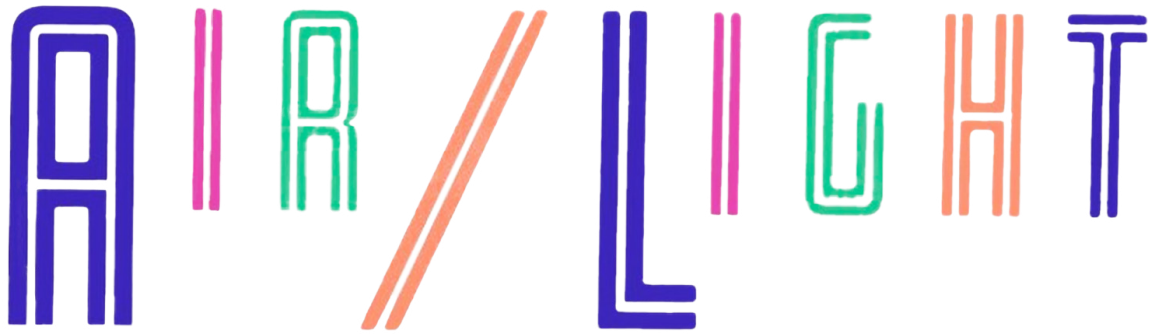


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Air/Light is an online literary journal published by the English Department at the University of Southern California. We showcase both traditional and innovative works. We are firmly of California and the West Coast — the occupied land of the Tongva in Los Angeles, where we are based, and those of other indigenous peoples of the Americas — but also national, international. We mean to look out expansively from this place rather than to gaze narrowly back at it, to express a West Coast aesthetic, a West Coast sensibility, and direct that lens onto the world.

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FROM THE EDITOR

Hurriquake

David L. Ulin

Where were you for the hurriquake? I know, I know: Like all portmanteaus, it's a contrivance, but that seems to me to be the point. If I've long imagined Southern California as apocalypse central, a landscape defined by the most elemental processes—including, or especially, those of its own destruction—it's also the case that until Hurricane Hilary was interrupted or (more accurately) punctuated by a 5.1 earthquake in Ojai, I had never experienced two overlapping disturbances at once. It helped that where I live, in the Mid-City flats, neither was remotely catastrophic. At the moment of the earthquake, my neighborhood was being bathed by a warm drizzle. The air was still, without even a breeze. Later, we would be hit with wind and water. By that point, however, the temblor, which I had felt only as a single short sharp jolt, had already receded from my mind.

What interests me about hurriquake is the speed of the coinage; on the social media site formerly known as Twitter, it was trending within a few minutes of having taken place. On the one hand, that suggests our alacrity at making phrases, our desire to frame or reframe, to use language as a container, if you will. At the same time, I want to argue, there is more at stake here, for language, as anyone who works with it will recognize, can be imprecise. The words we use, the sounds and shapes they make, are attempts at representation. They can only do so much.

I say this not to dwell on the limitations but to embrace them. It is there the roots of creativity reside. If we don't have a word for something, we invent it. If the existing terminology doesn't illuminate our experience, we improvise. Read through such a lens, a neologism such as hurriquake becomes

an act of expression, a reminder that despite its margins, language remains fluid and alive.

Something similar might be said in regard to this issue of *Air/Light*, which offers its own series of reframings. Fiction, essays, interviews, poetry—all of them in conversation with the circumstances they aspire to evoke. In the work gathered here, you will find a wide array of perspectives and phrasings. You will find writers recording, even actively remaking, what they see. The same sort of process, of course, also happens (it must) with nature. Earthquakes and hurricanes as editorial mechanisms, in other words. And why not? The world is always writing and rewriting itself, just as we are. The world is always making itself anew.

I rode out the afternoon of the hurriquake sitting at my desk, much as I am doing now. I kept looking out the window to see if anything was happening. I felt a delicious, if unsettling, anticipation, much as I do when I write and read. This is the sensation art is trying to provoke, isn't it? The delirious uncertainty of being alive? All we know, all we can ever know, is our experience of the moment.

That is what Issue 8 of *Air/Light* seeks to explore.

POETRY

“Falling Blue, 1963,” “Untitled # 10, 1990,” “Grey Stone II, 1961”

Victoria Chang

Falling Blue, 1963

Someone wrote that Agnes made small simple repetitive gestures that led to something larger. This resembles a life, each day a mark on canvas. Or the way a prisoner might carve each day on a wall. On some days, I think about putting down the brush. On other days, I want so badly to finish so I can see the complete piece. No one tells you that you'll never see your own painting because you'll be dead. What we make can only be seen by someone else. What can I learn from these other paintings? Besides that a man can never see us because he is an inch from his own canvas. Besides that each line does eventually end but will always be unfinished. It's three a.m. and a small light shines on my paper. A dog snores on my dead mother's green chair. At this hour, a line is the thing with a human face. There is no hope in shapes. There is just the line and the sound of its scratch as it crosses out memory. Perhaps it's not memory we're trying to capture, but everything instead of it.

Untitled #10, 1990

In the film, Agnes paints a red band vertically and the paint drips. She catches it with her brush and smooths the drips out into the band. I shiver as her brush passes over my brain, flattening my thinking.

Agnes once said that *there are so many people who don't know what they*

want....that's the only thing you have to know—exactly what you want. Agnes wanted 11 lines per group or 44 lines, some lines darker in some areas than others. She forgave the lines for their thinning out. Their transgressions have something to do with ego. She said the

worst thing you can think about when you're working is yourself. In the midst of depression, there is even a difference between I and me. Tears never come out, but drip within the body. A small river forms and things begin to feel damp. The animals gather

around. All day and night, a cricket inside my body rubs one wing with the underside of the other wing. I've never seen the cricket, but when it finally stops rubbing, I can still hear it. My error was to become what I wanted to be, not its tone. The words, not their cutting.

Grey Stone II, 1961

I buy tears at the store for \$11.99. When I tilt my head back to drop them in, I see the bottom of God's shoes. I'm surprised by how dirty and used they are. Lately I see them pacing above me more and more. I can't tell if God is here to get me, help me, or scold me. Agnes used a pencil to score her painting, as if to fix something. Very few things never need surgery. The sky, rain, the word happy. I hold so tightly on to my pencil that I take it to sleep with me. On some days, I see a flash of light from my hand and fear it is happiness. I wave my hand wildly into the wind until the yellow pencil reappears. Yesterday, after seeing an Agnes painting in person, I decided to cut off my hand to save the pencil. It turns out my blood is white, the texture of gesso, and the pencil wasn't the one that needed saving. What happens when you're not supposed to be depressed? When depression becomes the form of your happiness? When your happiness is so sure of itself that it leaves only its form behind?

Community Is My Poetics: the 2023 Chowdhury Prize in Literature Acceptance Speech

Victoria Chang

I am humbled and honored to be here today to accept the 2023 Chowdhury Prize in Literature. I want to thank the USC Dornsife College of Letters, Arts, and Sciences, Kenyon College, the Subir and Malini Chowdhury Foundation, and the jurors, all tremendous artists, educators, and literary citizens. I know how difficult it is to select just one person for an award like this, and to be that last person standing here in front of you is pretty overwhelming. I want to thank you for creating such an award and making the space for someone like me to receive it.

I grew up in a family where there were books everywhere, but they were either Chinese books, brown *Encyclopedia Britannicas*, or dictionaries. My parents were part of a wave of Taiwanese immigrants who came to America in the 1960s, mostly people with technical backgrounds. I never thought about this much until after my mother passed away, but I'm a bit in awe of the fact that she left China during the Civil War, and then left Taiwan in her early 20s. Before she made it to 25 years of age, she had already left two homelands to come here.

I'm grateful for the support of my late parents, obviously, but since literature wasn't a part of my upbringing, it was actually other people—the teach-

ers—who showed me that reading mattered, that there were other books beyond encyclopedias, and that poetry could change the world. I never imagined that I would be here today, standing in front of you, as a writer, as a poet, as a literary person.

I was a quiet kid who spent most of my childhood overwhelmed by the world and the people around me. Poetry became a way to make sense of a largely racist and misogynist landscape. From Mrs. Kilpula in first grade, who taught me what a poem was; to Mrs. Leinweber in high school, who used to prance around the room in her lacey shirts, pencil skirts, and ballet flats reciting Emily Dickinson; to Mr. Corcoran, who stood in front of the classroom in his tweed blazers and read us short stories—these teachers were the ones who taught me about poetry, about literature.

We are in a difficult time in this country, at this moment. I wonder if everyone before us has said the same thing, which makes me wonder if it's not the moment that is difficult, but it's us, human beings, who are difficult.

Because it is what I do, I believe that writing can change the world, can make a difference. It was Audre Lorde who said, "Poetry is not only a dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before." I think poetry and writing aren't just about memory, about our private and/or public pasts, to paraphrase Annie Dillard, but about mapping out the imagination of the future.

I hope to be able to continue to stand, humbled in front of language, at the foot of a large letter, looking up, unable to see what lies ahead, but having the conviction and hope to climb that letter to see the world widen into an imaginative future. I am excited to be able to lower myself to the ground, faced with the next giant letter, astonished to be climbing on the immediacy of language.

I'll end here with another quote from Lorde: "Without community, there is no liberation." I often say myself that community is my poetics. As writers, we aren't alone, or isolated. We are more effective when we are a part of a community working together to make the change that this world so desperately always needs. I think writers and artists aren't just writing books for our own egos, but we're changing the imagination of the future, changing the narrative of our society, one word at a time.

Thank you.

Attuning Yourself to Yourself: A Conversation with Victoria Chang

Victoria Chang

*Editor's note: On April 18, 2023, poet Victoria Chang was awarded the second annual Chowdhury Prize in Literature in a ceremony on the campus of the University of Southern California. The prize is intended for mid-career writers, as much for what they might do in the future as for what they have produced in the past. In that sense, Chang is an ideal recipient. Edgy, creative, always looking for a new approach, a new treatment of both form and content, she published her first collection of poetry, *Circle*, in 2005, but came into her own with *The Boss*, which McSweeney's published in 2013. There, she developed the metaphor of the boss—be it employer or child or parent—to examine questions of power and commitment. Such an approach seems a necessary precursor to her 2020 book *OBIT*, inspired in part by the death of her mother, in which Chang explodes poetic form entirely to excavate both private and public grief. In these pages, mourning is a state of being, one that often emerges long before it is recognized as such. "My Mother's Teeth," she writes, "—died twice, once in 1965, all pulled out from gum disease. Once again on August 3, 2015."*

*What Chang is tracing here is connection—both the necessity of it and its ultimate inability to console. She is not looking for easy answers ... or, for that matter, any answers at all. Instead, she means to occupy emotion, in all its inchoate messiness. A similar motivation informs her 2021 collection of "letters," *Dear Memory*, which blends epistolary prose with precise visu-*

al collages to occupy a space in which, as the poet tells us, “memory isn’t something that blooms, but something that bleeds internally, something to be stopped.”

*Most recently, Chang has published *The Trees Witness Everything*, a collection built around the Japanese form of the waka; it is a spare and moving work. Air/Light asked Matthew Zapruder to be in conversation with her for this issue; what follows is their back and forth.*

Matthew Zapruder: I think you and I met after your book *The Boss* came out with McSweeney’s. If I am remembering correctly, we did a few readings together in San Francisco, including a lunch time reading at Twitter headquarters downtown. I adored that book. Its form, incantatory, and fugue-like, yet also somehow nimble and funny, felt completely original to me, and also timely. Its subject, which was treated with humor and compassion, seemed to be the sorrows of business, commerce, late capitalism, filtered through abstract and mythic representations that populate American corporate spaces, like “the boss” and “workers” and “Bens and Tims.” I want to start by asking about that book, whether it felt like a change or move forward for you. And do you remember that reading at Twitter, or am I hallucinating?

