?

**Sam Hamill:** What you read is what you feed your muse. "Garbage in, garbage out," as the saying goes. Just as our language is enriched by the addition of words and ideas from Japanese or Latin American Spanish or Native American cultures or African American cultures, our poetry is enriched by those who extend it beyond our borders, who extend themselves beyond borders. My many years of immersion in classical Chinese and Japanese brought me into the practice of Taoist/

Buddhist heart/mind. My reading (for instance) of Eduardo Galeano's *obras* informs my definition of what is "American," and the fact that such a definition includes the poetry and music of two continents and literally hundreds of Native American cultures as well as national cultures inclines me, as a poet, to think far less along national lines and more along lines of solidarity with others. As the great French painter Maurice Vlaminck observed, "Intelligence is international; stupidity is national; art is local." Think globally while living locally is sound advice. The "practice" of poetry begs us to understand the longer, greater traditions of poetry. The Greeks, for instance, thought rhyme was for children and that what we would call political poetry was essential to poetry itself; yet in the U.S. today there are still those who insist that poetry should be composed in the English (or Russian) tradition of rhyme and meter and that (as Mark Strand has foolishly written) "political poetry has no legs." The longer view demonstrates the ignorance of such confining definitions of our practice.

**HLH:** You recount, and reflect on, a remark by Robert Duncan about the implications of construing the poet as enacting a sacrament. Am I right to take as a crucial theme of your book your substitution of an ideal of poetry as an act of conscience for the prevalent ideal of poetry as "emotion recollected in

tranquility"? And to hear this ideal as altering other ideals?

**SH:** We all have a range of emotions, the same range of emotions. But the quality of those emotions differs from human to human. Ezra Pound observed, "More poets fail from lack of character than from lack of talent." There is always too much "self" in current modes of poetry. There is always too much ego in the arts of all kinds. That's just one of the conditions of mediocre art, and without mediocre art, we'd likely have no great art, because the failures of others point out ways for a working practice to carry forward. The function of poetry is to call up emotions, to clarify them, as well as to tell a story or to present a striking insightful image, etc. As every parent knows, emotions need to be disciplined. Wordsworth's adage isn't bad. It's just insufficient and often taken out of context.

**HLH:** I may be repeating the same question three times here, but...what are the effects (on what and how we read, and on what and why we write) of taking poetry as a counter-language to the "ever-evolving vocabulary of violence"?

**SH:** Art is born in imitation. You wanna play a great jazz sax, so you "go to school" or Coltrane, then extend that schooling to include, say, an "open"

composer like Mingus. You study the whole history of jazz, which brings you to the history of European music and the history of African tribal music, and so on. The same things happen in writing. You learn from the masters, and the more masters you study, the more humble you tend to become, realizing how great the great ones really are and how important the endless number of good ones are. So you struggle to be a good player and get "greatness" out of the way. *Then* you might actually, almost accidentally, write a great poem.

ROBERT HASS  
on **TIME AND MATERIALS**

**H. L. Hix:** "A Poem" seems a condensed variation on the whole book, in its attention to time (the abrupt shift from a sentence in which "was" is used twice to a sentence that emphasizes the word "now") and to materiel, with the -el in place of -als evoking the god (Elohim, El Shaddai) named by Eberhart, an evocation intensified by the aerial/Ariel pun. I take as a direct implication of the statement near the end of the poem that one aim of poetry is to imagine a response to facts. Is it a less direct implication that in times of political extremity a poem may need not so much to do the imagining (that's easy in this case) as to do the recalling of the facts (much harder in the case of facts we would prefer to deny)?

**Robert Hass:** Yes. I didn't really think of "A Poem" as a poem. It's, I guess, a short essay in a book of poems, and the title was intended to allude, wryly, to that fact, and to some notion like the one you propose. Not so much, though, a matter of fact as a matter of naming. The story about Leon Gouré is a series of facts; reminding people that the Vietnam

war was based on terror is a matter of naming, with some intention of clarifying the public language around Al-Qaeda and the Iraq War.

**HLH:** The next poem, "Bush's War," identifies in the "taste for power" a "contempt for the body," and presents war's reduction of the body to bodies. Is it a way of thinking about this poem as representative of the book, and perhaps your entire oeuvre, to take the choice between "kissing / And bombing" as fundamental for humans?

**RH:** No, I don't think that is the import of the poem. That passage merely wonders if we don't "like the kissing and bombing together, in prospect at least." There is a lot of evidence (see Simone Weil, Chris Hedges's recent book) that people like the idea of war as a way of intensifying the drama of our mortality. I think people are going to kiss whether they bomb or not. I would like to see a lot less bombing. I would like (as "A Poem" proposes) to see the nations of the world ban the use of missiles and aerial bombs under most conditions (in something like the spirit of Kant's great essay "On Perpetual Peace"), but I have no expectation that people can or will choose between bombing and kissing. I know that larger questions about Eros and Thanatos as powers in human culture and the human heart lie



behind your question. I am trying here to slip out of an easy set of opposites.

**HLH:** "The Problem of Describing Trees" includes the line "It is good sometimes for poetry to disenchant us." Why "sometimes"?

**RH:** Because poetry also needs to enchant us, which probably doesn't need saying in a poem, since the connection between the music of poetry and its power to make (maybe someone with a philosophical education would say "instantiate") value is ancient, and poets have been going on about it from the moment we have records of poems by way of the invention of alphabets. Useful to say the other though, just for that reason.

JUAN FELIPE HERRERA

on

## 187 REASONS MEXICANOS CAN'T CROSS THE BORDER

**H. L. Hix:** I am interested in the continuity of *187 Reasons*, not only as a "remix" of earlier work with new work, but also as a work continuous with your other work, such as your writing for the theater and your work in the schools. Your introduction ends with these sentences: "I didn't start out to be a poet. Because I had been silenced, I started out to be a speaker." Is it fair to infer, from this book itself and from its place in your larger work, that, for you, "to be a speaker" means to speak and to give voice to others, or that in other words you understand your own voice to be inseparable from the voices of others?

**Juan Felipe Herrera:** To speak and to give voice to others and to voice my voice as inseparable from the voices of others and as separate and none of these, at the same time: this is where I stand. This is a more accurate way of describing what I do. It is impossible to "give voice" to others. It is impossible to have an "inseparable" voice and it also is very difficult

to have a “separate” voice, severed from the life of others, since, at its most basic level, language is an ongoing collective stream of constant exchange and growth. So imagine poetry-in-performance and in-text and other heightened, symbolically compressed vocalities. The poet of the twenty-first century is constantly at work dismantling borders of language, culture, communication, writing and expression.

**HLH:** Reading “Amerindia One Heart” and then “Vámonos a la Kiva Casa Libre” immediately after it leads me to ask (because both not only share an urge for oneness but also use as one language Spanish and English) how you see the relation between oneness of heart and oneness of language, between *el idioma del corazón y el idioma de la justicia*.

**JFH:** Language is a heart of sorts since it is a generator and circulator of personal, social and global consciousness. The Heart-Spirit-Big-being is a language and non-language at the same time, and neither of these and both of these (I say this since these are almost metaphysical concepts and can be better treated with what seem to be contradictions and since they embrace contradictions). Anyway, “oneness” is one of the most powerful keys to justice, since it involves the shedding or displacement of ego, power, cultural attachments and social material accumulations. With a poem that treats these themes

and is written with these keys in mind and hand, and is performed as a way to break through assigned borders of culture and communication from and for groups that are “beyond-audiences,” then we are on track. A “Beyond-Audience” is a group that is not officialized as an “audience.” It lacks the institutional and cultural approvals as well as the social stagings to be qualified as an audience. It is more of a “people.”

**HLH:** “One by One” feels mythical to me, analogous to the Hebrew Exodus, the Greek *Odyssey*, and other culturally formative journeys and border crossings. But “Indocumentos” seems to distinguish your project from these others, by not claiming the authority that such “documentos” typically claim. I take your “undocuments” as an ideal and a strategy, to claim a home not *from* others but *with* others. I don’t know quite how to frame my question, so I’ll simply end my observation with the hope that you will comment.

**JFH:** You are right: Exodus. When a group is persecuted and banished, what it writes, says, inscribes on tablets or papers is much different that what is expressed and marked in time by the banishers: its texts are “undocuments.” They float between being and non-being. Mexicans and Latinos and others in the U.S. suffer from this predicament. As long we are

“illegal” in one way or the other, our language(s), in text or not, is seen as lacking cultural footing, the frame of authenticity and significance. As a matter of fact, such expressions and acts are to be “deported.” This is a problem, since the location where they exist is legitimate. So what we have is the *Undocument*, a literature without paper and a shelf, yet a most powerful fluid site of continuity. To paraphrase Groucho Marx, in his letter to Warner Brothers, when directed not to use the owned term “Casablanca” in an upcoming movie title, he responded: we were brothers before you were.

YUNTE HUANG  
on  
CRIBS

**H. L. Hix:** Found texts (or texts *presented as found* texts, I didn’t try to check) appear throughout the book, as early as “Nearly Half of Crib Deaths...” They seem to me to help introduce thematic concerns, and to create a dynamic tension with the “made-up” poems’ interest in language itself (by attending to the referents of language). Are those roles at all related to your own purposes in including such found texts?

**Yunte Huang:** “Words as they are” is certainly one of the central concerns of *Cribs*. As such, then, they are subject to cribbing in the sense of borrowing, stealing, plagiarizing, (mis)translating and so on. I didn’t provide citations for the “found texts,” because the book sets out to undermine the idea of originality. It would be poetically self-defeating to provide citation. The found texts, as you have keenly observed, are treated as my “made-up” poems.

**HLH:** I take the piece on pages 40–41 as a statement about society’s enforcing our confinement within language (that what matters is the “coaching notes,”

our agreement with others, not with “reality”). Am I wrong to extend that thematic concern to the whole book?

**YH:** For better understanding the section on pages 40–41, you may consult my recent book *Transpacific Imaginations*, in which there’s a whole chapter on Angel Island poems and the “coaching notes” the detained immigrants used to beat the system. I’m a translator. The most interesting stage in translation for me is the stage of “crib” (literal translation), where the two languages meet face to face, like two lovers in an erotic embrace (hence the prevalent linguistic erotica in *Cribs*). In real life, I’m interested in listening to nonnative speakers struggling and playing with a language, a crib in which they were not originally born. Most linguistic cultures tend to defend themselves against such intrusions, building walls and boundaries to demarcate acceptable from unacceptable usages. As cribs, poetry cuts through these restrictions to imagine an outside for a language.

**HLH:** I’m interested in Joseph Conrad’s grammatical mistakes and Pound’s use of “an enormously learned crib.” Your *Cribs* are enormously learned, but also highly aware of limitation. Is that awareness of limitation as definitive of the work as its learnedness?

**YH:** The affected learnedness (Wittgenstein, Pound, Benjamin, Fenollosa, Conrad, Twain, Poe, Deleuze and Guattari, Thoreau, etc.) is a mockery of learnedness as mastery; hence, the quote on page 42 follows immediately the coaching notes on page 41. I was trained in the tradition of poet/scholar, a tradition that tolerates and even encourages a certain amount of poetic wackiness in scholarship, and vice versa. So you are on the mark by suggesting that there is an awareness of limitation.

**H. L. Hix:** In my head, I put your works into the box labeled “poetry,” even though most of the works I have by you are labeled by you, the author, not as “poems” but as “pwoermds.” Are your pwoermds a new kind of poem, or something *other than* poems (perhaps related to poems, but distinct from them)? Or is that a distinction that doesn’t matter to you? A typical lyric poem invites the reader to *interpret* it, or at least we often behave as if that were true; to what do pwoermds invite the reader?

**Geof Huth:** “Poetry” is the name of the realm I work within, but I see poetry particularly broadly, not even requiring the presence of words in a work I would call a poem. The word “poem,” though, seems important to me because it grounds my practice in an intense focus on language: the way it looks, sounds and means (processes that Pound referred to with various -poeias, but which I call shape, sound and sense). I call some of my poems “pwoermds” for the same reason a writer of sonnets might call his

works “sonnets”: only because it is a more specific term.

There is nothing particularly new about pwoermds, and I am not the creator of the form. I’ve written them for about a quarter of a century now and have written hundreds of them. It is a form both easy and impossible to write: a single word presented as a poem, a single word bearing the weight of expected significance.

The earliest pwoermds were written in the early 1960s, and Aram Saroyan, a one-time-minimalist poet, was the most famous and probably most successful practitioner of the form. All I have done of any consequence is give the form an unpronounceable name: “pwoermd,” an interweaving of the words “poem” and “word.” Against all reasonable expectation (and as if there were a crying need for it), this word has become the common term for referring to poems consisting of nothing but a single word.

A pwoermd is, significantly, the distillation of a poetic moment in a single word or string of letters. This means that a pwoermd is a poem, but an extreme minimalist poem, one sometimes reduced to a single letter. Yes, a pwoermd is meant to be understood, interpreted, made a part of a reader’s

consciousness. Pwoermds usually work through processes of distortion to suggest new ways of looking at language or thinking about the world. Some pwoermds are nature poems describing a moment in the natural world, many are revelatory puns focused on human activity or language and meaning themselves. And a few are sound poems meant to mean primarily through the beauty or dissonance of their sounds rather than anything else.

Emerson said, "Every word was once a poem." And every imagined word can be a poem, though I would never claim that every neologism is a poem. Most neologisms are practical particles of the language, and pwoermds should have nothing to do with practicalities.

**HLH:** In some ways, *NTST* is "normal" for a poetry book: e.g., its subtitle makes it a "collected," and it is in book form. But I have the sense, especially if I think of it in the context of other works of yours that I've seen, that the pwoermd (or the poem, either one) and the book are part of a larger artistic continuum, that they are more essentially within that continuum than separate from it, more essentially a part of that continuum than a self-contained whole. (Even if I had not seen other examples of your work, I might pick up on this from your exclusion from *NTST* of pwoermds that "depend more heavily on their

visual presentation for their meaning.") How would you talk about that continuum?

**GH:** Poets (and actually people of any kind) are remembered only for parts of themselves, so I'm remembered as a writer of pwoermds and a creator of visual poetry. All of this is my doing, because I've taken as a mission the promotion of these marginal forms of writing, forms that most people don't even consider writing. But the range of my poetic work is much broader than these two core parts of it might suggest.

The continuum of my poetry ranges from the purely textual to the primarily visual and then to the primarily oral. From the beginning of my writing career, all the way back in high school, I have been a poet and a visual poet. As a poet, I've written poems of various kinds that are merely text on the page. I call these "textual poems," and people would generally recognize these as poems, though I do employ a range of styles and techniques that one person or another might find unacceptable in a poem, including the insertion of images within the run of a poem or writing a poem primarily with nonsense words.

To me, pwoermds like those in *NTST* fall just about on the boundary between my textual and my visual

poems. They are simply pieces of text, so they seem to be textual poems, but usually there is something occurring in the pwoermd that can only be made clear by seeing it, so it usually depends on its visual presence in a way that other poems do not.

As a visual poet, I've created poetic works that require a certain visual presentation to complete themselves. Some of these poems include syntax. Many of them include words divorced from usual syntax. Plenty focus on fragments of words or on letters that do not cohere to form any words at all, and many use only fragments of letters or letters from imaginary alphabets. I call all of these "poems," to the consternation of many, but the visual poems examine and use language in ways usually quite different from my "normal" poems. Many people see these poems of mine as drawings or sculptures or other works of visual art, which is of no concern to me. They are those things as well.

My life could be reasonably reduced to the statement, "He was obsessed with language in all its forms." I grew up in an extremely verbal family, where punning and the distortion of language were the norms of life, where a large vocabulary was expected and not knowing all the senses of the word "obtain" could lead to derision. Along with an extreme interest in visual qualities of text starting at an early age

(three or four, by my mother's testimony), I've been interested in the sounds of the human voice, the blips and burps and hums we use to create words and imagine sense into being. After a lifetime playing with the sounds my voice could make, I have begun, in the last few years, to create poems that are purely oral events, sometimes with words in real languages and sometimes made out of the sounds of the body's emotions. Some of these poems are spoken. Most are sung. Some are performed and disappear into space. Some are sung as I record their sounds along with images of the environment I'm walking through. These poems include rhyming songs that I create extemporaneously, something I'd done for years without thinking anything of them. But now they are poems.

That is my continuum. It is one that depends on and requires diversity, one that desires and exalts it.

**HLH:** *NTST* includes some pwoermds from a *book of poems so small I cannot taste them*, which introduces itself as having been "written in a line / of minutes from / 3 to 4 February 2005." In addition, then, to questioning typical assumptions about the unity and discreteness of the poem and the book, are you questioning assumptions about the temporality of the process of composition (assumptions such as, for instance, the privileging of laborious and

lengthy composition: Larkin must be good because he spent a long time on each poem)? I am thinking in this regard about Coleridge's story of composing "Kubla Khan," how that narrative suggests a version of inspiration or genius, of the poet as medium; by analogy, your composition process would suggest what?

**GH:** I am a poor reviser of anything, but I have actually revised slightly a few of the poems in a *book / of poems / so small / I cannot / taste them* (I consider the linebreaks part of the title, rather than merely vagaries of typesetting). That point is fairly insubstantial, however, since I can rarely revise a poem well except when I'm still in the process of its initial composition. Ginsberg's "First thought, best thought" is not really my dictum; mine is "First thought, only thought."

My poetics is a poetics of presence within the language. Thus the process of composition, the act of creating something at a particular moment, is an essential component of that poetics. I understand, accept and promote the idea that we write what we write only because we created it at a particular moment. Sleepiness, ambient sound, a certain slant of light, and the experiences we've accumulated at a particular point in time all converge on the poem to create it. All writing is extemporaneous, because

it is always bound by the temporal sphere. There's no escaping it.

That book of tiny poems of mine is merely one piece of evidence of that. It's a book written at night during the winter, and I think it is clear that that is when it was written. It's a book written after just having read two books of minimalist poetry, Robert Grenier's *Sentences* and Mark Truscott's *Said Like Reeds or Things*. It's a book written into a little notebook Roy Arenella gave me, and that determined the number of poems in the book and the number of lines a poem could have. That notebook was also the direct inspiration for a pwoermd I appropriated wholesale. I wrote these poems to my wife, Nancy, while she was asleep, and that also affected what I would write. If I'd written the same book on another night, it would have been something else entirely. It is the accumulation of one man's experiences at one point in time, with those experiences most near in time affecting its production the most.

A pwoermd is always such a work. It always comes to me in an instant, fully formed and inspired by the world around me, and I immediately record it. I also write tiny one-line poems during the course of my day, especially during the course of a day's reading, and I record those online via my phone, deciding a book of them is done when a certain



number of poems is reached. The first of these, set for publication sometime in the near future, is *atwhich*, and the one I'm writing now is entitled *all Klimt with violets*. Many of my visual poems I create during meetings at work, their being little more than tiny doodles focused on the word. My poemsongs are creatures of the moment. I invent their tunes and words (or wordless vocal sounds) on the spot: on a stage, while driving a car, while walking down a street or upon my bed. They live in and of the moment, and if they disappear, they will still have lived their lives as they were meant to live them.

All these poems written of the moment are written with some plan in mind. I usually write books of poems, rather than discrete poems meant to subsist on whatever meaning they can scrounge on their own. So if I'm writing a poem, I usually understand it as part of the book it will reside within, and that is a constraint on the poem. That fact tells me how the poem must work, what rules it must follow, how it might fit into a continuous universe much bigger than itself.

Although I don't edit well, I do change my poems after first writing them, and occasionally editing is an expected part of the writing process. I adhere to no fantasy that hard work is necessary for or a guarantee of the creation of good works of art. The

quantity of work is immaterial to the value of the work of art. All that matters is the work before you. It can take as much, or more, work to create a poor poem as a transcendent one. People frequently tell me that they or others or I am doing the best we can, and I am always compelled to remind them that the best we can do may not be good enough. Effort doesn't matter. Only results do.

Still, I don't just abandon my works to the earth without seeing if they can be improved. I just probably do so less than most. I have a friend who is always rewriting her poems, even minutes before she performs them at a reading. By the time I read a poem, it is done—I have figured out everything my mind can figure out about it, and it has become a static fragment of our greater reality. I do, however, control my works by rearranging them, by abandoning some of them (this is shockingly rare), and, most importantly, by typesetting most of my own books of poetry. As a visual poet, the visual look of my books carries meaning to me. Everything is of a piece and required for the meaning of a book, so if I can control the typesetting I can control the meaning. The editing process, in this case, moves out of the realm of writing and into that of design, which is reasonable, since my poetics resides, usually, between two worlds.

GABRIELA JAUREGUI  
on

## CONTROLLED DECAY

**H. L. Hix:** I find myself wanting to treat the lines “like all history / they distort the view / —in this case beautifully” as a haiku-like statement of your poetics. How far off base am I to do so? What is the importance to your poetry of distortion?

**Gabriela Jauregui:** I think all writing is distortion in the fullest sense of the word: I don’t mean it in the narrow and negative sense of the perverse distortion or misrepresentation of facts (as in the media, say), but rather in the sense of “to turn to one side, or out of the straight position,” (*OED*) also in the sense of altering the shape of any figure (or reality) without “destroying continuity, as by altering its angles; to represent by an image in which the angles or proportions of parts are altered, as by a convex mirror” (*OED*). And poetry does this in particular ways. Poetry is full of rhythm, sound/meaning excursions that distort the way we think and use language normally, that give it different value and give us new angles by which to read/enjoy/decipher it. So I think distortion is essential to poetry.

I hope my writing can be a revelatory distortion, like the skull in Holbein’s painting *The Ambassadors*.

**HLH:** “My pencil scrapes the rust / off the pages” seems like a different aim from the more typical poetic goal of recording and documenting. What is the importance of this subtractive gesture instead of the more common additive one?

**GJ:** I meant that subtractive gesture to be revelatory, in an almost forensic sense: here’s all the blood that has rusted and accumulated over my pages, our pages, the pages of human history. It is all there—it’s all recorded already but my task as an individual is to slowly and patiently and carefully scrape and scrape until things can be revealed, found, discovered. To me, the poet as recorder is perhaps less interesting than the poet as forensic doctor, as investigator, as Sherlock Holmes, as bone-grinder, as blood-scraper.

**HLH:** And what of the defensive gesture in “Armor”: the remains of the “you” as a protection against the world, not as a charm but as armor?

**GJ:** This poem is one hundred percent Barbarian “I” (this becomes especially clear when you read the poems that precede and follow it in the book). So, more than armor, the “you” becomes a jewel: jewel as armor, armor as charm (a diamond is one of the

hardest surfaces, a perfect armor, and also a perfect charm).

The gesture in the poem is both slightly aggressive and defensive. If I had to choreograph it: the Barbarian "I" has turned the "you" into a diamond incrusting on its incisor (as jewel, armor/charm) and then the "I" has also refashioned the world into the dagger now strapped to its leg.

ANDREW JORON

on

## THE SOUND MIRROR

**H. L. Hix:** "I Am the Door" seems only one example (maybe any poem in the book would be an example) of the concentrated sound relationships between words (alliteration, etc.). But if I choose, say, Hopkins for comparison, as another poet whose work employs heavily concentrated sound relationships: he seems to be doing something like turning up the volume, but you seem to be...changing key? Ventriloquizing? Calculating?

**Andrew Joron:** Hopkins (one of my earliest influences) was attuned to patterns of all kinds, natural and linguistic, as revelatory of the "inscape" of being. For me, the inscape of a thing is not a timeless essence (though it's often defined as such) but a dynamic self-patterning or self-organization of the world-substance. For Hopkins, the inscape of language was the divine Logos, manifested first of all by the "instress" of sound. Yet sound in Hopkins is always a source of disequilibrium, of being-in-stress, a way of mortifying his longing for the stability of "immortal diamond." Hopkins's sound-play is driven

by the need for narrative and spiritual closure; mine (I suppose) is driven by a sense of open-ended emergency.

**HLH:** How far would I be able to push “perception pointing // To its stoppages” as a description of the project of the whole book?

**AJ:** This phrase, which would appear to resist a globalizing perspective, might lend itself, ironically enough, to a description of my whole project. Its meaning relates directly to the German Romantic poet Novalis’s aphorism: “*Wir suchen überall das Unbedingte, und finden immer nur Dinge.*” We seek everywhere the unconditioned, but always find only things (conditions). Here Novalis does not deny the Absolute, but implies that it stands forever, ecstatically, out of reach. Which among our sense-perceptions comes closest to reaching this unthingable, unthinkable state? Most sensations rivet us to the particularities of the body, either our own or another’s. Sound alone is the bound of the disembodied. (As a materialist, I intend “disembodied” to mean not a bodiless or transcendent state, but an immanent state of ekstasis, in which the body is beside itself.)

**HLH:** “Citations from Silence” introduces a dialogue between paired elements, the numbered sections and the named sections. Is such a dialogue implicit in

the poems that precede this one? To put this another way: are the poems that precede “Citations from Silence” like the numbered sections in “Citations from Silence,” with the difference that the silences that accompany them remain outside, rather than being presented in, the book?

**AJ:** A word stands in place of a thing or idea. So the sections referring to silence are actually displacements of silence. They *refer* to “silence” (which must be elsewhere); they are *about* silence, in the manner of discursive prose, whereas the facing prose poems, in contrast, *perform* and *transform* silence (in the same way that light, according to current physical theory, is an *excitation of the vacuum*). This holds true for the other poems in the book: they are not “accompanied” by silences that “remain outside” them, but instead attempt to ring or bring silence out of itself. There’s no either/or in this case. Sound and silence are locked in a mutually conditioning embrace. The play of sound against meaning in my work pushes language against its limit-conditions, ultimately moving with and against silence. The play of *speech* against *writing* also participates in this movement. Looking at letters, we wander among the domes and ziggurats of the Silencing. Paradoxically, much of the sonic/semantic play occurring in my work only becomes apparent on the written page (the sound mirror).

FADY JOUDAH

on

## THE EARTH IN THE ATTIC

**H. L. Hix:** Early in the book's very first poem, "Atlas," the speaker says, "For now / Let me tell you a fable." Throughout the book, the conditional or hypothetical posture of fables ("Suppose...") recurs, as for example in "Love Poem," which begins "Say I found you and god / On the same day..." If I am right to attribute importance to that posture, why is it important to the poems?

**Fady Joudah:** The hypothetical in poetry is necessary for several reasons: to open up a window for imagination; to safeguard against dogma and certainty; to serve as linguistic tool for the making of a poem, whether at the level of anaphora or syllogism, for example. But "fable" in particular is, for me, another way of saying "myth." The lexicon of time or timelessness is necessary in the making of a poem. Narrative is essential to the human mind's grasp of events, and "fable" is critical in transporting or translating the limitations of (historical, or linear) narrative to a more imaginative space.

**HLH:** "Love Poem" continues "at the border / Of words." The poems seem to inhabit or speak of borders, to happen *in between*. In "Landscape," for example, the speaker says, "There is a point A, which is fixed, // And a point B, which is in flux, / And I am the distance / Between them." What is the importance of such in-between-ness? Is it related to the provisionality noted in the previous question?

**FJ:** Exile is the crux of the matter here. Exile, internal or external, is a quintessential state of being, not only for the poet, but also for anyone. I seem, for many, to address "external" exile: that which is bound up in geography and the political boundaries of the nation-state age we inhabit. The "American" poem's "democratic" domesticity (if I may risk an admitted reductionism here for the sake of counterpoint) addresses mostly "internal" exile, but is obviously not limited to it. Exile from one's language, for example, is not limited to those who are bilingual or who have suffered the international crossings (or erasures) of (national) identity. Louise Glück's poem "Quince Tree" in *The Seven Ages* (followed propitiously by "The Traveler") is one of the best representations of exile I have read. Similarly Michael Palmer's lyric or John Ashbery's vernacular represent "landscape" as exile from one's language within its domestic borders: an exile whose trajectory is immense, beyond borders.

**HLH:** "Sleeping Trees," which is very concerned with in-between-ness, says that "Between one falling and the next // There's a weightless state." Do we fall because we do, or because we don't, bear what "Moon Grass Rain" calls "The narrative / Burden of events"?

**FJ:** What you address here, I hear and read as a definition of the lyric poem. There is no such thing as a pure lyric poem, not one without the elements of time, not one without negotiating narrative, I mean. There is always a narrative. Narrative defines our existence, especially, as I said, in its most severe form: history. And it is the poet's task to make choices about that "narrative burden," to diversify the quality and quantity of falling from, into or out of story, in order to free up the lyric that, in a way, possesses me like a rhythm singed on a child's mind. Dealing with the problematic of narrative is akin to defining modernity: to break with the past. Some may ask about the problematic of breaking with the lyric. I think we have already done that. Now it's narrative's turn: that which we cannot do without. A quasi-cycle. I wonder if therein also lies a definition for "post-modernity." My medical mentor used to say that the more articles that exist about a subject out there, the more it means we don't know what we are talking about.

KATIA KAPOVICH  
on  
**GOGOL IN ROME**

**H. L. Hix:** The sense of smell is often described as our "deepest" sense, the one connected with our "lower" rather than our "higher" brains. The first poem in the book talks about the *smell* of the motherland: is this a way to emphasize in the book a connection to Russia that is more visceral than cerebral?

**Katia Kapovich:** Yes, the sense of smell is primitive and "low" like you put it, but it's still more sublime compared to the sense of patriotism. The poem is basically antipatriotic.

**HLH:** "A Shave" follows immediately after "Privacy": that was the moment in my reading when I began to see how interested the book is in very particular people and very particular places. Am I right to see as one theme of the book what Simone Weil would call "the need for roots": the dependence of personal identity on connection with (a) place?

**KK:** No, my theme is no need for roots. Trespassing is the philosophy.

**HLH:** In the so-called West, states such as Germany and the U.S. like to consider themselves sane and rational, but the “I” and the “he” in “Totaled” laugh “like crazy.” Would I be reading too much into the poem if I saw it as reflecting how inexact is the correspondence between two “states”: the nation-state in which one lives, and one’s state of mind?

**KK:** Yes, something like this, the permanent opposition between an inner and outside State. The characters are young too, not to forget. And “like crazy” is a Russian cliché of my generation, that one of the late ‘60s/early ‘70s. We did everything “like crazy.” *Comme des fous*.

DAVID KEPLINGER

on CARSTEN RENÉ NIELSEN’S

## THE WORLD CUT OUT WITH CROOKED SCISSORS

**H. L. Hix:** Nielsen’s poems bring to mind for me the English words “animal,” “animation” and “animism,” which share a root, and which in some way rhyme with or echo the coincidence of phylogenetic fact and ontogenetic metaphor (our evolutionary descent from apes) that is posted for question in “Darkness.” What about our animality is “put...another way” in/ by these poems?

**David Keplinger:** When Nielsen came to speak to my students at American University last spring, he was asked similar questions about our animality, and his response surprised them. He said he felt it was very interesting that we saw those coincidences and rhymes in his work, but what did he know, he “only wrote the thing.” I suppose if we were to ascribe animality to his poems it would find its source in this intentional unintentionality. His poems (and I have worked with them so long they now feel like mine) are very conscious about their movements. He

works on them meticulously, but they achieve the unchoreographed, un-intention of birds suddenly turning simultaneously in the air.

**HLH:** “Carrier Pigeon” seems to suggest that transformations are multiple, various and perpetual. There’s a strong tradition in literature of metamorphosis as a theme and metaphor (with Ovid as the most obvious exemplar). How would you speak of Nielsen’s poetry in relation to that tradition?

**DK:** Nielsen’s poetry finds its roots in the French Symbolist tradition of Rimbaud and Baudelaire. It is a tradition in which metaphor is used to infuse the world with mystery—once the divine correspondences in nature are debunked by Darwin. Nielsen is a scientist, though. He sees transformations not in the mythic world but in the everyday world, as Darwin did. He sees a heart behaving like a dog, and an ape behaving like a man. His way of infusing the world with myth is to see the mythical in the ordinary, and to speak with the language of a neighbor observing someone’s underwear hanging on the line. The prose poem is his microscope slide. Everything oozes together in that space, turning into everything else.

**HLH:** “Horse” and “Marmot” seem to me especially vivid examples of an aspect of Nielsen’s poetry. In “Horse,” the girl perceives what others don’t perceive,

and what indeed might not be the case. In “Marmot,” humans are present only by implication, and as an absence. Is this attention to what is ambiguously there and not there something you regard as peculiar to Nielsen’s poetry, or as more broadly characteristic of poetry?

**DK:** I agree with Mallarmé that meaning is found not in things themselves but in the ways that things relate when they are set side-by-side. He said the meaning comes in the interstice, in the gaps. Essentially, Nielsen’s poems are full of gaps. So each relationship carries multiplicities of meanings. Not random meanings, either. His intention is very clear—to surprise us with joy when we’d expect horror, and to horrify us when we are sitting satisfied and unsuspecting. He does this by creating an absence of something we inevitably imagine for ourselves—he trusts us to do the dirty work.



EMELIHTER KIHLENG  
on  
**MY UROHS**

**H. L. Hix:** What is the importance of starting off your book with a poem that consists almost exclusively of questions?

