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D. Nurkse

NOTES FROM THE FOOTHILLS

The male fly lives sixteen days. The female twenty-four. The hatchling never grows: slips out full-size and zooms.

Rain in the orchards. The crests of the Dolomites are smudgy. Logy wind probes the cinched curtain. She murmurs a name in sleep. The fly zips away.

Once I tried to kill it. Once I succeeded. I had to scrape wings from the lines of my palm. They never lost transparency. Mostly I failed. It took off backwards, five times faster than my hand.

I formed a picture in my mind and tried to destroy it. Would it have been easier without that image?

The fly has wing-stubs, halteres, attached directly to its eyes, bypassing the mind: the wings are wired to body hairs.

Nine stormy nights. Nothing can stop the airedale from stiffening his body into an s-shape, staring incredulously, and shitting in the lupines, nothing stops the eggs from opening.

In each eye, four thousand lenses, in each lens a different I, a pattern of diffracted sparks that equals two middle-aged lovers and a judgmental cat.

A bee in its career makes a quarter-teaspoon of honey. A fly makes nothing. It will eat our bodies though it is mouthless, just a sponge and sticker.

When it dies, Altair dies, trapped tonight behind cloud cover, Andromeda, and Betelgeuse, still below the northern horizon.

This village lives off plums, walnuts, and black wine. Volley of slate roofs. Back country of stone walls. Mills on swift rivers. Yards glinting with chestnuts.

Was it you who invented death, blank page?

Is it true you can turn yourself?
Two sleepers in the pine cabin, both us, 
horizon in the window like a spirit level, 
Ferris Island with its single lamp, August, 
annoying whoosh of the gold flies, suddenly imperceptible, 
a name covering us like a nubby cotton blanket.

Perhaps it was then I lost the skinny thread 
that fastens the needles to their sticky cones, 
the insouciant cloud to its ponderous shadow.  
The coast was framed on her lips, but it was dusk. 
I couldn’t grasp how her breath held it, almost spoken.

I will never know who I am, never have a clear mind, 
but moonrise will come, and the stumbling moth, 
whiter in darkness, groping for the outlines of a face.
MOOSE IN SNOW

A moose is born, his legs
unfold and wobble
beneath the weight of himself.
He grows, roams the fields, his antlers
sprout into empty hands.
Then the sky drops
snow, a meadow
fills with whiteness
the moose trudges through,
his breath in the Montana air
cobwebbing. A man
raises his camera
and the moose materializes
in the blood light of his darkroom.
A painter finds the photo
and squeezes out
titanium white, burnt umber,
works the brushes until
he has the snow-stippled coat
just right, and the visible eye
looks like the night
standing behind a peephole.
There are reproductions, rollers
spin in a print shop
and it's moose moose moose
descending on itself. One man
buys one, hangs it
with a frame in his sunny office
where his patients come
troubled, medicated, and I
explain to him this heaviness
pulling down the length
of my body, scalp
to soles, cells and all.
DEAR MOCKINGBIRD

Damn the intelligence of your eyesight for puzzling out Diego’s stripes in the crisscross of branch-shadows. Damn your birdcall, your bursts of static, some mechanical thing breaking down. Your wings, too — damn them both, fanning open audaciously when you plummet, dragging your screech right over him, then fly skyward only to dive again, all without pausing your song. Did I say song? I mean needle scraping across a vinyl record. I mean shut the fuck up, skedaddle, let my cat be, who swipes the air where you passed, again and again where you passed, always half a second too late. It’s sad watching him fail repeatedly, and comical, also mundane, which eventually becomes sublime, there’s this sensation like my mind is traveling around a Möbius strip, which means I’ve been watching too long. Can I make a confession? I stack words on top of words to push away loneliness, though it comes back and I build another mound. You see my dilemma. No you don’t. I understand you don’t understand anything I’ve said, there’s no mockingbird translator here to facilitate a useful discussion. I am, more or less, talking to myself. It’s something we humans do when the universe feels as large and cold as it is.
Wild sarsaparilla is the fool’s sang.
Follow jack-in-the-pulpit, goldenseal,
cohoshes black and blue. To find true heal-all,
fall head-over, get brave, get fangled up
in bobcat mouths or caves, and wrangle twang
and drawl from fiddleheads into a single
clear-cut note. Then forage through the leaf-
like chiming, sundried light. Hear me, stranger?
Feel it pull you underground, transform
you — forest-body, heart, and mind — to root,
moving through the dirt, a shape like a person.
You are wherewithal and you are wild.

— jack-in-the-pulpit, goldenseal,
cohoshes black and blue —

You are real and dream and dissolute.
I mean you are a tangle and a song.
THE MOUNTAINTOP REFUSES HIS ADVANCES

I need you like I need a hole in my heart
a soul in my head a hold in my hand and
sand in my bed a foal in my whale a
flood in my horse a toad in my ode a
skoal in my toast a hot coal in my throat
a listen, drop dead, you toll in my house
you for whom I’ve bled infrared black
and blue you pistol-spit you stone-face
you price on my hide you violence
purebred: I need you like I need another
vowel in my head another hope in this
hope-heap of hope upon hope that
becomes me my knoll my knoll-edge my
backbone my hymn-knell to this earth.
RATTLESNAKES

Meet me with Saint Peter at the all night
AA disco. Halfway to Hades, in the Greyhound
Station bathroom, I cut all my hair off, and
Smoked another cigarette until my brain
Finally clicked on.
God is singing in my head again
In the voice of an insane woman.
What she says I cannot say,
Not to anyone. These days
I parade in mother’s long, ice-cream-blue gown,
Drinking red wine from a paper cup.
I waited for you on the endless fluorescent
Green lawn of the sanitarium
Broken diamonds of no sleep.
And I don’t remember
A thing. If I could, I would
Love all the boys, weeping.
Administer my poisonous
Heaven to each and every
Beautiful and terrible
One of them.
How small a marriage can become with its clean white sheets, how silent and slapped on, smelling of Tide and shut rooms
How you can begin to grow small in the body and small and smaller in the life of the mind until you leave, large with grief in a white car so packed you can’t see what’s behind you and you learn to cook salmon and you go to the beach and eat lobster with someone who smells of the sea and you keep lying down and getting up, opening countless blouses, running hands and zippers up and down, finding someone else and someone else and it’s 10 years and 10 more and more and you keep doing your bank statements the same way as when you were first married and he showed you his way at the white kitchen table, drawing a red line in the checkbook to show when it was perfectly balanced
THIRTY YEARS

You said, I thought of you every day we were apart
and we were apart
thirty years.

I laughed and told you that was impossible
I tried to pull your hair
which was white and clipped short.

Your son and I discussed this
at your deathbed
over your prostrate body.
(You were quiet
being full of morphine.)

And once again I said, Impossible
not every day
not for thirty years

which woke you out of your coma.
You struggled up
and tried to say, yes

propped on one wobbly arm
on the too small
rented hospital bed

Yes.

while I moved toward you
just beginning to understand
how thirty years
is not that long.

Not compared with always.
Tonight I watch, at the edge of your bed, the light pulse flicker and dim between two filaments,

the whole animation beginning to end. Are you here? You were. Scent of balsam, as if the room were filled with needles —

What will become of us in the redshift?

One hundred eighty-six thousand miles flash into this moment thereby my hand becomes

a pomegranate I offer. Here, love. Our shadows hover too near a blind stairwell,

newly formed. You are falling, as I am dressing to go somewhere. There now, there now.

You, a clear bulb,

weightless on a slender cord. Transported, part dissolved in air.
Don't think of a childhood of unrequited
bread crusts, a youth
of eviscerated candy wrappers

blowing down the street in a manner not unlike leaves.

The rinds, socks worn through
at toe and heel, balloons that gave up

your stale breath years ago, apples with one brown bite
missing. A great, bristling

sandbar of cigarette butts in the middle
of the Willamette. The condoms, the favorite shirt forgotten
on a stranger's bedroom floor.

The crook of an arm your head occupied
for seven winters' worth of cold nights.
The mouths that used to

say your name and now
don't, the pillow and mattress
rebounding from your indentations, the grass springing back
even as you lift your foot.

There, over the edge of the field, are the skins
that you walked out of, flake

by flake, reassembled and lit from within
like rice paper lanterns at an autumn festival.
As I clip my toenails, one foot propped on the garbage can, I think of all the cruel teeth of dinosaurs that have shrunk so slowly into the bills of ducks and finches.

Your father, by the time I met him, was nothing more than a work shirt draped over a ladderback chair, a tyrant with all the tyranny siphoned out.

In his kitchen, he kept cocking his head to catch the ring of a phone that wasn’t ringing.

He showed me a windowless room with a piano, played a little Joplin rag, and couldn’t remember my name.

It was later, on the hotel bed, TV muted, that you said: He used to take me in that room and push the piano against the door so I couldn’t get out.

Life is chalk dust on your sleeve and satellites failing in their orbits, the gallons of milk still in the unchewed grass, a cassette tape on which your childhood self tells a story.

Which is to say when you see a man in coveralls you ball your fist. Which is to say that the hair we had as children has all been cut and swept away, and our skin and bones, and every atom in our hearts has been replaced now many times over, and yet jazz sets your teeth together like millstones, and a crater filled with a beautiful lake is still a crater.
We didn’t see your father again. We checked out of the hotel with the little red light on the phone still blinking, and only later wondered if the next occupant would pick up that phone, thinking the message was for him, and hear your father rambling on about how he’s regraveling his driveway, but these sons of bitches, they charge an arm and a leg for nothing more than bits of stone.
Francesa Abbate

DEAR (YOU KNOW I NEVER RODE HORSES WELL)

late April, your sinkholes
in full bloom.
The bus bucks,
the windows shiver.

I’ve never seen a street
open a fabulous new crater.
I was walking elsewhere,
eyes small
against the wind.
Was, will be, whatever.

The last one, the one
that woke me? —
you could throw a ladder
down to Hell.

Speaking of:
I’ve been reading
about Rodin’s Gates.
How “the undulant topography
reifies the scrimmage
between us and them.”
Which means, maybe,
that barred (in this life) entrance,
one turns back upon oneself
and finds that wow,
the Hell we can know

is Really Quiet.
There’s a dead mouse on its back
in a corner, toes furling,
and a bag of rotten ground beef
in the doorway
you have to step over.
A fly would be
a pretty measure.

Like finding,
in last month’s snowbank,
an open tube of lipstick.

Same half-story out there —
soyfield, cornfield, wetland,
soyfield, Wal-Mart.
Eagle on a road sign.
Hawk on a road sign.
Cowbird on, etc.

Yours, and sorry:
for a thin month,
my thin letter.
PSYCHE’S FIRST CHILI DOG

On the walls, the usual Americana.
The place was half under
the sidewalk, I’d nearly missed
the five cement stairs down.

In those lake cities
dusk affords year-round
a winterish distance.

It was winter anyway, very —
every cardinal like the pulse
in the throat of sleep.

*She sleeps, she slept, she will sleep.*
When I woke it was like a holiday.
Everything was shut.

*You should eat something,*
the voice said. Not yours —
my body maybe.
But I’m a traveler, I said,
I travel, I do not want.

So I ordered a chili dog,
which I particularly did not want.

I sat at the counter, under the girl
in polka dots and white gloves
sharing a Coke with Mr. Sailor,
her never-lover.

A commonplace, to feel meant
for something. Another: to feel un-
meant, like: the boat’s gone,
that thought you thought
you belonged to.
The wax cup of root beer
in my hand was as cold
as my hand: I could neither warm
nor relinquish it.

Go on, the voice said, eat.
Not yours. Some ant god, maybe,
shepherd of another petty hour.

I wiped mustard from the tips of my hair,
onions from my lap.
I licked someone else’s stray poppy seeds
from my fingers.

In the waxpaper-lined plastic basket,
jetsam — a wreckage of napkins.
Between such crafts we bide.
Kevin Prufer

FOUR LITTLE CONVERSATIONS

What's in that pot? Lamb stew with carrots and potatoes. What's in that other pot? That other pot is empty. And this one here? And that one there? Empty, empty. And what's in the refrigerator? Perishables. Perishables? Things that wilt and die. And what's in the drawer? The knives I use to slice the perishables.

Is it bleeding? It's just a little cut. Is it bleeding bad? No, not really. I just nicked myself with the knife. You should hold it under cold water. You should cover it in gauze or paper towel. Do you have any alcohol? Do you have any Neosporin cream? You should wrap a sheet around it. You should tie it off at the joint so the bleeding stops.

Thank you Lord for this food we're about to eat. Has the bleeding stopped? And thank you Lord for our friends who love us. I can see a little spot there, on the gauze. And thank you, also, for the many kindnesses of the day. It's like a lamb's red eye opening. It's like a perishable unfolding its petals. You'll scare the children.