Victoria Chang: That was a long time ago. I remember being nervous to read at Twitter and wondering why I had agreed to do that, but I was relieved that it was in a small conference room with a handful of employees and not a whole auditorium of people. *The Boss* was a big change for me in terms of writing style, but it was even more of a change for me to stop mimicking other poets and just write me, myself. Before that, I thought I was supposed to write like everyone else so I mimicked other poets as a way to learn how. It was completely the wrong approach to art-making and poem-making. My mimicking was really just a lack of self-confidence. Once I grew more comfortable, I found that train and never got off.

I think being an original artist is just a matter of attuning yourself to yourself, if that makes sense. I’ve learned over the years that so much of art-making is deep listening to myself, my own voice. I am my own best company. I cannot wait to be in conversation with my own mind. That sounds strange, but especially today, I yearn for that quiet self-contemplation.

What did you think of that Twitter reading?

MZ: I remember being perplexed. I had never been inside one of those social media company buildings. Twitter headquarters is in the Tenderloin, so it is surrounded by a lot of human suffering, and also wonderful human life. You go inside and are immediately in a protected sterile environment where you can breathe completely sanitized air and only run into approved people. I remember they took us to the cafeteria after the reading and there was so much different stuff there, including a kombucha machine, before which I stood in bafflement. I found it quite distressing and horrifying because it just felt like such an obvious manifestation of privilege and curated isolation. People were literally starving only a few hundred feet away. And being aware of that did no good; it was just a terrible feeling that went nowhere. It also seemed like the final verdict on all the values I had as a card-carrying member of Generation X. Welcome to the future, where it is totally cool to sell out.

Many pixels of writing have already been expended lamenting the death of the private self as a result of social media. I love your idea that art-making, presumably as opposed to activity on social media, is deep listening to oneself. I agree that your poems feel like a space where a person is talking and listening to herself, about things that matter in the deepest ways. In *Barbie Chang*, it had a lot to do with identity, and of course, *Obit* emerges from the losses of parents, which we all can relate to. So even though the books feel like they have a private voice, they are the farthest thing from solipsism I can imagine. Your poetic voice feels generous and honest and capacious, like it is reaching out to all humans. Paradoxically, social media turns everyone into a monster of solipsism, and the privacy of poetry has (or at least can have) the opposite effect, of opening us up to the world as we plunge through the portal of the private self in its encounter with language, and come out the other side.

It sounds like you experience that privacy, that listening only to oneself, as a relief. It also strikes me as being both utterly correct as a poetic approach, and completely unfashionable in our current cultural moment. Can we talk about how that works, practically for you? How do you do it? Do you have

thoughts about that paradox, and the relationship of the private and public voice to the reader, and how that might have changed for you over time? Also, do you remember what you ate for lunch at Twitter?

VC: I love your detailed memories of Twitter. I remember that “cafeteria” too, which seemed more like a buffet on a luxury cruise ship of decadence. I remember the table we sat at but don’t remember what I ate. I think I was too uncomfortable to eat for all sorts of reasons. It was a strange time in the Bay Area and I had already left for Southern California.

I think perhaps the public and the private are complicated for me. For my own poems and writing, I think the private is the public, meaning our own private individual experiences can reach people in ways we can’t imagine. When I’m writing, I’m only working from my own experience, but in the back of my head, I am trying to avoid solipsism. This is much harder (for all of us) to do than we think. I guess, for me, it’s no different than having a conversation. We’ve all been in those conversations where the person just talks about themselves. I’m not that kind of person. I’m very interested in the person I’m talking to. I think for better or worse, our poems have elements of our own personalities, if that makes sense. Hopefully, as we become better people, our poems will become better too, although this sounds like a ridiculous thing to say.

I suppose when people ask, *Do you think about your reader*, that in the past I might have said, *No*. But today, I think it’s much more nuanced. I consider my reader, meaning I am not just writing in a diary. How about you? I’d love to hear your thoughts on the public and the private in poem-making (note, I didn’t use versus—these are not polar opposites).

MZ: I think all language—every word really—has both a public and private aspect. Language is our shared wisdom, so poets can tap into it, like some deep underground river of history and knowledge, and draw things out (images, ideas, sensory impressions, connections, observations, single words) that in the new context of the poem explode with significance. So you don’t ever need to try to make poems relate to everyone’s experience. That’s inherent in the material. But there is a personal aspect to the use of any language as well, so a poem vibrates with that intimacy, if that is not too vague

a way to put it.

Does that sound right to you?

I think a place like Twitter flattens all language and turns every use of language, including questions, into a reductive statement. Does it feel that way to you? And how do you find a different use for language in your poetry? Like, how have you done that in the poems of *Obit* or *The Trees Witness Everything*, or how are you doing that right now in your newest poems, which are incredible, the ones about Agnes Martin?

VC: I like what you say about language being our shared wisdom, yet also how there's a personal aspect to the use of any language. I think both are true for me as a poet. I want to read poems that are alive, that ricochet, that vibrate. But I don't want to be in a vacuum, meaning I like to read poems (and try to write poems) that don't already know what they want to say before they've started.

Twitter is a tough place to be for me. I see its merits but I also find it to be toxic. The language can be reductive, which paradoxically leads to misunderstanding. I am not conflict-oriented so I just post things I read or post about events. I don't spend much time in that room because it doesn't necessarily bring me joy.

For me, language is malleable. It's flexible. Just as the mind is. So I like to ask my poems to tell me how the language should flex or where the poem should go. This is why I love associative poems because I love surprise in my life so I love surprise in poems. I'm interested in how to say something differently. I like to surprise myself while writing.

I like to have fun while I'm writing too. I give myself little things to do while writing or revising. Simple random things like: use lots of periods. Or vary your sentence lengths. Or use only monosyllabic words. Or end with a question mark. Or like in *The Trees Witness Everything*, count syllables. In my Agnes Martin poems, I was lucky and had a chance to use a new vocabulary of art in interesting ways. Even words like rectangle or line or grid or perception might not normally appear in my poems.

What about you? What kinds of things do you think about related to language while you are writing your poems?

MZ: Not to keep coming back to that reading at Twitter, but I just remembered something: as we walked into the main part of the building, there was a wall on which people could scrawl various phrases in chalk. It felt like looking at tiny flickers of individual thought before entering a space where that is no longer welcome. I remember looking at the writing on the wall, so to speak, and having the sad thought that despite the fact that these were expressions of individuality, none of the language was interesting or original. It felt like the sort of thing you would read on the side of the mug you get to use when you are a temp. Which just depressed me further.

To be fair, most of my daily thoughts are pretty boring, too. Sometimes I think people have it backwards. They think: I have all these interesting thoughts, let me write something so I can say them. But actually, maybe the best reason to write is because if you didn't, you wouldn't have many interesting thoughts at all. A poem is a place for me to be interesting, at least to myself. A form which begins to emerge and then be filled with thoughts that would not otherwise have arisen, or where the thoughts can stay stranger for longer than they would in more defined situations, like work or social media.

You call what you do listening to the poem, or looking for surprise, or variation, or the new. I would call it all those things too, and also I would use the archaic word beauty. Which is not the same as pretty or pleasing. Something closer to the sublime. I am looking for something that wrecks my complacency or despair. It can be the electric thrill of a single word, rare or common, that slots exactly into the moment of the poem. Or a weird metaphor, or a phrase that seems funny or exact. Or so many other things. Just some texture, some life.

Taylor Swift is currently on tour. By some estimates, every living organism on earth will have seen her in concert at least three times before it expires. There are people who play video games on the internet who are watched by millions of people as they slay adorably monstrous avatars. The number of

people who will read our poems during our lifetimes is fractional in relation. All true, and I don't care. What is wrong with me? I don't think poets should be famous, do you? What do you hope for, going forward, for your poetry?

VC: I feel like that visit to Twitter traumatized you. There's so much you talk about here. I tend to be both microscopic and way up in space so I sometimes think about what you're talking about in the bigger picture. I feel like I'm a combination of all the poetry movements before me in some way, a mishmash of the Romantics, Modernists, Postmodernists.

Maybe we all are to some extent. We live for such a short period of time and I don't think we truly understand that until we get older. But I feel that shortness now more than ever. On the whole idea of the "famous poet," honestly I don't think about these things much. People surely will disagree with me, but I'm most interested in the piece of art. If I've written a wonderful poem or book or collection of works throughout my life, my hope is that the work itself erases me, the poet. I think of myself as an electric wire, a conductor. The poem is electricity/electrons that flow or move through the conductor (me). I'm useful, necessary, but ultimately not the thing itself, the thing that is the most important, which is the electricity to turn on that light. To extend this metaphor likely too far, when the wire tries to be something else, such as the electricity, nothing works, the light doesn't go on.

I think there's a big difference between connection and fame. I also think no poet is entitled to either of these things. If my work connects with a reader, that's lovely and lucky. If it connects with a lot of readers, that's even luckier and also fateful. And there are also downsides to fame, lots of them (of which one is more people desiring your time, and sometimes getting angry if you can't give it to them). But in general, these aren't things I'm interested in as a poet. Other poets might be interested in these things and I support them in the pursuit of their dreams. But for me, I am most interested in wrestling with language. I'm interested in understanding myself in the short time I have on this planet. I don't know if I've always been like this, but I can't remember when I haven't felt these things this way.

When I was younger, I felt like I didn't understand a lot of things about language, about poems, about writing, about the writing life and world, and

maybe I had different beliefs, but that's to be expected. Most of us are more foolish when we're younger, wanting things that probably shouldn't matter. I'm still learning how to be generous with myself and my own foolishness. There's also a kind of unfettered beauty to foolishness.

I have trouble making larger proclamations about anything because I really do think people should be free to do and believe what they want (within reason, of course). Some people's fates are to be famous. Some people want to be famous. Some people use that desire to drive them to write. I respect them because that is who they are. We can't ask them to be anything other than that. But that is simply not me. And I do hope people respect me for who I am too, give me grace for my mistakes, as I continue to change and grow.

As for hopes for my own poems? I don't know. I get bogged down in the thing(s) I'm working on/obsessing about so I'm the kind of writer that is always looking at my feet (not socially—I'm quite social—but writing-wise). I'm happiest when I'm looking at my own feet. I don't have large dreams for my poems. I just hope that I can live alongside them, hold their hands, more like a companion to my life.

I have more hopes for myself as a person—I hope to live my life with integrity, honesty, authenticity, care, generosity, kindness. I get just as annoyed as the next person, but in my short time on this planet, I have tried and will continue to try my best to live my life with goodness. Poets, writers, and artists definitely test my boundaries (and patience), but I always try to be true to myself with my own values and beliefs. If that means I leave some friends behind or don't play with certain people, so be it. I won't compromise my values because I only have those.

One last thing is that I think people (all of us) think we know things when we don't. We can "see" a lot today online and then we form our beliefs about people or their situations that feel "right" to us. I would challenge all of us to question our perceptions and beliefs. Sometimes people say things to me, based on what they see online, and I am aghast at what they've gleaned and how wrong they are. We must continue to challenge ourselves instead of jumping to conclusions. We must continue to see things differently, from

all possible angles, and then refract and refract again. If we, as poets, aren't doing that, then who will?

MZ: It's funny, I had almost completely forgotten that visit to Twitter until this conversation. Maybe all the trauma is deeply buried and repressed. I probably have some of the details wrong; my memory isn't that great. Though I will swear on Emily Dickinson's herbarium that there was a kombucha machine.

Maybe we could talk about your most recent poems and Agnes Martin. What drew you to her and what are you working on now?

VC: That's the beauty of memory—it's always wrong.

In 2021, the Museum of Modern Art in New York asked me to pick any piece from their collection and write a poem about it. With a catalog of 200,000 pieces, I had trouble selecting so I ended up choosing something by an artist with whom I was relatively familiar, Agnes Martin, having read her philosophical *Writings* many years ago. I picked "Untitled" from the "On a Clear Day, 1973" series.

