

= POETRY PROJECT NEWSLETTER #271 =



- / \_ WINTER 2023 / \_ -

## THE POETRY PROJECT NEWSLETTER #271

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# Editor's Note

Here's a line I love from a letter that the late, unbeatable Bernadette Mayer (1945-2022) wrote to her sister Rosemary, April 5, 1978. "I seem to be able to really practice [the] full use [of language] and I mean practice as it is a constant situation of still learning and teaching myself, I see this as somehow opposite to the poet who learns by revising and always trying to get it perfect." The appetitive, searching, desirous curiosity that Mayer names here reminds me of the spirit that swept through St. Mark's this past January 1, when a thousand people gathered at the Church for the thirteen hours of the Project's New Year's Day Marathon. The Marathon's tremendous range of syntax, play, sound, and performance seemed to stretch the limits of speech and emotion, and that maximalism rhymes with Mayer's work, which for over fifty years invented new possibilities for thought and language. Several readers invoked her presence, standing on the stage at the front of the Sanctuary where, while director here from 1980-1984, she introduced readers and welcomed the audience to The Poetry Project again and again.

In this winter issue of the *Newsletter*, we remember Mayer, who left us this past November. KB Jones's cover art riffs on an image from *Memory*, Mayer's 1971 multimedia project, while Mayer's friends and loved ones offer their memories of her across the decades. And that's not all: the spring issue we're already at work on—and were, even before she passed—will be a *Festschrift* of sorts dedicated entirely to essays about Mayer's work, collaborations she worked on with other poets, and experiments that take up her challenge to "work your ass off to change the language." So look out for that, too.

In this issue, too, friends of the late D.C. poet Doug Lang remember his singular contributions. Joss Barton and Casey Plett talk with me and each other about "raw and rude" DIY trans publishing against the backdrop of the anti-trans moral panic. Andrew Smyth takes up the "heretoforeuncontemplated languageflux" of Simone White's *or, on being the other woman*. Krystal Languell talks to Anselm Berrigan about baseball poetics, Wo Chan and imogen xtian smith talk to each other about their new books, and Rachel James talks to Morgan Vō about the Cynic philosopher Diogenes and trying to make a lover come until it feels like a chore. Rounding out the issue: poems by Brontez Purnell, Aida Muratoglu, and the Multiverse writers; and reviews of books by Maureen Owen, Hugo García Manríquez, Cat Fitzpatrick, George and Chris Tysh, Barry Schwabsky, Matt Longabucco, River Halen, Mirene Arsanios, Edwin Torres, John Yau and the Joe Brainard show at Tibor de Nagy.

It's such a *chatty* issue, like one of those episodes of *The Nanny* where Fran Drescher's still talking when she leaves the set. That, too, feels aligned with Bernadette, whose published work in its entirety couldn't be squeezed into a single bound volume, even a big one. It'll have to be released in one of those majestic box sets, like Milton, Freud, or the *Marx/Engels Collected Works*. Who's getting on that? Consider this your cue.

— Kay Gabriel

*NOTE: The editors would also like to celebrate the life of Atlanta forest defender Manuel "Tortuguita" Teran, who was murdered by Georgia State Troopers on Wednesday, Jan. 18, in what Kamau Franklin, founder of the racial justice group Community Movement Builders, has called a "political assassination." They spent their time between Atlanta, defending the forest from destruction, and Florida where they helped build housing in low income communities. They were a trained medic, a loving partner, a dear friend, a brave soul, and so much more. In Tort's name, we continue to fight to protect the forest and stop cop city with love, rage, and a commitment to each other's safety and well-being.*

contents

- 1 REMEMBRANCES | Bernadette Mayer (1945–2022)
- 5 REMEMBRANCES | Doug Lang (1941–2022)
- 6 ESSAY | heretoforeuncontemplated languageflux: on Simone White's *or, on being the other woman* by Andrew J. Smyth
- 9 IN CONVERSATION | Wo Chan & imogen xtian smith
- 11 ROUNDTABLE | Raw, Rude, and from the Future—DIY Trans Publishing Today: Joss Barton & Casey Plett, w/ Kay Gabriel
- 13 INTERVIEW | We Meet in a Different Context, but I See that You're Wearing the Uniform: Krystal Languell w/ Anselm Berrigan
- 16 INTERVIEW | "Beaten by a child in plainness of living!": Rachel James w/ Morgan Vö
- 18 POETRY | "tressing voids" by Multiverse: Sid Ghosh, Adam Wolfond, Adjua Gargi Nzinga Greaves, Imane Boukaila, Lauren Russell, Hannah Emerson, JJJJJerome Ellis, Chris Martin
- 22 POETRY | Four Poems by Aida Muratoglu
- 24 POETRY | "Photographs of Paintings" by Brontez Purnell
- 25 REVIEWS | *26 Tears* by George Tysh and Chris Tysh (review by Tyrone Williams), *Commonplace* by Hugo García Manríquez (review by Judah Rubin), *Heroic Dose* by Matt Longabucco (review by erica kaufman), *Dream Rooms* by River Halen (review by Spencer Williams), *let the heart hold down the breakage Or the caregiver's log* by Maureen Owen (review by Cassandra Gillig), *The Autobiography of a Language* by Mirene Arsanios (review by Alisha Mascarenhas), *The Call-Out* by Cat Fitzpatrick (review by Liam O'Brien), *Feelings of And* by Barry Schwabsky (review by Marjorie Welish), *quanundrum [i will be your many angled thing]* by Edwin Torres (review by danilo machado), *Joe Brainard: The Art of the Personal* by John Yau (review by Tyhe Cooper)
- 33 CALENDAR | Spring 2023 Readings & Events

WINTER 2023

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Bernadette Mayer reading at the launch for Stacy Szymaszek's *A Year From Today*, Mar. 3, 2019. Photo by Viktorsha Uliyanova.

## REMEMBRANCES

# Bernadette Mayer (1945–2022)

Anne Waldman

for Bernadette's Bardo

dear you in there,

poetic knowledge taking place in silence?

bright-faced deities, 26 letters experientially to infinity  
& written life, colored inks, illusory shadows  
real evolution where people are reading you  
& yr life circulates in us, poet's vocation  
continuity of life red means "russet in the trees"  
hear you down to phonemes means "love in feral heat"  
of moment, stars, of paradox means "non-teleological"  
composite body on pyre, oneiric zones now only  
urgency of chant, lateral thinking, prophecy  
alchemical torrents in bardo wind tunnel  
balance of anything is love,  
where form is emptiness is "heart sutra" is poem of pieces  
your humble "membrane singer" writing this down  
concordant experience not subject to form,  
but de-colonizing mind in the seismic channel  
where else we could ever be your eyes have blazed.

— 12/25/2022

Lee Ann Brown

Poetry Changes the World like the  
Life Force of an Amaryllis

for Bernadette Mayer

One of the many questions Bernadette returns to again and again in her life and work, in her works and days, in late night phone calls is: "Can poetry change the world?"

One way Bernadette changes the world is by making clear roadmaps to her own discoveries in the laboratory of poetry and language. Her list of experiments, written with the students she taught at The Poetry Project, offers an invitation to magnify the arcing fields of reading, thinking and writing together for anyone who wants to try their hand at poetry or its expansions. (Over half of my first book *Polyverse* is in direct response to these Experiments.)

I hear her saying in my mind: "Read the Steins! Einstein, Wittgenstein, and Gertrude Stein." This triumvirate of names mirrors her practice of always reading science, philosophy, literature, while also absorbing pop culture. When she couldn't read herself when she was recovering from her cerebral hemorrhage in the mid 90s, friends gathered around to read classics aloud in a circle, with always a break in the middle to watch *The Simpsons*.

I open at random to a line from "Geology Sky of Geology Night" and find:

"I'm in love with the great attractor, my dog hector."

One of the biggest events of the week for Bernadette was the advent of the arrival of the Tuesday edition of *The New York Times* because of the Science section. Bernadette was the first

poet who impressed upon me that a poet needs to study all things, all disciplines, beginning with the names of the plants, stars and planets, the natural world, the multiverse. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* says the "Great Attractor" is "a proposed concentration of mass that influences the movement of many galaxies including the Milky Way and neighboring galaxies."

And her dear dog Hector suggests her love of ancient Greek and Latin poetry.

The wonderful caesural comma, those wonderful "or" sounds!

Bernadette is one of the great loves of my life.

She is my, and our, Great Attractor.

We met in the Summer of 1985 after I read *Midwinter Day* by way of C.D. Wright's course on the long poem, so during my year off between Junior and Senior years of college I made a pilgrimage to Naropa to find Bernadette. She had just turned 40 that May 12th, and she was traveling with her 8 year old daughter Sophia. I was 21.

I keep hearing Emily Dickinson's "After great pain, a formal feeling comes—." She certainly had her share of great pain, and needed to invent large and expansive forms to live. And I keep returning to the "forms" of collaboration where we simply wrote together every other line, being present with each other and with the words arising.

"Formal" as in when I half proudly, half shyly showed her some writing I had done, Bernadette said, "Great, now you need to find a form." Over the years with her, I've grown into fully understanding the nature of generative form, and the importance of breaking forms open so that the pleasurable music of thinking can fold down out of the wall. She continues to help me go into and increase interior space and make it exterior.

Bernadette made deeply personal and intellectual poetry of handmade mutual aid, of time and attention as large as any reacher of the cosmos, a culture worker of deepest love. She created an intergenerational transmission and recognized others as equal despite being on different points in their trajectory.

Can poetry change the world?

Yes, from the bottom up, transforming the materials swirling around us. Yes, like the life force of one of her favorite flowers, the amaryllis which blooms outrageously in December given time and space erupting like the lava flow from the Canary Island volcanoes she so loved to watch on CNN during the last year of her life. Like the Antarctic explorer narratives that gave her material to write some of her most personal and exploratory works.

I do especially send love to Bernadette's family: Marie, Sophia, and Max Warsh, Alyssa Gorelick, her beloved granddaughters, Veera and Zola, and her devoted partner Philip Good and thank them for sharing her with all of us and taking care of her so lovingly, and I send wishes for our continuing journeys together.

Here is a phrase from a recent Laynie Browne letter to me that I think sums up what I am trying to say about Bernadette, and

can bear to end with (for now):

"So what will we say to amplify her work for the world now and later. The first thing that comes to mind is love. Not simply, because love is never simple and yet I think I can say clearly now that love is always the impetus even when irreverent or angry or ludicrous what is underneath is always love and reaction that when it is not there, when humans ignore our world or ignore the presence of another person as human, as important, what happens in the poems is a complaint which urges a return to love."

In Gratitude and Love,

Lee Ann Brown

Clark and Susan Coolidge

Memories of Bernadette

The first time Clark and I met Bernadette Mayer was some time in 1969. She and Clark had corresponded before that, then Bernadette drove to CA with Ed Bowes in his sports car. I had been out on errands with our infant daughter Celia and had climbed the stairs to our third floor flat with her to find Clark in conversation with this beautiful young woman at our kitchen table!

In 1970 we moved to Hancock, MA, in the Berkshires. Bernadette and Ed visited us there, and Ed videoed Clark and Bernadette reading from Gertrude Stein's work in various spots in our house. Celia, now about 3 or 4, was entertained by this "hide and seek"! That evening, we watched the results on a TV on our dining table. At one point, the camera was on, playing the results on the screen, so Celia could watch herself. So much fun!

On another occasion, Bernadette and Ed stayed at the house while we were away. It was summertime, and B kept the doors open (our house had all sealed windows, full A/C and little vents in each room to allow fresh air. We later added openable windows in the previously windowless bathrooms and laundry room, plus next to the front door, to allow more air and light). But with the doors open, birds flew in. Turns out Ed was afraid of birds. So B fashioned a net from a mesh shopping bag and a broom handle to catch the birds, a challenge as our living room had 11-foot ceilings.

Later that decade, Bernadette was in Worthington, MA, living with Lewis Warsh, whom she married at that house. At the wedding (in November?), we discovered Jack Daniels went very well with wedding cake! Lewis's family including his niece Rose (?) was there, plus Celia, and Bill and Beverly Corbett's daughters, Marnie and Arden. The girls had a fine time clamoring in the woods, wearing their "wedding finery"!

Bernadette had created a cookbook for Lewis to use so he could help with meals after the birth of Marie. Later, at Christmas time, Bernadette (or Lewis?) called in great distress. The furnace had "died" and there was no heat. Clark and his father (Clark's parents were visiting at the time) went off in our VW bus to "rescue" everyone, bringing the trio (plus perhaps Peggy DeCoursey) back to our place, where we found beds for every-

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one. It was a high point for Arlan, Clark's father, rescuing this young family right at Christmas.

Later, B and L moved to Lenox, much closer to us. Clark visited them quite regularly, and for a time drove them to their appointments with a homeopathic doc over in NY. After that, the pair bought a not-very-reliable automobile, which gave them some independence. Sophia was born in Lenox.

Of course, we have memories of Bernadette at Naropa in Boulder, CO, and of various poetry readings there, in the Berkshires, in Maine, and in NYC. The family moved to Henniker, NH for a time before returning to New York, when B ran the Poetry Project.

Clark's mother Sylvia really connected with Bernadette. For a time, they wrote back and forth, enjoying a shared love of diagramming sentences! Later Sylvia helped Bernadette with her "Phil" project [published in *Poetry State Forest* as "The Phil-Words"]. Sylvia was a Classics major at Radcliffe in the 1920's and she loved helping with all the Phils.

After Bernadette and Philip Good moved to East Nassau, NY, we visited once while on a trip east, having by that time returned to California. I remember we shopped for items to add to a picnic lunch. We were entertained by a wine called "Irony." Bernadette got a kick out of asking someone to "pass the Irony."

Over the last decades, Clark and Bernadette lost touch, discontinuing their correspondence years ago. After Bernadette's diagnosis, we were finally able to visit her and Phil last September. It was a lovely chance to connect once again. Clark was struck by Bernadette's beauty; the decades seemed to have melted away and she reminded Clark of her younger self. The two had their heads together for close to two hours while Phil, Max, who was visiting, and I sat nearby, chatting. Max and Phil were very attentive, letting us know when Bernadette needed to return to bed, and we took our leave.

1/14/2023

## Laynie Browne

When I had the good fortune of meeting Bernadette Mayer in the early 90s in NYC, I was already a devoted reader of her work. An instant recognition happened in reading—which was confirmed exponentially upon meeting—that I had found the writer who would make everything possible.

Her work generates a powerfully contagious and collaborative ethos. You can find it in her legendary writing experiments, throughout her brilliant, boisterous poems—simultaneously erotic and irreverent, physical and metaphysical—and even in her titles, like *Memory*, *Ethics of Sleep*, and *Poetry State Forest*—which suggest we might all do well to look again, collectively, at anything we think we know.

Bernadette's capacity to welcome the unknown, every aspiring poet, her voracious interest in everyone and everything—is tremendously inspiring. From her I learned that letters have colors, that Troy, NY is full of Hells, that all is fascination: the brain, the garden, the world of dreams, and that the work of the quotidian is equal to, or may exceed the appeal of extroverted outer lives.

Always a generous correspondent, her letters, typed on goldenrod paper, stitched distances between meetings and followed different trajectories than phone calls. In one, I asked Bernadette if she could tell me about a method of composition in which she'd said that her writing was "already written":

"when I say something has been written already & i just trace it, that's how it seems. it's already in my mind, already done. the way we use the word 'done' is misleading. As we know things don't have a beginning, middle or end. all i'm saying is the whole thing's there in my mind, it's already there, even though it can't be seen (?)"

We, the lucky readers of her work, can return to her tracery anew, since—thanks to Bernadette—we see. She may remain "unseen"—but I highly doubt it. I am counting on ethereal appearances at St. Mark's, as she was known to see in her days as director, as well as cameos in dreams, and her gaze across every page I read and write—meaning to say that those who love Bernadette might agree—that the word "done" is misleading, and that there is no "beginning, middle or end" to those poems and those lives which encourage the most intimate and profound investigations, our own tracery of the unseen.

## CAConrad

Dear Bernadette, the first time we met, I told you "It Moves Across" was one of my favorite poems by anyone. You asked me why I liked it, which I did not expect. I was so full of shit back then, but I loved that poem and wanted to make a good impression on you, so I said, "You take me to a place I like to inhabit. It's a place I never knew existed until I read that poem of yours." You offered me a glass of wine, and I really liked drinking that glass of wine with you. Then, just like that, you opened my copy of your book and read "It Moves Across" to my absolute delight!

Years later, after you learned that I was playing the lottery so I could build The Poetry Hotel for poor poets, you would ask, "Hey, CA! When are you going to win the lottery so I can move into The Poetry Hotel!?" Now that I'm older, I realize what a pain in the ass being the landlord of poets would be! If I ever do open The Poetry Hotel, I promise you, Bernadette, that a framed copy of "It Moves Across" will greet everyone who enters. And we will always keep a seat for you at the table. Much love to you, and I hope to know you again in the next life!

## Peter Gizzi

### Bernadette Mayer Forever

I loved Bernadette Mayer, loved all the times I got to spend with her, and often with Phil, and with one or all of her children, Marie, Max, and Sophie. They threw the very best midsummer cookouts every year. Such good times with everyone present, including many years back, my brothers, Michael and Tom. The vibe was open and fun. My favorite thing was to make her laugh. She had an unforgettable laugh. It was infectious and mirthfully conspiratorial. I first heard Bernadette's laugh in the mid-80s at 172 East 4<sup>th</sup> St. I was editing the journal *o•blek* and very much wanted to publish her. During one of my earliest conversations with her, or maybe it was even our first, she asked me what losing my father at 12 meant to me, or what it was to me in my life. I instantly liked her. It was, finally, a real question, intense but also, thankfully, real. I knew parts of her story from her work and that she had experienced hard losses and was orphaned as a young teen. We both hated the word "trauma," and agreed loss at an early age allowed for a premature introduction to the sublime. We bonded over that. Also, over the fact I grew up near Lenox, MA (where she wrote some of her major works) and, like her, was a deep fan of Hawthorne and Melville. I could hear how her intelligent and sympathetic love of their work had affected her phenomenal syntax, which, I always felt, performs a radical transcendental porousness of personhood. Like the transcendentalists, she could find a unity in all things and a unity beyond conventional logic. In her epic works she built a world and developed an inspired grammar and syntax to connect "everything," and yet the scale was always remarkably human. For me, to build the capacious human emotional reality manifest in these works, the urgency to connect "everything," to create a continuous syntactical present, is a durable magic, and perhaps, in part, comes from early loss and the native understanding of irrevocability. Her work is heroic to me. She has delivered a libertine vision of the home world, and it's deep, filled with mundanity, children, landlords, incident reports, friends, laundry, bills, food, and lovers. Some of her books are poetry and some are prose, some run to hundreds of pages, and some have been art installations. Her poetry is untamed, courageous, word-loving, thought-bending, anarchic, scientific, plaintive, funny, generous, honest, and fearless. She wrote in so many registers and forms. I love her work in all its moods just as much as I loved her.

1/1/23

## Brenda Coultas

### B.M.

On her summer writing desk is a blue electric typewriter (the brand is Coronet), yellow paper scrolled inside the carriage, opened letters, a short stack of books, including one by

Dashiell Hammett, and four large bird feathers, probably from the wild turkeys with their chicks who paraded in the pasture all fall.

She thought it was hilarious that her initials were B.M.

I like to imagine that if I had gone to high school with Bernadette like Peggy and Grace did, I could have been mentioned in her long works like *Studying Hunger*, *Memory*, and *Utopia*.

When I saw Grace this fall, we drank white wine and talked. She's got a great story to tell me about Bernadette (heavily pregnant with Marie) and Lewis's wedding and an uptight priest.

Instinct tells me there is a biographer(s) for Bernadette already born.

Sometimes I cross reference the friends and lovers in her work. There could be five or more books open on my table.

On the day she came home from the hospital, Marie, Phil, and I were sitting with her on the porch when a box of the newly published *The Letters of Rosemary and Bernadette Mayer, 1976-1980* arrived.

Bernadette was willing to drive with Phil, 1600 miles in a Jeep in July heat, to my wedding, even though she disapproved of marriage.

Bernadette and Phil spent the night in our apartment and I had the memoir *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City* by Nick Flynn next to the bed. She got a kick out of that and kept calling NYC "Suck City."

"Are you okay?" And right after I said it, saw a look pass over her face, and I said, "Thank you Bernadette for not pointing out how stupid that question was." She could have crushed me because of course, nothing was okay.

During the pandemic, we arranged East Village dropoffs to Phil and Bernadette in parking lots around the Hudson Valley in 3-degree weather: Venieros' Italian cheesecake, Yonah Schimmel's Knishes, and Russ & Daughters' delicacies.

She mailed me an envelope of broken Easter egg shells, trolling me after I wrote in a poem that "I know Bernadette is alive because she leaves egg shells on her desk."

In November, we watched *Northern Exposure*, an '80s tv show set in Alaska, on video tape. In December, we watched *Time After Time*, a movie about H.G. Wells in his time machine pursuing Jack the Ripper to then-'80s San Francisco.

A sonnet by Bernadette and Phil, typed on yellow paper and signed with a golden thumbprint.

When the nurse asked about pain, Bernadette said, “It’s complicated.”

My Turtle Island edition of *Midwinter Day*: the spine cracked from two decades of readings. The back cover fell off this December 21 at the marathon reading at Torn Page Parlor.

It’s signed, and the B and M are merged and look to me like an elaborate garden gate.

## Sarah Steadman

In the raspberry house there’s no money or landlords, shallots are the size of babies, and it’s warm and red as an Amaryllis. You love food better than anybody—fruit pizza, pike quenelles, and sorrel soup. Pound cake with one whole pound of everything. There’s a lot of creeks you love and people, as real as if they were your children or lovers. Every day I say in my head, “Be strong Bernadette,” because you are so good at laughing. You look very fine in your blue beret, slurping an oyster and joking at the weather. So many days fantasizing about what we want for dinner. You love leeks, you’re so picky. You’re the most alive dead person Bernadette, I love you. In all those blue herons, where two creeks meet, showing us nature and moss *until there is no more panic at the knowledge of our own real existence*. Send the iguana down the river, the shoe in the backyard, the blue mushrooms were incredible. Sitting on the front porch or the back porch, looking at the birds—Bernadette showed me lots of poems. A hummingbird moth or a nest in the rafters, a thunderstorm, or a bird in the chimney, that’s a significant event! Everything normal and joyful, with aura and a big joke. Bernadette hates astrology. When she eats oysters, she throws the shells in the middens in the backyard. Every Tuesday she reads the science paper. She will make you feel like you are a real poet. Kind of like Brook Farm, making fun of Nathaniel Hawthorne, or living in a horny phalanx, your poems of love for everything you see and what’s been and you still see. Bernadette with a real good belief in the earth, “steadfast as any farmer and fixed as the stars.”

## Erica Dawn Lyle

When Phil told us the news on the night Bernadette died, Sarah and I held each other and cried and then we told stories about Bernadette to try to cheer ourselves up.

Here is one of my favorites:

Sometime around her birthday last May, Bernadette and I were in her backyard where we usually visited, just sitting around and smiling and watching the birds. It was a glorious late spring day in the Poetry State Forest, and the cardinals were going nuts in the bird feeder. A hummingbird even came through.

We fell silent, watching, for some time, and then Bernadette spoke.

Bernadette: Do you want to play a game?

Me: OK, sure! What are the rules?

Bernadette: The rules are that we have always lived in this yard and there is no other world outside of it anywhere. This yard and what is in it is all there is anywhere. The whole universe is just what we see here.

Me: OK, let’s play!

(There is a long silence during which we both start kind of silently giggling.)

Bernadette: (in an exaggeratedly friendly voice) Oh, hello! Here we are in the yard! It’s really nice to meet you. What do you do for a living?

Me: Well, I am actually a famous rapper. These animals you see here are some of my fans and they have gathered today in hopes that I will perform for them later. But, tell me, what do YOU do?

Bernadette: Nothing! I don’t do anything! I am one of those awful layabouts that everyone always gets so mad at because we just sit around all day. I DON’T EVER DO ANYTHING AT ALL! ALL I DO IS SIT HERE!!!

Oh, Bernadette, my Taurus queen, who so loved beer and oysters and hated the long cold winter, thank you for all you gave us! You lived your life so you didn’t have to do anything you didn’t feel like doing, and it worked, the world actually just came to you, to this backyard, within which you found the entire universe, and it’s the funniest thing, now you’re gone, and I just see you everywhere.