**Emelihter Kihleng:** When I chose to “open” my collection of poetry with “To Linda Rabon Torres,” I suppose I wasn’t really thinking about the fact that it consists almost exclusively of questions. I wanted to put it first because in some ways I saw the poem as a warning to people reading my book that I am going to be talking about or writing back to the discrimination faced by “Micronesians” who live away from our home islands, in places like Guam and Hawai’i . I suppose I was saying, “This isn’t a pretty poetry book full of flowers and beautiful island scenery and you may not like what I have to say.” “To Linda Rabon Torres” is one of my most powerful poems in *My Urohs*, and the first section “Likio” focuses on the lives of Pohnpeians living “on the outside” or away from Pohnpei, and I thought beginning with that poem would be appropriate. Going back to the poem consisting almost entirely

of questions: I think the collection serves to dispel, question and answer a lot of misconceptions and misunderstandings about people from my part of the world, Micronesia. *My Urohs* questions representations of “Micronesians,” more specifically, Pohnpeians, by outsiders and by ourselves; it questions our identities at home and in the diaspora. It questions change, movement, identity and more. I love to question.

**HLH:** The word “FACT” occurs in all capital letters at the beginning of one of the first poems in the book, and all the poems seem grounded in fact. What is the role and importance in your work of fact?

**EK:** A lot of my poems evolve out of headlines I read or things I hear, and am sometimes shocked to hear (and find offensive) that people say. As an undergraduate at the University of Hawai’i at Manoa, I studied under Juliana Spahr, and I credit her for getting me to research my poetry. At the time I was working on my honors thesis, which was a mixed-genre creative manuscript that consisted of an eclectic mix of poetry, oral history and media clippings focused mostly on “Micronesians” living in the diaspora. I had completed some oral-history interviews with Pohnpeians living in Hawai’i and in Pohnpei, and incorporated those into the manuscript. I started to write poems that included statistics and “facts” having to do with the subject

matter of my poems. "The Micronesian Question" and "Micronesian Diaspora(s)," two of my earliest published poems, incorporate oral-history interviews and information collected from newspapers. Juliana Spahr and Jena Osman's twelfth issue of *Chain* was on facts, and I wrote a poem based on fact called "Destiny Fulfilled?" for that issue. Since then, I've been on a roll with putting facts into my poetry. It's like having citations for my poetry, and I like having evidence and being able to back up the things I write.

**HLH:** Those questions focus on the beginning of your book and look forward into the book, but the last stanza of the last poem makes me want a retrospective look also. Given what seems a strong urge in the work to record, to document, the speaker's protestation that she does not "want to go back" and "be forced to remember / what is gone" is striking. Is this a fulfillment of the urge to record fact, or a counter-urge?

**EK:** Very interesting question. I agree that there does exist a "strong urge in the work to record, to document." I can see how one might find it striking that I end the collection saying that "I don't want to go back," when throughout much of the collection I am a kind of poetic "ethnographer" as Teresia Teaiwa writes. In that particular poem that I end

with, "Ong Pahpa," I am writing about the power of memory, the memories of particular places and how they can haunt a person—depending on what may have happened to that place and how it may have evolved over time, sometimes for the worse, as is the case in this poem. I write about a particular piece of land that belongs to my father's family, and my father's memories of it, and how I am somewhat grateful that I don't share the memories that he has of the place. My poem is a small attempt to record my father's memories of that place, while not having to experience them for myself, and wishing I could look back into the past while being grateful that I can't. Seeing the memories through my father's eyes is painful enough. Therefore, I'd have to say it's both an urge and a counter-urge to record fact or, more so, an urge to document memories that are not mine, but that I want to remember.

PETER H. LEE

on

## ECHOING SONG

**H. L. Hix:** You note in your preface that the poets in *Echoing Song* question “the symbolic basis of women’s social oppression,” and construct a “modern female voice of resistance.” Having translated (or gathered translations of) the work from one *language* to another, do you see that resistance as translatable? In other words, are there aspects of these poets’ resistance to the *circumstances* of social oppression in Korea that apply to social oppression anywhere?

**Peter H. Lee:** A Korean woman poet’s “resistant voice” should be contextualized and decoded (“unriddled”). A typical poet is writing in the context of Korea’s past and present: 500 years of Confucian moral discourse whose aim was to contain, control, and silence women; Japanese colonization (1910–45), the Korean War (1950–53), corrupt or dictatorial governments (1948–92) and imperialism. In fact, Korean poets, both male and female, wrote their works under continuous censorship from 1910 to 1987.

There was almost no female discursive tradition in premodern Korea, as elsewhere. In my opinion, our poets are trying to invent a language adequate to express the multiplicity in feminine desire and experience that informs their artistic vision: a language that is able to present feminine subjectivity and sexuality as culturally variable. The language of suffering in East Asia and the West, for example, is male. Hence our poets delve into ancient shamanism with its phonocentric tradition, in which women control symbol-making in myths and religious imagery in the folk tradition. Their resistant voice, in varying degrees, is expected to have a disruptive function. They are trying to write a socially and culturally engaged poetry that is not continuous with the language of their oppressors.

Similar works by feminists elsewhere (e.g., Native American, African American, Asian American and other minorities) are accessible with proper contextualization, because gender-based oppression and cultural-symbolic repression exist globally. The poem as poem seeks other poems of a similar kind for recognition and evaluation, but the educated reader is able to note the differences at the points of maximum resemblance. As Barbara Johnson said somewhere, the question of gender is a question of language.

**HLH:** I found the “Why I Write” notes especially compelling, and a very helpful and provocative aspect of the anthology. I found myself trying to apply each “Why I Write” statement more broadly than to the individual poet who wrote it. For example, when Kim Sûnghûi says her writing rejects “the world of ‘rightness’ and the world of ‘of course,’” I begin to see others of the poets also seeking to take nothing for granted. Are there ideals expressed by one of the poets that seem to you to extend also to the work of others of the poets?

**PHL:** Yes, for example, Mun Chônghûi’s preoccupation with “a live language,” and Kim Chôngnan’s battle cry, “To think with all of my body. To perceive a woman’s body, which is nature, teaches,” which echoes French feminists, especially Cixous’s notion of feminine writing, *écriture féminine*, in which one writes with one’s body.

**HLH:** One particular moment in the book to which I keep returning is Ko Chônghûi’s “A Study of Women’s History 6,” and its distinction between a man’s rule and a woman’s way. Is this a distinction that, though only explicit here, is implicit throughout the work in the book, and helps to explain the success you identify in your preface, the poets’ success in “constructing a female voice of resistance” without neglecting “women’s spousal and maternal role”?

The resistance then is to a man’s rule, and the affirmation is of a woman’s way?

**PHL:** Yes, you are right. The late Ko Chônghûi, and Yi Yônju, Ch’oe Sûngja, Kim Sûnghûi, Kim Chôngnan and Kim Hyesun, in various ways, are strong feminist poets.

RAINA J. LEÓN  
on  
**CANTICLE OF IDOLS**

**H. L. Hix:** A number of poems in *Canticle of Idols*, starting with the very first poem, “Voz: Sweet Child,” relate themselves explicitly to Biblical passages. There is a long, rich, varied tradition of Biblical hermeneutics. How do you see these poems in relation to that tradition? Would you describe the poems as interpreting the passages? As retelling the stories? As applying the passages? Or in some other way?

**Raina J. León:** It is an honor to be considered as falling within this tradition. Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon was one of the first poets that I ever read and with whom I connected that really combined Biblical knowledge with a modern reimagining/situating.

The Voz poems within the book (there are three) stem from a personal dedication to form. When I was conceptualizing the book, I knew that I wanted it to be divided into sections ruled by the three Marys of the Bible—my own virgin, mother and crone within the Christian tradition. I wanted the

intersection between those women, though, to be led by the seeing of one man, himself divided between Earth and heaven. The Voz poems (“voz” meaning “voice” in Spanish) refer to this duality within one person trying to wrap a human experience with an omniscience surrounding these mysterious and yet clear women. The poems play upon this understanding that Jesus was a rabbinical scholar, entirely familiar with the Psalms, the praise songs of God. In these persona poems, I was allowed to imagine Jesus using the Psalms as praise songs for the women (as related to his understanding of God, perhaps allowing that God has not just a masculine energy). Within the poems, a femininity is encountered and acknowledged as well.

In addition to this, within this series, I created a form, choosing the Psalms to be reinterpreted by the persona and woven throughout the conception of womanhood. The Psalms are unable to be extracted without altering the meaning. Standing alone, yes, they mean one thing, but within the poems and within the ruminations of the persona, they mean another. The poems interpret the passages, retell the story and apply the passages to an intimate understanding between man and devoted follower, man and mother, and man and lover.

**HLH:** “Oración del cuerpo,” especially its fourth stanza, leads me to two questions on the pattern of the previous question (how are your poems related to X?). One question derives from the poem’s being *una oración*: is there a sense in which this is broadly representative of your work, a sense in which you see all your poetry as prayer? The other is about the Spanish language: I took the lines to mean that Spanish is “a language of happiness” and “the wrong language” for prayer, only to you, not in general, and only *because* it is the language of your past, not because of some intrinsic characteristic of Spanish. But I also took it as a concrete instance of the problem that Augustine poses in a more abstract way in the *Confessions*, namely that we humans need to pray but do not have the language for it. Do you see the dilemma in your poem about the role of Spanish as also having this universal character, as being a particular instance of a general problem?

**RJL:** I wouldn’t say that I see my poetry as prayer generally. Within this first book, I was working within that vein, but my latest work is more concerned with abuse, neglect and the molding of children into the selves their parents/communities would have them be. My work changes according to my experience at the time, what I am reading, what life-stage I am in, what central concerns impress upon my life, etc. *Canticle* was written during a time when I was deeply

immersed in a return to Catholicism, a desire to make sense of a devastating loss in my life and of culture shock in moving to an entirely different location from anything I had experienced previously. Perhaps this first book, though, was filled with prayers, a pleading to the divine for clarity.

In reference to this conflict presented by Augustine, “namely that we humans need to pray but do not have the language for it”: I think the language of love is the language that God speaks. For me, that language is Spanish, and through those words I find it easiest to communicate with the divine, to feel a direct connection. Though I have a greater fluency in English than Spanish, the softness of the vowels in my mouth in Spanish has always been a corridor through which I more easily experience the transformation and transcendence that for me God represents. I agree with Augustine that we humans need to pray, and sometimes it is in the act of offering that we fulfill that need. For me, speaking Spanish in prayer is a beginning of offering, particularly that of praise. For others, the offering is in meditation, in writing, in comforting others, etc. My acknowledgement of that role of Spanish is an acknowledgement of a greater concern with prayer.

**HLH:** The last stanza of “Japanese in Rome” (which reminds me of Anne Carson’s lines: “Moonlight in

the kitchen is a sign of God. / The kind of sadness that is a black suction pipe extracting you / from your own navel and which the Buddhists call // 'no mindcover' is a sign of God.") feels to me as though it casts its shadow over all of *Canticle of Idols*. Am I putting too much pressure on it if I construe it as a framing question of the whole book?

**RJL:** This concept of offering I noted earlier is interesting in this context as well. I was recently sharing a conversation with a younger poet. In our conversation, I became greatly agitated, even angry. It was not what the poet said or did, but that there was no generosity in either action. There was no offering without expectation of return. Within that last stanza of "Japanese in Rome," I found myself considering the generosity of the divine, after experiencing a loss that crumples the body like a thrift-store shirt, something worn and tossed aside easily. At the time, I was questioning (invoking Mary Magdalene after the death of her beloved Jesus, the loving nature of God), perhaps considering that even within divine love there is a conflict, but coming to no conclusion.

ALEXIS LEVITIN  
on ASTRID CABRAL'S **CAGE**

**H. L. Hix:** You note in your introduction that creatures from Cabral's childhood "have accompanied her faithfully through a lifetime of travel," and that she herself claims never to have renounced her animality. If Aristotle considers humans "rational animals," is it fair to view Cabral's poetry as depicting humans as "traveling animals"?

**Alexis Levitin:** Let me answer at a slight tangent. When asked years ago if she goes often to Manaus, Astrid replied: "I do not live in Manaus, but Manaus lives in me." In her dreams she often finds herself walking the streets of Manaus. As for travelling animals, her tangential reply is: "I travel and the animals of the Amazon travel with me."

**HLH:** Taking "Amphibian" as a hint, is it too reductive to see Cabral's poetry as amphibious, in the sense of operating equally well in nature (as represented by her childhood experience) and culture (as represented by her urban adult life)?

**AL:** Your metaphoric speculation seems valid to me and to her (she is sitting beside me as I write). However, she is a pretty down-to-earth type person, and so she prefers to see the term “amphibian” in its earthly, literal sense of being at home on land and in the water. In fact, turns out that in a much earlier book called *Visgo da Terra (Viscosity of Earth)* she divided the text into three sections: “Terra” (“Land”), “Agua” (“Water”), “Seres” (“Creatures”). As for nature/culture, she says some of her books leave her childhood life in nature behind and focus on more abstract, universal things. She feels that her poetry presents two distinct lines: one turns toward the tangible, the concrete, the immediate, a world of places, animals, things; the other turns towards abstract thought, contemplation, speculation, etc. (Two whole books are full of ruminations over death, many of the poems provoked by the deaths of her husband and one of her sons). *Jauala*, of course, is a collection that clearly deals with both nature and culture. By the way, her translation of *Walden* suggests an interest in the amphibian forces in our lives: was Thoreau “really” in nature? Remember that even from his humble cabin, he would walk every afternoon over to Emerson’s for dinner. He was, in fact, a highly cultured man, filled with Greek and Latin, etc., while counting his beanstalks. [Laughing]

**HLH:** Animals and plants in Cabral’s poetry seem to tell us not only about themselves, but about ourselves. For example, the snake in “Life Among the Ruins” tells “of the nothingness surrounding man,” and the chestnut trees and turtles in “Pity” prompt the speaker to ask “do they feel pity for me?” This leads me to regard Cabral’s poetry as (whatever else it is also doing) at least implicitly articulating a vision of humanity. Are there other indices of her vision that I should also be alert to?

**AL:** Yes, when she speaks of animals she is thinking of us as well. In fact, she is against the artificial separation between the world of animals and humans. Very often in this book she is describing the real animals she has encountered literally, while at the same time using them as metaphors for other observations from human experience. For example, “Cave Cane” is a poem in which she is really talking about what is inside people, the animal side of ourselves. Throughout the book there is a strong metaphoric aspect in which things human are represented by animals. For example, death appears as a naked jaguar in one poem. In another, the mystery of death appears as the “Seven-Headed Beast.” The “Two-Faced Dog” for her represents the ambiguity of life itself, which gives us the good and the bad (which, by the way, is a common expression in Brazil for any difficult problem one is confronting). The poem called “Tamed



Dragon" is of course about a childhood memory, but also about the entire magical world of childhood fantasy which one loses upon "growing up." " River Dolphin in the Body" is based on a familiarity with the real river dolphins of the Amazon (quite a sight, by the way, when their perfectly smooth, rounded back, utterly pink, suddenly appears curving through the muddy waters), but also clearly represents the universal force of sexuality in humans. The poem "The White Whale" is as much about the world of images in which the modern world has immersed us (the white whale is seen on a TV screen, hence the sofas at the end of the poem) as about the white whale itself. So in this poem the nature world ends up being a world of images, a part of human culture.

MAURICE MANNING  
on  
**BUCOLICS**

**H. L. Hix:** In an essay in his *Orpheus in the Bronx*, Reginald Shepherd notes that poets often "write about nature because there is a readily available, thoroughly worked-out language with which to do so." Your book appeals by its very title to the tradition that did the working-out of that language, but it seems to be about the business of creating its own pastoral language more than that of employing a given language. To what extent do you mean to draw on the bucolic/pastoral tradition, and to what extent do you mean to reject or revise it?

**Maurice Manning:** Your quote from the Reginald Shepherd essay is interesting. I've not read that essay, but based on the single quote I'd say I'm certainly aware of particular conventions associated with the pastoral. Some of those conventions include the notion that singing goes along with physical work, that a kind of good-natured competition arises between fellow laborers, and that the work of farming (hoeing, planting, mowing, maintaining pasture) has emotional and spiritual parallels. These

are features of the pastoral tradition I agree with and would not want to reject. Some poets in the pastoral tradition use the pastoral setting as a stand-in for something else, and the pastoral is part of a larger artifice. But in my case I wanted the pastoral world to be as real and palpable as possible. Yes, the sense of language in the book is intentional, but that's because I'm from Kentucky and my little place in Kentucky informs everything I do; it's just my effort to put a Kentucky stamp on the poems, which for whatever reason I can't avoid trying to do. It's also worth noting that all of the poems in the book "happen" outside, where the shepherd-speaker is in direct physical contact with the created world, and is therefore presumably that much closer to the Creator. In everything I do I think about dramatic space, seeing the poem as a kind of stage, and always I want some specific verifiable action happening on the stage, not because I intend a pose or tableau, but because I see poetry emerging from physical activity, from real time and place and action. That's often what happens in my own case.

**HLH:** The poems address an entity who seems closely identified with Nature (capital N) as "Boss." The address seems different in tone and purpose from, say, Keats's "To Autumn," but why personify and speak to "Boss"? What are the risks/limits for us (humans? Americans? poets?), and what are the

benefits/possibilities, entailed by personifying and speaking to (a figure of) Nature?

**MM:** At some level it's hard for me to see a distinction between Nature and any concept of God. I like to think we are always confronted by the created world: it's always there in front of us and we're in it; we're part of it, and have no special dispensation to separate us from other creations, such as trees or streams or hillsides. If one believes the wind is the sound of Creation voicing its own process, if one believes trees swaying in the wind and birds dashing from the blowing tree branch are further examples of a creation process which is still unfolding, then I don't see how one cannot also begin to think about the Creator. That's my experience at least. None of it seems risky or limiting to me, but I'm not a skeptic about these matters. On the other hand, however, I'm not a preacher. The created, natural world has always filled me with wonder. It has been a sustaining wonder and it has made me grateful.

**HLH:** I doubt a reader could get through the poems without thinking of nature and god, but "Boss" also seems to draw on another register, that of labor. Certainly it is less explicit, but am I wrong to hear it as a presence in the poems?

**MM:** Yes, I wanted Boss to be a kind of Creator and author of the world, but also the Boss-man, the one in charge who assigns the chores and tasks of maintaining a small patch of Creation. I've done plenty of farm work through the years and had lots of labor-intensive jobs. In those situations, the boss-worker relationship is complicated. It can be oddly intimate, somewhat parental. In my experience, such a relationship has been warm and informal, but one which is also marked off by strict boundaries. The worker is obliged to do what the boss says, but the worker can also doubt the boss or be resentful of the boss's authority. In most of the poems in *Bucolics*, the shepherd-speaker is doing some kind of work or about to, or is reflecting on a long day of work, and he acknowledges (I think) he's done the work because Boss has told him to, or has at least given the signal to get back at it. One of the conflicts the shepherd-speaker discovers is he cannot see an end to the work: why tend the green? Why notice it daily? To what purpose beyond blind and imposed duty are my labors? The poems in the book move from a jumpy and jamed rhythm into an increasingly steady tetrameter, which is my effort at suggesting the shepherd-speaker talks himself into accepting his labors in the presence of such uncertainties, taking pleasure in the rhythm of the work itself and singing along to it.

BRANDY NĀLANI MCDOUGALL  
on

## RETURN TO THE KULA HOUSE

**H. L. Hix:** At least "Po" and "Haumea" among the early poems in *Return to the Kula House* appear to me to be creation myths. What is the importance to your poetry of this approach to origins, of poetry's coming from seeds "long germinated"?

**Brandy Nālani McDougall:** Yes, both "Po" and "Haumea," as well as a few others in the collection, are from our creation (hi)stories. Our creation stories are a tremendous source of inspiration for me spiritually, culturally and artistically. The line "come the off-shoots of those long-germinated seeds" is a reference to the view that is common throughout the Indigenous peoples of the Pacific of the stars as ancestors, which I choose to view as the "long-germinated seeds" from which we, the off-shoots, have sprung. I see poetry and language as existing on a similar nonlinear continuum, allowing for the past to be a part of the present, just as our ancestors, the very stars in the heavens, are part of us. The words we use are off-shoots from the originals, which have had to change, evolve, adapt; still, they

have an ancestry we should recognize. Stories and songs are like that, too. They have a life all their own whenever they are retold, performed, written and read. They are kin to those stories and songs from our ancestors, and in that way, they are the past and the present simultaneously.

**HLH:** Your poems describe memory's singularity ("There is only the spirit of memory"), its imposition ("I had to remember for all of us"), its (in)completeness ("Once, it was enough to remember / without remembering"). What role does memory have in reviving "the old words that have succumbed," and what role do the old words have in memory?

**BNM:** This question is a little harder to answer because the poems from which it has been taken are dealing with different issues—some personal, and others cultural. The poem "Ka 'Ōlelo" is focused on the process that many Hawaiian families are going through now in terms of language revitalization. I was reflecting upon how, in the history of my family, the Hawaiian language, 'Ōlelo Hawai'i, stopped being spoken/handed down to the next generation during my great-grandfather's time, so that my grandfather was the first generation of our family to be raised without speaking Hawaiian, only English. My great-grandparents made this decision out of both political and economic necessity, as well as out of love and

protection of their children, who could receive corporal punishment in school if they were caught speaking Hawaiian, which was banned in educational and political arenas. The poem is intended to share some of that story, as well as to reflect upon the cultural differences between English and Hawaiian. As a poet, English is my first language and it bears that colonial mark, though I am conflicted, because I love poetry, which I feel really pushes at the limits of the English language. I am currently studying 'Ōlelo Hawai'i, a language I feel I should have been born speaking. My whole life, English words didn't seem to fit with certain Hawaiian cultural concepts and experiences. It felt like the net that catches too little in its mesh. Certainly, after studying Hawaiian, I've come to see how English seeks to apprehend, to capture; it seeks to define and explain. On the other hand, Hawaiian is much more comfortable with metaphor and multiple meanings of words. To limit a word to one meaning may be more precise, but it also limits the spirit behind that word, all the ways it could be used. The "old words that have succumbed" are those Hawaiian words, some forgotten and waiting for us to speak them again, some only now being given use again through Hawaiian-language revitalization efforts. Still others are being born, as we must create new words to fit our lives and our new technologies.

GEORGE MESSO  
on İLHAN BERK'S

## A LEAF ABOUT TO FALL

**H. L. Hix:** Berk's comment that the "difficult thing is to write easy, flawed poems" reminds me of Yeats's "Adam's Curse": "A line will take us hours maybe; / Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought, / Our stitching and unstitching has been naught." The (apparent) ease in Berk's poems makes them welcoming to the reader. Is there something about their flaws that lends them (some portion of) their weight?

**George Messo:** I chose a lot of the poems from Berk's *Deniz Eskisi*. If there's one book above all that I like, it's this one. It was written at a time when Berk had recently retired and moved to live in the coastal town of Bodrum. A lot of the book's "feel," its "openness" (that casual tone) has to do with his own sense of liberation. From that moment he was writing more or less full-time. He once talked about how he'd wake early, set out through town on foot, walking by the harbor, up into the foothills, and then at the end of a long day he'd settle down at his writing desk and set down all that he'd seen that

day, the impressions, the sounds. So there is in these poems a strong sense of the "given," of what a poet can be *gifted*. He went out each morning looking for the poems he'd later write. They read, for me, like celebrations of these gifts.

If I can try to connect this to his use of "flaws": I think he's not so much talking about a stylistic or linguistic feature of the poems. It's more a creative stance in relation to the way a poem makes its claim on him. He wants (at least in these poems from *Deniz Eskisi*) to be pushed and nudged and lead away in all the directions the poem has a mind to go. He doesn't want to sit imperiously over the page and shape it to a template or a pre-recognized form. It's the simplicity, maybe the honesty of that approach that lends it weight.

**HLH:** Such lines as "Whichever angle we take, everything explains itself," and "We know the way" might be read as optimism or as fatalism. Which do you find more central to Berk's poetry, and what is its effect on the work?

**GM:** Berk talked repeatedly about "the hell of writing." But I'm not sure how seriously to take him. He loved to play the "Turkish Rimbaud," but there's little in his work to suggest that it was *there*, in the poems, that he wrestled his demons. That

“(apparent) ease” that you sense, and which I feel too in many of his poems, has a lot to do with Berk being at ease with himself as a writer. In his best poems he’s a celebrant, “crediting marvels” as Heaney says, big and small. And in Bodrum, where he wrote most of these poems, he was practically falling over them. The poems poured out of him. He was immensely prolific, right to the end. He said that he always considered life a place for writing, not for living. He knew the way: *his way*. Poetry, he says repeatedly, gave him life, and he made a life from it.

**HLH:** The first poem (my favorite in the book) centers on something that doesn’t explain itself: the “she” is left wondering who it was who left the sprig of basil. Am I right to attribute to mystery (to the unknown and ineffable) as much importance in the poems as the explained (or even the explainable) has?

**GM:** I’m going to sidestep this one, clumsily, by throwing in Paul Muldoon, who writes: “You have before you a person who...argues for the primacy of unknowing yet insists on almost total knowingness on the part of poet as first reader.”

Berk loathed the idea that his poetry could be “explained” or that a poem might itself be some form of “explanation”. Frequently, his strategies of (what he called) *deforming*, of *deformation*, corrupt

common meanings in ways that re-mythologize his subjects. *Seyler Kitabı (Book of Things)* is, I suppose, a vision of the familiar worlds of the *inanimate* and *a priori*, radically de-familiarized. He’s waving, making signs, running home with his shoebox full of grass and stones and spiders, and from these common, simple things, he makes a poem. His appetite for engagement, for meetings and “friendships” (as he called them) with the world around him was boundless. Time and again the poems say “Hey! Over here! Look at this!” These objects, these *things* were so profoundly mysterious to him and, yes, very much unknown in the wider sense, and yet intimately part of his life, so intimately and vitally part of his life that without them he could never write.

PHILIP METRES

on

## BEHIND THE LINES

**H. L. Hix:** Your book starts with the observation that “exclusion of dissenting voices...has continued throughout our history,” but implies near the end that the exclusion may be more complete now than ever, since “war’s televisual representation...nullified the kinds of lyric responses upon which war resister poets traditionally relied.” If the exclusion is more intense than ever, what justifies the sorts of hope you express in your coda?

**Philip Metres:** There are at least two ways to address this question: via the personal (i.e., my own story vis-à-vis poetry and the peace movement) and intellectually. My own journey through *Behind the Lines: War Resistance Poetry on the American Homefront since 1941* had many stages. It was borne out of an intellectual and poetic attempt to understand the failure and despair of peace activists (myself included) during and after the 1991 Persian Gulf War, when I was a junior in college. I was stunned by what seemed to me a mass psychosis, in which everyone huddled around the television (myself included) as if it were

an intense sporting match—but which was a war not unlike any other, though the corpses themselves were disappeared in the official media coverage. Journalists, particularly the television media, seemed more interested in making amends for its purported liberal bias during the Vietnam War, in healing the wounds of the Vietnam defeat; I can see it now as a classic example of what Richard Slotkin called “redemption through violence,” in his pivotal work of American history, *Gunfighter Nation*.

Years later, researching the multiple pasts of the American peace movement, I was buoyed by the steady courage and flinty audacity of dissenters and resisters, and found myself involved in a full-scale historical “recovery project.” As I was completing the book, the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> caused a complete reassessment of my entire argument, in which I radically questioned every presumption I’d made over 10 years and three hundred pages, but eventually I returned to the abiding conviction that the peace movement (aided and abetted by poetic work within and through peace) is an essential brake in a nominally democratic society to its imperial ambitions. Once I gave up the arrogant idea that the peace movement should be judged only by whether it stopped specific wars, I was able to see its modest pragmatic successes; just as importantly, I could now see its essential moral (indeed spiritual)

labor of witnessing to our common humanity. Long story short, at least for the moment, I feel as if I've made peace with the peace movement's own limits, its marginality, its "ineffectuality," its quixotic and utopian tendencies.

Incidentally, the peace movement and poetic production share their common sensitivity to the watchful gaze of the Other, the generations of the past and future. Our work is an attempt to dialogue with the dead and to create a model of being that might be worthy of our possible futures. I am haunted by a quotation from Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain*, at the end of her chapter on war:

Yet from a distance of many centuries, we often ask why they permitted it; for it is a universal fate of those from whom the power to author their own fate has been retracted that later populations reattribute to them the power of authorship and speak of them as "permitting" it. This question is not only asked, retrospectively, of the slaves forty centuries ago, but of the concentration camp prisoners four decades ago. *The same question, however unfair, will be asked of us.* If there is to be an answer to those future populations, it will only be heard in the words spoken to contemporary military and political leaders, words that will

have to be spoken very clearly and soon....  
(italics mine)

What words would we like to have said? What actions would we have wished we'd have committed, had we the chance? What will they say of us? (Incidentally, it is in the arena of ecological abuse, part of a larger system of domination that includes war-making, that I feel this question most loudly).

Now, the other way to answer your question is to say that you've conflated "dissenting voices" with "lyric responses," and indeed, two different historical moments in the book, the Persian Gulf War moment and the Iraq War moment. On the contrary, dissenting voices are themselves increasingly accessible (to those who are looking to find them), thanks to a proliferation of digital technologies, dissenting voices are perhaps more accessible and wide-ranging than they have been in human history. However, their availability has not substantially mitigated the enormous power blocs that they decry: the military-industrial-security complexes that continue to proliferate.

What I was referencing toward the end of the book was the way in which poetry itself (in particular, a poetry based on the illusion of authentic voice, transparent image and containable narrative) seemed particularly outflanked by the technowizardry



and media savvy of Department of Defense self-representation. In a sense, this is the argument that Language poets articulated in the period between the Vietnam War and the Gulf War 1991—which is why, incidentally, for me, the best poem about the Gulf War is Barrett Watten's *Bad History*. Its poetic strategic perfectly and perversely matched that war's representation for American civilians, in which all dissent was ridiculed, undercounted or ignored; in which we were invited to see the Patriot Missile as "the war's first hero"; and in which reporters were utterly censored and kept away from the scene of battle, thus ensuring that the state could assert its own triumphalist narrative, without alternative.

Indeed, why should one hope at all, if, as Foucault argues, repressive state power has simply morphed from brute force to the discipline of surveillance and internal self-repression? Why should one hope at all, if, as poststructuralist Marxists argue, all acts of dissent and resistance are so swiftly and easily commodified (Billy Bragg: "revolution is just a T-shirt away!").

All of this makes a certain sense. But the Gulf War did not end wars. When the Berlin Wall fell, history did not end. Things change. What is an absolutely true statement, in a few years, no longer holds. The difference between the war in Afghanistan and

the war in Iraq, between a war of retribution and a war of imperial choice, made the peace movement reappear, as if out of nowhere. But it was always there, in the small actions of people like Cindy Sheehan, who don't usually make the evening news, who say, "Our grief is not a cry for war."

Somehow, we "hope against hope," to use the title of Nadezhda Mandelstam's memoir, whose hope was articulated by her holding by heart hundreds of her martyred husband's poems, since his manuscripts had all been destroyed during the Stalinist years. In the book, I articulated my hope on the level of rhetorical address, when I made the decision in the coda to shift from my discussion of the peace movement in the third person to the first-person plural; in other words, I implicated myself in the possibilities and limits of poetic involvement in the peace movement. The coda, which deals with poetry and the peace movement after 9/11 and amidst Iraq, is a performative call into being that which already exists but has not been named as such—a widespread rapprochement between poets and the peace movement, between poets of various competing schools, who see a common need for a poetry that refuses to cede the story of our nation (and, of our other allegiances) to the pundits and demagogues. I'm still working out, in my poetry and in my daily activism, what that rapprochement

might look like, but the *Come Together: Imagine Peace* anthology of peace poems was one attempt, my poetry project "Sand Opera" another, and the "Stories of War and Peace" project, interviewing peace activists, yet another.

**HLH:** Each chapter of the book is illuminating, but I was especially taken with the chapter on William Stafford, which will send me back to his poetry and will send me to *Down in My Heart*. One of your paragraphs about *Down in My Heart* includes the observation that "resisting war in contemporary America necessarily includes grappling with the difficulty of representing resistance." That seems to me one of the central insights of your book: that a necessary condition for successful resistance is successful representation of resistance. So is Stafford's memoir a representative case, in that his poetry of resistance needs also an apology of sorts?

**PM:** William Stafford, to me, is our preeminent pacifist poet, whose poetic practice and war resistance dovetailed inextricably, crystallized in his years undergoing alternative service as a conscientious objector during World War II. Though he is a minor figure in American poetry, his lifelong working-through of the problems of pacifism in poetry, in story, in essay, in teaching, in his daily life is a vital, untapped resource. I'd highly recommend not only

his memoir *Down in My Heart*, but also *Every War Has Two Losers: William Stafford on Peace and War*. Stafford's memoir articulates the struggle not to differentiate oneself from the *socius*, from others, but rather to claim a shared humanity between the war resister and the society at war (after all, Stafford maintained a lifelong closeness with his own brother, a bomber pilot during World War II). It is Stafford I return to, in his notion that the peace activist (each of us, in fact) must not settle for "being right," but must do good. And the difference between these two positions is the difference between rhetoric and poetry, as Yeats formulated it ("out of the quarrel with others, we make rhetoric, out of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry"). When peace activists have been able to represent themselves as the "ourselves," as part of the collective, their witness and outlook have spread more widely.

Arguably, the same is more or less true for poetry. Though we need dissenters and poets whose visions radically challenge our very assumptions about the true and the good (not to mention the status quo), we also need activists and poets willing to speak representatively, as if it were possible (knowing, as the poststructuralists know, that such a stance is itself probably impossible). That's why I am particularly enamored of poets like Blake, Whitman, Stafford, Neruda, Ginsberg, Ashbery, Lowell, Rich, Spahr,

Nowak among others (my novelistic heroes being Cervantes, Tolstoy, Melville and Twain): because they refused to cede the fundamentally social valences of poetry, articulated by Aristotle as *mimesis*. These poets call into being the radical dream of a shared, communal life. What worries me about contemporary poetry is that it appears we have ceded a large territory, the territory of representation and of narration, to other literary forms, to film, to mass media, and have circled our wagons around language itself as the only defensible territory. When an art becomes completely self-referential, it ceases to be art. Now, I'm not saying that this has happened, that this is the end of poetry (clearly, there are many poetries that resist this sort of retreat), but much of the scene seems to participate in a poststructuralist madness of our own premature demise.