It was a very good stew. Thank you. Is there more? No. And how is your cut? The bleeding's stopped. And the knife? Safe in its drawer. And the perishables? Asleep in the crispers. And the perishables? All tucked away in the crispers. And the perishables? They are dreaming and happy. And the children? As I said, they're asleep.
We were the infirm, cackle-voiced lispers, half gone in the brain, gray-headed limpers.

Bat-minded and strange, we slept most days in our chambers, dosed on the cupfuls of pills they left on our trays.

Nights, we wandered

vast hallways past parked ventilators, past restrooms and gurneys, the stairwells, the dead elevators.

When the bombs fell, we were not afraid.

From my window, I watched the overpass crumble.

The cars slid off it like pills from a tray. And up rose the smoke from a block of sick houses, up coughed black smoke from the maternity ward, up with the smoke from the row of sad stores, and the low clouds reflected the orange of their flames.

So we were forgotten, who never mattered much:

Estelle with her puzzles and long lists of words and Grace with her belly she wrapped in a truss. Or nimble old Carl who climbed out a window to sit on the rooftop and crow like a bird.
And what does it matter?
The city is gone, is ash-sweep and embers.
The hallways went quiet some days ago.

You who keep passing under my window,
and you who no longer look up when I call —
I’m still re-composing
this tale of our last days.
You’ll find some of its pages
caught in your trees.
Cookie, I can hear them scratching in the walls.
All night long they say *scritch, scritch, scritch.*
Hush now. Hush. [ ]

There you go.
They’re OK, they don’t mean no harm, anyways.
Not to you nor me.

Coming out of the wall sockets
quick as sparks. Got those little claws on them.

+ 

Some days it snows all night. Then they sleep
like the deadened. Like your dear old dad.
Tell the truth. You can hear them. I knowed it.
*Scritch scritch* like a rocking chair.

And rain
on the roof will wake them up. And thunder
sets them going good.

+ 

I do miss him. That’s true. [ ]

] Yes, I do. [ ]

+ 

You don’t need to tell me nothing. You don’t need to visit.

When night comes down I got
all the company I need.

[ ]
Sweet boy, a little silence is good for the soul.
Sometimes, they’re so feisty I sleep in the yard.
No need to bring me in no more.

Hear that now?
First comes sausage, next comes vodka.
Like a layer of packed dirt abused by a coffin,
the sausage waits in the stomach for vodka.

Another shot! A lingering sting
from medicinal history.
Solved: the mystery of your education!

Funny how you never saw vodka
knock you flat.
But then you get up.
You get up and you walk.

You walk until you meet a pig.
And you know what you’re like when you meet a pig.
You apologize to the pig for his future

drilled by vodka. The pig speaks softly.
He says he’s heard he’s not headed for sausage.
Instead, he will be roasted

with an apple in his mouth.
Why, he asks? Why do they put
an apple in my mouth

as if after I’m dead I’m still eating?
If it’s realism they want
they should feed me garbage.

There is nothing you can say to the talking pig.
It’s not realism you want.
CONFESSION

In Dutchess County, everybody who is dead
goes down to the river
to plead his case.
I know this.

When my brother
and I were young,
we caught a bat
in our father's room.

It smelled of ginkgo.
It smelled of wine.

Listen, you can try to kill it,
my brother said.
You can try to touch its face.

At night
you lie back.
The moon,
however you curse it,
the moon
will slip into your quarters
with its kind,
like wolves inside a children's ward.

It will lie to you.
It will open up your arms.

Look at the country tonight.

They are down there,
boys, the dead,
standing in the reeds.
Furious, they slap the shallows with their sisters' hair.

Once you touch the wings, my brother said, you can't be woken.

Once it brings you to your knees, once that blindness enters you, nothing washes off, my friend, nothing can redeem you to the light.

That night they found us in a corner, we'd taken the pact, we'd slipped the creature's fangs into our arms.

Shirtless as we were, and torn, they must have peeked inside the door,

they must have thought we knelt in praise, at last,

that we were bowing to the watcher in the skies, my god, and not

the earth, the curse, the commonness in us.
I HAVE MY OWN DAMNED FAMILY — THANK YOU VERY MUCH — BUT THEIRS APPARENTLY HAS NOBODY

Bandaged. Gagged. In B-flat minor
and the tenth time in childbirth,
which girl-face goes later
under what old-lady lace cap?

Here’s the brooch last seen five girls ago,
and if I come up kissing — someone, anyone —
I’m kissing through them.
The eyes. The eyes all have it.

Niagara between the wars. How
sweetly their honeymoon bliss
just fit the flipside
of this postcard waterfall.

Please, won’t I take it away now — that laprobe
made from the very horse
they rode as children? The eyes.
The eyes have all had it.
NOT WITHSTANDING

The framed-up kinfolk hide in furs. Wall-side on his high horse, this one’s smile a beard blurs. I dust them. I wind their clocks. Why? Why can’t you conceive yourself as of Him? Why, when you were raised so well?

All these goatees under glass but no chins. My mother points me up the cupola of grins. To be better than her comes in a letter as better then me. Comes with pale blue gloves. Did you ask for these? Bare-handed, I dared not touch either end of our infinity. My toes dip... the same river twice over twice over.... Shoo was the world’s last word.
D. A. Powell

THE OPENING OF THE COSMOS

You’d have thought me a blushed newbie, to look at my face then.
And you’d have been wrong.
Discolored, yes. But that was an accident on the pommel horse.
That was the beating I took from the winds,
trying to work my way uptown.

If I retracted, I’d retract just like the milksnake’s scarlet skin:
welcome to the past. Here is my private self to greet you.
I am the spitting image of the night’s prehensile lips,
ready to clamp you against the solid surface of my palate.
And I am the new sap, aroused by spring, the hard xylem,
the knotty stick whose protuberance sends forth new shoots.

Didn’t you say you always wanted a child?
I can be that too: the whippersnapper who follows you.
Or maybe you want the youth who’ll do your labors
and be paid with what little kindness you can manage.

Go back and try to snag me while I’m yet unspoilt.
The morning’s saporous dew, the early strut of the cockerel,
the first fugitive act of copulation, which,
because it is a first, feels like a last.

You picked it all when you picked me out:
what satisfied you, what couldn’t love you back.

The endless act of revising. And with that, the revision.
TRANSIT OF MERCURY

At the beginning,
    these were indistinct: the cortege
attending me my every astral night.

Before the sandy lake of light pollution
    sounded its coarse tongue
across the seductive bottom of the sky.

Now you’re the one alluring planet
    I hope to reach, before we plunge
toward our separate gravitations.

Never having had affairs in order,
    I might not try to save you for the last.
Run, brief page, lest I should catch you.

I’ve got a heat-seeking missile for heartbreak.
    & so do you. If there’s another side
of the sun, then you must hide there
    in less than your underclothes,
emitting every molecule of thermal funk.

    Thereby, create some other world that I
can be disclosed to, adamic, flayed of this sullied
atmosphere. Promise to take away all my air,
astride me, astraddle, & hurl me to oblivion.
ALMONDS IN BLOOM

Who could sustain such pale plentitude
and not want to shake the knopped white blossoms
from the swarthy branches.

The petals seem more parchment, and more pure,
in her upright phalanges

with a box of soap flakes, tackling the mud-cake
somebody made on the quarter sawn floor.

Just when we think we've been punished enough,
there's a bounty to contend with —
she's at the spinet, now, and every key's a plunker.
She hasn't had it tuned since the flood.
Yes, she really troubles heaven with her deaf singing.
But after all, it's heaven.
Even death will be forgiven.
A right turn, then another
and suddenly you’re rising
out of this city, a road
paved yet no cars, green-quilted
canopy of sugi, elm,
a whisper in deep shadow,
stream unseen to the left. I
am running, the road corkscrews
above Takamatsu Lake,
the first clearing a farm house
abandoned, two bouquets left
each Saturday morning at
the family grave, lilies,
pale chrysanthemums, orchids —
always white, color of salt,
of death. Further, the forest
peels back, a single stone stood
on its narrow tip, shihi —
poem carved in the face — Grace
of clouds in pale sky, it says,
I called for light here,
over my valley. It came.

Dusk now, sky
the mirror’s silver,
which forgets.
DIVORCE POEM

April noon, a valley in snow country,
window panes open pop-pop, the breeze
weighted, pine, old ice off the hill tops,
the water-blistered fields. We’re to air
things out, hanashiai — word meeting,
only it’s all amiss, the cold, my
posture, seiza — legs folded under,
ominously numb. Father-in-law
wants everything, so it’s unanimous,
I’m to get the dog but nothing else.

Outside, the still-winter garden, the odd,
arthritic twists, the lifting up. Jinsei

ha kore kara — life is from now,
he tells me, the skin on his face and hands
taut, his kidneys are broken, daily
he grows larger, younger, a balloon
animal. If I could, I would rise up
and hit anything, my feet distant,

bloodless — how relentless the needs
of the body, how it fails us.
Black dog, black wave,  
his little Okinawa,  
you don’t eat for days and  
so he cries Odysseus tears,  
faces of the dead coming  
back to him in paw  
and greased pelt.  
Your eyes gone skyward —  
soldier chewed  
by bullet and sand.  
And so the laying out  
of memory in the body  
of a dog, the needle  
to the leg. I know  
it is not easy dying,  
or watching his nerves  
fly through rings of time  
so it is almost the arc  
of planets he impales  
with each hesitant step.  
Mercury huge (his  
daughter says)  
because the sky is so clear.  
Wife’s body in a box  
of ashes. Her perpetual  
unsifting. The Florida sun  
her only suitor.  
There is a bed, I know, carved  
from the heart of tree,  
but he does not sleep  
there. Dogless, he paces.  
Dogless, because a new one  
will tip him over. He’ll  
fall, I suspect, when that time  
comes, willingly.
But for now, his box of stills. The pith helmet. Pre-invasion breakfast of steaks and eggs. That one photo we lingered over when we first met—a Japanese soldier, a boy, with his right big toe crammed into the trigger guard, rifle barrel pressed to the chin. Cold penny of death, back of his head glued to the sand. We stared at it a long time before he turned it over and—because you were still alive—petted your neck, rambled off a buddy's name... Then, not one tear.
Finally: the fences swung open
and the horses ran off. The hardest part

was knowing what to call the loss:
memory made their markings run together

forming one horse of a single color.
Years later, we were still trying to describe it:

maybe an Arabian, but less steadfast
and without the clean lines, made of wood

with an army inside, or an escaped racehorse.
You may know him: his name in all the papers

his neck a wall of roses. This is how forgetting
happens: the sadness gets smaller, migrates.

Tell me: what was it in this empty palm that meant
so much? Where has it gone: my tether

my sugarcube: clearly I am no expert.
I am between horses. Once the question

was put to me: feline is to cat as equine is to _____
and the answer seemed obvious.

It makes its bed in the barndoor’s narrow sunlight
and bends to a burden before knowing its weight.
HICKEY

We’re given bait and shown how to hold it near the sensitive stingray nose, a quick briefing — gestural simulation, really — but weeks of lecture couldn’t prepare us for the flat host we roll backward to be loose among. Pure wing, they follow our hands so closely into loops and flourishes of scent we can feel depth relinquished in the softer of their skins. How long does it take us in water sunlight permeates to forget needing ever to be told? A stranger swimming behind us might think us part angelic semaphore. Each diver chooses differently when to move the baited hand down the underneath from the nose to the mouth of the fish. It’s a question of how long you can bear taking advantage of something more beautiful than yourself, even if meaning to feed it in the end. When we slow and let them dilate over our open palms they make a nothing world in themselves and suck the old one in. It can leave a mark through neoprene.
There are times I really see.
— That isn't what I meant to say.
What I meant to say is true.
Meant the poem to be a proof.
I might have catalogued her face.
How its pieces click together
when we talk. The telling details
shown, not told. The daylight
in them. Warming me awake.
The link, unbreakable, between.
Against her in the morning.
The give of her the give of love.
Then there might have been
a line or two to make you cry.
But just as I began it ended.
Something withered, lost. A hush
fallen, leaflike, onto nothing.
I could not call her face to mind.
Every feature for an instant un-
specific. As if my love for her
were nothing other than a making-
happy-sense-of. A sung paradise
to purpose life. Worth glowing,
growing into. Some assembly required.
But then she shifts in bed and sighs,
her mouth feathery, partway open.
IRON MIRROR

Light

snow

falls

through.

*

A seeing-

into

light-

fall.