The Atlanta spa shootings had just occurred and something about Martin's grids made me want to cut out the grids and write the poem on the grids. Here's the poem and my rendering of it. It's since changed in form, but this is what I started with.

<https://www.moma.org/magazine/articles/648>

I read this poem at a reading and when I sat down, I felt very emotional about Martin. I then read every book, saw every film, read every piece of criticism I could find about Martin. I looked at her work obsessively online and whenever I could, in person. I stumbled upon a few Martin pieces randomly at museums too. I started writing poems whenever I felt moved to, kind of like a correspondence with Martin and her work, and ended up with a lot of poems that grapple with mental health, depression, menopause. It sounds dramatic, but Martin, her work, her views on the world, really helped me during a confusing time in my life.

I am working on poems right now about trees for the manuscript tentatively titled *The Tree of Knowledge*, and also ekphrastic poems related to Hilma af Klint and lots of other artists. I'm also working on a prose book that I'm not quite comfortable talking about yet because I'm not sure what I'm doing.

How about you? What are you working on, or what have you finished lately? Obviously you have your wonderful new book, *Story of a Poem: A Memoir*, and I know you are working on a poetry manuscript. I'd love to hear how you're feeling about having a new book coming out, if you feel like talking about it. I'm sure you've talked about it ad nauseam, but can you tell me something you haven't told anyone else about how that's been?

MZ: First of all, let me just say that this poem is extraordinary. It is so moving that you let the emptiness of Martin's spaces fill and guide you. I can imagine an uninterested and shallow reaction to that work being: There is no emotion here. But of course, the other way of looking is to say that the grid is what makes it possible to experience what would otherwise be overwhelming. It is (or let us say, can be) an extremely emotional piece, as your poem makes clear. Here is a form into which emotion can be poured. Like language. Like a poem.

Your poem does not remind me of Dickinson (actually, it reminds me a tiny bit of Stevens and his blackbirds), but it seems to be in implicit conversation with her statement that after great pain, a formal feeling comes. Before great pain can manifest, there must be a form. For someone who is relatively reserved in public, your poetry is deeply emotional, but never in a sensationalistic or maudlin way. So I feel the reality of those emotions, whether in relation to those close to you, or those you've never met.

I adore the fabular and dream-like quality of your poem, the disappearing horses, the apples that become rectangles, the mysterious fact that the people are far away, but their chewing (what an odd and eerie word) is here. And then the shift into the epigrammatic: "On any clear day, all my thinking fits / into boxes that can't be opened." I love the questions and the statements that feel exploratory and generous. The final lines are so mysterious and clear. Each time I read them, I think of something new.

This poem and the others make me so eager to read your next book and whatever follows. I'm so glad you are so busy writing so many different things. That's exciting about the prose, though you are wise not to talk about it.

Thank you for your question, although this is not an interview of me. But I will tell you one thing about publishing this book of prose, by way of asking you one final question. This book was very difficult to write, or rather to publish. It is extremely personal, and putting it out into the world felt at times unwise or risky, especially when people seem in the public sphere so willing to be so cruel. However, since its publication, I have heard from so many readers who feel a sense of connection in reading the book. People have written me deeply personal and heartfelt messages, each one of which makes me feel as if writing this book was not just something I needed to do for myself, but worthwhile for others. And those reactions matter more to me than anything else.

This is something I have learned: No matter how annoyed I might get about the shallowness or cruelty of conversations on social media, there are readers who want to have imaginative experiences in language. Their voices might not be the loudest, but whenever I hear from them, I am so moved and grateful and reaffirmed in my work, and in people. I want to send each person who has reached out to me mortal flowers in return.

In conclusion, can you say something you have learned about poetry in the world, and its relationship to readers, that you might not have had the opportunity to talk about before?

VC: I first want to thank you for this conversation—it's been so fun, and a lovely extension of our other conversations. Thank you for the close reading of my poem (I didn't put it there for you to read but now in retrospect, I sort of made you read it).

Your stories about how readers have connected with your work is really wonderful. The loudest voices sometimes wound us the most. Also, if we put our work out in the world, in some ways, we are inviting people to have

opinions about the work (and by extension about us).

Sometimes I have to focus on all the other kind people I know or who have contacted me or who I meet because I have a tendency to focus on that one critic, that one less generous person. I just read somewhere something the artist Barnett Newman said: "Critics are to artists what ornithologists are to birds."

I am easily wounded. I've learned to embrace those bruises, punctures, holes, and then move on and focus on what matters to me the most—my writing, reading, thinking, seeing—all the things that bring me joy.

FICTION

Fluxus on Pulver

Pearl Abraham

A sofa appeared in the cornfield on Pulvers soon after harvest. Nubby beige, a two-seater, it faced roadside and, when the afternoon sun set the field on fire, stood apart, refusing to glow. Among the rows of cut stalks that give these late autumn fields their singular color and texture, the sofa was a surrealist absurdity, but by my third or fourth drive-by, I started thinking of it as the plausible contents of a Hopper farmhouse done in somber blues and blacks. A request for something noir had arrived in my inbox and I was in search of plot, though I was living in the countryside where little happens.

A week passed. The sofa stayed put. Meaning the Pulvers who farmed this land were leaving it there, to offend the perpetrator with the daily confrontation of their worst self, I guessed. Would shame serve as corrective, force a return to the crime scene for clean up? I was pretty sure the kind of rage that motivates such an act belonged to a local, someone aware of the extreme inequity of the haves and have-nots in the area, angry enough to flaunt their hatred one way or another, to spew extra carbon as they accelerated past weekenders bicycling or running to stay fit, or to fly the Confederate flag. Though I didn't have names, I had some candidates in mind, people I identified by their vehicles: the rusting pick-up screaming metallic, the unbalanced Dodge that veered crazy close past people on foot along the winding country roads. The lockdown in March kept weekenders up here full time, further enraging locals. Living around such rage, I imagined, would feel unsafe, especially if you were a child or a woman.

Thanksgiving came and went. Hunters walked the fields. One late after-

noon, I saw two in full camo lean back on the sofa, as if sunning, then suddenly leap up and move off. The cushions were probably soaked. Winter arrived the following week and Pulver Corner, situated at the peak of this Taconic Ridge, was shrouded in thick mist, why we call it Dracula Hill. I've experienced a few heartstopping winter drives up here, when I couldn't tell where the road ended and the field began, and I wasn't the only one, because the town finally got around to painting lines to provide some illumination. They help.

Days before Christmas, an artificial tree showed up beside the sofa. Someone's idea of a joke? At the metal base of the tree, some squarish white things that, from a distance, appeared as boxed gifts. I pulled over to get a better look. Was that electric wire? I got out of the car, walked a few yards into the field, and confirmed that in addition to the tree, several dirty electric kitchen appliances sprawled.

I looked around uneasily, wished I'd thought to bring work gloves, lifted a soaked cushion anyway and found the usual detritus: pennies and nickels, a paper clip, strands of long blonde hair, a receipt from the local Agway for Purina cat food. From under the second cushion, I retrieved a photo printed on card stock and a leather riding glove. In the print, a woman in her twenties, lips puckered around a cigarette, with the faraway eyes smokers get, seeing no one.

The sofa was stained, its arms clawed. In addition to the blonde, cats had lived in its household. The smell of cat pee was powerful even out here, in the open. I also discerned a perfume, something recognizable, though I couldn't name it. I moved away to clear my nose, then stepped back. Maybe just a bad freshener or upholstery cleaner, nasty enough I didn't want to stick around.

At home, after unloading the groceries, I put the receipt and glove on a brown paper bag. I pocketed the photo. Someone might recognize her.

On my way back from the train station on Sunday afternoon, I saw a car parked beside the field. We were entering into the second winter of the pandemic, and people were eager to emerge, desperate to do things, to get out and live, despite warnings. Vaccinations were becoming available, and a sort of Darwinist jostling for first in line had begun. Some people still wore masks, others threw them off, eating in crowded places at crowded times. This driver was on foot in the field, alone with a camera, filming a little black bear. I pulled over to watch. The bear approached the sofa cautiously, star-

tled and took off in the opposite direction, then approached again. I rolled my window down for sound, but there was none. What can creatures of the wild understand about human transgression?

In truth, it seems near impossible not to sin against nature. Fencing the vegetables we grow causes suffering, trapping and maiming rabbits. Birds fly into the netting surrounding the blueberries so often we finally just let them at it. Harvesting a handful or two for my own breakfast makes it a good enough season. In the fall, the electric wire that keeps the horses safe snared a great horned owl. With the help of Audubon volunteers who know how to handle wild birds, we were able to rehab and release him. Early evenings, on my way back from barn chores, his happy hooting tells me he's well.

The following Saturday, on my weekly run to Agway, I showed the photo to John, rather than to Kristen, because he likes talking to people. I've watched him for years now. His strategy is to distract customers with chit chat so he can get away with a bit of grifting: incomplete change if it's cash. He has done this to me more than once, shorting me a ten or a twenty, so now I've become watchful, asking for a receipt, and counting my change. Oh, here you go, he will say casually, handing me the missing bill. Grifting seems to be a thing around here. The elderly woman behind the counter at the local wine store also engages in this kind of petty crime. Do you want a receipt, she asks when I pay in cash. I'm using my credit card more.

John took the photo from me and studied the face. I've seen her, he said. Horse girl. Comes in dressed for riding. Tall boots.

Know where she lives?

Bean River, where she worked, until she met someone and moved in with him.

More pieces started showing up in the field. An armchair and coffee table, set up living room style. A tall lamp, too, between the sofa and the chair.

A dining set appeared about a week later. I drove up the mountain the next day to confirm that I hadn't imagined it, and there in the field, as if in an adjacent room, were a bed and dresser.

The furniture was of a heavy type, traditional pieces you could pick up for almost nothing at the old Johnson & Johnson, before it became North Elm, a makeover that didn't improve things aesthetically. What had kept me going back to walk the cavernous aisles of the old J&J was the occasional modernist find: After spending too much on a mid-century sofa in the

meatpacking district of New York, I bought my coffee table for \$50. I also paid \$250 for a Cherner bedroom suite complete with signature rounded corners. Even the interiors of the drawers were meticulously curved. When I researched Cherner's work online, I learned that one of his desks had sold at a Chicago auction for more than \$2200. I went back to J&J, and leaning against a wall were the heavy round mirrors that went with the dresser and dressing table, mounting hardware still attached.

The pieces in the field were not Cherners. Still, they were made of wood finished in oil or wax, not intended for the elements. Someone considered them dispensable and was having some fun. Did they all emerge from the same house? And what was motivating this installation exactly? Maybe performance art was the better term for this, a sort of Fluxus event started on a whim, without a plan, valuing process over finished product. How would it end? I wondered.

In the late 1980s, I attended a performance at a Fluxus gallery in lower Manhattan: The artist mixed clay with water, threw a pot on a wheel in front of the audience, none of which was exactly exciting, but then, when the pot was finished, she smashed it to the ground and distributed the pieces to those attending, asking everyone to return to the gallery a year later, to reconstruct the pot and fire it. I understood the performance as an adaptation of the Kabbalah metaphor, gathering the shards of a broken vessel to engage in world repair. Was this installation on Pulvers such an event? After so much careless consumption and carnage, repair and reparation were indeed overdue.

Some years ago, the elder Pulvers had a wind turbine installed beside the barn, allowing them to go off grid. At the top of this Taconic Ridge, the wind keeps the thing going most days, producing enough energy to return some for credit. Clean energy, a step toward world repair.

Waking the following morning, I had an idea that in the next plot move, a structure to house these furnishings would appear, but when I drove past the field, nothing had changed. In the afternoon, I ran into Linda Pulver and her daughter at Tractor Supply and asked them about the furniture.

We get one of these obnoxious dumps every year, Linda said. Jeff likes to leave it there for a while, until spring usually, for everyone to see. But that Christmas tree before Christmas was extra special, she laughed.