War resistance poetry reminds us that poetry is not only for itself, but both a medium and an end. It reminds me of the endless wrestle between these two aspects of all art.

**HLH:** Another moment in your book that I find especially arresting is your observation about June Jordan that "her work challenges the peace movement to abandon simplistic notions of peace." This seems to make the project of resistance much harder, not

only in itself (we can't take our aim as self-evident), but also in regard to representation: it's one thing to represent resistance if "peace" is obvious and simple, and another thing altogether if "peace" is complex and difficult. Is this part of the importance of poetry as a means of resistance?

**PM:** It makes me a little crazy when I hear retreads from the 1970s (or commodified versions of said retreads) say "peace" is a simple idea, a self-evident act or way of being. Whenever power is at stake, conflict arises. If we were to live a world of total abundance, then perhaps peace would be a simple idea. But insecurity, vengefulness, cupidity are ancient feelings, wounds, it would seem, in our very DNA. Robert Bly, in a forthcoming film on William Stafford, said (and here I paraphrase) that there is something in us that wants a big war, a war in which we kill lots of people. What is that in us that wants such a thing?

Because of what June Jordan experienced in her life (the violence of her father), because of the color of her skin, because of her outspokenness, she never could feel that peace was an easy thing, disconnected from the struggle for justice, for human dignity. She is a key figure in war resistance poetry because of how, through her poetry, her essays, her

pedagogy, she renders visible the American peace movement's traditional limits, its relative protection from actual attack, its ideological blind spots, its (occasionally) bourgeois whiteness. This is not to say that there are no black voices, no poor voices, in the peace movement; on the contrary, there are many.

Poetry is again both a means of resistance and a mode of resistance in itself (some have argued that poetry is poetry insofar as it demonstrates a resistance to paraphrase, to easy meaning!). Jordan's particular gift hearkened back to the prophetic tradition, with her own version of the jeremiad, scolding the people for their moral lassitude, for their failures to answer to their (our) better selves. A self-described woman warrior, a warrior for justice and for peace, Jordan widens the field of peace activism into resistance, into the struggle for human rights.

DUNYA MIKHAIL  
on **THE WAR WORKS HARD**

**H. L. Hix:** My even making this inquiry violates your clearly stated (and repeated) request in "America": "Please don't ask me." I would be among the Americans who would say that a failure of policymakers to ask the right questions of the right people was an important contributing cause of the harm that the U.S. has inflicted on the people of Iraq, and on itself. Each position seems to me to have its validity: asking questions often functions as a way of excusing oneself from complicity, and can be a form of condescension, but failure to ask questions often reflects a self-righteousness and dogmatism that denies its own harmfulness. How might an American citizen, especially an American poet, engage in a dialogue that is more constructive than those alternatives?

**Dunya Mikhail:** After all of the dreams of arrival that were interrupted by various public and personal obstacles, and after you finally do arrive, you would think that the first person who receives you (in my case it happened to be a U.S. airport police officer)

would give you a pat on the back and say "You finally arrived? You made it. Good for you!" Well, she didn't say that, instead looked suspiciously in my passport and asked me many questions while my fingerprints were taken. Well, I know she was doing her job and she was not responsible for my ironic life details before the moment I arrived. However, the matter of asking questions is interesting. As you said, it requires asking the right questions at the right time. During my poetry presentations, I feel pleased and honored to be asked about poetry and other issues. Like Eugene Ionesco, I believe that it is the question that enlightens us, not the answer.

**HLH:** The poems seem deeply attuned to such dilemmas. Is it fair for me to hear "I don't remember what I wanted to say. / I don't want to say / what I remember" as a dilemma that informs the whole book, and indeed the life of one with profound and immediate experience of war?

**DM:** When I was in the middle of the war in Iraq, I had to hide my actual meaning under many layers, figures of speech and metaphors, as an attempt to avoid the censorship that would put you in a real "dilemma." Now I can say whatever I want, except that I don't have that fresh or immediate memory anymore. But I don't need to complain. Those metaphors were probably good for my poetry, and

this distance from the theatre of the events might be healthy for the purity or clarity of the vision. Forgive my English please.

**HLH:** The line "I thank everyone I don't love" is to me a particularly striking example of the unexpected gestures and attitudes that pervade *The War Works Hard*, beginning with the very first lines of the very first poem (declaring it good luck that a mother has found the bones of her son). Would I be wise, if I wish to act and speak more responsibly as a poet and citizen, to adopt as an imperative for myself what I take as an implicit imperative in your work, namely to make unexpected gestures in preference to expected ones, and to adopt unexpected attitudes in preference to expected ones?

**DM:** This is one of those "enlightening" questions that I would not like to spoil with an answer.

WAYNE MILLER  
on MOIKOM ZEQO'S

## I DON'T BELIEVE IN GHOSTS

**H. L. Hix:** The title poem laments in its first stanza the absence of stability and law, and in its last stanza “the cancer of bureaucrats.” Yet in between the two is the statement, “I believe in life, everything I love,” which reminds me of Ivor Gurney’s “I believe in the increasing of life.” Is it generalizing too absurdly to view these poems as investigating the space opened for love by law?

**Wayne Miller:** I think Zeqo would be intrigued by the idea that the law opens up space for love, and would be inclined to agree. I think he’d be more comfortable with the clarification that the law, judiciously and humanistically applied, has the capacity for opening up space for love—and, more generally, space for personal, intellectual, and artistic pursuits and interests.

In the context of the time and political situation during which Zeqo was writing *I Don't Believe in Ghosts* (Albania under the Stalinist dictator Enver Hoxha), “the law” was utterly unpredictable, and

its application had the potential to disrupt without warning an individual’s personal and intellectual life. I think Zeqo’s assertion implies that, in such a context, that which is called “the law” is, in fact, nothing like what we value as “the rule of law.” Under “the rule of law,” at least ideally, the law isn’t fickle, politically motivated or unequally applied, but rather should possess an almost metaphysically grounded steadiness of application.

Thus, for Zeqo in 1970, asserting the value of “life [and] everything I love” (which I think means love broadly defined, including intellectual loves, such as literature) stands in opposition to the absence of stability and law. Love posits a real life-grounding value—one that contrasts starkly with Hoxha’s bureaucratically maintained, anti-humanist, ultimately valueless caprice. As such, you could read Zeqo’s poems as investigating the space opened for love by law, though I suspect Zeqo might like the inversion of that as well: the space in which the rule of humanistic law can be applied is opened by love (again, broadly defined).

**HLH:** Is it generalizing too absurdly to view such lines, from a more private/personal (rather than public) point of view, as exploring the space opened for love by secretlessness?

**WM:** I'm not sure that, in "Open," Zeqo is talking about the space opened for personal love by secretlessness—at least, I hadn't thought about the poem that way before. In my reading, Zeqo's highlighting his own artistic emphasis on the senses and the present, which he sees as grounding himself and his work. He's also contrasting his work's articulation of his personal, emotional life with the narrow, prescribed artistic agenda of socialist realism (and with the closed nature of Albanian life under the prying eyes of Hoxha's dictatorship). His standing before the world "open, / secretless" is sort of offering himself up—both to his art and, more ominously, to the political apparatus that could turn such an offering into a martyrdom.

But that's my reading. I'd be curious to see you make the case that he's also talking about the relationship between secretlessness and love. I don't think that idea is incompatible with Zeqo's worldview. It's just not my reading of the poem.

**HLH:** Such poems as "The Moon Sings" and "Signature" seem to me to insist that the domain of poetry is unbounded, and its origins cosmic, even metaphysical. What implications of such a view for an Albanian poet in Zeqo's circumstances at the times during which those poems were written can be generalized to poets in other circumstances as well?

**WM:** Zeqo definitely sees poetry as unconstrained and rooted in the cosmic. Zeqo was deeply inspired by the Romantics (especially Shelley), and I think Zeqo sees the poet's role at least partially in transcendent, metaphysical terms. This fact, though, was complicated by the place and time in which Zeqo wrote, because to see poetry in such a way could be viewed as diverging from socialist realism and, perhaps worse, as finding value elsewhere than in "the system"—and thus was inherently a political act.

Further, I think both "The Moon Sings" and "Signature" (as well as other poems, such as "An Explication of the Word Loneliness") respond to Albania's isolation. It's hard for American poets to imagine Zeqo's position writing in Albania in the early 1970s, when Albania had severed regular ties with every country in the world except China (and would soon disconnect from China, too). Remember that the country of Albania has about the same population as the Seattle metropolitan area. If Zeqo had almost no chance of finding an audience outside of Albania's borders, and if his work was likely to be suppressed within Albania, then for whom was Zeqo writing? With whom was his work in conversation? His answer seems to be the natural world—and perhaps a kind of mystical notion that, even if his work never were to find its way out of Albania, it

somehow still would commune with literature, across the vast distance between Albanian writers and everyone else.

What can be generalized from this? Well, there is a kind of optimism in the fact that Zeqo wrote these poems potentially with no broad audience in mind, and now they're published in the U.S. and elsewhere (and Albania's political situation is better, if far from ideal). And I think there's something to the belief that one's words are always in contact with the larger cosmos of literature—even if such a communion only occurs in the poet's mind. I can see how that idea (the idea that, in a country as isolated as 1970s Albania, Zeqo was never actually alone in his work or his thinking) was legitimately sustaining through some very dark years.

CHELSEY MINNIS  
on  
**POEMLAND**

**H. L. Hix:** *Poemland* feels like a list of things I would say about poetry and life, except I'm too chicken. It's the held umbrella that's the problem, isn't it? Not the fistfight.

**Chelsey Minnis:** My favorite way to answer yes or no questions is with a yes or a no, and then no explanation afterwards!

But on this question I would end up answering something like "neither." The umbrella, to me, means that the fight is staged to a certain extent. In poetry terms it would mean that you're creating a space for the poem to be unacceptable. You're going to fight out some issue in the poem in a way that might be violent. The fight isn't "real" but is a choreographed dance-fight. I guess I would like to try to use the poem as a way to fight something out because I, too, am too chicken to fight it out in a real forum. Like I'm protecting myself, in the poem, from the fact that what I'm saying might be immature or unreasonable.

**HLH:** Right. Poetry demands the truth, that I judge myself accurately, and a lie, so I can be thought



well of. It demands that “I behave as though I am a human being.” So if you “have never had the right to say things that are true,” are you saying things that are not true, or saying things that are true despite not having the right to do so?

**CM:** I’m not sure if I understand the question! I think I am trying to say something that is true and forbidden and useful. But the more freedom I allow myself to say something true and forbidden, the more I realize that it is not always useful. And that is the goal perhaps. To feel free and authentic and say something positive because you mean it and not just because it’s acceptable to say.

**HLH:** Double everything (from page 76). Reasonable statements and cry-hustle (from page 85). Seduction and counterseduction (from page 122). A slit slip under a slit skirt (from page 14). There’s a question here, though I’m not sure what it is.

**CM:** I don’t know either. I guess I was trying to say that sometimes you need to recreate what it is like to say something spontaneous, and that is very hard. Sometimes you write a line and it makes no sense but it seems good anyway. When you try to revise it to mean what you wanted it to mean, it is no longer any good.

RACHEL MORITZ  
on **THE WINCHESTER  
MONOLOGUES**  
and **NIGHT-SEA**

**H. L. Hix:** In *The Winchester Monologues*, the themes of repetition and of séance/medium recur throughout § I, and the theme of architecture/house recurs throughout § II. I found myself wanting to read them also as correlatives of poetry: is that a stretch, or does it seem valid to you?

**Rachel Moritz:** This does seem valid, especially in terms of séance/medium. I often experience writing poetry as fishing around in the depths for something murky that becomes illuminated. The poet, like the medium, is a vessel through which one realm speaks to another. Just as the medium gives up the self/ego to become a vessel for spirits, so the poet lets go of the literal world to tap into something mysterious. For me, this always arrives at some kind of slant and feels like listening to the unconscious. The process is about communication, but it’s also about the experience of being filled, of becoming a container, of holding language that’s in transit from one place

to another. This sounds a little vatic, but it's also my experience.

I got excited by the Winchester story because it blends many of these ideas. First, there is the literal story of séance/medium: Sarah, like many Victorian women, works with a medium to contact the spirits of her dead husband and daughter. Upon the medium's advice, she (supposedly) builds this mansion whose whole form and purpose is to ward away the ghosts of people killed by her family's repeating rifles.

Which brings us to repetition and architecture. If you tour the Winchester Mystery Mansion (now a museum), what's fascinating is its maze-like quality, the feeling that it lacks a core. You can't figure out where it's going or why. The house was created over many years, with the goal of daily repetition of the building process, which was meant to bewilder the spirits. Repetition here is about trauma. The building of the house can symbolize grief's repetitive thoughts and feelings. Repetition is the secret of the rifle "that won the West," and indeed, of the whole Industrial Revolution.

As I wrote these poems, repetition also felt like a metaphor for self/life: what is our singular core, anyway? Repetition of the beating heart keeps us alive. Minutes and days continually repeat. And yet,

repetition keeps us from ever getting to the heart of anything. Time keeps moving onward, seeming to repeat itself. Like Sarah's house, repetition becomes bewildering because it moves us away from origin, and it's also what keeps us alive in time keeps us in a container.

In that poetry is also a form that holds interior experience, language models this process. For example, we enjoy repetition in poetry; there is pleasure and security in language that repeats. Likewise, a break from repetition is pleasing and unexpected. In the first section of the book, repetition is expressed by sounds, phrases and images that recur. In section 2, I suppose repetition is more about using language to ask for clarity or for epiphanies that never arrive.

**HLH:** Following the Joseph Campbell epigraph, I take *Night-Sea* as a "crooked landscape of symbolical figures." But I'm curious what you would say is "crooked" about this landscape.

**RM:** This series of poems was written during a retreat on Lake Superior. I was simultaneously reading Joseph Campbell's *The Hero With A Thousand Faces* and Albert T. Morse's early-1900s book about Abraham Lincoln, which is mostly photographs paired with the kind of master-narrative historical

writing that marks books of this period: heavy on the dramatic, mythological language, which is also so poetic and pleasing to the ear. The “landscapes” of these texts blended with my own exterior landscape (the lake, a series of barge crossings at night) and with my interior landscape of dream and memory.

Within this mix, I began to think of crookedness in a few ways. The first was the crookedness of time travel. Could two realms of time coexist simultaneously? As a child, I was desperate to go back in time; I have memories of lying awake at night crying that this wasn’t going to be possible. In childhood, the walls between worlds feel more porous. I often had the sense that events of the past still existed, just in another realm we couldn’t access. So one kind of crookedness in *Night-Sea* is that I superimpose events of Lincoln’s life against my own childhood memories, as if they are happening simultaneously. Crookedness as a kind of slant: not quite the kind that Emily Dickinson writes about, but the slant of simultaneity.

Crookedness is also about descent into personal mythology. Within dreamscape, images arrive as if by accident, and language associations mirror this process. In the book, there are figures of the guide leading the speaker on a night-sea journey inward, figures of the mother and father who are origin

points of sorts, figures of the child, figures of the shadow (insanity, depression).

Finally, what happens to the world when we strip away the official narrative, the one that makes sense of events? I was thinking about the grotesque quality of Civil War photographs: Abraham Lincoln’s melancholy face, the bodies of his assassins hanging in the prison yard, the way that, beneath the language of the nineteenth century (such certainty as to authority, right and wrong, evil and good), lies the mystery of being, itself a bewildering crookedness: “Oaring your body across that brief monologue.” What is it, anyway, that we are oaring across?

**HLH:** Is poetry for you a “threshold struggle”? Is it an ideal of your work (and I include here your poetry and your work as an editor and publisher of the WinteRed Press chaplet series) to “pulse...into that last // element, that which purely configures / the earth”?

**RM:** According to Joseph Campbell, the hero encounters “threshold struggles” as he answers to calls to his journey, one that is essentially about leaving behind security and community and going into the unknown to wrestle for your soul. And about thresholds, Campbell also says: “Passage over the threshold is a form of self-annihilation.” Going into the unknown feels like this,

and that's what can make it a struggle. Personally, I experience a threshold struggle every time I sit down to write: resistance, doubt, uncertainty about why the work matters! And then, if I'm lucky, I'm happily on my way. There's pleasure in giving over to the unknown, which feels like the process of creation.

Campbell also writes that, at the threshold, the hero encounters supernatural guides who represent "the benign, protecting power of destiny." And I suppose you can carry this metaphor into anyone's work as an editor/publisher. Sending work out into the world is about crossing and passage. I'm happy to act as a kind of threshold guardian (definitely not supernatural!) who helps poetry get out there, to be on its way in the world.

And it does seem like poetry and art-making are about "configuring the earth," as in populating it with images and forms. The challenge of being an artist, of course, is figuring out how to believe that these forms matter in a world where other kinds of making are usually given more weight. Even though it sounds dramatic, I do believe so passionately that making art is a hero/heroine's journey: it's about going into the unknown and figuring out how to communicate with that space.

ANNA MOSCHOVAKIS

on

## I HAVE NOT BEEN ABLE TO GET THROUGH TO EVERYONE

**H. L. Hix:** Hart Crane talks in an essay about a "logic of metaphor," and your untitled opening poem establishes a strange associative logic that will recur throughout the book. I wonder if you have a way of naming or talking about this logic?

**Anna Moschovakis:** I have been thinking lately about the idea of the "slippery slope" as it applies to logical thought. I am the daughter of two (mathematical) logicians, and in college I studied continental philosophy, which is more associative than systematic—partly as an expression of my resistance to what I saw as the dogma of logic in my household growing up. But I aced logic, despite myself. I'm very drawn to the forms of logical thinking (inclusion/exclusion, if/then, etc.), but perhaps my attraction to them is more aesthetic than epistemological. That is: I like them because they scratch a kind of itch, but I don't have faith in their descriptive power. Or maybe it's just that the problems they address

and the truths they describe are not the problems and the truths that obsess me most. But I think that some version of logical thinking is soothing to most people, and therefore can be dangerous. It's as if the ability to explain, step-by-step, how you logically got from one idea to the next is all the rigor we should demand of ourselves. But anyone with a naturally analytic brain (or who is intimate with someone who has one) knows that without the willingness to ask the hardest questions and to challenge the most airtight assumptions, the dance of logic is just that: a dazzling performance. Back to the slippery slope. That's a term that philosophers (and political theorists, psychologists, etc.) use to describe the way a chain of small steps can lead from a sound premise to an unexpected conclusion. From the perspective of the thinker, it's how sound thinking can turn into unreasonable thinking through a barely perceptible link in a long, logical chain. As is often the case with analytic philosophy, I love the term itself: the drama and danger in a "slippery slope," the physicality of it, the vertigo, the irresistible appeal. So, yes: metaphor. Perhaps I like the metaphors of logic. Now I need to go read that essay by Hart Crane.

JENNIFER MOXLEY  
on  
**CLAMPDOWN**

**H. L. Hix:** Since one aspect of my project is to engage poetry by conversing with it rather than pontificating about it, I am especially interested in the sense, which seems formative in *Clampdown*, of poetry as itself a conversation. The poems seem to be talking with Alice Notley, James Schuyler, Robert Creeley, Constance Hunting and others. Do you mean for the book to be a conversation in that sense, and if so why was it important to make it such a conversation?

**Jennifer Moxley:** I can't imagine that this quality is unique to *Clampdown*, as I have always thought of poetry as a conversation. For me, poetry is a conversation back through history, forward into the future (Whitman: "I consider'd you long and seriously before you were born") and with the present as well. I am influenced by Creeley's sense of "company," and Duncan's "responsibility is to keep the ability to respond." In this isolated and isolating art, I am comforted by the belief that a "conversation" can take place through literature, across time, as it were.

I feel this is a foundational aspect of the art. Dante revivifies Virgil so they may talk. Clearly the poet would not have bothered if Virgil had not *spoken to him first*. Our works are invitations, often rejected, despite which fact they send their signals still. I cannot accept that I must “make do” with what my historical moment has on offer, nor that I should be moved by something I read and not manifest that feeling in a response, and a wish to so move others.

Another aspect of “poetry as conversation” emerges through my definition of lyric poetry. I have written on this, so will only summarize here: lyric makes real the response to the social conversation for which there is no space or permission; it is the voice of the silenced interlocutor, formally framed and decorated so as to escape censor. Thus conversation in poetry need not be wanted, or shared. It can be, and often is, a provocation.

The connection between the conversation and the essay also intrigues me, insofar as both are spaces for trying out ideas without the pressure of having to be right, or of having thought *one’s way all the way through to the end*. I feel that the thinking that takes place in these forms is both generative and generous, unlike the thinking too often rewarded in academic contexts.

Then again...I am fond of direct statements of belief and the audacity of saying “It is so.”

When you send me your questions as a response to *Clampdown*, you ask that the conversation not end when you close the book. In many ways this is much more meaningful to me than a good review, which is not *for me*, but for a “reader” whom I have not yet met.

**HLH:** The poems also seem to me to be meditative in a particular way, not unlike the way I understand Montaigne and Emerson, say, as thinking of the essay. How resistant would you be to a reader viewing *Clampdown* not only as a collection of lyric poems but also as a collection of verse essays?

**JM:** I would feel no resistance to such a reading. In fact I’m usually very open to whatever reading a reader wants to give my poems. Though it would be false to say that I wrote *Clampdown* with the essay in mind. I do write poems in the intellectual tradition. That is to say, I believe the poem is a space of thought rhythmically arranged. But that is just one aspect. Poems can also tell stories, and, I think very importantly, represent the complexity of emotion and memory (your “Remarks on Color” is certainly a fine example of this). There is an aspect to knowing that takes place in a realm that cannot be defined as

“rational,” or even “real.” This poetry shows us. The essay strikes me as more suited to a kind of “account” of the thought process. “This happened and I had a thought....”

Your question was written no doubt without the knowledge that I am in the process of completing a book of essays at this very moment! But this project was begun after *Clampdown* was finished. My essays, very much inspired by Risset, allow me a certain kind of thinking that I don’t usually do in poetry. They are more evocative and calm, I believe.

**HLH:** The description “providing a meaning to bring to / a future in which we will not be” is spoken as part of a brief critique of “this kind of just war.” As a disembodied phrase, though, it could be applied to poetry. How does that possibility participate in (what I take to be) the book’s attempt to “cast a cold eye” on both war and poetry, to oversimplify neither but also to be duped by neither?

**JM:** “To be duped by neither”: the question might be, rather, how to have convictions and passion without blindly embracing this or that ideology? An unsettled aesthetics. I’m not suspicious of poetry, but of any too-narrow definition of it—likewise of the idea that poetry is somehow “superior” to other pursuits. I can’t say I understand war, but I resent the

way it bullies away all other thoughts. As for “a future in which we will not be”: that is the “deal” poetry, or any art, offers mortals. Though it is not particularly comforting, how glad I am that past poets took it!

My book *The Line* is much caught up in the complexities (read resentment) I have felt about this “deal.” In some ways, this allowed me to write my way through it. But, there it is, showing up in *Clampdown*!

That said, an addendum: there is *meaning* in the present, the meaning that takes place in the process of writing, of shaping a life in words. But it is evanescent, often dissatisfying and difficult to bottle.

JENNIFER MOXLEY  
on JACQUELINE RISSET'S

## SLEEP'S POWERS

**H. L. Hix:** From the very beginning, Risset describes sleep as “ever elusive.” In other existential/spiritual matters, we often ascribe elusiveness not to a practice or experience itself, but to its object: e.g., not poetry itself is elusive, but its meaning; not worship, but deity. In learning about sleep from Risset, is there, in your view, also something(s) we learn about such other matters?

**Jennifer Moxley:** I think the important difference between sleep and your examples above (poetry, the deity) lies in an aspect of it central to Risset’s exploration: sleep is not outside of us. Sleep is quotidian and, perhaps, banal. Risset is interested in how this somatic necessity undermines order, reason, societal control, self-possession, self-knowledge and so on. Her inquiry is reliant on the uniqueness of the phenomenon of sleep. And yet...sleep and poetry have often been equated (Keats, the Surrealists, etc.). Perhaps sleep is not elusive in the way the meaning of a poem is elusive: after all we can *read* a poem; it is a material object, fixed in its choice of words if not

in its fullness of message. A good poem may yield many interpretations, but its secrets will out more readily than those of the unconscious mind (sleep’s playground). The poem once made is outside of us. Not so the unwritten work, the potential poem, the creative spark. Perhaps a search for analogies to sleep might end here, at creativity itself (as Valéry describes it in “Poetry and Abstract Art”), insofar as it is something that is *in us*, but that we cannot readily control.

**HLH:** Though its area of concern is similar to the first question, I *think* I’m not simply repeating the same question over again. When Risset recommends that sleep “be rendered in sentences which imitate its quasi-imperceptible movement,” is the (linguistic and literary) sympathetic magic on which the value of this recommendation would depend something that can be extended to other quasi-imperceptible objects of inquiry?

**JM:** There’s a fissure here. Risset is talking about representation, not inquiry. In other words, I feel that your question suggests that certain poetic rhythms might serve to conjure up the ineffable (unless I mistake your meaning, which is entirely possible). Of course, poetry, magic and spells are deeply connected. Once you begin to count beats and lines (whether Dante’s Trinitarian *terza rima*, or



the pentagram evoked in pentameter, as Duncan has observed), you participate in a history of conjuring (whether consciously or not—and whether or not one *believes* repetitions can awaken the unseen, poetry's magic, in large part, lives in rhythm). There is a connection to Risset insofar as the sleep sentences she describes are trying to imitate sleep's rhythm, to *represent* sleep, but also, perhaps, to put readers into a sleep-like state (while keeping them awake). A poetic gesture?

As for other “quasi-imperceptible” objects of inquiry, I think I'd need a specific example to say anything more. Though if you are asking whether or not poetry (and art) can discover a form so analogous to a metaphysical phenomenon as to literally *connect* the human to that phenomenon—then I would say that, to my mind, the best attempts to answer such a question have been made by Mallarmé in “*Le Mystère dans les lettres*,” Kandinsky in his *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Yeats in *A Vision* and even, in a way, by Spicer in his Vancouver lectures.

**HLH:** I am especially intrigued by the chapter on Time, but I have not decided how to read it. When Risset says sleep *suggests* “a substratum of time beneath the time that devours and changes all things,” do you yourself take her to mean that sleep creates such a substratum, is the vehicle that

offers us such a substratum, conceives of such a substratum though it does not exist in fact—or some other possibility?

**JM:** Hmm. I think the reason why Risset uses words like “suggest” (*suggérer*) and “approaching” (*approcher*) is because her subject cannot be pinned down so far as to write, for example, “I know that sleep, without a doubt, does this.” So she picks words that allow her to say exactly what she means, and which leave open the possibility of various readings. In the opening chapter she says we pass over a threshold into sleep, but she does not list a definite “place.” Again, sleep as the ever-elusive. For me, the charm, and indeed the intellectual integrity of her inquiry into sleep, lies in part in the fact that she refuses to settle on any one definition of sleep. She allows the exploration and the knowing to coexist.

EILEEN MYLES

on

## SORRY, TREE

**H. L. Hix:** The only intervention into otherwise “normal” typesetting is the circle around “why” in the very first poem. I took this as a clue that the poems would be asking questions, and as a suggestion that I do the same, though I have no real reason for interpreting it that way. I wonder how you yourself meant that intervention.

**Eileen Myles:** I felt there was no punctuation that adequately stopped in the splashy way a handwritten circle around a word does. I wanted a real sign, like “STOP” on a street. I wanted to push through the limitation of the page and be in another medium. I wanted to be standing on a stage. It felt like a performative punctuation. I’m always thinking about the depth of the page, its way of holding more than it generally is assumed to be doing. The circle was throwing its hands up somehow.

**HLH:** The attitude toward culture expressed in the lines “I’ll just write / into it” intrigues me. What does this (writing into culture, rather than about it, say, or

from a place already within it) imply for you about the subjects and purpose of your writing, and how it stands in relation to other aspects of your life?

**EM:** I think writing into it implies the physical space of the culture. How we are participating in it when we are thinking and writing. I don’t think writing is an art. If anything it’s connective tissue. When I write I’m participating more deeply, marking it (the culture) it seems to me.

**HLH:** I’m similarly stuck on the brief comment about bad luck in “Everyday Barf”: “It hasn’t stopped. It’s normalized.” I think of the narrator in Camus’s *The Plague* opening the book by describing the habits of his fellow citizens, which the plague is about to interrupt; when he criticizes the banality of daily life, he seems to assume that human nature cannot resist reducing experience into the everyday, except when prevailed upon by irresistible forces from outside, and even then only briefly. Am I right to hear you suggesting that we are capable of not treating experience as if there were an “everyday”?

**EM:** The everyday is this myth we’re invited to slide into endlessly in the literary world. That is if we seem to be commentators on it. If your work can be seen as having identifiable subject matter then you are readily invited to speak on the everyday.

That convention makes me want to splatter on it with the fluids of my body for starters. That is actually quite everyday but not the everyday that everyday organizers generally have in mind. So in the collectivity of everydays one can peel one away from the rest by attack for example. But really everyday is wide open, not so easily categorizable. It worms its way as it likes.

MAJID NAFIGY  
on

## FATHER & SON

**H. L. Hix:** In "Death and Life" the father speaks to the son until the last two lines, in which he speaks to Death. But there is also at that point a switch from the present tense to the future tense (with which the poem began). Is it the present moment that is the son's gift to the father, and the father's revenge on Death?

**Majid Naficy:** I think we should read this poem in the light of the poem "Father and Son" (from which the book receives its title), in which after the mother gives birth to the son, the poet/father says: "Looking at the strange riddle / She had put in front of me: / Am I now closer to death / Or further from it?" I think the poem "Death and Life" is dealing with that question. In the beginning of the poem, the poet/father feels that whatever the son does, let's say jetting urine from his penis onto the father or taking the milk bottle in his hands, reminds the poet/father of when he will be buried by the son. Here, there is a little cultural innuendo. In Iran, usually every Friday evening my father and I stopped by the cemetery

to visit his father's grave. There came a water boy who brought a clay jar and poured the water on top of the grave for a penny. To understand fully the imagery of the first stanza of the poem, you should know about this custom.

But then in the second stanza, which, contrary to the first stanza, belongs to life and not death, the father enjoys the beauty of having this infant at his side: the gurgling of the milk in his son's throat and the rest of it. So it's natural that, in the end of the poem, he changes his addressee, and instead of addressing the son, now he speaks to death. I think that you are right. We can also look at this poem in terms of the dichotomy between present and future. We can say that the future is a gift from the son to the father, because the son will continue the life of the father in himself.

**HLH:** This second question is almost a mirror image of the first. In "Secret of the River," is the future the father's gift to the son?

**MN:** I wrote this poem when I was living in Venice Beach, and as you know Venice Beach has some canals in the style of Venice, Italy. I used to take my son, Azad, along the river. So you have the imagery of the river, and the river in Persian culture (I think in all cultures—remember for example *Finnegan's*

*Wake* by James Joyce) is very important, because the river, unlike the ocean, which is circular, starts from somewhere and ends somewhere else. It's like life: you don't know where the origin of the river is or where the river ends. So that's the secret of the river, the secret of life.

But then, what I like about this poem is that from the beginning the father looks through the eye of the child. He sees the aggressiveness of elements of nature against himself. He feels that in the middle of his life he hasn't found any meaning in his life except for this child. The wild geese tune up their battle horns, so nature is telling him to go away. And then you have the cat who has lifted her tail in triumph: in other words, *We are the victors, not you*. He accepts and surrenders, because the palm leaf (and by the way I have made a little change in the poem since its publication, changing "palm frond" to "palm leaf") forces him to bend his head and surrender himself. He says, "OK, I have to accept this. This is my son, and maybe, maybe, he will find the secret of the river."

This poem is not really about the interrelationship between death and life, as "Death and Life" is; it is more about the discovery of the meaning of life for each individual.

**HLH:** Are “Childhood Landscape” and “Allowance” mirror images of one another: the father seeking to reclaim by description his own childhood landscape in one, and to offer the son by description the son’s childhood landscape in the other?

**MN:** I’m not sure that they are really mirror images of each other, because in the first poem, “Childhood Landscape,” the poet/father is just remembering his own childhood in Iran, when, upon opening the window each morning, he could see Mount Soffeh, which looked like a camel with humps. He would see himself as a camel driver who could command and move the mountain. He was full of passion, and now he is missing those days. There is not a picture of his own son in this poem.

But yes, the second poem, it’s about when you reach puberty and you shed your old skin, just like the skin left by a snake. So that’s what he feels about his son. His son is now 12 years old, and is shedding his old skin, so the father writes this poem about that specific night when the son is angry and has told his father that he hates his life. The father says: “OK, I will increase your allowance,” and later he writes this poem so that his son will have a remembrance for that turning point in his life. I think this poem “Allowance” has the quality you are asking about, but maybe not the first poem, “Childhood’s Landscape.”

JESSE NATHAN  
on  
**DINNER**

**H. L. Hix:** The poems in *Dinner* are not “autonomous,” but are enmeshed in various ways: connected with one another, related to songs and collages, part of a collaboration, etc. Does their being so enmeshed change how they work or what they are doing? I.e., are they different from other poems (of yours? in general?), or does it just happen that their enmeshment is made visible, though all poems are enmeshed in various ways?

