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Carol Potter

DÉJÀ-VU, OR HOW WE GOT OUT OF THE SWAMP

Maybe it’s not déjà-vu. Maybe I’ve just been pretty busy repeating myself. Dialogue exact. Trees in the right places. Nothing spooky about it at all. Guys and gals kicking their legs in the air. Audience singing along. The whole score memorized years ago. We like thinking it’s the spirit world talking to us. Something Edgar Allan Poe about it. And where did that teacher go who read us those stories with such aplomb? We were 12, 13, ready for the world being that strange, and all our actions coming back at us. Missing cat. Heart bricked up in a wall. People milling about in the street. It’s coming back to me now. The audience restive. Someone out there in the dark with a tickle in her throat.

* 

Lately I’ve been thinking about evolution. How we came up out of the swamp. Crick in the throat, some part of us trying to breathe but the breathing piece missing. No gills. No fins. And the air impossible. Today, the saleswoman on her iPad tapping inch-long glossy nails against the screen. All of us waiting for central office to explain some bizarre new charge on the rental car. Something I wasn’t going to pay. All systems were down. There was a bargain somewhere, but it was making me too nervous.

* 

I had to get out of there, took myself directly to the beach. Needed to stand in some sunshine, float in the sparkling blue waves. The sun had come out for the first time in days. Our President was flying into town; his updated helicopters hovering over the beach. Like supplicants anywhere, we were jumping up and down in the sand, waving our phones in our hands, shouting,
trying to snap his face at the window but which window was he sitting at? Which chopper? One might wonder what to make of all this. Genetic drift perhaps; the gain of some inexplicable new feature. None of us knowing how to fix what we break.
A COMMON MISPERCEPTION

It’s quiet like that. Bucolic.
Looks like nothing’s going wrong anywhere at all.
Bare trees rocking back and forth. Three crows
chasing an owl across the field into the woods.
Yesterday, men appeared at the top of the drive—
rifles, orange vests, big boots, at the same moment
dog ran at them barking and a 350 ton C-5 Air Force
cargo plane grazed us all. Its 200 foot wingspan at tree top,
the noise of it making each of us hold his or her
breath for a moment. Dog didn’t bite the men.
Men didn’t shoot dog; plane didn’t crash.
Of course they were puzzled by the woman shouting
from the doorway of the house.

*

I wasn’t shouting. I was swearing. At dog. At men
with rifles. Cargo planes. Forest. One week after
San Bernardino. The inexplicable mother and father.
It gets confusing. Which was which. When and where.
We heard the shots. Saw someone fall. The plane.
Boots on the ground. Dog barking.
One thing blending to another. Linkage disequilibrium, yes.
Something vestigial in us all. You might be the enemy
you were fighting from the air. What you know
might be useful information if you could shake your own self
down. Could remember what country you came from. What
language you were taught to speak. If you were the men
in the plane or the men the plane had come to take.
If you were the plane or if you were the bolts
on that plane or simply a passenger. What feeds us. What
we feed on. The men faded back into the woods. The plane
disappeared. Dog came back into the house.
I was the young girl with moon lipstick on the scooter
I was breaking eggs everywhere.

I yelled NASA REALI KO
because I saw it in movies
and it was my mother tongue.

I made a cookbook for my mothers.
I couldn’t see the date and then I could.
It meant that I was seventeen
and I was trying to cook for everyone.

I said rich-mond
because I was new to this country.
I picked up a melon and I was confused
because I said to it Asian faces.
I said he’s dead and there is no justice
and I get that there maybe never can be
but there is a lot of anger.

And I threw the melon.

I was finishing a tedious task.
I was correcting grammar,
or weaving a shawl,
or peeling a thousand parsnips.

Because I could.
Because my life could depend on it.
I was dancing by myself on the dance floor
with the remnants of my work
around me and everyone even
my one beloved family was gone.
I said look you are at the center of it and I traced the center spindle of the dancing floor. But I was alone.

What hurt most was that my mother was in the car and I thought that she was going to leave me but I wasn't sure. I saw the small likeness of a mother floating in a river. I heard my sister say on the phone it's not right how they did that and her voice was breaking.
A young boy was shot to death so I wrote a poem and arranged it like salt around his vanished body. (Only I didn’t.) I said you can’t go past here. Wind was flying in our faces. I was scared I didn’t understand critical race theory.

At last, it can be about aesthetics....

I brought my friends with their leathery hands. Their hands like pylons and bread baskets and struggling rappers who sing baby, baby, baby.

How does it balance on crazy bird of paradise legs? The left hands of the clock aligning around a number cut to burgundy serifs.

How do we bear our own skin against ours? How we cooked for each other, told each other we were sick. We went to beaches and we were in pink bathing suits. Salty and fatty things were in the cooler and the belly of the sky was managed with stars.
Dan Alter

ODE TO THE IDEA OF FRANCE

Life is too filled with failures, shins banged, shoes that no sooner home from the store don’t fit, once more in the doorway turning back to explain or just plead but the words in fact, only magnets drawing metal fury. I have hidden and hidden my hopes, slipped free of their knots ragging my skin until I am my own Houdini, escaping the handcuffs and glass-walled water-closet of my self. My first car, for instance, was an ancient Ford Falcon van with no seats in back, just carpet, bought from a lady in a parking lot to bus my friends every weekend to the beach, which we did, more or less, once. And my friends who had held to each other like the inflated raft after a plane crash, floated off. So let there be France! not the one we can visit, with universal healthcare and five weeks off every year, saturated with museum tickets, baguettes and stinky cheese next to the Seine sundown; nor the one that with gusto packed its Jews onto trains for the solution to the east, nor France of the banned hijab, car burnings spreading from young North Africans’ rage in the suburbs; but a someday France across the unsullied water where the Paris commune sheds its light into history, where the evening mist is tender on country fields, and pizzicato continues an orchestra into the gentle summer dark. A France of sensible little cars
but still enough headroom, of movies
about people like us stumbling
back toward happiness, France
of bison and horses in ochre motion
on cave walls at the end of the last ice age,
where I can drop the recent centuries to the floor
like my shirt and pants, can undo the zip-ties
of our suffering and make up
right then. This is not, I know, convincing.
The Antarctic ice-sheets really are
dissolving. Oh my friends, demoralized,
medicated and spread everywhere like margarine,
like you, I do not know what to do.
Eleanor Mary Boudreau

[ONE THOUSAND WORDS ON REGRET]

From the pond behind the barn, the talented dogs pull frog after frog.
“Eleanor, a dog picked up one of Rachel’s gloves. Let me know if you see it. It’s white and beige, and it’s not hers, it’s not a dog toy, it’s not a dog toy.” I found a glove, but it’s not Rachel’s.

I start the engine in my car and the little needles jump up to me in greetings, terribly, terribly small. Greetings, they say, greetings, and Lucy, Kris’ dog, slides through the dried leaves on the hillside, the cast on her left hind, inflexible as metal, is covered with green bones.

I have something to say to you, but I refrain from saying it. I feel terribly (terribly small)—down, doggy, down—

Last night, I had sex for as long as it takes to drive to the gas station (on Cambridge St.) and all the silver sperm capsized in the jelly—imagine their surprise—like beached fish.

Give me 1,000 words on regretfulness.

Sitting in the grass, I am trying to write out I hate you, “I have, I gave, I gate—” and it’s just too difficult to do. I gate you. My jaw hurts and so I say it out loud, “My jaw hurts.” And that just makes it hurt worse.

Swallow a candy in panic and it just sits in your stomach. Please, there is room—

make use of the furniture.

The title on your bookshelf Whores on the Hillside and I say, “Whales are mammals and abortions don’t take place in your stomach.” A trailing, smoky breath primed for the coming extinction. I know that I’m not stupid.

In their paddock the horses roar, like dinosaurs.
Bully for me! That's the creative spirit! The sunlight on the roof's stone banisters—a missive reads, "Missing: a pair of tan/gold fishnets"—tights. Help! The whole world is turning into words and I don't believe them.
Fred Marchant

E PLURIBUS ANIMUS

One-soul sits weeping on the seawall, a hero wishing to flee the enchantment.

Dog-soul stands guard, swivel-headed, guarding its bony idea of the enemy.

Good-finger-soul twitches as it labors to keep the chamber oiled and clean.

Soothe-soul wipes with a gauzy swath, circles of comfort on the blued metal.

Prickly-wire-brush-soul scrubs the lands and grooves free of the flecks of the past.

Hand-soul weighs the weapon, marvels at its simplicity, service, and perfect fit.
Alison Prine

MIDLIFE

I think we all have one thing to say succinct, the teacher would write on my papers, perhaps too succinct

now a clarifying image of who I will never become

you can learn about a woman by the way she licks her knife

always the two hunger and fault knocking against each other

carpenter ants gradually hollowed out the sill, then a chickadee pecked a hole near my window

the relief of burdens we set down

truth is I did not want to do much of what I have not done

though I wish I were the sort of person who could cross a street slowly

it isn’t necessary to believe in something to enjoy it

let us pray
He thinks he made the universe somehow—scattered stars, decided if the trees would leaf or needle, dressed the beetle in medieval armor.

It’s not out of the question.

After he burned a moon-sized hole in the ozone, razed the Amazon, turned the endless plains into a pile of bison skulls.

It took seven days. It took seven billion years. It takes all his lungs to keep this damn coal smoldering.

So he doesn’t get worked up about another shooting. From this distance even the bombings bloom and die away.

It isn’t even lonely.
THE ECONOMY STUPID

Like a Taco Bell built
on the site of a desecrated
burial mound,

Bruce often forgets
to be despondent
over everything

we have burned,
bulldozed, hauled
away. His attention

is drawn to clean
lines, gaudy billboards,
the eclipsed moon

hidden in the silent
bell. He loosens
the paper shroud

and eats one-handed,
driving from city
to swamp, leaving

a trail of oily
tears. Always hungry
for the new outrage,

he scans the skies
for a signal, another
jingle. It’s so easy

being Bruce.
He’s open late.
He lets anybody in.
LYING DOWN IN DARKNESS

Are you going to get up in darkness? he asked me. Go to bed in darkness? Turn out the light.

The basin is full of darkness. Were your feet in it? No one can use it when it’s filled with darkness. Who killed the light and made darkness. I want to be home now. This is home? I’m not going to forget this. The window is open. The heat is on hold. Not me.