I liked her light spirit and laughed with her, grateful for this moment of levity, for the normality of a lighthearted social exchange. We were at Tractor

Supply without masks and stayed almost six feet apart as we spoke.

It snowed and the furniture temporarily disappeared, an unintended natural event that also became part of the performance. A friend was in town for a week and we met at the Ancram Bar, a local dive she'd always wanted to try.

We caught up on our lives and our animals over cheap red wine. She was interviewing, desperate to get away from the compliance firm where only men were promoted.

What are you working on these days? she asked.

I told her about the furnished field, the only eventful thing around here.

Dumping old furniture is a thing around here, she said. Definitely awful.

I guess it costs something to dispose of bulky items at the town dump, I said.

We paused to look around. A couple of men at the bar. Kermit behind it, keeping conversation going, serving as needed. This local establishment has been in his family forever. At the pool table, a large burly guy in his twenties, amusing himself. The Confederate flag on the pick-up parked outside belonged to him: a man with an ax to grind. I'd seen this flag flier before, driving too fast, scowling at the twee guy in argyle socks pumping gas at the Cumberland. He struck me as someone who could easily lose it and start shooting. I also knew where he lived, a property perennially under construction, a retaining wall around the driveway, repair of the front steps, the porch.

The bell above the door chimed and another stocky late twenty-something strutted in, heading straight for the pool table. They high-fived, and soon he too wielded a bottle and a cue. I tuned in to hear their conversation:

Heard from ? he asked. I didn't catch the name.

Nothing, the flag flier said. Up and left with no goodbye, no call. Not even on Christmas. Probably moved back home. It was always about family for her. Her family and her horses. Nothing else mattered. I definitely didn't.

Well, you're not hitched, his friend said.

They clinked bottles. Hit some balls. The flag flier paused to chalk his tip.

I was always cleaning up after her, but even after she was gone, I could smell her. I purged. I dumped her shit, that dirty sofa she moved in with. I wasn't going to pay to get rid of it.

Bingo, my friend mouthed.

Getting into her truck, she paused. Let's have a look. I have a flashlight.

She followed my car past the general store, post office, and church, the triumvirate that makes up the tiny town of Ancramdale, up Route 8 to Pulvers Corner, where we pulled over and stepped into the night.

My friend trudged into the field fearlessly and illuminated the dirty wet sofa, the Christmas tree beside it, the appliances beneath. But that's all there was. The rest, the kitchen, bedroom, and dining rooms were missing! Erased. I closed and opened my eyes, to see again.

Hauling all the pieces in and out, and arranging them, she pointed out, would require major effort. Who would do it? And why?

A prank? I offered.

A very imaginative prank, she said, looking at me.

Half an hour later, I was in bed, sipping water before turning out the light, seeing the furniture in my room afresh, imperfect, with the side of one dresser damaged by direct sunlight, the bed frame missing bits of veneer. But once in use, I hardly noticed the imperfections. Now in its second or third life, in this farmhouse with no closets, the dressers serve well, providing much needed storage. Full bedroom suites, I know, are mostly a thing of the past, too many pieces for streamlined modern tastes, too matching perhaps, but they have the advantage of presenting as finished, a fully furnished room, a habitable home.

Complete, they make meaning.

POETRY

Dummy Ventriloquist

Michelle Bitting

~ after "Not I: Throwing Voices" exhibit, LACMA, 2021

Or a misalignment of voice and body.
Some folks get paid
not to let you in. While my lips
won't move having mastered the virus
speaking through hidden
identities. The artist
with various hats on inside a bubbly
tower reduced to marbles in the
mouth. It's a dimensional bridge
and I am crossing it.
Super woody sneeze
with lip zipped!
I smell leather and cowboy boots.
Red trim transmitting ire inside
a deep-seeded ear. My crying bust
of a child. You can fear it.
You can dead hare and a falcon in the niche.
I've got my fingers carved into pinewood
with gems around the neck—my
mannequin pedestal.
Ur, Mutter,
I am not your doll.

“self-portrait with atmospheric river & cougar sighting,” “self-portrait with hummingbird & beaver moon,” “You Don’t Know What You Don’t Know”

Marci Vogel

self-portrait with atmospheric river & cougar sighting

also called mountain lion also called puma ours numbered 22
all numbers spent Hollywood misses you mascara-smeared under a
Janus-faced storm 6 months 7 years & a half-century from where
my mother delivered a child whose name they misspelled
insisted on correction insisted on driving through August
sweltering drought-stricken uprising so her youngest
could arrive on time for once in her life could write one rainy
night the odd time a package arrived carrying artificial
leopard-spotted luxury lined with genuine Australian sheep-
skin—slipping them on my feet i imagine a worker named Iris
holiday-exhausted depositing Mercury retrograde all turquoise &

poppy in some other box my running shoes in exchange for animal
paws padding royal over parquered oak slipping out the glass
door into the village green racing down coliseum over emptied
aquifers along cement-cradled floodwaters running wild through
boulevards of tar over guttered freeways traffic-choked
infrastructures roaring every lament into the ocean oh our ocean
river in the sky making landfall tonight your Pacific green eyes

self-portrait with hummingbird & beaver moon

hydraulic brightness i was once
a child constructing kingdoms
of branches & mud. each morning thick pelt
sprouted from my skin, each night i'd
begin again. novembers i stream
toward fullness more being
than industry. it's said the smallest
of birds flies all night without stopping
departs at dusk with a flock of passerines
arrives the next day on warmer shores. wintering
young birds trace the same ancestral route
years into the future they alight
ruby-throated on the exact day in the exact spot
by what knowledge no one knows.

YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW

Have you ever wondered
where trails come from—

where the trailhead starts
slant rhyme by the road
listen for rattlesnake signage

chaparral & Saltgrass
the hands of a dozen
students carving a path

forward you walk
shin-scratched visitor
offered yarrow, Island Rush-

rose, tiny suns above Catalina Live
Forever—take care the coastal prickly
pear bee stung blossom carried over

by wind by wing by wave

Tomorrow you will swim
in an ocean you've lived by
all your life never knowing

of fish orange as buoys
under a July night lit
one direction by the city

the other by stories
you haven't heard
since you were a girl—

Once upon a time there
lived an acorn on a cliff. Once
upon a time young humans

gathered in the shelter
of a Picnic Oak. One day
may you ride in an open truck-

bed, happen upon a lone
creature, bison-eyed traveler
who would know you anywhere—

POETRY

Morning Without School

Caitlin Thomson

A stranger's daughter waits in the alley, a hat in her hands.
Our calico cat stares at her from his fence post perch. It starts
to rain, lightly. When a blue truck arrives, she enters without words.

The milk stinks of grass, so I send my husband to the store, black
umbrella and all. The children cling to my legs like pants.
I hear them better than my own thoughts.

When the rain stops, I send them screeching into the mud.

Vanguard Mail Operations

Kristen Gallagher

I submit, below, a manuscript for our consideration titled “Introduction to New Hires.” I’m not sure what the document is—maybe we can call it an unfinished pamphlet. It’s something my father wrote, or had been tasked to write, but never finished, at a job he was fired from three days after he started it.

I found “Introduction to New Hires” in a box of writing my father, Eddie, left behind when he died. He was not a career writer. He was unpublished except for a single piece in *The Philadelphia Inquirer* about a vacation spoiled by a hurricane: “Better Safe Than Soggy.” The same box also contained his unpublished voodoo novel, titled *Daddy’s Little Doll* (I never read it), his unpublished memoir that doubled as a takedown of the Catholic Church (I read this; various angry notes and attempts to beat the church at its own logic), and numerous family eulogies (he wrote eulogies for each of my mother’s deceased family members, which—I found out later—he’d forced on everyone as the self-appointed “family eulogist”).

I’d never seen the manuscript before, but the story around it had become a thing of legend to me. On the one hand, it was the most banal piece of writing he’d ever done, and yet his passionate attachment to its construction got him fired from the best job opportunity he’d ever had. He’d spent most of his working life as a night shift mailroom worker at a major investment firm. And he hated it. Hated it. This pamphlet-writing job was his opportunity to get out, but he was fired before the end of his first week because, as he told it, he fought for his vision that “Introduction to New

Hires” be written in a way that was unlike any other pamphlet that had ever come before it.

*

It all started when, after nearly twenty years in the mailroom, someone from management in the Communications Department noticed that Eddie was a smart guy and a good communicator. This manager said, “We gotta get you out of this mailroom, I’ll find you something.” And soon enough, Eddie was brought into the Communications Department for a chance at a 9-to-5 office job—not only that, but a job as a writer. For his entire life, Eddie had wanted to be recognized as a writer, “a published author” as he called it, but he never knew how to make it happen. With this opportunity, he felt his time had finally come.

My mom took him suit shopping. They bought five suits. She had them pressed. She ironed all his shirts. And like a well-trained 1950s-era American Girl, she also ironed all his socks and underwear. By the time his new job started, he had a week’s worth of complete outfits ready to go.

On day one, he was given his task: write an introduction to new hires in the mailroom. He was given earlier manuals to use as guides. He was instructed to keep it basic, informational.

He wrote his first draft. And he did it his way. He felt he needed to invent a new way to write an instructional pamphlet; necessary, he explained, because the examples he had been given were too dry. He wanted to really speak to these new hires, but also to innovate, and make it entertaining to read.

He also refused to use a computer, and instead brought his old typewriter to work. He line-edited things by hand. He assured the manager that he’d enter it into a computer when it was done.

The manager rejected the first draft, told him he was getting too into it, that it was just a pamphlet. Try not to take it too personally, Ed, the manager told him, it’s just a generic introduction to the job, nothing to lose sleep over.

But Eddie wasn’t about to waste an opportunity to lose sleep.

“No,” he insisted, “this is your introduction of the company to new hires! Don’t you want them to think that you are the best, that we are the best, that you hire the best writers who take writing seriously, who innovate, I

mean, isn't it right there in the name of the company? Vanguard? We tell everyone we are out ahead of the others, we do things differently here. Don't you want to show them that?"

I know my father's temper well. I imagine him sitting across from his new boss, end-gaining off the edge of a cheap office chair, red-faced and getting belligerent about it. I imagine his manager finding it all a bit odd.

"Just write the manual, Ed."

But Eddie was determined to prove the boss wrong. He spent the next few days working tirelessly on the manuscript. He brought it home at night. He skipped his TV shows. He ate dinner at the typewriter. And every morning, his drafts were rejected. He skipped breaks, worked through lunch, and tried new angles and approaches. But every afternoon, he was rejected just the same. Twice per day, for three days straight, he was told no, that they just wanted him to write a basic, ordinary instruction manual. And every day, twice per day, Eddie refused.

Before the week was over, Eddie was sent back down the mailroom. He didn't even get through all five of his new suits.

*

I learned all of this from my mother, who told me the story as it unfolded. The only time Eddie ever discussed it with me, he referred to one segment where he notes, in his characteristic angular handwriting, an idea for a joke he might include: "Everything but free pizza. Come to think of it, there's free pizza sometimes, too!" He said he fought hard for these lines. His point was that this thing needed humor. Management disagreed and found it not only unnecessary but not actually that funny. If there's pizza sometimes, why keep the line "Everything except free pizza"? In a pamphlet where the aim is to keep it brief and informative, a line that is about to be revealed as false should simply be erased.

But in Eddie's mind, this was solid gold comedy and the boss was an idiot.

While humor was important to Eddie's vision for the pamphlet, the real star of "Introduction to New Hires" is The Bell & Howell 6000 which, my father wrote, is "speed itself." This piqued my curiosity, so I googled "Bell & Howell 6000 + speed." The BH 6000, or BH6K to those in the business, sorts 12,000 envelopes per hour and in its time was the fastest mail sorting machine in history. My father worked 40 hours a week, so that's 480,000

envelopes per week, which is 25,000,000 envelopes a year. He worked there for 23 years, so that's 575,000,000 envelopes processed by Eddie. Is processing mailers for a huge investment firm a kind of writing?