*

Opened ground, a

boat-

length.
TO DISAPPEAR AS LOVE

As through I had some way of existing in every season.

Some way existing, as through I had in every season.

Nothing much is happening, as though at once.

In every way at once, as though in every season.

The absolute is love as every season happening at once.

As every season’s way of happening: a sudden, joyous gap.

An early bluish tulip, its stubbornness. The joy of nothing much.

The absolute as joy’s sudden way with nothing much.
Lee Sharkey

BY YOUR INTOLERABLE ACTS OF GRACE

You are the teacher standing in the aftermath who insists, Kill us all, kill us all right now

I am the witness who forgets the prayer and where it was made but swears, there was a prayer there, there is a prayer

You are the nurse who spoons egg yolk into the prisoner’s mouth

*  

I lay down on the earth that lay on the stone that lay on the fire

I thought, I could die here, letting the earth breathe for me

As pine needles tumbled end over end to cover me

I thought, you would lay your weight on me and we’d be balsam

The birds forgot me

A definite cat came to question my stillness

I opened my eyes and saw what the woods floor sees: vault stitched with needles of light

I flew over the latifundia and the slave gardens

I ran and the bands grew tight

*  

You have labored to gather stones from the speechless

Tongues in the rock

On the drumskin of earth, we run
LOVE

He says he saw a moose once.
She disagrees.

The letters they exchanged in the war molder in the attic.

There is a chemical process that describes why they are unreadable.
Mark Neely

FOUR FALLS

The royal sky only maples with their orange brushes bring reminds me of a pair of eyes, the bare dogwood of brushing stray hairs back in the dark. I used to talk all night. Shouldn’t I know more now, have more to say? I never wrote much down I guess. If this is summer dying, then the forecast must be sad and beautiful. Then again this could be a loud and bloody season being born.

Garage roof, bike ramp, the high rickety fence of the three-legged dog. Once I wrapped my knees in cotton and did a stuntman down the stairs. A woman my mother knows is missing. They found her gray bike in a ditch. I think I’m psychic when I see a mouse sniffing the corn leaves in her hair. She always dies. The farmer always finds her body. The dreamer always dreams her falling there.

Mist on my face like lice from a raging giant’s hair. The tour book tells me I will feel both exhilarated and insignificant, but the sausage I ate at breakfast isn’t sitting right, and my eyes are itching from last night’s champagne. I’d like to be back at the hotel, drinking coffee, watching ESPN in that overstuffed bed, and unless an asshole goes over in a barrel, I’m not going to feel a fucking thing.

Wait long enough and the screen goes purple like a desert flower, round at the corners and I’m diving again sliding down the wormhole into what dimension? This time I peer at a square of sky from the bottom of a mine shaft as the backhoe moves to fill it in. Kids who fall in wells must dream wet walls forever. But there’s no bottom to this one — half a dream of falling, half a dream of flight.
Steven Cramer

from CLANGINGS

I hear the dinner plates gossip
Mom collected to a hundred.
My friends say get on board,
but I’m not bored. Dad’s a nap
lying by the fire. That’s why
when radios broadcast news,
news broadcast from radios
gives air to my kinship, Dickey,
who says he’d go dead if ever
I discovered him to them.
I took care, then, the last time
bedrooms banged, to tape over
the outlets, swipe the prints
off DVDs, weep up the tea
stains where once was coffee.
Not one seep from him since.

What, you wander, do I mean?
Except for slinging my songs
wayward home, how do things
in people go? is what I mean.
from CLANGINGS

Dickey's death feels all over me.
I try not digging at the thing. He died
before I could grow his hemlock seed.
Boyo, the tricksters of this cemetery,

long-sleeved shorts with their shirts off,
can't tell a cow's dead till it's slaughtered.
He was a sublime Halloween snicker,
bat dark meat. Never watched golf.

Not much now but gum and minerals,
blue pods, tainted entertainments.
Our folder warps, drifts, frags, taunts.
Everest ground down to soil samples.

I've lost my sprite, my shot at distemper,
nobody's rabies can pillow this blow.
Nobody's but Dickey's. My "he" is "O,"
who once flicked hearts, a lamplighter.

I could clang wish-bells, break out a dish,
but I know he's the headache at the base
of my throat. He's left ice in my voice,
foam round rocks where we used to fish.
differentiates his hand from a fork. When a tumor overpowers this part he sticks his hand in his pizza. He throws away all his belts.

When my grandmother cracked her skull open, she said numbers and letters for weeks until she died. These units of thought must lie in the strongest part of the brain. I appreciate this, but it is not beautiful.

The image of my grandfather’s belts in a trash can also is not beautiful.

In what way can I show my grandfather his own hand? From years of running a wax paper company he has no fingerprints, just like a fork, like every fork in the whole goddamn world.
Your books swollen alive
in their tipped over shelves,
the horrible water, shit-colored, lapping
your loveseat, sloshing over
the oven door’s hinge, snatching
every Saturday you can remember
since 1983, every last one, and you and your cat
balanced at opposite ends of the last dry beam
of the bedroom floor
gaping at one another over this new
and deepening hopelessness,
what can be said? You got out,
more or less, the little boat made it across
the parking lot, your friends put you up,
you went back to work, told your usual
goofy jokes, but you and the rain
had come to know each other
the way one would know the face
of a man who had raped her in public,
in daylight, know it so well she begins
to become him, see him every time
her reflection grabs her and insists
with bullyish vehemence
that it belongs to someone else,
every broken umbrella
upside down in the trash is another
failed angel, and something less survivable
than this water that glistens because it is
only water, that has begun to end
the world, is rising in you, every day
you conceal the line of it as it grows higher,
go at it with sponges and rags and finally
the clothes off your back, and yet
every day more goes under,
how much more can the sturdiness
for which you are known
withstand, how long the appearances,
deadlines met, sister-in-law gone
out to dinner with, and the worst is when
the rain stops and the shameless sun
spreads out like a well-paid courtesan
over the garish new flowers.
Will Schutt

STRANGE GIRAFFE

Perspective, put one way, is invitation to accident:
Andrea Del Sarto painting a strange giraffe
in the entourage of the Magi having only read
about giraffes in travel books, tired, maybe,
of the materials his time allowed, and hoping
an old spirit would stretch into the clothes of the living.

Me, I wake up to the city of bread and lilies,
inside a cenaculum, a penny wedged in each eye,
still wondering why the elaboration isn’t harmless.
Hunting for the long-ago life in my own life,
finding a mistake is the light behind the wattle.

Seeing the elephant once meant to see from
high perspective. The past, in hindsight, appears
clearly, riddled with wrong measurements:
elongate arms, a sun describing orbits around earth.
Out in the square, someone clears his throat
to phone home: I can hear you, can you hear me?
Heat in the tent, hard ground. I hang my arms out the opening for a drop of air until a heave of flies drives me back in again and I lie still for a sleepless hour.

It’s easy to imagine giving up, like Rimbaud. The brain quits braiding its elaborate elocutions. The past is around us but isn’t pressuring or insufferable. My journal fills with sea lily and holly. On my way to piss, I spy a boy swallowed in the husk of his hammock. The spirit, though we make it otherwise, isn’t complicated, rising and falling in its calligraphic exhaustion.
FROM A MIDDLE DISTANCE

At this moment I’m sitting in the sun leafing through a book on Velasquez with a pithy line about his having painted mankind because he couldn’t see angels. Exuberant, out of style, its Edwardian era prose makes me blush, eighteen again and gut-struck by ideas I’ve just discovered in art house films. I called movies films back then. My labored hyperbole put most people to sleep. Now lunch is meager: steamed asparagus, a glass of lemon water. I’m learning to suck wind — an old phrase of my father’s who’d drop words like copacetic with a wink standing under a windmill in tennis whites scuffed with clay where he’d fallen during a match. It’s funny to see the bare trees stunned out of their comas by this unseasonable January mopping the yard in lambent apricot strokes, or watch snowmelt disappearing in creeks that politely disappear in the river. Everything appears equally important if all of it’s to be gotten over: ideas, styles, and incidents of greater impact, which are personal and therefore alone in me translating into a yellowish morbidity. Say good things about me says my father, and I shrug at the notion,
digging further into the book’s detail of *Las Meninas*: the narrow face of a rousing mastiff whose dark narrow eyes betray knowing, which is to say restraint.
ELEGY: WATER FROM THE SAME SOURCE

A time came when none of us could use the figure without mutilating it.
— Rothko

Knuckles stripped
to a skinned goat’s head —
the nearly vacant fingers

of barge workers. After you left
I turned the walls inside out.
For a week after, I was shut up

from surgery, bed-stunted
and itching. Going back out, sinking
into subway tunnels, I was reminded

how easy it is to forget the world
is inhabited mostly by others.
I wanted only to rehouse

myself, wire-jawed and silent.
We’re ten, I’ve got three joints
in my jeans pocket, and we’re kicking ash

from our shoes in the pointless
heat, smashing a ditch’s discarded bottles
in the night, so that their wreck

spreads in cinders over the blacktop
like silage spilled into moonlight, like
something you might want.
LETTER FROM AN UNKNOWN WOMAN

Some of the women at the party don’t seem like purse women, but some of the men do. Shem, transvestial, \textit{avec sac}, walks a slinky strut, a fairly gorgeous anxious slut, says his mother has dementia, but she remembered, on call last night what a \textit{safety} is in football, and the \textit{field}, taking three kits from their burrow with dry fingers, and their whining up from the hand-canopied apron, remembered, she says, “Walking to the no one place to look for more warmth.” We stand on a roof in Alphabet City, sopping sober and not nearly far enough above the underdressed citizens below — up here is the gray which when I close my eyes, surrounds me, leaving no distance between me and it, and the sounds that encroach on my drowsiness and hum in my head. How hard the black bear has to work to speak, accosting the boulder for its lack of ambition, its absence of anger, its need for touch — I, wondering, as I often have, if I have the vinegar to wipe and re-wipe my aged and large mother, the tangle of whitening pubic hair. I looked at Shem’s naked hands gesticulating his story, the painted thin-lipped smiling mouth moving, looked at my own paws, thinking about how far they seemed from me, about cleanliness, and its complications.
Diane K. Martin

REFRACT

If human life moves from matter to spirit, fact to story,
is it more than the breeze shot through aspens,
turning its gold medallions?

Light waves pass
through a glass and move at a different pace
in the watery medium. As she is, not what she will be —
girl in the too-big coat
on the train who sings eensy-weensy spider to her fingers —
What a hurry we are in to lift off
into silkscreens of memory!
Dante the car jockey pines for the boom of the nineties:
Those days, sometimes forty cars would stack up at the curb.
And still cigar smoke drifts
on the Embarcadero under an emoticon moon.
DAY JOB

Picture the fibrous spokewheel-scaffold of an infinitely thin wafer of orange

held to a window, transilluminated in its circumference of rind.
Now picture a volume of human

reduced to planes and fluttering under my thumb like a flipbook showing the disease in action.

Every one of those planes: hundreds of lines stacked tight enough to resolve the speck not yet a lump.

Every one of those lines: a string of pixels end to end, razor-luminous horizon round a darkening world.

Each pixel: a point geometry defines dimensionless, no height, no width, no death. I see what ails the body

by regressing body back to spirit: the volume a stack of planes, the plane a row of lines, the line a string of points,

and the point, at last, nothing at all, all form substanceless by radiologic proof. I read no images more imaginary than

the mind’s, every layer of it immaterial — the gray matter, the white matter,

the dark.
Lyric poetry in English has always flirted with length, even as it’s made its major commitment to the short lyric: sonnets have been following their Italian models into sequence ever since the Renaissance, and modern and contemporary poets have expanded the range considerably.

Though the poets under review are at very different stages in their careers (we’re looking at Jackson’s third book, Wright’s 18th and 19th), both have been unusually drawn to sequence. That both have now written books of insistently short lyrics raises interesting questions about the discrete poem in relation to the expansive impulse. Formally, these books play close to the sonnet tradition: Jackson’s poems (with a few exceptions) have ten lines, somewhat suggestive of Hopkins’ curtal sonnets; Wright’s are, as his title tells us, sestets. In fact, almost all that keeps the books from being sequences is that each of the short poems carries its own title. Or are they sequences after all, and does it in any case matter?

Major Jackson’s first two books evoke, in memorable language and varying forms, a richly peopled African-American urban scene, with sequence providing an expansive—and expanding—canvas: sequences begun in the first book (“Hoops,” “Urban Renewal”) are completed in the second. More remarkably, over half the second book is comprised of a 13-part, 69-page “Letter to Brooks” that claims both the epistolary tradition and Chaucer’s rhyme royal, playing them against not only Gwendolyn Brooks and other black poets but also hip-hop and contemporary culture, which leads to some stunning prosodic fusions: “Not out for the epic, I want a vault / For my verbal wealth. I want a form / For my lyrical stealth. I want a malt / To toast the public’s health. I want a storm / On my perfect shelf.” For all of the linguistic and prosodic dazzle, Jackson’s “epistolary chat” is a leisurely journey through a wide range of aesthetic and cultural
topics (with poetry at the center) as well as a variety of locales. Not an epic, no, but it's a big poem.