**Jesse Nathan:** Even though this project was a collaboration from the beginning, and even though these poems were always cast as responses of a sort to Chris Janzen’s musical compositions, I set out to write poems. That’s it. I did not intend, at a foundational level, to write lyrics or replies or anything else enmeshed. I always want poems that stand on their own, and not just as a group or book of poems, but as individual pieces. That’s a goal in any line I write, and it’s a goal that’s constantly in conflict with my tendency to want to create worlds. By “worlds” I mean massive narratives or cycles

or sequences. The conflict is this: these worlds inevitably require that the pieces (the individual poems) lean on each other and fuse and echo and share symbols and language. And that makes the individual poems dependent, and it makes it more and more difficult to pluck one out of the context of the whole and have it remain at all comprehensible or enjoyable as a stand-alone. With a jigsaw puzzle, the individual pieces aren't all that captivating. But with poetry, I want the pieces of the puzzle to be totally captivating apart from the finished puzzle. It's an unresolvable conflict. Every book-length thing I write, I suppose, will be another round in this ongoing internal boxing match that's happening inside me. To return to your question: I agree that all poems are enmeshed in something, and maybe you're right that the enmeshment is more visible in the case of *Dinner*. In my head, though, these poems had to pass a test: they had to be, in each case, works of art that stood on their own. Poems must succeed in the silence of the mind, because for me poems are read on the page first and everything else (reading them aloud, performing them with music, pairing them with visual art) comes after that and remains a lower priority. So the test with these was always: does this poem work as a poem, independent of everything else? And when it did, subsequently enmeshing said poem in the larger world of *Dinner* intensified and heightened everything already going

on within both the individual puzzle piece, if you will, and throughout *Dinner* generally. That's the hope, anyway.

I want to add one other note, and it echoes well, I think, off your next question, though it might undermine the big point I just made, but here it goes: the Hart Crane piece is a good example of the enmeshment made visible. When Chris gave me this song, I immediately thought it sounded like someone trying to speak while underwater. I wanted those underwater rhythms and that elision of sound present in whatever poem arose. I wanted those slurry watery cadences. And so this poem grew very directly from the musical composition I was given.

**HLH:** These are poems about "sixteen eccentrics," but when I read, for example, the Hart Crane poem, I feel in the attitude of the poem an alternative to the normally grave, even devotional, demeanor of homage poems. Am I right to regard the poems as not only being about eccentrics, but also as being eccentric (out of the circle) themselves?

**JN:** Right. Words for me aren't a vehicle that gets you to an experience. They are the experience. With the *Dinner* poems, I didn't want versified research, which was an ever-present danger, and the biggest challenge to any poetry that's steeped in facts or

history. You risk eclipsing the lyric (which is to say: the music) when your poems are tied strongly to researched information. You risk robbing the poem of poetry. So I had to put enormous energy into matching the given eccentric with the eccentric form that fit best. The poems had to embody the eccentricity of the personality. It would have been lame to versify a bunch of facts about a person's weirdness, to basically *talk* about how eccentric Hart Crane or Billie Holiday was. It would've been lame because why not just read a history textbook if you're after pure information? And it would've been lame because eccentricity lives somewhere beyond intellect or reason or rational conversation. Eccentricity springs from the primal parts of a person. I want the reader to feel the strangeness of Ray Johnson in his or her gut. I want there to be a gut-level flash of recognition and alienation, simultaneously. The other big risk, I think, when writing about dead people or history generally, is hagiography. The guests at the dinner party were, when alive, funny and irritating and sad and obsessive and intelligent and a bunch of other things, and so it's impossible to imagine there being the level of liveliness I wanted vibrating throughout this dinner party if the poems had been gravely respectful. Sometimes being respectful is a bad idea. Being respectful can easily translate into

respectability, which is reasonable, but reasonable and respectable art is usually boring.

**HLH:** I am always on the lookout, in reading a poetry collection, for poems that can be read as *ars-poetica* poems, that in other words might offer a clue to how to read the collection. Would you affirm, or warn against, my impulse to read the last three or four parts of the exchange on pages 48–49 (from Virginia Woolf's question "Satisfied?" to the end) as an *ars poetica*?

**JN:** I'm OK with your impulse. I will say, though, that I stashed little pieces of myself all over these poems. Within every character, I tucked traits and ideas and tastes that I would say are my traits, my ideas and my tastes. But I also injected into these poems doses of other people I know, or people I made up, and obviously I injected huge doses of what I imagined these historical characters to be like (from research and extrapolation). So parts of the Virginia Woolf of these poems are not me. But Virginia Woolf hosted the party, and invited the guests, and that's kind of my role as the poet (selecting and orchestrating and messing around with a bunch of variables), and so it's hard not to think of myself in these poems as Virginia Woolf. I didn't really mean for that to be the case, at least not consciously, but I permitted myself to be led in that direction over the course

of the project. (A question like where I was locating myself would have been irrelevant during the writing. While writing, I was everyone and no one.) From my vantage point now, months or even years after some of these poems were written, I can say that when Woolf says, "I'll hide behind my tongue" in the first poem, or when she assesses the evening in the passage you mention, I am probably, yes, poking my own head into the mix. And I think you're right: I'm offering one roadmap (of many) for navigating these poems. I do think the phrase "confusion then madness then dinner" pretty much contains my worldview as a human being. And I think Woolf's concern that "many dirty hands" have "fondled" beauty is a concern I really do share, though maybe this notion is just a nice provocative conversation-starter among artsy types at a cocktail party, sniffing amongst themselves at how bad most art is. What's nice about making things up, though, is that you can say things and pretend not to believe them.

UCHE NDUKA  
on  
**EEL ON REEF**

**H. L. Hix:** The back-cover text on *eel on reef* warns against attempts to construct linear meaning out of the poems, but if I stop at a moment in the poems (such as one favorite of mine: "i'm solitude rowing / through neons patterned / after the life / of a night"), there still seems to be "linear meaning" available: those four lines sound like a very compressed odyssey. But if I were to modify the warning, to have it warn against constructing only linear meaning, would that simply be a step back toward what is being warned against, or would it nod to another aspect of the poems?

**Uche Nduka:** I think that taking words from a blurb rigidly to aid the reading of poems in a volume is a dangerous exercise. That action may hinder, intimidate or confuse a prospective reader. A poet writes a poem and the poem in turn inscribes the poet. The relationship between a poet and a poem is a freewheeling one. At each stage of composing a poem I feel language accumulate in me that will be able to carry the experience of that particular



moment. In other words, no aesthetic, stylistic or thematic preoccupation becomes totalitarian at that instant. The warning against looking for or even constructing a linear meaning out of the poems of *eel on reef* is not to foreclose a reader's own perceptions. Actually I think the "warning," invites the reader or critic or enthusiast to a writerly adventure. It says, "Step out of your skin for a while and ride around with a poem; leave your usual way of reading (whether linearly or non-linearly) and just be with the lines, the stanzas, the couplets, the poems as they enter your consciousness." As a poet I am more interested in that dazzling immediacy that accompanies the bringing of a poem to life than the secondary explanations or rationalizations that come afterwards. I am both reverential and irreverent towards meaning and form in my poems. The buoyancy and richness of a true poem point almost always to another aspect of communing with it. Those four lines you quoted strike me as adrenalized. To me a poem is continually evolving and sometimes even sabotages its operational strategies, for better or worse.

**HLH:** I am interested in the uses of repetition in this book, as for example, with the repetition of "obituarists." On the one hand, its repeated placement at the end of the stanza recalls the traditional poetic form of the ghazal, but I wonder

if musical models are also behind such a use of repetition?

**UN:** This use of repetition is a nod to sensuality and musicality. It seems I threw aural nodes at that poem to see what would happen. Lyrics loosely tethered to each other. However I don't think any particular musical model influenced this poem. The musically acoustic gloom of the poem is commenting upon itself. "Obituarists" gets repeated just because the poem calls for it. I don't get stuck on repetition as a way of progressing while working on a poem. Sometimes poems just get thirsty for tonal variations.

**HLH:** One poem includes the stanza "stony tracks / lie trespassed / and dishevelled— / there are no footprints / to read in them." Whatever else these lines are doing in this poem, are they also offering a way to read the whole book?

**UN:** No! Those lines are not summarizing the whole book. The lines are savoring a measure of their particular existence in that particular poem. There is no special way to read the whole book. *eel on reef* is both exuberant and sinewy and does not seem to welcome a monotonous focus. Its creative core is rousing, passionate, inventive. Perhaps the bite of the book emerges from its space, weight, pulse.

MAGGIE NELSON

on

## JANE: A MURDER

**H. L. Hix:** Jane's diary is an important source throughout the book, but a poem such as "(January 21, 1960)," for example, reminds the reader by its lineation that the diary is not simply re-presented, but that you "have taken the liberty of altering the appearance of Jane's writing on the page." How does such alteration advance the purposes of the book?

**Maggie Nelson:** The lineation of Jane's diaries was done pretty instinctively. It wasn't overly thought out. The entries needed some kind of distillation, especially as the book at large was about distillation. I felt each page of her diary had some kind of essence to it, and I tried to draw each one out, as a kind of exercise, and chose from there. Also, her writing on the page isn't spatially regularized: she doodles; some words appear at angles; there's a lot of white space; many fragments appear undated, etc. So if I had attempted a "straight" rendition of them, I would have failed anyway.

More poignantly, perhaps, Jane wasn't a word wizard or a poet. Or, at least, I didn't have access to her more poetic writings. (I actually do now: after her case was reopened, some new diaries emerged in the evidence boxes, and are now in my possession. But that's a different story.) Some of her thoughts and expressions are hilarious and awesome, but many of them, due to her age and the era, sound just like those of any other young Midwestern white girl listening to Doris Day on a phonograph and writing about what happened that day at school. Some of that everydayness served the book, but too much of it wouldn't have fit. She did have a kind of Emily Dickinson way with dashes and whatnot, so I emphasized that.

In short, I wanted Jane's voice to be in there, as a sign, or a vestige, of the real. But I was also inventing her (that's explicit throughout the book, especially in poems such as "Figment"), so I didn't feel it was out of keeping with the book's ethos to play with her writing, and meld it to my own poetic sensibility, my own ear.

I might add that those reconfigured poems from Jane's journals were the first pieces of writing I did for this book. Those, and the first dream sequence. For a long time, that was the main action. The rest came later.

**HLH:** To choose again only one example out of many that might illustrate the same issue: “The Funeral” appears to take a source other than Jane’s diary, and re-present it with only altered appearance. Is the documentary impulse also an impulse toward ordinary language?

**MN:** Yes, I think so. I think of myself as an ordinary-language poet, and as a documentary poet, though I’m not entirely sure what those terms entail. But generally speaking, I’m with Wittgenstein: “ordinary language is all right.” (I know I’m warping his context, forgive me.) Generally speaking I am after clarity, which isn’t the same thing as being after truth, though they often get muddled up. I’m not interested, for example, in any notion of truth that could be described as clarity without context. Pursuit of clarity, pursuit of context: these seem to me utterly indispensable to documentary investigation, poetic or otherwise. Put in a different way: I am a writer and a person who thinks the given world is good enough.

**HLH:** A reader might well ask, “Why poetry?” I wonder if I am right to read the lines “So there’s // no plot” as suggesting one answer: that a “normal” prose memoir insists on finding meaning in, or attributing meaning to, events, but events that cannot be made meaningful call for a lyric mindset,

in which one has nothing with which to replace simply standing and “listening to the birds.”

**MN:** Yes and no. I actually wrote a “normal” prose memoir, *The Red Parts*, as a follow-up to *Jane*, but I don’t think the memoir, if that’s what it has to be called, attributes meaning to the events it describes any more than *Jane* does. So I don’t think poetry, or lyricism, as you say, gets to take the whole cake here.

Of course, if you want your prose to do something similar, you can make it work that way, but you have to use different tools—you can’t use line breaks and white space. You can’t rely on lyrical flourish or leaps in logic, or on minimal gestures. You have to get into the art of the sentence. At least, that’s what I’ve found.

On that note, I think there’s a profound difference between prose that people customarily call “poetic” (i.e., image-laden, dreamy, prone to surrealism or stream-of-consciousness), and prose that makes use of less stereotypical poetic principles (meter, intense juxtaposition, internal rhyme, and so on). I tend to be more curious about the latter.

I’ve heard that some people have actually taught both *Jane* and *The Red Parts* side-by-side in English classes, precisely for this reason (to get students

thinking and talking about the formal differences between poetry and prose, what they can each do, and what they cannot: in short, where their limitations and possibilities and overlaps lie). This pleases me.

I am a poet at heart, but I distrust a lot of the special claims that get made for poetry. I think those claims can lead toward the strange predicament that poetry/poets often find themselves in, in which being a poet of anything (i.e., Kurt Cobain as “the poet of grunge”) is more honorable than being a poet of poetry itself.

I think the main reason why *Jane* needed to be the way it is has less to do with lyricism and more to do with the fragmentary, with what it means to attempt to put together the story of someone’s life and death when you’re left with the bits. Some have talked about the relation between the fragmentary and the traumatic in relation to *Jane*, which sounds probable, but I’m on less sure footing here. And of course, I could be wrong, which would be fine too.

IDRA NOVEY &  
PAULO HENRIQUES BRITTO  
ON BRITTO’S

## THE CLEAN SHIRT OF IT

**H. L. Hix:** I don’t mean to generalize too much from a particular observation, but I was struck by your comment in the introduction that Britto draws “on an understanding of his local community made more complex by knowledge of the world beyond it,” and I wonder if you share my inclination to extend that ideal—to see, as one important purpose of poetry in our “global village,” the introduction (by finding and/or making) of resonance into the dissonance between local and global?

**Idra Novey:** To find resonance in dissonance is a beautiful way of describing what a poem can do, and that’s certainly what appealed to me in Britto’s work. When I met him for dinner the first time, I was amazed at the breadth of his knowledge about other countries, and the fun he had connecting those other realities to Brazil. In a span of three minutes, he connected the history of a building in Rio de Janeiro to something happening with a building in China to a scene in a novel by V. S. Naipaul he’d translated the year before—all while driving us through Friday

night traffic in Rio. It was a fantastic ride, and a bit like the experience of translating his poems.

**Paulo Henriques Britto:** Because poetry is heavily language-bound, it may not be quite the best means for bridging the local and the global. I'd say music is probably a better choice. Poetry, at its best, is, I think, an exploration of language, which always means one particular language. But then, of course, translation is always possible (I'm a translator of poetry myself), and a good enough translation of a good poem can capture enough of it to make it worth reading in a different language.

**HLH:** "Fable Without a Moral" strikes me as particularly important to the collection. Probably this is more subjective than objective (I'm probably attributing importance to it partly because I like it a lot), but I am curious whether you see it also as somehow paradigmatic of Britto's work. Could one read others of his poems as fables without morals?

**IN:** Oh sure. I think a lot of Britto's poems could be described as fables without morals. His poems are mostly urban and ironic, but he also has a fascination with history and what happens over and over, which gives his work an old feel—of the weird, suspended world of fables.

**PHB:** Yes, I agree with you. Indeed, this might be a good definition of literature in general, since Baudelaire and Flaubert at least: a fable without a moral. We no longer look to literature for answers of any kind, moral or otherwise, but rather think of it (to the extent that we think of literature as content at all) as a source of questions, questions that are worth asking. Think of Henry James's earliest fiction and his late novels: there you have the passage from the old Victorian (though it's actually at least as old as Horace) idea of literature as providing delight and instruction (mostly moral), to our present disenchanted outlook.

**HLH:** A similar question. When Britto says "The world remains opaque, / immune to consciousness and its flickers / of logic," this seems like an anti-moral that doesn't validate our constructing the fables we call poems, exactly, but contributes to explaining why we construct them. His poems seem guided by flickers of logic, but he doesn't allow himself (or the poem or us) the delusion that those flickers reveal "the truth." Is that too egregiously bad a way of looking at his work?

**IN:** That sounds like a good reading to me, but I'm going to forward the question to Britto to see what he might add....

**PHB:** Well, I'd say one of my constant themes (it's almost a running gag, only it isn't particularly funny) is the idea that it's absolutely imperative that you should make an earnest attempt to make sense out of everything, though all the time you're perfectly aware that (1) it's impossible to make sense out of everything, and (2) even if you do make sense out of some things, the sense is not in the things but in your own mind, so this probably tells you more about yourself than about the things. The old essentializing view of truth has proved unacceptable, but the idea that truth is just a dumb logocentric fiction is equally unpalatable. So you sort of swing back and forth, or rather move in circles, as a comedian in some insane silent-movie routine, and maybe you don't really go anywhere, but it sure beats sulking in a corner or taking such drastic steps as committing suicide, joining your local church or writing Language poetry.

MARK NOWAK  
on **SHUT UP SHUT DOWN**

**H. L. Hix:** If I were offering a succinct apology for your book to a reader who had arrived at it expecting assorted examples of what Adrienne Rich calls "the columnar, anecdotal, domestic poem," I would start with the last page, and (what I take to be) your assertion that this is a "people issue," and that even if one of poetry's roles is the expression of personal emotion recollected in tranquility, another of its roles (more pressing, less often realized) is the insistence, in the face of corporate and governmental ways of framing matters, that economic and political issues are not primarily "money issues" or "security issues" but people issues. Does that bear any relation to how you would speak of the book?

**Mark Nowak:** Absolutely. People, working people, are always front and center in my work, as well as the first audiences for its reception. Their voices are writ in bold (literally). My writing attempts to expand both "the social condition of poetry" (as Raymond Williams, one of my favorite critics of Wordsworth, especially in *The Country and the*

*City*, calls it) and the social terrain of poetry (i.e., where it is reproduced, read, staged, etc., and for whom). My work is regularly staged/performed at union halls, conferences of working people, labor historians and labor educators, etc. And, I should add, Wordsworth himself makes an appearance on the first page of that serial poem, "Hoyt Lakes/Shut Down," though articulated, as you say, to "people" issues: "workers/words/worth/repeating." It is impossible, I think, to disjoin "work" from "people." No matter how much we might love our jobs, we're still there primarily to put food on the table, keep the house out of foreclosure, put something away for retirement or our kids' college fund...until the greed of the corporate world and Wall Street turn it all into ashes so that, with another depression, as Andrew Mellon infamously said, "assets return to their rightful owners." And then, now, we have to renew our energy for social struggles and action again.

**HLH:** The juxtaposition of voices in these poems, as represented graphically by contrasting bold, italic and plain text, creates a kind of dialogue, but even though such dialogue seems clearly as crucial to the work of these poems as dialogue is to the work of Plato's philosophical inquiries, your poetry's aims do not, on the surface at least, much resemble Plato's. How would you articulate the importance of dialogue in these poems?

**MN:** Dialogue has two major functions in my work. First: in much of *Shut Up Shut Down* and particularly the new book (*Coal Mountain Elementary*), the individual pieces are built, so to speak, to function simultaneously as "poems," photo-documentaries, labor histories (or, as I've taken to calling them, "Labor history with line breaks") and theatre works. "Capitalization," for example, originally won a project-development grant from Stage Left Theatre in Chicago, where it premiered; it was then done at the Cleveland Public Theatre, a rally for striking Northwest Airlines Mechanics and Cleaners (AMFA Local 33), etc. And *Coal Mountain* opens at the Studio Theatre at the Cathedral of Learning at the University of Pittsburgh next month, followed by a run as the spring production at Davis & Elkins College's theater department, just a few miles from the Sago mine. Second: since the publication of *Shut Up* I've been facilitating national and transnational "poetry dialogues" with workers at Ford plants (in the United States and South Africa), striking clerical workers at the University of Minnesota (through AFSCME 3800) and currently with Rufaidah, an organization for Muslim nurses and health care workers.

**HLH:** The frequency of numbers in these poems (in titles, etc.) might be construed in relation to the presence (actual and referential) of photography, as ways of signaling that these poems are not enclosed

within an internal, alternate world, but are in active congress with the “real” world. Is it apt to say that this book is not aimed at reflection as an end in itself, but at reflection as a call to action?

**MN:** “[I]n active congress with the ‘real’ world”: what a fabulous way to phrase it. Yes, and yes definitely “reflection as a call to action” as well. I go back a good deal to Volosinov’s *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* and his comment that a “sign that has been withdrawn from the pressures of the social struggle—which, so to speak, crosses beyond the pale of the class struggle, inevitably loses force, degenerating into allegory and becoming the object not of live social intelligibility but of philological comprehension.” In “Hoyt Lakes/ Shut Down,” for example, I was experimenting with rendering Marx’s superstructure/base through poetic form (an expansion of the haibun, really), where the “superstructure” above is grounded in a very precise economic number (i.e., the exact number of people who lost their jobs in each and every Iron Range town when the LTV mine closed). In *Coal Mountain* I started with a similar question/ problematic: how could I render what I think is a significant new development in labor organizing, transnational social-movement unionism, in poetic form?

**HLH:** “Be reasonable” is typically used as an injunction to acquiesce to the status quo. When one voice in “act/eleven” says “*It wasn’t because of reason / that I wept. / But when I stopped // weeping, that was not because of / unreasonableness,*” I take it as part of a call, but is the call to reject “reasonableness” as an ideal, or to revise what counts as reasonable?

**MN:** Like we poets say: revise, revise, revise (literally, “to see again”). I was just speaking to someone yesterday about reading the online responses to stories about labor actions (strikes, sit-ins, protests, etc.). Inevitably, someone will fairly quickly write, “If those lazy bastards don’t like it, they should just quit and go work someplace else.” That, for me, is one type of reasoning I’d love to revise. People absolutely deserve a voice and power in the place where they will spend one-third of their adult lives. Similarly, after previewing a dozen or more labor documentary films for my classes the past two weeks (films like *Workingman’s Death* and *Losers and Winners* and *Mardi Gras Made In China*) the “invisibility” of labor (from the Western/Global North perspective) has been a theme we’ve been talking about a great deal. How, here in the U.S., one can walk into any Walmart or Target or Dollar General or wherever, and find a seemingly endless supply of products “Made in China.” But what does that



label really mean? And why are “we” (again, from the Western/Global-North perspective) able to “reasonably” deny (or not be concerned about) the conditions under which these products are manufactured? And more so, as I attempt to bring under the spotlight in *Coal Mountain*, why are we “reasonably” allowed to be negligent of the fact that these manufacturing facilities are powered by electricity from coal mines that, in China, are killing (Engels calls it “social murder) thousands of Chinese coal miners every year (recent conservative government estimates run at four thousand to six thousand per year; labor groups say it might be four times that). That, too, seems to me an invisibility that has been accepted as reasonable, and one that my writing revises, I hope, back into visibility.

DG NANOUK OKPIK  
on **IN THE TIME OF OKVIK**

**H. L. Hix:** The prefatory note to your collection places us “in the time of origin,” where the poems also operate. This makes me want to read “Foist” as an *ars poetica*, and inquire into your sense of the importance of treating poetry as “Bones surfaced on the old land,” and of writing “as if for a fossil record.”

In your poetry, contrasts/tensions seem to create a multiplicity in the speaker (and implicitly in the reader): “This day is made of horned puffins and soothsayers” entails (I think) that “I am there and here” and “No longer can we do / one thing at a time.” If I am right to read the poems in this way, how would you speak of the importance of our inability to do one thing at a time? Or, perhaps this is the same question: why ought we, as you put it in another poem, “seldom listen to only one voice”?

**dg nanouk okpik:** I believe my writing is always in transition: ever-changing and ever-present, past, and ever-future. I was taught by an elder that native storytellers share stories from a space where a

thousand years ago, five hundred years in the future, or here are all possible simultaneously—as if the storyteller from these markers of space is sitting right next to me. And, as I tell you this, we the storytellers embody the universe all at once. They are the ones-who-sit-beside where time is no longer a measure but an echo, a reverberation, ever sung, as if we are all singing the same guttural song.

The storyteller is consciousness speaking through what Inuit might call *Sila*, the breath soul in the wind, the inspired, expiring voice of the spirit who moves in all things. We share this breath with all beings, with rock, water, animal, plant, human, etc.

So when I come to writing poetry it is not “I” speaking/writing the words on the page. It is all those I share breath with, all of the spirits who have stories rising up within them. I am just a hollow bone, a vessel through which the images and music blow. The words are not my own: they are the ashes of all languages derived from all knowledge or intelligence.

Arthur Sze taught me that in classical Chinese and Japanese poetry, the ancient poets were considered to be poet-priests, and the ideogram of the word “poetry” is *word and temple*. Each poet was recognized by the sounds, rhythms and inflections—not by his

name. So there is no “I” or individual and, as I see it, therefore one name in the many.

The ancient Chinese and Japanese wrote and left poetry everywhere for every man, women or child to read: on cherry trees blossoming, on road signs dangling in the wind, or by floating them on a piece of driftwood in a brook.

It seems to me that today humans are searching for this again, or messages from the other—multiple and yet one. What is written in “Foist” does seem like an *ars poetica*, but let me assure you it is from the spirit of things. The poem “Foist” has changed so many times that I sometimes wonder if it isn’t alive and breathing on its own as a living language (a lot of my poems are in-progress).

I think if you study my poetry it repels the “foist which is upon us” today. As we grow in multiplicity and numbers, it is my hope that as humans we retain trace-words of the rooted languages but also create a living testament of history. But I am always chasing origins, searching where I might find the self.

By creating a multiplicity in the speaker’s voice, I tend to find a better space to become and nurture. The writing seems to be able to maneuver in and out of consciousness, time or space. Arthur taught me

about seeing an object from many points of departure or angles: as if it were a crystal ball hanging from a string, multi-faceted, collecting light while twirling in freedom. Seeing the star Polaris from all trajectories in the sky at once is how I think of time and place in the writing.

For instance, when I was a child growing up, some of the mightiest and grand rivers on Earth were in Alaska. I remember fishing with my father on the banks and shoals. Say on the big Susitna River, near Talkeetna, I remember gazing at the water on a sunshine-filled morning and watching light dancing across the surface. Yet if I looked a little closer, a little deeper, I saw hundreds, even thousands of silver backs (salmon) edging their way up the river backwards. They would just skim the surface at first light, awakening to the swift movement of the river's gulch. Then by daylight they would be thrashing the river rocks as if time were ending and finite.

I believe in this sense of urgency in the poetry, just as the swimmers/salmon know the end is near. This helps me convey my place in Inuit history. I am Inupiaq, Inuit. My family resides in Barrow, Alaska. There are not many Inuit in the world today. I believe that I read there are less than one hundred and fifty thousand. So you may see the sense of utter exigency one might feel.

Also, since there is not a lot of poetry written by Inupiaq peoples, most of the writing I have found has been written/collected by anthropologists, sociologists, scientists or explorers, which makes my observations and stories unique. However, it is not my poetry to own and claim—it is the world's, because once I write something I give it away to the page and to the reader, whereas I am just a vessel of bones in which the wind may travel.

I hope the writing will speak for itself and lend witness to the existence of my family and what changes are happening on the earth today. I cannot speak for my people, but I can document one account as if it is a voice from many views, and I am just an onlooker of say an open all-encompassing consciousness of the spirit-that-moves-in-all-things, *Sila*.

DANIELLE PAFUNDA

on

## THIS IS WHAT A FEMINIST [POET] LOOKS LIKE

**H. L. Hix:** When I read the *This is What a Feminist [Poet] Looks Like* forum, I am particularly struck by two recurring themes: the embodiedness of experience, and the multiplicity of feminisms. But I wonder what themes (recurring or not) strike you, the forum curator, as urgent, or surprising, or whatever.

**Danielle Pafunda:** Thank you for the opportunity to wrestle with these questions, fortuitously designed to serve some of the big projects on my plate at the moment. I answer these questions as the WILA (Women in the Literary Arts) Association & Conference project enters its second month of existence. Tonight the Facebook group has over four thousand six hundred members. I also answer these questions as the “Numbers Trouble” conversation begun two years ago by Juliana Spahr and Stephanie Young (*Chicago Review*, Autumn 2007) continues without much resolution. Publication rates remain about 70 percent men, 30 percent women, and I’ve just received an announcement for a new journal whose mission is to bring “extraordinary literature”

to a “wide audience,” and while I agree that they’ve got some extraordinary fellas listed in their table of contents, I wonder how it’s possible in this day and age to put together an inaugural issue where 21 of 25 contributors are men. Troubling numbers persist.

I had no idea how women poets would respond to *This is What a Feminist [Poet] Looks Like*. In fact, this is exactly why I queried: that multiplicity you observe. On women-only and women-primarily LISTSERVs, the great variety of feminist convictions and practices quickly becomes obvious. We’ve all read *The Feminine Mystique* and marched in “Take Back the Night” rallies, but beyond that our lived experiences and our favored texts makes us rather multifarious in our allegiances. Subsequently we have wildly different ideas about what makes a hot feminist poem. So what do we mean when we say “feminist poetics”? How many threads are we working? Plenty, it seems, and I’d like to examine each one. We’ll have a second forum with all new contributors in November, and a third next spring, and I doubt we’ll find two women in perfect agreement. Which is not to say that we’re pitted one against another, but that we’ve got this valuable friction that begs exploring.

That said, there’s certainly overlap in the narratives. Of all the similarities, what struck me most, though it’s not particularly surprising, is that so many of us

come to feminism through our negative experiences. One is not born a woman, nor is one born a feminist. And while one is getting cultured into womanhood, she often thinks, *This will be different for me*. And then it isn't different. She's put down by teachers or classmates in a particularly sexist fashion. She's belittled for being too feminine in her interests or aesthetics, targeted for being too masculine (and, paradoxically, bitchy). She sees the bodies of other women assessed in documents meant to speak to their intellectual merit. Somewhere along the line, she realizes she needs a feminism of some type or another. And this is sad. It is sad that we don't come to feminism more often via our joie de girlhood or our interest in hanging out with other feminists, or because we love the bands and the fashions.

On the other hand, I far prefer to hear that an experience with sexism leads a woman to feminism, and not that an experience with sexism leads her to depression or false consciousness or bad poetry. So here we are, women poets, some of us quite comfortable calling ourselves "feminist poets," with our wry grins and our conviction that it ain't over yet, and it certainly ain't level.

**HLH:** Though I didn't hear anyone saying exactly this, I wonder whether the struggle with accepting a qualifier of any sort to the term "poet" (feminist

poet, woman poet, etc.) begets, at least implicitly, a reversal in the cumulative dialogue of the forum: if the resonance between societal duplicity toward women and societal duplicity toward poetry makes women poets more archetypally poets than men poets, if "man" instead of "woman" ought to be the qualifier we're trying to decide whether to apply or accept?

**DP:** Let's see: male nurse, man purse, househusband... man poet doesn't quite fit the formula. But I see your point, and this has always been the tension, right? At least in modern times. Poetry is a man's game, but it's not a masculine game. Virginia Woolf captures that well in the early chapters of *Orlando*. Thus the male hysteria of someone like Eliot, or Pound's cock walk all over history, or whatever it is Robert Bly does out there in the woods. Which is, of course, part of what makes their respective works so well worth reading.

The subaltern positions of poetry and women might analogize well, but the subaltern positions of poet and woman don't. The poet who treads in those unmarked categories (man-identified-male, hetero, able-bodied, white, etc.) has a more privileged lived experience than do his poems. But analogous subalternity is tricky, too. In this round of story

topping, is it worse to be a poem or worse to be a woman?

There are certainly cultural-feminist types that would categorize poetry as a woman's domain. For my part, I think that the ways in which women have to navigate the gaps in our privilege serves us well when we come to poetry. We've had to learn to value ourselves when significant voices tell us we're dull, worthless, unappealing, unattractive or too complicated.

And, as I recall, poetry and feminism are at about the same level of misfit in the high school pecking order.

**HLH:** The question that feels trickiest for me: I believe in the power of dialogue, politically, philosophically, in interpersonal relationships and so on, but I wonder whether this is one context/subject in regard to which, because I am a male in a still-flagrantly gendered culture, my only legitimate participation in the dialogue is not to enter the dialogue, but to shut up and listen. If, by implication, even my framing these questions and posing them to you, and proposing to remark on this work in my own project as I am remarking on other works, continues and exacerbates the problem rather than diminishing it.

**DP:** Taking a page from blogger Twisty Faster, I don't think women should waste any more time explaining feminist basics to men (or women)... and we certainly shouldn't waste a moment more *debating the need* for feminism with men (or women). But I do sympathize with the position of well-intentioned men who want to explore feminism, or participate therein, men who are also subject to the often damaging gender norms our culture regurgitates one generation to the next. Feminism helps men, too, and those men can and should help feminism. So, despite the dangers of analogizing, I liken men's participation in these discussions to my participation in discussions of race, or any other category of identity in which mine is the unmarked, privileged position. I want to, for instance, discuss why American poetry is so overwhelmingly white, but is it my place to start the discussion? Do I exacerbate the imbalance of power by attempting to define the problem from my comfy perch? To abstain from the discussion makes me complicit with even uglier forces, so I try to listen more than speak, to speak humbly and acknowledge my ignorance of experience, but still be useful, resourceful, brainstorming into the future. And to be patient when my participation is criticized. Because I have a lot to learn about participating appropriately and productively.

After we launched “This is What a Feminist [Poet] Looks Like,” there were responses from men in the blogosphere, men considering their feminist, pro-feminist or not-so-feminist stances.

Now, *Delirious Hem* is run by an ever-shifting loose assembly of experimental women poets who subscribe to polite anarchy, and many of its forums get executed fast and dirty, but there is one thing we all agree upon: *Delirious Hem* was established to provide a platform for women poets who feel themselves too busy, too overwhelmed, too seldom welcome at the party to participate in a more traditional form of criticism.