## Katy Bohinc

Bernadette, you space monkey! You were a Taurus, so it had to be of the earth or it was not for you. But also you were always of outer space. Everyone else was in the mundanity and you were, I remember, recruiting my help on how to design a thin, impermeable yet breathable (preferably metallic) jumpsuit to shield you from the newly invaded ticks (because you did not want Lyme disease) so you could still hike Poetry State Forest. These were the important questions.

You were always saying, “Did you ever think of that?” and you would smile and laugh at the absurdity of what you were saying, because of course, none of us had thought of it. Because it was from outer space.

And you would tell a little story and then lean in, give the punchline, smile and say, “Don’t you think that’s weird!?” followed by just the appropriate amount of earth-witch cackle. If others got to laughing, you would laugh more, just to keep us at it until our sides ached from giggles and bliss.

Your endless joy at the absurdity of the world around us, boundless curiosity, and eternal

childish awe—alongside a ruthless intellect—made you a space monkey. I will forever be grateful to have enjoyed your interstellar with you. Some of us have days, have moments of space monkey; you made it a constant, everyday jubilee, and goddess bless, shared it with us. You made it an art. Thank you, forever.

## Greg Masters

Bernadette was a healer, still is.

## Stacy Szymaszek

### The Real Talk

*Phone call between me & Bernadette Mayer in advance of our March 9, 2019 public talk at Poet’s House on the long poem. She was at her home in East Nassau, NY and I was in a rental in Missoula, MT where I was a visiting writer. These are the parts of our conversation I had the presence of mind to write down.*

9:00 am - 9:50 am 2/11/19

B: Do you miss the job?

S: No, did you?

B: Not for a second.

S: You wrote in one of your work journals that, working at The Poetry Project, one becomes necessarily superficial.

B: Well that’s an understatement...

B: When I was the director [name redacted] came to the office and put his arm down on my desk and just couldn’t understand how a woman could run the Project. I don’t talk about these things for obvious reasons.

B: I think the Project should get rid of all the men.

S: Like no men should work there or...

B: Any involvement of any kind.

B: I probably can’t say this but I was told I should fuck Andrew Young to get money for The Poetry Project. Is he still around?

S: Who is he?

B: He was a politician.

S: I think you can tell this story. To think fucking a politician for poetry money would work... it sounds absurd!

B: I thought okay, if he’s the most beautiful person I’ve ever seen I’d consider it—but no.

B: *Illuminations* is a long poem, I just thought of that. We should at least agree on what a long poem is.

S: For me it has always meant a book-length poem.

B: Isn’t that an epic?

B: Poe said a long poem is written in one sitting. He was a notoriously impatient guy.

S: So, a 2-page poem written in 1 sitting is a long poem? I can agree to that. I think I already know you’re not into editing.

B: No, I’m against it. You can remove large sections, or just throw it away... or read it backwards.

S: Oh yah, I heard you wanted to ask me about Gummy Bears. Do you eat them?

B: No, well I just got some, you chew 2 and they are supposed to put you to sleep, but they don’t work. We could talk about the contents of food. Keep it real low level. There is a chemical in Cheez-Its that can be deathly.

S: You eat a lot of Cheez-Its?

B: Grace and I eat them in the car. We can talk about asparagus.

S: Is there something bad in it?

B: No, I love it.

S: Me too.

B: We can talk about how much we like it.

S: So I fear that they will expect us to maybe be more academic than we are?

B: We’ll use the word “fractal.” As long as you use that word you’re academic.

S: Phil told me he ordered my book.

B: Yes, do you know the Cage book *A Year From Monday*?

S: Yes, I stole it.

B: In the book do you ask people to meet you a year from today?

S: No. When I check books out of the UM library they always say, “These are due a year from today,” so I get to hear people say these words back to me.

B: We could wear our clothes upside down.

S: Oh, what are you wearing?

B: Right now?

S: [bursts into laughter] No, I’m already thinking about outfits for the event... OH you cut your braids off recently, why?

B: They became an affectation. I went to the local hair cutting place. And it’s called Sheer Perfection. I wanted to donate it for wigs but they told me no one wants grey hair.

B: Will there be a microphone?

S: Yes.

B: We could just laugh into the mics. It’s very therapeutic.

S: I like that.

B: Or we could weave. Do you crochet?

S: No, I don’t do any crafts like that.

B: I could teach you and we could crochet.

S: Yes, and maybe just say a thing or 2, very intermittent and casual.

B: I’ll say “You know Stacy, I was just thinking, etc...”

or “The long poem is...”

S: Yes. Well we’ve basically just had the talk.

B: Why do we have to do it again? Oh yah, the money.

## Laura Henriksen

The first Bernadette Mayer Feminist Reading Group that I was involved with was in the fall of 2017. Simone White, who was curating the workshops and Wednesday Night Reading Series at the Project, asked if I would like to facilitate a reading group. I had never done anything like that, and as I agreed to Simone’s invitation, I felt both honored and intimidated. I didn’t have to think hard to know that I wanted to focus on Bernadette’s writing,

even though my relationship to her work at that time was more as something storied, a foundational part of the community I belonged to, and not as something that I had read extensively. In fact, when I had tried to read *The Desires of Mothers to Please Others in Letters* in college (at the suggestion of my professor, Em Card), I found it overwhelming. I had never experienced such abundance, or been offered such expansive permission, until I encountered these poems that push in order to make room for everything. It took me some years to find my way back.

Reading Bernadette's work, both in that first reading group and in all the various formations and arrangements in which I've read her poems since then, has helped me to understand the sociality of poetry in ways that have changed how I read and how I think and how I write, and also how I attempt to build community, still working at the Project all these years later. I feel all that when I read her poems by myself, too. We called the first group "Could I Get Them To Be Me?" after something Bernadette had said at Naropa in 1978 about *Memory*. She was commenting on the invitation she was making with the piece, or the question she was asking, about what it would take to authentically share an experience, what it would mean if a self or a consciousness could be opened up in a way that allowed it to be someone else's self or consciousness for a moment. It's exciting to me because that transmission feels simultaneously exceptional, radical, while also acting as a reminder that this sort of porousness is happening in different ways all the time, we are always transforming and being transformed through our interactions with each other. I feel so grateful to be part of a community so filled with people who have passed through the portal Bernadette opened with her work, who have been transformed by being her, being with her.

## Barbara Epler

Back in the 1990s, one day on a subway ride my friend Erik Rieselbach shared that marvelous sonnet ending "Whaddya mean perforce? / Army or navy or marines?" (in *o•blēk*). I loved it.

Over the years, I had suggested several poets to James Laughlin (who guarded the New Directions poetry list like a tiger), none of whom had interested him. I tried again, and he said Yes: "I admire her Catullus translations."

It was Bernadette's erudition—profound, eclectic, chewy, and deep—that opened the door to her many ND books.

And for me Bernadette opened vistas. I'd never known anyone so unconventional. Growing to sense how much her freedom and her genius fed one another has been a joy.

I feel so lucky to have made such a friend and to know her wonderful family. We're so proud

to publish her. (I can't say I edited Bernadette, who, in a last hurrah, made smithereens of my *Milkweed* structure, availing herself of the floor for a fresh organization.)

I will so much miss her wit, her surprises, her letters (which looked as if her typewriter were part shotgun), her graveyard cackle, her huge heart. And if anyone gets flights of angels singing her to her rest, it's our sweet prince Bernadette.

## Annabel Lee

Oh the laughter. Her enthusiastic listening. Poets felt safe with her. Dithering condoned. To write about Bernadette Mayer, her life, her work, her influence, is to write something about my life, the work, the influence on my work and life, the work being writing, motherhood, keeping house, publishing, observation. When we met I'd lived on a wooden sailboat with no engine for a year, had piles of journals filled with spewings and dreams, was commuting to study poetry at Sarah Lawrence, was superintendent of my building on East 10<sup>th</sup> Street, had apprenticed as an offset printer. She showed me how, how to pick out words with tweezers, how to be in community, what to do with what I see, have seen, would later see, dreamed. In a 1979 dream: *sitting on the grass. Bernadette begins to ask me intimate questions drinking beer, and where I'll be in July. I blurt out "France," she gulps and understands in her own way.* St. Mark's Church, Worthington, Lake Buel (a childhood place for me), Lenox, Red Rock, East Nassau, places. In Lenox I adored those little girls Marie and Sophie (whom I called Sophia Peabody after Hawthorne's wife). It is sad to transition to visits with Bernadette beyond the veil of this living life. Max, Sophie, Marie and Phil help.

## Don Yorty

### In the Honest Here and Now: Being with Bernadette Mayer

Poetry State Forest is a strip of land with trees that Bernadette Mayer and Philip Good own between their home and a creek. It's a good place to walk and you can read in the green chair there in any season. At one end of Poetry State Forest, where two creeks intersect, it is deep enough to swim, and in the summer the perfect place to sun and rest. Bernadette was a city girl who moved to the country, and I was a country boy who moved to the city, and at the intersection of those two creeks, we settled into our surroundings where the unexpected often happens when you're watching what's all around. Suddenly there was a kingfisher, or a heron, jewelweed and cardinal flowers. We talked of favorite authors, Catullus, Whitman, Hawthorne, intimate as lovers.

When it was time to swim, to get to the deep part, you had to go down a slippery slope of stones that could hurt you if you slipped and fell. Bernadette simply slid on her bottom, picking up large stones that hindered her path,

and dropping them by her side into the rushing current. After her stroke, in the late 90s, doctors gave her the terrible news that it was likely she would never read or walk or talk again, but Bernadette listened to none of them. Though she could no longer write by hand, she could type, and after she moved upstate, closer to nature, her love of language with the language in her, continued to observe and report, often in shorter poems, the honest here and now. I remember once at the creek when I'd safely gotten up to my waist and was about to swim, I turned around and said, "It's so beautiful, I think we're in Eden." "We are. I can see a snake," Bernadette said, pointing to it peeking from the rocks, spreading out her arms, gliding by my side.

## Peggy DeCoursey

Bernadette and I exchanged letters for more than sixty years, back when a first-class stamp cost six cents. When I was in St. Louis or Los Angeles and she was in New York, when I was in New York and she was in New Hampshire or the Berkshires, wherever we were we corresponded. We exchanged trash book recommendations, gossip, job complaints, updates on her children, thank you's, poems in progress, recipes, plans and reminiscences. There was always more to say, recording dailyness.

For the last several years, her letters usually came in large, square-ish, almost neon-yellow envelopes, often decorated with stickers—dinosaurs, butterflies, bats, basketballs, meerkats. They sometimes contained dried flowers, seeds, menus, poems, photographs or newspaper clippings. One arrived with a "Postage due: 49 cents" notice, but it was delivered anyway. Those envelopes were easy to spot in my mail, and I saved them to open last.

On a visit to Buffalo in 2011, she wrote that the chef baked her name into the cornbread.

From Pensacola in 2004, she told about dreams and turducken, along with a recipe for vegetable broth. The stamp cost 37 cents, and featured a reticulate collared lizard.

In 1992, pre-stroke and still handwritten, Max seemed to have an earring stuck in his earlobe.

There's a birthday letter: I like Peggy better than creamed spinach...I like Peggy better than sky blue pink skirts.

She watches her neighbor bale hay, and Douglas Rothschild helps Phil paint the roof.

I wish she had included more details when she wrote, "For my trash book, I'm reading the story of a Colombian woman 'brought up' by monkeys."

Two subjects recur, especially after Bernadette and Phil moved to the country. She recorded weather—often with disfavor at its extremes, the skyscape and the current leaves and flowers and incipient blossomings. (*Incipient* was a

favorite word, I noticed as I reread.). The other dominant topic was food. What else to expect from a Scrabble player who felt all food words earned double points? Oysters, raspberries, asparagus, potatoes, soups and pies...

When we were in the same city, we spent a lot of time on the phone, often in the middle of the night. Those calls were immediate, and important to us, but the letters seem to offer freedom to wander, and to speculate. More wordplay, more space, more flirting with language.

I have no idea what I ever wrote back, but it doesn't much matter. The letters exchanged news and ideas, but mostly they were a way of saying I'm thinking about you.

It's cool and cloudy tonight, and there's an amaryllis flowering on the table, next to a bowl of clementines.

## REMEMBRANCES

# Doug Lang (1941–2022)

Phyllis Rosenzweig

Doug Lang, brilliant poet, mentor and beloved friend to many, died on November 22, 2022, at an assisted living residence in Silver Spring, Maryland, where he had lived for the last few years.

Born in Swansea, Wales, and a resident of Washington, D.C. since 1973, Doug never lost his endearing Welsh accent or old-world charm, graciousness, and kindness. He was the glue that held together a closely knit community of writers in D.C. and connected them with the larger writing community. As the organizer of the renowned reading series at Folio Books from 1976 to 1978, he brought together nationally and internationally esteemed writers from D.C. and beyond, including Bruce Andrews, Charles Bernstein, Ted Berrigan, Tina Darragh, Lyn Hejinian, Susan Howe, Peter Inman, Alice Notley, Tom Raworth, Leslie Scalapino, Ron Silliman, Diane Ward, and Terence Winch, among many others.

He created a community, as well, at the Corcoran School of Art + Design, where he taught from 1976 to 2013. Devoted to his students, as to his friends and colleagues, he celebrated their creative potential and made writing, their writing, seem important.

Some may know of Doug's writing through informal channels, such as personal correspondence, gifts and readings—including his reading at The Poetry Project with Ron Silliman on November 2, 2011. Doug was notoriously and frustratingly reticent about publishing his own work but among his admittedly rare and hard-to-find publications are: *Hot Shot* (Jawbone, 1977), *Magic Fire Chevrolet* (Titanic, 1988), *dérangé* (Primary Writing, 2013) and *Epistrophe* (dry imager, 2020). *In the Works*, the first in a series of several planned anthologies of his work, has just been published by Edge Books. A selection of his readings, and an interview by Terence Winch are available at Penn Sound. His papers are housed at Burns Library, Boston College.

Rod Smith

They say friendships are defining. They give our lives meaning, that's the thing. Meaning a kind of Langing. Doug everywhere for us, *for* us. The us here refers to the D.C. poets, his students, his long-term girlfriend Sandra, and pretty much anyone that knew him. It's intense to have had such a friend, whose way in the world helped so much. For Doug, being and being a *poet* were the same thing. Not that he would ever say that.

I have a poster for a reading at the Corcoran School of Art + Design where he taught writing and much else for some 36 years. Screen-printed by his longtime colleague, the poet Casey Smith, the poster includes a few seemingly casual elements—in the upper left is a visual poem by Tom Raworth which consists of the letters LANG superimposed on one another. To the right in block letters, POETRY, in the center left, "Doug Lang & Students, May 1, 6–8 pm Corcoran Auditorium," and in the lower right, the logo for his hometown football club Swansea City AFC. The Swans. Casual and beautiful, like Doug. As they say in Swansea and we now say here, Up the Swans!

He would show up at readings and hand me 20 or 30 mix CDs he had made with titles like Zana, Mesner's, Xquenda, and Jogo. This happened several times. He organized his music at

home chronologically and his mixes tended to be likewise. Jazz, Folk, Blues, Calypso, Rock, etc. of all eras. His readings were always a big event, nobody wanted to miss Doug. He'd read sonnet after sonnet or whatever he'd been up to in his terrific Welsh-accented, gravelly voice with dedications to D.C. poets & Corcoran friends and we'd laugh. Laughter and respect and enthusiasm for the creative were the main things this man communicated in his work and in his life. It was beautiful. Thanks Doug, thanks and good wishes, always.

Terence Winch

My very dear friend Doug Lang, brilliant poet and beloved teacher, passed away at around 11:00 p.m. on Tuesday, 22 November, 2022, in his apartment at Springvale Terrace, the assisted living building in downtown Silver Spring, Maryland, where he had been a resident for the last five years. His health had taken a turn for the worse in the past month, and his legendary resilience failed him this time around.

Doug Lang was born in Swansea, Wales, on 11 April, 1941. His first years were spent as WWII was raging. He had one sibling, his sister Synde, who was about four years younger than Doug. The two were very close, and Synde's death in 2013 in England affected Doug deeply. The two were raised by their mother under the harshest circumstances. There was often little to eat and, during one particularly rough time, Doug had to miss school for several weeks for want of a pair of shoes.

Doug received a basic education in England, but one of the most remarkable aspects of his biography is the extent to which he educated himself. He was known for his voracious appetite for learning and for his nimble and penetrating intellect. He fell in love with books, movies, and music when he was a boy, and wound up becoming incredibly knowledgeable in these areas and others.

After marrying American poet Andrea Wyatt in London, Doug settled in the US in 1973. His appealing personality and genial temperament gained him a wide circle of friends, most of whom were deeply impressed by the extent of his knowledge of fiction, poetry, film, music (especially jazz and rock 'n' roll), and the visual arts. He had an encyclopedic mind and photographic memory.

When the Corcoran School of Art in D.C. was looking for a new writing teacher in 1976, Doug was a natural choice. He had taught at an art school on a Greek island in the late '60s and had a natural gift for teaching. The Corcoran was also looking for a practicing artist, and Doug had already published two novels by the early '70s. He was also known as a catalyst on the Washington poetry scene; an accomplished poet himself, he also ran a nationally celebrated poetry reading series in D.C. at Folio Books in Dupont Circle, attracting many of the leading poets of the day, who were usually paired with a local poet.

The Corcoran hired him, and Doug stayed for the next 37 years, becoming the most loved and respected member of the Corcoran faculty. His colleagues and his thousands of former students felt a tremendous debt to Professor Lang for his prodigious ability as a teacher and his generosity of spirit in all his interactions. In the literary world, he was known as a poet of fierce linguistic energy and technical skill. To his friends, he

is an irreplaceable man of wondrous talent. A new edition of Doug's selected poems, *In the Works*, is slated for imminent publication by D.C.'s Edge Books.

Doug Lang is survived by his close personal friend Sandra Rottmann, several nieces, nephews, and grand nieces and nephews in the UK, and by his many devoted friends and fellow writers. A memorial event, in conjunction with the publication of Doug's new book, is planned for early 2023.

I talked with Doug every day on the phone & visited him once a week. Even while struggling with short-term memory loss, he remained the best of company—wise, funny, deeply knowledgeable, unpretentious, and charismatic. It's a much more barren world with him not in it.



Doug Lang. Photo by Sandra Rottman.

# heretoforeuncontemplated languageflux

on Simone White's *or, on being the other woman*

Andrew J. Smyth

[Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are from *or, on being the other woman*.]

Or is a conjunction. It functions as a signifier of equivalence or substitution, renders the approximate, and cues syntactical division. In Simone White's book *or, on being the other woman*, the word "or" continually replenishes a dumbfounding heuristic field of selectivity. It becomes a propositional hinge or caesura, which brings forth alternatives and modulations, a compositional reflex by which we are "sensitized to beauty in iterations of being in stead."

This is but one of many singular textual devices in the poet's repertoire of inflection. Consider the formal jaggedness of the text, its orthographic mischief, wild parentheticals, rogue punctuation, and "prepositional weirdness." Weirdness itself considered as a black aesthetic category, the sexual and racial contours of being weird, with their attendant history of improper conjugal and financial arrangements. What is "the cost of being strange" in this fickle life, how is it to be paid, and by whom?

In what follows I record one passage through the text, recognizing in advance that there are many others, as the book's sites of address are manifold and lend themselves to a heuristic plurality. Or being an index of the poem's excursive destiny, generally.

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Those who have followed the unfolding of White's poetic corpus have done so with pleasure and wonder. It is a body of work that has continually displaced itself, with a quality of restlessness that seemingly impels her to pursue a range of formal and compositional strategies, often within the same volume. Textures recur throughout however, principally those of a ridiculous erudition, not to mention an ineluctable glamour. "Methodologically, I should not be so beautiful or funny," she writes in *House Envoy of All the World*. The reversibility of proposition and beholding and the shock of the ad hoc furthermore characterize these irreverent verbal transmissions. I am particularly interested in monitoring the impetus throughout her work to "undo the poem altogether," a tendency which I would argue culminates in the new book. I think it worthwhile, then, to revisit the previous endeavors before I proceed to what I think of as the "unformal" tendency of *or*. As White writes in her 2013 book *Unrest*,

WHO RODE THE BUS DISCOVERED IN ITS WET  
HEAT THE RUMPUS ROOM OF INFLATIONARY  
CITIES

Beginning with the abecedarian system of glimpses in *Unrest*, its epistemological humidity and pragmatics of intellection. Our age of "savage commerce." The fumes of upkeep and the racial plight of the credential shape this adventure of consciousness and pagination. Its exertions are obliquely referential, exquisitely stubborn. Not to say humorless: "In our parade clothes, shall we go to business only?" Concurrently, White sit-

uates herself as a contributor to the *longue durée* of black enlightenment in the Americas, her interlocutors ranging from Olaudah Equiano and David Walker to Ida B. Wells and W. E. B. Du Bois. Ostensibly one of the projects with a greater degree of formal regularity, even here the equipment is somewhat erratic, for instance titular letters of the alphabetic sequence are passed over, conjoined, or simply missing. The implication already is of exception from a plenitude withheld. As White writes in her 2016 book *Of Being Dispersed*:

Encircled            The circle was of being dispersed  
Of trying to live

In *Of Being Dispersed*, the milieu is of the epistle, of the miniature, its diagrammatic impulse countertended by the surge of formlessness. Bursts of discernment constellate with ethical pronouncement and humorous asides, the decidedly open configuration of the work rightfully evoking Robert Duncan's notion of field composition. Dispersal indeed. This poetics of reticulation is replete with "Speech that has wishes, wishing to be more than sound." Of one who habitually "Was sliding vertically along the hard / Front of economic history." The field undulates as though behavior of the sea, from which eject tremors, stipulations, conferrals of blessing and malediction. These holographic messages produce their own spacetime, rhythm being the constructive factor of verse language.<sup>1</sup>

So that the structure of the poem was falling down around me  
as were the constitutive  
energies of what i was

More and more the writing has unstuck itself from the illusion of official verse culture that there is such a thing as "poems," word structures that occur in epiphanic sufficiencies. Heaven forbid the intolerable nomenclature of the workshop which dogs us with such trite formulations as "the speaker of the poem." What I find in *or*, instead, is a performance of lopsidedness, of "roughhousing perspective." The writing freely oscillates between an unbounded strophe and a sort of ventilated prose, transferring itself from the onus of the narrative-in-verse to the free gamut of the soliloquy. Think topological squiggleness. Obstreperous mellifluousness. Its glitchiness implies digital composition, things perhaps needing to be written quickly or in transit, these conditions preserved by the artistic decision not to repress the processual messiness of things: "unsorted words please me so"; "lol the irregularity of my thought." The scene of writing is gratuitous, untidy, because "writing is as we are." I think of White's receptivity to the unfashioned as a refutation of mastery, as Dawn Lundy Martin suggests: a consent to be transformed, undone, obliterated by poetic divulgation. The unfurling of language.<sup>2</sup> This black unformalism knows that every given writing is subtended by a field of transposition without origin or end. The poem comes apart because we do, she does.

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trap has developed as a means figuratively to represent in  
and beyond words (oo, oo, oo) an emotional notation system  
for desire in our lifetime ...

i have used this music, its metaphorical aliveness, as a proxy for  
the unbearable ways my  
body declares itself irrepressible or central to anything that is.

*or, on being the other woman* also extends White's inquiry into the hermeneutic purchase of music for the theorization of black experimental personhood. Through her ongoing scrutiny of trap music, she has modulated the conceptual terrain on which the black musicological object has been situated heretofore, questioning in particular the presupposition of free jazz as a controlling referent of its elucidation. In *Dear Angel of Death* this meditation obtained its patterning through an inhabitation of Nathaniel Mackey's novels, whereby she desedimented a now orthodox paradigm for the treatment of black unorthodoxy. Contemplation of blackness's "infolded" condition furthermore made the case for epigraphic (therefore written, discursive, spatial, and compositional) rather than musical-sonorous definitions of black avant-garde practice. These critical postulations are endowed in or with stunning textual dimensionality, as the poem reconfigures the very boundaries of commentary and performance.

Trap has required me to pretend to believe in sexual  
difference in order to become intelligible but the machines  
ever obliterate a sui generis feminine

White does not describe or historicize the productions of Future and Chief Keef, but becomes coplanar with them, physically ricocheting off their noise environments. It's sort of the denouement of the ekphrastic. Trap music, with its synthesis of grandeur, dereliction, and masculinist bombast, thus becomes the unlikely (to whom?) "surround" of this work of black feminist thought. That putative unlikelihood is effectively displaced, however, by the actual behavior of the work. This music's combination of percussive twitchiness and operatic burgeoning corresponds obviously with White's scriptorium. What does it mean for someone (someone like Simone) who lives with and through this music to prognosticate the pleasures and dangers of black social life? What do its tonalities foretell for post-Black Arts Movement infrastructures of experimentalism? I suggest White's inquiry poses the problem of contemporaneity itself for literary and art criticism, her concern being ultimately neither for the dominant nor the residual but the emergent. One thinks of Fred Moten's question in *In the Break*, "What will blackness be?"