And now *Holding Company*, which has more titles than "Letter to Brooks" has pages—80, divided into four sections of 20 poems each (the number of sections in "Urban Renewal"). The form is constant: all but a handful have ten lines and only two have stanza breaks, making them almost square on the page. In the first section, though, the poems are remarkably discrete. Some focus on a single subject, from Leni Riefenstahl to the rock band Jane's Addiction; one gives us a landscape, another a dream. Other poems travel more randomly within their ten lines—deliberately, in "Discrete Intelligence," or more unexpectedly in other poems, creating a style that is jumpier and more "difficult" than the leisurely style of the earlier work.

Whether focused or ranging, most of the poems in the book pack a lot into their ten lines, using unexpected turns and shifts of diction to keep the reader just a bit off balance, though rarely so much so that a second reading will not open up the poem, which is one of the book's pleasures. Though occasionally blurred in what feels like experimental intention, the syntax usually gives the reader a grip on the poems, which sometimes use the ten lines to develop a single sentence, and make frequent use of anaphora, dependent clauses, and other repetitive and sustaining devices.

Whatever their individual concerns, the poems of the first section give a sweeping sense, through their discrete flashes, of modern and contemporary history and culture. Few of them touch on racial themes, though those that do are powerful, especially "Migration," which conflates tautly-rendered details of northern migration and lynching. But while the first poem in the book ("Picket Monsters") foregrounds history, it also gives us a clue that something different is coming:

For I was born, too, in the stunted winter of History.
For I, too, desired the Lion's mouth split
& the world that is not ours, and the wounded children
set free to their turnstiles of wonder. I, too, have
blinked speechless at the valleys of corpses, wished
Scriabin's "Black Mass" in the Executioner's ear, Ellington in the Interrogation Room.
I now seek gardens where bodies have their will, where the self is a compass point given to the lost.
Let me call your name; the ground here is soft and broken.

The hypnotic I, too's take us back to Jackson's earlier work and into the material of the first section; the last three lines point to what's ahead.

In the second section, then, "my lover" appears and we're in more familiar territory: love poems that begin, for all their differences, to accrue into what feels almost like a traditional sonnet sequence, even as the poems themselves begin to sound more like sonnets, with occasional end-rhyme and internal rhyme increasingly punctuating a line that throughout the book plays against a loose pentameter. A pending separation or divorce is a present absence from this point on, made explicit in "On Removing the Wedding Band" ("As though undreaming the mountain / from the sea or tweezering hands from / a watch . . . . As though a reverse / whisper of vows into a pageant of elegant ears"), and it's not always clear, even here, whether the "you" or "she" (the pronouns shift, as they do, less often, between "I" and "he" and even "you") is the same woman. Nor, for all the language of love and lust, are the poems always in praise of the lover or the loving, though there's a good deal of that ("Whichever way your shoulder moves, there's joy"); even here, the speaker is aware of limitations. One emotionally complex poem is comprised of a list of similes for "How You Love," beginning with "Like the injured laid down at the scene of an accident / before cars collide" and ending with "like Janus."

But none of this quite prepares for the shift, in the first poem of the third section, from the singular to the plural, where the speaker describes himself "gesturing until I scattered / myself into a luminance, shining over a village / of women. Was I less human or more? I hear still / my breathing echoing off their pillows. So many / eyes like crushed flowers." While the poetic tradition of love poems and sonnets continues to shadow the poems,
it's in stark tension with their contemporary language and revelations; thus "Hookups," which steals its beginning from Wyatt (and note the rhyming):

They never flee from me, hobnobbers of the dark moon—of their own accord, moths mistaking the bud. Like a mob they swarm to my room. Bored I lead them to the firmament of touch: forage my blues, they say, as such, cloud formations who graze horrors, then release their internal weathers. Boom boom in the dark regions. I wish I'd pulled the covers over my head and were left alone.

As the title suggests, we're way out of the concerns of traditional love or even lust poems here. Entitled "Caressing the Ruins," the third section is a brave descent (with the slightest of Dantean echoes) into a self that, as the first poem of the book had it, is "a compass point given to the lost."

A turning is hinted at even here ("I no longer want this weather on my breath"), and the fourth section, more reflective than the descent that preceded it, feels like the aftermath of a difficult confrontation with the hard truths of the third. "My own jury I acquitted my inner savage" begins a poem called "Immanence," which ends with a rhyming couplet that economically conflates tenor and vehicle, self and self-with-other: "When I faced Nature, I had not a tincture of will. / I tossed her on my bed and did not keep still."

In addition to rhymes, even a casual reader will have begun to note a repetition of complete lines: the last poem of the second section ends with the first line of the book, and the next section opens by repeating, with the last three words now dropped to a second line, the first line of the previous poem: "How did I come to make a crisis [/] of the body?" These repetitions become even more prevalent in the last section, until the last poem, "Forecast," becomes almost a collage of previous lines, but with some differ-
ences. A number of lines replace the earlier singular version with the plural: "Whichever way our shoulders move, there’s joy," and "I thought of our lives, / caressing ruins through half-opened windows." By the end of the poem, the line that began the second section, "This is the year I’ll contemplate the fire-fangled sky," has a different timbre. Though only a "Forecast," as the title has it, the poem directs us toward a more shared, less narcissistic love.

As the increased focus and formality suggest, the end of the book feels very different from the beginning: it’s as if we’re watching the poet find his subject here. This is not to wish away the first section, which provides a background that is echoed in references to events in the larger world throughout the book. In the end, I’m reminded of Robert Lowell’s unrhymed sonnets, which (ultimately but not initially divided into three separate books) treat similar themes—and which, I can’t help but wonder, might have been some sort of model for Jackson. It’s also perhaps of Lowell that I think when I return to the question with which I began. Perhaps the poet who has begun to think in terms of large poems, or thematically-organized books of poems, can’t help but be drawn toward sequence, however tempted by the smaller poem.

The question applies as well to Charles Wright, who has been writing long poems for most of his long career. Two 20-poem sequences fill much of his third book, which became the central volume in what he’s since described and published as the first of three trilogies—a trilogy of trilogies that comprise much of the poetry he published in the twentieth century. That a Dantean structure underlies this project is clear.

After the third of the triple trilogies was gathered in 2000, Wright published four more volumes before Sestets, the last of which (Littlefoot, 2007), expanded the “journal” form he’s been using for some time into a book-length poem. Physically, Sestets speaks deliberately to Littlefoot. The spare cover design is identical, but reversed—white type on black instead of black on white, with “POEMS” where “A POEM” had been. Littlefoot had 35 numbered sections, with no titles; there are 70 sestets (69 titled poems: one’s a double), as imaginatively and lengthily titled as any Wright has written.
While Wright’s central concerns in *Sestets* might seem to be a reflection of his relative maturity, he’s never been the poet of love and desire that Jackson is in *Holding Company*. As he’s said more than once, his concerns are language, landscape, and the idea of God—a conflation that puts him in the earlier tradition of meditative poetry, but with (as in Jackson’s love poems) a difference. For decades, his poems have been “meditating,” much as the poems of George Herbert, say, meditate on a Biblical text or idea—but in Wright’s poems the text is often landscape. Nor does he write as a “believer,” however often God may be addressed by whatever names.

Not surprisingly, death, or the idea of death, has made frequent appearances in these quasi-theological poems, sometimes elegiacally, sometimes philosophically, as the poet questions what, in a post-Christian vision, death might mean. But in his recent books, including these sestets, mortality—with particular emphasis on the poet’s own mortality—comes front and center.

Traditional poems of meditation tended to be discrete spiritual exercises that accrued, much like love sonnets, into sequences (Herbert’s *Temple*, Donne’s *Holy Sonnets*). Closer to home, the first poetry published in the American colonies was a slim volume by Philip Pain called *Daily Meditations and Quotidian Preparations for Death* (1638). Whether Wright wrote his sestets as daily meditative exercises I don’t know; one poem is called “Little Meditation,” and the day seems central to the structure of the poems. In any case, they feel like poems not only written as but also readable as daily devotions: a secular lectionary, a book of (un)common prayer(s).

Here’s the first of the *Sestets*, which highlights the day in both title (“Tomorrow”) and first line:

The metaphysics of the quotidian was what he was after:
A little dew on the sunrise grass,
A drop of blood in the evening trees,
 a drop of fire.
If you don’t shine you are darkness.
The future is merciless,
    everyone’s name inscribed
On the flyleaf of the Book of Snow.

The “metaphysics of the quotidian” is exactly the business of much of Wright’s work. Here, description accomplishes this, moving us, as it moves through the day, from the physical “dew on the sunrise grass” to the metaphorically descriptive “drop of blood in the evening trees,” which then becomes a less predictable “drop of fire.” Shine, yes—but then the poem turns, not as a Christian’s might, toward a book of life that promises a resplendent heaven, but rather toward “The Book of Snow.”

The two stanzas of the poem suggest a kind of condensed sonnet, and others exhibit a similar turn. Some begin in landscape, some like journal entries (“May 30th, early evening, one duck”). But others feel almost like sestets that follow absent octaves. A number begin not with landscape, but aphoristically, as bits of wisdom: “It is not possible to imagine and feel the pain of others,” or “The more you say, the more mistakes you’ll make,” or, reversing Stevens, “Death is the mother of nothing.” Here’s the third poem in the book, “Future Tense”:

All things in the end are bittersweet—
An empty gaze, a little way station just beyond silence.

If you can’t delight in the everyday, you have no future here,
And if you can, no future either.

And time, black dog, will sniff you out, and lick your lean cheeks,
And lie down beside you—warm, real close—and will not move.
Time, like God, is often given metaphorical substance in *Sestets*—here as a relative of the dog that God has sometimes been for Wright, by reversed spelling. What’s startling here is not just the description of the dog, but the intimate colloquial language that interrupts it: “warm, real close.”

That’s the kind of move Wright’s famous for: in the midst of lush description, a colloquial moment, a fragment of a song (Gospel or Little Richard), a bit of regional slang. In the longer poems, this kind of moment plays against a lushness of description that’s often dependent on metaphor; in *Sestets*, it often plays against something plainer. Description is still high among the pleasures of the book, but it’s often talked about, especially in a cluster of poems in the first half of the book. “Homage to What’s-His-Name” begins: “Ah, description, of all the arts the least appreciated,” and ends with this stunning last line-and-a-half: “And what’s more metaphysical than that, / The world in its proper posture, on all fours, drinking the sweet water?” Several poems later, in “Description’s the Art of Something or Other,” we’re reminded again of loss, of mortality. “Description is expiation,” the poem begins: “It is a coming to terms with.” Then a stanza break, and the turn, leading to another surprising but very different ending: “Or coming to terms without. / As though whatever we had to say could keep it real. / As though our words were flies, and the dead meat kept reappearing.”

As the differing tones of these two poems suggest, individual sestets chronicle very different emotions, leaving it to the reader to make connections. There are invitations to do so: similar titles (“The Gospel According to Somebody Else” and “The Gospel According to Yours Truly”); echoes of one poem in another (“what’s more metaphysical than that” morphs into “What could be better than that?”); recurrent imagery provided by landscape (ducks, horses, heron, moon), some of which resonates beyond itself (rivers, mountain).

Which takes us to the question of whether there’s a progression here. In the exact middle of the book, with 34 poems on either side, Wright is “With Alighieri on Basin Creek.” There are earlier Dantean references, and in “Yellow Wings” the soul is a canary.
that is “pulled toward, and longs for . . . the light its wings dissolve in if it ever gets out from the underground.” Then, three poems later, “With Alighieri”: “All four of the ducks are gone now. Only the mountain remains, / Upside down like Purgatorio / In the pond’s reflection, no tree at the top, and no rivers.” The Purgatorial reference does nothing so simple as signal a turn up the mountain, though references like “up here” seem more frequent from now on. But there’s actually more darkness in the second half of the book, with the vast majority of the poems explicitly set at sundown. Language begins to disappear, along with everything else: “In the Kingdom of the Beyond . . . Everything’s what it seems to be, and a little less. // In the land of the unutterable, words float like reflections across the water” (“No Angel”). But the darkening brings something else, too. In “Autumn Thoughts on the East Fork,” when “the evening starts to drain the seen world from the unseen / And the mare’s-tail clouds swish slowly across the mountains, // Contentment embraces me . . . .”