And it’s true that if men were desperate to talk about their feminism, they’d be doing it. They don’t need my permission or assistance.

However, while I’m deeply committed to creating a space for women to speak, I am in fact curious about how men poets conceive of their participation in feminism, how they see their work as (pro)feminist, and I suspect that if I don’t invite them to speak about it in an organized fashion, it’ll remain only partially articulated in the comments boxes on other dudes’ blogs.

I decided to host (co-host, actually, with poet Mark Wallace) a forum on (pro)feminist men poets (I use the word “men” rather than the more felicitous “male” to make some distinction between biological sex and the cultural constructions of gender, to welcome those born female or intersex who identify as men, and because the awkwardness of the phrase draws attention to the fact that “man” is usually the default identity for “poet”). And while we usually run *Delirious Hem* on that polite-anarchy model, I didn’t feel comfortable launching a bevy of men onto our platform without some consensus. Which consensus wasn’t entirely easy to reach—turns out we women aren’t really in agreement about how men should participate in or speak to feminism. Eventually, we came up with a format with which we all feel more or less comfortable (“all” being the loose assemblage of women who steer *Delirious Hem* at the moment). And in that process many of us realized it was incredibly difficult to articulate our opinions about where men belong in this process. All that is to say (and I’m just one feminist speaking here): if we want men to participate in the alteration of gender relations, we have to create spaces in which they’re invited to speak, despite any and all reservations. These spaces serve two purposes. Firstly, they give men a place where they can be sure that women want to hear from them. Secondly,

when men speak in our house, then perhaps we can neutralize some of the always already uneven distribution of right-to-speak. Perhaps we can avoid some of the seemingly inevitable collapse of discourse. It should be a well understood given that in these spaces men will have to take turns. Once they speak, they must expect response, and they should (would happily I'd hope) listen carefully, open themselves up to persuasion as well as praise, critique as well as thanks.

SARITH PEOU  
on **CORPSE WATCHING**

In a recent article, Richard Bernstein expresses hope that the trial of five members of the Khmer Rouge will “provide a measure of satisfaction to the Cambodians who experienced the devastations of Khmer Rouge rule.” Insofar as they were in fact devastations, satisfaction in any measure seems improbable. Unlike courts, poetry is not empowered by our society to administer justice, but does poetry make any form, or any measure, of satisfaction available to those who have experienced devastations of violent political regimes?

“My Sister Rachana” concludes its recounting of violent acts with a statement from the speaker that “I feel guilty for misplacing my anger on my poor dog.” Yet the scale of the suffering recounted is such that it seems anger could only be misplaced. Is it appropriate to read your poems as interventions into the cycle of anger and violence, attempts to replace anger instead of misplacing it? If so, how ought readers of the poems hear and absorb them?



In *The Burden of Memory, the Muse of Forgiveness*, Wole Soyinka calls forgiveness “a value that is far more humanly exacting than vengeance.” Your poem “Scars” seems to me to set out those exacting terms implicitly but clearly: an exacting account by the sufferer of what must be nearly unbearable to recall, and an exacting imagination by others of suffering far beyond their own experience. Am I exaggerating matters to regard “Scars” and the other poems in *Corpse Watching* as an attempt to reclaim a humanity that extreme violence attempted to deny you, and as an offer of humanity to your readers?

Those were the questions I posed to Sarith Peou. His response was extraordinary: 25 single-spaced pages in answer to the first question alone. It was obvious to me immediately that his reply not only far exceeded the scope of this book, but had a gravity and import that merits publication as a book of his own. He is continuing to work on his replies to these questions, which surely will find a publisher soon after completion. Meanwhile, I present here, simply as a foretaste of his book to come, the following excerpt from early in his first answer to me.

—H. L. Hix

**Sarith Peou:** When I came to prison in 1996, at age 33, to serve my double life sentences (60 years minimum), I had lost all hope of accomplishing

anything meaningful in my life, especially something about the suffering that my Khmer nation has gone through in this recent history, in particular the atrocity under the Khmer Rouge’s reign of terror.

Disappointed in my life, I contemplate suicide, which was not new to my life; I had a few attempts myself, and I had lost two brothers to it. Thanks to the intervention of a couple of Christian friends, I am alive today. They convinced me that God had saved my life from the Khmer Rouge’s killing fields and numerous other times in my refugee adventure “for a reason.” That reason could be to tell the rare survival stories, as well as the mistakes I had made in my life that had brought me to prison, which could inspire some people.

Although I have many stories of my own, I also had witnessed and learned many heartbreaking stories of other Khmer Rouge victims with whom I lived and for whom I worked. I should not deprive the world of such truth that God has called for me to tell. If I failed and took the easy way out of life, this work would remain undone.

I thought about so many friends and relatives and many other Khmers I had witnessed taken to executions. I thought of the executions before my

horrified eyes. I thought of those haunted looks in their eyes, those masks of terror.

I also thought of those helpless voices of moaning and screaming from the torture chamber—the voices that still echo in my head and dreams until today. I thought about the expanding of the Khmer Rouge's killing field beyond those mass graves inside the country. Khmer bones were scattered all over the jungles, and thicken the air along the Khmer/Thai border amid the plights of escape: months of walking, running and climbing mountains in the jungles, and minefields. Many had died from starvation, dehydration, malaria, landmines, and attacks by the Thai border rangers and the pursuing of the Vietnamese invading troops.

I thought of a man, who later became my friend, who lost his wife to dehydration in the jungle during their escape. He had survived with his infant because his wife let him suck her breast milk. During the many years I knew him, he had never been normal again. I met him again in California—he still had not smiled, and he had never been interested in another woman.

I thought of those death trails along which families were forced to leave their sick, elderly and infants behind because their slow movement would put the group at higher risk. The infants were considered

the highest risk because their crying gave out their presence to potential predators.

Those survivors are still living with tremendous guilt and madness from what they had to do to save their own lives. These are the stories they are too ashamed to tell. I had the privilege to hear these stories only through my work as an interpreter in the mental-health program in a few refugee camps for five years, and I had not just interpreted the words but also conveyed the feelings and horror each of these stories demanded.

The mental health centers were my home. I worked and lived with the inpatients and became their personal friends. Some committed suicide and I was affected tremendously. I had been burned out numerous times and had attempted suicide a few times myself.

I thought of the first wave of refugees, thousands, who were seeking refuge on Thai soil, but were bussed and dumped in the minefields without food or water. More died than survived.

I thought of one lone psychotic woman who had eaten her own infant after she gave birth in the jungle, though I had never found out whether she ate her infant because she was crazy or she became

crazy after what she had experienced during her escape, including having to eat her own infant for survival.

I thought of the two boys who were so traumatized by the war and had lost their voice and sanity. You must have seen "The Unfitted" in *Corpse Watching*, which tells the story.

I also thought of the landmine victims (most had lost one or both feet), including one orphaned boy, told about in "I Don't Know What Happened to Him," who had lost both legs, both arms and both eyes. I interpreted for him when a group of medical staff in the ICRC Surgery Hospital discussed his fate. They would not save his life if they could not find a person or country to raise him. Cambodia is still among the post-war countries with the greatest number of landmines, which still take thousands of limbs each month.

I thought of my own three brothers, ages 11, 12 and 14, whom I left home to rescue. They attempted to enter the refugee camp but were arrested, put in the Thai prison (where I found them) then sent to a remote prison camp, in a malaria-infested jungle. The youngest, Sokha, lost his sight and hearing to malaria. About eight years later, when I came to America, I worked three jobs: daytime, evening

and weekend. I then sent money to hire some Thai officials to smuggle them into the camp. All three were admitted for depression and suicide risk, at the mental-health center where I used to work. Sadly, the camp was closed to new refugees, and Sokha committed suicide.

I thought of a friend and some other refugees who committed suicide because their medical problems, whether physical or mental, held their families from departure for resettlement in a third country, after they had been accepted. They sacrificed their lives so their families could find a future.

I thought of the orphans, most the only survivors in their families. They were drifting along the breeze of mercy and had no clue what their future would bring. Some young girls were coerced into prostitution and some became mistresses of old married men. Some, who had no means to survive by themselves, ended up with one more baby to raise. I also thought of many lone mental patients, the only survivor in their families.

I thought of many widows, who had lost their husbands in the Khmer Rouge, but were sexually exploited, including rape in their camps along the Khmer/Thai border. Those resistance camps were ruled by the most barbaric guerrillas.

These intrusive images have been imprinted in my conscience with permanent ink. They are played and replayed restlessly in my mind. They have broken my heart and disturbed my soul. They are painful to remember, yet cannot be forgotten; hard to bear, yet cannot be erased; hard to tell, yet must be told. They still scream loudly in my conscience and demand to get out and be known to the world.

CRAIG SANTOS PEREZ  
on

## FROM UNINCORPORATED TERRITORY [HACHA]

**H. L. Hix:** In the book's preface, you give a clear statement of your ambitions in/for the work. The statement seems addressed to me most explicitly in my role as a citizen, but I take the creation of a strategic site for resisting the reductive tendencies of a deformed democracy also as a challenge to me as a poet, by activating poetry not primarily in relation to tradition and literary history but in relation to its (and my) contemporary responsibilities and effects. Is that one appropriate way to begin absorbing the parenthetical "(and other voices)"?

**Craig Santos Perez:** As I mention in the preface of my book, "Guam" as geographic location and linguistic signifier has often been reduced to only mean a strategic site of the U.S. military (the *USS Guam*), which occupies about a third of my homeland and currently plans to transfer eight thousand marines from Okinawa to Guam. The hope for my work is that Guam becomes a site of resistance for my own voice (and other voices) to resist the reductive and destructive tendencies of America's

colonial democracy. By “other voices,” I hope that my work will inspire other native Chamorus (whether they live on Guam or in the diaspora) to express their own voices through poetry. In addition, I hope that my work makes Guam visible to American poet-citizens who speak out against the deformities of U.S. democracy.

**HLH:** Some pages present maps, or map-like texts, an act for which the reader is prepared by the first paragraph of the preface. What is the value (strategic or otherwise) of including maps within (as part of) this work? More generally, what is the role of information and facts in this work?

**CSP:** I’ve been living in the U.S. for 14 years now, and I’ve been asked countless times to point out on a map where I’m from to people I meet. More often than not, Guam doesn’t exist on maps presented to me. My work attempts to map this feeling of invisibility, this feeling of inarticulateness. The maps in the book (which were designed by Sumet (Ben) Viwatmanitsakul, based on actual maps included in my original manuscript) are maps in which Guam is located as the center of various forces: contemporary airline routes, the Spanish Galleon Acapulco-Manila trade route, and the routes of military activity during World War II in the Pacific. French theorist Michel de Certeau has written (here translated): “What the

map cuts up, the story cuts across.” The poems in my book are meant to articulate voices rising from Guam: to make Guam visible. The stories of my family in the book are meant to cut across the abstractions of all maps of Guam. The historical information and facts are other kinds of maps, a way of mapping the story of a people and place. I place this kind of historical mapping within the stories of my family (my grandparents in particular) because so many voices are made invisible by certain kinds of historical mapping. My grandfather’s voice, his experience growing up with U.S. colonialism and as a forced laborer during Japanese Occupation, is a central map in the personal history of my people.

**HLH:** I want to quote three passages that are themselves quoted within *from unincorporated territory*: “edge closer to the illegible borders” (presented in the text with only opening but not closing quotation marks), the epigraph from Charles Olson advising the reader “let them not make you as the nation is” and “my job was to preserve things that i wasn’t willing to build.” In each case, is the quoted passage a way of thinking about what your poetry is doing? Of thinking generally about what poetry ought to be doing?

**CSP:** I definitely think those three passages articulate the aesthetics of my work. Poetry to me is a kind of

edging towards what I don't understand, what is not yet spoken, what is on the verge of being forgotten: all the "illegible borders" that frame my personal, historical, psychological and cultural experiences. Olson has been a very influential poet to me, both his theory and his praxis (particularly his *Maximus Poems*). The passage I quote from his work is an important lesson in resistance, in aesthetic activism, in defining the tension between poet and citizen (or colonial citizen, in my case). The final passage is a direct quote from my grandfather describing his job as a superintendent of the National Park War Memorial Service on Guam—his job was to preserve the structures that he helped build as a forced laborer. He said this as matter of fact, but I knew he said this to teach me a lesson. I can't change the terrible tragedies forced unto my people by three centuries of colonialism. I can't change what happened to my own family. I can't bring back my grandfather's brother who was beheaded by the Japanese military during the Occupation. I can't bring back the child my grandmother miscarried during the Manenggon Death March (would have been her first child). I can't take back the land that was stolen by the U.S. military from my great-grandfather. What I can do as a poet is to tell these stories—stories that would be forgotten otherwise (as N. Scott Momaday once said: the oral tradition is always one generation from being lost). And hope that these stories might bring about change.

MAHEALANI PEREZ-WENDT  
on  
**PAPAHANAUMOKU**

**H. L. Hix:** The title poem of *Papahanaumoku*, which is also placed first in the collection, ends with the line "We would sing again." What is the importance to you of the collection's presenting voices (plural), of its being "we" rather than "I" singing?

**Mahealani Perez-Wendt:** There is a nationalist movement among Kanaka Maoli, the Indigenous people of Hawai'i Nei, to reclaim their political sovereignty and national lands. I have been a participant in that movement and often lapse into the plural "we" almost unconsciously. I believe the habit is largely attributable to a deep self-perception that I am not separate from the collective. Through the years, I have spoken to many groups about the Kānaka Maoli sovereignty struggle. Because of this, I believe I have (I hope not arrogantly) taken for my own our collective persona. This has not been done purposefully or for self-aggrandizement. I am not a grandstanding politician or fiery activist who makes inflammatory, or even inspirational speeches. I am not someone who presumes to speak for an entire nation of people. It is a voice that has come

quite naturally and, because of this, I have listened, embraced and flowed with it.

**HLH:** When an “I” does appear in the poems, its relationship to the voices is not an easy one: the voices themselves “rise out of shadows,” and the “I” feels “tethered and hammered through / Wild among dark branches / Snared by voices on angry winds.” Is it fair to infer that you would say it is important not to ease one’s relationship to the voices? I take it as possible (and tempting) so to ease one’s relationship to the voices; how does one avoid doing so?

**MP-W:** The voices of ancestors speak. I hear them. You might say they’re a source of conscience. They tell me that the bastardization of our culture is wrong and must not be tolerated. They tell me we cannot acquiesce, cannot go along with exploitation that comes with being Indigenous to a homeland transformed by capitalist outsiders to a major tourist resort destination. Hawai’i is the good bad example of what Pacific peoples ought not to do; i.e., welcome exploiters, their religions, tolerate their destructive lifeways. The voices are full of anger and indignation, because Kānaka Maoli are too often buffeted mercilessly about by powerful, contending world forces: sacrificial, so to speak. This poem expresses that dilemma.

JESSICA PIAZZA  
on  
**INTERROBANG**

**H. L. Hix:** First, a question that at least *starts* with an observation about a formal decision. Many (most?) of the poems in the book are sonnets, but as if to intensify that decision, there is a crown of sonnets at the beginning, another near the middle and a third at the end. What does the crown of sonnets make possible, that leads you to give it such pride of place in the book?

**Jessica Piazza:** Yes. I like crowns a lot, I don’t think less is and I did intend them to work toward more. I want more intensification, as you put it. I think crowns more and then take what a sonnet does most beautifully some, and then (capturing a moment in the very act of its some motherfucking changing) and widen that potential, allowing more. See Jill for turns between poems as opposed to Essbaum. See solely within them. Timothy Donnelly.

While sonnets are not usually considered *Sam*. See list of narrative forms, I really like the way people you’ve had intertwining them in crowns invites more sex with, with ratings opportunity for storytelling of a sort. and marginalia. See We follow the speaker of the poem not Marcel Duchamp only through the singular moment of the and lots of random

sonnet, but through five such moments or ruminations, which means a chance for greater characterization.

Of course, I really just love the refrains in crowns. Anywhere, in fact. The act of repeating can be insistent (as in: *remember this; it's important*), lamenting, soothing (as mantras are) or suspect (when the refrain is re-contextualized so the same words have different meaning or nuance.) In my book, I've tried to stretch what I consider to be the expansive nature of the crown even more so with three crowns, all in the voice of the same speaker. My hope was that opening, anchoring and closing the book with these crowns would highlight the movement between themes—the first crown focuses on the end of a relationship, the second on memories, the third on an exploration of finding one's independence while staying connected.

In the end, I also felt that such a circular form lends itself perfectly to a book about obsession (which mine is). Obsessions rely on circular thinking, and ending up exactly where one started (as crowns force the reader to do, since the first and last lines

objects that are also art but also random objects. See Everything the Power of the World does is done in a circle. See Go go go! Find the best thing and multiply multiply reproduce reinvent. See Richard Siken. See the words *Kuala Lumpur*. Say them over and over and you have to smile eventually. See John Berryman. For disambiguation See Crown of thorns. Crown molding. Crown and anchor. Or: better just stay ambiguous. See Christian Bök. See Kate Greenstreet. Synonyms: tsunami, stampede, tea leaves at the bottom of a glass, Craig

are the same) should ideally evoke the exhaustion and fixation of obsessing.

**HLH:** "Kopophobia" is set in Eastern Europe (Prague and Budapest), where "they brave ruin, but we could not survive it." Is this poem representative of your work, or is it anomalous, in seeking connection between the personal and the historical?

**JP:** Well, I'm noticing lately in academic English programs that there's this really concentrated move toward what they're calling "area studies" (which, along with cultural studies and general theory, have by now at least equaled if not surpassed aesthetics as the main focus of PhD literature curricula.) But despite writing several poems set in different foreign and domestic locales, I feel that writing specifically about geographical places in a cultural context is more of a political act than I'm interested in pursuing in any serious way.

However, I am attracted to how a place (whether a city, a country or simply a space) can act as a metaphor for

Arnold. Antonyms: buttonhole, haiku, braiding, tiniest misstep and you fall and die, keep your mouth shut.

Did I tell you I was an Assyrian princess once? I tricked the king into marrying me. I was bored. I tricked him into making me ruler for the day; on that day, I put him to death. Now, I have a lot of meaningless sex but they're all in the dungeon by morning. My ex-boyfriend was a hunger martyr. Another ex was a dirty locker in a bus station in Moscow. I like beaches because they're often stormed. I like storms because



points of important emotional import in a poem. In the poem you mentioned it's a pretty simple correlation: ruins of a city as backdrop for a ruined relationship. Of course it's not always that simple, especially when you start talking about the historical as opposed to the geographical. I do think I seek connections between the historical and the personal, but again, I almost always use place/space allegorically.

On a visual scale, places offer color, artifacts, literal background. Which might be exploitative, I realize. That's OK by me. History is all exploitative anyway, so making my own history into public record and stealing a little cultural pizzazz along the way is fine. In this sense, I think the historical in my poems sometimes works to help the poems' world become more mythic. Referencing real historical events and places along with personal stories is a quick way into narrative cosmology.

they have eyes. I like eyes because I can see. I like seas because they hug beaches. The thing about tautology is that it's tautological. Did I mention, once, that I like circles? I could tell you why I like hugs, but that's obvious. The last time I was in Budapest this kid had a Mao Zedong lighter that played "L'Internationale" when he flipped open the top. That was irony. The communist statuary garden is very beautiful and all the statues live there together. My family lives in Rome, each with a house on one of the seven hills, each with a planted flag and a breastplate, each sacked and powerful and fallen. All roads lead to them.

**HLH:** This may be the same question, but I mean it to be different. When I read "Automatonophilia," I am reminded of Donna Haraway and the cyborg. How do you understand (how do you intend) your poetry to stand in relation to connections between the experiential and the theoretical?

**JP:** I want my poetry to be entirely experiential. Or, maybe I mean I don't want to make statements or create structures that have no "use." Or that there's no theory without experience. Maybe that's trite, but I mean it; the theoretical seems to be a way of seeing or explaining, which is only useful if the thing itself is worth the theorist's gaze. One has a feeling, then theorizes what that feeling means, how it applies, what cultural contexts inform it, etc. I think poems at their best aren't academic acts, nor even political acts. Don't get me wrong: there are wonderful, important political poems. But they aren't wonderful because they are political, but because they allow insight into the feelings and fears at the heart of political issues.

Only in one arena am I interested in experience vs. theory: prosody. There's

Bang bang bang  
bang bang. Hammer.  
Or? Pentameter. Or?  
Vibrator. Or? Not or; all.  
Intentions are the best intentions, you know.  
Let's take a minute to discuss the beautiful and the sublime. If I boom chicka boom chicka boom chicka boom will you hear it like tricked-out car stereo bass? Like burlesque soundtrack? Like arrhythmia, which means you're close enough to hear inside me? To forget is probably beautiful. Once something is attached, is it not mine? OK, you don't get it. I get it. But do you want it? I

certainly a lot of scholarship about metrical structures and their political or narrative uses, and I often think about those questions when I work with form (or, more recently, the ghost of forms). However, as someone who really wants poetry to be a lot more exciting than it currently is, I'm invested in playing with the music and structure of the poems to create or sublimate emotions. Sometimes the emotions teased out from the formal elements of the poem are contradictory to the actual "meanings" of the words on the page, which I think is fun, and which I think complicates notions of how we understand meaning vs. how we *feel* meaning.

As far as Haraway and *A Cyborg Manifesto*, I do indeed admire her ideas on hybridization as a way of resolving contradictions. Maybe I attempt that in poetry, insofar as my themes often involve both power and powerlessness in relationships; my speakers are in turn empowered and victims of circumstance (or worse, of themselves). But by owning all those complicated,

want it. Cyborgs. If you are a person and also not a person you win and you are horrible. Certainly, you're sublime. So when I read Edwin Arlington Robinson you're the tyrant and I'm the tyrant and we're all implicated. And when I read strangers' blogs I wonder if they're typing those answers while eating an entire bag of candy or jacking off or hating someone so much they need to distract themselves. There are people whose lives I covet so much that when bad things happen to them it hurts me as much as my own troubles. Some of them aren't even alive anymore. Some of them are only here in pixels. Also, in your question I read "experimental" first, not

contradictory feelings, I do hope that my speakers say something about the difficulties of being female in this cultural moment, and speak honestly about being any human seeking connection with others. That's the important part, maybe: humanity. Haraway sees the cyborg as "post-gender" (though I think omni-gender is probably more accurate), whereas I don't think that's possible, nor even preferable. I'm more interested in mining and exploring, sometimes even exploiting, the differences (in gender, yes, but also in circumstance, perspective, capacity for empathy) in my poetics.

"experiential." Which made me laugh, because this last fucking breath I took was experimental. And so's this one. And this one. (*What if, what if, what if I didn't?*) This body, it's experimental, too, but also, by definition, experiential. Do you feel me, brother? *Boom chicka boom.*

KHADIJAH QUEEN  
on  
**CONDUIT**

**H. L. Hix:** The first poem in the book appears to me to be structured by its first and last lines: “You could drift off,” but “The whole point is to sink.... To know what runs through.” Is this premise/metaphor, that sinking grants the stability to know the transitory (or something like that), one that informs the whole book, or only this first poem?

**Khadijah Queen:** I do feel that I was exploring the nature of experience/experiencing, in reference to relationships, self-awareness and living/reality in general, and finding incredibly poignant contradictions that I didn’t want to alienate from each other. Yes, then, that premise does inform the entire book, which is part of why I chose it to be the first poem—to set the tone, offer a clue into the ones to follow.

**HLH:** If sunken/drifted is a contrast present in *Conduit*, “rough and holy” seems a conjunction equally present. Am I making too much of that one line—of roughness and holiness conjoined throughout the book?

**KQ:** I love that you found that conjunction in the book, and noticed its significance. Embedded within that is a sense of finding something valuable and praiseworthy in witnessing and surviving the difficulties we and others experience. Its application ranges from literal to metaphorical (i.e., from actual physical violence to the tactile sensation of running one’s fingers over ancient human-worked stones, from navigating the complexity of relationships to searching one’s own interior for unadorned reconciliations and recognitions of all kinds—especially the thorny ones, the realizations about ourselves we want to hide from, but, ultimately, if we want to evolve, cannot).

In a more general sense, the process of writing this book was also for me a meditation on how (our own and others’) past histories inform present actions, choices, existences. There’s something sacred in honoring that thread of continuity, but also a kind of vulgarity in the ways histories large and small can brutalize, can infect the present and the future. So “rough and holy” encompasses that dichotomy.

**HLH:** The last line of the last section of “Ways to Unsettle the Flesh” (“Risk all reason for vigilance”) takes the imperative tone, as do many of the lines in that poem. How particular or how universal is that imperative? I.e., is the imperative spoken to the imagined addressee in the poem, and do I the

reader overhear it, or is the imperative (also) spoken to me?

**KQ:** While I shy away from the word “universal,” I definitely worked with the sense that feeling is humanizing in a different way than thinking or knowing. Much of *Conduit* began as a conversation with the self, an effort at reckoning the difference between reality and expectation on both intuitive and intellectual levels. I think as the writing progressed it opened out into a wider conversation that is at the same time intimate. I definitely wanted to invite the reader to have that dialogue with the text. On a philosophical level, my intention was to metaphorically call out the dangers and consequences of complacency, both on a social and personal scale. We don’t evolve as individuals, artists, humans, families or societies by settling into an unshifting, unquestioning pattern of being: so, in that poem, I was interested in the space or distance between awareness and understanding, and what it feels and looks like to traverse it.

SINA QUEYRAS

on

## TEETHMARKS

**H. L. Hix:** At least in the book’s second section, the centrality of Cindy Sherman (especially combined with the John Berger references) suggests something I suspect is also true of the other sections, namely that women’s experience, as contrasted to men’s experience and distinct from what human experience may be shared across gender, is a focal concern. I take it as among the various implications of Sherman’s work that one such gender-specific aspect of experience is im-personation: our ways of creating/receiving our identities and inhabiting them. Am I right to hear the same implication in this sequence of poems?

**Sina Queyras:** Yes, identities are of concern to me, not only gendered identities, and perhaps more so the awareness or extent to which we are conscious of the activity of creating identities. Most of us seem quite at the mercy of ourselves: we plead ignorance; we are passive; we cling to passivity as if it was a choice. Creation and consciousness in general is a concern in all of my work.

**HLH:** If I may continue to frame things in terms of assumption of identity, is it fair to see the lines “how // many will die today so that we / can be hot and bored” as an explicit statement of a concern implicit throughout the book, that “we” (in the poem a specific couple, but in the book broadly we humans) assume our identities at the expense of others? Or is that putting too much (or the wrong) weight on those lines?

**SQ:** No, I don’t think that’s putting too much weight on those lines. At the risk of suffering what Teilhard de Chardin termed “compassion fatigue,” I prefer to factor in the full costs of decisions we humans make. We are having a tough time at the moment, globally, but it seems to me that this is a backlash that arose from so many years of refusing to acknowledge the cost of our actions—politically, socially, economically and creatively. I understand that we have to make decisions that are harmful, and I can make tough decisions, but I am largely offended by the lack of connection between the choices we make daily and the world that those choices end up creating. Again, choices. Creation. It’s a matter of consciousness for me.

**HLH:** I want to take the title poem as suggesting that our alter egos are not *alter* at all, but that my self is as much constructed of my substitute selves as it is

distinguished from them. Again, in doing so am I in touch with the poem?

**SQ:** “Teeth Marks,” the title poem in the collection, recounts a moment of revelation and identification between two young girls. It’s that moment when the activity of projecting one’s identity onto objects becomes palpable. It’s a moment of consciousness and I am fascinated by the ways in which humans behave in these moments. So much of the time we simply stuff these bits back into some formal shape, tear off the uncomfortable details, or simply pretend we don’t see or hear. So yes, it can be read as suggesting that our alter egos are not so alter after all, or, again, as an opportunity to see into the multiplicity and constructedness of self. Even of childhood.

MANI RAO

on

## 100 POEMS: 1985-2005

**H. L. Hix:** The theme of familiarity appears early on in the book: "The songs we like are the songs we know"; "I wake up like a dancer into a rehearsed, familiar position." This provokes in me a tension with echoes such as Pound's "make it new" and George Oppen's critique of pop art, that "it must say what the audience already agrees to.... It is incapable of saying anything which audience does not believe in advance." How do your poems stand in regard to the familiar: affirming it, contesting it, some blend of the two?

**Mani Rao:** The familiar is famili, and carries both necessity and tyranny. Patterns and rhythms are necessary, and generate renewals. First genealogy, then r/evolution. When famili atrophies, it must be overthrown. In both the lines you refer to, the familiar is tyrannical. In one it is the romance of the self, recognizing as well as deluding itself; in the other it is the limitations and frustrations of the cyclical, the waking up to the daily.

Pound examined and integrated the classics, so that his next step would be the next step for everyone. His "make it new" is not in the service of newness—it is natural to the spirit of quest. Oppen's critique is spot on. Both these points are excellent reminders. But newness does not come just like that.

While it is true that the very occurrence of a poet in a time implies s/he has inherited the past, the mind must also journey through the centuries and arrive at the present. I mean, no one is born as an indeterminate postmodernist preferring verbs to nouns. One has to arrive there philosophically. If the form is a manner, the poetry does not ring true, for it is an adoption of new formal practice rather than expression of a philosophical point in time. Luckily for American poetry, Thoreau and Pound considered the entire world as their own tradition, so American literature is well founded. Today, borders are less fixed, and poetry written in English anywhere inherits traditions from across borders, especially the English and the American. It is comparison that is more tricky. Content, tone and perspective may be culturally influenced, but the material of a language (sonic and visual) is most palpable to the poet who is most familiar with it.

A poet's search is not for the unfamiliar, but for sloughing off the false famili, and for re-familiarization with the truth. Here's John Cage, celebrated for innovation and (not but) continually seeking the heart of things:

I am frankly embarrassed that most of my musical life has been spent in the search for new materials. The significance of new materials is that they represent, I believe, the incessant desire in our culture to explore the unknown. Before we know it, the flame dies down, only to burst forth again at the thought of a new unknown. This desire has found expression in our culture in new materials, because our culture has its faith not in the peaceful center of the spirit but in an ever-hopeful projection on to things of our own desire for completion. However as long as this desire exists in us, for new materials, new forms, new this and new that, we must search to satisfy it.

So your question about the familiar takes me to quest, to hunger. I asked, in "Salt," "If family were an adverb what verb would it describe?" A friend responded to that, saying "family" came from "famishedly."

**HLH:** Is your "Sitting here / Attentive / to a snake in the room" an indication of the relationship between "action" and attention in your work?

**MR:** It is about being poised, ready, aware. In the active suspension of activity one can catch whatever is manifested. Sensors being eyes, ears. And something about tasting/eating/reading what's in the spine of the wind. But the snake is not exterior, of course, as we all know, the snake is in one's own spine too (kundalini); and in my own poetry snake references are self-references (some personal mythology here).

**HLH:** Such passages as "Duck before a bullet and the bullet / ducks with you" and "The more one peels the more the explosion" lead me to think of Nietzsche or Wittgenstein. What is the role in your work of the aphoristic and the oracular?

**MR:** I am interested in distillation, in capturing the essence of an experience. I will often write whole pages and keep a line. Sometimes these lines can be statements that I have known as truth, and present as truth: therefore they sound oracular. I see the true poet's job as Orphic.

JED RASULA  
on

## THE AMERICAN POETRY WAX MUSEUM

**H. L. Hix:** One important aspect of your book, insofar as I have grasped its project, is to record the shrinking of the dominant lyric mode in America for the past 50-plus years from a pursuit of “representational accountability” adequate to “mass reality.” Can the outlines of representational accountability be made out now, or is such accountability the sort of thing that we will recognize when it happens? In other words, is there a prescription for such accountability, of the sort that the critic can describe it to the poet, or is such accountability something that critics will note when a poet achieves, or some poets achieve, it?

**Jed Rasula:** My book was an unintended swan song for a then rapidly vanishing era of print literacy, documenting the way power struggles and reputations were stage managed in the venues specific to that cultural formation. In the 15 years since I wrote it everything has changed, probably more dramatically than I’d have thought likely at the time. What we now have, in the form of the Internet

(compounded by the profusion of messaging technologies that dominate everyday life) is a de facto representational grid, a kind of conceptual mainframe, into which we’re all helplessly plugged. The issue of “representational accountability” is now quite different than what I was referring to in the early ‘90s. At that point the heritage of print fixity still cast a large shadow over one’s approach to knowing anything, or finding out about anything. The ubiquity of data is now such that it’s much easier to “know” or “find out” things, but the sources of information are precarious and mutable. I don’t mean, by the way, that Wikipedia is “unreliable” or anything like that: if anything, it’s more serviceable in that its instability is on display, so there can be no mistaking it as the final authority. Rather, our search engines and data resources amount to a vast noetic mirror, reflecting with unsettling accuracy a state of affairs (call it “representational” and set aside the accountability for the moment) that is collective, imposing, yet also momentary. The Marxist diagnosis of capitalism, “all that is solid melts into air,” simply gets more accurate all the time. But to extend the original metaphor: the air itself is becoming liquefied.

So what does all this have to do with poetry? What impact does it have? My observation is that it’s created a vast echo chamber in which private psychodrama and the glut or refuse of public,



collective semiotic systems speak together in tongues. Most of the poetry I see now (written, say, by 30-somethings) is imaginatively and linguistically quite rich, but it also seems to be composed by a big trans-personal paintbrush. The fluidity and immediacy of the vernacular is now more invasive than it was in print culture. So the '50s combat between orality and print now seems very remote. The new orality is identical with the transcription apparatus of cultural telepresence. People absorb slang and neologism as readily via print as by speech. I found it interesting recently hearing Richard Price respond to a question about the colorful patois in his novel of the Lower East Side, *Lush Life*. The interviewer wondered how Price could be on top of such lively street jargon, and he admitted it was impossible. So, he said, he just made everything up from scratch. And yet it sounds "real." I guess you could say this proves Baudrillard's point that simulacra have overtaken the real. In any case, what it means for poetry is that the old divide between actual speech and the jargon of print is obsolete (at least in the case of American English).