I tried to find out more about the BH6K. But at the time of my writing this, there was no information about the machine on the internet, except in a Google Books entry I found on 4/2/2022, from the 1997 *Official Gazette of the United States Patent and Trademark Office: Trademark:*

DATE OF FIRST USE 1995-09-20

™ EXPIRED 2020-05-01

SN 75-114,469 BELL & HOWELL MAIL PROCESSING
SYSTEMS COMPANY, DURHAM, NC FILED 6-5-1996
BH 6000

FOR MAIL PROCESSING MACHINES (U.S. CLS. 13, 19.
21, 23, 31, 34 AND 35).

HRST USE 9-20-1995; IN COMMERCE 9-20-1995.

I talked about the pamphlet with my friend, the artist and writer Alejandro Crawford, who was doing a job that involved drawing 3D digital schematics of machines. He suggested he could try to create a model of what the 6K might have looked like, if I could get him some information about its design or inner workings. So I called the sales and marketing departments at the firm to see if they had images of it, but they didn't. I tried to find a company archivist, but there wasn't one. I even asked the nice person who helped me process Eddie's death paperwork at the firm's HR Department. She knew of the machine, but had no further information.

I called various departments at the firm and tried everything from being honest that I was writing about my father to making up stories like "Hi, I am a tech reporter writing about the history of mail sorting machines and need information about the BH 6000, as it was a huge innovation. I seek patent or trademark documents, images of the BH 6000 or design diagrams, archival records, or contact with someone who would have such documentation."

But there is absolutely no record of the BH 6000 at the firm except that everyone seems to know it is a machine they once used and no longer use, and that it was once "a big deal." There are no images of the BH 6000, no pamphlets, no instruction manuals. The firm's new mail operations division uses different machines now.

My mom, Eileen, grew up as a fairly sheltered girl who liked to have fun. She married Eddie expecting to be a stay-at-home mom and the wife of a writer/editor, which is what Eddie had imagined for himself. But it didn't work out that way. By the time I was eight, she was the one working and he stayed at home—but without taking over the cooking, cleaning, or childcare. She still did all those things, too.

She was from a solid, kind, wholesome family. She was the oldest daughter of eight children and most of her siblings have multiple children. More of a traditional Irish clann than simply a family, there are about seventy-five of us. Every weekend there's a christening, a communion, a graduation, a wedding, or a funeral. We do everything together.

My parents grew up a few blocks from each other, in Mayfair, the Irish Catholic neighborhood in Northeast Philadelphia where our whole family is from. My mom had known Eddie since kindergarten, including his abusive hateful mom, his silent ghostly dad, his lovely and hilariously disassociated sister, and a brother he became estranged from.

My mom was part of a standard-issue late-fifties high school girls' club, the kind of thing that looked, in movies like *Grease*, like a gang. But my mom's "gang" was a gang of "good girls." They called themselves "The Checkers." Their motto was—and I am serious—"fun, but not *too* fun. And everyone knew exactly what it meant," my mother proudly declared. They were fun party girls, a guaranteed good time always, but they weren't letting you do more than kiss! They kept it "in check." Hence, "The Checkers."

My father didn't start working at the investment firm until after I went to college. About a week after I left, my mother gave Eddie an ultimatum: either get a job and start helping around the house or I am leaving you. She was able to get him to agree to dust, vacuum, and do the dishes. But on the question of taking an office job, he was stubborn. She could only convince him to try temping. "Temporary" was the only kind of job he was willing to take. He could not face the idea of himself as anything but a published author or a big-time editor. Since neither of those things was happening, he became a temp. Ironically enough, he quickly found a somewhat permanent

gig, where he was still a temp but they needed him all the time. For ten years, he worked the night shift in the mailroom, but for temp wages, with no health insurance and no retirement plan.

Then one day, my mother found out that this large investment firm paid full-time mailroom workers fairly well and provided them amazing benefits: a generous 401K, long paid vacations, a life insurance policy, secondary health insurance during retirement, and hundreds of thousands of dollars automatically placed in a health saving account. She was beyond infuriated when she found this out; she was disgusted that they could have been collecting on this the whole time. She confronted him and, after a long and wrangling battle, forced him to accept that he did, in fact, work in a mailroom, and that after a decade of working there for a pittance, he needed to accept the pay and benefits that came with the full time job. He had to do it, or—this was her second such ultimatum that I am aware of—she would leave him.

He did it.

It turned out that the main thing holding him back had been that as a temp, he did not have to wear the polyester mailroom worker uniform. He just hated the idea of the uniform. He said it was like “a confession of failure.”

*

Alejandro’s idea to design a BH 6000 still seemed interesting to me. Recreating it felt like an homage to labor. We can ask questions about the place of this machine in the economy—the investment firm’s mail sorting machine, infernally bound to the constantly churning financial market—and the person who must sacrifice nighttime sleep to work it.

Since I got nowhere with the firm, I began writing to everyone I could at Bell and Howell. But no matter what I wrote or who I pretended to be, I got the same reply:

Thank you for your inquiry. The BH 6000 was a Bell and Howell inserter introduced around the early to mid 90’s and was the fastest inserter of its kind at the time. However, we discontinued this product and have no information to share with you.

You can find the current listing of Production Mail equipment on our website at <https://go.pardot.com/e/138131/production-mail-solutions-/2qz-12p/247992038?h=FuxFYJinP1t87T4wjlsPQVQTbu5MMRpUlfGco8GUTA>

Thank you,

The Bell and Howell Team

I contacted the lawyer who oversaw the trademark, but he didn't have images of the BH 6000, either, and had nothing much to add.

I searched for patents. Through this, I realized that the BH 6000 is not so much an object, a thing, but a union of various gears, switches, cranks, funnels, and levers, put together in a sort of way that stuffed and moved envelopes really fast by 1995 standards. Like an industrial Ship of Theseus, the patent might not be for "the machine," but for its various parts, each with their own separate patents, and each infinitely replaceable.

By now, the BH 6000 has evaporated from history, in part because it barely existed as a unity in the first place.

*

I had imagined the 6K like the *Star Wars* Imperial Star Destroyer: sleek, metal, pointed, thousands of tiny black windows conveying information. I imagined it defying human perception of time and space.

I imagine my father, standing at its side, rocking slightly back and forth, focused but in an altered state, some mix of tired and wired; one with the machine, absorbed in its codes, its sounds, ready to respond to its incessant need for more paper, more envelopes. He occasionally moves to the output end to lift the box where the finished jobs fall and pile up, a box that will be taken away by someone with a different job, the mailroom box carrier job.

Recently, my friend, the poet Eddie Hopely, also fascinated by dead media, searched for the 6K while in Rome and found an image. The image didn't live up to what I had imagined. The copy machine at my job—at an austerity-bound community college—looks more space age than the 6K, which you can see incorporates a block of wood.

Introduction to new hires

Congratulations and welcome to ~~your new job in~~ Vanguard Mail Operations, one of the largest and most modern facilities of its kind in the world.

In time, you will learn all you need to know here. You will become a dependable operator, ready to handle any machine, any job, any time.

Getting there will be ~~challenging~~ and satisfying, but it will take time. How much time will depend on several factors: take it seriously, work hard, listen and learn, take notes until your memory ~~lets in~~ catches up, relax and let it happen.

Soon, you will start to realize just how much there is to know in this job. ~~It's a lot~~ There may be days when you wonder if you will ever get it. But you will get it if you want to, with solid help from your supervisor and co-workers. Pay attention, ask questions, absorb.

To help you get started, we present you with this Training Booklet, which is divided into Hardware and Software. In these pages, you will learn that your new job has its own vocabulary. You are about to speak, "mail room," a language that includes terms like -- X1's, track jumper, D1's, roll-to-roll, two-ups, N1's, vista, quarter-end, and on and on.

You will begin working on a variety of machines, some of which turn out a blistering amount of mail -- with you at the helm.

Congratulations again.

Now . . . let's begin!

✓ Everything but free pizza.
Come to think of it, there's free pizza
sometimes, too!

FINDING IT -- OVER

when

A FEW

If you are "over," you have ~~a different group of~~ things to look for.

COUNT THEM

First, check your smallest category. If you have 5,000 in the trays, 25 off-lines, 7 mutes and 3 overcharges, ~~count~~ your overcharges again. It's possible your first count was wrong. *STARTING*

(SMALLEST)

If you ~~definitely~~ have 3 clean overcharges, fine. But be sure. Sometimes, if you've had a jam under a meter, ~~the meter~~ will stamp the same envelope twice. Are you just counting envelopes in your overcharge stack or are you counting all the overcharges. Look again. ~~If you've had a meter jam,~~ you might have an overcharge with a clean stamp and a red smear on the same envelope. Show that to your lead operator or your supervisor. If ~~they agree~~ it's another overcharge, and you were one over, you're good.

Now, check the mutes. Count them again. Make sure each mute is a complete set. If you have split a multi-page set and counted it as two, that could be it.

Now, off-lines. Count them again. Here, too, make sure you haven't split a multi-page set into two envelopes. Another thing: When you're counting off-lines, you might simply be counting envelopes. Is there a set in each envelope? Are you sure? You wouldn't be the first operator who quickly picked up two envelopes to insert one set, then put it all with the other off-lines. You could be counting an empty envelope as an off-line.

if
~~Once all the above are done and~~ you're still over, it's time to flip through the trays. Look for an envelope that is double-stamped -- two post marks on one envelope. If your batch had bar codes in the addresses, that bar code was printed only on the first page of each set. If the machine split a set and put it into two envelopes, one of the envelopes will not have a bar code in the window. So, if you find a window without a bar code, or a window showing ~~only part of~~ an insert, open it. If it's a partial statement, the rest of it is probably in the next envelope. *Combine the two into one new off-line + 2 new dc.*

If you save one over, you're now perfect.

QUESTION: Did your batch have a "break"? That's a place where the printer stopped printing, ran off a few blank pages, then started printing again. Always check page numbers when dealing with a break. Make sure the set before ~~the break~~ and ~~the set~~ after the break are consecutive. If they are not, you could have duplicate sets, which will put you over. If there was a set missing at the break, you could be short.

Finally, if you're still over and nothing on this page helps you find it, you probably won't.

Batching Out - *The good, the bad & the ugly*

Many of the jobs you ~~will~~ run will have a "batch count" ~~which means they~~ *se*
a
will have/Beginning Banner Page and an Ending Banner Page. ~~There is a lot of~~
important information on Banner Pages, ~~but~~ *is* among the most important info to an
operator is a ~~section~~ *line on* of the Ending Banner Page in which ~~one line~~ says,
"number of envelopes." That ~~means~~ *is* the number of envelopes the batch you
just ran was supposed to have in it. Also ~~in this section~~ *on this page* will be blank
lines where you will enter the number of off-lines, mutes and overcharges.
Your meter count plus off-line & mutes, minus it must match "no. of env."

For example:

You just "sequenced off," ~~at the end of a batch.~~ *finished running* You checked the
"hoagie hole" and the cutter. *and* You have your ending banner page in hand, ~~and~~
Now, it's fun time!
all your mail is accounted for . . . you think. You count your mutes, your
off-lines and your overcharge ^s, then you check your meters to find out
how many envelopes you've posted.

Let's say the Banner Page ~~says~~ *indicates batch* you should have 2497 envelopes, total.

^(s) your meter says you've posted 2490 ~~times~~ *batch* you have 1 ^b off-lines,
with 1 mute. *because "# of env." & your actual count = match up.* Those last three numbers add up to 2497 and you're in *great* good
shape. However, overcharges count as a minus and if you have one, then you

have to subtract it from the total and you're now at 2497 ~~minus~~ ^{minus} 1. You are

~~short~~ *is called*, "short," and that is not good. *You might have more than 1 ok on your meter, might be more than "# of env." Points: "over" or "under"*

Quick review. Add metered units, mutes and off-lines, ^{then} subtract over-charges.