Though present moments like this center many of the poems, the governing tense of Sestets is the future, from the first title (“Tomorrow”) to the last sestet, a “Little Ending”:

Bowls will receive us, 
and sprinkle black scratch in our eyes.
Later, at the great fork on the untouchable road, 
It won’t matter where we have become.

Unburdened by prayer, unburdened by any supplication, 
Someone will take our hand, 
someone will give us refuge, 
Circling left or circling right.

The untraditional comfort this poem gives comes partly, of course, from language: the bowls, the mysterious “black scratch,” the surprising “where we have become” (not “what”), the way “by” in the fourth line plays both with and against the traditional function of prayer, the Dantean ending. But here and throughout, the fu-
tire tense plays against the finality of a non-Christian mortality, making, by its repeated use, the darkness of ending into what is after all a kind of comfort, a "refuge."

The vague arc of Sestets—which I suspect emerged both during and after the writing process—makes the book more than the sum of its small parts. But I think the ongoing pleasure will lie in individual poems—here, for the like-minded, as meditations to meditate upon. For both kinds of reading, the recent Outtakes is informative. The second in Sarabande's artist/poet collaborations, Outtakes pairs sestets with what the book calls simply "abstract images" by Eric Appleby. The images all seem to be photographic, but photographs tinkered with, blurred, expanded, their images sometimes repeated. Some seem to focus on sky, some on terrestrial minutiae, either natural (stalks?) or manufactured (pens?); some look both ways, as in what appears to be an image of buds that, in negative, look like stars. That all of this is in the spirit of Wright's own method is usually more to the point, for me, than any specific pairing of the images with the poems that each accompanies.

The fact that the poems themselves are "outtakes" is foregrounded by the decision to publish them in typescript. This highlights the composition process, of course, and invites the reader to consider the fact that the Sestets are not just a compilation. Though some selection is bound to be arbitrary, especially if one's counting poems, it would be hard to argue with Wright's choices. Many of the poems in Outtakes seem plainer in style, more one- or two-dimensional, with fewer unexpected turns. But for the reader deeply interested in Wright, a comparison of the two books provides a rare opportunity to observe the poet at work. And for the reader who has enjoyed the process of reading these little poems as meditations, it's nice to have more. It's interesting to consider, too, the possibility that the Outtakes themselves are a selection: there are 35 of them (against 70 earlier sestets)—and once again, Purgatory appears in the exact center of the book, here in a backward look: "How long ago that all seems. / Who was to know we sat on the hard rocks of Purgatory, / Watching ourselves be pulled in, watching ourselves reeled out?"
For me, though, the ultimate gift of *Outtakes* is the occasional individual poem—especially the second, "Together," which states more directly than anything in *Sestets* what seems to be the business of both books:

I wish I had the capacity to see through my own death. Some flash light, some force of flame Picking out diamond points of falling leaves and rivers of stars.

This is the year I’m scraping the ice away from its sidewalks. This is the year I’ve slid its shoes off. This is the year I’ve started to keep it company, and comb its hair.

Accompanied by an enlarged photograph of skin, the poem ends in a breath-takingly intimate gesture; almost, almost, we’re in the language of the body that rules in Major Jackson’s book. Almost, we can love that loving of "one’s own death," and both envy the linguistic experience and admire the bravery of taking it on.

*Martha Collins*
A BIG MOMENT YELLOW

Ewa Chrusciel, Strata (Emergency Press, 2010)

Strata means "loss" in Chrusciel's native Polish, but strata also means the levels and layers, not of inorganic stone, but of language and experience, each adding to the other, expanding and recurring throughout one's life, or in this case, throughout the text, comprised of four sections of poetically charged prose. A book between genres, Strata could be seen as a collection of prose poems or (highly) lyric essays; its precursor seems to be (by both affect and by Chrusciel's own reference) the ground-breaking work of poetry-memoir My Life by Lyn Hejinian.

"Your first sentence will always be your native lung," writes Chrusciel early in the collection. Part of the pleasure here is certainly the way she leaps from sentence to sentence, sometimes following a narrative or autobiographical thread, but more often progressing by image or sound: "My neighbor died in the window from lightning. Lightning is a strange apparition. A big moment yellow. In storms I close the windows."

Like Hejinian's "as for we who love to be astonished," Chrusciel uses phrases repeated and recurring throughout the text to bind together what would otherwise be a very diffuse collection of sentences indeed. But unlike Hejinian, where the repeated phrases seem to be de-centering or defamiliarizing, Chrusciel's refrains—"A big moment yellow"—are used more like musical themes, causing the reader to recall earlier pieces and the moods associated with them.

The "loss" of the text is the departing consciousness of the writer always leaping onto a new thought, but this is tempered by the layering or accretion of the strata so that there is always something new to be discovered, and because of the musical recurrence of images and phrases, one never feels that Chrusciel has abandoned an early line of thought, only that she is adding new lenses through which to perceive.

Consider this short excerpt from a piece entitled "today light in itself capable to paint":

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Encounter. Luminous brown calmness. You said you’ve always been fascinated by the symmetry of. Half given; the other half hidden. Do you see a mulberry in a mustard seed? Which part—insanity? X-rays of hands through layered rings. Anything carved into them heals into black scars, recording the event. Undying iterations of this moment. Flicker of memories. My mother would sit by me and point to his supposed mistresses. Her theories—elaborate. She collected the evidence.

When at the beginning of the description the sentence breaks on “symmetry of” we might at first read the interrupting period as a stylistic device designed to give more emphasis to the “half given” and the “half hidden,” but honestly the text throughout is haunted by interruptions such as these. It is only a matter of time before the reader’s relationship to the text changes: rather than only confusion or “loss” (strata), the reader becomes engaged with discerning the scattered narrative. Indeed what immediately follows is another description of strata—the tree’s rings, their scarring—that also graces the book’s cover.

In the “flicker of memories,” Chrusciel then begins recounting a story of her mother. Narrative here resides among the swells of music and lyrical explorations of time, atmosphere and mood. “If you could only grasp that you are not the center of things,” she writes, and later still, “The size of my radiance is precisely that of volcanic lavish.”

On the rarest of occasions (six times throughout the slender but dense book of sixty-odd pages) the prose pieces are punctuated by poetry. Only two of these are traditionally lineated poems, the others are more open-field compositions, punctuated with Robert Duncan-like word grids. Each of these poems meditates on the act of recalling or collecting experiences, sifting through them and working not necessarily to determine meaning but to see every surface. Like the surfaces of Hejinian’s book, the surfaces of Strata refract in dozens of directions at once. It is a book, as the old saying goes, that would reward multiple readings. In “annunciation of light,” Chrusciel writes:
Wherever I go you let in not enough. I stopped. Collecting. Evidence. For your existence I stopped collecting the evidence and yet there are layers of invisible belonging

There’s a lot at stake emotionally for Chrusciel to try collect the details of her life, turn them around and upside down, and like other poet-memoirists (besides Hejinian, Dunya Mikhail, Etel Adnan, and Fanny Howe all come to mind), Chrusciel creates a gorgeous weave of experience, informed by both narrative and lyric by always returning to previous pieces, creating a mosaic-like or symphonic effect:

My Mother used to collect cactuses. I waited all my life to see pink luscious fruit grow out of them. What splendid flowers would emerge. We would like only for once to get where we are already. In storms I close the windows and open the doors. This is the size of my radiance.

Throughout these “prose poems” or “lyric essays” it is the sentence and not the paragraph that is Chrusciel’s primary unit of meaning and engine of energy. So individual pieces do not necessarily cohere the way a short lyric essay might, nor do they unify as individual poems could. It is easier to think of the book, like My Life or Adnan’s In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country, as a full unified text that depends on its repetitions, recombinations, leaps and forays and feints, to both engender a sense of loss or unfamiliarity and also give the reader the experience of multiple layered experiences at once.

As in Adnan’s and Hejinian’s texts, this experience of multiplicity necessarily replicates for the reader the experience of being an immigrant writer, a multi-lingual writer creating poems in her new language. Strata is Chrusciel’s first book in English (she has published two others—Furkot and Sopilki—in Polish). A powerful, multi-valenced work, it deserves closer and sustained study.

Kazim Ali
A PAIR OF TAXIS AND A PARROT

Nick Lantz, We Don’t Know We Don’t Know (Graywolf Press, 2010)
Nick Lantz, The Lightning That Strikes the Neighbors’ House (University of Wisconsin Press, 2010)

It’s a rare occasion when two books by the same poet come out in a single year—publishers often fear such timing will eclipse one or the other volume. Nick Lantz’s two 2010 books, We Don’t Know We Don’t Know and The Lightning that Strikes the Neighbors’ House, provide an opportunity to compare first and second collections without waiting the usual interval of years. And in this case the presses can rest easy, as these books have won three awards between them. No eclipse here; a double star.

Pliny the Elder abutting Donald Rumsfeld is both hilarious and appalling. We Don’t Know We Don’t Know opens with a preface-like page before the first section containing only a quote from each of these men; Rumsfeld’s provides the titles of the book and of its three sections: Known Knowns, Known Unknowns, and Unknown Unknowns. Roughly half of the poems carry epigraphs from one of these “philosophers,” carefully selected quotes that contribute not only to the poems below them but also to the overall examination of the known and unknown, laced with irony. The epigraphs alternate between Pliny and Rumsfeld, mixed with other poems that have no epigraph.

These epigraphs provide not only structure but tone. Here are two examples from Rumsfeld: “If I said yes, that would then suggest that that might be the only place where it might be done which would not be accurate, necessarily accurate. It might also not be inaccurate, but I’m disinclined to mislead anyone.” And “I mean, you’re going to be told lots of things. You get told things every day that don’t happen. It doesn’t seem to bother people.... The world thinks all these things happen. They never happened.” The convolution and disingenuousness of such statements are entertaining until one considers that their source is a former U.S. Secretary of Defense.
Against this satiric background (the satire established without a single word from the poet), Pliny the Elder’s ruminations sound earnest and honest (but are not necessarily correct). "Of the Parrat and other birds that can speak" provides an example; its epigraph is "It is for certain knowne that they have died for very anger and griefe that they could not learn to pronounce some hard words." But the Pliny statements are not entirely attributable to Pliny: the translation is by Philemon Holland in 1634, the notes tell us, and then provide critical statements about Holland’s language, including: "He loved ornament with the ardour of an ornamental age, and he tricked out his authors with all the resources of Elizabethan English. The concision and reticence of the classics were as nothing to him.” Many things cannot be taken at face value in this book.

In contrast, the language of “The Parrat” is contemporary, the tone light. The parrot the speaker bought for his mother is silent for weeks and then says "in fact," a phrase the mother uses frequently. The theme of the known is touched on delightfully in the line "this [phrase] is now the preamble to all your mother’s lies.” In the last stanza the mother has died and the speaker is driving away from her house with the caged bird in the passenger seat. It "makes a sound, not a word" that is recognizably the sound of her telephone ringing. “And you know it is the sound / of you calling and calling / and of her not answering.”

In fact (no, really), this is not a poem that has been constrained by the structure; it has been made larger, woven into the treatment of knowing and not knowing at various levels. The only "known" that the reader can trust is the last one, quoted above; Pliny’s knowing, the mother’s knowing (as in "in fact [the parrot] learned to open the cage himself") are ironic and undercut. A gentle humor amplifies the emotional effect of the narrative and then dissolves in the poignancy of the ending. The turn prompts me to read the poem again immediately.

"We don’t know we don’t know" is, grammatically, parataxis, in which two phrases or clauses are joined without a conjunction. By extension, in poetry, the word refers to the juxtaposition of two or more radically different images or fragments, which leave the reader to make connections between or among them. Since their
epigraphs appear above different poems, the presence of Pliny the Elder and Rumsfeld is technically not parataxis in the second, poetic sense. But the contrast of their language and ways of knowing, invoked early and touched on often (in the epigraphs of 16 of the 35 poems here), so sensitized me to the technique that I found it in many of the individual poems as well.

Here is an excerpt from “The order that Bees keepe in their worke” (the first line below is a subtitle):

**Leper’s Window (Kloster Oesede, Germany)**

Here we knelt by the outer wall and listened to the buzz of the congregation, though through our hole we saw only a sliver of the sanctuary. When the priest raised the host, a boy rang a bell and we pressed to the crack.

The bee’s eye comprises thousands of hexagons.
The eye inscribes its pattern on the mind, and for this reason Plato loved the bee, its six legs and six-sided dreams. No bee ever thought to build a honeycomb of three- or five-sided chambers.

God was only ever as big as the hole we saw him through.