In the little white cup there, pills. My pills. Is it time? The garbage should go out, but it’s dark, and darkness paints me black. I need more light. There are two pairs of pajamas here.

Can’t wear both but can change. Why are you angry? What makes it dark? I keep forgetting....
FULL FATHOM FIVE

Instead of a kiss, he gives me a pearl button. Neither Peter Pan nor a Lost Boy, yet the nuance is the same: a nubbin of value/no value, something for my sewing bin, a token to save for a rainy day, as I, too, am being saved. Pearl of wisdom, pearl as biography, Zipangu pearl placed on the tongue of the dead. Full fathom five, a sea change would be needed.

Of course, the button—*button, button, who's got the button?* I do, yet it's not a kiss or even a real pearl but stamped from mollusk shell. So this sphere in my hand will never couple his shadow to mine. Inert, it will rattle in the bin of the lost, sink to the bottom, cast away and forgotten amid bright bits of plastic and leather and bone.
Apparently my house which wasn’t my house was crumbling, just like my real house is, in places. And under the ratty gold carpet (which I would never tolerate), the floor was glass. Somehow I stuck three fingers through a cut-through: waft of cellar-air. Which room of me was that, to not go down into? The answer came days later when my back went waffly and lit a fire-strip down my right leg. I must need sistering, like the rotten joists under the squeegee sub-floor under the punky linoleum tiles under the toilet. Meantime the only Valentine I got this year was an apology, and now here comes that graying Scottie-dog and how much is left on my body’s mortgage? When the Mohawk dream a thing, they must do it. Get baptized, go scalping. What about last week, the rifle shot to the groin in of all places an elevator? And all I could think, bleeding out, was that the shooter some of us would name Vito, others Otto or Muhammed. “Reap while you sleep” said the ad for collecting hotel points. Quelle harvest. I need a higher power. Someone to push me around, whisper-deliver the right command right in my ageless ear—Revel! Revel!—so I wake with a mission—that’s what I’d call reaping in sleep.

for Jean Valentine, who does
Relentless, the song that keeps me up
every night now for weeks.
The color of crimson, its feel
is rich on the skin, a food-
like substance. But more precise and hopeful.
Secret, it sounds like a murmur,
unrecognizable, just like this:
I bought myself a cream-
colored blouse, French, with tiny shell buttons
and a narrow, black, ribbon-like tie
for survival, a book of Unica Zürn’s last letters,
sketches, and ephemera, and a pair of white stockings in dot-
like pattern, like snow in summer,
in Grünwald, or near my neighborhood,
the forest at the precipice near the water
at daybreak. The days here are not
like days at all. But, instead, like a film,
the top layer of dream. The city I am in
is completely different from Brooklyn.
And, also, it is exactly the same.
I’m reading Zürn’s final letters to her sister, after
she followed Bellmer to Paris.
Her tiny drawings are exquisite
and intricate like the broken traces
of memory that occur upon waking.
Everything I eat
here tastes the same, like cream-filled
pastries, or warm milk
served in a porcelain cup
to a child unable to sleep,
in the middle of the night.
You confuse yourself, she said,
so you can tell yourself you don’t
know. But you do, she said,
you do.
CANCER WARD

A joy so acute it startles me.

Here, on this mountain pass where dangers multiply,

fates with an appetite—

a clearing of bright cold-bladed air.

Even here, on this corridor, this slippery-when-wet,

a clarity.

As if joy required only joys to feed it.
YOM ASAL, YOM BASAL

One day honey, one day onion.
—Arabic proverb

In every maybe the fear of yes.
In every promise a shattered glass.

For every portion a cutting edge.
For every rift a rustproof bridge.

In every hope some pickling salt.
In every gloating a pinch of guilt.

Unto every plan God’s ringing laughter.
Unto every death a morning after.
What do you see?
Bunch of bright kids with shitty jobs and tacked up photographs of everybody’s teeth. Everybody’s teeth in rows on the wall. Everybody smudged in rows. Piles of their watches. Bits of toast in the butter from the knife, the knife and leaves and vessels failing. Children falling and scaling broken walls and catching buckshot with the holes it makes in their bodies. Like a finger pressing seed into dirt, over and over and over.

What do you see?
Flotsam and jetsam and broken bits of ship. A few drowning and many drowned, floating like oranges. Nets cast to gather the bodies in piles, letting them dry in the sun before setting them on fire.

Tell me something useful. What do you see?
An arm, a net, a spell, a role. Things that can be cast. A bearded god not with a book but a bar tab. A nest and a wooden owl, lips blowing life into things and clouds. It’s the same, only more so: fires in new places, everybody smudged.

What do you see?
It’s the same only more so. Men using machines for fun and for killing. The machines getting smaller and learning to see. You continue to harm. You watch it on the small screen of your small machine. You watch what you’ve done on your small machine. And when you’re done you put your small machine into your pocket. Because you like it. You like being watched.
He talked to me for a bit about bones and cast iron, how using both and a rubber-tipped hammer, you can determine the age of a tree. The rings, he said, are just there to fool you, and we, he said, are not to be fooled by trees. He went about preparing breakfast while I wound bobbins at the long table, a kind of day starting outside that pushed the curtains. Ate and put on hats, filled thermoses with coffee and soup.

He said, “The oldest trees were born three Christs ago” and told a story about a man who grew a chair out of the ground and another who, like St. Bartholomew, skinned the mother of the forest alive. He took her shell on a railroad tour.

Spent most of the afternoon with our knees in leaves, him mapping roots growing underground by knocking on the earth with his knuckles and listening. Wrapped red ribbons around the trees that were poisoned, prayed and kissed them, touched them with the tips of his fingers. I wrote down the numbers he muttered to himself in a neatly organized grid.

Dark came and I asked him what the trees do at night. “The sick ones cry,” he said. “And the well?” “The well cry for the sick.”

Walked home and bathed, he patched his habit and smoked. We slept this time in separate beds in the same room. Went to sleep and never woke up. Called the coroner to pick him up, his palms all caked in blood.
Margaret Ray

AT A DISTANCE

Entanglement (Quantum Physics): a phenomenon in which particles remain connected so that actions performed on one affect the other, even when separated by great distances. The phenomenon so riled Albert Einstein that he called it "spooky action at a distance."

Wanda leaves her nail polish in the photon lab for the seventh time this term. Redshift Red it's called, the color of receding. The Cavendish is cold this time of year, but news from the University at Delft is of entanglement. Even while she reads the memo, Wanda thinks instead of what a color knows of cues: Blue knows about announcements like approaching light.

In that other Delft school, how Vermeer's windows annunciate just this daily miracle—whispered assurances of how little we know, or what remains unsaid:

A woman holding scales, receiving letters, or just attending to the milk and bread.
SHOW/TELL

Lotte, 5, hides in the corner when you arrive at the house in Vermont—family friends who remember you at Lotte’s age.
Just a routine visit.
You play the part, smiling when they ask “How’s ____?
We’re sorry he couldn’t make it tonight.”
Your lines are well-rehearsed but the short-legged dog, Romeo, seems to sense something and so remains prone at your feet all during dinner.

(A rescue. He wouldn’t answer to anything else!)
Late spring, coming on summer

so the evening lingers in the driveway. Gravel underfoot, you walk down the drive to see the chickens as an excuse to remain enfolded in the cool coming out of the dip in the hills, the conversation about the film festival on campus, their uncomplicated attention.
In the meantime, Lotte has collected backyard artifacts in the form of beetles, stray leaves, a feather. (You hold out your hand on command.) Look at this, she says. And this. And this.
There was a chapter in Poland before the war. Now I'm a chapter of me. I study Escoffier, the delicate art of simmering unclouded broth courtesy of a Chinoise; from Rombauer the method for rolling dough to the translucency of a silk stocking. I polish stainless steel with olive oil, scrub my fingertips with a lemon half after mincing garlic. The piano waits at attention for each evening's attempt at Schumann. I unfurl the newspaper, place it next to the leather chair. I bring the slippers, fancy ones, rimmed with Alpine braid. Domesticity rises through me till I flush like a safe and convenient battery-powered candle. I read *Ladies' Home Journal*, "Ten New Ways to Please Your Man," and memorize each in pantomime. The house approves of me. It parades the sky in its windows, admits the opera of passing sirens, the swerving, rocking ambulance with its brave young driver, determined to reach the hospital in time to save the patient, to let him heal and return home, tentative but upright, to his one true love, the Lady of the House.
As I lay down too tired to believe is a line you love by Laura Jensen. You imagine it coming to her easily like dictation, like cold with snow.

You want that. How you want that. And the night you dreamed you sat in a chair in the middle of the sea and could see the shoreline:

lights, a hut, dune grass; and bluffs behind them shone, oddly as if on fire—Oh, you want them, you want them back like the waterfall you built

of cheesecloth, papier-mâché, and wire, and called Salishan, a name sounding like silver buffed up to a shine. You want that too; a ton of it.

So brush your hand across rough cotton here, or here. Or notice, if you’re naked, the pelt of shower water against your skin, the scent of scentless soap, the weight

your feet confer to the tub floor. Today you’ll amble through the city’s jazz of rain. And the voice under your scalp that says there’s little to no point? Poor voice.
After a head trauma, distance is one measurement of injury: across small breaks, the nerves regrow.

Spanning large gaps requires silk grafts: spider threads ensheathed in nerve cells, new suspension bridges between the word flood and the rush of rising sea water. This discovery reveals the body sees the silk as kindred, absorbs it, so there is no ensuing infection. It is easy to imagine the brain as a meshwork of silk rope bridges.

Perhaps easier as a city or a field of grass. A lone apricot tree, its orange fruits flaming up like ideas—

* 

I am at the ballet, watching a woman dance herself to death to ensure spring will come again.

Snow is melting. My father is leaving his voice in my silenced phone.

My mother is at the kitchen table, frozen bags of home-grown peas and corn scattered around her, all bloodied as they melted against her gashed head. That’s the thing: the thing with her brain makes her balance go.
Later she stole the stapler
the nurse used to pull the cut shut
because she is forever practical and what if she should

need it again? I have to stop working
my father is saying in the message, I can’t
leave her at home alone.