That number must be the same as "number of envelopes." *Short is bad, over is bad, but over is uglier.*
~~The numbers must match.~~ *to make a good batch,*
The numbers must match.

If they don't, you have to find out why and make it right.

*if the count you need doesn't come out of the meter
you're either "short" or "over."
Short is bad, over is bad & bad is ugly.*





mute, off-line + ok

"Mutes" is a term shortened from the word "mutilate." When you are running a batch, even when you know what you're doing and the machine seems perfect, a ~~"set"~~ ^{can happen} can jam at any time. ~~page~~

That's when ^{all} or part of the ~~set~~ ^{set} contents intended for a single envelope get out of line and the machine crushes ~~or otherwise~~ ^{crushes} "mutilated" paper. It could happen to the principal element of the set -- a letter addressed to a specific investor, a check, a financial statement -- or it could happen to an insert, ^{or to a whole set}. If it happens to an insert, just replace it. ^{or the proper track section} If it happens to the principal element, you must decide if it can still be sent or if it has been ~~damaged~~ ^{damaged} so badly that it must be re-printed. If it must be re-printed, it's a mute.

^{in the principal element} Check the number of pages. If it is more than a one-page set, make sure you get all the pages together, staple it, place it in a prominent and visible place and number it, #1, #2, etc. If it can still be used, it's not a mute. ^{you might be able to} you might ^{put it back in the machine} put it back in the machine. ^{or it might be an} or it might be an ...

"Off-Line," which means it will be part of your batch but ^{will not get} ~~will not get~~ ^{at your machine} ~~at your machine~~. ^{put} Make sure the set has appropriate inserts and ^{place} ~~place~~ it all into a postage. ^{Off-lines can come from a few different} Off-lines can come from a few different ^{reasons} reasons. They are clean envelope. ^{There are various reasons} There are various reasons ^{that are several reasons for off-line} that are several reasons for off-line ^{sets in} just envelopes that have not been posted when the batch ends. Example: Any batch marked BATCH 1 could have foreign addresses at the beginning. The machine

^{divert these} should ~~kick these out~~ ^{before they get to the meters, thus, no postage} before they get to the meters, thus, no postage. ^{Sometimes} Sometimes the machine will throw a set into a compartment called the "foreign dock" ^{notice of metering} notice of metering ^{may be on empty line got there} that got posted but cannot be used. "Overcharges" are envelopes with postage ^{maybe on empty line got there} that got posted but cannot be used. The envelope is

The envelope may have been stamped in an unreadable manner. The envelope is not usable but it will be part of your batch because it is now part of your meter count. Save it. You'll need it when you batch out.

** place it in a prominent & visible place*

Bell & Howell 6000
6K is like the 4K in that they both produce the same product. However, in its insert systems, track orientation, outside envelope presentation + general physical design, the 6K is alone.

6K

The Bell & Howell 6000 is ~~much~~ ^{a lot} like the 4K, ~~with a few differences~~ ^{only faster.}
The 6K has a different insert system and is generally engineered in a different way, ~~with the aim being that the 6K is much faster than the 4K.~~ ^{the biggest diff is}
While a 4K ~~puts out about 7500~~ ^{puts out about 7500} envelopes an hour, the 6K can go nicely at ~~over 12,000~~ ^{at most} envelopes an hour.

If the 6K is that much faster than the 4K, why not get rid of the 4K's and just use all 6K's?

Good question. ^{Answer is, each machine has its plus & minus sides.}
~~is quick but it~~ ^{if you don't know both machines.} ~~is~~ ^{is}, the 6K can't handle as many different jobs as the 4K. As we have said, the 4K is the workhorse. It can handle almost every kind of job, ~~but it's slower than the 6K.~~ ^{not built for the kind of speed the 6K is.} The 6K can go fast but it can't do as many jobs.

We try to use a particular machine for a particular job with the aim being overall efficiency.

Once again, the purpose here is not to instruct you on how to run the 6K. You will receive training on that ~~probably~~ from an experienced operator on your shift.

For now, we just want you to know something about what the machine is expected to do.

When it's running well, the 6K is ~~the~~ ^{speed itself}

4K

The machine we call the 4K is ~~actually~~ the Bell & Howell 4000.
It is ~~probably~~ not an overstatement to say the 4K is the workhorse of
the mail room. *We have 13 of them.*

We will not, in this booklet, instruct you in the workings of the 4K.
That will be done by a Bell & Howell factory employee who will come to the
Vanguard mail room specifically to train you.

What we will do here is to ^{tell a little about the 4K,} ~~inform you for the first time that~~
~~the machine~~ ^{the 4K} is actually an incredibly sophisticated machine ~~which~~
operated correctly, ^{gives} turns out almost every kind of mail we produce.
Some will have inserts; some will not. Some will have bar codes; some will not.

Some will be letter-fold; some will be half-fold; ^{some will have no fold,} Some will have postage
on the envelope; some will not. It will be up to you to know ^{the diff} which is which
and how to set up ^{your} the machine so that the envelope coming out the end of the
machine ^{puts out} the correct contents in the correct envelope with the correct
postage and the correct date. ^{More about that in the section called, "Your 4K"}

You will get to know where the Accumulator is ^{you will learn} what to do when the
machine stops and the screen says, "Accumulator ^{ENTRY} Jam Cell Exit Jam," or any
one of dozens of other ^{readings} ~~statements~~. Same for knowing where the Collector is.
Same for the Cutter, the Hold and the TOS.

Are your envelopes sealing? Is the mater ink too dark? Too light?
Problems will arise. ~~Some will occur.~~ You will diagnose and fix.

What does, "Aims READ ERROR," mean? *Could be a few things.*
You'll learn. You really will.

In the, you will learn to
some machine smoothly with. Tricks of the trade not all that.

Finding It

~~If you're short or over, you have to make it right.~~ *find out why + get good numbers.*
If you're short, check all parts of the machine for the missing set(s). Check the floor under and around the machine. Look everywhere. Look in the trash. You might have

absent-mindedly tossed a good set in there with a bad envelope. *Some times, the*

~~an envelope will go through a meter without posting.~~ *check the batch for an envelope with no postage*

~~If you find it, either on the belt or in the trays, it's an off-line.~~ *and must be counted as such. If you*

~~NOTE: When your machine stops with an "out" light, the next envelope~~ *changing your count. more / shut + you get in / posted*

~~might not post. Got an out light? Check the belt.~~ *check it now.*

Earlier, we used the term, "track jumper." That's a ~~statement~~ *letter or check or statement* entering

the track at an odd angle, ~~ending up~~ *settling into the section of track* behind where

it should be. If there is already a ~~statement~~ *letter or check or statement* in that section, well, now you

have two ~~statements~~ *envelopes* in that section. They will be inserted into the same

envelope and you ~~will~~ *could* be short. This condition can be very difficult *to find*

~~while you are looking for off-line~~ *while you are looking for off-line*

~~Somebody is going to tell you to be more careful next time!~~ *(to weigh: 1 oz. postage but 2 oz. or scale)*

weigh it. If it weighs more than indicated by the postage, open it. You

might find two in one and you're good to go.

If that doesn't work, put the batch through the Mailweigh, a machine

that separates envelopes according to weight. If that doesn't find it,

~~you have a bad batch. It might have to be re-printed + that is a bad thing!~~ *you have a bad batch. It might have to be re-printed + that is a bad thing!*

~~Somebody is going to tell you to be more careful next time!~~ *somebody is going to tell you to be more careful next time!*

FURTHER NOTE: Do not avoid being short or over by fudging your numbers.

You could be sending a check or statement to someone who is not supposed

to have it and that is nothing but trouble. Besides, ~~it could come back to you +~~ *it could come back to you +*

it's not worth the hassle. Even the best operators come up short or over.

It happens. Don't take it personally. Just clean it up and move on.

Your Job

This one could be very wordy or real, real short.

Let's make it short.

Your supervisor's job is to get as much work done in a shift as necessary and that means his job is to make sure you do your job.

Your job is to ~~run~~ ^{do} your assigned ~~machine~~ ^{work} -- to do whatever job you are ~~given~~ -- in a timely and professional manner. *If that means running a machine*

~~If you are running a machine, and if you can run it at 7500 an hour~~ ^{a 4K} and you can keep it running, fine. Do it. If you have trouble keeping it running at that speed but you can do a good job at ~~6000~~ ⁵⁵⁰⁰, do that. *Also, some jobs can be run faster than others. You'll learn what is what.* Within reason, it is better to run the machine at a comfortable speed and keep it running, ^{you're running} than to run it at 7500 and go through a shift stopping and starting.

Get it running and keep it running. That's the job.

Anybody can press the "~~start~~" ^{run} button. The question is, "What do you do when the machine stops?"

~~The answer to that is the central difference between a good operator and someone who just shows up and never gets a good review.~~ *Good operation is not merely challenged by that Q. They are identified.*

Somewhere in all the information you are receiving these days is a list of performance standards. If your work is clean and ~~quick~~ ^{consistently correct and} your numbers are roughly in the area of the performance standard, you'll be fine.

*

Shortly after taking the full time job, Eddie became obsessed with the firm's founder and CEO. He read the CEO's autobiography and talked about it constantly, for years. He also drank the wine from the CEO's winery. He loved to open it, let it breathe, pour a small amount in a glass, swirl it around, smell it, take a sip, and say, "Oak." He regularly reminded us of the heroism and genius of this CEO. It was strange. But we let him do it.

"As long as he stays employed," my mother said, "he can like whatever he wants."

*

After my parents died, in the process of cleaning up their house and going through all their old things, I kept finding trophies from the firm, countless clear acrylic fake crystal trophies of various shapes and sizes: globes, pyramids, cubes, bowls, all with the firm's logo, a date, and some text naming whatever the occasion was. Things like "\$500 Billion Milestone" or "Mutual Fund \$1 Trillion." These were never personal trophies except for the occasional "X-Year Anniversary" or the final "In Honor of Your Retirement." None ever had my father's name on it.

After what felt like a lifetime of listening to my father rave on about the glory of the CEO whose mailroom he operated, I felt a bitter hatred for these fake bullshit "trophies." I threw each one in the garbage as I found it. Looking for silverware in the dining room, I found another drawer full of trophies; lifting the fake flower wreath out of the glass bowl centerpiece, I realized it read "Quarter End Record Broken" at the bottom, in a circle around the company logo. There must have been a hundred of these things crowding my parents' little townhouse. Why do the mailroom workers need a fake glass pyramid reminding them the firm just made a trillion dollars? Once I realized the sheer volume of them, I wished I'd piled them all up and taken a photo of them and then melted them in a bonfire on the CEO's lawn.

In the end, I saved one as a memento. It sits on my desk as I write this.

My father was proud of these pathetic little trophies. But all they said to me was that he had been hoodwinked. How many people are hoodwinked into worshiping a small group of super-wealthy people who earn their for-

tunes on the backs of the workers, workers who have real gifts but no real time or opportunity to develop them? The firm wouldn't be so rich without the mailroom, and the firm wouldn't be so rich if people weren't forced to gamble their retirements on the stock market. *But here, enjoy this fake crystal trophy, night shift worker, and please remember to buy a copy of the CEO's ghost-written autobiography, too. Maybe you'll learn a thing or two about hard work.*

Then again, maybe the firm was just deeply invested in the acrylics market.

*

One way Eddie handled the humiliation of working in the mailroom was to tell everyone he knew that he worked "in communications."

"Technically true," he'd always say to my mother and me. "I have a gift. And that gift is communication. The mailroom is beneath me. I don't know why I am there, or how this happened, so I will not allow it to be how I am seen. That's not me. I am the guy who has a job in communications. And it just so happens that the mailroom is part of the communications department, so, technically, I do work in communications. I don't think anyone needs to know that my part is sorting the mail."