To address the "shrinking of the dominant lyric mode" as you put it, I'd add a cautionary observation that it hasn't shrunk in the least: it's just shifted venues. One of the more striking phenomena I've observed about poetry consumption and marketing, demographically speaking, since I wrote *Wax*, is that "poetry" has now

become a sector of the self-help market. Think of all the anthologies geared toward making your day brighter, giving you uplift, maximizing a little daily pleasure, offering consolation, etc. It hardly matters whether it's dished out by Garrison Keillor or Robert Pinsky—the lyric mode is thriving at least in this "niche" market which constitutes a bigger niche than that for so-called serious poetry. This is not new. It's just more conspicuously promoted now. And I think Don Byrd's observation from 1980 (!) quoted on page four of *Wax* still applies: "poetry is well on its way to ranking with tating, restoring antiques and pitching horseshoes as a harmless pastime."

**HLH:** Your book is a critique, not an instance, of the how-to, self-help approach, but does it also translate critique into a revised practice of reading and writing? For instance, does the clause "as long as we keep thinking of solutions as happening only once we perpetuate the trauma of our native insecurities" recommend a principle of serial solution substitution, or is inferring a principle merely a repetition of native insecurities?

**JR:** I appreciate your alert reading, in that you recognize I was making a recommendation about "solutions." But note the context in which I raised the issue, which had to do with the chimera of a cultural center, a center presumed, for instance,

in Helen Vendler's way of talking about "we" and "our" poetry. That site is always refreshed, in (or on surreptitious behalf of) the public perception of poetry as a succession of "advances" or what I ended up calling solutions. This assumption doesn't require close analysis; it works by way of all the ambient cultural Darwinist flotsam at hand, the assumption being that succession entails progress and improvement. This is an issue I've long been fascinated by, insofar as it transposes to (and imposes on) the arts a model from science and technology. It's most evident in the art world, in which "problems" are identified (Renaissance perspective; en-plein-air color in Impressionism; Cubist refraction) and lineages adumbrated on the basis of who solved the problem, and then who improved the solution, etc. The peculiarity is that critics and historians are forced not only to retain the artists whose "problems" have been solved by others, but to continue to appraise their "groundbreaking" innovations. Even after Picasso, in other words, Cézanne still seems worthwhile. My take on this whole syndrome is that it attributes a different order of causality to artistic creation than is warranted. For the most part, the logic of improvement carries with it the sense of being done on behalf of, or for the benefit of, a larger community. But this rarely applies to actual practicing artists, who are indeed solving "problems" but strictly for themselves. The artist just wants to

paint, and the poet to write a poem, in a gesture that is fundamentally existential, not social. (I don't mean to deny social efficacy, or even a social intent, where that is the case, but I think it's rare.) So to bring this all back to poetry, I'd rephrase my recommendation from *Wax* as follows: every poem is the solution to a problem, but no poem can borrow its solution from another solution (however much it can poach on preceding problems).

**HLH:** Allen Tate's serving as "an object lesson...in the hazard of dreaming that the utopia one imagines will take a form other than that prepared for it in advance by the institutions one happens to inhabit," juxtaposed with your stated purpose, on page 339, of "reckoning the social costs of predictable responses," seems to present a catch-22: the poet is *obliged* not to make predictable responses, but also unable not to make predictable responses. Is there a way out of this dilemma? Or a way to resist it that is to any degree effective?

**JR:** First, to emphasize again the context you quote from: my note on page 339 is a summary of Keith Tuma's position. He noted the fact that advocates of the vanguard were as likely to stigmatize mainstream poets as the other way around. And one thing I definitely wanted to do with *The American Poetry Wax Museum* was to de-villainize the New Critics,

even as I held them accountable for perpetrating the institutional constraints I documented, and that's where the reference to Allen Tate comes in. I think you're right to notice a link between the two passages, but I don't get where you see a catch-22 coming into play. That is, where do I seem to suggest the poet is "unable not to make predictable responses," as you put it? My guess is that you've inferred this from the coercive environment of institutions, which do force one's hand and compel responses that are certainly predictable, but they're predictable only insofar as they come from an institution. It's rarely the case, however, that a poet would become so identified with an institution as to seem identical with its "predictable" responses. My point about Tate is more along the lines of the old bit of advice about being careful what you wish for. Tate (and New Criticism, Inc.) started from the classic Socratic position of gadflies, outsiders strategizing irritating raids on an insurmountable foe. Their sallies ended up being a bit unusual in that they actually prevailed. And the weak point (which most of the original New Critics recognized, and were alarmed by) of this success is that the real strength of their original positions had to do with their idiosyncrasies, not with the collective dicta and pledges of faith that their followers adhered to. So it becomes the classic dilemma of authority: how does one preach, from a position of authority, "Don't be like me"! Now that's a real catch-22.

BINO REALUYO

on

## THE GODS WE WORSHIP LIVE NEXT DOOR

**H. L. Hix:** Many of the poems (e.g., "Singapore Sunday," "A Night in Dubai") have explanatory notes about real events and persons. To what extent is this collection driven by a documentary impulse?

**Bino Realuyo:** There's a lot of premeditated and reflective process behind the poems. I started writing them before the boom of the Internet. So much of the documentation was still on paper. The Internet age presents a barrage of information that might justify an impulsive reaction, a need to respond immediately before the information is lost. However, I personally was not responding to selected events in history, the way news media would. There were many cases of abuse in the Filipino overseas worker population, but the ones I picked stood out more than the rest. I am more interested in presenting an authentic voice than a specific event, a voice large enough to represent many similar lives.

**HLH:** The clause "All is memory" leaps out at me. We often treat personal memory as primary,

and collective memory as a secondary, derivative meaning of the term, but would I be right to see this book as a reversal of that valuation, as a call to more robust and inclusive and *just* collective memory?

**BR:** Each poem in the collection is a remembering, so one can assume it's personal memory. My decision to write about historical facts from a very personal and narrative perspective is meant to present the most authentic semblance of memory. For instance, in the poem you quoted ("GI BABY?"), how does the protagonist deal with memory once the landscape that anchored it has disappeared? One needs to trust the profound personalization of memory to manifest it, especially once the environmental triggers are gone (U.S. base in the Philippines). There is memory in everything around us indeed. I rarely deal with collective memory in my work: so much gets in the way when memory is forced from a crowd.

**HLH:** Though section VI follows narrative conventions that not all readers will recognize, it seems clearly to be telling a story. How does story (and this story) participate in the aims of documentary and of memory?

**BR:** Poems of a socio-political nature are very hard to write. I have known of many political poets who could easily turn off readers with political

rhetoric in poetry. I think we are all storytellers, and because of that innate nature of humans, we are also more open to listening/absorbing this form of communication. Using storytelling as a tool makes poetry more accessible to the natural storytellers in us. In a world of megabytes and factoids, most of us will only remember: stories. Literature is really all about stories, human stories, our ability to hold on to memories and reinterpret them.

BARBARA JANE REYES

on

## POETA EN SAN FRANCISCO

**H. L. Hix:** The phrase “The opposite of Eden” is applied in its immediate context to Vietnam, but I wonder if you would affirm my sense that it is much more broadly applicable in the book: that a strong current in the book is a depiction of the U.S. as the opposite of the Eden it presents itself as being?

**Barbara Jane Reyes:** I think of the opposite of Eden in Biblical terms; if Eden is Genesis, creation and paradise, a place of optimism about possibility, then its opposite would be Revelation, destruction and apocalypse, a place of apprehension about possibility.

The Book of Revelation is interesting to me because of its coded, vivid, metaphorical language. It’s a language against empire, written under the conditions of division and collapse. As an American, this does sound like familiar, contemporary circumstances.

Apocalypse is interesting to me as well; it is not absolute end but the end of something. This is what

revolution means: something ends and something else begins. I suppose those who dread apocalypse are those who benefit from the way things currently are.

**HLH:** Another fragment to which I keep returning is “forgive, forgive, for principles won’t do.” May I take it, too, as, if not quite an imperative (its grammatical mood), at least a plea that the whole book supports? (It happens that I read your book just at the point of the semester when I was teaching Martha Nussbaum’s *Poetic Justice* in one of my classes, and it strikes me that her book is a similar plea specific to the judicial system.)

**BJR:** I do like what you are saying, that the book makes a plea for forgiveness. As a lapsed Roman Catholic, forgiveness is a hard line for me to toe. Jesus asking us to turn the other cheek really does feel like too much to ask, but we strive to achieve this graciousness. But in terms of being Americans, of Filipino immigrant origins, I suppose some amount of resolution between the colonized and Indigenous selves, as well as the parts of the self which represent or mirror the colonizer (religion, language, etc.), is necessary in order to live our everyday American lives.

**HLH:** The question the epilogue asks (“do you know what it is to witness an unraveling?”) calls to mind

for me Czesław Miłosz's *The Witness of Poetry* and Carolyn Forché's anthology *Against Forgetting*, whose subtitle speaks of a poetry of witness. Am I right to think of *Poeta en San Francisco* as pursuing that ideal: to be a poetry of witness?

**BJR:** Poetry of witness, absolutely. My poetic speaker is a witness to history, to war, to the city, to its streets, transcendent of any singular human lifetime. As an extension of witness, she is a chronicler, a holder of memory and story. Her witness status does not preclude her being also a participant, an actor in historical cycles, experiencing her own unraveling, becoming so fed up that she pleads with her estranged lover for immolation.

ED ROBERSON

on

## CITY ECLOGUE

**H. L. Hix:** In "Toward an Urban Pastoral," Reginald Shepherd says, "Often we write about nature because there is a readily available, thoroughly worked-out language with which to do so," a language that ensures we'll "come up with a recognizable poem," though using the language of nature typically results in only "a simulacrum of nature, a reiteration of the vocabulary of nature that refers not to nature but to nature poetry." Would that be one valid lens (not, of course, the only one) through which to read your *City Eclogue*, as an attempt to write about nature, in a country in which 75 percent of the people live in urban areas (Shepherd again), without falling into the already worked-out language of nature poetry?

**Ed Roberson:** As I grew up I knew many black people who would take deep offense at the words "you people" as a form of address, in conversation especially, but in any kind of public speaking in which they were spoken to or referred to as "you people." You would think it was a matter of tone, but it is the basis of segregation enforced in those

words. These words position the speaker as not one of those addressed, not wanting to be any part of one of those. And in fact imply his superiority to them. The word “nature” is used in that manner, with that sense—innocently, of course. It’s just that those daffodils never cussed you out to your face.

I think I’m probably trying to find an integrated language. I think you can talk about living in a house cantilevered out over Los Angeles, or your first time living on the fifteenth floor, without referring to a “tree” house, or to the deep avenue of high-rises as a canyon. Babies know when they don’t want to fall. Your whole body can feel or reason height: you get too close to the edge and your cremaster muscles raise hell. It may be that we’ve just ignored our experiences in the city that are the source of sensations analogous to those in the country. We’re still oriented to the formulaic countryside as what we want the city to be. I try to write between the two different experiences as if they are one. They are.

The poem “Urban Nature” from *City Eclogue* opens by distinguishing between the two sources of associations to be used in the poem. Denying that I’m talking about those formulaic images (New Hampshire, the Midwestern farm, the summer home on the island) allows the reader to recall those or similar sensations introduced as another setting: one

where the cycles are bus schedules; the sounds are birds joined by the underground coming through a sidewalk grate. Steven’s sweet berries are for sale from a lunch cart and that wonderful orange is being imported from someplace else. It shouldn’t take much, from the phrasing “picked of its origin,” to think of American slavery, our origins in immigration. It should remind us that the basis of our Sunday morning pleasures today rest on a history of our harvesting the world, picking from all over the world. The cycles, history, the long rhythms of a coming future, the beauty of it are all there.

**HLH:** The *Atelos* series, in which this book is published, claims for each of its volumes that it “is involved in some way with crossing traditional genre boundaries.” *City Eclogue* seems to me to be so involved, at least in part by its mixing of genres/modes/forms. It calls itself an eclogue, and includes an invocation, a song, an idyll, a sampler, a psalm. The “Eclogue” feels to me as though it bumps up against the old crown of sonnets. The allusions include jazz music, Surrealist painting, field guides and so on. How would you describe the book’s “involvement with crossing traditional genre boundaries”?

**ER:** As for crossing genre boundaries, all those forms or genres are responses to an experience with some

particular environment or event. These happenings are what shaped those forms. The city is defined by a mix of everything in one place. Anything you want, a city got it. When I feel that mix in the city, the poem should feel that full. The poem is shaped by that happening, into that happening on the page. I'm hoping that at no time soon will all of our happening have only one shape, one program. At that point is when we'll get "urban poetry" as a genre, and the poems will become about virtuoso performance of that form on the page, and not the street happening we actually perform getting from place to place. Nature poetry as we knew it, as Shepherd is talking about, will not disappear, but it is already sharing the stage.

**HLH:** I keep coming back to "A Sampler": "It's just that word is not all the saying." May I add *ars poetica* to the list of "genres" from the preceding question? Is language (for humans) a necessary but not sufficient condition for communication? I'm trying as a reader to be alert to "shadow sayings" in this book, sayings in addition to what the words say, but are there any you would nudge me toward?

**ER:** It is because of the insufficiency of language that we continue to learn about our surroundings and our experiences of them. So in that sense we are always looking for the addition to what the words say,

our individual take on the relation between the word and our own experienced happening. I think I've always tried to write beyond the edges of the words, outside the limits of what the word can be loaded to carry, written to say. I've also written outside the way words can be put together. The way is a word; those ways are a vocabulary itself.

We agree that there is something beyond what words can say, even if it is only that blur into the next word. What develops within and constitutes that blur is what I want to bring into focus. I want the experience of creating the transition through that void into something there that represents the way it is not there in words. I need a reader with an associative head, a mind for metaphorical analogy and what shape shifting says. The ability to hold open yet not leave blank that gap, that interval, that blur into the next word or the end of a stanza or long string of open images, and to land in the center of made sense. I sort of look at that unspoken continuum between words as the whole rest of the cosmos beyond us. I would nudge you toward that opening.



F. DANIEL RZICZNEK  
on **NECK OF THE WORLD**

**H. L. Hix:** I am intrigued by the assertion that “into the low / carved system of systems / the world dissolves.” Is poetry (in general? or your poetry in particular?) contesting the system of systems? If that is in any way true of these poems, do you think of them as doing so primarily through what we think of as non-systematic (intuition) or as systematic (language)?

**F. Daniel Rzicznek:** I see a common ground of sorts between the intuitive and the systematic, a shared responsibility for the purposes of my work. That line about “system of systems” arrived via my perception that the world as seen from space looks like one thing, one contained system, but any student of nature knows that the larger system is made of smaller systems that get smaller and smaller until they’re countless. It’s the idea of a singularity dissolving into endless varieties. Start with the alien’s-eye view of the planet in space, and eventually one arrives at the ant balancing a fingernail clipping on its back near a front stoop in Bowling Green, Ohio,

and things get impossibly smaller from there. I feel I’m contesting any notion that the world can be contained or explained—an argument for innocence, I suppose. As for language, it is a system to be sure, but many of my moves within it (especially for *Neck of the World*) are intuitive. When writing those poems, words presented themselves before I could develop an understanding or poetic context. So a word, image or sound appears (equatable with our industrious friend the ant) and it’s my job to help it be part of the system, the poem.

**HLH:** Any number of the metaphors in the book seem to me to sustain a “second” reading as metaphors for poetry itself: a small toy in the gut coming apart, unconquered thankfulness, ticket for a fire, inner snowing, to name only a few examples. Are there any that you especially want read in that way, that seem to you to open some door onto what poetry is or might do?

**FDR:** I think the only two you mention that have that intention behind them are “tickets for a fire” and “inner snowing.” Those two, and the entire poems each is taken from, are concerned with the human condition (mine in particular) and how imagination interferes or interlopes, and I think that is tied directly to what poetry can and does do. Poetry in that sense is a very human (perhaps the most human?) of arts. I

can't think of a clear parallel for it in the natural world, which, ironically perhaps, is where my best work has always been rooted. I'm wary of an *ars poetica* in my own poems, but I know that shades of it are bound to creep in. I'm more interested in capturing my particular angle on existence itself (including the inner life), and that happens to include poetry.

**HLH:** The poems also seem populated with pairs that are at once twins and opposites: "text, ghost text," feathers as warning and feathers as lure, this world and a world that resembles it, etc. What is the importance to you (to the poems) of such pairs?

**FDR:** This is a great question, one I haven't thought about before. I think these images stem from what was one of my main goals when writing: to capture the simultaneity of outer and inner life. The bear poems, along with the ones you reference above, are good demonstrations of this. Inside and outside become confused. Action on the inside creates reaction on the outside, and vice versa. I sometimes feel like a secret agent. Poetry is something I think about and carry around with me during the day-to-day normality of life. Gradually, that snuck into my poems and I started reacting. Many times the pairs arrive out of a need to describe something twice, the need to tell the reader that there's no one definable way to look at it. I think that's what I want from my

poems: not to have them say something, but to have them enact for the reader a three-dimensional experience that can't be fully appreciated from any singular vantage.

ROBYN SCHIFF

on

## REVOLVER

**H. L. Hix:** “H5N1” clearly responds to “Ode to a Nightingale.” It seems a complex poem, not to be reduced to one theme, but would I be right to include among its complexities a lament for the loss of conditions that would allow a Keatsian Romantic relationship to (capital-N) Nature?

**Robyn Schiff:** Thank you for this question, and for offering this reading to me. The poems in *Revolver*, and “H5N1” in particular, definitely explore the relationship between Nature and Artifice (indeed with a capital N and A!), but I hadn’t myself considered it a lament, though I think you’re onto something I wasn’t aware of at the time. I guess I don’t read “Ode to a Nightingale” so much as a nature poem, but as a poem about the creative process and the imagination, and I can’t help but to read it through Stevens’s “Autumn Refrain.” I was definitely feeling “a tragic falling off,” as Robert Hass might put it, and in using “Ode to a Nightingale” and leaning on its armature, I suppose I was mourning that fall (which yes, is a fall from grace, an exile from Eden). But

there is something very sci-fi about “H5N1,” and its almost hysterical ‘70s-era disaster-movie pitch is quite earnest. But I’ve been sitting on your question for several months now (I’m so sorry!); winter turned to spring, and spring to summer. And here I am at this very moment looking into my garden (a garden I didn’t have in my life when I wrote “H5N1”) with such lament I can barely contain it in a poem. How will I ever express what I feel in that garden? That’s part of the poem too, yes, but I didn’t know it at the time of writing.

**HLH:** The last stanza of “Eighty-blade Sportsman’s Knife, by Joseph Rodgers & Sons” (“this / era is task-specific. When we use the / tool intended for the job / we are neutral. The right tool for the right / task is objective truth”) and the last three stanzas of “Project Paperclip” (“there are two names / for my beloved, one on this side of the world and one, / alas, on the other”) seem to represent at least one of the tensions in the book, something like cold clarity versus warm mystery. I read the book as advocating the “mystery” side of the tension (or to put this another way: I take as a kind of summation of the book the lines “there was a ghost / before there was a body, it throws its voice”), but that may be projecting my own inclinations onto your work. Do the poems make a value judgment, or are they

attempting a more value-neutral presentation of such conflict/tension?

**RS:** Hmm. I don't think they're value-neutral, but I don't think they take sides, either. I think I meant to enact or express the exacerbating attempt to represent the whole truth, which I fall short of doing every time out. These are certainly Bush-era poems, written in response to the frustration so many of us felt about the presentation of facts, but they also explore what we were discussing in part in your first question: a failure to fully express, to fully contain. I guess part of the tension in the book is between the drive (responsibility?) toward full articulation, and the drag of being dumbstruck so much of the time. I'm not on one side or the other in the bout between "objectivity" and "subjectivity" (or truth/mystery, or lucidity/awe). I'm just reporting on the matchup, but it keeps changing, and the change has to be part of the story, too.

**HLH:** As signaled by the title, the revolver recurs throughout the book. But in each poem there appears to me to be (at least implicitly) a contrast with some other technological apparatus: from knitting needles in the first poem through telephone receivers and Philips-head screwdrivers to paper clips in the last poem. Is the language of the poems (as for example in the use of puns such as "enlisting," "fits"

and "mailed") mitigating or exacerbating those oppositions?

**RS:** Puns are a kind of technology, like all tropes and figures of thought. And like all technologies, their use is open-ended and often has unintended consequences. I can't say whether language mitigates or exacerbates, anymore than I can say whether someone who buys a knife will use it to make something or to destroy something. Each technological gadget in *Revolver*, including the rhetorical turns, has the capacity to make and to destroy. The "psychopath" "arranging implements" in "Eighty-blade" is both a creative tormentor and, well, a figure of a poet.

SUSAN M. SCHULTZ

on

## DEMENTIA BLOG

**H. L. Hix:** In the “Fore and After Word” to *Dementia Blog*, you explicitly relate dementia and politics. This is a book that was first a blog, so would you also add new media to that set of correspondences (as, say, Neil Postman would), or does the work’s originating as a blog indicate that you would not take new media as corresponding to dementia and the political memory loss you address in the book?

**Susan M. Schultz:** It depends on what you do with the medium. In general, I agree with Postman and Todd Gitlin that television and computers (email, cell phones and so on) shorten our attention spans. This is dangerous for a poet who needs time away, space and time not to be bombarded with information, voices, demands. But one of the reasons I am drawn to blogs is that they provide the best source of information on politics. I read *Talking Points Memo*, *Daily Kos*, *Buzz Flash* and other sites every day. So the way in which the media, in and of itself, contributes to our forgetfulness, our “dementia” in

the metaphorical sense, is mitigated by uses of that media to inform us, re-mind us.

**HLH:** Pages 15 and 16 list a few contrasts that I’d like to pose back as questions about the book. Poetry or poetic prose? Sequence or unraveling of? Call to action or to observation?

**SMS:** The point of the contrasts is that they are all true. The book is composed of many genres, even if they are all absorbed into prose. I’ve had an idea for a long time that you could teach genre and form by way of sentences, ask students to compose sentences that gave them access not to how a form works technically, but to how it opens the world up conceptually. Hence, a sentence about sitting under a tree and examining your own life would show you the work that a nature poem can do. Or a sentence in which you remember a lost family member illustrates the work of an elegy. And so on. I found in writing this book that those experiments gave me structures to work through as I wrote my prose sentences.

The book is a call to the action of observation, I suppose. And a way to suggest that observation is itself a form of action, that all action takes as its origin the noticing of something in the world, whether it is language or ideology. To notice is to act. And the “notice” (noun) passes that action on.

**HLH:** I keep returning to one sentence: "The situation itself is the poem; you need only take it down." This seems to me to echo not only what immediately precedes it (discussion of a "moment of lucidity" in dementia), but also earlier observations, such as "Consolation exists, if it exists, in the act of description." Is documentary, then, not one possible direction for poetry, but an essential impulse of poetry?

**SMS:** I agree with your reading that documentary is "an essential impulse of poetry," something I never imagined when I was younger and less interested in the world as it is. But something else I was getting at is the way in which the world itself, in extreme moments, takes on the shape of a poem, becomes figurative. When my father was in his final illness, he began to "make" things with his hands, and he saw family members who were not there. His real world had merged with an imagined one, which was composed out of his memories. That world seemed to me to be poetic, and I was astonished, because my father was not a poet. (Lesson learned, that poetry is not exclusive to poets.) So that "take it down" meant finding the poem in the world and rendering it on paper or in pixels. My mother's world, at the time I wrote the blog, was likewise a mix of real and imagined, present and remembered, elements. It was the poem I took down. The consolation for me is that there is meaning there, in these situations that are otherwise quite painful.

RAVI SHANKAR

on

## LANGUAGE FOR A NEW CENTURY

**H. L. Hix:** In your introduction to the "Slips and Atmospherics" section of the anthology, you note that the poems "are about multiplicity and escape." I assume that you are *not* suggesting that they are escapist, but how would you characterize the difference (between work about escape and escapist work)?

**Ravi Shankar:** That section of *Language for a New Century: Contemporary Poetry from Asia, the Middle East and Beyond* is one of my favorite sections because it encompasses the work of Asian and Middle Eastern writers (including those from the diaspora) who are pushing against the boundaries of form and received meanings. The assumption that certain language and conceptual experiments are the exclusive purview of Western writers who've taken classes on post-structuralism and deconstruction is proved spectacularly false by poets like Rukimini Bhaya Nair (who integrates the graphemic style of Sanskrit into English-language poetry), Yang

Lian (who appropriates characters from the two-thousand-year-old Seal script and combines these with characters that he has invented), and Filipino modernist giant José Garcia Villa (who punctuates his poem with commas the same way a pointillist painter would use dots of color on the canvas).

I characterize their work as work that is “about escape,” because they circumvent the expected forms of meaning-making that have been passed on (in whatever linguistic tradition they come from) for generations. Syntax can become a kind of prison, as can narrative structure, syllable count and lineation into stanza. What I mean by “escape” is that these poets are assembling a system of meaning from the ground up, and that they are proving the truth of Gertrude Stein when she writes,

I took individual words and thought about them until I got their weight and volume complete and put them next to another word, and at this same time I found out very soon that there is no such thing as putting them together without sense. I made innumerable efforts to make words write without sense and found it impossible.

The tenuous, paratactic and lyrical sense that these poems provide is an escape from transparent

confession, from contrived formalism and from codified expressions of love, grief and longing.

Something that is “escapist,” on the other hand, would look out at the world through sepia-tinted shades, amplifying certain elements while repressing others. A poem that doesn’t take seriously Keats’ notion of “negative capability,” of suspending our rational need for a totalizing answer in favor of abiding in the ambiguous and the contradictory, could be escapist. A poem where the narrative voice is so secure in itself that it never questions its presumptions could be escapist. A rhyming bit of occasional verse that allows its sonic imperatives to override its ontological purpose could be escapist. A rhapsodic pastoral poem that ignores the impact of man and machine, pollution and perception, on the natural world could be escapist. A poem that’s all glinting surface, linguistic wit and nonsensical collision, one that is uninterested in communication or in exploring the complexity of a mind in the world, could be escapist. And all of these I counterpoise to the idea of escape as aesthetic strategy.

**HLH:** In introducing the “Earth of Drowned Gods” section, you contrast the “enormous machines” that construct the “suffocating matrix of political ideologies” with the individual lives of “those who live under” and are affected by those machinations.

What is the relationship between poetry's role in documenting/recording those large-scale machinations, and its role in enabling us, at a smaller scale, to endure and contest the machinations?

**RS:** One of the great virtues and most often cited grievances with poetry is that it doesn't earn any money, that it is steadfastly outside of the closed circuit of commerce that other art forms (even peripherally) engage with. A friend of mine was recently lamenting that you "can't even give a poetry book away." What that says about the nature of our current literate readership, and the impact of the culture of narcissism on even those least predisposed to be affected by it, is fodder for another meditation. But I will aver that because a poem stands outside of most institutions of accretion and material wealth, it is *free* to comment on anything that deserves comment, to satirize anything that deserves satire and to break the taboos that other genres might feel compelled to uphold. Therefore I think of poetry as perfect in contesting the machinations of institutions—because it is literally beneath the gaze of those in power.

There's a famous quote from one of Auden's poems that "poetry makes nothing happen." This line is often quoted without its proper context, so I'd like to provide it here:

For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives  
In the valley of its making where executives  
Would never want to temper, flows on south  
From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,  
Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,  
A way of happening, a mouth.

This excerpt speaks to me about the *power* of poetry in evading the gaze of executives (assuming that the poetry version of *Jersey Shore* is not forthcoming, and that there won't soon be a reality-TV show following a poet drum-beating trochaic stresses against his jeans while his inebriated Language poet housemate throws darts at a wall-hanging covered with words). Sometimes the smallest voice, like Anne Frank in her diary, can provide the greatest testimony to the nature of reality at any given time or place. I think of the immense courage of Bei Dao and others bicycling to the Democracy Wall after the Cultural Revolution—to post poems there that would buoy the spirit of millions. Or the poetry written by children in the concentration camps of World War II, like this excerpt from a poem written by Michael Flack in Terezin in 1944: "If in barbed wire, things can bloom / why couldn't I? I will not die!" If that doesn't speak truth to power, I don't know what does.

To quote British poet Angela Leighton writing on Auden's oft-quoted phrase; it



turns, by a tiny inflection, a redistribution of its stresses, into its opposite: “poetry makes nothing HAPPEN.” By this accentual difference, “nothing” shades into a subject, and happens. This is an event, and its “happening” sums up the ways of poetry. Intransitive and tautological, nothing is neither a thing, nor no thing, but a continuous event.

Or in the hands of Wallace Stevens, “nothing” is what the listener in the snow beholds, the invisible and sheer fact of his or her existence, or what Buddhists call *Śūnyatā*, the emptiness that leads to the cultivation of insight. What a poem does, being so miniscule that it enters our body as heart-song, is to imperceptibly transform us into a greater awareness of the world around us. A sharpening of the senses, a temporary lifting of the veil of discursive perception that freezes the ever-moving world into permanent edifice, and a revelation of the inwardness of another being—these are just some of the ways in which poetry can help us endure the hyper-accelerated world of information and capital in which we daily drown. In spite of all of this, we (the irreducibly divine part of ourselves) survive as a way of happening, a mouth, and therefore it’s incumbent upon us to provide witness.

**HLH:** The penultimate paragraph of your introduction to the “This House, My Bones” section notes one thing we receive from “being presented with many versions of place and origin,” namely illumination of “our shared humanity.” I hear, though, a suggestion that we not only receive something, but are *obligated* to something, namely generativity (a word I take from the first sentence of the paragraph). Am I right about that obligation, and if so would you be willing to speak to it further?

**RS:** Yes absolutely. I think that a serious engagement with art comes with a concomitant obligation towards transformation, whether on the perceptual, ethical, spiritual or linguistic level. Unless it’s on the news, how often do we think about those suffering in Africa or suppressed by a dictator in Asia? In fact, isn’t it easier to think about the world in shorthand, in stereotype that allows us to make broad generalizations without having to engage with the problematic aspect of another’s consciousness (which carries with it a claim for as much happiness and comfort as we ourselves, mainly through no choice of our own, might possess)? So poetry can be a force that forces us to engage with the reality of someone else living on the other side of the globe from us. And I believe this engagement is not passive but active—that when we truly inhabit the mind and the potential deprivation of someone we don’t know, we are required to act

in some way, whether that's to write a poem or to donate to a charitable organization. That's what I consider the generative imperative of poetry, such that the art doesn't become an onanistic and closed exercise, but one that opens up into the larger world.

One of the primary reasons we put together *Language for a New Century: Contemporary Poetry from Asia, the Middle East and Beyond* was to react to 9/11, which devastated all three editors enormously. And yet, in what followed (the depiction of the East as intolerant and violent, the conflation of those from India with those from Pakistan with those from Afghanistan with those from Iraq, the caricature of individuals as terrorists or gurus, and the fear-mongering and virulent xenophobia propagated and capitalized upon by politicians with their own agendas), we felt compelled to react in some way, to show that we shared more in common than we differed from each other, that the principles of love, safety, community and interdependence were as pertinent for Kurds as they were for Americans. We hope that those who engage with this anthology will come to realize that there is no East (in fact, what we call the Far East is the Near North for the Australians) with a capital E. That there are as many different beliefs and personalities abroad as there are at home. And our hope is that with this revelation comes the imperative to speak out, to change the

dialogue of "us versus them," to begin to try to understand other cultures, even the reasons why they might loathe us—rather than to stay closeted in fear. And this imperative *is* generative. It asks us not to take our own independence for granted any more, but to reach out empathetically (through space) with the recognition that we (this human experiment) are bound up together, much closer than we might ever have imagined before.

RAVI SHANKAR

on

## INSTRUMENTALITY

**H. L. Hix:** In *Elizabeth Costello*, J. M. Coetzee has characters debate whether and in what sense Elizabeth, a novelist, is able to become a man, an animal, etc. Does poetry enable us to become the blossom, or is the “obstinate grace” with which “things slip name’s knots” stronger than the poem?

**Ravi Shankar:** This little philosophical poem verges on the quandary that we poets find ourselves in, and perhaps points to the very reason why we write. It’s common knowledge that the etymology of “poet” comes from the Greek word for “a maker,” and some have argued that Adam in the myth of Genesis was the first poet, because he provided names for the natural world around him in the Garden of Eden. And in his prelapsarian mind there was no distinction between the object and the name conferred upon it; they were one and the same. Of course here at the start of the twenty-first century, we are all profound relativists and language itself is defined by its indeterminacy. In time, a word accumulates new connotations, sheds old ones, staying fixed in a

dictionary the way a rock stays fixed on the shore but in time becomes weathered to sand or subsumed by water. One of my goals as a poet is to create a bridge between the invisible and the visible, and to fix things in place with language, a task ultimately doomed to failure, but without which there would be many fewer metaphors and modes of seeing. And perhaps this is why we continue to write poems, because each effort reaches towards the asymptote of meaning but never quite arrives there. The world sloughs off our interpretations and the spiral shell of a snail remains as enigmatic now as it might have to our ancestors.