The music is crashing to a halt, so abrupt it’s said
to suddenly fall over on its side.
Stravinsky disparaged his final chord as A noise,

but could not write anything
better for the end. I have dressed up for the ballet
in a dress borrowed

from my mother’s closet and never returned: black,
strapless, with tumbling white flowers—

*

I know she followed the nerves
with her mind’s eye—the flaring
impulses, like bright drops of dew down a silk thread

from the brain to the shape
of a word within the mouth, to the cup brought to the lips, rip
of silk, the dial-down of the light-dimmer—

I’m doing it again. Hopeful deployment of words I like, making
the nothing into a picture, but what
can I use the picture for. A dream

to fill the stretch of months
in which she practiced keeping
the diagnosis unsaid, held it close.

A preparation, perhaps
she practiced lying
very still, practiced dying—
D. Nurkse

PENMANSHIP

Teacher gave me a nibbled inch of yellow chalk. She took my hand in hers and wrote on the board, "the quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dog," then drew a deep breath and printed, "these are the times that try men's souls."

She (or I) wrote with astonishing slowness so each sentence would feel irrevocably mine. I sensed her thorax contract and tense against completion, under her board-stiff blue serge dress. I watched the words surface on the slate, like the Pleiades reflected in a puddle, from the most distant point in the cosmos.

Why didn't I dare cough or sneeze? If I trembled, her grip tightened. Meanwhile the free children watched, passing spitballs like love notes. The bullies memorized my compliance, planning their own punishments: a turd in my desk, a frog in my satchel.

Yet in Teacher's gilt-edged ledger, there were stars glued beside their names as by mine. Gold, green, white, blue—each color had its own shade of suffering and abnegation. Here and there a star-shaped absence glinted with the sheen of desiccated mucilage.

And now Teacher is showing me the period. I watch my hand inscribe a circle, small as a sparrow's eye, and turn into itself. She gives me my body back, but it is a sign. Now I am my name and it is I who copied myself into the book, so willingly, so passionately, so mercilessly; an old man emerges in mirror-writing on the blank side of the page.
"It was a place I never heard of," a woman said, "though I studied geopolitics in college and worked as a secretary for an embassy. I googled it, no hits. Nothing on the library shelves. Yet I kept overhearing its name, outside the clinic or in the church basement. A voice would say, 'I have family there. There was a coup. The suffering is indescribable. The famine. The corruption. Useless to send help. My cousin never writes.'"

The speaker was my age, a red vein in the fleshy part of her nose, proud in her carriage. She addressed a friend who seemed completely uninterested, absently checking her I.D.

I was just an eavesdropper, heading north myself, in the crowd outside the departure platform. I wanted to interrupt, "that nation is Sheol, the limousines and shanties, padlocked granaries and empty fields, live wires strung in the rain. Of course your relatives won't return."

But our line was starting to move. Sleepily the travelers gathered their suitcases tied with twine, their sacks made of canvas sewn shut, their boxes—some contained animals whose eyes you saw glinting, whose pulse you sensed, though they were silent, patently willing themselves to be silent. A boy trundled a live fish in a cellophane bag of water. It darted like a flame. He kept the top sealed with his right thumb and forefinger, his left hand was cupped, supporting the weight. He held his ticket in his teeth. A little girl in a grimy lace dress brandished a cricket in a matchbox. She shook it to make it sing, and held it to her ear. It sang regardless, coldly, imperious. The man behind her, whose chalky face was wrinkled like a prune, had hoisted himself upright. Now he nudged her forward with the rubber tip of his cane.

Understand that our country is poor too, here too the lamps flicker, here too a toothache is incurable. Here too every inch of the border is sealed.
Lauren Clark

IN A DREAM WE ARE EATING DINNER TOGETHER
BY THE ATLANTIC OCEAN

And I say, I know you’re going to die.
He sips casually from a jug, says, soon.

Soon as the ground unrivets itself. Soon as the police arrive.
Soon as the moon rises between February and March.

I say, aren’t you dead? I remember your funeral.
He meets my eyes. Soon. Soon

as my mother sleeps through a night. Soon
as the dreams stop. Soon as my sister marries.
THE RECEPTION CONTINUES

It is night and everyone
is looking at the barn.
One by one each person

steps forward in the darkness.
They run their fingers along its walls
—between the slats, beneath the paint

where it has peeled away—and talk to it.
Many get splinters. They all
loved the barn. Pain is the price.

Then someone lights a match.
It starts small then grows.
The light. Everyone turns away

as the flames obscure the barn
and blow into the fields, stalk to stalk
until everything the whole thing goes up

in one fluid gasp.
Could have been anything
inside the barn. Could have been

grain or hay. Could have been
horses moving their eyes and tails
in several directions. Or flies,

or cold and warm machinery,
or nothing. I just don’t know.
I never saw inside.

I never even touched it.
And to the small animals
who make their homes in the shadows
of the corn: you will mostly make it out alive. Those who do not live on in our hearts. After all
what can a wedding be without the dead and the living, and those in equal measure?
Romeo... They look around—Romeo? Where had he gone? The blood they needed was in him, but where was he? Where's Julie to ask? But we knew when they'd find him he'd earn a little bruise, hyacinth and chartreuse, in the elbow's fold. We fasted for it. Simple procedure, so we summon you, Romeo. How the young technician Adam calls for you. Time will come he'll substitute silence for your name, put a halt to this waiting-room game. Our turn comes all the sooner with you in absentia. Your needle fear, for sure. You slink away, curly cornmeal ball of a man, not red meat. Sometimes they have to search, try twice, even more, but go ahead, go through the door; let them draw what flows in you, what runs beneath your skin, Tigris, Euphrates, Tiber, Po, Mississippi. They circulate back home: Columbia, Johnson Creek, Crystal Spring, your own little pint.
I have troubled, preemptively and without provocation, 
Trouble. I have scratched long before the coming 
of any itch. 
In the house of the hanged man, I've catalogued 
the species of rope and knot: cuckold's 
neck, French shroud, 
blood-loop. Refused 
to acknowledge the nonpresence of bygones. 
Neither mended nor ended. Enunciated 
as precisely as possible what had hitherto gone 
without any saying, the plosives 
of their at-last release. Compared 
uantages of odious vs. loathsome. I have whispered 
to the burglar of the weakness of my walls, then 
roused all the dogs of the house, in their sleep-heaps, left them 
slathering and clawing at the doors. I have licked 
ritualistically at the white-streaked- 
pink discolorations of longworn 
sores, time-poulticed. 
I have sawed 
and sawed at the bough, the bough 
of language 
I'm standing on— 
confounded and nonplussed—sung 
along to its splinter-thwack and leaf-strip, 
recitative of slowcrack 
split-and-tear: 
lit the book of wisdom-pith 
and adage, watched 
its boldfaced letters blacken further and scroll-curl, 
read their spirit that liveth in the scattered 
heaps of ink-ash, and 
just when there was no telling, I 
executed the message, and I told.
BY THE ROAD OF BY AND BY

... we get to the house of Never.
—proverb

Siamo smariti, we said, in what
Italian we knew from Dante, *we’re lost*,
on the hillroad to Settignano.
Umbrella pines shielding us from dusklight,
we banged the iron door-knocker cross
at a convent, the only house we could find.
The little nun tried to hide
her smirk at our garbled *Inferno*-speech.
*Lost* like “in perdition.”
*Perché la diritta via era smarita.*
Because the true way/
right road/unstraying/
straightforward pathway, whatever it was
translated to be, was missing, lost. Bewildered.
She crossed herself and giggled.
House of Now, who goes there, who lives
inside your locked mansion, and how did they get through your
marble door?

* 

And the paving stones
were good intentions?
I have followed Intention’s
downcoiling hell-road, through Time, knowing,
I knew, the straightway, the sweet
by and by—have swayed

on wavelashed, frayed-rope suspension
bridges, crossed and crossed those bridges though they never
came, will never come.
As it *were*, the saying goes. Past,
subjunctive: was always *were*. Time
covers and *discovers* everything, they say, but who
says Time will tell us anything? And when? Inflected, -fected, as though the verbs were to tell us nothing of time and its insistent ill-use, illusion. The tense will always have been present.

*

To say a by-your-leave is an apology for a permission you somehow forgot to ask for. By-your-leave, Time, I have left along the road of by and by, over treacherous and elusive bridges, toward Never’s stable trough.

*

Siamo smariti, we’re lost, we’ve been lost, we will have been lost, where are we bound that could be perdurable? Tell Time you’ve seen through to its stitches, their discovered scarifying sutures and never-snipped-off threads. Tell Time you know how cut it’s been—the bloodbunched pucker of its skin—and how haphazardly it’s now bound around the scar.

* 

Moment-wounder,
what is this road of by
then by: the Be All, the End All?
neither? both?

* 

_Give Time time:_

The Saying’s no sooner said than it dissipates on air
to cochlea-quiver on inner ear’s cilia and bony labyrinth
and, brain-deep, shocks its way through tens of
thousands of neurons into temporal lobe,
scans memory traces and word-hoards to ask
itself what it could mean, and adds itself to colonies
of laid-away arcana, gnomic parables, saws unassimilable,
ununderstandable:
What could it mean,
Give Time time?

Of what else, but flux and entropy
and gravity-warp, is Time made?
Time's got all the time there ever was.
What could the proverb mean:
*Time is an inaudible file?*
I hear its grate-rasp, scratch-grind,
inside every word.
Lauren Moseley

CYCLOPS

I am a cyclops God said
in a full-moon voice

One day you will forget
the way geese crease water

Every life is a renaming
We were sailing as if we had
another hour to kill
another hour to live

My name separate
as a severed hand

I'll always go too far
for a friendly face

a cup of coffee
with a moon of milk

One lens of her glasses fogged
above the mug and she

looked up one-eyed
straight through me
Maya Catherine Popa

AFTER A LONG SEPARATION, NOTHING CAN BE SEPARATE

After years, you'll believe anything might have happened. Delinquent astrologies, anchors lifted in the night. Where stood the house, a breach, a vanishing as gentle as forgetting. Though, really, hours interspersed with appointments, groceries punctuated by rain, long rides to visit other bodies spoken to across distances. Electric years of the horned animals. A great perpetuation of acronyms. Benign aches, ascension of a poached egg from water. The emptied something never refilled. Unforeseen sleepover, elective sacrifice, release of a device in time for a birthday. Each spring's new fever of fawns, twist on a familiar timber. But it seems equally possible that those you have not spoken to have not lived, waiting to be perceived, have drifted in suspension of disbelief. And it happens that time is a lyric disappointment: I am here, you are here as in a dream. No less to separate us than us. As years would have you, I have not had you, waiting like an augur for the stark pattern. The rumbling, as though the sky had defaulted, the lightning.
Marianne Boruch

A RESCUE

The whale might, she might
vaguely recognize human cries of
those drowning as some distant tribe
of fin and blow hole. And the damaged

submarine as cousin once, twice,
three times removed, huge and gray as it

lies in the blood-let Atlantic’s notorious
cold beyond cold, fable-lined at bottom with

outrageous fish whose photos in a glossy
seasick book would wide-eye you
to some kind of moon creature,
their luminous razors on stalks blinking
to terrify or protect.
So the great species of the planet

unite underwater where we earth stuck
oxygen-eaters rarely look or think to look.