His strange relationship to the truth was part of his Irish inheritance. He had a gift my Irish therapist calls "The Blarney." Not all Irish people have it, but it has something to do with the Irish way of storytelling—a gift for generating eloquent speech, including making shit up out of whole cloth when necessary, sometimes getting the truth confused, or getting carried away with talk, or maybe just being full of shit. Eddie's mastery of The Blarney was possibly part of his creativity, but it also really sucked sometimes.

In 2004, at a Christmas gathering of "friends" from his youth, Eddie, fronting as an executive in communications, decided his "go to" conversation topic would be the wonderful new invention, track changes. Unfortunately for him, the party was full of successful, real executives who had been using track changes since the 1980s. Eddie, however, had only just learned about it and so imagined it was new. He kept describing how to use it in detail, as if no one at the party had yet encountered it.

“Have you heard about track changes?” he’d ask.

And the person he was speaking to would respond half-seriously, “Sure, yeah,” as if the question was rhetorical and leading to something greater.

But it wasn’t.

Eddie would then launch into his routine no matter how anyone responded: “Track changes is this thing you can click on and it will keep track of different changes or deletions you make to a specific document. You can actually see, people can comment or suggest changes and you can accept them or delete them! It records all the changes and suggestions, and you can even restore things. You can change something and then undo it!”

My mother and I had to sit by and smile, gritting our teeth through the low-key horror.

It was painful and humiliating to watch the looks come over people’s faces as they realized what was happening. And of course, these people—people who had “made it” in the gross 1980s American Wall Street sense—were the inspiration for his need to lie in the first place. He cared so much what they thought of him. Everyone had “made it” but him. By their silent smirks, I knew that they found his humiliation entertaining. They just let him keep going, and when given any space to do so at all, Eddie always kept going.

*

Since my father’s retirement, the mail operations department has closed down, and the firm outsourced all mail services to a large mail sorting company in El Paso that uses the labor of day workers from Mexico.

A Reddit-style discussion board for people involved in the firm offers pages and pages of speculation about the outsourcing, everything from opinions about the company using labor from Ciudad Juárez to the idea that Texas’s lower humidity, compared to swampy southeastern Pennsylvania, might allow mail sorting to move faster by keeping envelopes from sticking together. I found out that all those great benefits that came with the job when my father worked it no longer exist.

*

My father was King of the Bullshitters. He raised me on the old Irish adage: *Never let the facts get in the way of the truth, and never let the truth get in the way of a good story.* Perhaps these are the rules of The Blarney: it's a hierarchy where facts are lowest, story is highest, and truth is somewhere in the middle. He lived by this. I was raised to think of the truth through a storytelling lens. This meant the "truth" was less about a moral calculation or a strict accounting of fact-on-fact, and more about what my words cause a listener to imagine and feel in their heart, and a desire to connect and be accepted socially.

The storyteller's work, as I understood it, was to tell the story that gets to the heart. If the facts don't give the feeling of the experience, then we reshape, remix, resize those facts. You may need to twist something to drive home a point, use hyperbole, create incredible images—many effects can work towards creating the truth. It's about the listener's feeling matching the feeling of the experience that led to the story. This roundabout path, the theory says, cuts to the heart of the matter more than facts do.

But I've had to unlearn a fair amount of what I learned from Eddie on truth. Too often he took it, I think, too far. But also, as his primary pupil, I've sometimes taken it too far. Because I believed this was how it worked. The biggest lies I ever told were sincere efforts to point to my most inexplicable truths. Sometimes this worked out, other times it ruined relationships.

For most of my life, I believed it was totally okay to say I was "from" any area of Philadelphia that I had ever lived in, if it had made a deep impression on me. Certain places have, I feel, entered my DNA. I take places into me; I learn them forever; they rewrite me. I've told people I was from Mayfair, Kensington, West Philly, and Norristown, because each of those places marked me deeply. But I re-mixed the facts in a style I learned from Eddie: I told Norristown stories as if they happened in Kensington, I told Kensington stories mixed with Norristown stories as if they happened in West Philly. All of it felt true when I said it. Some of it still does. But I understand many comrades believe that where one is "from" needs to be something like the address your parents filed taxes from for more than ten consecutive years of your life before the age of eighteen. I get it.

Where I'm from can't be where my grandmother kept me and my cousins loved me; it can't be where I felt safe and where I belonged; it can't be where I spent a year doing meth to avoid remembering what happened, gradually reducing myself to a skeleton; it can't be where I learned peo-

ple can live happily and functionally as anarchists in squats, and I never felt more liberated; it can only be the place I lived the longest before the age of eighteen, even though I reject it, because it rejected me, and good riddance, because its haunted ancestry has nothing to do with mine, and never did, and never will, and so I long repudiated it and excised it from the depth of my being. But yes, it must be that one, the place where the worst things happened; yes, that is where I am doomed to be “from.” And so I feel as if I am from nowhere in the end. I abdicate all my seats, afloat forever, odd of orbit, like Pluto: a raging half-planet no one can pin down.

For a while, in response to all this, I became a truth purist. A fact checker, a side-eyer of others’ wavering half-truths. But I learned that this, also, does not work. Everyone lies, almost constantly. Language doesn’t tell the truth; as Vico says, it is used to “make truth.” The poet George Oppen says “truth is the pursuit of it”—the pursuit, a process. You can write your truth one day, then return to it the next day and find it lacking. You remember what happened but your brother remembers it differently. You tell someone your story, then they retell it incorrectly at your funeral. In the end, many aspects of Eddie’s theory of truth bear out. People tell you what’s true for them. Or what they’ve decided to believe. Or the version of the past that will make you see them the way they want to be seen today, because it feels true to who they are today, however metaphorically.

Nonetheless, I now suffer from a hyper-vigilance around my every speech act. Is this true? Am I sure? Am I deluded right now? Am I nervously over-compensating? Meanwhile, I’ve converted my blarney skills into becoming a fiction writer. All my stories are remixes of facts, with various amounts of fabrication thrown in. Whether I’m great at fiction writing or not is beside the point, I was born for it. My truth is fiction.

I’ve come to believe Eddie’s self-mythologizing—and my own, by extension—ultimately derives from a long lineage of ancestral trauma. We are Irish; the Brits cut their colonizer teeth on us. It’s not just about Eddie refusing to admit his position in life. It’s also about the need to hide weaknesses, to avoid being discarded by family and society, a desperate need to fit in, a bid for validation and connection with others, and for survival. It’s wanting to be seen and valued, but not looked at too closely; to share (and shed) certain feelings without being compelled to directly repeat the worst of what has happened to you; to suggest the worst of what has happened to you without having to recount it; and to suture one’s broken self back to

the human group by trying to make oneself understood, by presenting the world with a version of yourself that you hope will track. Self-mythologizing is an act of defense through translation, telling stories as directions for how you want to be viewed, a cover for the rejected misfit in you, written by that misfit, however desperately or deludedly.

I don't mean to pin these issues to an ethnicity; these problems are ultimately human. But I can see The Blarney as a survival strategy, a way of fast-talking to get oneself out of trouble that stems from colonial oppression. And it's easy to see how this could evolve into a way to talk one's way through situations of shame and anxiety. It operates on the assumption that social life is less about having one's facts in order than it is about being preoccupied with, maybe even lost in, maps of human desire, obsession with belonging, looking for little signs of connection, knowing perception and language for the labile systems they are, and expressing oneself accordingly.

Once in my teens, I got myself in trouble by revealing facts about myself to cops who had arrested me. My father was not mad that I'd done something illegal, he was angry—and didn't speak to me for three days—because I had not come up with a story good enough to get myself out of trouble. He admired my friend Denise for denying the wine cooler in her hand was hers.

"At least she tried," he said.

I, foolishly, took a swig of my wine cooler and told the cops they were overreacting. That got me handcuffed. Lesson learned.

There is an ethics here, one that is easy to miss if you have a more puritanical, more actuarial take on life and language. The Irish don't simply *lie*, as WASP culture has historically loved to say. In my upbringing, it was repeated often that you should never lie about your feelings, never pretend to be someone's friend if you're not, never share others' secrets, and never break a promise. You had to be a person of your word in that regard, and emotionally honest always, at all costs, especially within your own community.

My father said often, with a stern austerity, sometimes even grabbing me by the arm, "Tell the facts when it's important," which, he explained, was when there are consequences that could materially affect people in a negative way. Then, to the best of your knowledge, you give the facts.

But otherwise, language is a creative art. For things like dealing with authorities who can harm you, or when trying to make the feeling of something understood, facts are labile, and are often not the truth. Facts never

“Racket on the Petals,” “Hedge Man,” “Vanishing Point Canto,” “Freddie Mercury in Paradiso,” “Jeanne Lee, Conspiracy”

Diane Mehta

Racket on the Petals

Nectarivorous creatures get their fill and buzz off
uncaringly; the slant of hours encroaches.
A shrub rose drunk on apricot, believing it is divine,
suffers unyielding passionate arrivals and yearns
to be confined, to shorten the sting of life, away from here.

So, the flower alone meets creatures in habit and habitat,
burdened by its scent, its silhouette all season
petaling and unpetaling, swarms of butterflies
doing as they please; no disaster, but what a racket
on the petals, bee-loud wings and hummingbirds vibrating.

How quickly we glissade past biographies—

the double-bloom chalice rose or a prickly wild one on the trail—
comforted by the glut of nectar pollinators drag out,
by a rose fulfilling its design: to be wedded, to exchange vows
without argument and without seeing.

Hedge Man

The gardener climbs a ladder, wiring floodlights
in to snip the darkness off and save us.
We think we are so rich, below hedges
trimmed; we believe in Galileo because we telescope
objects of desire and confirm their centrality.

We have lived here since the fourteenth century.
We are kings of pencil shavings and paper
gaming high designs; we word-build
in Scrabble and weep over apocalypse letters
that won't weave mechaniv into E or zock in O.

The floodlights swallow all the stars
we loved so much, but made within its shimmer
spotlights of our faces, dissolving behind us
with words and shapes we made at our tables,
knowledge in hand, believing we are so rich.

Vanishing Point Canto

Feeling the imprint of long-
angled light, I troubadour along,
apprehending rich love
in the labor of contemplation
unusually felt, and fall into its tempo;
splendor of nowhere and the beat.

Felicity is the poorest view.
Largesse these lofty years!
The undertaking of the soul—
walkabout ideas ensembling—
to shed all matter, cut my clothes,
be the fullness of what I do not know.

Wondering if the soundings are true
I send out four hymns
to find out what the thinking mind
says life is supposed to be about.
Contemplation is not the project!
Mystery is the echo but not the object.

Face on wrong, eyes out-of-socket,
I speak to souls that hear me think,
seeking fantasia and the if—
savage I live, savage is my exit
drumbeating; paradise is not an easy
place to be; paradise is No Place in me.

"No place" is the Empyrean in Dante's Paradiso canto 22; the phrase is a pun on exiting humankind and entering Paradise, which is beyond space and time. "I send out four hymns" references Tranströmer's "An Artist in the North," about the composer Edvard Grieg.

Freddie Mercury in Paradiso

"I sometimes wish I'd never been born at all!"

Freddie struts across the stage
in beautiful harmonies of himself.

Hearing Bohemian Rhapsody again,
I wonder what it means to be an outsider
in the one-act of yourself.

"Don't get manipulated by your public," Freddie said.
"You build up a sound, and that's all they want."

If ballad, bawdy energy are what harmony requires
on stage, you'd better prance and sing, or do it gospel,
and find your weirdest screaming heart—
each night is beautiful, each moment full of love.

By now he's finding harmonies unheard of,
rearranging his stomping, explosive art in paradisiacal
contours, in service to the giant heliotropic stage
of all pleasure, and all grace, playing another encore
to angel's applause, crooning
"I sometimes wish I'd never been born at all!"

POETRY

“Fallen,” “Mirror and Table”

Brian Kim Stefans

FALLEN

*Und in das Atmen der echten Gesichter
später, fällt nur ein Widerschein
—Rilke*

He fell through cavities of time,
the forlorn, the debater,
objects of Love just out of reach,
a parody, an exterminator,

and all was changed. Such history:
he thought Babel a paradise,
objects of Love named, unnamed,
a pulse enough to satisfy.