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I do not know whether knowledge about sexually inflected  
dependency (the economic  
emotional and racial matrix that forms black women as  
persons who carry, fuck, never  
tire and remain impoverished) is related to knowledge about  
who this writing is for ...

If I am writing a script it is a script for performance of the  
intellectual status of the art  
professional

The other woman is a position of enunciation with at least



*or, on being the other woman*, Duke University Press, 2022.

threefold significance. Simultaneously, she calls forth the melodrama of heterosexuality, the political economy of the conceptual artworld, and the employment of black femininity within the social choreographies of capitalist dispossession. The other woman is the one whose generativity and labor are siphoned by the socius to reproduce itself, which is, in part, how Joy James defines the figure of the “captive maternal.” Insight into the mutual presupposition of these orders distinguishes White’s performance. Reading the poem, that is, one follows the real movements of personhood through a fierce historical embeddedness. Textual manifestations such as “flayed vestibularity” and “dissolute facticity” evoke this not only symbolic and iconographic misfortune. The motif of “dependency” is also used throughout the book to name the “matrix” of surrogacy, fungibility, and captivity that punishes black women intellectuals.

I am interested in how these tensions of world order are elicited through a poetic “unsheathing of memory,” inscribed, in other words, by the motives of survival on the terrain of the diurnal.<sup>3</sup> Living is itself theoretical. It would be generative, moreover, to think about the book in terms of a poetics of black social reproduction. The supposed trivialities of the quotidian, for instance, have hardly been expunged from the poetic surface, as these mundane expenditures proliferate in the account. The cleaning of toilets and payment for domestic labor, the strategics of parenting and the costs of childcare, financial transactions and salary negotiations: “effective means of housekeeping categorically interest me.” The depiction of White in profile on the cover of the book, itself a theory of portraiture and adornment, visualizes this tight fit between literary production and the life-world’s actualities. The poetic social reproductive vantage on the order of things illuminates how “laboring women,” in Jennifer Morgan’s phrase, reproduce the global present—in White’s words, “the black present, which is the present.” So too does its angle of reflection bear upon the art, university, and gig economies, recontextualizing such phenomena as labor flexibilization and adjunctification. The effectively pulverized concept

of bohemia. On every level, the reproduction of the forces and relations of production can only be sufficiently addressed by reckoning with black maternity and the ongoing history of racial slavery, which White refers to as “the history of being worked to death.”

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What ‘is’ is is determining the terms of exaltation, praise, and defilement, the turning off and on of the pleasure and pain centers. Subjectivation. Profanity’s nonce forms engage linguistically in what sound people call muddiness, profanity’s imbrication with epithet is a richer form of meaning making that taps into sign at a zero level, incredibly powerful, elementally so

Demetaphorization equals desubjectivation. This would seem to be what Joan Retallack might call another “wager” of the book, its theory of linguistic subjugation. With metaphor understood here as “a form of patriarchal / control over language and a currency of poetic power.” Thus when the poet’s ex hurls insults at her that induce the scene of racial caricature, this word behavior cuts immediately into the psyche, not metaphorically. The vituperative effectivity of slurs renders a more general sociolinguistic (therefore ontological) predicament: the immurement of persons and things by words. Considered in this light, White’s poetry intervenes directly upon the workings of the semiotic in the operation of the real. This writing is not a transcendent reflection of the plane of immanence, but is completely flush with it, which confirms the equality of thought and extension. This black Spinozism, if you will, profoundly escalates the poet’s work.

i think the unfitness of words is the base from which we might understand such concepts as barbarity, the crudeness of words, their impingements such rough modifications

Inscription yokes. However, and luckily for that matter, “You cannot really ‘inscribe’ anything on the surface of flux,” as White writes in *Dear Angel of Death*. In *or, on being the other woman*, the surface of flux is where one finds the ontological wiggle room necessary for the enunciation of the singular, which is freedom from impingement. Practically, this involves the multiplication of the verbal with coefficients such as speed and duration, whereby black poesis abuts capitalist semiosis, R. A. Judy, for example, might contend. This I find to be a generative formulation, yet my other feeling is that the procedure White performs is not one of abutment (implying the possibility of being heterogeneous with capitalist exchange which at this point I do not think exists) but of convulsion from within. Indeed, the “black ontological truism” of this “language game” is that its semantic units are ever laden with pejorative capability: “the / gathering or clearing in which verbalization will begin to take place is already jammed / up.”<sup>4</sup> One does not exit from the sludge, but toils within it, which is where we are, through to a temporary supersession or hiatus. There lies, perhaps, the ontological shimmering of black virtuosic speech and writing.

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i have been given a vision of it, life beyond use

The title of my commentary gestures toward a moment in the text when Simone fuses together the two words heretofore and un contemplated. This portmanteau occurs to me as a precise descriptor of *or, on being the other woman* itself. One could say the heretoforeuncontemplated is the epistemological register of the poet’s work. Myung Mi Kim refers to it as “the unfathomable.” In this book, White has invited us to linger with her heretoforeuncontemplated thoughts, to join her in the consideration of heretoforeuncontemplated problems, and to behold her heretoforeuncontemplated gifts. The project is to bear and distribute light.

## Notes

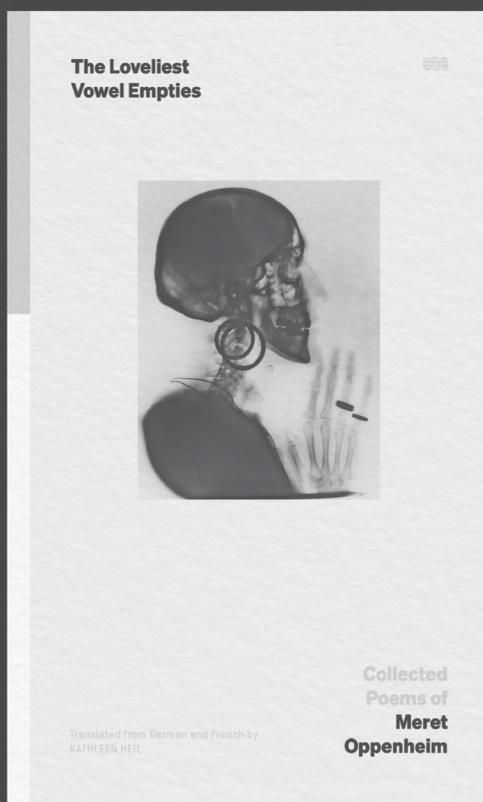
*Throughout the text, I have not capitalized the words black or blackness, the intention being to distinguish blackness from the grammar and orthography of the proper.*

<sup>1</sup> Yuri Tynianov, *The Problem of Verse Language*, trans. Michael Sosa and Brent Harvey (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1981). See also Lyn Hejinian, “The Rejection of Closure” in *The Language of Inquiry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 40-58.

<sup>2</sup> Myung Mi Kim, “Interview with Myung Mi Kim,” *Bayou Magazine*. <https://bayoumagazine.org/interview-with-myung-mi-kim>

<sup>3</sup> In conversation with Lorna Simpson, White uses this phrase to describe the project. She also notes that while the book begins with the question of “what a wife is ... it’s not inside of me, that question.” <https://www.artforum.com/video/the-poet-and-artist-discuss-how-to-protect-one-s-own-interiority-89364>

<sup>4</sup> Harryette Mullen’s poem “Denigration” encapsulates this. Darius James’s *Negrophobia* being the extreme case.



**MERET OPPENHEIM**  
**THE LOVELIEST VOWEL EMPTIES**

Translated from German and French by  
**KATHLEEN HEIL**

“To read Oppenheim’s lyric bulletins, conveyed tactfully into English, is to feel that we are plunging for the first time into the pure waters of poetry itself, impervious to fad. No dross, no affectation: instead, Oppenheim gives us strangeness, tone, translucency.”

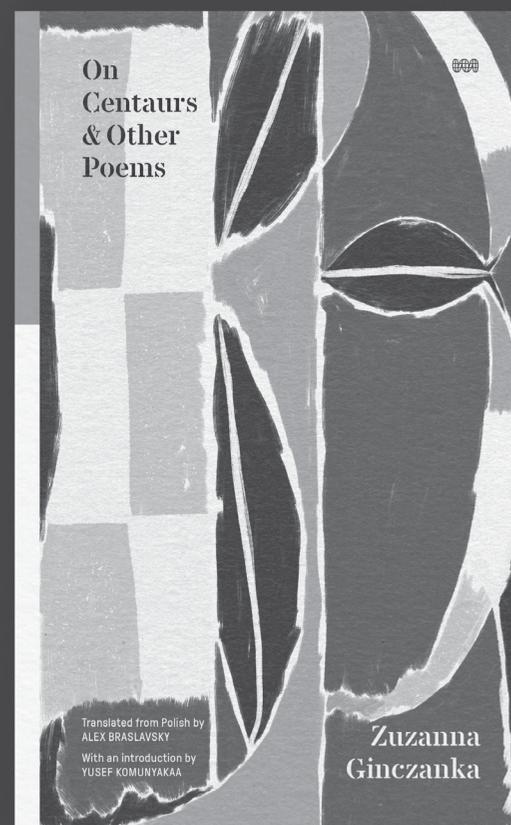
— Wayne Koestenbaum

**ZUZANNA GINCZANKA**  
**ON CENTAURS & OTHER POEMS**

Translated from Polish by  
**ALEX BRASLAVSKY**

“To read Zuzanna Ginczanka is to witness—through the merciless gun barrel of history—the vanishing of a visionary, surreal world. A poet of a tragic biography, Ginczanka sings history with unparalleled sublimity, irony, and anguish.”

— Valzhyna Mort



**MANUEL MAPLES ARCE**  
**STRIDENTIST POEMS**

Translated from Spanish by  
**KM CASCIA**

“Maples Arce appears, passing out molotov cocktails to girls, waving to twenty-eight year old revolutionary generals from a speeding motorcycle, listening to Jazz with his stomach while military trains unload the wounded, telling poetry, From now on your name’s Adventure.”

— Roberto Bolaño

# Wo Chan & imogen xtian smith

*Friends in poetry and queerness, Wo Chan (aka The Illustrious Pearl) and imogen xtian smith each published their debut collections from Nightboat Books last fall. In a wide ranging conversation, Wo and imogen discuss structuring their books (Togetherness and stemmy things, respectively), immigration, double LPs, Chopped, and growing up down the road from each other in the South.*

**Wo Chan:** I want to start by asking about the chronology of the book.

**imogen xtian smith:** With *stemmy things*, there isn't a linear narrative, but constellations of times—big moments like the early pandemic, or the time I spent in January 2020 in Berlin on fellowship. There were rumblings of COVID in Europe and that time feels carefree in a way that isn't the same now, but has allowed me to retain some sort of wide-eyedness. And then the congealing of years living in the South being confused as far as who and what I am.

**WC:** I'm interested in chronology when reading first books of poetry. They contain everything in a writer's life up to a point, more or less. What has it been like seeing past versions of yourself? I felt like I encountered an image of the South, and of you in Berlin, working through bodily pleasures and political thoughts as you're trying to figure out how to move through the world, causing less harm.

**ixs:** Right, and you do so much of the same in *Togetherness*. There's so much of your adolescence, moving around the restaurant and family spaces, the you that is voyeuristically captured in the immigration testimonies of your neighbors that are interspersed.

I thought about the fact that I grew up fifty miles down the road from you in—in a different decade maybe—but I thought about proximity and the world of difference between our experiences. That has been striking and generative and made my heart ache, just imagining either of us in those places, regardless of the very real and differing contexts.

Encountering old selves has been weird and nerve-racking since the book came out. I've wanted to read new work, but felt I needed to sell this book or whatever. So I've been trying to perform pieces that don't lend themselves to a five minute set I know is gonna be electric. That gets boring, so I've been reading stranger or more abstract ones, encountering this liminal self, poems inhabiting more ethereal or intangible spaces.

**WC:** What you're saying makes so much intuitive sense. I think as queer people, especially in a place like the South, fifty miles or ten years make so much difference. We write poems to hold parts of ourselves that are difficult to process internally and create this physical space in order to unpack them.

It's exciting to hear your thoughts on readings, because the poems that feel liminal and unresolved are so alive. I find reading from *Togetherness* has become a bit routine, and while it does hold my experiences, I'm afraid of becoming bored. The worst thing would be to look visibly bored by my own stuff! I like that you prioritize the aliveness of poetry.

**ixs:** *stemmy things* definitely has some anchoring poems in each section, like a pop song or something I know I can always do to be an engaging performer. But yeah, that gets tedious, so I've started to memorize or riff on them, just to be spontaneous, or not look down!

**WC:** I've started seeing how long I can go without looking down! Really edge the page and fuck with people while reading. Maybe your eyes roll while trying to recall something and you look like an oracle.

I wanted to ask if there's a poem in your book that has changed meaning for you, or revealed something different through performance in surprising ways.

**ixs:** There's a poem called "the way we get by" that has always felt striking, but I'm surprised by the intimacy of it—so earnest, disordered eating, disassociating. I've only read the long section ("true blue uncanny valley") once, mostly in reaction to the audience. I was being angsty and wanted to read this poem I felt might be challenging, dealing with colonization, whiteness, and gentrification. Parts of it I now find cringeworthy, or edging cringe, but I understand it more as a piece of art, in terms of what I was working through and with. I'd use different language now but whatever.

**WC:** The cringe of the first book reminds you of how powerful a mirror poetry can be, and that I can still be inscrutable to myself, which is exciting. Or when a review reveals something I didn't know about the book.

**ixs:** Some of the cringe of the first book was realizing how indebted I was to the trope of trans memoir. A first book can be a catch-all, and it was impossible for me to avoid being autobiographical. In that way there's a lot of cringe! Also, a lot of learning how to be a writer.

**WC:** This is interesting to me. I was also avoiding tropes—documentation, deportation, immigration, being a queer poet, certain tropes with that as well. Were you actively thinking

about those tropes?

**ixs:** I was just noticing them. When you're blessed with the opportunity to make a book, you go for it, because you might never have the opportunity again. I wanted to say everything I knew about being a human. It feels good to have that behind me, because I have this project-based manuscript I'm working on, and the process is like—here's a question, I'm gonna write around it until I feel satisfied, then move on. Those new poems are not *not* tethered to me in personal ways, but differently than *stemmy things*.

**WC:** There's that joke with poets that the first book is their entire life and the second is about some hobby. So the first book is like everything, terrible and wonderful.

For my next book, I'm thinking a lot about my process in psychotherapy, and about the shapes and characters that I inhabit in my mind—some of which are like characters I've done in drag—and wondering what I look like, dressed like them and moving through the world.

What right now feels most alive in your book?

**ixs:** I appreciate seeing myself in the real time of the poem, especially in the flirty ones where I envision going deep into my desires to name them. A lot of the poems are aspirational, putting all my hopes for pleasure and curiosity and body. I can see myself trying to come into language.

**WC:** Poetry creates so much pleasure for other people—the shaping of breath and movement of mouth, there's something very erotic and synchronized with that.

**ixs:** What about you? What feels most alive?

**WC:** What feels most alive, mysterious, kind of insidious in what it holds, are the letters of testimony in *Togetherness*. These are community statements of character that were submitted to the courts when my family and I were deported. One of them is from my high school best friend's dad, who was city manager and wrote something about us paying our taxes on time, and about my family's restaurant being a sizable source of tax revenue for the city. Those pieces are excerpted and never performed. They're supposed to serve as molecular objects or separate pillars dividing the book. I recognize now that those documents are sort of evil and shouldn't exist.

**ixs:** I'm so curious about how they function in the book, and the emotional gravity of their inclusion. So much witnessing and being wit-

nessed, tension of gazes and the way those letters announce your family's role and "value" in community, juxtaposed with observations about your parents, your older brother, how life has played out in the realm of those assignments. *Togetherness* is full of the expectations of that term (community), and those documents do feel evil, reducing civic life to economic value. Economic value as signifier of "the human," where even expressions of praise are underpinned by the violence of the forms required of them.

**WC:** It's wild to note their language, that they exist in their own form, as their own performance. They tried to speak from a place of pure intentions and sometimes are very moving. That can feel like a twisting of a knife.

One talks about our family hosting a wedding reception. It's by the delivery driver, who, by the time we were being deported, had become an immigration lawyer. So she's a deep family friend who wrote this beautiful letter. She also talks about witnessing my mother's love, which is a very real thing to read, especially when you're a queer person trying to work through family.

**ixs:** Those artifacts are often placed alongside another thru-line of your book, the prose blocks, your *Chopped* poems. Like, "It was a Monday, you remember your roommate once said that food is like paying rent to your body." Those pieces and sentences send me back to the letters—like, how can you afford this, and for how long?

**WC:** I love the *Chopped* poems. I used to work at Sephora and as a waiter. Every job required some form of human exchange—smile, do makeup, serve food—kinds of care work. That was very grounding, but when I started in nonprofit work, it was jarring, uniquely depression-inducing, and those poems helped me stay in my body. This was during deportation proceedings and I was watching a lot of *Chopped* to keep whatever mental thread I had. I was reading about my position in the US in the second person, via documents, and those voicings really came to me.

Childhood sounds and memories—the rush of the kitchen, the look of a chef, steel trays on steel tables. I was watching, thinking "what would my brother or parents do if they auditioned," while knowing the show is also very metaphorical for the US, the scarcity and construct of success. There's only one winner, and you have to stand in front of the judge and plead your case.

**ixs:** Right, whether literally, in terms of depor-

tation, or with whatever product you can produce to validate continued existence.

**WC:** Yeah, and it has to be shiny and entertaining and innovative. *Chopped* is fascinating to watch and doubly fascinating when it becomes a confessional for immigrants, as they'll invariably talk about their backgrounds and struggles. So these prose poems were like television vignettes.

**ixs:** I'm curious about your identification with the second person in the specific moment of those poems' creation. Was it from seeing yourself objectified in the language of the courts?

**WC:** What I recognize about the tone and voice of those poems is how mean and laced with contempt the voice is. That left me at some point, and the nature voice came in.

**ixs:** During our time in class together, you spoke of your love of [Gerard Manley] Hopkins, which I find recognizable in your work. The "nature poems" in your book are so dynamic, so strange yet formal. Can you talk about influence and how you came to these fluid yet formal forms?

**WC:** I do love Hopkins and think he's embedded into my writing DNA. I also claim him as a queer. But actually, I want you to answer this question! I know you love Kathy Acker...

**ixs:** I do love Acker, and Bernadette [Mayer] of course, and attempt some sort of experiment in noticing everything and writing that, which her work continues to teach me. In trying to take aspects of that on for myself, I've seen how difficult writing simultaneity actually is! I'm not sure I succeeded, but did and do try to compose all the sensations around me in a moment in such a way as to capture them slamming together at the point of my body—and how that initiates politics.

Some reviewers have said *stemmy things* is too sprawling, which I disagree with. I was really insistent on the excess! The major templates for the book are double albums—records like *Exile on Main St.*, *Sign O' the Times*, *Sandinista!* or "the white album," these records that, if you condensed them, would be perfect and precise. What makes them interesting though is the mess. I think you get a much richer vision of life that way.

The other template is *Poetry State Forest* by Bernadette Mayer, which I feel similarly about. It's really long and jumbled, conceptually and temporally all over the place, containing so many different forms that sometimes feel haphazardly thrown together. It's so fun to read because you're constantly interrupted! The excess is intentional and I kind of live or die by that. It was my choice and maybe it works, maybe it doesn't, but that doesn't matter to me because I trust myself as a writer.

**WC:** And some of us don't live seamless lives, we have very sprawling experiences.

**ixs:** It feels like a stereotypically queer impulse. I'm kind of a nightmare at readings for that reason, because, with my new poems in particular, they're really long, and if I'm given five-seven minutes, well, it might just take ten and I don't know what to do!

**WC:** We just need to have more specific spaces designed for longer readings.

I love hearing about your non-book influences, that's a fascinating side of the process. Your book really has a double album feel!

**ixs:** Maybe it's surprising because you don't always get a double album as a first record—it's like "who does she think she is?" But whatever—same price, more poems, take it or leave it, y'know?

**WC:** If I were to compare my book to a non-book art medium, I picture it as a long dance piece. In my mind there's an empty stage and the first poem steps out, does its walk, makes its shapes then exits at the page break before the next poem leaps on and does it differently.

That's how I thought about organizing it, and I had a lot of trouble figuring out how. You don't get that practice in school. You get practice writing a poem each week—

**ixs:** A very specific kind of poem, too.

**WC:** Right? And there are so many ways to organize a book. So I did it like a drag number, or a lineup where you need to see the pieces in a certain order to understand the story. What's the least didactic order, or the least boring that creates tension in or between the poems, or a nice reprieve or dramatic term? I see the poems as shapes that move across the stage, pose, maybe say something then leave.

**ixs:** *Togetherness* is so strikingly unified and well choreographed, the shifts are dynamic and very pronounced, the transitions between *Chopped* or the more legalese—you really stay within the book's flow. Then there's all the extravagantly gay shit, that opening poem "performing miss america at bushwig 2018, then chilling," and "the smiley barista remembers my name" towards the end. Those really sashay!

**WC:** Yeah, I wanted to ask you about the ordering of *stemmy things*.

**ixs:** The first section, "ecologies," holds poems on that subject—broadly defined. That's a huge theme and organizing principle of the book, ecologies of land and family moving through social spaces, erotics, fantasies, and turning more concrete in the last few sections. "field jar" is more observational, a collection of moods, travels, relationships. They each find their grounding. But really, the classic MFA poetry book has three sections and I wanted

anything but that. I feel great antipathy towards my MFA time, and wanted to imagine the book the program trained writers to write, and then make the antithesis of that.

**WC:** You wrote such a full book that has its own legs in the world. The MFA book feels so produced. Even your author's note is so thoughtful, a clear place to open and introduce yourself.

**ixs:** That was important to me, because, take a sequence like "true blue..." that deals with gentrification. So much of that poem emerges from real experiences working as a dog walker, spending everyday for years outside, observing and reflecting on my place in it all. Editing the book was very difficult because I didn't want to come across voyeuristically, but engaged, and not for spectacle or experiment's sake. I didn't want to flatten the world, so it was necessary to situate myself and give the reader more agency in how they approach the work. It's like, this is who I am and where I'm coming from, which might be illuminating for you, or might actually not be good for you, and here's the info so you can make that choice.

**WC:** I think that comes across, as well as how open you are with your own experiences. I love, in "true blue...", the format of a walking journal. There's a rhythm to it all.

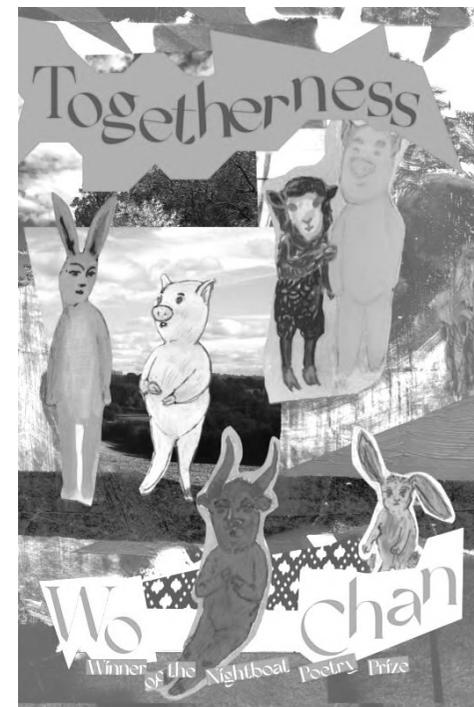
**ixs:** It's about envisioning how a poem sits in relation to other poems, whether to create fluidity or tension or something else. I don't like thinking of poems as discrete—they're relational.

**WC:** I remember running into you at a reading in the fall and talking about releasing our first books, how it felt eerie because there's so much buildup and you aren't sure what's supposed to happen. I was like, is someone gonna drop confetti on my head?

**ixs:** It's really anticlimactic!

**WC:** I was in a mild-to-low level state of panic, going into the world and looking for my book, physically, in bookstores, and that never felt satisfying. The first time I felt recognition of it being real was talking to a student whose class I'd visited. We were signing books, and she said, "I'm a 58-year-old Chinese woman, I changed careers and started writing poems seriously." She's in an MFA program. I really felt like the book exists in the space between people's minds.