And on hearing those cries—
Wait, doesn’t the whale have a massive

mammal heart (a child could
run through it), that sound, such a flood
to the brain (brain curious as a calf in spring
folded up, tangled, still wet from the going).

*Do something!* bells and billows
through the hopeless slate-blue. The whale’s
identical first cell of us too
in the watery void before we turned

sea creature here, land breather there, damned
the same—maybe and future—

to archangel across for down
ANGEL

I was out of candy.

It said
my halo blowed off,
my wings is really for pretend,
my boots is not the kind they wear
except when it’s raining.

It said
I seen your light.
PIGEON

I am in the station,
only I am
not taking the train.

A rock, a dove,
below, above,

I am God’s
good eye,

waiting out the rain.
Bent over the sink,  
my mother is washing her hair.  
She reaches for a towel, water  
dripping on her shoulders,  
her worn cotton house dress.  
I am too young to notice  
her flaws. I burn with adoration  
like a candle in church.  
My mother catches me  
watching. She turns away  
with her eyes. Older,  
in a museum, I see the white  
plaster figure of a woman  
leaning out of a window frame,  
tilting her head  
the way my mother did,  
drying her hair:  
as if listening for tomorrow,  
hoofbeats that never come.
Daneen Wardrop

AS HE GOES

he came to visit, flew
into Kalamazoo and asked me for his car

you left it in Virginia, Dad

ports overlay

like he used to tell us about when
he was in Bin Hoa flying through fog,

his helicopter, upside down

the instrument panels rightside up

^ 

we take a walk
troops are down that hill, brigades up this walkway

I’m making all this up, Dad
I don’t know, you walk calmly next to me

a hitch in your balance

sun butterflies the branches

maps burn in the night

get the chopper off that cliff, Major

^ 

you’ve met a lady, she just walked up to your front doorstep
(not Mom, she’s snapped to white)
this lady showed up to ring

^

a trip in a car purposed
the very smooth, the two of you
kept passing the same billboard
with a miles-long wink
the lady kept looking disparagingly at her packages
you'll make those chocolate chip cookies for her

Who is it that can tell me who I am
the cookies everyone likes

^

years ago soldiers in formation on the parade ground
one man keeled over soundless
a hot day, that keeling day
grass melted, sun stuck to branches
you, at attention

^

in the lady's yard blossoms squirt from bushes
kudzu tries to bend
her soldered face
she lives on a river
starlings build twig-circles on top of bluebirds' eggs
in the clutch of the river's shoulder
you can track as far as the water curves

when Dad's cellphone gives him trouble he throws it in the dumpster

call the quartermaster
even if only a quarter of him can come
all guests long to be quarterbacks
all tanks long to be quarterhorses
if ever love held loss in sway
it's where a steeple pierces a quarter-moon—
her dining table, not quartermaster furniture,
the singer's quarter-note judders wine glasses
helicopters give no quarter

you laugh the lady doesn't
you will put on your dress blues
I think you have married her
copter blades rotate the sky

confusion studies the flickering

_fire us hence like foxes_—

if you think we, your children stand at attention
we attend so we can help you
come back

maybe you think, as long as you can hear us breathe
we will stay alive

that you can do that for us

and you can

^  

when you moved away from your old house blue herons
creaked when they flew
memory spooling out

^   

every time I call her house she answers

the once or twice she lets me talk to you
you’re in her basement

how do you unmarry someone from someone

when one of them doesn’t remember a vow
try telling that to a social worker
try telling that to a judge

still as a look, fox on a hill

^

we walk along

*Nothing will come of nothing*

he says, *tar-nation*

unmaps terrain as he goes

I say, Dad, don’t
forget about us
Your loved ones die so you eat their brains. It’s a sign of respect. That’s one way. In the U.S., we send cards that we buy at grocery stores. But what can you do? We’re creatures of our moment. There’s this game I heard described on the radio a few weeks back, it was a Jewish game this guy played with his wife when they met non-Jews. The game went something like this: “He’d turn us in.” “She wouldn’t turn us in.” “She would but he wouldn’t.” It’s a dark game. And what are the cues they’d go by? What might I do when talking with them, knowing on their way home they’d be back and forth with if or not I would or wouldn’t. I can understand why one would imagine the government is opening camps, and that they’re looking for you. Invitations go out. It’s how they round people up sometimes. I read once that the police send out a slew of “You Won” letters to the addresses of people with outstanding warrants, with the address to show up to for their prize, and then arrest piles and piles of them. Also a pivotal scene in The X-Files, where the evil (I guess?) aliens lure the humans who’d been working with them to a hangar to escape something, only to kill them all with flame throwers. The story you remember is always going to be a story of flipping a coin, the very slow ambush burning through you, so softly you don’t feel it until it’s too late. Eliot’s seven, and is sad that we can’t carry him around anymore. Carry me, too, we think at times. He’s saying goodbye without knowing it, to some future that might turn him in when he thinks he’s just leaving a party or going to one. We never know. Part of this ongoing theme song, how you can’t know you’re going to outlive someone until they die or you do. Or maybe it’s a version of “meet the new boss, same as the old boss.” Or something like It’s Coming Back Again But Each Time It Comes Back It’s A Little Slower, A Little More Worn And Coming Apart.
Long title for saying “diminishing returns,” for thinking something about the cosmic drone of the air conditioner, how it sounds like a waterfall, or an orchestra tuning up in the background as the lottery winners take their seats.
OTHER THINGS THAT HAPPENED ON THE DAY MY MOTHER DIED

I bought an everything bagel from Panera and shared half with Natalie. We picked up some shoes at the mall that she needed for dance team. A book came in the mail. Eliot told me this joke: “What do you call a magic owl?” “Whodini.” “I’ve looked out this window so many times,” Natalie’s friend Kennedy said as Natalie drove the car around the block, practicing. I made myself a sandwich and thought “anonymous bread,” because suddenly now I’m always eating. I bet I could eat this house, starting at the front door. I had this dream I was chewing glass so why not move to the table and chairs, why not move to the lambent originals we keep out of sight in case the secret police arrive unexpectedly, parking at the corner behind the retirement facility. I always knew—what did you always know. One cannot know that which is on the other, that which one is unable to know. One is to sit there watching others breathe, waiting for it. Maybe something good will be happening by then, one of these moments of seeming great promise that doesn’t come to much. Where did it go off track? Or perhaps this was the track all along. It’s not that I’m always eating—I’ve even lost a pound or two in the last month—but that I remember once, when I was twelve, standing in a parking lot outside Western Sizzler. It was raining hard to my left and sunshine on my right. A straight line across the parking lot, unambiguous, like a ruler.
ONCE I MADE UP MY MIND

the room felt flimsy, like a paper box
for takeout rice or small ornaments.
It had a hypotheticality,
blank walls dizzy with new paint.
On the carpet: assorted piles
of old phone chargers, insurance statements,
a glazed Turkish bowl filled with nickels.
For unknown reasons,
these could not be thrown away,
but I wasn’t bringing them with me.
The van was packed outside,
yellow, hulking in the foggy neighborhood
like an outsized thought.
At such times guilt is never to be doubted.

She’d been coming home at 3
most nights, a 3
like falling open handcuffs,
and I knew the quiet hours well.
But the room had waited until now
to share its hollowness with me.

She had left long prior
but I’d only just begun to feel
my skeleton on the air mattress
and notice how loud
the overpass was behind the elm trees,
or the swamp cooler,
obnoxious, knocking all night
in its brackets
and to wonder how we ever slept.

Because she used to have to wrestle me awake
so she could tell her long
and detailed dreams to someone,

although now I’m less sure
they were really dreams:
the alligators chewing on a horse,

gold tasseled dancers diving off the cruise ship,
or the jukebox like a glittering pharaoh
and her kneeling,
fitting coins to its thin mouth.
Brian Tierney

FLAGS ON THE MOON

Curiosity tells us there are blue dunes
on Mars; that a streambed existed
knee-deep for a thousand years, NASA believes,
right there in Utah-red, like any old fossil,
like a vertebrae in clay, an ancient skeleton
current we keep looking for—

that there was water, once, before
us, belonging to no one—as though space
exploration were a post-co-
lonial thought, which it is

not at all. There are five U.S. flags left standing
on the moon, five dollars
each, stitched with nylon from Jersey, & all of them
bleached into one color, now, in the nation
of nothingness. God says, I don’t believe you.
And Dr. Snaut goes on about how we don’t want
other worlds, in the first go
at Solaris; we just want

a mirror—which I take to mean we
cut down trees we press into reams on which we write
down our history of cutting
down the trees; that space rocks crumble
then clump, like my Cuma Mar-ie
on the mantle, here, in front of me, even if I shake her
& make a stupid wish. The first of us humans
to occupy the Americas may not have
crossed Beringia land bridge, a new report
to believe
for now, says. Just worm routes collapsing behind us as we move. And I felt important then, she said, my mother that is, about her stint cleaning very small chips with a dollhouse brush for one of the missions of Apollo, when she was young & needed a few bucks for gas—yes, the mission that didn’t last. What happened when we turned the two mirrors, once, Sean & Constance & I, in the room overlooking the creek that’s still there after a good stretch of rain comes—what happened after we turned them to face one another, in the sun, was that the sun became an amplified burst going down, coming in, the snow-blinded walls in that one perfect minute I was standing inside a star.
CODA WITH A CORPSE FLOATING IN THE PATAPSCO

River—which means tide covered with froth—which means no
that isn’t the first snow
forming in his eyes when the fire crews find him on the south end
of Baltimore;
his knees, like split grapefruits, floe-slashed under fog the shippers
pass through
like the breath of a horse I saw, on its side, outside Lancaster
when I was nine
with my father, buying trinkets the Amish carved to pass their self-
denial even
fallen Catholics envy; & the eldest one, or most certainly one of
the elderly ones
hosing off the blood where the ankle of that indescribable heap broke
through cleanly,
leaving a spot in the grass like a tumor in a petscan seen
from above:
so that you looked at the shape your inner life had taken long
before the mind
caught up with the body that had always been dying & unkeepable
anyway. Like a battery
I find floating. A father. It’s never
about the horse—

for Edgar
Here are two welcome additions to the already substantial literature of Neruda translations in English. In some respects the two books couldn’t be more different; the Copper Canyon book, which joins ten other Neruda titles on their list, is brief (165 pages) and lavish in its color reproductions of some of the poems in their original state “on napkins, playbills, receipts, and in notebooks.” Its contents, 21 poems, are drawn from recent discoveries in the Neruda archives. The Tupelo volume is huge (513 pages) and offers a complete version of Neruda’s ambitious epic on the Americas, a fifteen-section work that rivals and surpasses such ambitious counterparts as Pound’s Cantos or Spenser’s Faerie Queene.