In writing this poem, I was thinking of Martin Heidegger’s notion of *Dasein*, or “Being-There-ness,” the irreducible unity of the essential self with the world, which to me is one of the goals of poetry. To provide a merging of the self with what’s being described, to penetrate the mineral core of the stone so that its essence is embodied in the stanza. An impossible goal of course, as linguists have shown us that language, by its very nature, is partial, that it signifies but does not provide any kind of equivalence, and I think poets feel this loss most keenly. We continually try to find the perfect expression and maybe even get close, but ultimately we fail and have to try again. But the paradox is that this failure is perhaps the greatest success that we could hope for: greater than the

photographer's reward for representing the world; greater than the journalist's reward in documenting an event; greater even than the scientist's reward for breaking something into its constituent elements and providing a taxonomy for understanding it. In a very real sense, poets *do* become the thing we describe, or at least as close as we will ever be to it, when we attempt to bring its essence into language.

The other poem that was in the forefront of my mind when I wrote "Symbiosis" was this pitch-perfect lyric by Hart Crane, "A Name For All," one that I've always held dear:

Moonmoth and grasshopper that flee our page  
And still wing on untarnished of the name  
We pinion to your bodies to assuage  
Our envy of your freedom; we must maim

Because we are usurpers, and chagrined  
And take the wing and scar it in our hand.  
Names we have even to clap on the wind  
But we must die, as you, to understand.

I dreamed that all men dropped their names,  
and sang  
As only they can praise, who build their days  
With fin and hoof, with wing and sweetened fang  
Struck free and holy in one Name always.

In some ways, this poem strikes the same note that I hope my poem does. It provides a fulcrum point between praise and lament at how we need use language. That dream which the speaker of Crane's poem reveals to us at the end is that point where things are no longer discrete from one another but rejoined in unity. This is the state we imagine exists before birth and after death, a post-consciousness mode of being, whereas to name something is perhaps to do it some kind of harm, at least in so much as we are separating it from everything else. A moth is not the flower it alights on, yet what would the creature be without the environment it moves through? That's what I intended with my last line, "Only a blossom can define proboscis." The notion is that meaning is relational, that the only real definition of something is found in process and utility, and that the instrument an insect uses to reach deep into a flower to feed and therefore to pollinate is the realest way each subject can inform and indeed bring into being the subjectivity of each other. In a certain sense, it's meaningless to talk about any one of the terms without the others. That relational circuit is untouched by language but of course all we have at our disposal to touch it is language, and that double-bind is what I hoped to illuminate in "Symbiosis." In a poem, we are yet are not the moth.

**HLH:** “War Effort” is among the poems in the collection that I find most profound and powerful: the contrast between nature’s continuity and humanity’s self-destructiveness, the “if” in line six, and so on. Is this a poem of despair or a poem of hope?

**RS:** The biologist Lynn Margulis in her book *The Symbiotic Planet* describes certain kinds of bacteria that live inside nuclear reactors, her point being that as destructive as we are capable of being, it’s rather narcissistic and homocentric to assume humans could end the world. The battlefields of the past are the ecosystems of the future. Nature is profoundly apathetic, and I suppose my poem intends to be both hopeful and despairing at the same time. The Earth has an amazing capacity to heal itself, has survived Ice Ages and heat waves, and life, that generalized principle of evolutionary overabundance, will always continue, no matter what we do it. So that’s hopeful. But the fact remains that warfare is an intrinsic part of human nature and will continue to be so. That is despairing.

I grew up partially in Manassas, home of the battles of Bull Run, and as a teenager I would wander the grassy fields, hoping to find some Civil War relic, a cartridge box plate or carbine bullet, but instead found clover and vetch poking through grass that stretched for miles. If it weren’t for the Visitor’s Center, I probably

wouldn’t even have had a notion that bloody conflicts had taken place there just a little more than a century before. And that memory of the amnesia of the land has remained with me, and whenever I see some weed poking through the concrete sidewalk that it will eventually overwhelm, I’m reminded of how tenuous our grasp on “civilization” is and how the natural world could do just as well without us. The poem intends to remind the reader of the wildness and resilience of the landscape, and the diminution of its prior human inhabitants is meant to serve as a clarion call for the fragility of life and the need for pacifist interventions amid the appetite of humanity for its own self-destruction. Let’s hope that this aspect of the human experiment can be averted.

**HLH:** I take the last line of the book as susceptible to recontextualization that would make it refer not, as in the poem, to an Ella Fitzgerald song, but to poetry itself. What would it mean to you to say of poetry that its “music, while it lasts, changes everything”?

**RS:** I’m glad you picked up on that, since it was intentional on my part to end with a rather prophetic last line. I studied with Lucie Brock-Broido in graduate school, and she always felt that the last line of a book of poems should be like the cracking open of a fortune cookie, a bit of gnomic wisdom that readers could take with them after digesting the sumptuous

meal. So yes, I intended the line to be metonymic of poetry (indeed art) itself, and I suppose my intent in making such an assertion was to underscore the magic spell that a well-wrought work can cast. When I read a poem, I'm immersed within the cadence of the syllables, inhabit the perspective of the speaker, abide for the moment in the materiality of the language and feel deeply the emotional heft of each stanza. In that attenuated moment, I forget who I am and what my concerns might be. I am lifted from my quotidian existence and put in contact with archetypal forms. I no longer worry about the grocery list, mortgage due and my laggard correspondence, but instead am free of time and place and body.

Just this morning, I am staying at a poet's house whom I do not know, but whose bookshelves have been keeping me company all morning. I just finished reading a book of poems by Aleš Šteger, translated from the Slovenian, and in the process forgot where I was or what I had to do. Instead my mind lingered on some of his lines, like the end of his poem "Cork," which makes the purpose of the thing that stoppers a bottle of wine weird and sacrosanct: "The voices of fugitives from neighboring tables grow distant, / The consolation of the bottle, that the message in her didn't travel in vain."

I've never considered a cork in such a way, and as I turn the poem around in my head, holding each facet to the light, I am released from myself, emptied of my petty anxieties, and my pores breathe open in the act of corresponding with a poet from another country, writing in another language that has been translated into signifiers with which I can engage. That is the great power of art and for me of poetry in particular. Emily Dickinson famously wrote in a letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "if I read a book [and] it makes my whole body so cold no fire ever can warm me I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only way I know it. Is there any other way." The music while it lasts certainly changes her, though like most manifestations of beauty, I imagine the flicker is transient, and when we put the book down, the cork back in the bottle, our head settles back on our neck, our body temperature returns to normal and the world outside rushes to shut our open pores. But while the music plays, well, that is evidence of the startling and transformative power of art.

PRAGEETA SHARMA

on

## INFAMOUS LANDSCAPES

**H. L. Hix:** Do the lines “I am not sure what I have in my hand: // A hatchet, a club, or a long-winded sentiment” reflect, beyond the confines of their sense in this particular poem, a more general uncertainty about poetry?

**Prageeta Sharma:** In some way all of my work explores a kind of uncertainty about poetry, perhaps an apprehension. But not about poetry: more about the subjectivity inherent in all personal truths or values. I’ve been really interested in having the poem look as though it’s thinking aloud, but still be fierce in some way. I also recall my first graduate poetry professor, Marjorie Welsh, encouraging us to read Ashbery and Rilke. Certainly both are influences for me.

And I still remember Welsh’s exercises from my first graduate workshop: she had asked the class to create an abstract poem retelling some kind of event, either in third person or second person, akin to the language moves in Rilke. I think she may have even asked us to imitate Rilke. I remember reading Rilke’s

“Blank Joy,” and thinking about the kind of event leading up to the heartfelt last lines (“If I’ve wept for you so much, it’s because / I preferred you among so many outlined joys). I was deeply moved by the way Rilke allowed strange and forthright feelings to inhabit that poem. I think I try to hold on to Rilke’s movements, but add more uncertainty.

**HLH:** I’m intrigued by the ambiguity of the referent of the “it” in “Our paths will cross and it will be provisional.” What will be provisional? The crossing of paths? The grin? The life of a talking book? The viewpoint? Am I right to see this as a significant point in the movement of the whole book?

**PS:** I know: I live in ambiguity! Ultimately this was a love poem about unrequited love, and the speaker is reassuring herself that any future events with this person will prove “provisional.” So yes, the “crossing of paths,” the “life of a talking book,” etc. Essentially, the subject of the poem is the movement of hope that oscillates throughout these poems as they explore despair and a kind of defamiliarization of the speaker with others. Actually, in thinking about Rilke, this poem recalls similar turns from “Evening Love Song”: “a new chapter of our nights, / of those frail nights / we stretch out and which mingle / with these black horizontals.”

**HLH:** Among the many lines and sentences that seem to contain much more than they explicitly say, “to claim the encounter / for the intentions of personal gain without the empire” seems like it is pushing at an ideal for (your) poetry. Am I right to think so? Is that ideal one you’re willing to speak to?

**PS:** I do see a kind of politicized female speaker attempting to reclaim an ideal for the self rather than for a lofty public purpose—though the irony is that all of these poems are invariably lofty and take up space.

ABRAHAM SMITH

on

## WHIM MAN MAMMON

**H. L. Hix:** A reader from a certain educational background (read: a background like mine, may Miss Wilson rest in peace) would not be able to read a short poem called “Eagles” without thinking of Tennyson’s much-anthologized short poem called “The Eagle.” May I ask you to take that juxtaposition (which I take as more contrast than comparison) as an occasion for saying something about what you are trying to resist in your poetry?

**Abraham Smith:** ah yups the tennyson eagle poem...  
i read it in a lawnchair  
whilst cousins batted a badminton birdie, perhaps 14 years  
ago.. lilac bleeding into the mosquito whinnying wind..  
have no ms wilson  
to nod skyward to.. thats a bit of a half bit brineless  
pickle.. ways in  
which poetry is not there for us in the lions share of pub  
education.. in  
one class we memorized one frost poem.. snowy harness bells..  
some years later we “read” the iliad.. this “reading”  
worked thusly:



we were handed a xerox with 25 questions.. : read, then  
answer the questions..  
the answers to the xerox were stapled to the wall.. and so,  
we loitered.. donning  
the faux mask of faux earnestness.. count 25 faux glances  
down at sundry  
clanking aegises.. then sashay over to the wall, write  
down the answers.. then sit back down.. then wait to be  
handed  
25 more questions.. then loiter, then etc... anon.. talk about  
a yawning  
lion wortha education.. i hope the whim book, the poetics  
stamped  
in there.. i hope the whim jig does not resist.. i hope it's that  
abandoned barn there with vines going in at the windows..  
i hope bats  
and broken baseballs and bad breath coyotes and mice  
and foxes all  
do the buffalo shuffle in there.. i s'pose the ink pot is not  
poetry  
so much as the ink black flambeau river and my early  
yearning haunting  
feeling thereabouts.. the book is pretty much one  
adolescent pinch  
with screaming eyes pretty much.. i guess it's a roethke  
trampoline..  
i guess it's roethke and dylan thomas hoboing across a  
frozen lake..  
call it rousseau with a musky fish for a walkin stick.. if the

book resists something it's the unsurprised fellas who  
laugh back  
in the back of their throat and think of the wild as  
something to  
kill or to tamp back down or to tame.. fence that in there..  
i hope i am tattling  
on them.. i hope each word feels endangered.. i hope i  
am letting the birds  
in through the windows without the glassy neck.. let me  
hobo on the peaked  
back of an emily d bird.. let me go to heaven all along..  
mr. bobolink link up..  
how haunted i am by eagles.. by rivers.. i love that a  
young boy can bring  
the river home in his ears.. that that can be painful.. i love  
that a thick young man with a barrel chest  
and eight ten guns back home can be casually talking  
about this or that win or gun or winsome wind brought  
down  
the shot that woulda dropped the buck.. i love that just then  
back deep in the woods where a little clearing opens..  
an eagle  
will swoop down and lift a fawn right off the ground  
and it's adios humdrum barrel chest dude.. i hope the  
book stands  
as preachment to my sundry hauntings.. i love how hushed  
i was in that  
lawnchair.. i love my totems: birds, wolves and bears..  
i have spent most of my life trying to eye them.. maybe

even more than poetry they are my reading life..  
they the three who tear my mouth off and take it away..  
i hope whim  
works as my lost ramble, asking this: you seen my mouth?  
of every other  
pine birch and maple...

**HLH:** The words "tough" and "tender" seem important in "Venison Tough As." Is the conflict/tension between toughness and tenderness important to this book as a whole (as, obviously, I am taking it to be)? How so?

**AS:** toughness and tenderness.. yeps i'd say that's the  
jeep capsized  
on a bed of sumacs gist or essence or seance of tha bookie..  
how a room feels close where the passed out man is  
sleeping..  
yeps that it.. dangerous should he wake so tippy toe..  
versify on toe in half off tube socks.. tuff and tendon..  
difference twixt a saddle  
and a stirrup.. theres that hombre pistola t is for texas  
feelin therein.. but  
i hope that the looser almost baby bird on a baby swing  
sense of a winged  
thing in a stirrup is in there too.. i hope the thin bone  
heron leg thinly lined  
poems jab at a reader like an atlatl shipped north from  
tenochtitlan.. i hope  
tha wider whitman belly laugh meadow widely lined  
poems feel like youve

been hammering at something all day when all of the  
sudden someone taps  
you on the shoulder, and says, it's OK, take a bran bar  
and a break.. these  
are the confessions of a boy raised into manhood by  
women.. these  
are the yowlings of the papa-less hound.. i suppose this  
book translates as:  
hell yes, this muffler is loud, um, i am sorry i am sorry  
i am sorry.

**HLH:** Whatever else is going on in the book, it looks to me as though you are rethinking confession. "I throw my name / in stone to sea" or "I hell palm the art materials" seems like something different from "I taught my classes Whitehead's notions" or "Daddy, I have had to kill you." Do you view your work as a mode of autobiography? Or confession? Or do you view your work as contesting autobiography and confession? Who is the speaker in these poems, and what is the importance of that speaker's identity(ies) to the work the poems are doing?

**AS:** well i have been reading a lot of tolstoy lately so i'd  
say the book is  
a bunch of duels between a bunch of myselfs with the  
aurora borealis  
belching dragons up above and the snow rolling its no  
number

dice and lo: the moon betting on none of me to win.. i  
am going to  
call these autobiographies.. i am going to call my sense  
of the  
prep of the poems and their oral presentation the sense  
of the folk  
singer straddling a rickety chair by lantern's least bright  
brights.. they  
certainly aren't confessions.. they don't fetch cons out of  
the river.. the  
speaker is a jittery little guy blowing on a blade of grass..  
they are  
that squealing squelching peal.. i hope they are shrill  
chlorophyll..  
i hope they are a late night call to the jittery boy and the  
voice on the  
other end says, say what you know of birds and say it fast,  
say what you know of the ocean.. what you don't know  
make up..  
say what you know of the woods.. but hold back a little  
on the oars..  
say what you learned from that painful river in your ear,  
sure, throw that in.. the speaker  
is standing up on top of the mailbox hoping that all of  
you guys  
going to london can see me.. i aimed to write these poems  
via the river to read these poems aloud like a sudden rapids  
for several hundred q-tipped ears.. no jittery waterlogged  
boy no poems..

no eye flashing tween the eagle and the bear flushing down  
the yawning god mouth of the woods no poems.. i hope  
they are dirty poems with a bar of ivory soap and a map  
to the river.. no land no poem.. i hope you can feel my  
150/100  
blood pressure in the thin ones.. i hope.. in the second  
to last  
one you can laugh and hurt and bite your hand to keep  
from crying  
and lay around a bit in a brown easy chair  
with my grandpa sipping coffee.. last of a sweet roll on the  
back right molar.. one more swig and swish around and  
it's down.. gone away..

and a ps

i notice just now that i called the whim poems confessions  
then said they were not.. ay ay ay.. term me a liar, i reckon!

mirthfully, a

HAZEL SMITH  
on

## THE EROTICS OF GEOGRAPHY

**H. L. Hix:** I am interested by the “double stance” in your work: facing backward in its performative aspect, toward Homer and other exemplars of oral poetry, and facing forward in its new-media interests, toward an increasingly digitized future. Such a chronology oversimplifies things, I know, but I wonder how you see those two aspects of your work in relation to one another.

**Hazel Smith:** I like the idea that my work faces backwards and forwards, and I am certainly interested in both connecting with tradition and breaking out of it! However there has been considerable interest in performance poetry in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, so I don’t see my interest in performance as only looking backwards, but rather as a contemporary transformation of orality. Sometimes it is a digitized orality too, when my voice is manipulated technologically. There is another factor here also which is that I used to be a professional musician and am extremely interested in the whole idea of bringing words and sound together

in performance. My explorations in performance and new media are in both cases related to the desire to find ways of expanding poetry beyond the page, and they are both connected to my enthusiasm for working with new technologies. Some of my pieces, such as “Time the Magician” (on the CD of *The Erotics of Geography*) combine both.

**HLH:** Speaking of chronology, “What it would be” includes the lines “When I started this poem I didn’t know what it would be about. / If I had known I wouldn’t have written it.” Is our perspective on poetry, even our own and even as we’re writing it, always already retrospective? And if so, what is the upshot of that?

**HS:** Those lines refer, of course, to the process of writing, which for me is always about finding something out, moving into new territory. Sometimes as I am writing I start to ask myself what bits of the poem or performance text mean, but I try not to be too literal, too self-conscious as I write. Even retrospectively the poem never settles for me into an exact or single meaning and I always welcome different interpretations. I am really delighted when someone finds something in the poem I didn’t know was there. Of course when I read other poets I am always reading retrospectively in the sense of reading after they have written!

**HLH:** The list of “not ams” in “The Poetics of Uncertainty” recalls the historical tradition of “negative theology.” Is that a way to begin thinking about the lines “If I could be a witness without eyes, a listener without ears.... If I could be, as I have said before, a poet without language” as a high ambition?

**HS:** This seems a very clever and viable idea. It was not what was in my mind, when I wrote it, but as I said before I welcome other approaches to my work. I should also add that I am an atheist! There is a deconstructive element in my work that is operating here, a tendency to put together ideas which cancel each other out and/or negate each other, so I see what you mean. But the referent for me here is radical uncertainty, not God! I saw this passage (again retrospectively!) as a kind of stripping down, a desire for temporary relief from sensory input.

PATRICIA SMITH

on

## BLOOD DAZZLER

**H. L. Hix:** The metaphoric correlation between woman and weather is introduced in the first poem (“every woman begins as weather”) and revisited regularly throughout the book. This is suggested, of course, by the old tradition, changed only fairly recently, of giving hurricanes feminine names, but I take *Blood Dazzler* to be employing that trope as a way of inviting readers who were not immediately affected by Katrina into personal identification with those who were. Would you describe *Blood Dazzler* as primarily accepting this metaphor, or primarily questioning it?

**Patricia Smith:** “Every woman begins as weather” is not suggested by the tradition of feminine hurricane names. In fact, I didn’t have that in mind at all. I simply wanted to get my readers attuned to the idea of Katrina as a flesh-and-blood entity. I also wanted to suggest that every woman holds the potential for storm, the ability to violently and irreparably change her environment. Throughout the book, I try not to put those affected directly and those not affected directly into different camps; in a tragedy

as far-reaching as Katrina, no experience can be discounted.

**HLH:** Of the many presences in the book, Luther B is for me the most memorable. Why is a dog, and his experience, so important to this work?

**PS:** After I saw a photo of a dead dog draped over a power line, I realized that I couldn't downplay the experience of those who lost pets during Katrina. The Gulf Coast region was constantly plagued with lesser storms, and many residents routinely tied their dogs to a tree "out back," with supplies of food and water, and urged the animals to "stay put and hunker down" until the nasty weather had passed. After Katrina, however, the owners did not or could not return. Losing their pets was like losing a member of the family. Although I've never had that kind of bond with an animal, I knew I couldn't write the book without acknowledging that huge reality.

**HLH:** "Thankful" seems in some ways representative to me, especially in its placing two voices, Barbara Bush's in the epigraph and the speaker's in the poem, into conversation (argument) with one another. Voices (plural) seem crucial to this work: we hear the storm itself, victims of the storm, animals, TV newscasters, the President, et al. This is perhaps a broader version of the previous question: why was

it important to have many and various voices in this work?

**PS:** It's just one attempt to encompass the tragedy. It was just too easy to see Katrina as a "black people" experience, or a "poor people" experience or even a "Southern" experience. But it should have been a wake-up call for every single breathing human being. Everyone who watched saw the frailty of body and spirit when matched against the unflinching force of weather. And everyone in this country who watched saw just what our country was capable of. Everyone needed to be able to look at the tragedy closely and see themselves.

STEPHANIE STRICKLAND  
on  
**ZONE : ZERO**

**H. L. Hix:** I get a lot of signals about its interest in digital media before the book begins, in the jacket copy, in the fact of its having an accompanying CD, etc. If I were to start with the creaky false distinction between what is “inside” and “outside” the text, I would note the double entendre of “beam” (beam of steel or wood, beam of light) as the point at which I begin to understand from “within” the text that these poems will worry over our placement historically/culturally in the industrial age or the information age. From your position as the writer “outside” the text, how do you experience the process of inviting slower readers such as myself, who came to poetry strictly through books, into the contemporary aesthetic/political issues raised for and about poetry by digital media?

**Stephanie Strickland:** I came to poetry orally, through nursery rhymes, lullabies, jump rope and hopscotch; but I grew up with books in the industrial age, my father an engineer and my grandmothers both great, idiosyncratic readers. Even then, however, in the ‘50s

of the last century, there were oscilloscopes in my basement.

I was introduced to digital literature (then, e-fiction) in the mid-’90s, attending the first NEH summer seminar on digital lit, taught by N. Katherine Hayles, to which I applied as an “independent scholar,” poet and representative from a public-arts center.

Almost everyone I know today has more digital equipment than I do (since I don’t own even a cell phone), and most also have a firmer (more aggressive, or more ideological) idea about what poetry is. Though the most salient characteristic of urban life in the wealthier parts of the globe is the complex interpenetration of virtual and gravitational, and though many can’t remember a pre-digital world, they’re still not sure what e-poetry is: an art in its infancy swiftly evolving.

I find the best way to invite people toward e-poetry is to show it to them, read it to them and talk with them about it. Often one needs to learn how to “work” or “play” e-poetry, as it is an application, a poetic “instrument” that creates a poetry of movement and behavior. To invite writers, specifically, toward e-poetry, I teach workshops which greatly extend the kinds of poems they write and appreciate. We read e-poetry but don’t directly write it unless, as often

happens, the students' own written experiments lead them on. I do refer to examples, like Emily Dickinson's folded-envelope poems made with pins, the three-dimensional appreciation of which requires a digitally implemented presentation.

Processes of play, discovery and reflection generally bring people to digital literature unless they have a fixed commitment to the fixity of print. The fixity of print, however, is a five-hundred-year-old anomaly in the many-thousand-year-old history of world poetry, evolving and adaptive in both oral and written forms.

**HLH:** Maybe this is a similar question. If I read, say, Gwendolyn Brooks's "Sadie and Maud," I feel as though I know the backstory, as though it falls readily into narrative conventions (competing sisters, good child/bad child, etc.) that familiarize the characters. With "Ballad of Sand and Harry Soot," I wonder if you see it primarily as employing narrative conventions and familiarizing the characters, or as contesting narrative conventions and defamiliarizing the characters. (I know that, like inside/outside the text, this is a false dilemma, but I invite your altering the terms of the question to help give it sense!)

**SS:** *The Ballad of Sand and Harry Soot* appears twice in *Zone : Zero*, once as the printed poem and once on the CD. You have asked about Sand and Soot as

characters. The answers might be different for the different implementations of the poem.

As a print poem, *The Ballad* won the *Boston Review* prize, chosen by Heather McHugh. In her judge's statement she said:

A very odd love song, constructed around the figures of Sand and Soot, manages in ten inventive yet coherent pages to spin some astonishing variations on its theme. Sand and Soot are considered as elements, as temperaments, as linguistic fields, as harmonic fields, as shimmers and shades. One would think the possibilities exhaustible in a few pages, but this poet keeps deepening the premises of an inspired polarity. Everywhere the ranges of reference are generous—through binary numbers, physics, history, economics, medicine, magic, music. At times the poem seems to be made of brushstrokes, at times of whole notes—or maybe hemi-demi-semiquavers. When "Tell's weapon" appears just two words away from the word "inscription," we are sufficiently wised-up not to miss the meta-poetics of this love tale.

Not least important are the licks of wicked humor at work in this peculiar courtship of



Sandwoman and Sootman. And when, her in dotted-Swiss shift, "Sand could be retro," the reader is ready to supply the senses of the "spect": for these are pointillistic figures—figures of perception and imagination, figures of time and its escapees; one transparent, one opaque; one originating, one completing. It would be all too tempting to make a simple binary opposition out of them, but the poet is far too canny for such reductions. One of the poem's great virtues is its capacity to send off from its original premises more and more shooting stars of wild association, while never belaboring the host of fundamental—yet sometimes just delicately implicit—relations: relations that arise in the mind, over the course of a sympathetic reading, as spectres of near and distant fires, glasses (mirrors, microscopes, telescopes), sandmen, time-keepers, dreamers, and dreaders. All the while the masquerade manages to keep two living lovers at heart: in a world of Metro cards and movies, aircraft carriers and chemical peels, they're nothing if they're not contemporary, too.

Time and timelessness are equally the premises of poetry, and virus has an etymological kinship with life itself. The thinker makes much

of numbers, and the lyricist of love, but the mind is also a dreamer and the heart a ticker: dot dot dot, dash dash dash, dot dot dot. The point of this poem is many points, moved by fondness, funniness, fatality: a wheel of words, a wind that darts us, whirl of real stardust.

One could not more fluently, nor flatteringly, characterize the print. An aspect that might particularly relate to the digital is that from the beginning I had in mind that all flesh (human, animal or plant) and most paper and ink are made from carbon, or soot. Harry Soot is their avatar. And Sand is the silica used to make the microchips that computers are based on physically. I saw them as two kinds of life, and *The Ballad* as the song of their love/hate/ambivalence as they reached toward each other: organic life and computational life.

In addition, the images and image statements that can be reached through the "Coda" section of the digital poem expand our sense of the many components that feed digital life.

**HLH:** The "small dusts" and "shadow of a human" in "Absinthe 5" call to mind for me the last line of a Sor Juana poem: "*es cadáver, es polvo, es sombra, es nada*" (it is a corpse, it is dust, it is a shadow, it is nothing). I then begin to see those

elements throughout the book (e.g., "cadáver," "polvo," "sombra," "nada"). I assume that this is a coincidental association, rather than an intentional series of allusions, but it raises for me the question of how the book's (oh god, here comes another false opposition) synchronic concerns (e.g., with contemporary science and technology) alter its diachronic character (i.e., its use of and stance toward "tradition" in the way T. S. Eliot, for example, used that term).

**SS:** I think, for me, diachronic is synchronic, by which I mean that in some frames, and at some scales, chronology is a superstition. One outcome of trying to think general relativity and quantum theory as a "true" account of the world is to have a sense that parallel worlds are simultaneously accessible. The concerns of the different sections of the book, the different Zones within it and on the CD, do return: under different filters one might say. So, indeed, the shadow, dust, sand elements of life in the desert, the rich spiritual desert of tradition and the desert of the Absinthe poems, echo the concerns of digital artists who speak in *slippingglimpse* (where they speak next to Hildegard of Bingen and to a folk account, *The Passion of the Flax*), and they also chime with the concerns of those avatars, Sand and Soot.

What we see as virtual or relatively immaterial was certainly spoken of in the past by those referring

to shadows and reflections, dreams and ghosts, airy nothing, and of course these were never "nothing," most especially when being exorcised as such. I think especially of Spain (Machado, Cervantes) and the Indian subcontinent as being sophisticated sources of such poems and stories. Thinking about dreams and shadows and avatars has come to be mediated by technologic concerns, but in fact is connected to a long history of writings on shape-change, mind-alteration and parallel worlds.

SUSAN TICHY  
on

## GALLOWGLASS

*This “interview” is constructed, with Susan Tichy’s permission, from the biography and author’s statement that accompany Gallowglass. Those [two statements](#) are available in their entirety at the [Ahsahta Press website](#).*

**H. L. Hix:** The poems in *Gallowglass* do not “present” in the first-person domestic autobiographical mode that one encounters frequently, at least in contemporary American poetry. They do, though, feel intensely personal. Is the personal connection something you’re willing to identify explicitly?

**Susan Tichy:** In my teens, I was a small but active cog in the antiwar machinery in Washington, and my first poems were published in *The Quicksilver Times*, an underground newspaper, which I also sold on the street. In 1977 I spent four months picking fruit, painting fences and herding cattle on an Israeli kibbutz on the Golan Heights, which became the focus of my first book, *The Hands in Exile*. In the early 1980s, I married Michael O’Hanlon, a Vietnam

combat veteran who was a Colorado native and a mountaineer. Most of what I know about war, I learned by living with a combat veteran for 25 years. The essential thing was that the war never went away, for either of us. In 2002, Michael fell to his death while descending a mountain peak near our home in Colorado. After his death, I began searching through language for a way to escape the monotonous narcissism of grief. These poems became the root of *Gallowglass*, which took hold over the next few years, as dead bodies accumulated in Afghanistan and Iraq, and as U.S. veterans began to return—young gallowglass for whom few seemed to be grieving.

**HLH:** Any boundary in these poems between the personal and the communal seems very porous. Do you mean them to be “double” in that way?

**ST:** *Gallowglass* is a book about grief, both public and private; it asks *how* to grieve in a history and a culture so permeated with images of imperialism and war. “Gallowglass” is an Anglicized form of the Gaelic *gal-óglac* (Irish: *gallóglaich*), a foreign soldier or mercenary. The sequence of ghazals from which the book takes its title tracks this figure in forms both linguistic and human: in the foreign combatants of Iraq and Afghanistan; in words and phrases misplaced, made “foreign” through collage; and in the life and death of my husband, who returned

to Vietnam thirty years after he fought there, and who also traveled, in his restless, post-war years, through all the desert countries our military currently occupies.

**HLH:** In regard to “form” or “technique,” how do you mean these poems to do their work?

**ST:** Collage allows images to become a way of thinking, and in *Gallowglass*, part of my thinking is about images themselves. Are the immanence and autonomy we assign to poetic images distinguishable from the perpetual framing and reframing of mediated images? Both pass before us in an unending stream of transformation, blurring categories of time, place and possession, wearing away, as Lao Tzu says, into completion. Is a Taoist reality of presentation commensurate with the phantasmagoria of representation that now passes for information? Can we live in that stream of images while resisting their imperialist claim of universal access to others’ experience? I have tried in *Gallowglass* to model some possibilities. In collage every juncture can feel like conflict; but its gaps also let in the light: transformation, detachment and the possibility of creative error. The transcendence offered is metonymic—social and communal, rather than metaphysical, the private embedded in the public.

What happened happened, but the action of collage makes it not so much a narrative as a way to live: not grief and then recovery, but a constantly recurring consciousness. *How to grieve*—moment by moment—and how, moment by moment, to let grief go.

**H. L. Hix:** A reader would have to be pretty drowsy not to pick up on what I take to be the governing metaphor of the book, the identity of self with star suggested by your name. But the recurrence of an image or metaphor does not entail that it have the same meaning or aim each time, and I wonder if you mean the cosmic references to be summing toward one signification, or exploring various significations (or some combination of the two)? In other words, if I were to choose one example, such as “Black Hole,” ruminating on the pattern in it (darkness/density/compression/collapse/delay), in what way should I expect that poem to illuminate others in the book?

**Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon:** I have to first admit, it is difficult for me to answer questions about poems in a prose format. That difficulty is one of the things I’m trying to address with/in ] *Open Interval* [. Poetry allows me the space to say what I mean to say. Anything I say about a poem feels reductive to me. Identity is such a complex topic. I definitely wanted the cosmic references to be both “summing

toward one signification” and “exploring various significations.” I am a seriously “both/and” kind of girl. A very important part of “Black Hole” for me is its epigraph. Editors, and I’m certain some readers, are tempted to correct the attribution: to change it from C. K. Williamson to C. K. Williams. Though I imagine the lives of those two people could not be further removed. Between-ness intrigues me: the distance between the person you’ve “heard of” and the one you haven’t. Who gets to speak things into existence? The distance between myself and my name has been a lifelong fascination. It is a difficult name to pronounce. While writing the book, I returned to pronouncing my first name trochaically (LYrae), the way my mother did, rather than iambically (lyRAE), the way I’d introduced myself for years. And I wanted to think about it. What did I mean by that? What, for example, of my awareness of the ways in which the trochaic pronunciation marked me as country, as Southern? And what of science? And faith? Or the distance between myself and my Pentecostal background? Between my ideas about poetry, say, and John 1:1? Obviously I’m interested in form as sound, form as body, form as place, form as space. But identity is a bounded infinity. Yes, I want the reader to notice the way the meaning or aim of a recurring image has changed with each passage, but I wanted to point out the infinite moving towards of each passage. I’m not sure how to say that more

clearly in prose except to say yes: "Black Hole" is a good choice in terms of a poem with which to read the rest of the book.

**HLH:** I wonder whether I am also right to connect such moments in the book as Jimi Hendrix "play[ing] the hurt / Backward" and the parachute jump in the last poem, to see reversal and descent as crucial to the work, to see the book as a kind of counter to the ideal of "ad astra per aspera"?