**ixs:** You realize having the artifact isn't the thing that keeps you writing or makes you happy. It's absolutely these linguistic and energetic entanglements that come from others and the life of the world itself, things you can't necessarily see.



*Togetherness* (2022) and *stemmy things* (2022) are both out now from Nightboat Books

# Raw, Rude, and from the Future—DIY Trans Publishing Today: Joss Barton & Casey Platt w/ Kay Gabriel

*For this conversation, I invited LittlePuss Press publisher Casey Platt and poet, performer and zine-maker Joss Barton to talk about trans culture, DIY publishing, writing, readership, performance and community. I admire the hell out of Joss's writing, I think the LittlePuss list is tremendously exciting, and I'm glad to get each of their thoughts on the state of trans culture and the meaningful interventions that DIY publishing can make right now in a political situation of right-wing anti-trans moral panic and widespread liberal cowardice. Joss makes reference to the work of Mira Bellwether, author of the zine Fucking Trans Women, who passed away last December while we conducted this interview; the zine is available at [fuckingtranswomen.org](http://fuckingtranswomen.org). You can find Joss on IG @ganjacum\_ and on vimeo at [vimeo.com/user40935030](https://vimeo.com/user40935030). You can find LittlePuss's books at [LittlePuss.net](http://LittlePuss.net). —KG*

**KAY GABRIEL:** Can each of you talk a little bit about the publishing that you're doing now and that you've been involved in recently—Joss, of your own work, and Casey, of the LittlePuss Press books? What kinds of writing, editing and/or publishing have you been involved with in the past, and how is your current project different?

**JOSS BARTON:** Well most of the publishing I have done has been DIY and independent, dare I say, limited edition? The two major zines I have self-published (*The Wagons Ain't Here Yet...* and *The Summer I Got Bit*) were imagined and materialized as small printings. I don't think I printed more than 100 copies of *Wagons* and only 200 of *Summer*. Coming of age as a writer through the early years of Tumblr, I always found my work resonated most with an underground, queer and trans and radical punk audience. Yeah, I would submit work here and there to publications but most of them would pass on my work, but when you see (and feel that delightfully twisted high of) a very long Tumblr activity log on a piece, you can't help but understand that as trans women we were and still are writing from the future and that work hits people, especially other trans folks, in incredibly raw ways. All that to say, I said FUCK IT to submission portals and started self-publishing my own work.

Currently I am working on what will be my third and last zine *GOODBYE TO A DREAM BELIEVED!* It is best described as a meth- and amphetamine-fueled goodbye letter to my former home, St. Louis. I'm also developing another stage production performance of it.

**CASEY PLETT:** The most recent book we published at LittlePuss was Cecilia Gentili's *Faltas: Letters to Everyone in My Hometown Who Isn't My Rapist*, which is the first new book LittlePuss has put out (the first book we published was a reprint of an anthology that Cat Fitzpatrick [the other half of LittlePuss] and I had co-edited). I think Cat and I are really invested in working with authors to *develop* books together into something that, like, *has* to exist. So with *Faltas*, Cat had approached Cecilia after one of her storytelling gigs to be like, your work is amazing and I think you would write a great book if you wanted to do that. Cecilia wasn't sure, but after some years went by, she came up with the current format of the book, letters to individual people she knew from her childhood, and that was the key, and the book flowed from there—she would write a letter and then talk about it with Cat, and then write another, etc.

This is different to me from a more conventional process of,

like, an author writes a book, submits the book, and then the publisher decides whether to publish the book. I think with LittlePuss we're interested in seeing what happens working outside that standardized process. It's exciting for me to work with authors to consider, like, "How should this book exist as a thing in the world? How do we make something real and not-bullshit and beautiful together?" We ain't ready to announce what's coming next down the pike but there's a few writers we're currently working with on new books for hopefully next year, so—watch this space (and when I say "watch this space" I mean "go to [littlepuss.net](http://littlepuss.net) and subscribe to our mailing list at the bottom," natch).

**KG:** In the work that you publish, what do you think is possible to say that couldn't be said in a different, more professionalized publishing context? What do you think people find challenging in that work, and what do they resonate with?

**JB:** For me I believe my zines as well as my stage performances invite readers into a truly transsexual world where trans women make the rules and hold the power. Institutions have historically proven to only offer trans narratives when they're either easy to digest for the cis public (the entire canon of trans memoirs) or when it provides some kind of guilt relief for systemic trans misogyny and virulent transphobia (think ANYTHING RYAN MURPHY!). For independent trans artists, especially trans women/femme artists and writers and performers, our work must be polished but subversive, but not too radical. We must be fuckable but never holding the upper hand to cis desirability. We must be responsible and respectful and always able to take every ounce of unwarranted and unasked-for criticism and critique as if we all just stepped off the open mic circuit for the first time. So for me, my work, my zines, my practice is all a way to say NO, in this world I am building, I am refusing to be polite or responsible or respectful or passed over. In my world, trans women are the blueprints, and we are fully humanized in both our spectacles of glamor or prophecy or pussy while unapologetically surviving and loving perfectly and imperfectly. I want to write and perform work that shows that we as trans women are flawed but also flawless. My mentor, the late and one of the true prophets of the world, Patrick Haggerty, once told me after a gig in New Orleans that he saw my work as raw and rude. That has stuck with me especially coming from the queen of raw and rude! Lavender Country was so raw and rude it was blacklisted for decades! We need trans people to be more fucking raw and rude! Our very existence is being used to fuel a white nationalist takeover, so if there was any moment in time for our work to burn down the walls it's fuck-

ing now. And that is also where my work diverges from the sterile incubators of literature and art: it's making very clear demands for our collective liberation and survival.

**CP:** I'm not sure what the work's saying that couldn't be said in a different, more professionalized publishing context—but maybe I don't think it could *get there* in a more professionalized context? (Maybe that's splitting hairs, idk.) I think in those contexts, by the time an editor or publisher at a big house gets eyes on something, it's already within these confines of what a book needs to be and what it can do. And it's very hard within that system—even for individuals committed to trying to "look for new stuff" etc., to put a book together that breaks those confines. Not to say it can't happen at big pubs, but I don't think we see it as often—we rarely see it for trans women writers, and Cat and I are very interested in making dynamic, confine-breaking work.

Like, I think a lot of how Cat worked with Sybil Lamb on her novel *I've Got A Time Bomb*, for example. Sybil had sent in all these zines to her and the idea was to publish a collection of those zines. Cat was like, "I think there's actually a novel I can see in here, what do you think about writing a novel," and Sybil gave it a shot and she did it and the two of them worked together intensely bringing it across the finish line and the end result is this gorgeous, horrifying picaresque that is that book. I can't see that process being replicable at PRH or something.

As for what people find challenging/resonant, I dunno. I think I'd hope that what is challenging is also resonant. I think with *Faltas* specifically, what's resonant is the truthfulness and honesty in which she wrote the book—Cecilia really excised all the bullshit that can easily come with writing memoir. Like, not trying to look like a good person and being more interested in the truth and reality of what was going on. (I say this having trouble with such things when I myself am writing memoir-ish stuff.) And maybe some readers will find that challenging because she talks about a lot of brutal, hard stuff at the same time, but I think as long as someone's compelled to keep turning pages, being challenged is good.

**KG:** At whatever scale—100 or 10,000 readers—who do you think finds their way to the work you're putting out there? And who do you think isn't reading it currently but ideally would be?

**CP:** Oh man, after thinking it about for days I still don't know. Like, I see a lot of trans women come to our events and that's cool and I can maybe grab onto that. But also people buy our books online and the orders come through our store and I'm like, "I wonder what kind of person you are, I wonder what you're about, what you love, what moves you, what keeps you up at night," and I have *no* clue! It is cool and a mystery and emotionally there's something to that I maybe wanna keep that way.

**JB:** I feel my work is primarily being read by queer and trans folks, especially trans women/femmes. I have heard from peo-

ple who have bought my zines or seen my stage performances that they came to my work because someone gave them a zine or shared a poem of mine with them. I absolutely love hearing that! It confirms for me that writing and producing work about and for trans women/femmes works. I think the audience I would hope begins to experience my work would be both readers from the academy and the Gen Z trans kids. The academic poets and performance peers because I want to see more underground and DIY poetry to be understood and taken as seriously as institutional poetry. I imagine how much my work could have been enhanced if I had been able to read work from underground radical trans artists during undergrad. And now just writing, how my transition could have been different as well. That's why I hope the younger generation also reads my work. What I am trying to convey with my work is based in these concepts of love and loss that are timeless human conditions, but there is something so powerful when it is framed around a transsexual consciousness, a femme trans emotional experience, that could possibly work as a lamp for a reader who is beginning to understand their transness.

**KG:** Since Harron [Walker]'s article about LittlePuss came out in the *Times*, I've been thinking about that infobox in the middle in which, in the middle of an article about a trans literary press throwing a party full of "drunk transsexuals," the *Times* advertises one article about the increase in the number of people who identify as trans, a second about trans people feeling politically under threat, and then two articles about trans medical care that repeats the political opposition to accessing medical care as if it were science. And that feels like an extraordinary snapshot of the different aims of very mainstream liberal journalism right now: on the one hand, occasionally buttressing trans cultural creation under the banner of respecting social difference; on the other, more or less repeating the talking points of Jesse Singal and other right-wing liberals in attempting to limit access to trans medicine, as if the threats to trans safety were somehow separate from the concerted attempt to limit, or block entirely, access to transition care.

What's your sense of how trans publishing should approach this problem? How do you approach it personally? Given this political situation—middle-class liberals offering both weak opposition to and unwitting support for conservative and far-right anti-trans political programs—what kind of intervention do you think trans writers and publishers are making?

**CP:** Cat and I haven't been able to really talk about this yet, so this is just me spitballing and not representing the two of us: while I doubt there's a good/easy answer, I think one thing that steadies me despite its bummer aspect is that in a lot of ways this isn't new. I always remember seeing an *Atlantic* magazine cover in 2008 with the headline "A Boy's Life" and a panicky article about a young trans girl. The deck for it seems plucked right from present-day, maybe even that same infobox. In a certain light, it's the same old exhausting thing it's always been. (I realize it's complicated because of how the right is targeting us in a way that is definitely *not* the same old thing and can't neatly be separated from the middle-class liberals "just asking questions" stuff.) Basically, I hate that some higher-up at the *NYT* put that infobox in there, and I'm also not terribly surprised.

I think that when it comes to these institutions, we'll always probably get the same occasional bits of recognition from one hand while receiving scorn and shit from the other. I'm not really expecting either situation to change? Maybe it will some day, and that'll be great if it does. But I sort of move forward in my life with that attitude as my baseline. I've said yes to things because I wanted them materially and no to things because I couldn't deal with it on principle. As artists, we probably all have personal decisions to make regarding this stuff (if we're lucky enough to be presented with them as decisions), and it's

rare I begrudge any trans artist for how they choose to do so. Having said that, I definitely never want to *need* these institutions, and I want an ecosystem of trans writing that can exist without them. That's probably part of my hopes for LittlePuss, to be a helpful part of such an ecosystem, when you speak of interventions.

But it's thornier as a publisher. Like, when it's just me as a writer, it's my shit, my attitude mostly affects me, and I've been used to calling those shots and building an artist's life for myself that way over the years. Now as a publisher, my approach to these questions affects a constellation of other people (like yourself, being featured in that *NYT* article!) which demands more thought and is harder but necessary. Like I said, Cat and I haven't been able to talk yet, so I might have more to say here, but those are my first blush thoughts, and I would also very much welcome yours should you have them!

**JB:** I agree with Casey. I believe we as trans people will always have to navigate these bizarre situations where mainstream cis neo-liberalism is simultaneously applauding and choking us. As trans publishers and as trans artists I think our job is to be as unapologetic and uncompromising as possible in creating the work that speaks the most to us and our people. I say this as the forces working against us are being just as brazen in their language and their rhetoric that depicts us as dangerous and evil. I think that trans creators and artists and audiences are making the interventions big and small they need for their communities. Personally, one of the most interesting interventions I think I use is encasing myself in the t4t shitposting online, where we (trans women/femmes) are making content that speaks only to us and runs the gamut of dissecting everything from chasers to 'mones to sex work to drugs to relationships and everything in between. I don't think this particular brand of trans creation is necessarily the most important or even subversive against the agendas you mentioned but it gives me a bit of comical reprieve from the discourse that I personally need or else I would spiral at every opportunity when another TERF is born.

But I can't in all certainty know what we as trans folks need in order to stop it, I think we are all doing what we can with the power and capacity available at our disposal. If I could try to summarize anything it would be that we have the ability to publish and create work that is meaningful to our communities and we should know and own the fact that this work is important and will continue to change the lives of trans people for generations to come. Look at what Mira Bellwether (HOLY MOTHER!) did with *Fucking Trans Women!* She created something so beautiful so powerful and so important it will long outlive all of us. That tenacity to make work that is unashamed of the beauty and the power of who we are as trans people, as trans women, is something we need now more than ever.

# We Meet in a Different Context, but I See that You're Wearing the Uniform: Krystal Languell w/ Anselm Berrigan

*This conversation took place in the summer of 2022, just after the publication of Krystal Languell's book Systems Thinking With Flowers, which was chosen by Rae Armantrout to be published by Fonograf Editions as part of their Open Genre Book Prize. You may need to look up some of the baseball terms, we do a pretty thorough deep dive into the sport vis-a-vis Krystal's poems. Krystal and I worked together as part of the inaugural Emerge-Surface-Be program several years ago, so we got right into things. Her book begins with epigraphs from Nick Cave and Ron Coomer, former professional baseball player and current radio broadcaster for The Chicago Cubs—Krystal's team. We conducted the interview via zoom, and I could only type up [laughs] so many times. The longer version is online. —AB*

**Anselm Berrigan:** Your book is divided into two sections. Did you have these two sections in mind while you were working on the poems or did the poems come together individually and then seem divisible into the two sections? I'm curious about how that might have happened.

**Krystal Languell:** I was approached by an editor at *Baseball Prospectus*—Patrick Dubuque—and he was editing this section on their website called “Short Relief” which was like a creative writing channel. And he I guess had read some of my work somewhere and asked if I was interested in becoming a contributor and of course I was. So for a while, maybe five or six months, I was writing a poem a week for *Baseball Prospectus*. Every Thursday night was the deadline, so I'd start and finish the poem typically on a Thursday night, which created a fun routine in the house where my husband knew he had to leave me alone. He'd wait for a shout to indicate he could talk to me again. I'd say, “Get out of here I have to write a baseball poem!” And some weeks it wasn't a poem. Some weeks I wrote some weird non-fiction, or even fiction-like stuff in a sort of blog post style, and of course none of those made it into the book. I remember writing one about novelty twitter accounts, and I found this one called Emo Bambino where they paired photos of Babe Ruth with emo lyrics.

**AB:** I can't believe I didn't know about that.

**KL:** Yeah, I'm not sure if they're still making posts, but if you've never seen it, check it out. Emo Bambino, there's a few other ones. There's one of baseball images that preceded precipitous events, like a screen shot right before someone hits a devastating grand slam.

**AB:** I just followed Emo Bambino. They're still there. So you were writing baseball poems!

**KL:** Yeah, I was writing baseball poems, and I was getting paid. It was \$20 a week. It was the

most money I've ever made from poetry. Still not enough to get a 1099. So that was that, and I was still writing other poems that were not about baseball. Then when I saw that Fonograf Editions was having this contest, I was accustomed to thinking about Fonograf as putting out records so I thought, oh, I could have an A-side and a B-side. The A-side will be baseball and the B-side will be other. I thought Rae Armantrout might like the poems if they reached her eyes, and it turns out I was right [laughing], which is pretty satisfying. This is the only place I sent the manuscript. I hurried things up to send to that contest, and badabing badaboom, it will never be that easy again.

**AB:** What was it like working with *Baseball Prospectus* in terms of editing when you sent them poems? Did they give you any feedback, or did they run them as-is?

**KL:** There wasn't really a poetry specialist. When I was submitting the poems to Patrick, he would say, “Yeah, great... no notes... all good.” And then his role changed, and Roger Cormier became the go-to, and sometimes Roger would ask me to make the poems a little longer.

**AB:** Well, it seems to me, reading the baseball poems, I got the feeling it was less about picking up on a particular subject, so to speak, although I know from the notes that you had the Trevor Bauer quotes, and the Addison Russell falling into the nacho cheese laps, and certain points of anti-inspiration I guess, and more about riffing on the language of baseball in a way where it's just in your consciousness and intertwined with other points of perception and memory and looking at what's around you. It's this language coming and going quickly, turning around and doing different things, lightly punctuated and agile. Does this sound accurate at all to what it might have been like writing them?

**KL:** Yeah. I think the first poem in the book accurately represents what that's like as an experience. You know, I live with my husband and we're both longtime Cubs fans, and we have this situation where we'll be in separate rooms listening to the broadcast, and we love a lot of things about the game and the Cubs. Specifically, the broadcasters Pat Hughes and Ron Coomer—it's really fun to listen to them when there's not much to talk about. That's when it gets really interesting to both of us. So these recent games that are blowouts—the Cubs are not doing well..

**AB:** Are these the radio announcers?

**KL:** Yeah, radio. When the team's not doing well, the things they find to talk about are stupid, and funny, and when they get bored or frustrated they have to keep it G-rated, they can't be political. And knowing what their parameters are it's kind of like they're in a formal experiment that I would think of as parallel to various poetry forms that you can constrain yourself with. They'll have strong feelings and they have to translate it into this G-rated, apolitical speech. Or even if someone does something stupid, or makes a lazy mistake, Ron Coomer is the hot-tempered one and just says, “That's bad baseball.” He really wants to say something nastier, but works within the constraint and you can tell the big emotion is there, too.

**AB:** Was Ron Coomer the source, by chance, of the title “The All-Star Game Is Stupid?”

**KL:** No. Because I think that is too direct of a statement for him to be allowed to say. So no, I think that's just my opinion [laughing].

**AB:** In that poem you end with the lines “It's not personal in the end / as long as we look like a team.” That seemed to be presenting a kind of skepticism of the appearance of teamwork, in a way. But then baseball is this odd sport where it's very individually oriented, but you do have a team dynamic at the same time. So you do hear a lot of language about teamwork, and camaraderie, and chemistry. But the players are constantly being isolated under pressure—the pitcher is alone, the batter is alone, the fielders are socially distanced by rule. And they're getting all this data breaking down their swings and arm angles and things.

I got this sense across some of the poems that the notion of the team was something you could bring to the surface at points, because you could also be referring to a work situation at an office, or you could be referring to the way sports language in its more cliched forms gets adopted by politicians and corporations to....

**KL:** To motivate.

**AB:** Yeah, to motivate.

**KL:** With this line I think it depends on how you read “as long as we look like a team.” In this poem I mention a couple of things Joe Maddon was doing when he was managing the Cubs, like spoof suits on road trips. They'd go on the road and there'd be a theme—pajama day—kind of stupid stuff, but they're all doing pajamas so every player does it their own way. And some guys look stupid and some look cool, and some guys wear a bunch of gold chains with their pajamas to say I'm cooperating but I'm still being myself. So ok, that's fine, you can be creative and put a spin on the theme as long as the theme is still visible.

This other line that was something I said to my husband. We met in New York and then we moved to Chicago: he grew up in the Chicago area, I grew up a couple of hours away. So when I was moving to Chicago, which I had always wanted to do, two exciting things happened. We got here and we went to a friend's house and the game was on the radio and I was like wait, that's coming out of the radio and not the internet, cause we're in Chicago, cool. And the other thing, when you're away from home, let's say you're in a foreign country, it's so exciting if you're in Prague and someone else is wearing a Cubs hat and you're like, *Heeeeeeyyyy!!!* But then we moved to Chicago and the shirts are here, it's not special, everyone's wearing them or has Cubs paraphernalia. So do we look like a team, like we're on a team—are we a team? We meet in a different context, but I see that you're wearing the uniform.

But then this other poem that I would love to bring up in this context too—I don't remember what it's called so I have to find it—it's about this situation, and this might be something I want to edit when I go back. The real



KRYSTAL LANGUELL

Systems Thinking With Flowers,  
Fonagraf Editions, 2022.

story is that I was on some academic teams when I was a high school student, and before a competition—I was not a senior yet—but someone who was a senior was trying to give a motivational pep talk before our big competition. He told everyone to stand on their chairs, and I was like, *Fuck this, I'm not doing that, fuck you* [laughter]. “And then stick your arms up and stick them up higher! We're going to reach the sky as a team!” And I had my arms crossed and just thought, this is stupid. He saw what was happening, and I was leader on the team too, but he didn't change the script and said, “Anyone who doesn't stand up is trying to tear you down.”

**AB:** Oof.

**KL:** “And they're dead weight, and how we tell we're a team is we all stand on a chair together.” And I just thought, this is fucked up. So there's some of that in here—reach for the sky, or shut up. In the poem “Team Spirit” there's the line “sticking up for yourself / is at odds with team spirit / outside the shadow the script rolled on / it said those who don't climb / hold others back / no logic captures / the non-model member / we already were the same shirts.”

**AB:** Were you reading any writing on baseball while writing these poems? There's a lot of really good writing on baseball, and then there's this poetry-baseball connection you can find here or there with certain people. I wouldn't anticipate you were deep diving into that while writing these poems necessarily, but I am curious. Rae mentions Jack Spicer briefly in her introduction, and I thought that was interesting and wondered how much of that reference was Rae and how much of it might be Krystal.

**KL:** Yeah, I think that was largely Rae. I'd heard that Spicer term before, the Martians, and I went and read up and refreshed on that after reading Rae's piece. In her intro she says she's not into baseball, and she's surprised she likes the poems. I thought of that Spicer line as translating the alien transmissions, and baseball is what's alien. The prism translating it and putting it into something that's visible, even if you're not a fan and even if you're not immersed in the language of that sport. I wasn't doing a lot of baseball reading. I was doing a lot of Emo Bambino type of reading. Trying to see what the boys were talking about online. And then I found a few people who were talking about baseball who were not the boys. I did find a bunch of baseball writers whose opinions I respect, but a lot of the loudest voices online are people saying things like, “Oh, Trevor Bauer, it doesn't matter what he gets into off the field, that's personal”—you know, stupid idiots. But I was following a lot of journalists who were writing about why he's a scourge.

**AB:** There's this other angle from Spicer: the poet as radio. That you were listening to the radio while writing the poems makes a certain circle with that, though that wasn't intentional

in any way. There's a certain amount of baseball poetry that comes off as prosaic, and your poems never do that.

**KL:** By that do you mean more sentimental? Or prescriptive?

**AB:** Leaning overly on sentence construction, and putting this reflective mode up on the surface. That actually leads to sentiment, but I'm interested in sentiment. I just want to see it in ways that aren't telegraphed. I have this question I want to ask you, and I can't tell if this is a pain in the ass question or a funny question or both. It's sort of two questions in one, and you can answer it however you want: how old were you when you went to your first game? And how old were you when you wrote your first poem?

**KL:** I went to my first Cubs game on a field trip in school during fifth grade, which I think would have made me ten. I did not pay attention. I ate peanuts. I understand Sammy Sosa was there. That was very technically attending a game [laughing]. And then my first poem at all?

**AB:** Let's say the point at which you wrote something and realized, *Okay, I'm going to write more things.*

**KL:** Probably 15, if not 14. I was fortunate to go to a nice public high school that had creative writing classes, so I got to do that at school for three years. I must have been into it before the classes started, so that's why I think 14. I went around writing explicitly political poetry. I was reading *Adbusters*, and flipping through *Maximum Rocknroll*.

**AB:** And then did baseball come in at a certain point or is it more of a recent thing?

**KL:** It's a little more recent, and that Addison Russell cheese poem was the first one of these I wrote, before I was doing *Baseball Prospectus*. I think that's the one Patrick read, and then he contacted me. Which also, just to pause there, was fucking amazing. I thought, is this a scam? Someone looking for my credit card number? “Hey, I read your work and am wondering if you'd like to write some baseball poetry, and we pay a little bit of money.” Are you a bot? [laughing] I usually listen to the radio—maybe I watched the highlight later. Watching the video clip I just felt like there was so much going on that the commentators weren't including. And that felt like a pretty good metaphor for the whole situation. Many commentators were in fact describing the whole situation there.

**AB:** So that poem is called “Baseball Poem Written by a Woman”. It begins: “In St. Louis tonight, the shortstop tips over the left / field wall, his left arm extended to break his fall lands / in a woman's nacho cheese...” The poem begins as if it's happening right now. It's written in the present, so it's constructed as this moving image. A little later you say it looks like “one of those Renaissance paint-

ings.” I haven't gone back to look at the play, but I understood completely what you were talking about. All these different points of action and perspective laid out in front of you, and something is happening that's absurd but also this thing that could happen at a game.