What they have in common, besides bargain prices ($23 for the Copper Canyon book, $39.99 for the Tupelo), is that they are loving, careful versions by working poets. Gander is a well-known American poet with a record of deft translations by both Spanish and Latin American poets. Griffor, a Chilean-American poet and publisher, draws on the deep roots she shares with her subject, a poet whose work she has lived with for many years, in a political exile that mirrors his own in some respects.

When poets of this caliber undertake translations of this scope and importance, it is cause for celebration. Gander was reluctant to add to the large Neruda literature until he found himself falling in love with the poems: “Once I moved through the introductory material and into the poems, it was all over” (xi). Griffor, through years of political activism and bitter exile, carried her love of Neruda on through her own transformation to a poet writing in English and living in the United States. Her project of a complete version of Neruda’s masterpiece is a lifetime’s work and a gift to the rest of us.
The Griffor cannot accommodate the Spanish, of course, but the Gander book does, putting the Spanish texts in the second half of the book rather than, as more typically, on facing pages. This makes sense, one realizes, partly because poems that spin out over several pages need to be uninterrupted, and this way they can be, both in translation and in the original. Even lazy readers can readily learn to visit the Spanish texts as necessary. Meanwhile, the poems, mostly love poems of one kind and another, often work in lines as short as one or two words:

TO THE ANDES

Snow-pelted
cordilleras,
white
Andes,
walls
of my homeland,
so much
silence,
they hem in
the will, the struggles
of my people...

This poem goes on for six pages in both languages, so I won’t quote it in its entirety; I’ll just note that its manner and subject are typical of the lost poems, often resembling the odes that Neruda developed mid-career and always reflective of the ecstatic lyric voice we so enjoy in this poet.

One of my favorites among these 21 lost and found poems is #3, from the middle fifties, when Neruda was writing odes on every possible subject—the dog, the cat, yellow flowers, socks, etc. This one, a kind of ode to grief, a little song of absence, may have been deemed too diaphanous to join its cousins:

Where did you go  What have you done
Ay my love
when not you but only your shadow
came through that door,
the day
wearing down, all
that isn’t you,
I went searching for you
in every corner
imagining you might be
locked in the clock, that maybe
you’d slipped into the mirror,
that you folded your ditzy laugh
and left
it
to spring out
from behind an ashtray—
you weren’t around, not your laugh
or your hair
or your quick footsteps
coming running

It may not be an ode, but it speaks to anyone who has had to experience loss or grief. As for the translation, Gander finds little felicities—“locked in the clock,” “ditzy laugh”—that I think would have made Neruda smile approvingly.

The pleasures of this book are perhaps especially acute for those who know and love the poet’s work already, but they could also lead a newcomer into the beginnings of an interest that will blossom and thrive.

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*Canto General*, meanwhile, is a very tall order. You should probably figure on having it around all your life—to browse in, to visit and revisit. Just as you would not devour Dante’s *Divine Comedy* in a few sessions, you need patience and curiosity for this challenge. It may take you years. Reading straight through would be an admirable undertaking, say a section a day over fifteen days, but skipping around, as in Dante or Homer, is certainly also permissible. One
day you may feel like climbing Macchu Picchu; another you may wish to be a Chilean patriot.

As you grow familiar with this massive encyclopedic epic, there will not emerge, as with Dante, a grand and unified vision of the whole. Rather, as perhaps with Milton and Blake and Whitman, there will be a dramatic tension among possible unities, none of them wholly satisfactory: not history, not natural history, not Marxism or Chilean politics, not even the poet’s life story: we encounter all of these, and more. They compete for primacy, and on one visit one may dominate, only to be replaced on the next visit by another. When Neruda put this huge work together he was in mid-career and the century was at midpoint, 1950. It should not be seen as a grand closure and summary, but as a giant collection of the preoccupations that had seen the poet through the thirties and forties. He would go on, to the marvelous odes and the incomparable late poems—go back, in other words, to a more standard lyric mode. But his impulses as a lyric poet were of course constantly at hand, as this opening passage demonstrates:

I am here to write this history.
Out of peace itself, from the buffalo
to the wind-lashed sands
of land’s end, in the gathering
surf of the Antarctic light,
and of the Andean burrows, studding
the cliffs of somber Venezuelan plains
I searched for you, my father,
young soldier of shade and copper;
oh you, nuptial grasses, wild hair,
mother caiman, silver dove.
I, mud-made Inca,
felt the stone and said:
Who
waits for me?

It is Whitman, but with something a little more wild and modernist prevailing, as in Crane or Roethke. That the Spanish—Desde la paz del
búfalo / hasta las azotadas arenas / de la tierra final, en las espumas / acumuladas de la luz antártica—comes over into English so well is a tribute to both poets, Neruda and Griffor.

Canto General’s second book, The Heights of Macchu Picchu, is certainly the best-known section of the poem, justly admired for its imaginative scope and poetic atmosphere. It exists in several English translations (including one by this reviewer) and is the subject of John Felstiner’s widely admired 1980 study, Translating Neruda: The Way to Macchu Picchu (Stanford). For many readers, then, that second section will be a starting point from which to begin a further exploration of Canto General. It is a masterpiece within a larger masterpiece.

For the last few months I’ve been involved in just such an exploration, alternately consulting the Spanish text; reading around in the one other complete English version, Jack Schmitt’s, published first in 1991 by the University of California Press and still in print; and mostly savoring and sampling Griffor’s newly published version. Again and again I have marveled at the scope and energy of the work, its attempt to embrace and document the geography and history of the Americas, especially South America. There are catalogues of rivers, conquistadores, flora and fauna, liberators, poets, and despots, all realized in the combination of inward and outward, dream and materiality, that is the signature style of this poet. There is a great deal of anger and condemnation, at the conquistadores and colonizers on up through recent capitalist exploitation and the betrayals of corrupt politicians. But there is celebration, always, to temper the story of greed and corruption, an affirming of the inexhaustible spiritual potential both of the human and the nonhuman.

Even choosing an example to cite is intimidating, given the abundance and variety of the whole. Here is a tribute to house wrens from Book Seven, the Canto General of Chile:

XI. House Wrens

Try not to be distrustful: it’s summer, water bathed me and raised my desire like a branch, my song keeps me going
like a wrinkled trunk, with evident scars.
Tiny beloved, perch on my head.
Nest in my shoulders, where the lizard’s
brilliance struts, on my thoughts
where so many leaves have fallen,
O, tiny circles of sweetness, grains
of winged wheat, small feathered egg,
irreducible forms in which
the unerring eye manages flight and life,
here, nest by my ear, distrustful
and diminutive: help me:
every day I want to be more and more bird.

The speaker is a tree, wanting to host, and then eventually become, a bird. That scenario is typical for this poet, whose identity with the nonhuman can intrigue and astonish us. Mariela Griffor handles it, here and elsewhere, confidently and lovingly. Her version of this lyric is slightly superior to Schmitt’s, which is certainly serviceable and welcome. But one is glad to have this new version of a poem almost overwhelming in its size and scope. There is a freshness and drive to Griffor’s translation that readers will find exhilarating.

_Canto General_ also, of course, has weaknesses, passages that are tedious or that feel cartoonish in their politics and discourse. Neruda is far less authoritative when he takes on North America, understandably. Book Nine, _Que despierte el leñador/Let the Woodcutter Awaken_, celebrates the beauty of North America (“Yes, through acrid Arizona and gnarled Wisconsin, / to Milwaukee lifted up against wind and snow, / or in the oppressive swamps of West Palm, / near the pine groves of Tacoma... / I wandered, treading mother earth... / I love the small farmhouse”) but eventually drifts into postwar politics, where astute observations mix together with Neruda’s notorious homage to Stalin, a product of both his idealism and ignorance. He is on much firmer ground, of course, in his dealings with Chilean politics and the betrayals of political allies that sent him into exile. The poem closes with an autobiographical section, “I Am,” that predicts revolution and social justice while acknowledging a troubled present:
Here ends this book, here I leave
my *canto general* written
in hiding, singing beneath
my country’s clandestine wings.
Today, February 5th, in this year
of 1949, in Chile, in “Godomar
de Chena,” a few months before
I turn forty-five.

That we have this flawed and lovable masterpiece, so passionate and
so comprehensive, in a new and vigorous translation, is occasion for
wonder and for celebration.

*David Young*
In 21st-century America, what makes Jewish art? In *Walking Backwards*, Lee Sharkey touches the borders of themes—the Holocaust, Israel, Old Testament narrative—that might traditionally define a “Jewish writer” in a lineup of her gentile peers, but never allows those outsize subjects to diminish her lyric focus on the individual. In the collection’s six sections, Sharkey considers diverse Jewish experiments to recover from exile, persecution, and the erasure of cultural knowledge. Her speakers, often historical characters, reflect upon life in the Vilna ghetto, the hiding places of East European Jewish partisans, a divided Jerusalem, and the intimate relationships of the Biblical gleaners. An alter-ego for Sharkey herself is present, too: witnessing, documenting, translating, remembering. For this poet, we realize by the collection’s end, entering human consciousness through art and language is the only way to approach the character of cultural identity, to declare oneself part of a cultural tradition.