The stanza on bee optics is easily connected to the lepers’ narrative, and very productively, but by voice, tone, and indentation it is disjunctive. I’m not going to get into a wrangle about whether this is strictly parataxis, but if not it is a first-order relative. What I want to appreciate here is the way the contrasts, ironically, cohere—the book is more of a whole because of juxtapositions.

Here is another example, the beginning of “As You Know”:

As you know, the human head is the most commonly stolen body part.
As you know, honey does not spoil, and for this reason it was used to embalm the bodies of kings.
As you know, dogs were also convicted of witchcraft and burned at the stake. So were chickens, fish, and a few trees.
Honestly, I don’t think that dogs executed for witchcraft are funny at all. But fish? Trees? And I laugh, even though I don’t believe that either fish or trees were convicted—and that makes me doubt what came before, which makes me doubt what came before that; the poem unravels in seconds and becomes a different poem from the one I just read.

Another interesting aspect here is the use of anaphora. The repeated phrase pulls the poem together while apparently unrelated images pull it apart, creating a dynamic tension something like the balance of centrifugal and centripetal forces. There’s a sly tone to the titular phrase and its insistence: as I know? No, actually, I don’t.

The subjects of these poems are eclectic, with a scope of historical, literary, and general knowledge so broad that the reader soon realizes the next page or stanza may go anywhere in time and space and subject, 762 or 1230 or 2010, Massachusetts or Turkey, reading Rilke or translating the untranslatable. It’s clear this poet is interested in just about everything, that he enjoys simply knowing; in this he reminds me of one of my favorite writers, William Matthews.

While some poets are meticulous about the facts in their poems (Linda Bierds comes to mind), Lantz’s intent is not always to write the literal truth. “When it comes to writing poems, I’m not very loyal to the facts if they get in the way of a good story,” he says in an on-line interview. “The poem is true up to a point,” he says (speaking of “The Year We Blew Up the Whale”), “and the rest is entirely fictional. I just imagined various extensions of that one act, imagined what it would be like if a whole town approached all of its problems in that way.” Facets of truth and the absurdity of our human stories are what he seeks.

And finds, often using parataxis-like technique. Even when a poem seems to focus on one subject, another isn’t far away. A few poems like the one below demonstrate the poet’s range and provide the book with needed variation.
POTEMKIN VILLAGE: ARS POETICA

Verisimilitude requires a homeless man's feet protruding from a dark vestibule. Empty huts will fool no one. If I say do not look there, you will look more closely, so I say, look, for God's sake look. The men and women: papier-mâché flesh, one bare bulb burning in each ribcage. From this distance, light can resemble life. See how they wave to you.

This poet finds opportunities both in truth and the quasi-truth of "a good story." According to the notes, "the claim that Grigori Alexsandrovich Potemkin erected fake villages along the Dnieper River to impress Catherine the Great is likely untrue, or, at best, an exaggeration."

The Lightning That Strikes the Neighbors' House is as eclectic as We Don't Know We Don't Know; from one page to the next we may find ourselves in ancient Greece or on U.S. Route 50 in Nevada, or considering welding or crickets. Structural elements here are less obvious—rather than a network of epigraphs and contrasts, we have a more circular device, the title of each of three sections being the last line of its last poem.

Within poems juxtaposition remains a major strategy, though it too is muted compared to We Don't Know. It's a natural choice for "The Last Words of Pancho Villa," for instance, which reports
the last words of Thomas Edison, Amelia Earhart, several condemned convicts, and Einstein before getting around to Villa's (which I very much doubt are true but are certainly entertaining). The humor of putting Einstein next to the convicts is related to the humor of putting Pliny the Elder next to Rumsfeld.

Here's another poem that uses contrast, but softly. Its title is taken from a 1529 painting by Albrecht Altdorfer.

**BATTLE OF ALEXANDER AT ISSUS**

Off in the mountains a hermit checks
his rabbit traps before returning
to his hut for the night. The rabbits grow bold near dawn and dusk, the hours when clouds lower ladders of light down the mountainsides. The hermit hasn't admired this light in decades.

At this time of day he is always bent low, unfastening the thin leather snares from around still-warm necks. If he hears what sounds like thunder in the valley one cloudless evening as he ties another limp body to his belt, he thinks only of returning home to bed, the rabbit fleas that torment his sleep, the door that never quite closes against the cold night air.

This poem enacts the perspective that appears at the end of Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts," and in a sense it too is a poem of parataxis, the second term of which is indicated only in the title. One might think the poem's strategy derivative of the painting's, but the latter depicts massed armies and charging steeds, ornate to the point of flamboyance. Connection between the two works is slight, hanging by the thread of a title; the hermit and his traps are altogether imaginary.

Another poem provides a more balanced example of parataxis. Here it is, complete:
CHALLENGER

The bones of Hannibal’s elephants can still be found in the Alps. The tilting, prairie homesteads where our tragedies are born will become historical monuments.

Crows carry off the breadcrumbs, and the lost children have only a trail of guttering stars to guide them home.

In Vinland the Vikings left behind coins, combs, nails.

Max Q is the value at which aerodynamic stress peaks, the moment when a rising vessel’s integrity is tested.

Nothing is a tragedy these days until it is on television.

The first animals sent into outer space died of fear.

A poisoned arrow killed Ponce de Léon. One day a person will walk out of his home and not return.

The Millerites waited for God on their rooftops like birds wait for dawn. The crowds are already gathering to see the crooked plume of smoke.

In the deep sea dark, some fish lost the power of sight; some grew eyes big as hubcaps; others began to glow. The wreckage of Challenger washed ashore for ten years.

No surprise that space doesn’t come into the poem until the third stanza, with Max Q, and that halfway through the next stanza
we’re in Florida with Ponce de Leon. As the poem nears its end it circles closer to the subject of the title while still allowing room for the Millerites and the evolution of fish.

This sort of leap here and throughout both books is often called “associational,” with an implication of involuntary recall and connection. Somehow I doubt that’s how this poet works. He has the sense to get the most from a subject and then drop it in order to get out of the poem’s way—a talent related to a comic’s timing and one famously praised by Richard Hugo in his essay “Writing Off the Subject.” (“You don’t know what the subject is, and the moment you run out of thing to say about Autumn Rain start talking about something else.... There are a few people who become more interesting the longer they stay on a single subject. But most people are like me...”). In these two books the jumps could be by association, but to my eye they look more intentional than that.

That’s how I think Nick Lantz works. But I know I don’t know.

Pamela Alexander
The news provides, indeed the world provides, reason enough to think that all poems should be laments, laments for the brevity of life, the uncertainty of love, the weakness of flesh or spirit, the remoteness or cruelty or absence or silence of god. And while there may also be reason enough for praise and gratitude as well, lament’s claim may always be the stronger, if only because the poem is such a frail defense against evil, venality, oblivion, or time: “how with such rage shall beauty hold a plea, / Whose action is no stronger than a flower?” In fact, it seems that poetry, because it is always merely poetry, contains fused within it the occasion of bewailing.

It is perhaps on account of this deep structure that the lyric tradition has so frequently deplored the death or vulnerability of children. The inability of the poem to preserve what it loves (or what the poet loves) finds its most dreadful worldly correlative in the slaughter of the innocents or the Kindestod, the invisible demon of child death. This correlative points back to a founding assumption in the Western scriptural tradition: the first fruits of the womb must either be sacrificed or redeemed. One of the ways that poetry in the West has evolved has been as a way of redeeming the child; whether through the benign offices of anonymous lullaby, entrusting the soul to the angels or God, or in more ruminate works such as Coleridge’s “Frost at Midnight,” Lowell’s “For the Union Dead,” or Grossman’s “The Work.” As hopeful as these poems are, they positively shiver in the knowledge of their own weakness. When Ben Jonson in his elegy “For His First Son” says, “Rest in soft peace, and ask’d say here doth lye / Ben Jonson his best piece of poetry,” he reveals how such a death is not only a personal and societal loss, but a wound to the very possibility of meaning-making in the world. The death of the child appears to destroy the very sense and value of writing itself, leaving, in the
face of unspeakable loss, nothing to be said. And yet Jonson's poem exists. The poem testifies to its own insufficiency most beautifully, not only with great poignancy but great authority as well, and in doing so, paradoxically, achieves its success. Against such rage, beauty can hold a plea precisely in coming to terms with its weakness, its otherworldly delicacy. Compared to the mortal things of this world, beauty (Shakespeare and Jonson affirm) attains an integrity of a wholly different order. What that order is, and how it may be preserved, is an ancient topic in poetry. It has not, however, in recent decades, received a more searching, grave, and luminous account than in the recent work of Julie Carr.

Carr lives, teaches and raises her family in Colorado, the state where occurred, not incidentally, the Columbine school massacre. Carr takes up these circumstances, not remarkable in themselves, in her tour-de-force volume 100 Notes on Violence, and sets them against the backdrop of the rage-beauty topos. The book poses itself the question whether such a state (as a metonymy of the wider American State) is not in fact an inherently violent undertaking. Are we, her book asks starkly, constituted by violence? Are we not only citizens of a state at war (against terror, drugs, immigration, age, boredom, etc.) but creatures of a state of war?

Taking up these matters, it is Carr's procedure both to allow and to compel readers to get their own bearings. There is no anxious fussing to make the reader comfortably at home. Rather, she takes pains to ensure the reader feels quite uncomfortably at home. Note 23, however, illustrates Carr's method while reflecting directly upon it and declaring quite openly her objective:

The idea to write a book "about" violence. "What kind?"
"The close-up kind."
Because I cannot write the words "school shootings" into the little search box.
Later I hear that whatever you write into the little search box will somewhere be recorded as data in order to better sell you.
What does the person searching school shootings want to buy?
I keyed "guns" instead, but I don't want to buy a gun.
I could buy a gun.
As Carr renders it, the issue of violence—real, historical, local—is both urgently pressing and maddeningly elusive. The book about violence is a book "about" violence because the attempt to write about vulnerability is itself always a risky business. Any totalizing ambition will doom itself to failure. The violence in question is "the close-up kind" not only because it threatens those closest to us, but also because the media feed on, and feed us, a diet of violence served up in sensuous "close-up." Thus, the figure "the 'close-up' kind" is tellingly complex. We cannot help but experience this violence close up, but the experience is always mediated, rhetorical, framed in inverted commas, a "close-up," presented for our delectation.

Similarly, Carr, in wanting to come to terms with this violence finds again and again that the terms are deceptive, misleading, or treacherous. To look into such violence, the portal is the very screen that feeds us the image, and thus our appetite for knowledge is met by an equal and opposite appetite to sell. Carr's query (typed in "the little search box") is for her a trembling question, a way to think about the unthinkable and write about the unspeakable. For the search engine, however, the term is not a question but an answer, a statement about who this person is and what she may want to buy. This answer is recorded and analyzed as data somewhere "in order to better sell you."

This sentence tempts us to fill in a blank at the end, catches us saying "sell you something, right?" But in doing so it also rebukes our impatience. By dangling as it does, the "you" oscillates indeterminately. It is either the direct or indirect object of the verb "sell" (because I can either sell you a gun or sell you down the river). The poem insists that the selling of something (guns, say) is always also a selling out of the searcher. Such a selling out betrays the searcher, interpolating her worry into the very culture of violence from which she struggles to free herself and those she would protect.

So far so good, or good enough, but the poem does not content itself with easy sentiment. The ambiguous concluding statement "I could buy a gun" identifies the self as a possible consumer of violence (Look how appallingly easy it is to buy a gun!), but
this recognition is not permitted to hide itself in an expression of bien-pensant outrage. Instead, the poet sees in herself someone who might willingly choose to do something, who could in fact do something, who could in fact buy a gun and meet violence with violence. Thus the “little search box” returns—circuitously, startlingly—news of the self.

The moment of recognition, of avowal, is what appalls most completely. The search results change before her eyes from, “Pssst, you want to buy a gun?” to “You do in fact want to buy a gun.” The declarative statement is all the more unnerving for having reflected so vividly the face of the poet’s desires in the cascading results of a faceless algorithm.

Like Note 23, the book itself follows—sometimes more quickly than the eye can track—the insinuations, implications and infiltrations of violence in all affairs, whether that violence is the aberrant mayhem of a school shooting, or the economic depredations of unchecked consumer capitalism. The problem is not a new one, is indeed a commonplace in a world where the uninterrupted spectacle of violence repels us and absorbs us at the same time, consumes us even as we consume it. Unique in Carr’s work, however, is the delicacy and infinite wiliness of the intelligence and intellectual discipline on display. Carr chases from the book the intoxicating fumes of sanctimony, even while documenting the soul’s promiscuous desire for consolation in any form. This combination of austerity and promethean flexibility should be an occasion for rejoicing among those who seek new poetries accountable both to the terrors of the world and the rigors of art; it remains, however, for a different project, one keyed to matters at once less global and more elemental, to illuminate the full scope of Carr’s poetic strength.