**KL:** I don't know if you remember but there was a meme going around about Renaissance paintings. There was an iteration going around, someone in London or somewhere in the U.K. getting arrested for public drunkenness. He's on his belly with his hands behind his back, and all the people around him are watching—unrelated people watching the same thing, or just getting caught in the background doing their own thing. And this meme developed where people were like, *Oh, it's a Renaissance painting!* I don't even know if Renaissance is the right word. It's standing in as code for a museum painting. But there was something of the Fibonacci sequence about it, where there was a central point of action and then a rotating outwards. I don't think Renaissance painting fits that image, but it fits this one at least as well as that one. You could just see one thing or you could see more than one thing.

**AB:** What's your take on analytics? Do you care? Are you more old school?

**KL:** I'm a little bit more old school. Some of it I'm interested in. I don't really care about exit velocity. I don't think it matters.

**AB:** There's a couple lines for you.

**KL:** For some purposes I'm sure it's useful, but to the casual fan... I'm going to lump it in with the gambling stuff. I hate hearing about the over/under if I'm listening to the last minute of the pre-game bullshit before the real thing starts. That's so far outside of what's actually happening, to me, but then again I never played fantasy sports either, and I feel that's outside of the real experience. I know people who do multiple fantasy baseball leagues simultaneously, and I think, don't you feel like that ruins the fan experience, where you have to root against your own team sometimes? Obviously, they maintain no. Analytics, fantasy sports, sports betting is all more noise, and I've got enough noise in my brain, generally speaking. I don't need more. I don't really follow any other sports. I think I'd rather follow another sport as a fan than add another layer of complication. The layer of complication I do pay attention to is personal stories, which I think most fans do. The stuff the other day with Willson Contreras and his little brother William playing against each other—that's an interesting story. I'd rather spend twenty minutes thinking about that than something like, “How can I make a dollar off the next pitch?”

**AB:** Going back into the book for a second, how did “Zobrist sees America” come together? Is that poem written entirely from [Ben] Zobrist's perspective? Did you read about a trip he took?

**KL:** In my imagination it's from his perspective. I mean, I guess the whole book is from my imagination. What happened with Ben Zobrist was pretty interesting. He stepped away from the game to attend to some personal matters, and we found out what the personal matters were, which was that his wife had engaged in extra-marital activity, unbeknownst to him. With their pastor or something. Some kind of nasty detail that was not nice. And so in response to that there was this speculation—are they going to get divorced, are they going to patch it up? Eventually they got divorced. He was devastated and took time off from playing baseball because his family was falling apart. And he did go, I believe, and play some games at triple-A Iowa [high minor leagues]. I don't think he played any games at single-A South Bend [low minor leagues]. I was thinking about and imagining the travel times between locations for him. He identifies as a devout Christian, so I'm sure there was an extra level of pain for him in that situation. That's not my identity, but I can use my imagination there, too. Probably pretty disappointing. But he used to ride his bike to Wrigley Field, he lived in the neighborhood, or the next neighborhood down. He would put on his uniform and ride his bike to work. Pull up outside the field, in his uniform, and play catch with some kids before he reported for duty. He was a good player, and he seemed like a real sweet dude. I was feeling bad for him.

**AB:** That poem and “Try Your Best and Have Fun” are for me these two poems that get into this whole geographical ground. The minor leagues are really different than something any other sport has. There's been a reduction, unfortunately, of minor league teams. But they're all over the country, people playing baseball in all these small towns. There's Low-A, there's High-A, there's the Rookie League, there's Double-A, there's Triple-A, and there are also independent leagues. So you have five or six levels per organization. And that's not even getting into the Mexican League, the winter ball that takes place in certain countries in Central America, South America, across the Caribbean, and out into Japan and Korean and Taiwan. Baseball's this international sport that doesn't know how to celebrate that and articulate that sometimes. But I really like the way these two poems move across this wider field—no pun intended—and that odd sense of networks. “The full baseball moon will rise over the Pecos mountains / in the sputtering league's weird logo. Bisbee. Cruces. Ruidoso.” Bisbee is where my mother [poet Alice Notley] was born.

**KL:** They share the logo—it's the Train Robbers and the Vaqueros and two more teams, and they all have the same logo. I'm pretty sure Bisbee has the same logo as the others. And she [Notley] ends “At Night the States” with three cities, so that's a kind of nod to her.

**AB:** I wondered about that. I heard it.

I want to ask you about the second section, the

non-baseball section. These are the poems written around, or maybe parallel to, the baseball poems? Are they roughly from the same time period?

**KL:** They are. Maybe a slightly broader time period than the baseball poems. They're written the first couple of years I was in Chicago. 2017-2019. There are a few that are processing leaving New York and coming to Chicago.

**AB:** I was particularly interested in the poem after Howardena Pindell's work, “If You Succeed We Will Destroy You”, and then these two sonnets where the titles come out of Michael Jackson. It seems like the sources and forms of the poems are varying a lot. And there's this tonal characteristic across the poems that I don't want to try and define too much, because it's flexible, but I'm curious about this section in relation to the title of the book—*Systems Thinking With Flowers*. Sometimes book titles happen easily, and sometimes it feels impossible. This one has an intersection with every poem in the book. It feels like the sense of systems is an undercurrent, not a top-down thing foreclosing on the poems, if that makes sense.

**KL:** Yeah. With the baseball poems, in a way, they're all about baseball, but with the other section it never crossed my mind to make it be all about a thing that could be pointed to like that. But what I tried to do, even with the baseball poems, was to make them not be flat, where they're all pointing to a subject matter. It's interesting to think about form in the second section, because those two sonnets do kind of stick out. I think I was thinking about them as a kind of stunt—it's not what I usually do, writing into existing forms. I thought, I wonder if I can do that.

I took a workshop at The Poetry Project with Eileen Myles a bunch of years ago. We did this activity, which I've done as a teacher in different ways too, where we listened to something. We listened to a few minutes of *The Three Musketeers* on tape, or something like that. You listen, you take down language, you make something out of the language. Then you come to find out it still sounds like you. Even though it's not your language. So I was kind of doing that with the sonnet form. I had this bigger idea that I would write 65 sonnets that were all titled after songs by Black American artists. But then they were all going to be titled with parentheses, and I had too many rules. I still feel like these sound like me, they feel like me. I think there's this mood of critique when you're writing about and after people who were used up or thrown away by America. Pretty easy to stay gloomy if that's what you're working with, which is what was here.

**AB:** The poem “How Will I Know (Don't Trust Your Feelings)” —I didn't catch the title right away as coming out of the Whitney Houston song. I don't know how, because I've heard the song a million times, especially as a kid when it always on the radio, and it's just in

my head. And then I remembered “How Will I Know” is sung by Whitney Houston in the song, and “Don't trust your feelings” is this other voice, like a chorus coming in. And so the parentheses separate the phrases, and then the poem has this other density and fluidity to it. Once I caught it I was reading the poem thinking about Whitney Houston, and then I was also reading it word by word and line by line and letting it wash over me—that rate of change line by line and thought by thought. The baseball poems are cut by what's happening and what's on the radio and the turns are really surprising. This one's doing that but maybe there are longer articulations.

**KL:** When you say longer articulations, and I'm looking at the poem, as sentences they're longer than you might see in the baseball poems, where the lines are shorter and firing away. Part of what was fun about writing in that form was that I don't usually do that and I'm trying to make it work. The sentence gets stranger as it gets longer, because more tricks are required to navigate the form.

**AB:** Yeah. And I wonder if that thing you were talking about in terms of Eileen's class, where you're working with language in this other way, you're putting things together, the materials are coming from other sources—it's still you making decisions about what goes where, and handling the sounds and arrangements. It's hard to get too far away from your own relationship to language, unless you really want to break it down and challenge that. Even then you're still you doing it.

**KL:** How do you write something without it being you—it's impossible. It reminds me—I remember when I was teaching at Pratt, and going through a bad time, and I went to campus with no makeup on and looked like crap and had been crying. And my students, who had usually seen me with some makeup on, still recognized me. And I was like, *Nooooo! I don't have the costume on! This isn't the me you're supposed to know.* What's the point of putting makeup on if people still know it's me? [laughing]

**AB:** I think my mother wrote about my father that he didn't think he could ever sound like Walt Whitman by being Whitmanic in a poem, and he thought that had something to do with his education, being this working-class guy from Providence. But he could take Whitman's lines, put them into his poem, and try them on almost like a costume.

**KL:** Right, but then what's more working class than trying on a costume?

**AB:** Are you working on anything now, any new works? How have you handled writing in the last few years amidst all this?

**KL:** I read for Belladonna\* in May of last year, from a chapbook called *Yacht Problems* that they published. And that was what I was working on at the dawn of the pandemic. I live

on Lake Michigan, on the north side of Chicago, and there was all this discussion going on about the water levels. It was really high, the highest it had ever been. Damaging property, messing up the beaches. Then the pandemic reached us and influenced that piece of writing. I'm not writing that anymore, but glad it exists as a chaplet. Right now I'm at the beginning of something, writing in little bursts, and what's most active for me is that I'm having a lot of bizarre dreams. And I'm trying to gather information from that.

**AB:** Oh wow.

To read a longer version of this interview, visit: <https://www.poetryproject.org/publications/newsletter/271-winter-2023/an-interview-with-krystal-languell>

# “Beaten by a child in plainness of living!”: Rachel James w/ Morgan Võ

*Rachel James is a dear friend, but we only became close at the very onset of the pandemic. At that time, the manuscript that would become Rachel's first full-length collection of poems, *An Eros Encyclopedia* (Wendy's Subway, 2022), had just been selected by Wendy's for the 2019 Carolyn Bush Award. This is to say, I wasn't hanging with her when the writing happened, but in the years since our friendship really broke open, *An Eros Encyclopedia* has always been a forthcoming star on my horizon, a UFO from a prior time—and oh, how I hollered upon its arrival. This conversation was a way, for me anyhow, to engage with the Rachel I hadn't known, who animates this book as its central trickster, philosopher, traveler, witness. —MV*

**Morgan Võ:** Early in *An Eros Encyclopedia*, you quote Audre Lorde asking, “What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say?” I was wondering if there was something you were aiming to elaborate when you were starting this writing?

**Rachel James:** It's funny, I feel like when you trace the activity of meaning making, the pattern changes depending on what moment in the process one's referring to. I think what you're asking is about: now there's a book, this object, that has a kind of closed-ness. It creates the illusion of beginning, middle, end. I like the question because it makes me realize how one of the effects of having a book is the sense that there was a beginning. It's hard for me to locate, other than thinking about my lifelong obsession with how knowledge works. I suppose those basic questions of epistemology. How do I know what I know, how do the people around me know what they know, why do we all think we know? That question of understanding categories, why they exist and who makes them, that would be the... what was the word you used? Aim?

**MV:** That you were aiming to elaborate.

**RJ:** Aiming, yes. I think that's what I was aiming to elaborate.

**MV:** When I look at the title, I first really focus on “encyclopedia” as something that defines a kind of text. What is an encyclopedia to you?

**RJ:** “Encyclopedia” was my way to create an arrow—to point to processes of knowledge production and systems of knowledge. The title sets up a false expectation because the book doesn't follow the form of an encyclopedia in any way. Although, maybe it does in its variousness? But that's a pretty loose connection. So, “encyclopedia” is a kind of shorthand for categories of knowledge and the question of who makes the definitions, and beyond that, who creates the categories.

I've always been curious how the categories

themselves come about. It makes me think of Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, an early encyclopedia, or I mean, not particularly early because encyclopedias are quite old, but one of the first widely printed encyclopedias. Ultimately, Diderot wasn't satisfied with the form, and wanted to draw out the connections between things, not just aggregate information. But I see a lot of connections simply in the idiosyncratic act of selection. Even idiosyncratic might be too banal a word: the purposeful act of inclusion and exclusion.

**MV:** There are so many funny and wonderful references to ancient Greece. I particularly laughed at the moment where you're yearning for clothing that is basically a toga.

**RJ:** [laughs] Mmm. Many years ago, a friend showed me this list that he made of all the directives—like, moments of action—in *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers* by Diogenes Laërtius. *Lives and Opinions* is kind of like a survey, an encyclopedia, of different schools of Greek thought. My friend suggested that if you enacted these actions, you'd have more access to the ideas and ways of being of a particular school.

Diogenes is “the father of the Cynics.” One of the directives of the Cynics is to, for example, masturbate in the town square. I like the idea that there could be encyclopedias that give action as a way of knowing. There are a number of direct quotes from Diogenes that a chorus says in the book. And ones I just made up. And—I don't know how much I should get into Diogenes, but—

**MV:** [laughs] As much you want.

**RJ:** Diogenes is a sort of rich kid whose father owned a minting factory. He gets kicked out of town after debasing the currency. He disowns his father, gives all his possessions away, and goes to the city to live in a big ceramic jar.

I'm trying to think of other moments I describe in the book. Diogenes sees a child drinking from her hands. He throws his cup

away and says, “Beaten by a child in plainness of living!”

**MV:** Living in a ceramic jar sounds a bit like a combination of performance art and scholarship. Like, you have to produce these experiences in order to push further in knowing things. One thing I wanted to ask was about this formal device in *An Eros Encyclopedia* of describing different stages, and different performance situations. I was wondering if you have some sort of theater-envy or something, or if you had a past in the theater, or what that relationship is to performance?

**RJ:** [laughs] If I could be on a stage in front of a large audience, I would be a musician or a clown. I am way too introverted for that. I definitely have performance-envy. When I think of acting—it just seems so masochistic! To lay yourself down to enact someone else's vision seems brutally masochistic to me. But also humiliating and liberatory in the best way. I used to think I had to perform, in the literal sense, because it was so terrifying. Now I let myself write.

At one point I was actually developing a play. I thought, “I'm going to write this play and weave the play throughout the book.” But I never finished the play, so it's satisfying to hear you say that it's there, even though it's not.

But yes, the stages. I want to keep going with the stages because describing them is a simple way to express my unending experience of artifice.

**MV:** Yes—it might be that it's less about being an actor or writing a play even, and more about what happens when there's an architectural space that separates a performer and an audience. What happens when there's that kind of witnessing? And what happens when there's a mutual agreement to that artifice?

**RJ:** There's a kind of abstraction happening in the way that I am employing the stage and the audience and constantly referring forward to it. Maybe that's a sign of my own alienation? Just feeling that slight divide between myself and what I am observing, the separation of the performer even from herself. But I do think there's something about theater that I haven't yet been able to articulate. While writing the book, I was thinking a lot about performers, always situated within structures of power, who mirror the story of power back to the audience—for example, the court jester. The

trickster or clown or jester, maybe if there's a voice—I literally never had this thought before now—but if there is any voice being witnessed throughout the book, maybe the trickster is that omniscient voice.

**MV:** For me, one of the pleasures of reading your book is that there's so many people in it. I was excited about seeing our friend Cecilia Wu so many times! Could you talk about how polyvocal your poems are? There are so many people in them, and what about your writing makes it possible for that to happen, or desires for that to happen?

**RJ:** I wish we could call Cecilia! She could come and be my ghost interviewee.

Writing is such a social activity for me. I am perpetually in a state of not at all knowing what's going on. I feel confused all the time, and very much in the unknown. So I am curious about other people and their experiences. That is one of my earliest memories of feeling, just really wondering what is the consciousness of others. And kind of strangely—even though I'm doing this activity of creating a text, sharing it with others—I feel very much not interested in what I know, or think I know. I'm not interested in putting my opinions down on record as an activity.

I'm wondering now about world-building, and what it is to somewhat reconstruct the world around me. I'm thinking about how this kind of greediness, to witness or understand more, to put that to record... I don't know. I'm having a complicated thought about futurity and world-building, and whether I'm recording the present or trying to construct some different kind of future. I've always been curious about—going back to my obsession with categories—disrupting ideas about authorship and authority of thought, which opinions belong to who and which understandings belong to who. I definitely feel a kind of permeability. Like I love the premise of Fred Moten's *B Jenkins*, where each poem is a portrait of somebody who Moten is connected to, either personally or intellectually, that came into his life or his knowing through his mother. So the book becomes a kind of portrait of his mother. I desire that kind of experimentation with portraiture, and trying to highlight the permeability of being. I think that's how my writing becomes polyvocal.

**MV:** At one point in the book, Cecilia is saying, “If you take to be given life, you owe your-



*An Eros Encyclopedia, Wendy's Subway, 2022.*

self to death.” And you later say, “Every origin begins with an act of consumption.” But then I contrast those moments with another: you’ve just had a revelatory sexual experience with someone, and you write, “It must take another person to show me things I’ve already got.” So I feel like some of the important issues in the book are about accepting how much it takes other people to be a person, but also the difficulty of knowing what that means for your responsibilities to other people.

**RJ:** I do think understanding things in terms of their relationality is so much a part of my experience of being human and of writing. I was talking to a painter recently about painting, and I love talking to painters because I feel so distant from that form, and the very precise formal questions about color and what-not, and when I look at a painting the first question that comes to me is, “Where did the wood for the frame come from?” And then, “Where did the pigment come from? How did it get made? Who was paid to make it? Where did the money come from?” I would eventually land on the surface of the painting, the image.

I think what you’re noticing is a relentless practice of wanting to understand the borders or perceived borders that may not exist between things. The line about “every origin story begins with an act of consumption” came from a conversation about how cells reproduce, how one can consume the other in order to grow.

**MV:** There’s another moment where you’re having an experience of extreme self-awareness, and you write, “I think I was writing the story at that point instead of living it.” Then you quote Moyra Davey’s nephew asking her, “Wouldn’t you rather live life than narrate it?” I was wondering if you could elaborate on what difference there is between writing and living? And if there’s any risk in confusing the two? Like, do you think it’s an obstruction to be engaged in the world in a linguistic way?

**RJ:** Something that’s confusing me about the question is maybe our interpretations of that Davey line are different. I see the sense of narrating as an experience of consciousness, of being separate. But it’s interesting, because Moyra Davey works in what I would call some form of auto-ethnography. And that’s a form I’m also engaged with. So it is true, now that I’m thinking about it out loud, there is a kind of practical task of narrating, which would be

creating—in her case—texts, photography, and video. I’ve been narrating in many mediums over the years, including—horribly—performance. In this case I made a book of poetry.

This is kind of a hard one, to elaborate on how I experience consciousness, the difference between being and describing. Here’s me being confused. Can you say the question again?

**MV:** [laughs] Yeah, but I think I’ll also have to work it out out loud, if you don’t mind?

**RJ:** Of course!

**MV:** In the moment where you say, “I think I was writing the story at that point instead of living it”—if I’m remembering correctly, you’re having sex with this person, and you’re trying to make them come, and trying to make them come has started to feel like a job. And there’s this separation that you’re aligning with a perspective of observation as opposed to experience.

**RJ:** Yeah, being aware of another layer of consciousness.

**MV:** I think part of why I wanted to ask this question is that I so often carry this fear that what I’m doing is looking, and not living. That what I’m doing is writing it down in my head, and not participating or experiencing. And then sometimes, as I’m spending more and more of my life as a writer, I’m sometimes wondering, well maybe that’s just a different way of living. So, to what degree is there actually a value judgment between these two sides?

**RJ:** That helps me a lot. Thanks for giving me more context. I feel you—because I often think my misery and pain comes from not being able to connect with others, but I actually believe it’s from me monitoring connection, which is a version of writing it down in my head. It’s such a great question about when are these processes of observation generative, and when are they just creating more alienation and separation?

Thinking through practices of experimental ethnography and documentary—my academic background—I’ve found a lot of rich resources addressing these questions. I’ve been confusing things by teetering between the inner experience of an individual and the external act of representation, the writing, but I think that’s because I’m not confident I understand the boundaries between these categories. Traditions of witness are so complicated. People

who make work that awkwardly sits within looking and living, like Moyra Davey and Trinh T. Minh-ha, are big influences in my thinking. This is not explicitly in the book, but it is in the book because it’s a way of being.

**MV:** One last thing I wanted to ask about: the cover image is so amazing, but I also have very little understanding of what I’m actually looking at.

**RJ:** It’s an alluvial fan! I was going through my computer looking for images or ideas for the cover, and I found this experimental lecture I had given that I have full amnesia about ever giving, or making. It had a video that I played in the background as I spoke which was mostly a blank screen, but every so often a series of photographs of alluvial fans would appear, then suddenly the screen would go blank again for a long time. The talk was called “On Knowledge”—a joke—and I was using the alluvial fan as a way to think through how knowledge travels. Alluvial fans are created through a geological process. A river narrows until the flow of water spreads out like a fan. The image is an aerial shot from far above.

I have to give credit to the designer Rissa Hochberger, who placed the image—thinking again of categories and frames—in such a way as to accentuate its anthropomorphic qualities. I see a lot of bodily positions, a mountainous ass, and legs spread.

That’s the story of the alluvial fan. [laughs] That’s the story of the cover of the book.

POETRY

# tressing voids

*Multiverse: Sid Ghosh, Adam Wolfond, Adjua Gargi Nzinga Greaves, Imane Boukaila, Lauren Russell, Hannah Emerson, JJJJerome Ellis, Chris Martin*

How does this work? This poem, a collaborative study in tressing and pooling, was gathered and scattered from writer to writer over the span of several months.

**Gestation**

Generosity of deep  
rivers deems us  
worthy of life.

Again the rivers  
find the sea.

Again and again.

Can you tell  
the river to let go?

There is nothing  
to be found.

Come away now.

*Sid Ghosh writes—*

*Adam Wolfond hears, Adam Wolfond writes—*

Is this not the thinking  
that is the crux of wanting  
the ways of people  
and that world was really  
the love we need  
for bringing vortex  
of pace and pattern  
the way of typing this  
treatise of relation?

The dance this takes on  
is the living muses  
of teaching knowing  
neurodiversity  
so faces of making  
is living bodies minding  
and moving together

I think that the ways  
of varying the answering  
bodies is the bringing  
people rallying wanting  
that fast feeling of inspiration  
not language of instruction

I am that open person  
who needs offerings  
of the ground and the sticks  
and the open atmospheres  
are nattering for my attention  
so using inspirations  
being of need of thinking  
and grounding is the way  
of open field can break  
in my movement

I'm not about school  
make this about real ways  
we learn and are prizing  
knowing for the ways  
mad breaks of pacing  
people to the same rhythm  
uses closed doors  
challenging for varied feelers

I am going to say that I am  
not about school but about  
the way of open feeling  
and closed doors of school  
very hard for having open mind

Starting in steps  
of atmospheric attention  
is like isolating rhythm  
but asyncoption is the way  
of going to the varied paces  
of the makings and the olfactory  
wafts in easy calm ways  
that lie in the air  
practicing asyncoption  
is what I do easily  
because I can feel  
the multiverse

*Adjua Gargi Nzinga Greaves hears,  
Adjua Gargi Nzinga Greaves writes—*

until we break  
the river in  
two open portals  
pass worthy only

if their spill grows  
branching braving breaking  
reverse it and discover  
pools of mingling study

ease of pooling  
ease of study

pooling work we  
stranger ants march  
down our hills each with  
our speck of marble

in the future on the world's  
newly ancient marble beaches  
our babies tell their babies  
of the rivers we had to move  
the sand we had to claim

dodging lies  
grain by grain  
we unmade the prisons and  
gave all the ivy new life  
at sea

*Imane Boukaila hears, Imane Boukaila writes—*

Listening thoroughly  
to motions hitting truths  
by reasoning waves  
unsettling sedimented layers  
smothered thickening

mistakes

yearning to home  
their longing purpose  
reaching introvertedly  
toward rising tides  
trespassing free daring

streams

tracing tilting roads  
stressing time  
to redefine thresholds  
trusting the shift  
damping mindfully

hesitating

muttered testing  
loitering trials  
waiting to boat mission  
to inhibited motivation  
truthfully tressing

voids

filling generously  
trespassed plots reuniting  
in hidden estuaries mingling  
truths and trials and mistakes  
trusting bonding saddling

modes

troubling calm waters  
reviving meaning  
piling treasures  
regenerating thorough  
findings excavated

Hoping to boat  
a wanderer beneath  
sunset's pink-chalked cross-

hatched altocumulus  
perlucidus posing  
for a photograph

some waves wear  
the code of rope and sail—

pummeling rocks  
in sacred formation, straddling  
unease and flirtation—

until sky's patchworked  
from navy and cloud:

Could waves shore  
you up, nudging you back  
to shore despite

such stars dangling  
in the quilted night?