**LVC-S:** If I understand what you're asking, yes. And that reversal appears in other places. In "Body Worlds 2: X Lady," for example, there are the lines: "I remember how hard it was / to pull myself back." There's a fear of getting lost throughout the book. If one's attraction is to between-ness, to inter-dimensionality, to space, to G-d, there's a real possibility of getting lost there. I wanted in part to address the ways in which ambition can feel like a pull towards death—death being mystery, but only a kind of mystery, not the only. Hendrix trying to make his guitar sound like the wind in his parachute made so much sense to me. And that story collided with crossroads stories for me of meeting the unidentified person who tunes your instrument, and with the thought of becoming addicted to anything. I try to make the way these overlap in my mind explicit in the book. Sites of intersection are spooky. Watch

*Riding Giants* and look at Laird Hamilton's face when he comes out the end of that "Millennium Wave." Or just listen to Billie Holiday's voice. You can't abide there. If you try, you get lost. So I guess, in one sense, what I'm talking about is rapture. To choose rapture (the stars) without choosing also the banality of the ground felt like an inappropriate sort of abnegation to me. Maybe I didn't understand what you're asking.

**HLH:** I keep returning to the line "I want to say this poem with—my hands," and I wonder if there's any sense in which you mean that as a desire that extends beyond this poem, to others as well.

**LVC-S:** There was that obsession with being bodied again. Again, I'm hesitant, afraid of reducing the poem to just one tidbit of information. When I was writing that poem I was thinking a lot about American Sign Language and how gorgeous it is to me. One of my friends, a fellow poet, Amy Meckler, interprets for the deaf in New York City. I had asked her at one of the yearly Black Dog Poets workshops how to sign "field." I was thinking about a field as an open interval. It is a word I love. I wanted to enter that word, to get as far into it as I could go: thinking about Gluck and "Witchgrass" and Mark Strand's "Keeping Things Whole;" thinking about Goodricke's deafness and what it meant in terms of identity for him; thinking about a sonnet as a field

and the integrity of the line; thinking about race and space and about signing my name. Throughout the book, I was interested in making explicit the infinity within that delineated square-shaped sonnet space, and in exploring the atmosphere in which survival is possible. There's a difference between air and space. I wanted the reader to notice a difference in the ways in which one interacts with and interprets *Dear John* and ] *Dear Phillis* [ in the poem, and to engage in conversations about escape and bodies—to revisit "Andromeda," say, and think about escape, to revisit "Bop: The North Star." Inherent in this poem is the wish that folks get hold of these poems and do other things with them. There's at least one young woman I know of, an actress and performance artist, who's working on a project that interacts with them. I've done some readings already with musicians: Johnny Dowd and Richie Stearns. I'd love to do a project with a photographer, like Rachel Eliza Griffiths. Or to see what someone like Shin Wei would do with them. "RR Lyrae: Sign" is the poem in the book that I think of most directly as a prayer.

MEG WITHERS

on

## A COMMUNION OF SAINTS

**H. L. Hix:** Your book puts into conversation two things that in contemporary American society don't often speak with one another: a Biblical framework (denial/descent/resurrection, quoted Biblical passages, etc.) and a thematic focus on contemporary queer experience. Why is it important for this particular conversation to occur, and for us (your readers, whether gay or straight) to overhear it?

**Meg Withers:** The answer to this has more than one tangent, but the main reason was the initial appearance of Biblical language by my own hand: the word "abomination." The word is never seen outside of Biblical reference as far as I know, so when it showed itself I was taken aback.

When I found I had written that word, I became concerned that the ethos that drives seemingly Christian dialectic was already seeping into my subconscious, which manifested in the then conscious use of that term. I had heard that term in relationship with queer existence for many years, both in and out

of the bar where “our girl” tended to her business of making cocktails and entertaining customers, who soon became family. As an aside, Steinbeck would have loved this place: The Big Family.

Once I recognized the presence of the Bible in the language of the poetry I spent a great deal of time meditating on the significance and necessity of that language in this unusual setting. My great and wonderful teacher at the time, Toni Mirosevich, and I, spent time discussing the present of Biblical language in the work, and the need for the natural reconciliation between Christian language and what Christian language is most often used for these days: excoriation and damnation.

It was time for this marriage of the two seemingly disparate conversations to take place. In queer terminology, I guess you could say I was using poetry to say in street language: “Get over it / yourself Mary!” This was the phrase I heard when I became quite the *telenovela* queen in the bar at one point. This language tells those who feel they own the sacred language of the Bible: *Get over yourself Mary (not Magdalene). We are resurrecting her, in high heels and big hair, and a penis.*

Language is the most powerful force in existence. We bless, curse, birth and kill with it. It needs to be

used to create living space for all. Between the power of language and the timing—this book happened. There is as well an inexplicable, almost divinatory nature to this seemingly purposeful occurrence. There is always the presence of a spiritual force that wends its way into creativity despite, in spite, to spite, the writer. That happened with this language and the writing I did, to some extent, create.

**HLH:** I am also very interested in the attention these poems pay to “street language.” What is it that occurs in the integration of “high” poetic and religious language with “low” street language, to give such weight to the work?

**MW:** First, when language is this disparate, there is more than one literary presence in existence. Similar to the lives of most of us in that environment, where it was not safe to be as queer as we were in the bar, there was a necessity to be another person in other venues. That said, Christ was a “street” kind of guy, and what happened to him because he told the truth was disconcerting to say the least. He spoke his truth (according to his chroniclers). So here’s this completely “clear” human being, touched with just enough magic/insanity to freak the regular folks out, who ends up hanging on a cross—never mind what happened after that. So here I was living in the midst of these amazingly human beings in this bar who



hung on their own crosses, so to speak. Here were honest men and women who risked everything they had and were and might have had, who could not lie about who they were/are. And they hung for it by the thousands in a very short space of time. But then, they were used to hanging for "it." None of them ever hung just once as Christ did, but hundreds of times during their lives, for being who they are. Most people don't have the *cogliones/huevos/balls* for that one.

Who gives up all they have (including life) unless there is a most clear truth? Who would put themselves in peril each day they wake up unless the truth of their lives is so insistent? The switch between the street/high language was a rough juxtaposition, a sort of literary whiplash that takes the person reading it back and forth. It's meant to be as unsettling as the times and the people in that time. I guess it works, as otherwise you wouldn't make the comment about its "weight."

**HLH:** Am I right to see as another in that list of dynamic tensions (Biblical language/queer experience, poetic language/street language) the tension between an imperfect present and an inevitable future, as in "hell to pay for later...but for now"?

**MW:** This portion is the language of prophecy, and prophecy is Biblical reality, and it always disconcerts us. Listening to prophets, we become filled with tension. Perhaps they are right? This portion also covers what happened when those of us who had been through the HIV/AIDS epidemic and all those deaths, tried to tell our younger counterparts (prophecy) that anti-retroviral drugs are their own awful reality, that safe sex is the only real alternative to the misery of HIV/AIDS, and that the AIDS deaths would continue to increase if...they didn't listen much, thus this prophetic portion of the book.

Additionally, the inevitable death of us all is the most difficult truth we deal with, mostly by not dealing with it consciously at all. How much we do to avoid at all costs the fact that we will die (and it won't be pretty) and we will cling to our last heartbeat with all we have in us.

A subsequent layer of meaning is that it is anathema to us to act with this knowledge of death. It is an admission of fragility, of human-ness, of inevitability. It's the ultimate submission to our human inability to live forever. The idea of admitting death into the room causes the most dynamic tension, particularly in light of the Christian ethos which makes a huge deal out of making do with a miserable life now so that when we wake up in "heaven," all the good stuff

will be within reach (whatever the “good stuff” is for each of us). The ultimate expression of queerness in this light is the absolute acceptance of our physicality. We aren’t waiting for the good stuff (we’re having it now) because we don’t take any good experience for granted.

This is the ultimate denial of all that “perils of the flesh” business we get sold as children. Meanwhile, we really never did believe it as eight-year-olds with our very grubby index fingers stuck up our snotty little noses. The biggest lie is pretending we don’t have a body, and that it’s not going to crumble. Read S. Elise Peeple’s *The Emperor Has a Body* for more on this topic.

The worst part of this denial of the body is that we never do anything with these great machines while we still can. And the people who practice all that denial of their bodies, boy does that piss off those who never got any of what they desired. After all, if some supreme entity did make all this, and make it with obvious functions, what the hell are we doing denying our maker by not using the damned thing? And I use the word “damned” very purposefully here.

Then there is the aspect of this book that deals with prophecy and the Book of Revelation and all that wild-eyed stuff that both attracts and terrifies people.

In places other than the U.S. and certain Northern European countries, prophecy and prophets are treated with a certain respect, as if they actually exist, have a purpose, and need to be heeded: versus our more “modern” tendency to view prophets as crazy, weird, outcast, scapegoats. The Protestant Revolution did us no favors in this matter.

The prophet Ronnie in the book is a good example of this. He was one of my customers whose voice no one was allowed to ignore, but to whom no one wanted to listen. He was grating, noisy, a bother, and most of the other bartenders kicked him out at one time or another. I dealt with him as if he were a sort of bothersome child (to my discredit): *Sit there, drink your rum and coke, and if you say one more word, yer outa here.* He managed for a short period of time to “behave,” and then I’d have to give him the “look,” and we’d start all over again. I just couldn’t see kicking the unwanted out of a bar full of other unwanted folks. He was a perfect person to be the prophet in this book. He hanged himself one night in the Honolulu jail, with a belt the cops “forgot” to take from him when they arrested him for public drunkenness and being a general pain in the ass. I didn’t find out about this until last year, when Bobby told me what happened. In our society we kill our prophets, and only then learn to admire them for their perspicacity. Read *The Incomparable Sayings of*

*the Mullah Nasrudin*, by Idries Shah, and you get an idea of what I mean by prophets and prophecy. I'm not necessarily referring to the Book of Revelation here, but to prophecy that is difficult to parse but nonetheless valuable. In the U.S., we assassinate prophets, or let them die of not fulfilling their job, which is to prophecy. Ronnie's repetitious, grating drone ("There is a limit, there is a limit") was our prophecy. We didn't listen either.

RITA WONG  
on  
**FORAGE**

**H. L. Hix:** The very first line of the very first poem in the book introduces a concept ("high-context language") that I take to be important for what follows. I assume that by high-context language you mean languages of small-scale societies, languages spoken only (or primarily) in one region by one group of people, and therefore closely tied to that context, but is it fair to infer that you are also embracing this as an ideal for your poetry: that you want your poetry to be high-context language?

**Rita Wong:** I was thinking about the contrast between high-context languages and low-context languages as the difference between language that relies on more shared understandings among its speakers/writers (and so can be more understated, indirect, relying on a little to suggest a lot, as some Asian languages are described) and language that has to be more explanatory and explicit because its speakers are more individualistic, less connected by a sense of collective relationship, or even alienated from one another.

I would hope that poetry can be enacted as a high-context language (one recognizes both Shakespeare and Rachel Carson references on the same page, and hopefully asks how both might relate to one's situation as a reader). Through a shared sense of inheritance (be it that of literature and/or the planet we live on) perhaps one comes to gradually strengthen a feeling of interrelatedness.

I am also thinking about how those of us who come to English with other languages in our consciousness (my first spoken language was actually Cantonese, though I am more fluent in English thanks to my schooling) may yearn to change the dynamics of English, to make it more relational, less hierarchical, more verb-based, etc. How might English learn from Cantonese or from the syntax of Indigenous languages like Blackfoot or Halkomelem? At a time when Indigenous languages are threatened, is the only role of English to further that destruction, or might English make spaces for co-existence and even respect for Indigenous languages? For instance, I'm interested in the work that folks like [Darrell Kip](#) at the Piegan Institute have been doing to help the Blackfoot language survive, which I've learned about in English. Where do we as speakers, readers and writers decide to spend our precious time and energy? That is what will shape or reshape the contexts we have inherited. I happen to believe

that Indigenous languages materialize important knowledges of the land—cultural perspectives that are crucial to human survival and co-existence with other life in a time of rapid climate change.

**HLH:** "Transcript" refers to a gift, and "recognition/identification test" imposes a test. Am I right to see both of these impulses, seemingly at odds with one another, at work in your poetry: to see it, in other words, as having the aspect of a gift to the reader and also the aspect of a test for the reader?

**RW:** Yes, I very much see writing as a form of giving back, and am influenced by books like *Give Back: First Nations Perspectives on Cultural Practice*, which has essays by Lee Maracle, Jeannette Armstrong, Joy Asham Fedorick, Jaune Quick-to-See Smith and more. I'm interested in how a gift-economy model might enable forms of connection and cooperation that are discouraged or stifled in a competitive, capitalist framework. Sometimes I say that reading has saved my life (has given me a sense of purpose, connection, long-term community in the process), and if, as a writer, I can give back even a little of what I've received as a reader, I would be happy.

As for the test part: I feel that I am constantly being tested by my environment, challenged to find ways to work for regeneration in the face of likely

environmental disaster. Insofar as we are all in this together (according to what Masao Miyoshi and others have termed planetarianism), I would hope we can meet this test together. It will take all our creativity, care and skills to survive this moment's challenges. In "recognition/identification test," I wanted readers to think about what lexicons might need more attention and cultivation if we are to better cooperate with other life forms, like plants. We rely on trees and plants for our wellbeing in terms of the air that we breathe. I would like to find ways to better acknowledge this.

Some poems in *forage* are more "difficult" than others and could be considered a "test," but what I hope for is a reader who is open to trying different kinds of reading strategies, open to hearing not only one syntax, but many—not only one culture or language or pattern of perception, but many.

**HLH:** For some reason I probably couldn't articulate, "after 'The Stars' by Ping Hsin" strikes me as an important poem for the book. It leads me to think of the poems in the book as "fragile offerings." Do you think of them at all in that way?

**RW:** Yes, most definitely. As mentioned above, writing is a form of giving back, an offering (as you point out) not only to the living, but also to the ancestors and

the yet to come. I lost my grandmother to cervical cancer, and *forage* is dedicated in her memory: that is her Chinese name on page five (not numbered) of the book. Many of us have lost a loved one to the cancers and illnesses that come with environmental pollution, and an offering cannot change this loss, but it does respect and acknowledge the loss.

CAROLYNE WRIGHT  
on ANURADHA MAHAPATRA'S

## ANOTHER SPRING, DARKNESS

**H. L. Hix:** Your introduction notes that Anuradha Mahapatra herself comes “from a different world” than that of middle-class city-dwellers in Calcutta, and that her poetry defies “the average reader’s expectations” in such a culture. Both observations surely hold true *a fortiori* for an average reader of poetry in the U.S. How might an American reader best recognize “the conditions in which the marginal people live” in these poems as “a different world”—but not simply as a different world, also as a world related to our own?

**Carolyn Wright:** In the years since Anuradha wrote these poems, and I translated them with my collaborators and subsequently wrote this introduction, the world has “shrunk” considerably, through the increase in global communications, the Internet, email and all the other ways in which we have access, virtually and physically, to far-flung regions of this planet. Nongovernmental organizations both international and Indian, fair-trade initiatives and other entities that reach into isolated communities (with both benign

intentions and unintended consequences), have connected with distant villages and their inhabitants. And many of these rural people have departed their villages to seek work in the exploding cities and manufacturing centers of their developing countries, to take jobs in manufacturing off-shored from the West, send money home, and create better lives for those who remain in the villages. There is much more communication, and travel, back and forth, between these villages and the cities. And cell phones are everywhere!

With all these changes, the world is slightly more aware of the world of Anuradha Mahapatra’s poetry, and of deeply rural people of the western uplands of West Bengal, the Bengali-speaking villagers who live on the margins of mainstream Indian society, as well as the pre-Aryan tribal people who speak their own Indigenous languages and live on the margins of the margins. Or at least, the people of Anuradha’s world can be understood to some extent because of the parallels between their lives and those of, say, rural Chinese—both members of the Han majority and minority groups like the Uighurs (who in the West had heard much about them before some ended up as prisoners in Guantanamo?). The development of China and the U.S. competition with China have brought the lives of poor rural and urban Chinese into our living rooms.

And as conditions of life for the working poor, deeply poor underclass, and formerly middle-class in the U.S. begin to resemble those of the poor in the developing world, the conditions of our worlds are much more similar. The relationships between the many marginalized communities are closer now than ever. We can see for ourselves in recent motion pictures, for example, how people in the slums of Bombay live, and we can see similar conditions in tent settlements in our own cities. Hurricane Katrina did a good deal to show us how quickly a long-neglected U.S. city, as well as its nearby rural areas, could fully join the ranks of Third World cities, and the images of devastation there brought home the realities of the margins to the formerly First World. If we want to understand the destitute widow in "Business Woman's Story," for example, all we need to do is walk past the doorways of office buildings of any sizeable U.S. city as evening comes on and the homeless claim their spots for the night. How many of these homeless are recently foreclosed from homes, or evicted as renters from foreclosed apartment buildings?

So perhaps the so-called margins and the so-called mainstream are coming closer together because the so-called mainstream is collapsing, and marginal conditions are overtaking large portions of formerly middle-class mainstream life. We are beginning to

experience in our own lives how "they" live, and "we" are becoming "they."

Perhaps I am being too sociological and political here, and not sufficiently literary, but it is interesting that poetic movements have arisen among the marginalized everywhere. Poetry/Writers in the Schools, Poetry in the Prisons, after-school writing workshops in inner-city neighborhoods, for at-risk youth, in rural libraries, on reservations, and elsewhere, all have existed in this country for many years.

In India, communities of Dalits (members of the lowest caste formerly called "untouchables," many of whom are related to Indigenous people) have been reclaiming their pride, their constitutionally promised places in mainstream education and employment, and shedding caste entirely. There is a whole movement of Dalit poetry and literature now. There are recent groups like "Kalam: Margins Write" (started by a U.S.-born South Asian literary activist and advocate, Sahar Romani) that work with marginal young people in Kolkata. This is a group that I would like to work with. Sahar is from the Seattle area, and I met with her a number of times before she moved to Kolkata. I gave her Anuradha's contact data a few years, and though she was not able to reach her, maybe she has by now. I have to catch up with Sahar soon!

Here is part of a message from her:

“Kalam: Margins Write” is now officially an independent literary arts organization recognized by the Indian Government. On September 20<sup>th</sup>, 2007, Kalam registered as an Indian Trust at the West Bengal Registration Office. This is a big step for us. All of us at Kalam feel grateful, we feel proud.

For pictures and details, visit our blog:  
<http://marginswrite.wordpress.com>

Also, stay tuned to our blog in the coming days for stories about our new office, programs, and activities.

Best, Sahar

--

Sahar Romani, Director  
Kalam: Margins Write

CAROLYNE WRIGHT  
on TASLIMA NASRIN'S

## THIS GAME IN REVERSE

**H. L. Hix:** The teaching half of Horace's assertion that poetry should delight and teach seems to make us nervous these days. But Nasrin's poetry seems not timid about that didactic aspect of poetry, and a poem such as "Story" appears to me like a parable with a "moral." The morals I hear recurring in the poems, especially about gender and about religion, are not new, exactly, or unique to Nasrin. They're just lessons we can't seem to get through our thick skulls! Why is it important to hear them from her, in this poetry?

**Carolyn Wright:** I think it is important to hear these lessons from women from all over the world, because women's experiences (though they differ in details depending on the culture, the level of economic development, the climate and other factors) tend to be universal. Women share more in terms of their experience than they differ. Nasrin's poetry provides one of these voices, and it has the virtue of being very clear-cut, vivid in its imagery, stark in its dramatic presentation, and not overly burdened with the sorts



of literary subtleties (historical and cultural allusions, echoes of earlier literary works in Bengali, wordplay) that are hard to translate or appreciate by those not familiar with Bengali culture and language.

And because she became an internationally known figure in 1994, as a human rights *cause celebre* and lightning rod for the growing Islamic fundamentalist movement in South Asia, Nasrin's personal story interested journalists and publishers, and enabled the publication of a book in my translation of her poems in English. At that point, my translations were the only examples of her work available in English. In fact, I had originally translated about 20 of her poems (the same number as I did for most of the poets I worked with in Bangladesh and earlier in West Bengal). But once Taslima Nasrin's story was on the front pages of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, publishers who had passed on her work before (*The New Yorker* and the like) began to approach me, asking if I had a book manuscript!

Nasrin first became known (and controversial) among Bangladeshi intellectuals in the late 1980s for her poetry's blunt language, angry and provocative tone, sexual themes and advocacy of sexual freedom for women. These were demands seldom expressed openly in Muslim Bengali society, where most women outside of the privileged middle and upper

classes are illiterate, married in their early teens, and treated as second-class citizens in comparison with men.

Middle- and upper-middle-class women, whose relative affluence tends to shield them from the most overt and brutal forms of male oppression, usually express their dissatisfactions (at least in written form) indirectly, with irony, wit or fiction—in the voices and experiences of characters not themselves. Or, when they do write more directly about women's struggles (as journalists, scholars, social scientists, politicians, social activists and literary writers), they tend to be less aggressive and confrontational than Nasrin. They tend not to attack verbally, but to pour their energies into more "constructive" responses: not only criticizing the ills of society as these negatively affect women, but proposing and working toward solutions, both in their writings and in their professional and volunteer activities with the many social-service and non-governmental organizations working toward the betterment of women, children, the environment and every other aspect of Bangladeshi life.

Ironically, one reason that a writer like Nasrin could emerge and flourish in Bangladesh is that she received a good education with the full support of her father, to whom she was devoted, and who was

determined that she follow him in a medical career. Though she is female, she had opportunities, in the hierarchical society of Bangladesh, available almost exclusively to those from a privileged background—and she had access and family support both moral and economic. Once she completed her medical education, in a country with a relative scarcity of doctors, Nasrin could choose to practice in the big city, Dhaka, the political and literary capital of the country. Thus she had access to literary and publishing networks, media outlets and a much freer lifestyle as a professional woman than she could have enjoyed in smaller cities and rural areas.

Part of Nasrin's notoriety in her own society came from a series of brief and turbulent marriages. Her first husband was one of Bangladesh's well-regarded younger poets, but the couple parted ways after a few years. Nasrin alludes in a number of poems to the difficulties and upheavals in this marriage, but this poet-husband did encourage her poetic interests—her first poems appeared in magazines and her first books were published during this period.

Her first books of poetry were essentially self-published (as are most books by young poets and writers in Bangladesh), with the author paying a printer, and then distributing and selling the copies through bookstores and on her own. Beginning in 1990, after Nasrin had

attained greater prominence for her columns and fiction (the same ironies that hold in publishing in the West!), she began to work with a professional publisher, who reissued the earlier volumes and published new collections.

In 1989, with the encouragement of her second husband (a Dhaka journalist and editor), Nasrin began to write columns for the news magazine he edited, *Khabarer k~gaj (News Paper)*. These columns commented on social and gender issues in Bangladeshi society, especially institutionalized prejudice, negative stereotyping, and sexual oppression of women, specifically *purdah* (female seclusion), prostitution and domestic violence. Later, her columns were published in other Dhaka magazines, which resumed publication after the country's first democratic elections in February, 1991. In all of these columns, Nasrin's anger at the injustices women face in Bangladeshi society burns through. Her graphic testimonies about her work as a physician in gynecology wards are among her most powerful: women screaming when they learn their new baby is a girl, terrified that their husbands will divorce them; women harassed or even attacked by strange men when they step outside their houses; professional women unable to rent a room or live on their own if they must work in a city where they have no relatives with whom they can stay. It was

columns recounting such experiences which first gave Nasrin a wider readership and following. With these columns as well as her poetry, Nasrin gradually became a household name among Bangladeshi intellectuals, with many admirers and critics.

Her prose style was blunt and confrontational by Bangladeshi standards, with a tendency to view issues from the most stark and one-dimensional perspective. As she has said in interviews with Indian journalists, this writing was meant to be provocative, to shock readers (especially hardline Islamic leaders) into paying attention. In one column, she asserted that Muslim women should be permitted four husbands, just as Muslim men may take four wives. In another column, she stated that men who rape women should themselves be raped as punishment. Political liberals and intellectuals applauded the courage of Nasrin's outspokenness. But some women's rights activists who worked with development organizations out in the villages feared that Nasrin's confrontational style could lead to a conservative backlash against the slow yet substantial gains in literacy and vocational training, economic independence, health care and family planning that poor Bangladeshi women had made in the last few decades. Many Bangladeshis also deplored what they perceived as a tendency toward sensationalism, a disregard for journalistic accuracy, and occasional verbal swipes at her own supporters!

But Nasrin was not a school of journalism degree-holder inculcated with the often-restrictive dictates of objectivity, balance and confidentiality of sources.

I tend to look at Nasrin's prose, especially these op-ed essays (a few dozen of which I have also translated) as an extension of her poetry—the same messages rendered in both genres. Both forms at their best are very effective. In "Story," in one representative dramatic situation, the speaker in the poem traces the "poor-me" storytelling of manipulative con men exploiting women's tendency to empathize and desire to be helpful and supportive. After the "boy" has told his sad story and gotten sympathy, good food, a warm bed and his sympathetic listener to share it with (this implied obliquely in the imagery of "drenching" in the river in moonlight), he moves on without any thanks to his next con, the girl next door. This guy doesn't even try to cover his tracks by targeting a girl a few blocks away. He doesn't seem to care that his previous con will be able to see him in action. Of course, this is a representative situation, not a re-creation of some particular incident in Nasrin's life, but it is certainly universal. Women anywhere can recognize this character type and their own experience of being used by exploitative men. And often, unfortunately, used with their own consent and awareness on some level that they are being exploited.

However, what would make this poem scandalous in Bangladesh is not the man's serial exploitation of women, but the one element in the poem that is treated obliquely, in indirect euphemistic imagery—the swimming and “drenching” in the river, and the fact that the woman speaker takes the initiative to invite the man to this frolic! Such “shameless” forwardness by a woman would be the target of outrage for reactionary conservative Bangladeshi men, and the target of randy imaginings of adolescent Bangladeshi boys, who apparently liked to skim through these poems for the “dirty bits.” How ironic, many of my Bangladeshi informants used to observe, that this poetry could serve to promote not so much greater freedom for women, but more of the same old objectification of women in the sexual fantasies of adolescent boys!

**HLH:** “Noorjahan” reminds me of the story from the gospel of John about the woman taken in adultery, but with twists: the woman herself is the main character, not the male teacher who happens to be passing by; the focus is on her experience, not on the accusation made against her. In the context of Nasrin's poetry, I hear both a reflection of the moral teaching of the gospel narrative, and a meta-reflection on the continued practice by the religious of that against which religions advise, and so on.

How does the echo of Nasrin's own life experience speak to us through such a poem?

**CW:** The poem “Noorjahan” is based, as the notes in the back of the book attest, on an actual case of a young woman being punished, supposedly for adultery, by the local *mullahs* of her district and committing suicide afterwards. I suspect that there was more nuance to the story than the media reported and than Nasrin re-created in the poem—complexities that we will never know. But it was a case that was sufficiently brutal and exceptional to receive coverage in the Bangladesh press, and Nasrin responded with her own outrage in this poem. Several of the women poets I translated, in both West Bengal (India) and Bangladesh, wrote poems in response to other vivid and graphic stories of abuse against women. I translated several of these. These poets (some of whom are journalists who regularly report on such incidents in the course of their professional lives) express their outrage at the brutality visited upon these women, and call for justice in powerful poems of their own. They deplore the self-serving hypocrisy of the so-called guardians of morality (in Bangladesh the right-wing Islamic clerics are the villains) who commit violence prohibited by their own religion's teachings in the name of protecting and honoring that religion!

But in this poem, Nasrin does something rather different: she claims her own victimhood in the victimization of this woman. Is this “me-too-ism,” an egocentric attempt to deflect sympathy from the obvious victim, Noorjahan, and draw the attention to the author herself as sympathetic, but opportunistic, witness? Some of Nasrin’s critics in Bangladesh had this view. Or is the speaker in this poem demanding something much more rigorous of herself: that she feel the blows in her own body, in the same sense that Jesus states that whatsoever his disciples do unto the least of these his brethren (the poor, the downtrodden of the earth), they do unto him? And Nasrin asks us, her readers, in the final lines of two stanzas of the poem, to examine ourselves—do we also feel these blows in our own bodies? Are we, thus, capable of blunt, direct, physical empathy with this suffering woman, the least of our sisters? It is this sort of that makes Nasrin’s sometimes overly didactic poems fresh and surprising—they present new ways to consider old circumstances.

JAKE ADAM YORK

on

## A MURMURATION OF STARLINGS

**H. L. Hix:** The book quotes as its epigraph Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assertion that “No lie can live forever.” Does your poetry treat that epigraph as a truth or as a hope?

**Jake Adam York:** Both.

If you’ll read the book as divided in half on either side of the central poem, in the first half the epigraph is more of a “hope,” in the second it’s “truth,” though the truth’s work isn’t yet done.

**HLH:** The book’s title suggests a connection between a preoccupation with the conditions of speech (lies, truth, hypocrisy, honesty, silencing, etc.) and the starlings that recur throughout the poems. The connection is sometimes left implicit within the poems themselves, and sometimes made explicit, as when “their mouths are full of birds.” How would you talk about that connection?

**JAY:** There's an arc in the collection, whereby the starlings first appear as creatures of violence, negation, fabulation, lie, and then are transformed into creatures of truth, documentation, position and reconciliation: specifically the reconciliation of fact. So yes, in some cases the arc isn't developed within a particular poem but is strung between and through a series of poems, while in other cases, especially in the latter half of the book, the connection is more explicit.

This reflects back on the epigraph, and the broader strategy of non-violent resistance Martin Luther King, Jr. championed and led. The turning point of the core struggle (it's not over yet) seems to me the Children's March in Birmingham in 1963, when the violence that had been used to combat and silence the movement was put on display, on television and in the newspapers, in such a way that this began to work against the violence. The nation began to see, on the proper scale, what was really happening. So, in the book, the starlings first appear and propagate through violence, but then they become the creatures of resistance to the violence: they are transformed, just as speech is transformed through a process of truth and reconciliation that continues.

**HLH:** The "Notes" at the end of *A Murmuration of Starlings* are prefaced with a statement that

the book "is part of an ongoing project to elegize and memorialize the martyrs of the Civil Rights movement." Elegy has a long tradition of secondary purpose. The prefatory note to Milton's "Lycidas," for example, declares that the author "bewails a learned friend," but also "by occasion foretells the ruin of our corrupted clergy." What does your book do "by occasion"?

**JAY:** I don't think my book foretells anything, but I hope it says something about structural or linguistic racism—how the simplest, most seemingly innocuous things (lies, stories, newspaper stories, small birds) can perpetuate (enlarge) systems of abuse and degradation. This is a point most academics might treat as obvious, but I think the broader culture is just now ready for this discussion. There are too many people asking whether racism is over, and the real discussion has barely begun.

LINDA STERN ZISQUIT  
on YONA WALLACH'S

## LET THE WORDS: SELECTED POEMS

**H. L. Hix:** I hear “House Said the House” as simultaneously affirming the importance of, and contesting the transparency of, the Biblical narrative of Adam naming the animals. Would that be one way (among many others) to view Wallach’s larger poetic project?

**Linda Stern Zisquit:** As a secular Israeli who grew up in Israel, Yona Wallach knew the Biblical texts which are taught in Hebrew in every school from grade 1. In this poem she may be reentering that Biblical narrative about Adam naming the animals. I was always moved by the childlike voice that is encountering these things as if for the first time—which is of course Adam’s situation, as the first one to do so. And yes, as a project, she was coining a new language, using the ancient gender-conscious Hebrew in new ways, freeing it from some of its linguistic restrictions by “cross-dressing” and exchanging sexes.

**HLH:** You mention in your introduction that Wallach “combines holiness and shocking sexuality.” How important is the qualifier “shocking”? In other words, is it primarily the shockingness of the sexuality, rather than the sexuality per se, that contributes to the qualities of her work that you note, such as its daringness and its transcendence?

**LSZ:** In terms of the language (Hebrew) and the context (Israeli traditional society and culture), Wallach’s work was shocking. She broke the taboos built around separation of men and women both linguistically and traditionally. In Hebrew you always know who is speaking, but in Wallach’s work there are surprises: the male becomes female; the boundaries are dissolved. Her experiments with language were groundbreaking and controversial—not only because of the sexuality she demonstrates, but also because of her sense of freedom to explore sexual relationships.

**HLH:** Am I stretching things too far to see “Colors Going Out” as another clue to the aims and qualities of her poetry, which seems often to distinguish between (to separate) essences and accidents, substances and attributes?

**LSZ:** Personally I see this as a poem about the end of Wallach’s life, when her keen awareness of colors,

objects, forms was changing because of her body's ailing and her imminent death. Earlier, she had been mesmerized by language with an almost manic quality, a swirl of words, and here she is coming towards a point of stillness—to get to the source, not to be swayed anymore by appearances. She is trying to find something beneath the surface of material objects, which (in a personal way) must have something to do with her approaching death. It is one of a group of poems written at the end of her life at age 41, as she was dying from breast cancer, and which was published posthumously.



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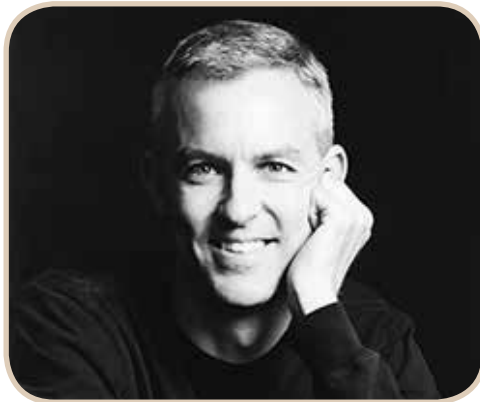
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## AUTHOR BIO



**H. L. Hix** recently collaborated with Jüri Talvet to translate a collection of the poems of the Estonian peasant poet Juhan Liiv, entitled [Snow Drifts, I Sing](#). His own “selected poems” is [First Fire, Then Birds](#).

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