In Carr’s most recent book, Sarah — Of Fragments and Lines, a passerby addresses the poet, remarking on her visible pregnancy: “One of those meaning-of-the-universe-type things,” he says. This book-length sequence situates in uneasy simultaneity the affliction and death of the poet’s mother from Alzheimer’s disease and the conception, gestation, and birth of the poet’s child. Both
events, it would seem, speak of primary and ultimate realities, first and last things, "birth, and death, and thoughts of these," topics monumentalized by, or buried beneath, ziggurats of earnest writing. If dying mother and unborn child are "meaning-of-the-universe-type things," they are then the common household materials from which many a "meaning-of-the-universe-type" poem can be handily manufactured. This is a suspect convenience indeed, but why? One reason is that minds yet to attain language and minds bereft of language are incapable of answering back. They are powerless to object if, contrary to a poet's claims, occupying the womb or a nursing home is not like living, say, on the Dead Sea floor, or in a space capsule, the Eternal Now, or Nebraska. The "meaning" of such sealed-off universes is meaning airlifted in on the wings of poesy—not outlawed, not perhaps unwelcome or unuseful—but certainly not native.

To encounter the implacable force of Julie Carr's intelligence is to encounter a force employed not in the heaping up of yet more meaningfulness at the edges of the known world but in a herculean exercise of resistance to these very temptations. For Carr, the experiences of losing a mother and awaiting a child are both experiences that call the "meaning-of-the-universe" into question, requiring of the poet a radical reconsideration of her world and of her art.

The recognition of this restraint comes as something of a surprise, considering the wild multiplicity of shapes her poems take, shapes often sketch-like, raw, or apparently provisional. This variability of contour and finish, however, insists not on a possibility of plenitude, as it might for Whitman, but on the severe necessity of finding the most fleeting forms for the most evanescent moments of certainty. Such restraint is the discipline required to acknowledge that meaningfulness is not our inalienable birthright but an uncertain, finite, and fleeting state, into which we may be ushered (as by loving parents, say), and out of which we may pitifully wander (as dementia or madness decide). Such restraint is what Carr exerts against the temptations to sell oneself, against the temptation to cash in these circumstances for a pottage of received phrases. The recognition Carr makes, upon which she
founds the very project of the book, is of the bitter reality that meaning, like all temporal things, has no claim on permanence, but is fated to the vicissitudes of growth and decay. Meaning, like all other things (as Yeats would have it) must fall and be built again. The pool of luminescence that is the meaning-bearing human world is delimited and defined by this reality.

If then for Carr the birth of her child and the death of her mother are materia poetica, they are so because they reduce “the meaning of the universe” to a kind of ground zero. The death of the mother here is not merely the loss of a beloved parent; nor is it even a personal loss employed to restate and deplore our shared mortality. It is the manifestation of the stark fact that the web of human meaning, the bond that secures one soul to another, can be torn, reduced to tatters, and must, if it is to exist at all, be made again. For Carr, the lyric poem is the means by which this building can occur. Carr registers this obligation, as she ought, as a severe formal challenge, a challenge to the very rationales built into the traditions of lyric self-description. The infant, then, represents possibility but also the bitter reality that the future is not guaranteed, that it must be built again from the rubble of the present.

Poets have equivocated for centuries over whether a poem should best be understood as a monument (which is to say, as a means for the preservation of memory) or as an infant, a new life both created and creative. Those poets who would see the poem as a kind of child see it not as commemorative inscription of lost life, but as the site and potential of new life. For Carr, both of these comparisons are tempting but flawed. On the one hand, the ephemerality of memory—embodied in the piecemeal disintegration of the mother’s mind—renders poetry’s monumental ambitions absurd. On the other, the vulnerability and sheer helplessness of the infant in a culture of violence stymies the force of generative vitality and trades it, sells it, for a despairing futility. But if this is the state of affairs, what then is a poem supposed to do, or be?

Carr’s answer to this question is, characteristically, both complex and formally inventive. One thing the poem cannot be is a poem in any immediately recognizable sense of the word. The
book of poems must instead identify itself as a book of notes, or a book “—of fragments and lines.” The title recalls the drafts and fragments of Pound’s unfinished Cantos, but here there is no future horizon of completion, however theoretical, no future world in which the lines and fragments may be gathered into a coherent whole. Rather than a collection or arrangement of fragments and lines, the book must be a loose aggregation at best. The “of” in the title is a fugitive preposition, suspended in permanent exile from any syntactic coherence that would suffuse it with meaning; it searches forlornly for what it belongs to, like the porcupine among cactuses, seeking its mother.

If it would seem implausible or misguided to imagine such salted fields producing something as unlikely as a masterpiece, let it stand as a testament to the sheer power of her art that Julie Carr is capable of managing the feat. Here, for instance, is “Metaphor Poem”:

Bits of food on the floor—abundance and decay
The removal of a lens cap is history and is memory loss
Weedy lawn means rain’s exuberance and no companion
The tear in her skin means sugar
The tear in her skin is a sleepless night, a hard commute, a broken zipper
News of a bombing and a locked museum, blood in an infant’s veins
Excess is a streaming ribbon or a streaming ribbon a song
A distant cloud is the perfection of the present and a mark of inattention
The end of the honey is one’s mother’s death and is one’s mother
A boy’s curved shoulder, a twelve-foot crater
Where once was a town center
A bottle of water is order in the capital
Ink is her face and is her sleepless night
A streaming ribbon, the end of the honey
A distant cloud—a lens cap removed
A bit of food on the floor of her thought
The title is unprepossessing enough, though this is not—in case you were worrying—yet another update on what metaphor is or should be or was or isn’t. To begin reading this poem one must first attune the ear to the exhaustion and devastation the title conveys. Of the joyous enchanted torrent of figures, images, currents of melody and rhythm that had been the poet’s art, nothing now remains but a dry swath, a vague depression in the ground is the only sign that something had been here; what title, after all, is vaguer and more depressing than “Metaphor Poem”? Of the limitless resources of metaphor, all that is left for the poem is the word itself, no metaphors but only “metaphor,” no honey but an empty jar marked “honey.” The abundance of metaphor’s magical, transformative as has desiccated into the poem’s dominant verb, is. Everything in the world—whether personal, political, remembered, invented, desired, dreaded—has collapsed into a single plane of unelaborated, uninflected being. Perhaps in the kingdom of metaphor (now hopelessly remote) nothing is what it seems, but here, now, in this ruined world, everything is what it is, and is only what it is.

Having thus attuned the ear, one can appreciate the poem’s queer problematic: how is one to make a poem from the residue left after poetry’s departure? One feels the shiver of an ineffable irony here, however, when one notices that the poem in fact does turn on a metaphor of sorts, or rather a troubled, insistent likeness, the likeness between the unscrewed lid of an emptied honey jar and the cap removed from a camera lens. In the presence of this likeness, the poet is not so much delighted by the resemblance as she is tormented by it. Might this similarity prove matchmaker for a startling compound image, as the apparition of faces in a crowd might seem petals on a wet black bough? Perhaps in one limited sense they do, insofar as we are surprised by the correspondence and pleased by the ingenuity that brings it into view, but whereas a metaphor derives from likeness a new vision of the world (as Pound literally animates or ensouls the bleak facelessness of the Metro) here likeness propagates malignantly. Meaning no longer presumes depth or hidden complexity, but is a scattering outward of associative vectors in no particular direction. Here the removal
of the lens cap is either the beginning of the recording of history, the capturing of the image, or it is, somehow, the draining away of the image, perhaps because all forms of memory are perishable—since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea, but sad mortality o'er-sways their power. The removal of the cap is like the removal of the lid on the honey jar. Take honey, as Porphyry and Yeats do, as the divine sweetness of generation, of life as Blake would say, embodied as the "human form divine." Here the divine honey of the human image, the sweetness of being which we have labored for a lifetime to gather and store, is draining away. The aperture of the camera is one through which the images and history can be gathered, but by gathering them into the temporal world, they are handed over to inevitable erasure, to "all-oblivious enmity." The lens, then, is the conduit of both memory and loss at the same time, both abundance and decay. What had been food for thought is now "a bit of food on the floor of her thought," waste and spoilage, crumbs for untoward creatures.

This is poetry of lament utterly resolute in its refusal of consolation. Its deepest integrity, however, inheres in its equal refusal of the carrion comfort despair.

The final poem in the book is called "Lines to Scatter":

A perfectly themeless piece of language, fallow in the lap of the wave, was love like a lemon does, silent, self-charged, struck with sun.

*

Buses move by, bass line steadies, the biker's heartbeat secure

*

Some fly or rat, some untoward creature, peeling the wrappers in the rank dark wakes us

*
Our bet is with the wind—in the wind—of wind, ripped

Without memory there's no appearance of snow, no way or where for now to emerge. No
government no travel

A dog on the Metro, muzzled

"And they, destined to shine like the brightness of the firmament for ever and ever, they..."

If no coherence is possible now, either for the mother or the speaker, if the coherent image is now only a scattering of scraps and parts, each scrap or part may be "a perfectly themeless piece of language, fallow in the lap of the wave," and bear within itself a sort of self-charged fecundity. Somewhere the fetus's heartbeat, like the pulse of the biker, might steady and deepen. "Our bet is with the wind," Carr writes: to be scattered, to be cast to the winds, lost forever to oneself and to those one loves, but one cannot know upon what soil the fragments will fall. This not knowing is itself a form of wisdom, is an example of the dark, difficult wisdom in which Carr is adept. Nothing else, she suggests, will secure for us a viable future. The concluding line, a fragment torn from the book of Daniel, provides a glimpse of such a future: "and they [that are wise] are destined to shine like the brightness of the firmament for ever and ever, they..." The sentence is unfinished, but in these books a project of unique seriousness and originality is unstoppably under way.

DeSales Harrison
"If you can’t bear to forget don’t / be born,” commands Beckian Fritz Goldberg in “Absence,” one of her new poems in Reliquary Fever. Such brassy rhetorical presence and sly enjambment are constants throughout Goldberg’s œuvre. Likewise are her bold associations, her startling images, her irreverent tones, and her interest in fusing lyrical beauty within realms of the grotesque. The Goldbergian line is image-rich, irregular, musical, and often arrestingly synesthetic: “It begins with something backward— / gardenia tucked behind / the ear as if scent could hear / its undoing” (“Prologue as Part of the Body”). Her associations defy rational logic, and they’re connected more often by images than by narrative:

The past isn’t big like the world but small like the Urals. Like Hungary—smaller—barely wide enough to keep the buzzard of my right ear from the doe of my left... (“I Have Lived Here All My Life”)

Not that Goldberg is your average American Surrealist. Her poems anchor themselves in the concreteness of a private world that blends personal history and myth: fetishized stilettos, Adam in drag, a mother cutting a face onto her daughter’s apple with a knife. Goldberg’s titles characterize the oddness of her perception, her knack for surprising imagery and turns of phrase, and the feverish eroticism present in much of her work: “Nights in the Constellation of the Tree Stepping from Its Robe”; “Sex in Heaven”; “Twentieth Century Children (5): Blood-Kissing”; “The Cloud by Desire.” Goldberg’s poems radiate with a searing emotional intensity comparable to poets like Plath or Tsvetaeva. Though Goldberg writes constantly of the past, her approach isn’t nostalgic, like, say, Charles Wright’s; it’s erotic, wounded, and defiant. The past also manages to be both spectral and immediate:
Sometimes he thinks of dialing the number that used to bring his mother’s voice. Would it ring, would it reach a woman with flour like moon seas on her apron, string around her finger. A reminder. ("Monsoon")

Goldberg’s poems evoke metamorphoses of the richly phantasmagoric sort, particularly when memories resurface in the present dimension. In “Retro Lullaby,” for instance, the poem’s speaker associates “the smell of moist hay” with childhood, figuring her now estranged girlhood self as “a postcard of a little stranger.” Remembrance, in Goldberg’s world, requires a dynamic and dangerous engagement:

If I drop the card in the hay-smell,

her ear will plump up like a dried apricot in wine.
And her stupid white hands will come up like two white pages from the bottom of a lake.