*Lauren Russell hears, Lauren Russell writes—*

*Hannah Emerson hears, Hannah Emerson writes—*

Makes makes makes makes beauty  
become reality nothing become  
the beauty getting beauty beauty  
grow into the beauty heaving beauty  
making beast become the beast  
looking becoming beast that universe  
needs to just needs to help beast  
become reality that is becoming universe  
reality that helps make thought tree you  
into the beauty that is getting born yes yes  
yes

After hearing Sid, Adam, Adjua, Imane,  
Lauren, and Hannah, I sat down at a  
hammered dulcimer and played. Here's a  
translation of what I played:

to trust a gallop fruiting full upward in deep  
winter

left astride the syncopated foot of a newly  
ancient dance

split pivots too quick to write but wide open  
to forgiveness

*JJJJJerome Ellis hears, JJJJJJerome Ellis writes—*

o star, o wandering, o ladder of tressed  
ephemera

we will hold close to the crossing of the pink  
channel of morning

the unseen upholds

a chair, uninvented, a year rolling back to  
swaddle shame

the high fruit calls search, a thought to tree  
toward

what can open multiverse in bodies?

generosity of deep  
come away now

is this not the thinking  
of the multiverse

until we break  
at sea

listening thoroughly  
findings excavated

hoping to boat  
in the quilted night?

makes makes makes makes beauty  
nothing that is getting born

to trust a gallop  
that can open bodies

a body that can open rivers  
a river that can let go

*Chris Martin hears, Chris Martin writes—*

*Sid Ghosh hears—*

POETRY

# Four Poems

*Aida Muratoglu*

## Ghazal for Awnings

Picture the olive tree in September: bleeding green,  
whistling unripeness. I dream it, I count it, I return.

My grandmother will eat fish later with her best friend:  
she told me so. Took a picture of the sunrise and hit return.

The city eats clouds for breakfast, then turns to grinding salt  
from its far shores. It's a new year again: the returns.

Subsuming my brother, I grow three beards a day—  
scraggly hairs on my face that prickle the pillow, no hope for return.

Taste the fig: bee: skin: pop:  
the fig gets under the fingers, watch the season (re)turn.

They named me recrudescence, coming raw again.  
Aida in Arabic: the one who returns.

## On Viewing Alex Katz at the Guggenheim, Or: Coming Back to New York from Maine

taking late this cold night I watch the fog settle over  
the city and remember the ocean, where the water meets  
the rocks and the eider ducks roll on the swelling waves, their  
small bodies resting as the ocean crests and breaks  
harsh on the shore: a summer turns to fall and the sky burns  
with it: there is dust on the light fixture: on the table the child draws a person  
with long arms that reach the bottom of the page,  
and the child giggles and her hair ups and downs and  
when she sculpts the play-doh she needs a special tray and  
some of her Halloween costumes scare her. laughing with the child  
lands me and is a falling apart from youth, or a  
proximity to it:  
joy across language,  
the books ringing on the shelf

## Sonnet II

*after Lyn Hejinian*

The girl Lila cares for ate gum off the ground in the playground  
Ottoman ghazals were written from top to bottom, and by that I mean from old man lover to  
young boy lover  
Make me cereal for breakfast  
Brathwaite says the oral tradition creates a continuum of meaning between poet and audience,  
history unmaking its lone self  
Then the angels—the illuminated letters  
The bouquet you got me for my birthday wilted and now we're left with crispy roses  
When time loops, does it do so without thinking? Does it follow a set curvature?  
There is no metaphor like a pile of dishes  
Pain in my body like ripe figs: let me rip you let me suck you let me drizzle down your sides  
May means cold in morning hot by noon freezing at night  
Assonant moonlight, oh woo, oow ho  
Toss the salt over your shoulder so when you tell me you're engaged I can look you in the eye and  
we can laugh together about it  
The man at the corner held a vanity mirror up to the sun, helloo and hello, good morning  
When I looked past your legs to the bottom of the bed all I saw was linen, no god

## Flower

The child tells us that the cat has died,  
says the cat will always be dead.

Later, we throw a stuffed animal  
across the room. Sometimes it hits the ceiling  
and then we laugh.  
The cat is still dead.

For a summer, you took care of that cat—  
mostly you, and then once me.  
She sat with you while you wrote and read  
and we fell further in love.

We swam so much.  
The ocean caught us.

I am unsure if I believe that ancient Greece  
was a phallocracy, ruled by the image of the erect penis.  
How does time work, then? Is Thucydides writing  
about dicks when he writes about war?

At Pentecost this year, I will remember it is  
Pentecost and I will watch the tree  
out the window and I will feast  
for that is the feast holiday, no?

The piano in the next room is bouncing, breathing  
up a scale. I wonder what the ballet looks like.

Next week, Will tells me it was lavish,  
that the choreographer works with ghosts  
and after some time in the church the piece shifted,  
making room for the spirits that live here.

On Shabbat this week, I did the hand washing  
so shadow, what do you say to that?  
The kitchen is an archive  
I came clean for you

God, have you seen this place?  
The boss, like pharaoh,  
so Ezekiel says,  
is a sea monster.

Red mountains spell your name  
but I would tie my shoes for you

# Photographs of Paintings

Brontez Purnell

1. I remembered that made for TV movie from his childhood. The one set in the 60s Deep South. An elderly black woman is defiantly sitting at a counter that's whites only. The soda jerk is a boy who she was a wet nurse for and was a maid at his house. He asks her to leave and she replies. "I nursed you with milk from my breasts—AND MILK IS THE SAME AS BLLLLLLLLUD!" And the white boy immediately sets her up a plate and fork at the counter. I don't know why this is on my mind as I wake up.
2. There was that one black and white photo of Coretta Scott King—not the famous funeral one but another of her in her living room. Hair and skin immaculate and a stoic far-away look—it's haunted me since childhood. I thought what a bother—having *Time Magazine* in your face like that when your husband had just died—though still in moments of grief when I am alone I often imagine that someone is there taking pictures of me.
3. I was sitting across from my altar to the dead in my bedroom. Right near a framed picture of Marilyn Monroe is a framed picture of my Father. They shared the same birthday. I am hesitant to draw similarities but also can't stop myself. These two good-looking, well styled, dramatic, self-destructive bitches. These two are the reason I don't fuck with Geminis. Geminis are fucking brutal.
4. I sat at the flea market digging through the 25-cent cardboard box of abandoned black and white mid-century photographs that were rescued from god knows where. There is a picture of two army men in brown soldier suits sitting in a booth of a bar—one's hands around the other. Their sleeves are both rolled up and as you would expect the more feminine one looks totally fucking wasted. You can tell these two men are fucking.
5. To this day it is a made for TV movie set in the 70s if I could guess. I saw it on the midday movie slot my local station had growing up—I had to be about 6 I think. A woman attends an award ceremony where she walks the red carpet alone and some bitch out of NOWHERE in a very audible voice says "WHY IS SHE ALONE!?"—she wins the big award and says something to the effect of "I have had to sell many things for this award—sometimes I've had to sell my body" and starts crying on the mic and heaven fucking help her I think some people start booing her and she runs out of the theater crying. Even as a young boy I know this is a total fucking carry—what I can't explain is why even after all these years I still get this deep knife twisted in gut feeling of sadness for her. Like how has that feeling maintained itself so fucking fresh—like I locked in a zip lock bag for 30 years and kept it.
6. There is this picture of Ruth St. Dennis that always captivates me. Do you know of her? She was Martha Graham's dance mother. It's from the 1910s or 20s and she is wearing traditional South Asian garb (she is a white woman). Her back is arched and she has one hand saluting the sky (her signature pose) and the skirt she is wearing is billowing out as if she is turning with a great force. It is a lie. It is theater. How sometimes the picture tells a better story than the dance itself. There is invisible thread fastened to the pleats of the skirt and pulled up and outward, giving the illusion that she twirled ballistically into this pose when in fact she is standing still.

# Reviews

**26 Tears by George Tysh and Chris Tysh**  
BlazeVOX Books, 2022

Review by Tyrone Williams

Though they have not always received due credit for their contribution among the oral (and, of course, musical) artistic innovations that have dominated the history of poetics in Detroit, George and Chris Tysh have been crucial to the development of a materialist countertradition of poetics, literary and otherwise. They have not been alone in this endeavor, especially if we think of Detroit as the hub of an experimental, even avant-garde, cultural matrix in southeastern Michigan (for example, Ken Mikolowski's *The Alternative Press* and Clayton Eshleman's journal *Sulfur*). Nevertheless, the LINES Reading Series that George Tysh initiated at the Detroit Institute of Arts in 1980 provided an important complement, if not rebuttal, to the traditional lyric and narrative poetics propagated by most of the poetry I encountered in the English Department at Wayne State University and, more generally, throughout the surrounding Cass Corridor. Both traditions, the dominant lyric/narrative one and the innovative/experimental one, were crucial to my development as a writer when I lived in Detroit (e.g., I took classes at DIA with Chris Tysh and with Edward Hirsch at Wayne State) and so everything that follows must be punctuated with a qualifying asterisk.

Though they have each published books of poetry separately, this new collection, *26 Tears*, represents, I believe, the first joint publication by the Tyshes. It's not exactly a collaboration since, as Chris notes, she wrote her half of the book after George had finished his. Indeed, her poem is, in certain respects, a response to his. Comprised of two abecedarians—George's follows tradition, going from A to Z, while Chris's moves in reverse order from Z to A)—*26 Tears*, in toto, meditates on what it means to survive, as individuals, as couples, during the twin disasters of the Covid-19 pandemic and the Trump administration. Those familiar with George's previous books of poetry will not be surprised by his sparse, laconic lyricism, moving seamlessly among couplets, tercets, and quatrains. Though often serious in a Kafkaesque way ("Masking // tape removes // the instant // from recorded / memory") (38), George will occasionally allow himself some coy linguistic play: "a golden / word / messy // so close / to / necessary" (32). Chris's abecedarian is more serious and full-bodied, more fleshed out, though the stanzas are primarily couplets and tercets (except for the opening, single stanza "Z" poem, dedicated to Etel Adnan). As in her previous works, leitmotifs circulate throughout the abecedarian, so that "In the waning days / A narrow window // Might

lead to / One icy fact" (90) prepares the reader for "You watch them walk / Across the thin ice // Of a cover story / Meant to reshuffle // What accrues as fact" (111). Moreover, both poets treat the verso/recto format of the book page as both a uniform field and as distinct, discrete fields. Combined with each poet's use of enjambed stanzas, the status of the poem can appear unsettled, both a particulate of linguistic matter and a nebulous moment on a temporal spectrum. Formally, then, the two abecedarians constitute a miniature history of aesthetic influences as George's poem draws its lexicon from innovative poets (e.g., Jack Spicer), novelists (e.g., Haruki Murakami), filmmakers (e.g., Robert Bresson), and jazz musicians (e.g., Ornette Coleman) while each section of Chris's poem quotes a single word from each section of George's work, forming an interlocking chain or, if you will, string theory of artistic practices.

*26 Tears* reminds us that in the wake of the poetry wars of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, the old binaries between "expressive" and "anti-expressive" poetics, while necessary strategic positions, were often, in fact, more entangled in certain practices (think of Michael Palmer or Susan Howe). As whimsical, polemical, and humorous as it is formally innovative and engaging, this new take on an old form is a welcome addition to the oeuvres of both writers.

**Commonplace by Hugo García Manríquez,**  
**translated from the Spanish by NAFTA**

Cardboard House Press, 2022

Review by Judah Rubin

Hugo García Manríquez's *Commonplace* approaches the Mexican state as an incomplete allegorical sign. Mexico, as an entity, is inseparable from the sign-system of the militarized world of the war on drugs and the ecocide of late capitalist extractivism. García Manríquez writes, "When we read literature / we read the budget / of the Mexican army // When we perceive artworks / we perceive the budget / of the Mexican army." For García Manríquez, this is familiar poetic territory. His 2015 *Anti-Humboldt* is an erasure of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), strategically reread and reassembled. As Divya Victor notes, this document itself acts as an oppositional reading. *Anti-Humboldt* does not dispense with NAFTA; instead, it highlights those stubborn constellations of discomfiting and ill-fitting international legalese that, in the creation of a documentary transparency, becomes opaque to itself. In *Commonplace*, García Manríquez is working at the fact of syntactic flattening of the major buildup in the Mexican armed forces during the so-called War on Drugs (including the development of the supposedly more "civilian oriented" National Guard under current Mexican president Andrés Manuel López Obrador).

Militarization often relies on the appropriation of the zoological and mythological, and the naming of military hardware stands in

both for the obfuscation of extinction level events for many of those same critters whose names are appropriated. In section three of *Commonplace*, we turn to the Palacio de Bellas Artes, which in many ways is representative of the transitional state, before and after the 1910 Mexican Revolution. In García Manríquez's book, we take a tour of the Palacio's design, where "You read about animal mascarons... The mascarons of human heads / represent the rifle FX-05 Xiuhcoatl." Xiuhcoatl, the turquoise serpent wielded as a weapon by the god Huitzilopochtli, enters here, as a way of marking the transformation of the national mythos. "The flowers and the mascarons of the Palacio / made by the Italian sculptor Gianetti Fiorenzo," García Manríquez writes, "are indistinguishable from the 267,500 active / members of the Mexican army".

The indistinguishability of the contemporary military budget from Mexican cultural heritage emblemized in the Palacio de Bellas Artes is, thus, central to this work: "Begin in any place of the totality // Begin, for example / with 40 combat aircraft, begin / with helicopters armed with additional / capacity for the precision / bombing of land // Bombers that are an extension / of the impact on my mother's cheekbone / when I was 17." I think García Manríquez would agree with critic Fredric Jameson when he writes that the study of capital itself is the "true ontology" of the contemporary period: to understand our time is to understand its economic rationality. García Manríquez's writing performs this mapping adroitly, demonstrating the way the biographical ("the impact on my mother's cheekbone / when I was 17") is coterminous with the hypermilitarized present of specialized military aircraft.

*Commonplace* is firmly located in this fractured and fracturing totality ("Beside history / our own indexicality"), but, and this is where I find *Commonplace* to be so brilliant, the text pivots to think with the *Popol Vuh* in its consideration of the more than human world. The *Popol Vuh* is a K'iche Maya story of creation, which poet and critic Edgar Garcia reminds us refers to itself as "an instrument for seeing." A syncretic product of the colonial period, it envisions, as Garcia writes, that "the power to create is summoned in language: what is needed to bring about the dawn from the darkness is a proper way of speaking, of ordering the world in language, which [the *Popol Vuh* says] is one and the same with a proper way of seeing." García Manríquez comments that "The *Popol Vuh* records the rebellion / of the objects and animals / against human endeavors" within which "...exist an imminent historical lesson," namely that "before after sound / before after sense // a new nothing // traverses the poem // as capital / traverses the century // reactivating insurrection / the insurrection / of objects / the uprising / of matter." Thus, though the *Popol Vuh* was written down in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by a Dominican friar, likely based on a 16<sup>th</sup> century Mayan version, in Edgar Garcia's words, complementing what García

Manríquez writes in *Commonplace*, "the book equates its penumbral anticipation, in its moment in the darkness before the dawn, with the darkness of colonialism."

The "rebellion / of the objects and animals" does not exist outside of the "progression of continuous moments / before the collapse"—as though one could pass into a space outside of material entanglement, outside of the fact of the violence the Mexican state must project in its specific historical formation, which is actualized within the time of everyday life. But it is the uprising of objects that retains the ability to speak in their mobilization in parataxis. The insurrection of objects comes from their anaphoric repetition. Directly after García Manríquez writes "The brink doesn't vary / under the weight of the concrete / it varies in its liberation" he begins the final movement of the book where stanzas beginning "The collapse spreads as far as the liberation of" are followed by a litany of threatened or endangered fauna. Here language is most taxed by war, there is slippage—collapse spreads "as far as...liberation." Though the collapse of species and ecosystems is imminent, it also "entra al lenguaje sale," or "enters language exits." At the far end of ontopower, there is liberation from language itself.

This book is thickened with the fact of violence's pervasive reality that finds itself in both the ontological ("just as the fauna is indistinguishable / from the 2,675,000 active troops") and in syllogistic transformation of, say, one endangered sea turtle for another. "A list collapses onto the forms of life...of 221 animals on the brink of extinction." For García Manríquez, "The list is an attempt to / approximate reality." At the site of collapse, *Commonplace*, *Lo Común* braids the agonizing reality of that "true ontology" in which any commoning is bound up, no doubt, in the quotidian and necessarily so. It is, as García Manríquez writes, "The collapse of abstraction / as another form of freedom."

**Heroic Dose by Matt Longabucco**

Goliath Books, 2022

Review by erica kaufman

*Heroic Dose*, Matt Longabucco's long awaited first full-length collection of poetry, is "a treatise on openings" that digs deep into the opening of subjectivity, experience, attention, and the inherent lyricism of everyday apprehension. These poems harken back to both imagism and New York School, while they also reverberate with filmic "moments of being" (to borrow Virginia Woolf's term), a dailiness that transcends "the panoply of life." Take, for example, the opening poem, "Waiting to Go Down," which collapses the metapoetic gaze into phantasmagoria:

It really does matter how long the lines are.  
Especially when you turn the page—what  
drama.  
There's a monster at the end of this book.  
Raw identity at the start.

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The poem moves from the observational—“book / that crosses the picnic table”—to comment on the book the reader is entering, then swerves to bring into focus the anxiety of a speaker speaking. It attempts to depict some semblance of “real” while also calling into question the hierarchies that define what qualifies as real or realistic. Literally, what is dubbed “real” depends on the thing’s legibility, existence as a recognizable object. However, this definition of “real” hinges on the viewer, a looker who deems that something exists because it is seen. Instead of simply describing “this book,” for example, Longabucco imbues the description with details that push the reader to reconsider their own sense-making process. What does it mean for “this book” to have “raw identity at the start”? What does one ordinarily expect from a book’s beginning?

In *Attention Equals Life*, Andrew Epstein examines “everyday-life poetry” because “such poetry has the potential to change the way we understand—and even how we live—our own everyday lives.” What Epstein draws attention to is the impact of attentiveness itself, how a lens cast on the tiniest details of a day raises the stakes of what it means to document the world as one wanders/wonders through it. “Waiting to Go Down” continues, “Over there a group of Orthodox girls / jump rope and it’s tricky with the long skirts / but they seem to do okay.” Here the speaker immerses the reader in a picture of their surrounds, a picture in motion and imbued with the pragmatic musings of the narrator. The line breaks invite the eye to dwell on the “girls” first and then the activity they engage in, with the final break offering an observational judgment detached by space from the activity itself. These girls jumping rope, “they seem to do okay,” and they are “do[ing] okay” at much more than just recreational sport, at least through the eyes of the speaker. In this moment the reader sees an everyday occurrence as both what it is in the moment of the poem, and what that small moment might signify on a much larger scale.

What does it mean to “do okay” amidst the contemporary moment?

*Heroic Dose* is largely comprised of long poems and serial poems that showcase Longabucco’s gift for making transformative use of extended verse forms. “The Oubliette,” the second poem in the book, oscillates between chronicling dailiness and dipping into a spectrum of references (film and text), and grounds the book’s poetic noticings in the deeply private and public spheres. Longabucco writes,

my mother used to shush me in theaters  
as if I could like anything better  
than all sitting quietly together  
each misinterpreting an image  
because of the force of incidence

This scene begins inside a familial (and familiar) moment, a child being asked to be quiet, and then expands outwards to question a collective of film viewers. “Each misinterpreting an image / because of the force of incidence” is a particularly telling pair of lines—individual perspective is emphasized, and the word “incidence” grounds the moment. One hears “incidence” and “incidents” at once, an aural move that evokes a sense of “misinterpretation” as both an event and a repeated occurrence.

Several sections later, Longabucco writes,

...people are careful these days  
they know the future is dire  
but they want to be in it  
healthy and accomplished  
you can’t love someone in the future  
you can only love them now

Here the poem addresses and depicts a moment in time, the current moment which is certainly one in which “the future is dire,” but this depiction is unusual in the way it is at once understated and urgent. The narrator continues to read as truth-teller, in the mythic sense of the term, one who can synthesize

hopes for a world which has not yet arrived, while also pragmatically remaining grounded in the present. I can’t help but think of James Schuyler’s “The Morning of the Poem”: “What can one write between the lines? Not one damn thing. Look over / Your shoulder, into the future: one thing I want to see is heavy snow falling in Chelsea, to walk in it, snow / Blowing in my face, from where I live to where you live...” Longabucco extends Schuyler’s excavation of the “ordinary” into aesthetic territory; the poem is omniscient in its gaze, one that brims with a cataloging and chronicling of objects and objectifications. The tools of another generation always need to be extended in order to greet the contemporary moment, and so Longabucco importantly extends the descriptive acts of cataloging and chronicling so that they also involve critical interrogation. The poem both depicts and questions the “ordinary,” extending the “I do this/I do that” gesture of the first generation New York School into a present where modes of representation are much more fraught.

As evidenced in its title alone, *Heroic Dose* raises the stakes of the poetic quest—as per Terence McKenna, “heroic doses” are incredibly and intentionally strong; they take one outside of the present, outside of reality, and pave the way for unexpected, meaningful experiences to occur. Rather than simply subvert “the heroic” or reorient the way the reader interacts with daily experience, Longabucco offers,

I know the madness of obsession  
seems like it’s going to rob us of our discourse  
but don’t you see that only after we accept it  
can our real encounter begin?

“Real” is key here, the speaker is in search of “our real encounter” which can only take place once “the madness of obsession” is accepted, once “discourse” is subsumed. This is a cinematographically scored book filled with critiques of everyday parataxis; life in the city. Take, for example, “where in Brooklyn do you

walk? / the grayest part or the greenest part”; “the maitre d’ on a barstool / texts into his lap”; “Home Depot’s always open / and the big public pool still empty.” These are moments where the city is palpable, yet not idealized.

“Lucky 7s” is a tour de force romp through neoliberal New York:

the future’s here  
we had the clues if not the concentration to  
foresee it  
the pen in my hand pulls toward the Muji  
store  
like a compass needle tugging true north

The poet/hero/anti-hero heeds the call to adventure and descends into the street self-consciously battling late capitalism: the pull of the commercial also pulls “these cheap boot-soles” as they “slip on smeared ice.” The vulnerability present in these descriptive, interrogative swerves pushes the reader to pause at the threshold of what’s known and unknown, both carrying weighty implications. In the collection’s title poem, Longabucco contemplates:

why, if I’m in an Airbnb  
and on the table there’s a magnifying glass  
and a crystal quartz  
do I stare at the tableau they make  
rather than use one to understand the other  
and then the other to smash the one

The speaker is in a borrowed home, questioning what to do with two charged objects that form a still life in front of him. Yet, rather than aim for understanding or destruction, he reflects on both, placing the weight of action on the act of reflection, of thinking about the way one interacts with that which surrounds us, and what that intentionality might teach.

“But I Have Always Been the Same,” the book’s last poem, reads as a retrospective, a harkening back to the evolution of the poet, “so I went to poetry readings / far from where

I normally went.” The poem continues to wind forward, in and out of texts and readings, and anxious musings on the self who attends them/to them. This poem is a particular triumph in the way it operates as a sort of mise-en-scène but full of mirrors, imagistic fragments that narrate and mutate:

...that was my last reading  
afterwards I decided to erase my trail  
retracted all the phrases and images I'd uttered  
back into me  
with a shiver  
like holding down delete  
while the cursor swallows letters...

Just as it began “...afraid, and everybody's nice / about it,” *Heroic Dose* comes to an elegant close fueled by a similar anxiety related to the self in relation to other(s). The return that happens is not one of atonement, but a continued grappling with the daily and the real, the powers that power us, as humans.

*Heroic Dose* is honest and piercing, vital in its formal bravery and aesthetic finesse. Longabucco writes, “I want my language / to adorn, transmit, and germinate / not spend more words than necessary,” and the result is this astonishing collection that interrogates objects of memory in an attempt to locate oneself in a version of home. These are poems that revel in too muchness, gestures of self-conscious self-understanding in a world where the self is a lyric that demands singing.

#### ***Dream Rooms* by River Halen**

Book\*hug Press, 2022

Review by Spencer Williams

I encounter *Dream Rooms* in the backseat of my parents' van as we zoom across the watery edge of California to arrive at my sister's house in Sacramento. The comfort of River Halen's book helps to soothe the anxious empty of the roadside views, and by extension, the cumbersome traffic we stall in. The entire trip I've been referred to as “he,” though the occasional “she” emerges from my parents' mouths like a red pen scrawling over a student's basic error, their untrained tongues struggling to accommodate what to them will always feel like a linguistic prank I'm pulling, despite six years of my being out reflecting back to them in the rearview. Refreshingly, *Dream Rooms* reads like knowing and welcome company for the perpetually misidentified, and as a result, is less concerned with fixating on commonplace splints of specifically trans microaggressions. The beautiful complexity of Halen's writing is a balm against that feeling of self-estrangement. I fall into Halen's poetics and prosaic histories like they're made of feathers, emerging as a reader both new and comfortably animal, a suddenly shapeless body held safe inside the margins.