A radical act of *Walking Backwards* is that Sharkey assimilates Yiddish literature, and the acts of reading and translating it, into her lyric. That Yiddish is a familiar point on the star of American Jewish identity may seem obvious, but the Yiddish of mainstream American culture is more often *The New Yorker*’s occasional *verkakhte* or television’s slipped *shtup* than the modernist works of Avraham Sutzkever and Peretz Markish, two of the writers with whom Sharkey has poetic conversations. Her engagement with their lives and works, both in the Vilna ghetto and before the war, allow us to imagine what it might be like if their names were as familiar to American life as Whitman or Dickinson. Framing this engagement is an intimate question that punctuates the entire volume: how does—how should—a living individual serve as a vessel for cultural memory, especially a culture rehabilitating from extreme erasure, as Jewish memory still struggles to do?
In the opening sequence of poems, “Cautionaries,” several different voices reckon with this problem. What’s the best way to get to know the past? One can learn history by embodying, putting on a historical mask. One speaker imagines herself “[slipping] into the skirts of Rosa Luxemburg / and [crossing] the border to foment the revolution.” Such experiments with memory are not without consequence; the self in the present may find itself living in terms of the past, altered by it: “Even now, / a century later: ink stain on my fingers” closes that poem. But the condition of being altered by our engagement with the past, Sharkey suggests, is a human one. We undertake elaborate mental gymnastics to accommodate or bury our histories. In another section of “Cautionaries,” she writes: “Because the hands remembered what they had done / they exiled themselves from the house of the body. / From time to time they crept to the back door / where the kitchen girl would toss them scraps...” Here, she complicates the idea that we learn history in order to keep from repeating its errors: the worst parts of our histories may haunt us like phantom limbs, just beneath consciousness, but are never gone.

In this universe of truncated memory and painful history, the speaker who wishes to remember is asked to begin again as if without antecedent, and yet with awareness of the enormity of what precedes her. It’s into this fragile territory, where absence and silence are tangible fabrics, that Sharkey welcomes us. Here she composes her thesis: that the individual body is the landscape where problems of history and memory are worked out, where the silence of erasure resides, and where remembrance is possible. The last poem in “Cautionaries” sets that stage:

Any sound that a sound might make has lost its history.
Look no further than the country of limestone and fir
whose lost name whips in the wind like an anthem
until no one can hear the other.

Any sound that a sound might make has lost its mother.
My friend says she will blow a hole in the silence.
I tell her, look in the mirror
to get the feel of absence.
Here, Sharkey already seems to anticipate Abraham Sutzkever, with whom she’ll have a poetic tête-à-tête at the collection’s end. Erasure of people and memory, Sutzkever argued in many poems, can’t be reversed, but only filled with what remains, best transmitted in language. “Who will remain, what will remain? A wind will stay behind,” he writes, and later, “From within our silence, trees and nests emerge. / In the humming muscles of the orchestra converge. / But who, from inside us, can play the I, all it connotes. / We are just the notes, just the notes” (34).

Rather than segue into a purely memorial mode next, Sharkey turns witness and reporter with the collection’s second and third sections, which hover around contemporary Jerusalem. In these poems, Sharkey probes one of the major ways Jews have tried to fill 20th-century voids, and uncovers ways the pain of erasure can give way to national feeling and cultural division. Translation between Arabic and Hebrew, or one of those languages and English, becomes a method of witnessing in these poems. Again, the individual body becomes the medium for understanding, memory, or the lack of those things: “Sometimes the interpreter seems transparent / As if her words entered my body directly, as if I simply understood.”

Translation also becomes a subtle but deliberate method of trying to repair and weave together the national memories of both Jews and Arabs. Throughout “Intentions,” nouns appear in both Hebrew and Arabic; not just any nouns, but foundational elements of a human life lived simply, on the land: mother, house, hands, vineyard, clay. Often cognates, these words become guideposts for Sharkey as she makes her way back to a vision of an earlier Palestine, one in which Arabs and Jews might have understood each other as mutually intelligible variations—cognates—rather than as hopelessly different. The last poem in “Intentions” lays out a framework in which hope for the future is an extension of the reconstruction of the vanished past:

Of the year to come I remember the blessing of green

Our hands, yad/yad, waded into the clay, tiin/tiin, and fashioned each other
We could hear each other cross through danger
We could see each other hang upon nothing
Terraced hills grew green with labor and the labor of the olive
We stood in the stone-lined pool before the likeness of each other
One sanctified history incised the other
The dark on the face of the deep enclosed us
Horizons opened around our first intentions
I remember your vineyard, karm/karem

Over and over, Sharkey implies that the weighty task of repairing memory must take place through the body or not at all, must feel as if it originates there. How does a modern person do such work, especially in English translation? In the second-to-last section’s opening poem, “Degenerate Art,” a crowd of visual images surfaces as a suggestion:

One day roan horses are running
The next day they turn blue in the closet
Under a scarlet roof, sheep graze in the bridal chamber
Lovers kiss under the many moons
Her painted blouse, her carmine mouth
The body strung together
He sees we see through to raw red
Under the plumage, under the linen hat
A dangerous man, half eaten
His head smokes like a chimney

One day lawn and peonies
The next, exile, like all the others

In her sharp lens, visual images—here pulled from the 1937 exhibit curated to showcase works that "insulted German feeling," which featured the likes of Klee, Chagall, and Kandinsky—provide an alternate avenue to reconstructing and revising a memory narrative. In the poem, Sharkey lets them function like storyboards, connecting disparate scenes. Images also help to compose the numbed and traumatized body ("He sees we see through to raw red / Under the plumage" and "The body strung together"). In the poems that follow this one Sharkey's evocation of the visual image proceeds to do almost everything but document: images communicate another artist's efforts to transmit horror ("The mother's dressed her in normalcy.... But the eyes will be white, there is nothing for it. / I lay on paint until she is blinded"), the Nazi party's objections to confiscated works by modernist masters ("The face confused natural form"), and the uses of art in captivity ("A near-invisible witness / stealing the souls of collaborators... / sketching the writers to perpetuate them..."). In these poems, Sharkey is at her best, setting the brutal stage for her unlikely efforts at conjuring the world and voices of the dead writers who guide her.

When she does speak through them, as she does in "Old World," a poem "in conversation with Peretz Markish," and "Something We Might Give," the volume's last poem, "in conversation with Abraham Sutzkever," she straddles a space between inventing and remembering. "Sounds cross through the thin green curtain: courtyard of cobblers, minyan of thieves / My three brothers, buttering their lips with the alphabet." This combination, of course, is more often known as fiction, but as Sharkey generates characters from Sutzkever, Markish, and others she lets them interject with their own language (in translation) and she speaks back. The voice she provides for them at times blends with her own: "At night I listen for them / Slicing black bread with a merciful knife / Their thirty fingers
drumming on the table / Turning the walls to text while history compels them... / What shall I do with so much memory."

What, indeed? In “Something We Might Give,” Sharkey again looks for a mandate, for what the surviving generation ought to carry forward, and how. From here on, all knowledge is fragmented, all survival is unlikely: “What joy in a stone here, a skeleton stone / A satchel, a compact, two small gold earrings / Scavengers piece the question together.” The collection nearly ends on an answer taken from a speech by Paul Celan: *For there remained amid these losses this one thing: language.* But as Sharkey writes earlier, the memory-keeper’s problem is that language is also part of the loss: “The tongue complicit: cleansed, denuded.” What to do with memory, then? Speak it, write it. And Sharkey does, having the last word and perhaps the words beyond that, as the poets would have wished.

*Leah Falk*

**Work Cited**

EVERYTHING IS IN THE LANGUAGE


The main drive behind a documentary poetics is the notion that social or political context drawn from found sources is as valuable and interesting as the lyric or narrative voice. Not all documentary poetics constructs itself solely from found text (such as that written by Mark Nowak or Susan Howe, to give two aesthetically divergent examples); some, like that in recent books by Martha Collins, uses historical documents to construct a lyric voice. Layli Long Soldier’s approach in *Whereas* is somewhat different. This book combines lyric poems, experimental language-based approaches, historical documents—both original and rewritten—and essay and diary-like reflections on history, culture and personal experience.

In an essay about recent poetry, Lisa Russ Spaar wrote about political poems of the 70s and 80s, “Most of the poems in these collections—with their fierce indictments of war, racism, prejudice, gender bias, the travesty of the federal government’s treatment of Native Americans, and ecological disaster—still ‘looked,’ for the most part, like lyric poetry,” while later claiming that most recent political poetry “is ‘hybrid’ in its lyricism, mixing fragments, passages of fully justified prose, lists, borrowed text, erasure, epistle, and so forth, as though the United States has become too fractured and manifold to be contained in any traditional lyric.” Spaar cites, among other books, C.D. Wright’s *One Big Self*, Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen*, and Solmaz Sharif’s *Look.*

The first half of *Whereas* is comprised of several long poems exploring Lakota language as well as a few short lyrics and a long prose narrative poem about 38 Lakota men executed by Abraham Lincoln in 1862 for an insurrection. The second half is a single long poem written as a response to the 2009 Congressional Resolution of Apology to Native Americans, a document that was never publicly signed nor presented to Native leaders or governments and includes in it text declaring that nothing in it legally supports or settles any claim by Native people or governments against the United States. History then is not only at the mercy of language but it must remain
in a condition of permanent flux because of the institutionalized indeterminacy of the language of the "apology."

In the early poem "He Sâpa," Long Soldier uses an exploration of the mistranslation of the Lakota word for "mountain" as the word "hill" in the place name for the Black Hills as a way of pointing out the ways that language and (mis)translation were used as part of the American colonial enterprise during the Western expansion. Later still she explores the way that language betrays its own physical realities: "I have always wanted opaque to mean see-through, transparent... O:open / P:soft / A:airplane or directional flight / K:cut through—translating to that which is or allows air, airy, penetrating light, transparency." The need for the poet to identify a word with its opposite has an ominous echo against the backdrop of treaty abrogations and betrayals of the spirit and the letter of legal agreements by the US government. "I negotiate instinct when a word of lightful meaning flips under/buries me in the work of blankets," she goes on to say.