Reliquary Fever, which features recent work alongside selections from her five previous poetry books, shows us how Goldberg’s early use of narrative in her debut, Body Betrayer, gives way to the hypnotic lyric voice of her second book, In the Badlands of Desire, which intensifies in music and speed in her third myth-inspired collection, Never Be the Horse. Though always imagistic and wily, her style grows increasingly self-aware in the punky meta-narratives of her most recent single collection, The Book of Accident. Also, her latter two collections evince a more deliberate thematic unification: Her fourth collection, Lie Awake Lake, for instance, centers on elegies occasioned by the death of the poet’s father, while The Book of Accident follows a scattering of feral, self-mutilating, Goth teens—with names like Torture Boy and Skin Girl—through the ruins of post-apocalyptic suburbia.

Although Goldberg’s poetic growth is evident throughout the collection’s trajectory, it’s also clear that her central obsessions endure: the eternal problems posed by time and death, the
enigmatic rift between body and spirit, and the imaginative space that hums somewhere between memory and forgetting. Goldberg's lush imagery and love of high-texture language might seem an escapist's rhapsody (a Baudelairean "Anywhere but the world" leap from suffering) but for her brave interrogations into the fate of the human body. The eleven-page new poem in Reliquary Fever, "Wound Man: Apologie and Treatise," is a departure for Goldberg in terms of its length and complex sectioning, although she's always been drawn to mythic figures (Adam and Eve, Lucifer, Eros, Leda, Narcissus). In the poem, Goldberg plucks "Wound Man" from the bizarre illustrations of medieval surgical texts and dramatizes his condition. (The historical illustration depicting "Wound Man" offers us a macabre compendium of all the injuries a body might suffer.) Here she catalogues his various afflictions:

- a gunshot in his head,
- a nail through his eye, an arrow in his shoulder,
- a knife in his gut, a dog bite on his right ankle, a thorn in his left thigh, a bruise on his ribs,
- a musket ball in his left calf, and an icepick in his neck.

Goldberg later observes in the poem, "It's how his body told time," a metaphor that's as relevant to our own aging bodies as it is to the over-killed "Wound Man." Or as Donne puts it in "An Anatomy of the World": "Thou knowest how poor a trifling thing man is, / And learn'st thus much by our anatomy." The darkest wounds, however, are often private ones, as Goldberg suggests: "The conclusion: Every body has / a wound that is secret."

One might say that Goldberg balances her decadent imagistic palette à la Celan or Pasternak through her equally fierce interrogations into the human condition: "It's punishment enough // passion's brief, desire long, form / traitorous, and the heart / good dog to all three" ("Extravagant"). In Reliquary Fever's first poem, "Shy Girls Waiting for You," Goldberg begins at, well, the beginning of human time, and no less, as she takes on the ultimate and confounding fabulation:
When the god and I
began it was not with light
but with the dottle of the bird’s
neck. After that I swore off

birds, those penitents, tight
sacks. While the god was
kneading his ball of dust
I watched the trees like TV

Land, waiting for the next
channel to alight. God,
I was a whore for a singing
detective, a Luminol

spray constellating the bed.
Still we continued and planted
the little beans that
unfurled like questions. Bit

by speckle by twang-twang
we covered a world and with one
finger a road and down the road
we put the sign
Shy Girls Waiting For You.

We conceived
the feeling of being caught in
the downpour in a strange
town without a raincoat. From there

we invented the human, hit
the bars blinking and the god
said, Let’s die.

Genius,
I said and only then
did I think back, 
back like a rabbit on fire
who can’t know what it’s like to be
put out, not at the moment

he is burning. It never
occurred to either of us to
think of miracles. People,
you are brilliant.

The god and I see double.
Beauty and hard beauty,
Oh,

hard, hard, hard.
Our questions are
our miracles.

"Shy Girls Waiting for You" is Goldberg’s Genesis myth for a
world already in ruins. Instead of that old "Let there be light"
command, the audacious speaker declares that she and the god
began in darkness and atomic messiness "with the dottle of the
bird’s / neck." "Dottle," for those folks unfamiliar with rites of the
tobacco pipe, is that damp and sour-smelling lump of unburned
tobacco found at the bottom of a pipe’s bowl. Not exactly inspired
fodder for our feathered friends (and great odes)!

Whereas the post-apocalyptic creation story set forth in Ted
Hughes’s Crow often seems apart from the contemporary stuff of
culture, roiling in a kind of ambiguous primordial gunk, Goldberg
grounds her myth amid flickers of the weirdly domestic. Of
course Goldberg’s god bakes man-bread while her speaker kicks
up her feet! This revised power dynamic not only allows Goldberg
to turn received myths on their own heads, it lets loose her inven-
tive imagination to “Hymn away this reliquary fever,” as David
St. John terms it in his poem, “Elegy.” Instead of booming orders
from the heavens, the god in the poem is “kneading his ball of
dust” as the speaker “watche[s] the trees like TV // Land, waiting
for the next / channel to alight." The speaker waits for the voyeuristic glow of television cop shows, her vision illuminated by the beguiling cosmos of a forensic chemical rather than the light of the sublime: "God, / I was a whore for a singing / detective, a Luminol // spray constellating the bed."

In addition to dealing with the obligatory scaffolding of the physical world, the god and speaker erect the sign "Shy Girls Waiting for You" and "hit / the bars blinking," to deceive the humans with a false promise of fulfillment. Goldberg plays with the old strip club marquee advertisement, "Live Nude Girls," as she displaces the trope with a more elusive and complicated kind of siren. She then evokes the minutiae of creation, from the "little beans that / unfurled like questions" to "the feeling of being caught in / the downpour in a strange / town without a raincoat."

It's worth noting here the unpredictable structure of Goldberg's metaphors: She defines the concrete with the intangible (beans as questions) and then reverses the structure of her metaphor (an abstract feeling takes shape in a raincoat and a place). What the creators forgot to wrangle up, apparently, was miracles. The instant the speaker realizes this omission, Goldberg concretizes memory with a metaphor characteristic of much of her work: one that fuses beauty and horror in a single lyric moment and where hypnotic repetition enacts the obsessive nature of remembrance:

...only then
did I think back,
back like a rabbit on fire
who can't know what it's like to be
put out, not at the moment

he is burning.

Although the notion of a world without miracles is a bleak one, where even remembering is a conflagration, Goldberg is no nihilist. She drawls, "People, / you are brilliant," which at first hits the ear with a kind of wry insouciance, then resonates as earnest praise when considered in context of the poem's philo-
sophically redemptive ending. The poem’s final stanzas crescendo with breathless repetition and unmistakably erotic (and perhaps consolatory) diction (“Beauty and hard beauty, / Oh, // hard, hard, hard”). We discover that our vast ignorance of the human condition may itself be a miracle, perhaps because such open-ended speculation of the negatively capable sort leads us to the imaginative realms of art: “Our questions are / our miracles.”

If “Shy Girls Waiting for You” is a Genesis myth with a conspiring co-god who rollicks in her own omnipotent bravura, Goldberg’s new poem, “Vodka,” is an elegiac exploration of the mute gap between the human and the divine. “Vodka” also shows us how deftly Goldberg weaves together fragments of personal history and myth, as she explores some of her essential themes: memory, desire, and the body’s and the spirit’s unhappy divide. In “Vodka,” Goldberg deifies the eponymous liquor and explores its Janus-faced power to induce both escapism and despair:

The potatoes grow in an orchard
where the eyes are harvested by women in babushkas.
Its song is my song. It goes, Let’s paint
the town pink. Followed by weeping.
When the belly is burning,
when the trees are bare, when the stray
horse runs around illiterate and happy
and the sun goes down like an olive
in ice, perhaps the melancholy
eats us to a person. And a man goes
home followed by women he doesn’t even like.
That was my friend, Angel,
who stood in the leaves of his yard
among the Sleeping With. Sometimes
a certain century’d

talk to us, forgive our being
here and now, Jewish and
wasted, dancing to Johnny Cash.
It’s old soul this thirst. Back to God.

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Though the proof of anything is in remembrance. The potato, an apple, blinded by some fate. Why isn’t the body happy—it has eyes, it has limbs, it has breath. The town is blue, and white, and the leaves sparkling...
And we, as Johnny says, flushed

from the bathroom of your heart.
Why can’t we sing whatever we want to sing to kill the mind, that pale white doll, that piteous incursion into Relationship. Shoes by the bed. Into Super-Collider. Into Supermarket. Followed by weeping. Talk to us, Super Molecule, benevolent poison, we are not what we want to be, fruit of the earth.

The origins of the vodka, that “benevolent poison,” are rooted in an Edenic orchard made strange by Goldberg’s Russian “women in babushkas” who harvest the potatoes’ “eyes.” I admire how Goldberg can pivot a deceptively simple literal description around a single word (“eyes”) and launch into a striking metaphor. I also enjoy how the action and imagery seem bizarre (women harvesting eyeballs in Wacky Myth Land) yet grounded (women literally picking potatoes), a sly technique Goldberg employs to maximize surprise. The image of Russian potato farmers plucking “eyes” from the earth transforms into a sophisticated metaphor. Goldberg, within the first two lines of the poem, not only suggests the “blinding” capacity of vodka (or any such harbinger of jouissance), she acknowledges the pain that accompanies visionary insight, and the haunting notion that we “harvest” the fruits (er, tubers) of our own destruction. That’s quite a start to a poem indeed.

Goldberg evokes her own peculiar conception of divine eroticism in “Vodka” (think of the Song of Songs, but with a vodka-
swigging Jewish gal, plus Johnnny Cash, doing the singing). Here we learn the speaker’s song “goes, Let’s paint / the town pink.” Rather than the riotous and carnage-filled spree implied by the old adage (“paint the town red”), the speaker’s choice of a color conventionally symbolic of love and virginal purity suggests her desire to reach, through intoxication, a purer passionate state. But we also learn that her song is “Followed by weeping,” as the vodka’s offerings of ecstasy turn treacherous.

Within “Vodka”’s landscape of eye-harvesters, orchards, and a town that’s “blue, and white, and the leaves / sparkling,” Goldberg anchors the poem in a fragment of personal (perhaps invented) history, as she writes:

That was my friend, Angel,
who stood in the leaves of his yard
among the Sleeping With. Sometimes
a certain century’d

talk to us, forgive our being
here and now, Jewish and
wasted, dancing to Johnnny Cash.

Goldberg’s inventive coinage of the compound noun “Sleeping With” (another hallmark of her style) exudes her sardonic wit. More important, however, is the way the phrase’s deliberately incomplete syntax hints at the tenuous or superficial quality of Angel’s primarily sexual relationship with his lover. Goldberg captures the nature of desire by extending the vodka metaphor, although this time the “thirst” is a spiritual one: “It’s old soul this thirst. Back to God. / Though the proof of anything is in / remembrance.” “Proof,” as we know, is a measurement made by determining the specific gravity of liquor: It lets us know how strong our martini will be. It’s also the evidence that compels the mind to accept an assertion as true. In this case, both definitions enrich Goldberg’s description of memory.

Later in the poem, Goldberg explicitly renews her song motif: “And we, as Johnnny says, flushed // from the bathroom of your
heart." The Johnny Cash tune laments a lost love, while the speaker’s vision of "paint[ing] the town pink" with her liquored-up rapture defines an opposite yet equally extreme emotional state. The speaker asks, "Why can’t we sing whatever we / want to sing to kill the mind, that pale / white doll, that piteous incursion / into Relationship." Her mournful lines echo both Keats’s famous declaration in "Ode to a Nightingale" ("Where but to think is to be full of sorrow") and Rilke’s antipathy toward dolls. In his essay "Some Reflections on Dolls," Rilke describes how dolls deceive children into inventing souls for them, a process that later results in the disillusionment of the adult mind.

The speaker in "Vodka" fears disappointing relationships. "That piteous incursion" begins with a low level of intimacy ("Shoes by the bed"), intensifies in erotic attachment as if from the charge of a particle accelerator ("Into Super-Collider"), and then fizzles out amid the banality of domestic ritual ("Into Supermarket"). The speaker then shifts into the imperative mood, as she addresses the vodka/silent deity at the end of the poem: "Talk to us, / Super Molecule, benevolent poison, / we are not what we want to be, / fruit of the earth." Goldberg closes "Vodka" on a tone that’s at once irreverent and profoundly wounded. We can’t "sing whatever we / want to sing to kill the mind." We can’t even very well escape from ourselves, even through a bacchanal’s best efforts. We can, however, continue to "Hymn away this reliquary fever," as this poem so defiantly filled with song demonstrates, and as this masterful collection proves to us on every page.

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D. A. POWELL’s most recent collection, *Chronic* (Graywolf, 2009), received the Kingsley Tufts Award and was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award.

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Manuscripts must be submitted during May 2011, through the online submissions manager on our website (www.oberlin.edu/ocpress). The contest reading fee is $28 and includes one year’s subscription to FIELD.

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