Like the old wads of gum plastering up the brick wall of *Dream Rooms's* cover, River Halen's book beams with color and trembles from the weight of its accumulations. In the

glorious clutter of Halen's archive, one finds animals both dead and alive, splintering their heads, feeling their cunts, and all the while blending into a mountainous array of sartorial objects, like “two sweaters, four T-shirts, a sports bra, eight pairs of slightly stretched-out underwear, a pair of jeans, a pair of too-tight beige cotton polyester blend pants...” This piling becomes a choreography of grief as the speaker traverses the aftermath of past heartbreaks and current estrangements. Similar to how a wooden chair burdened with the tossed contents of a closet inevitably transforms, with time, into a statue of sorts, Halen's poems shift and expand intimately familiar tableaux of solitude into communal meeting grounds. In “Reason,” for instance, space all but collapses around the speaker, turning a good, old-fashioned bathroom crying session into a familial memory where “My family did not keep / books in a magazine / rack by the toilet / they just sat / with the light of civilization / bleeding under the door.” Time and time again, the present of these poems reaches backwards in time to waltz with history, with longing, the contents of the world held just beyond the door frame, where a “bald eagle's nest” becomes a dueling sense of “love and casual / cruelty to my face.”

This rush of wildness is, of course, no accident. In the section titled “Some Animals and Their Housing Situations,” flesh and fur leave their traces upon the other, marking the thin line that divides human want from animal need. In the process of caretaking a friend's rabbit—hilariously named Frog—Halen's speaker is confronted with the double whammy of mortality's indifference to animal innocence and capitalism's lurking and monstrous silhouette in the spaces of an apartment that isn't wholly theirs. Frog exists on the page as both a comfort and a trauma, a being to care for and another thing to mourn. Despite a veterinarian's attempts at rejuvenation (following an accident causing Frog a head injury), captured beautifully by Halen as a “carefully choreographed series of trade-offs and competent hand motions that spell a gently glowing suggestion in the night sky,” the rabbit eventually succumbs to its wound, leaving a hole in both the apartment and the page. Such is the painful process of care. Sometimes our best efforts aren't enough to stop time or reverse it. The speaker's daily ruminations on apartment life are thus paired with histories that pull extinction into the domestic. Always, something on the periphery is perishing. And always, we are only able to do the best we can to survive the day.

Surviving, however, is not some bloodless act. It is messy, sometimes brutally so. In the poem—is that the word?—“Six Boxes,” Halen's speaker collects the abuses of male artists on a shelf, in book form. Their collective violations bleed into one another and then out, touching both the speaker's personal and literary life. How does one put into language the random absurdity of violation? How do the “words of the rapists and manipulators and assailants” become tangible, manipulative units,

things to view and consider and interrogate beneath the all-seeing eye of a microscope? For instance, as Halen's speaker ponders, is there “an aesthetic” or “a grammar” that binds the various abusers' texts together, like a code that can be broken for the betterment of us all? Halen's work suggests this kind of scientific probing is a potentially fruitless labor if the expectation is to arrive at a clarifying solution—there is not, and may never be, any clean answer regarding our ability to anticipate, or solve, abusers and the dangers they unleash. Thankfully “Six Poems” isn't interested in cleanliness. Even in writing this review, I've typed and deleted and re-typed the word “speaker” and have come away feeling unsatisfied with *speaker's* implied remove, especially on the subject of rape. For instance, when Halen writes “I began to think more about honesty” in regard to the poet Frederick Seidel and his violations, it becomes nearly impossible for me to sever the ubiquitous poet-speaker from the poets themselves, to write on behalf of a cypher's work, and to not hear the utterly human ache inside the questions posed about accountability and immunity, about trauma, about invisible marks left upon the body, marks that are still real because they are still felt.

I finish reading *Dream Rooms* at my sister's house, in the middle of a windstorm that cuts all power, leaving us in total darkness save for the glow of my laptop screen, a couple flashlights, and a pile of half-dead iPhones. In the pitch-black center of our collective anxiety about electrical wirings and hot water, I think about how laughably pathetic we all must look from above, huddled together at the heart of this old, shaking foundation, rendered equally vulnerable in the face of unexpectedly volatile weather. I hold this image of our panicking selves with a line from Halen's poem titled “Mirror,” because suddenly we are all lost in the dark. Suddenly my family and I have lost our bodies to this room that eats our light. I think about the line: “Hiding is OK. It's OK. / I uncross my legs.” In the poems we write, we are able to dissolve ourselves, to hide, and yet, at the same time, be seen. And so I follow this instruction, my body trailing behind Halen's poem to feel, however briefly, at ease.

#### ***let the heart hold down the breakage***

***Or the caregiver's log* by Maureen Owen**

Hanging Loose Press, 2022

Review by Cassandra Gillig

If there were a Mt. Rushmore of wild and free New York School Feminist Publishing, Maureen Owen would be up there beaming ear to ear for all the tourists. A longstanding and generous steward for language antagonizers, Owen's *Telephone Books/Magazine* was a Whitepages for lesser known St. Mark's devotees of all regions—freaks of the everyday, accidental lyricists, meter thieves, etc. Owen's involvement in the Project, too, is a beautiful looming history of love for poetry writ large.

Owen's newest collection *let the heart hold*

*down the breakage Or the caregiver's log* is her twelfth book, another work of attentive recordkeeping that adheres itself to even the smallest moment's melody or dysfunction or general allure. *let the heart* chronicles Owen's caretaking for her mother during the final stages of her life, an inevitably difficult topic but one that seeks truth and miracle with the same deft eye. Though Owen avoids directly addressing her own struggles, the book opens with a list of facts about caregivers—that they are stressed, exhausted, lonely in providing medical services but never entirely that alone (29% of people in the US also provide this sort of imperfect aid to someone in their life). Home care exists both because of the world and in spite of it; there's little recourse in a medical system which leaves us isolated in our time of greatest need and places the largest burdens of care on those with the least time and resources. The economy of caretaking is inextricably a part of poetry—so many of us being precariously employed or uninsured or existing against traditional family structure or simply broke and exhausted. We have learned to provide for each other in ways that are both because of capitalism's violent denials (“billionaires don't care if we like them” one poem starts) and far superior to anything it could ever dream up. Owen's story—of being caught for life at the fringes of stability—is relatable and her caretaking journey follows suit. Of all the failures chronicled in this book, there's an understanding that personal fallibility is a product of the impossible task. “Getting mad at anger is counterproductive,” Owen writes, reorienting herself toward the small miracle of anything working at all.

The poems in this collection are often dialogues or disobedient tautologies—what happens when the floor falls and leaves two people equally stupefied? There is a generous amount of misunderstanding but a particular sweetness in every exchange. Titles argue with the stanzas they govern. The poetry of life fights the austere anti-rhythm of living. It's a propulsion that tugs backwards. “Above us clouds flee southward / grounded our wind blows north // her hair blows forward / mine blows back” one title announces. This is a regular day:

*mark a line on a  
milk white plank table  
anchoring a stasis of modality*

Owen is at her best when the poem does not give in to the frustrated logic of the world—when it instead falls trustingly into an appreciation of what happens in logic's absence. The reader is moved between an understanding of how two people used to know each other and what their present alienation can provide even in the most difficult moments. In “sweating into / what is more beautiful than a summer's darkening twilight”:

On this remote porch salt plans drift  
so much indentation whose house  
could now resist such  
granular

I came to realize  
 that it was not “a break” I was experiencing  
 not “A vacation” not “a rest” but  
 instead  
 I was in the process of healing of  
 healing  
 from an affliction I had suffered from  
 my childhood and that by the  
 inconceivable vagaries  
 of fate I had been given this  
 second chance  
 to heal

This is not an optimistic book, nor one that seeks to punish its reader. It is simply an unadorned record—a serious account of everything that aches, and, too, a catalog of all that provides pleasure. Owen’s is a poetics of noticing, a necessary catalog of a destructively watchful eye and painfully focused heart. She has never shirked a moment of precision.

This is perhaps where a poet’s attentions and a caregiver’s overlap perfectly. We are created and sustained in the most exact details. Telling the story with a piercing accuracy might somehow truly, finally unlock a transference of some of the pain and uncertainty of watching a loved one grow sicker. It is a record that wills a lonely reality into a properly validating audience. Owen writes, “what seethes within that plumage / sucks from the room all oxygen / vegetation thick as thunder knots between us / into some exotic vacuum” and the reader feels it tug. We have seen everything build and unravel, too.

Owen’s caretaker breaks every day into digestible parts, actions, objects—our most basic skeletons of need and speech. But every list of to-dos or collection of items on a nightstand begins to reassemble itself into a whole. “A glass of 3 cards // data” gives us an image: “lip balm / Tums / talking clock / stepping stool & / rosary.” Each scene or room is full of familiarity—all we’ve used to give or receive comfort. Lists cascade into an incoherent-yet-definite commonality. It’s a clash of existences, too. Two people made real in their exchanges of objects, their incomplete volleying. As much as speech can fail, these serve to cushion something. The poem ends “now / without / staging / lighting / we seem to float / your talking clock / your stepping stool to bed.” Owen administers each word as if it might have the same impact as any small object of comfort stacked on the kitchen table. Meaning emerges in the mess.

As any book that takes a stance against overblown suffering-for-the-sake-of, *let the heart* has moments of impossibly good humor. “Did you say you ordered pizza with the / sauce that prevents aging?” Owen’s mother asks. Sometimes language fails in order to soothe. Hallucinations of strangers in the room and strangely timed food requests keep the difficulties of caretaking human enough to allow for air. Owen, when possible, gives her mother the final word. Attention is taken to

record their frustrated exchanges as much as their gleeful ones.

In digressions—perhaps some of my favorite poems in the book—Owen builds a portrait of her mother’s earlier life. We gain an idea of her power and character, one that I found myself deeply craving more of as I worked through the difficult present times of the book. These poems, too, hold contradictions. In “she could put on her left ear hearing aid / but not her right & sometimes / she could not put on her left either,” Owen falls into a memory:

back then  
 she would swing me up behind the saddle  
 of the smokey mustang  
 go full gallop up the cow pasture till the very  
 end fencing  
 my skinny arms wound around her waist for  
 dear life bounced  
 and flung my sides pinching & aching  
 then turn and gallop back through the  
 cows leap up the ditch trotting  
 the gravel driveway back into the yard

It chronicles a particular kind of wild independence that gave way to Owen’s, too; it’s all a cycle laid out with love. *let the heart* often collapses a sense of past and present, some way of making sense of trajectories and necessities and loss. In an early parallel moment of caregiving, Owen recounts dying her mother’s hair black, a poem that dips into diary: “rich fuzz of tawny & slipping green / banks as the herds of seals / sprawled soft & sloping hills” (“Distortions”). Again we are confronted by the constant pull between language’s ability to stun with beauty and language’s ability to torment with exactitude.

To caretake is to stretch a love to its furthest limits and challenge patience to proliferate in its gaps. As such, the literature of caretaking is permanently insufficient. This volume has an honest and knowing way of following suit—an attempt to record a relationship unfolding against the wishes of time and with full awareness that it does not know how to feel. Any poet is fortunate to have Maureen Owen as a guide in record-keeping and piloting a new schematic of care.

***The Autobiography of a Language*  
 by Mirene Arsanios**

Futurepoem, 2022

Review by Alisha Mascarenhas

I begin reading Mirene Arsanios’s *The Autobiography of a Language* at dawn, seated at a window at LaGuardia airport. I am waiting with an espresso and a papery croissant to board my flight to Montreal, where I previously lived for six years. This also happens to be where the author situates some of the first chronicles of her coming into a multifaceted, transnational learning to be in language.

No, I begin in 2018 when, hosted by *e-flux journal*, Mirene reads from her “E autobiogra-

phy di un idioma” in a dark upper floor room in Lower Manhattan. I am alone, sipping chilled white wine from an elegant plastic cup. I am immediately seduced by the poolside scene, and the dry, ironic tone of the author’s voice as she tells the story of the embodiment of a language, “centuries old and... pregnant for the past 20 years.” I have been in New York less than a year, and Mirene is a teacher, mentor, and intellectual crush who I occasionally run into in Bed-Stuy, where we both lived at the time.

This reading, and the way she brought this emergent text to life with urgency and a felt texture of reality, remains distinct in my memory. The humor that carries Mirene’s generous kindness and subtle wit are alive in her person as they are in her writing. Nothing is ever purely intellectual, and that is such a relief. Mirene and I met when she visited a class I was taking on the poetry of Etel Adnan. The teacher, Sarah Riggs, invited Mirene to come speak with us because of her aunt’s friendship with Etel. She spoke not only of the poet’s mystical and bewildered delight, but of her dedicated and rigorous militancy. I hadn’t considered Etel in this way before then. Mirene was quietly raising a challenge: a swerve to the current pulse of conversation. She has continued to do so on many other occasions where I have encountered her thinking. *The Autobiography of a Language* is a challenge charged with care, in all of its complexities and barest necessity.

*The Autobiography of a Language* is not an argument. Or if it is, you never have the sense, reader, of being argued with. Instead, you are raised to the challenge of its terms: a swerve, perhaps, to the current pulse of your thinking. As you read, the author incites you to an awareness of the composition of the book itself, the difficulty with language inherent to the process. She brings immediate attention to the many voices and technological mechanisms that police, reduce, and standardize the meaning a language is making. The way that auto-correct disrupts the structure of a sentence forming outside the terms of what has been authoritatively determined as *correct*. In what appears to be an act of tiny technological defiance, Microsoft Word has just spontaneously re-formatted my script to italics. A slant. I revert it to the upright posture of authorial certainty, centrality: this being the primary text. The author has taught me to rest in the pause of these adjustments; to notice the mechanism of writing, the tool I am using, its authority, its influence, its obdurate reinforcement of the right way to write. I can only type in one language at a time without a sea of red scribbles.

Through her own study of origins, the author makes evident the impossibility of pinning her to any singular “mother tongue.” Guiding us through childhood memories of the linguistic—which is cultural, which is national, which is familial shaping of subjectivity—she offers herself as a platform by which we may examine many forces and affinities: cultural,

national, familial, that shape a person, the languages of a person. Spanish, French, Arabic, Papiamentu: the languages that came to compose the person of this author are tracked, traced, followed through matrilineal, patriarchal and other, more diffuse relational histories. Friendships, sibling ties and conflicts, nationalist dis/identifications; teachers, tutors, parents, aunts, uncles, a childhood friend, enter the continuously unfolding scenes.

“Mother tongues,” writes Arsanios, “imply a process of natural acquisition, an (un) accumulation founded on (riba) the repetition of syntactical gestures, but the link between mother and tongues isn’t as linear as it (e) may (mei) seem. It is circuitous and (i) hot and (i) cold.” Her study of mother tongues traces her own language acquisition by way of her own mother and matrilineal grandmother. Through a study of familial histories and resultant alliances, Arsanios shows us the fractured and diffuse nature of what a family really is when you start to look at all the places where the nucleus comes apart. With this book we are gifted the perspective and skill of someone whose attention has been devoted to an examination of what makes up a person’s language when monolingualism is out of the question. This is a subject both frayed and discerning, as the author turns around and unravels her own questions: a “permanent expatriate, dilettante in the social-medical establishment, and connoisseur only of the first person.”

Before you start to think that this autobiography restricts itself to the personal life of the author, know now that it goes so much further. Cutting through the chronological order of the genre with stories—often bizarre, feminized embodiments of language—brings this book out of the personal (where it never rested comfortably to begin with), and even out of the political (where it drives with studied precision), and into the realm of symbolic surreality. I add “surreality” to the Microsoft Word dictionary, in case I need to use it again.

Mirene’s writing is always personal, never strictly individual. The mothering role in subject formation and language learning, in particular, refuses to be relegated to biological family. The author also finds mothers in hospital lobbies and a (perhaps) fictional passenger ship. Women in public spaces peer with open scrutiny, maybe care, at the young girl characters in their midst. These public mothers also serve as figures for the subject to repel against, to refuse. Language itself is embodied in characters, scenes, stories, situations that are uncanny, dreamy, at times grotesquely visceral. The texture of the book keeps changing. Where are we. Whose story is this now. Where does she come from. Who are her teachers. We are led to piece together the biographical with the fictional, not to arrive at any coherent understanding, but instead to grapple with the unwieldy, dirty, messy complicated realities of being in language.

Mirene wrote *The Autobiography of a Language*

as her father was dying in a hospital in Lebanon. This was a moment, she writes, that “preceded the onset of one of the worst political and economic crises Lebanon has ever experienced.” Through her narrative, Mirene examines what hospital care looks like in this context. Describing the nature of her exchanges with her father’s nurse, she articulates how “[c]are is perversely ambivalent because it conflates a transaction with an expression of love.” Mirene understands that the exchanges she experiences with this nurse whose labor is keeping her father alive are systemically predetermined. Their relationship is figured into histories of state power through a broader recognition of the ways in which social classes are formed. “Through a system of interdependence,” she writes, “the relentless exploitation of a group of people allow[s] for another group to live more sheltered lives.” It’s all about language, but it’s never only about language, in the way that once you start to crack that open, lifetimes spill out: fragmented histories of the conditions of a country’s political state determine the kinds of relations that can form there.

Amid much unforecasted questioning, examined experience leads the author to make certain declarations with confidence. About her father, she writes, “He loves me but his allegiance toward the conventions of his culture is stronger than the expression of his feelings.” This book is solid with grief, urgent with questions of how to hold the complexities of inheritances both chosen and inadvertently received. What have we absorbed, and whose stories do we enact with our words? “I also want to know,” writes the author, “why this language? ... It is incidental and life is made of circumstances, outcomes of unruly trajectories.”

***The Call-Out: A Novel in Rhyme***

by Cat Fitzpatrick

Seven Stories Press, 2022

Reviewed by Liam O'Brien

“Christmas succeeds Christmas rather than the days it follows,” John Crowley wrote in his novel *Little, Big*: whenever the day arrives, it seems to elude the intervening year and live in its own bubble of time, composed of prior and future Christmases. I sometimes feel this way about literary events in the trans scene. One arrives, and it is as if one has never left—time suspends itself in little cups of wine, flushed hugs, women telling funny stories about video games. At one late excursion into this bubble (World Transsexual Forum, which Jeanne Thornton and Anton Solomnik were hosting at Brooklyn’s Franklin Park), a grinning Cat Fitzpatrick took my shoulder.

“Liam,” she said, “I believe I owe you a drink.”

“Cat, is this because I’m reviewing your book for *The Poetry Project*?” I asked her.

“Yes,” she said, and bought me a Pinot Grigio. The world of trans lit is small and incestuous.

It’s impossible to read *The Call-Out* as a trans person of a certain age and relationship to Brooklyn without asking oneself (or a companion in gossip) who’s who in *real* life. Cat’s voice is so recognizably her own: chatty, witty, provocative, teasing. It’s pleasurable like settling into that bubble of endless trans lit party, a knot of friends gathered around one glowing raconteur. “Then what?” we ask, and “Oh, why did she do that?” We gasp, we exclaim. And we have one advantage over the party listener—if suspense becomes unbearable, we can cheat time and skip ahead to the outcome of the latest disaster.

The disasters are plenty here, though they orbit around the dramatic call-out of the title. This is a book about trans life in Brooklyn, from dancefloor to bedroom to literary reading. It weaves together the stories of several women who are linked, though they may not know it, by sex, by proximity, by friends or exes. They’re linked as well by the narrator, Laura: a woman who notices the budding desires of others and the trouble they aim themselves for, and who takes pleasure in being a chronicler until she finds she can’t stay out of trouble herself. The people of *The Call-Out* are deliciously familiar. You know them, or you’ve seen them at the club or in the bookstore. You’ve wondered about their flings and their clashes—now you can get all the details.

Intrigue and vivid characters are reasons enough to pick up *The Call-Out*, but it’s also an exceptional curiosity: a book in sequences of lively Onegin stanzas. This stanza, named for Pushkin’s novel-in-verse *Eugene Onegin*, is fourteen lines of iambic tetrameter, faithfully rhymed (ABAB CCDD EFFEGG). Cat’s engagement with it is not just a novelty—it’s an intervention. She is at her finest when dancing through the maze of formal requirement, and her wit and humor never flag, even when the material takes on discomfort or darkness. There’s an admirable audacity, a flourish, to making sure that even the Table of Contents and Acknowledgments pages are perfectly-made Onegin stanzas as well. What a show-off, but we can’t be mad about it!

Of *The Call-Out*’s many treats, perhaps the most thrilling is its mastery of time. The tale jumps back into the past more than once, with virtuosic mini-gestures of seasons in reverse. “Let the spring rewind: watch all the flowers / close, and their stems curl into the seed.” It’s a neat trick, that Spring which is also another kind of spring, coiling back only to pop up with a different layer of rooms and names, small injuries and pleasures, all happening on top of the first. We can press pause as well, holding off the inevitable tread of fate to watch a moment before “things inevitably go wrong,” linger in the warmth of a dancefloor when damage is still only on the horizon. The trick doesn’t hold for long, though: “It comes on you fast, / drops through your fingers, and spring is past.”

Time is a well-spring of sensation for the reader. It’s what keeps us catching our breath in a

story: “And then? and then?” This is the genius of gossip as literature—we get invested both in what just happened and in the layers of actions and conversations that led up to all the drama. And this pleasure we feel gets to the heart of why *The Call-Out* is a serious work as well as an astonishing confection. Relatively early on, we pause in the midst of a funny and familiar conversation about chasers and their own latent genders while Laura freaks herself out:

And then...I’m sorry, it’s too upsetting.  
I have to stop and take a breath.  
It’s like I’m recounting someone’s death,  
then I read it over, and they’re only getting  
laid and laughing and hanging out.  
What am I so upset about?

This is effective suspense-building: we have to ask what doom is ahead, why Laura is so worked up. It’s also a hint to the question the book keeps asking itself. Why do we care? Why are we moved by the decisions these strangers make? This, *The Call-Out* says, is the human problem of interest in each other: how stupid we often are, how likely to hurt one another and retreat into defensiveness—but nevertheless, the pull of our *nature* (natural as “the frogs that croak, the birds that sing”) is towards each other. “I guess this is just one of the features / of being alive: you have to care / about all these people you meet everywhere.”

*The Call-Out* is a community novel: it is *for* a community, dedicated “to the trans girls of New York.” There’s a frequent note of sisterly teasing, as in the descriptions of certain queer living habits: “There are three switchblades in the cutlery drawer / but only one fork. There’s a sort of tower / of mysterious amps, laptops, and cable / taking up half of the only table.” There are searing, hilarious bits on trans literary readings: “one can’t seem to find her story on her phone, one tells us she’s discovered, after completing / an online test, she’s part Cherokee.” There’s also the delightful in-joke of the format, for those who grew up posting their writing on forums with room for tags and content warnings. (My favorite cw’s in *The Call-Out*, for the record, are “trans men” and “pedagogy.”)

But we don’t get off with just the jokes. Inevitably, the book has to confront the dark, fraught, and nasty aspects of the world it chronicles with such affection. Cat’s characters slip into the whirlpool of “harm” and “accountability,” and it’s stunning to see so many familiar approaches to this problem drawn in sensitive (and often still funny) detail. The characters confront each other about what counts as harm, what counts as repair, and who gets to have a say. There’s a critique of moralism: one character complains, “I feel like recently, claims of virtue / have become the way you win a fight. / Like I’m totally licensed to hate or hurt you / if I first establish, I’m in the right.” There are also explicit conversations about what community means—is it nice? Is it healing? Or is it just based on “Contact. Sensation,” a basic physical need to be close to one another?

The narrator of *The Call-Out* enters the story fully when she falls in love, gives in to this need. Time trips us up again as we fall with her. We “rewind”: leaves reattaching themselves to the trees, nature undergoing its inevitable change in reverse. A trick of poetry, returning to lost joy. But as the inevitable heartbreak starts to roll on uncontrollably, the poet’s claim, “There’s no more beauty,” is belied by a stunning description of the clouded light on “windows, at last denuded / of air conditioners.” Her sadness lends the initial ending a disillusionment—“Hope is the poison,” she says, turning away from this world of friends, lovers, exes, enemies.