Language starts acting in the world in the etymologies and grammars Long Soldier explores in the poems that follow, and it's not even "poetry" that drives her impulse. In fact, in the long prose poem "38," which closes out the first section, she writes, "You may like to know, I do not consider this a 'creative piece'; and later, "I do not regard this as a poem of great imagination or a work of fiction. // Also, historical events will not be dramatized for an 'interesting' read." In the account that follows Long Soldier illuminates the history of the Dakota 38, the insurrection, its roots and outcomes and the commemoration of it by the Native people each year.

Grasses appear and reappear in the book, as do waters, the treaty lands and the people who lived and still live there. Always Long Soldier moves away from adornment and toward plain speech, and always she wants to unearth the meaning behind the words. "Minnesota," she tells us, "comes from mni, which means water, and sota, which means turbid. Synonyms for turbid include muddy, unclear, cloudy, confused and smoky. Everything is in the language we use. For example, a treaty is, essentially, a contract between two sovereign nations."
The fact that language is recognized here as a porous thing, and the treaties themselves traveled back and forth across the agreements previously made the same way the borders of the original North American nations continued to move in flux with the needs—mineral, political and economic—of the American government, further complicates the question of what we call “documentary poetics,” because here what is being documented is the vexed nature of land, sound, language, history and geography of the so-called “Indian,” and of course the nature of the documents themselves.

The public and the private intersect in the Indian body itself, as Long Soldier discusses in the opening preamble of the long poem “Whereas”:

I am a citizen of the United States and an enrolled member of the Oglala Sioux Tribe, meaning I am a citizen of the Oglala Lakota Nation—and in this dual citizenship, I must work, I must eat, I must art, I must mother, I must friend, I must listen, I must observe, constantly I must live.

The position of a division of awareness or existence, mediated by history, language and geography, may be the thing that haunts and/or makes impossible the notion of a “singular” lyric voice of earlier political poetry that Spaar discusses. After all, Long Soldier’s main documentary strategy here is not utilizing the found text of the Congressional Resolution but rather re-writing it, rewiring it, trying to rescue from it a personal and authentic experience. “If I’m transformed by language,” the poet declares, “I am often / crouched in footnote or blazing in title.” She asks—and as Gertrude Stein does, she asks without a question mark to delineate the asking—“Where in the body do I begin.”

Erasure, rewriting, footnoting, marginal notes and double exposures are all strategies utilized in the pages that follow. The Resolution is parsed, pulled apart, quoted, misquoted and reflected upon in an act of poetic recovery that mirrors some of the language reclamation projects that are being explored—both artistically and actually—by some of Long Soldier’s fellow Native poets including Natalie Diaz, Joan Naviyuk Kane, Ofelia Zepeda and dg nanouk okpik.
The historical documents of the treaties and the contemporary document of the Congressional Resolution both serve to delineate and fix meaning (or, in the case of the Resolution, “unfix” meaning) in time and space. The movement to prevent the building of the Dakota Pipeline on Lakota treaty land became just the latest example of Native people attempting to describe and document their own physical parameters against the political and economic interests of the US government. “Place” for the average American, whether urban or suburban, is a standardized space, and so it became hard for American audiences (viewing and reading about the protests from a great remove) to relate to the claiming of a physical space as “sacred” or requiring it to be removed from consideration for standard quotidian use (such as laying a pipeline.) Franco Berardi writes of the standardization of space that such an anonymous sense of place or space “leads to the obliteration of the singular relation between the individual’s mind-eye-body complex and the space around it.” He goes on to describe the standardization of territory aimed at “increasing the productivity...and facilitating transportation...has erased the marks of the historical past and, generally, those signs that have been ingrained with emotional memories” (18). Long Soldier’s poetry is an attempt at moving back into the past and reconfiguring some of those erasures. Her travel to Standing Rock and engagement with the protests and protesters there is a move in a sense against the standardization of space, language and history.

It’s not by coincidence that most Americans experienced the events of Standing Rock at a remove (I know I did) via their computer screens, nor a coincidence that many poets (including Long Soldier and Natalie Diaz, previously mentioned) joined the activists there. The unmooring of “space” engendered by the new information era and its attendant concept of (endless) “cyberspace” is accompanied by what Berardi terms “cybertime”—an instantaneous experience of time, instantly present and instantly over—“a time of attention, which cannot be intensified beyond a certain point because of its physical, emotional and cultural limitations” (11).

The action of documentary poetics creates a pathway of negotiating and combating these impulses of the simultaneous erasure/confflation of both space and time. At the heart of Long Soldier’s pro-
ject is not solely the conflation of the private and the public, nor the reparation of rupture in time and place, but the gesture of sharing—that the construction of meaning must be undertaken by the reader. In fact the book contains a disclaimer of its own at the end, both in the form of a response Long Soldier makes to a fourteen-year-old girl who has posted on the internet and also in a formal disclaimer mimicking the language of the Congressional Resolution.

Her intention is for the book to act not merely as an artifact of language but of being-in-the-world. In 2010 Long Soldier participated in an art exhibit at the Pine Ridge Reservation where she created a jingle dress—garb for a traditional dance with metal pieces that make sounds when the dancer moves; Long Soldier constructed her dress out of coiled metal from Coca-Cola cans and bits of text on paper. *Whereas* is a gesture along the same lines as that dress—one built from pieces of the past but an intention toward creating a new future.

*Kazim Ali*

Works Cited


WHERE MY BODY FIRST ENTERS

Brian Teare, *The Empty Form Goes All the Way to Heaven* (Ah-sahta, 2015)

:: a color field  a sort of tea-colored leakage  a headache  ::

:: the texture of paper bag and over it a grid in graphite fitted  ::

:: to a grid of white pencil  an almost subliminal flickering  ::

:: where my body first enters the picture  the inscription  ::

:: of conflicting readings...

So opens the first poem of *The Empty Form Goes All the Way to Heaven*, in which Brian Teare meditates on illness and uncertainty, peering through the grid of Agnes Martin’s work to find a space where the body in its illness can speak. Throughout this collection, there is a tension, “an almost subliminal flickering” of two things fitted to each other—ideal (healthy) body and real (sick) body, body and mind, the abstract and its manifestation—that never quite line up. For Teare, his body experiencing crippling illness becomes a disturbance, “a knot / between the warp and weft of observed surface words” that ripples the absolute, the physical gesture (“inscription”) that precipitates “conflicting readings,” “[stops] the work of the lyric” and “[stops] the mortal thought.”

The collection uses the work of Agnes Martin, her famous grids and graphite gestures as well as her gnomic writings, as the frame through which to read a body escaping legibility, to search for new reading practices and so a new body. In the Preface Teare writes of encountering Martin’s writings, having been unfamiliar with her art, during the course of a serious illness and having found solace in her words, the words of a woman who had famously retreated from the world and even from speaking. These words of hers come to be the titles of his own pieces in this book, leading each piece like a sage aphorism. As for so many others before, Martin became for Teare a
kind of hermit teacher to seek out, particularly in the Taoist or Buddhist sense (these two traditions appear throughout and form a spiritual grid upon which Teare’s relation to Martin and his illness is mapped). And just like a seeker of a mountain sage, Teare sat at the feet of Martin’s words and art to learn how to live in an ill body until the teacher was no longer necessary. Teare, like others, “did not wish to disappoint her by falling short of the ideals she and her art embodied with admirable and rigorous purity. Alone with her work for many years, I felt the same way until I didn’t.”

Teare’s work has always been carefully tailored on the physical space of the page. This collection is no different in its care (he writes of creating these poems with ruler and pencil in hand) but the form feels like quite a departure/evolution for Teare. The careful “work of the lyric” we can read in previous collections is here abandoned for a collage-like approach where discreet condensed moments inhabit the page in wary relationship with each other, sometimes merging cleverly into new wholes and sometimes abrasively resisting the convenience of being read together. Like an illness, each poem’s pieces function like symptoms. They cannot be ignored but in relation to each other they can confound, demanding in each instance a new reading strategy, a new diagnosis. Here, early in the collection in “There are two endless directions. In and out,” the reader is tutored in how to read this book:

afternoon

cloud cover
alters symmetry’s

brief virtue

illness posits

its question
will mind or body
two late T’ang dishes

one flowering
one empty

be the first
fugitive clarity
of a day’s gray
scale study

Two discreet moments are to be read separately, but then also together (or the other way around), and each re-reading develops an accumulated meaning. Yet Teare also creates poems where such easy and pleasurable meaning-making is frustrated. In “With these rectangles, I didn’t know at the time exactly why,’’ we read

old tin tub
soapy water
tilts over
its rim hits linoleum

nice image

for nausea
washing hot

one end
to the other
    I remember

my mother
poured warm
water over

how small
my body
has become
again

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Here there is no easy reading through, though “nice image linoleum” and “I remember again” do tease with seeming linkage. The not-knowing of the title becomes a readerly state that Teare provokes repeatedly by changing the rules of the game as the poems’ parts cycle and orbit around each other, sometimes merging, sometimes at odds, sometimes merely proximate. Each poem becomes a new moment of attention the reader must attend to, a new state of confusion before baffling symptoms.

In this ill text, the doctor becomes the expert reader, able to assemble discreet symptoms into legible sentences, legible bodies. In “There is the work in our minds, the work in our hands, and the work as a result,” Teare writes, to be “not yet diagnosed” is to be “without a language for it.” The assemblage of a diagnosis by a doctor is “a narrative I watch” in the “clinic a proscenium” that “I return to as an audience / to watch my body / symptoms a form / of prosthesis / performed to help me / to know my part.” And yet, far from being a savior, the doctor (and in a larger sense, any reading practice that confidently and with ease assembles meaning) feels like an oppressive director, forcing symptoms onto the body like prostheses and rendering Teare a mere passive witness to his own illness.

As this collection of (un)readable bodies progresses, other figures emerge. The healer, who uses acupuncture and other non-allopathic treatments to work with Teare’s body, and the teacher, Agnes Martin herself, whose words and paintings have been guiding Teare through coming to terms with illness, become two counterpoints against the doctor’s stage-directing in the depressing public clinic. The healer “makes / my skull a page / scored with folds / to teach it to open / thinking’s screen.” Here there is no reading at all, merely the opening of the page. The teacher, Martin, explains that “people are just like the grass... a blade of grass doesn’t amount to much” and in the following poem another teacher, Buddha, appears and explains that “even if you are a prisoner... when you rise and stand up / you are only that standing up.” The teachers’ advice is one of profound egolessness, a kind of medicine to the obsessive symptom-reading of the doctor.