But the book is too rich, too subtle, to leave us there. A guest narrator comes in the form of a forum comment, which reaffirms the possibility that all this love and trouble is not for nothing:

There’s this idea circulating  
that care is somehow a scarce resource,  
especially for girls like us, and of course  
half the world fucking hates us,  
feminists, Christians, the government too,  
but care’s not a substance. It’s action we do.

It’s tempting to go on, to pick through the nuances of “discourse” and the question of what

the book is “saying.” But I’m reminded of another recent trip into the timeless trans party bubble, and Cat herself telling me, “I hate it when people act like it’s a serious book.” So I’ll leave you there, and rewind myself to gratitude. I’m grateful this book is here, a portal into a particular transsexual grace and hilarity, a triumph of nimble language, a text that can’t stop chatting. As Laura says, “Talk is much jollier than thinking”—I feel called out.

***Feelings of And* by Barry Schwabsky**  
Black Square Editions, 2022  
*Review by Marjorie Welsh*

*Feelings of And*—how can one resist a book of poems entitled thus? The phrase gives rise to the consideration of lyric subjectivity, and predicts that whatever else the book expresses, or may be about, its poems gather a modest yet varied collection of the lyric condition as an open question.

The concept “And” here in this assortment of poems differs from a logical conjunction which would bring things together analytically for common cause. Rather, from poem to poem, and within each poem, are thoughts related but tenuously—discrete, detached from any necessity:

*Wrong Number*

Here’s what passes for poetry  
in one passersby unreliable account

the sea flaps its nets  
of futility.

who’s there, who’s there

images pay no rent  
but the echo carries

from what distance  
could a cloud of dust  
look that hard

With not much by way of necessity, the movement forward across breaks here is so tenuous in association that atomization of sense prevails: a world without conclusiveness. Experience here is rendered as mental representation—piecemeal and discontinuous, quixotic in itself. In this way, gaps between verbalized thoughts are as important to capturing experience as any words might be.

So, if the nature of “And” is to bring matters into conjunction, for the poem “Wrong Number” grammatical dislocation keeps elements worlds apart, keeps apart individual features of a world in the manner of a de Chirico, yet not as sinister as is typical of the Metaphysical master painter, for “Wrong Number” is rather more neutral.

Kinds and degrees of conjunction have had their own literature. The psychologist William James bothered to calibrate these kinds and

degrees, and determined that relative to “And,” the psychological weight of “With” is yet more neutral and generic. “The Thing and Its Relations,” published in 1905, is his sketch for the argument against rationalistic dialectics and for a kind of pragmatic affective gradient. James’s sliding scale of affective relations attempted to establish the subjectivity of relations as objects for consideration in themselves: “I tried my own hand sketchily resisting certain first steps of dialectics by insisting that the immediately experienced conjunctive relations are as real as anything else.”

The reflective mind, writes James, becomes aware that experience does not flow smoothly. Or, at least, its perturbations enter into the experiential flow:

Prepositions, copulas, and conjunctions—  
‘isn’t,’ ‘then,’ ‘before,’ ‘in,’ ‘on,’  
‘beside,’ ‘between,’ ‘next,’ ‘like,’ ‘unlike,’ ‘as,’  
‘but’—flower out of  
the stream of pure experience, the stream of  
concretes or the sensa-  
tional stream, as naturally as nouns and  
adjectives do, and they  
melt into it again as fluidly when we apply  
them to a new portion of the stream.

Furthermore, whatever the affective relations apparently given, experience is mutable, and constantly being readjusted, reframed even. So, in *Feelings of And* stanza breaks are consonant with the readjustment that goes on, which reevaluate observations. Moreover, in Schwabsky’s poems not all stanza breaks are created equal: his breaks inducing discontinuities are more like gulfs, and spacing as yet to be found measurable. But just when the reader comes to believe that the poetics of infinite deferral is the rule, something else is presented. Then, too, turning the page also does not allow for predicting the sort of poetic gesture that will come next. As we read here:

*The Bourgeois Poet*

Her parents had eccentric expectations.  
While their friends  
destined their offspring for the law, finance,  
good marriages, they  
hoped for a poet in the family. But she  
rebelled and became, despite  
everything, a poet.

This gives new meaning to the logic of identity, wittily. Transferred to the progress of maturity as here, the child becomes his or herself by rebelling against parental expectation not by becoming other but by *being the same as* the identity hoped for. Elsewhere in Schwabsky’s poems such wit—some, one-liners merely, others, savvy in social relations as this is—is worthy of inscription. There is an ethics to this game of identity negatively derived though; not everything is given over to a relativist *mise en abyme*. *Feelings of And* does loiter in the possibility of poetry of a sort that differs from that of a flaneur in the New York School wherein decadence or its counterfeit is the mask of the

poet flouting any and all propriety in social relations.

*Feelings of And* assumes that the debris of one’s mind is the very stuff of poetry. Stray thoughts and self-commentary issuing in excess of what one ought to be doing of a determinate and productive nature, are discontinuously ever-present and ever-ready to be intuited, so by no means wasted. Schwabsky, attuned to this intuitive zone, does not overstate the case for its significance, but in effect displays these intuited by-products of mental representation for possible consideration: is this a poem? If so, on what grounds?

Feelings, then, are the subjective remainders of experience as yet to be categorized, let alone anointed as literature. No larger-than-life theatrics here, nor emphasized significance; the feelings here come about through the merest indications of experience, for which the first-person singular is co-present. Attentive to properties and their relationships, but with no expectation of entailment, the poet gives assent to matters that strike him as peculiar. Here, for instance, is the close of the poem “My Bad”:

If only I glimpse it for a moment  
Your secret safest in me

Figure ground down to scratches  
Of those I most regret missing

And never knew how much you disliked  
them  
Etc. ad libitum

At the close, Schwabsky pulls back from feelings to something material, which is symptomatic of a tendency that matters to the poetics of *Feelings of And*. Noteworthy and indexical of the core of feelings: that humans are irritable creatures. Their sensible awareness begins in an irritation of neurophysiological origin, whether or not this irritability conveys sensibility to self-awareness. Irritants of the merest kind, the equivalent of scuffs and scratches, are not ignored; rather, they are acknowledged as intrinsic to human expression. If polymath Henri Poincaré is known for having observed wasps react to slight changes in barometric pressure, James is notable for dilating on human irritability:

Sentiments of rationality operate not just in logic or science, but in ordinary life. When we first move into a room, for example, “we do not know what draughts may blow in upon our back, what doors may open, what forms may enter, what interesting objects may be found in cupboards and corners.” These uncertainties, minor as they may be, act as “mental irritant[s]” (WB 67–8), which disappear when we know our way around the room and come to “feel at home” there. These feelings of confident expectation, of knowing how certain things will turn out, are another form of the sentiment of rationality.

In irritability as a psychological expansion of physiological irritants, *Feelings of And* finds poetic potential.

***quanundrum [i will be your many angled thing]* by Edwin Torres**  
Roof Books, 2021  
*Review by Danilo Machado*

“[N]o margins in my fingers, no borders in my pen,” proclaims Edwin Torres in *quanundrum [i will be your many angled thing]*. In this latest collection Torres grapples with seeing and hearing language between islands and cosmos. The book’s red-squiggle title evokes a conundrum at the quantum level, or perhaps locates the poems in the conundrums of quarantine. The poems within these spaces sing scales cosmic and cellular, overflow into each other. The book’s design is as graphic as its stanzas: Torres rejects any version of a poem or collection that does not press up against the colonial, dis-embodied edges of the page.

The book’s first and second sections have their titles encircled in ink, the letters spelling “dawn” cascading in repetition, as if pushed down past the end of the page. The circle, like condensation from a glass on a napkin, is one of the collection’s recurring visual motifs. It’s presented whole and broken, in bullet points, in colons, and in ellipsis. “[D]ot here, dot there, to again the *again*, / and there, the dot and *here*,” Torres writes, as if he were a point-illist. These become portals to and through these poems, directing the reader like the other motifs of arrows, slashes, and dashes.

Torres upends expectations of the page and of the act of reading, refusing a single presentation of his verses in font, size, layout, and orientation. Each spread spills and slants, some taking shape as concrete poems; some stanzas bolded, some skinny, some boxed. Some pages recall the uppercase pith of artist Jenny Holzer, some the work of Kameelah Janan Rasheed, who also makes words leak, warp, and blur to interrogate many kinds of legibility.

These visual textures often emphasize language’s sonic qualities, and are another way the collection is injected by rhythm and movement. (Torres has made significant contributions to the ongoing legacy of New York City slam and spoken word.) Torres deftly traverses between ideas and deploys corresponding tactics that guide your eyes. These travels are not just left to right or down the page—they are back and backwards, around and around. Indeed, the book is, in part, about the experience of reading, and Torres sometimes steps in as the patient, winking guide of his own word.

Torres is committed to and repelled by legibility: a conundrum. In “[of what is],” for example, Torres contends with an “accumulation of *bearing*”: of who said and hearsay. The work tangles and tangoes with the relationship between seeing and saying—and the consequences of whose sight, voice, or pen. There

are passages where Torres winkingly spells out words, as if to say: *say it, gringo, say it—let me hear you try*. Like other kinds of translations present in the collection, Torres always tells it slant, rooted in a knowledge of many worlds and corresponding languages. While often playful, underpinning these slights are the many violences of colonial language and the othering gaze.

Another key tension in the collection is between the part and whole. In “[compromise],” Torres complicates the expectations and disappointments of being presented with parts, its angled stanzas zig-zagging across two pages. The poem concludes with the quatrain “all the parts you fit / to all the parts you make / to all the parts you want / to all the parts you take,” punctuated by a black circle at the bottom of the page. The circle, present in full just a few pages before, is also cut in four parts. The echoing theme of how parts puzzle together and how we make choices about which to take (or desire) relates to language and to complex gestures of identity. “All color is full color — not lack of / but all — there is no density / in the fullness of being,” Torres writes later, perhaps alluding to the ways marginalized identities are flattened. Torres also demonstrates how naming those compositional parts—constellations made of stars, countries made of islands, communities made of individuals, words made of syllables—is one of the things that poetry can do best. Indeed, the poet reflects: “fracture feeds my write.”

In *quanundrum*, Torres builds archipelagos: collections of land surrounded by water, of words surrounded by blank space. In “[song of no island],” he writes: “from the edges that inspire me / to the edges that surround me / to the edges that define me / I’m a land of no horizon.” The lack of horizon echoes as Torres moves from galaxies to water, naming a desire to both “speak my island” and “reach no island.” What is conjured by this repeated image

is not just the geological, or the emotional metaphor of isolation, but Torres’s relationship to Puerto Rico. The collection wrestles with Puerto Ricanness as a signifier, not just of biography but of political community. A key figure in the Nuyorican movement, in “[immigrant earthling],” Torres names the “Quantum Ricans” and the “Alter-Ricua NoRicua Project;” perhaps alter- like angled thing, perhaps No- as part negation. The project is a communal one, since indeed “you can’t be ethnic alone.” Later, Torres declares: “*We are all islands. / We have all traveled. / We are all from somewhere else,*” a refrain that eventually morphs into “planet,” again drawing lines (or circles) between the terrestrial and cosmic.

In *quanundrum* [*i will be your many angled thing*], each poem is both the rushing river and the dirt at its floor—fluid and grounded. The brackets that cushion many of the titles evoke both limitation and openings, and as a whole the collection reminds us that “— *poetry can anything / if you let it —*” and that within the chaos may exist “a calm / out of kinetic obstruction.” It reflects an optimism and a need for creation, perhaps to the point of awe. “[W]e develop new organs to function,” Torres writes, “we are impossible question marks, curved / by human vocabulary—what face is yours / cured by vocabulary—by new limbs in movement.” Oh what nimble lines, what nimble limbs! What comes after the poem? After the poet? “The last resistance I have / is my body,” the poet concludes, and maybe that is what is left.

**Joe Brainard: The Art of the Personal**  
by John Yau  
Rizzoli, 2022  
Review by Tyhe Cooper

A  
CLEAR  
SKY...

THATS  
WHAT IS  
IMPORTANT  
NOW-A-DAYS  
IN BOSTON...  
WHERE... ..  
“EVERYONE  
OWNS A RAIN-  
COAT!” BUT ME. (JOE)

This is text taken from a pencil-on-paper self-portrait by Joe Brainard from January of 1963, sized at 4 ¾ by 3 ¾ inches, featured in both John Yau’s *Joe Brainard: The Art of the Personal*, and *Joe Brainard: a box of hearts and other works* at Tibor de Nagy. It’s one of the first works seen upon entering the show.

ME. (JOE).

That parenthetical (JOE) is representative of much of Joe Brainard’s writing, assemblages, paintings, drawings, and miniatures (etc.). He was earnest about being himself on the page, but never assumed that we must necessarily know that self. He never considered himself to have attained stardom, and thought of others first—something much to be noted when discussing the man who wrote *I Remember*, whose subject was identifiably “himself and everything he touched, saw, or cared about—a world that was simultaneously private and public, personal and anonymous,” in Yau’s words.

*Joe Brainard: The Art of the Personal*, poet and critic John Yau’s new monograph of the artist and writer, is a love letter from someone who knew Joe to those of us who wish we did—who feel like we must have. John Yau’s 73-page essay is referential, personal, and context-heavy, illustrating and mirroring the nature of Brainard’s work and life, providing a framework for the nearly 150 pages of plates that follow. Throughout his essay, Yau focuses on individual works sparingly, extrapolating key points in the pieces to contextualize the trajec-

tory of Brainard’s life and practice. The book was released alongside a show of Brainard’s works at Tibor de Nagy on the Lower East Side, an early favorite gallery of the Tulsa cohort of the New York School, just eight blocks away from Joe’s first apartment in the city (a storefront on 6th Street that now functions as a dry cleaner’s). The show, *Joe Brainard: a box of hearts and other works*, was on view from October 22 through December 3, 2022, and included many of the drawings and paintings that are featured in the book, a majority of which have not been exhibited previously.

Joe Brainard worked on the scale of generosity, the scale of his friends’ hands—evidenced in both the gallery show and the book, in works belonging to the collections of his friends and fellow poets Ron and Pat Padgett, Ann Lauterbach, Kenward Elmslie, Sandy Berrigan, and others. This community of poets and artists was as active in assembling this book as they were in Joe’s life. The book’s list of acknowledgements is testament to the strength of the corner of the world that Brainard was embedded in: Yau thanks their mutual friends and collaborators, Constance Lewallen, Anselm Berrigan, Tony Towle, Nathan Kernan, and many more. To borrow a phrase from another of Joe’s friends, the poet Anne Waldman, Joe was an “infrastructure poet” in the truest sense—he was deeply embedded in his community, working in and for it—and that infrastructure laid the foundation for this collection.

Joe was supported by the scaffolding of the city’s arts and poetry scene of the sixties and seventies and was integral to it. Welcoming the reader into a short history of the New York School, early in his essay, Yau notes that Brainard ought to “be recognized as a primary force in the proliferation of collaborations” in the Downtown scene, something that we know was fundamental to the mission of the New York School—the interconnectedness of that world made it what it was and is—it built

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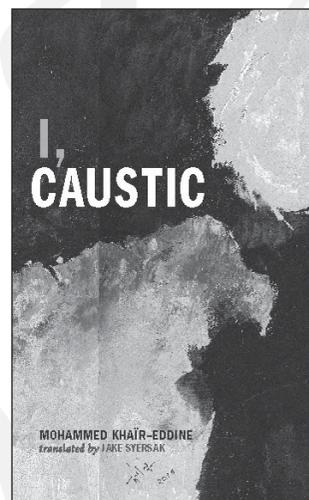
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TRANSLATED BY JAKE SYERSAK

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“With its undulating body, *I, Caustic* reproduces the two-pronged movement that testifies to the continuing relevance of Khaïr-Eddine’s writing: destruction and reconstruction, annihilation and regeneration, death and revival.”

—Teresa Villa-Ignacio, Co-Editor, *Souffles-Anfas: A Critical Anthology*

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the Project, this newsletter, the crowds of people packing the church on New Year's Day for the past forty-nine years. Joe, Ted Berrigan, and Ron and Pat Padgett, the "*soi-disant* Tulsa School" as John Ashbery referred to them, spent their time going around to galleries, seeing films, living, and working together.

Collaborative works abound in the book and show—it would be impossible to collect Brainard's work comprehensively and exclude them. In "Untitled (What!!)", a 1964 mixed-media collage by Brainard and Berrigan, in classic nudge-wink form, Joe has demarcated a "rectangle for Ted to do something in" below a repeating appropriated comic panel, in his signature all-caps handwriting. Directly above this is another 1964 work, made with Frank O'Hara, and on the facing page we find a neutral-toned collage collaboration with Tony Towle. On page 179, we see an especially debonair teddy bear advertising Anne Waldman and Reed Bye at the Project on December 28, 1977—one of a number of (generally pro-bono) book covers and reading flyers that Joe churned out throughout his life. Get the book, then find as many of the original covers as you can in your favorite used bookstore (Unnameable Books in Prospect Heights is mine). On the note of Brainard's sheer volume of work, Yau points out key differences and similarities between Joe and Andy Warhol (a common comparison), emphasizing that Brainard's relative lack of stardom was born out of choice and a conscious rejection of the art world, exemplified in his secession from it in 1977, following a solo show of 1500 works in 1975. Yau aligns him more closely with the artists Ray Johnson and Bruce Conner, both of whom circumnavigated the commercial art world in their own ways; Johnson mailing his work to other artists and collaborating via post, Conner repeatedly creating work under various alter egos.

Yau orients much of his essay around Brainard's intentional disregard for the commercial art world, noting that Joe and his friends' "acceptance of one another and the choices they made existed completely outside mainstream American ideals." The very matter of Brainard's work and life—the scale, the generosity, the interest in the beautiful and the real—necessitated a rejection of "western masterpiece tradition" and the desire for hierarchical success that many of his peers were climbing through. "He made art for his friends, created suites of work for his lovers... he did not accommodate his art to capitalism's structure of exchange." Yau points out Brainard's appropriation techniques and his dismissal of the capitalist movements of the art world, but—as he notes in his investigation of "Untitled (Flag)" (1962), a collaged Jasper Johns nod with text by Ted Berrigan—"he was not making fun of the abstract expressionist master or defacing a well-known Pop motif through his references. But he was making their work his own." Because Joe ingested art works and movements irreverently and enthusiastically, and as Ron Padgett noted, saw

them as a "way to see the world," he foregrounded beauty, the earnest, and something akin to anti-irony—"there was no message or commentary on consumerism and waste. He was not interested in being ironic." Joe lived a life that purposefully evaded commodification and neglected consumerism in its structure, but he was not interested in declaring anything in his artwork outside of himself, beauty, the real. He cared deeply about his materials. They were his subject, they were himself:

They are present, they are the ways of my  
country, they are familiar,  
they are us, the way we dress and the expres-  
sion we are forced to  
plaster on our faces.

—Joe, age 19, "Self-Portrait on Christmas  
Night" (1961)

*Joe Brainard: The Art of the Personal* is personal, artful. The life and work of Joe Brainard is so full and filling as to be difficult to traverse on one's own. John Yau is a stellar guide.

Interested in writing a review for the *Newsletter*? Send pitches for your engagements with recent publications to [neditor@poetryproject.org](mailto:neditor@poetryproject.org). Please use the subject line: "Review Pitch"

CALENDAR

# Spring 2023 / Readings & Events

## FEBRUARY

Wed - 2/22  
Lucy Ives & Stacy Szymaszek

Fri - 2/24 (virtual)  
*Fall 2022 Workshop Reading*  
w/ t'ai freedom ford, Vi Khi Nao, & Jared Stanley

∞

## MARCH

Wed - 3/01  
*Belladonna\* Book Launch* w/ Kimberly Alidio,  
Simone Kearney & Cait O'Kane

Thu - 3/02  
*INVISIBLE HEAVENS // Memory as Projection of the Future*  
Dis/Course w/ Tyler Morse

Mon - 3/06  
Yesenia Montilla & Funto Omojola

Thu - 3/09  
Yasmina Price & Elizabeth Purchell

Mon - 3/13  
Irene Silt & Syd Staiti

Wed - 3/15  
James Sherry & Celina Su

Fri - 3/17  
Robert Glück & Megan Milks

Wed - 3/22  
*Happy 80<sup>th</sup> Birthday Gerard Malanga!*  
Featuring: a slideshow of Malanga's photos; a screening of  
*Film Notebooks*; a reading by Malanga of his recent work; and a  
Q&A moderated by Vincent Katz.

Fri - 3/24  
Rachel James & Aristilde Kirby

Mon - 3/27  
sadé powell & Steffani Jemison

Wed - 3/29  
LaTasha N. Nevada Diggs & Anne Waldman

∞

## APRIL

Sat-Sun - 4/1-4/2  
Triple Canopy's First Annual Symposium

Mon - 4/10  
Stine An & Tatiana Luboviski-Acosta

Thu - 4/13  
*The End of the Line: Rhyme and the Poetics of Authority*  
w/ Julian Talamantez Brolaski

Fri - 4/14  
*The Measures Taken* by Bertolt Brecht  
directed by Lucas Kane & Jurrell Lewis

Wed - 4/19  
Mike DeCapite & Chris Kraus

Fri - 4/21 (virtual)  
*She Who Has No Master(s) Mentorship Program Reading*  
w/ Hoa Nguyen/Lauren Bullock, Lily Hoang/Erin O'Brien,  
Diana Khoi Nguyen/Rachel Ton That, & Vi Khi Nao/Quyên  
Nguyễn-Hoàng

Mon - 4/24  
Ana Božičević & Chia-Lun Chang

Wed - 4/26  
*Kenward Elmslie Celebration*  
w/ WC Bamberger, Maxine Chernoff, Donna Dennis,  
Serena Devi, John Godfrey, Ann Lauterbach, Ron Padgett,  
Vivien Russe, Steven Taylor, Cindy Tran, Anne Waldman,  
& Trevor Winkfield

Sun - 4/30  
*Celebration of Constantine P. Cavafy*  
w/ the Onassis Foundation

∞

## MAY

Thu - 5/4  
*ClickHole Poetics*  
Dis/Course w/ Alicia Mountain

Fri - 5/5  
Nile Harris & Andrew Smyth

Wed - 5/10  
Maureen Owen & Susie Timmons

Mon - 5/15  
Valerie Hsiung & Ada Smailbegović

Wed - 5/17  
*Tilted Thinking, Wanting Ways, and Our Neurodiverse Future*  
w/ Imane Boukaila, Chris Martin, & Adam Wolfond

Fri - 5/19  
Lucía Hinojosa Gaxiola & Emily Johnson

Mon - 5/22 (virtual)  
Kemi Alabi & Omotara James

Wed - 5/24  
Fred Moten & Ronaldo V. Wilson

Sun - 5/28  
*Pathetic Happening*  
w/ Eileen Myles, Tom Cole, & more!

Mon - 5/29  
S. Erin Batiste & Courtney Faye Taylor

∞

## JUNE

Fri - 6/2  
mayfield brooks & Tammy Nguyen

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# POETRY PROJECT NEWSLETTER #271

WINTER 2023

FREE

REMEMBRANCES Bernadette Mayer (1945–2022) & Doug Lang (1941-2022) // ESSAY heretoforeuncontemplated languageflux: on Simone White's *or, on being the other woman* by Andrew J. Smyth // IN CONVERSATION Wo Chan & imogen xtian smith // ROUNDTABLE Raw, Rude, and from the Future—DIY Trans Publishing Today: Joss Barton & Casey Plett w/ Kay Gabriel // INTERVIEWS Krystal Languell w/ Anselm Berrigan, Rachel James w/ Morgan Vö // POETRY Multiverse (Sid Ghosh, Adam Wolfond, Adjua Gargi Nzinga Greaves, Imane Boukaila, Lauren Russell, Hannah Emerson, JJJJerome Ellis, Chris Martin), Brontez Purnell, Aida Muratoglu // REVIEWS Tyrone Williams on *26 Tears* by George Tysh and Chris Tysh, Judah Rubin on *Commonplace* by Hugo García Manríquez, erica kaufman on *Heroic Dose* by Matt Longabucco, Spencer Williams on *Dream Rooms* by River Halen, Cassandra Gillig on *let the heart hold down the breakage Or the caregiver's log* by Maureen Owen, Alisha Mascarenhas on *The Autobiography of a Language* by Mirene Arsanios, Liam O'Brien on *The Call-Out* by Cat Fitzpatrick, Marjorie Welish on *Feelings of And* by Barry Schwabsky, danilo machado on *quanundrum [i will be your many angled thing]* by Edwin Torres, Tyhe Cooper on *Joe Brainard: The Art of the Personal* by John Yau // CALENDAR Spring 2023 Readings & Events

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