In this shift, there seems to be an evolution in the larger trajectory of Teare’s work. There has often been an elegiac thread through
his work, particularly in *Pleasure* and *Companion Grasses*, that has worked in a Christian framework to imagine new and whole (and saved) bodies emerging out of fragmentation. In *Pleasure*, Teare employs a zipper technique in which two poems, each complete on their own, merge together into a new and (more) whole body, a striking image for communion, spiritual or otherwise. Here, however, he resists any such easy salvation. The lesson of his teachers, the illness foremost among them, is to rest, open, release into the body just as it is, to be “only that standing up.” In the final poems of the book, Teare draws into sharper relief the differences between his Christian upbringing and the teachings his illness have given him. Teare writes that “for five years I wait for pain / to make meaning of my life” and that “Book I of *De Imitatione Christi* says / it is good for man to suffer” while “the teacher Buddha says the practitioner agitated by thoughts... makes stronger their bondage to suffering and the sting of becoming.” By the final poem of the book, “When you come to the end of all ideas you will have no definitive knowledge on the subject,” he writes:

and then I remember I thought I fell ill
as though health were a kind of eden

Instead he concludes that

it’s hard not to see clouds when looking
at clouds untitled like everything else
it took a long time to arrive at being ill
without falling I’m happy I really like
this painting there’s no salvation in it

In letting go of tight lyrical devices, Teare has found a space of ease where poetic moments can inhabit the page without having to merge into perfection. Clouds can simply be clouds, amorphous, changing, near or far from each other. *The Empty Form Goes All the Way to Heaven*, in its title, evokes what in the end becomes the most significant tension of the collection, that between salvation and emptiness. What is Martin’s grid that Teare has been examining all this time? It
is certainly not a ladder to climb up to heaven (or to fall down into illness), nor is it necessarily a barrier to cross in either of those "two endless directions. In and out." Perhaps it is just this body, not a new one or a healthy one—just this body at ease, porous and infinite.

Marco Wilkinson
LAUNCHING THE LIFEBOAT

Wayne Miller, *Post-* (Milkweed, 2016)

Although a single speaker appears in some of the poems in Wayne Miller’s breathtaking *Post-*, it’s primarily a book about “us” and our world, in which a superabundance of communication somehow fails to connect. A creeping tide of divisiveness and social decay becomes apparent, but it’s as if we’re not listening to ourselves talk about our problems. We have, of course, that famous human skill of adjusting, accommodating, inuring ourselves. Why worry? After all, “the world [is] made of meals, nice liquor, and music” and “the dogwoods are tousled with blooms, / big smudges of white.”

Pronouns are, of course, flags of this division. In “Consumers in Rowboat,” from which the above images are quoted, the reader might find the world of music and blossoming trees attractive, might identify with the two who “have fallen in love,” who “work in the yard” and “read books / late at night in their bed.” But about a third of the way into the poem, a “we” is introduced, and a dichotomy emerges. We find “they don’t speak of themselves in the way that we do.” Worse, a few stanzas later, “they’re speaking and speaking // by choosing their markets.” The lines remind me of the Supreme Court decision in 2010 expanding the concept that money is speech and therefore protected. Money talks, more loudly and crudely than ever. In the poem, we are all implicated; not only is there no escaping the culture of money, we’re active participants:

We’re here to remind them:
be good consumers,

remember your debt, the economy needs you—
you’ll carry it forward
like a boat to the water...

Layers of irony contribute to the effectiveness here: the reader recoils at the message she is charged with delivering—encouragement to “be good consumers”—and at the same time the poem’s overall
satiric tone snaps into focus. Those are not simply blooming trees, they are window-dressings for a slow-motion disaster. For while the water is as pretty ("the light-dappled surface") as the dogwoods at the beginning of the poem, human connections are stretched to the limit and beyond. The consumers row away from us, and in the last two lines "their movements" become "too distant from us to have meaning."

Another memorable poem, "The People's History," opens with these lines:

The People moved up the street in a long column—
like a machine boring a tunnel. They sang
the People's songs, they chanted the People's slogans:
We are the People, not the engines of the city;
we, the People, will not be denied.

Then the People
descended upon the People, swinging hardwood batons heavy with the weight of the People's intent.

This is not the more perfect Union nor the domestic Tranquility of our history books. The ingenious use of "People" to refer to both demonstrators and police makes its ironic point about social unity, and then the poem moves in a direction similar to that of "Consumers in Rowboat": some People try to distinguish themselves from others in a dialogue that closes the poem. The last exchange begins, "Excuse me, / but aren't we, too, the People? Yes, but wiser." In this case, however, the distinction fails: we are all in the same boat, so to speak, as the last line makes clear: "But sir, how can the surface be different from the sea?"

"Some Notes on Human Relations" could be the title of a psychology term paper, but here it is another poem that describes a population at war with itself. Like "The People's History," it preserves the essential, deliberate "confusion" about where the lines are drawn, but there are definitely sides to this conflict, too, and they are more violently defined:

We pulled the rope around the neck
to squeeze the mind

Then we had no mind...

We pulled the handle
so the blade’s weight split the breath

Our breath was split

The disjunction we saw between “us” and “them” in “Consumers in Rowboat” turns out to be relatively kind—it is, after all, economic. Physical violence escalates in “Some Notes,” and we are well beyond the wax bullets and crowd-control dogs of “The People’s History.” Now the nearly exclusive “we” has visited upon it two and a half pages of murder and torture. The poem’s inhumanity, like the real thing, rationalizes itself: “We said repeatedly: / This is what the Father wants.” The Father can be taken as a religious or a political figure, but the statement is chilling in either case. While “The People’s History” ends with a question, which offers some hope for change or at least reconsideration, this poem’s bleak view of human brutality ends in an image of unblinking indifference: “We sat on both sides of the table.”

The life we call “normal” does go on. Along with poems of collective disaster, there are those in which an individual speaker picnics with a pregnant woman, rides a train, reads to a young daughter or imagines her sleep, all of which broadens the scope and tone of Post-. We even encounter moments of quiet humor, as in the opening of “21st Century Museum”:

The people enter
but do not know they’ve entered.

The café, too, is an exhibit.

“On Language,” with its understated wit, is another poem that ex-
plores territory beyond social discord. It may be a meditation on language, but as with many meditations (and quite a few of Wayne Miller’s poems, as I’ll discuss shortly) it expands when read as metaphor, opening itself to being about work, relationships, and life in general. The poem begins its series of short sections with these two:

1
There were only certain stones we could step on to cross the river.

2
The stones we could step on to cross the river were not certain.

The simplicity of language is ironic, given the title and the speaker’s growing awareness of various unlikely events that complicate the task of crossing. An attractive village sits on the other side of the river, but it moves “impossibly” to whichever bank the speaker has not reached. The poem is engaging—delightful, in fact—in its surreal developments and resulting philosophical conclusions, such as “Looking, too, was a kind of crossing.”

Five individual-speaker poems interspersed throughout the book are titled “Post-Elegy,” and in a note Miller tells us they are “for—though not necessarily about—my father.” In the first two, the speaker deals with practicalities that follow a plane crash: finding a victim’s car (“you drove the rows of the lot / while I pushed the panic button on the fob”) and disposing (or not) of the remains (“For four years, I kept your ashes in the trunk of my car—”). The later three post-elegies use extended metaphor.

One begins like this:

In the image that recurred—of a house catching fire in the middle of a hard freeze—I was sure you were the house.
Now I see
you were the fire filling the house
with motion, your light opening
the rooms from the dark,
paling the oak's curve
like the inside of a forearm.

The first stanza establishes that the subject here is a recurring image, not an actual house fire, and the second stanza reinforces—with the use of “you”—that the burning house is a metaphor in which house (or fire—or, as the poem discovers, both) is the vehicle and the “you” the tenor. But the fire is so deeply imagined, so convincing an experience for the reader, that it’s easy to slip into its “reality.”

When the trucks arrived
scraping their sirens
up the line of porches,
you were already
feathering at the soffits.

The men locked their hoses
to the vast reservoir
floating beneath the city
and pushed that weight against you
until at last you were swallowed
back into the blackened lath.

This poem does what poetry is meant to do: imagine and articulate something so compellingly that it inhabits the minds of readers. It's a joy to find a poet reveling in accuracy and beauty of language the way Miller does here (and in many places in this excellent book). “Pushed that weight against you” and “feathering at the soffits” are two superb moments.

In some poems the signal of extended metaphor is slighter. A look at “Allegory of the Boat,” for instance, makes it clear that the title provides the only nudge that we are to read this narration on any
other level than one of realism. A young speaker and "Sis" see a light at sea, at night, and with much excitement imagine the crew and its conversation, expecting to be able to meet them the next day at the dock. The fourth section opens:

and then the light was gone.

Downstairs, Mom and her friends tinked their cups, a record was playing, I stared into the night, determined

to pull the light back into being, but—nothing. All that time it seems the boat had been sinking.

All that time
we'd imagined them trimming the sheets,
sipping their rum, talking of us,

they'd been crying out for themselves, bailing water as it rose around their vision of land (our land) that had almost saved them.

Post- is a dark book. The plane has gone down. People are being attacked by People, rioting rules the streets, bombs are reported, a shooter is at large. That these disasters (or near-disasters: the bomb was a hoax) are somehow absorbed into the continuity of everyday life gives us a modicum of comfort. Perhaps we should be more grateful that the youths who are "smashing plate windows to road salt" in "The Next Generation" rush home in time to watch themselves on TV newscasts. Or perhaps we should look for beauty wherever we can find it, as when the poet tells us that "butterflies / will sip blood from an open wound."

These are extraordinary poems, chilling in their incisive witnessing of social issues, wise in their perceptiveness about what it is to be human. Perhaps, thinking of the speaker in "Allegory of the
Boat” who asked “Now what could we have done?” we can ask, What can we do? One of the answers is to launch the lifeboat of poetry.

Pamela Alexander
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