He'd heard of “rock bottom,” but he
ate stones. He found feed
in the air! He woke up later
covered in mucus, and bird shit.

He'd heard of “ride the tiger.”
Decades passed. A dizziness

replaced the rhythms with mathematics,
the words with sarcasm.

Objects of love just out of reach,
but he rejected the Adamic,
wouldn't name Her, her life,
the seconds wrought with trivialities.

He found feed in the air.
He was a secret entertainer.
He traded a red one for two blue ones.
He basked in the air conditioner.

MIRROR AND TABLE

an solchen Dingen habe ich schauen gelernt
—Rilke

There is a mirror—it doesn't reflect,
it sees. Forces acquire mass,
and the ashtray with azure patterns,
the clear wine glass that bleeds gradients

of color, the brown table, the closed book—
these are the mirror of attention,
the solid, evanescent foundation
of I—that might otherwise be a rumor.

The arm is taut on its puppet string,
the hands swim blurrily, independent slugs
centrifugally arrayed from the palms,
the knee chatters its up-and-down,

the spine complains about writing,

the gut is a tempest of eating—
these are assurances that the poem is not
a syllogism that goes on repeating.

The crickets' barbs through the screen door
are a balm for absented ears,
the trebly chatter of neighbors rehearsing
the latest shows are second hands,

the smoke that hovers feather-like
before a neurasthenic writer
are beats in an unproduced screenplay
about a Pronoun and its Master.

“Apostrophe,” “Lottery (I’ll never know)”

Kristin Robertson

Apostrophe

The four-year-old points a finger, dares you to speak,
dust particles whirl then spark in the afternoon sun.

Baby girl sees right through you. I invented
the silent treatment, recognize your game, even

in the hall, where now I listen but never hear you,
only her. She answers her own questions:

Did you meet her imaginary fruit bat? You did.
Is Jupiter still your favorite planet? Sure.

My love, I could send our daughter to her playroom
with Bats of the World or that planetarium thing

the three of us orbited for hours, the one where
built-to-scale wonders glow with the colors of rust

or vapor. If I could get you alone, and if you weren’t
a ghost, I’d stick my tongue down your ever-loving throat.

Lottery

Our stunning glitters are made up of a chunky crackle glitter which catches the light beautiful giving the ultimate sparkle effect on a sunny day –The Glitter Coffin Company

I'll never know the inside of one.
When I die, someone will ash me
off the stern of a shrimper in the Gulf
of Mexico or use my body to grow a tree.
But I still dream the processional dream:
pallbearers and me, a Las Vegas showgirl,
a fallen honest-to-god star. In the event
of this good death, they could sugar me
into a casket glittered like a speedboat—
sharkbite or sunrust in a slow crawl
behind the motorcycles' blue flash.
Sexy self-constellation. With my scratch
off winnings I order a box in each
of the twenty bespoke colors. Passersby:
Kill your engines for this catchpenny
magpie. Be still my beating heart.

In Praise of White Hair

Catherine Texier

In one of the last scenes of Gustave Flaubert's great coming of age novel *Sentimental Education*, the hero, Frédéric, is reunited after sixteen years with Madame Arnoux, the older, married woman he has loved since his twenties. She has come to visit him and they've gone for a walk, but "when they came in, Madame Arnoux removed her hat. The lamp, placed on a dresser, lit up her white hair. It felt like a blow to his chest... *something inexpressible, a repulsion and like the dread of incest... and the fear, later, to be disgusted... to be embarrassed to have such a mistress.*"

He steps away from her, rolls a cigarette. It's over.

I had no recollection of that scene when I decided, in March 2020, to stop dyeing my hair. But the horror of that "white hair" must have still festered deep in my psyche when I stared at the white roots, glowing like larva in the light, just as repulsive to me as to Frédéric. I had covered these roots with henna every two and a half weeks for more than twenty years.

I only realized my hair was turning when a stylist who was cutting my hair told me about one third of it was white. Her verdict was chilling. I wasn't ready for that. I was fifty. I had a new book out. I was getting divorced. A new life was awaiting me!

You can still cover with henna, she continued soothingly, but you may need to do a double application for full coverage. One third of white hair! That was a shock. How did it happen? My first thought was that I was al-

ready staying three hours with the henna on my head, every two and a half weeks, and a double application would take me half the day. But I ate all organic and I wasn't about to put chemicals on my head.

In Paris, in the 1970s, we—the counter-cultural girls devoted to natural food and products—discovered henna. It wasn't our moms' dye. It was the henna that women in the Maghreb—the North African countries that had been French colonies—and most Arab countries use to color their hair and make lovely, intricate designs on their hands and arms: ephemeral tattoos. Henna, made from the *Lawsonia inermis plant*, is a powder that, when mixed with water, forms a paste that adds copper highlights to the hair while strengthening the follicle.

I liked the earthy look, the herbal smell, how it would color your fingers orange-brown if you didn't wear gloves or rinse your hands right away. It mixed with the patchouli I dabbed on myself. Henna was a mood, not a dye. It felt cool and hip. It was ancestral! It was good for the hair! I took my little sack of henna with me when I traveled and mixed it with hot water and applied it to my hair and let it dry in the sun. When I went to Paris, I searched for henna in the eighteenth arrondissement, or in the Grand Mosque near the Jardin des Plantes, where it was sold in little packets alongside vials of kohl powder that I used to trace the inside of my eyelids with a tiny wooden stick to make a smoky eye.

Over time, I couldn't help but notice how brassy my hair began to look—no more subtle copper highlights but an orange tone particularly vibrant in pictures, and not in a good way. More like radioactive red. I had visions of older ladies with flamboyant hair, permed and cropped, nuclear rays of white roots glowing at the partition, that obscene “tell” that didn't fool anyone except, perhaps, for them.

I had managed to stay in good enough shape: exercise, healthy living, good energy, youthful looks. So on some level, I could continue to deny the years were passing. I wanted to pretend that I was forever 38 or 40—but that bush of blazing orange was betraying me.

I switched to other plant-based dyes that came off a little more subtle. But they were still fiery because they couldn't completely cover the white. It felt like a costume, not the way I wanted to present myself. Yet, I persisted. Facing my white hair head-on would have felt like facing death.

A few years ago, my daughter, then in her early twenties, stopped by and looked at my skull with concern, pointing to the roots. What's this? I can see your skull! Are you losing your hair? Are you going bald?

I felt sheepish, ashamed, caught in flagrante for not having tended to my feminine garden.

No, I said. It's my white hair. I have a lot of white hair.

I felt I had deceived her, covering my tracks (my roots) so well she hadn't even noticed, paid attention, and now the horrible truth was finally revealed.

Or, as she put it another time, in another circumstance: you're not so young anymore.

And here was the proof. Maybe I was lithe enough to climb my four flights of stairs but nature had spoken. The white was sprouting on my skull and had been for years. Enough of pretending to be young—including making a fool of myself or making bad decisions and having affairs with men twenty years younger.

Or living as if there was no tomorrow.

The power of that image—the sudden appearance of white hair, instantly turning a woman into a maternal, untouchable figure—is such that even now, 150 years after the publication of Flaubert's novel, it still sounds the death knell of a woman's seduction and *fuckability*.

I follow women who've gone gray on Instagram. Some are models who made their mark in the 1960s and 1970s and have never used color; they went natural from the very first white hair. Others are women who decided to #ditchthedye and document the process, week after week. They embrace their white hair with pride, even claiming it as an instrument of seduction, in the same spirit that LGBTQIA+ people have claimed the term queer, turning a slur into a positive self-label. Natural hair has taken off in the fashion world, where the silver models rack up contracts with big fashion and cosmetics houses.

I was watching them online, these women, and I was trying to project myself into their lives, standing at the precipice.

Every two and a half weeks, I picked up the metal container I'd brought back from France, containing the plant powder I would have to mix with water and rub on my hair like some concoction dating back to Roman times. And every two and a half weeks, I hesitated. I spread my hair apart to stare

at the white roots that kept pushing like weeds, inexorably, patiently, invisibly, mindlessly, day after day, the roots that had to be battled, the roots, that, if I turned my back for one second, if I missed the third week without dyeing, viciously asserted themselves, and I had to decide: color? or let it go? Invariably I would color.

In August 2019, at Orly on my way to Berlin, I saw a woman with a young girl I assumed was her granddaughter. She was French, she had pure white hair cut in a cool bob, and she was wearing wide gray chino trousers, a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up just so, and bright red sneakers. She was stunning. When I complimented her hair, she said she'd never dyed it.

And then it was March 2020 and the whole world shut down. New York City was in lockdown and at the two and a half week mark after my last dye job, which had been in February, I didn't even look at the metal container. I wasn't going to see anyone for weeks, except furtively, behind a mask, and only to take a walk along the East River to get some fresh air. It was still cold. I'd be wearing a beanie anyway.

I wore the beanie a long time.

I didn't know that hundreds of women, maybe thousands, had the same idea all over the world. Taking the plunge cold turkey. Some because they couldn't go to the hairstylist; others, like me, who needed that push.

Hair doesn't actually turn gray or white. As you get older, hydrogen peroxide (the same as your stylist uses to bleach your hair) naturally builds up in your follicles, blocking the production of melanin. Juxtaposed against the strands with melanin, the colorless hair appears gray or silver—or totally white when the whole head has lost its pigments.

My grandmother was born in 1893, and like most women of her generation, she didn't color her hair when it started going gray. That was for the floozies and tarts who were trying to artificially prolong their shelf-life. As a proper bourgeoisie, she had it permed, set, and rinsed blue at the salon to avoid the dreaded "yellowing" that was said to discolor white hair exposed to air and sun. The passage to gray, which, for her, probably happened in her fifties (I grew up with my grandparents and only remember her with gray hair) must have been an accepted, perhaps even welcome, new phase of

life, that of a grandmother. It was a natural part of aging.

I flew to France after she died. She was on her deathbed, prepared for the funeral, wrapped in the traditional shroud of Vendée, the province she came from, hair straight and white, plastered on her skull; it was a shock, as though her previously permed, gray hair had been yanked out of her skull like a wig. The plastered white hair was never meant to be seen in public. Her gray-blue hair hadn't been a wig, but how different is the constant dying of the roots, except that it's a wig made of your own hair?

The white hair—that glaring faux-pas, a regrettable capitulation to the ravages of time—is anathema to all the efforts to groom, to civilize nature, to mimic youth. A giving up: like these roots I saw once in Brighton Beach, in South Brooklyn, pushing through the sidewalk in front of a house, roots reaching out like tentacles under the cement slabs and lifting them, breaking them. Nature asserting its powers.

Coloring human hair, like adorning bodies with piercings and tattoos, dates as far back as images have been recorded, far into antiquity. I like to believe it's part of the desire to embellish ourselves and our surroundings, to tweak, improve, subvert, play with what nature has given us. It wasn't just about hiding gray hair. And it wasn't just women, either. The Vikings worshipped blond hair and often bleached their beards to a saffron yellow. The color of your hair marked your place in a certain social class, or tribe. Roman prostitutes were required to have blond hair. They could either bleach it or wear a wig. The Egyptians blackened theirs with a mix of lead oxide and slaked lime. The Romans mixed fermented leeches with vinegar. To cover the grays, they would mix ash, boiled walnuts shells, and earthworms. The Greeks favored light colors and used a mix of wood ash and vinegar or lye. When the Romans conquered Northern Europe, blond became the rage among the upper class, who would make expensive, intricate wigs from the hair of their blond prisoners of war and captured slaves: a symbol of Rome's subjugation of the barbarians. If they couldn't afford the wigs, both men and women applied bleaching agents, or sprinkled actual gold dust on their head. Or yellow flower pollen, for a cheaper, more bucolic, fix.

In medieval and Renaissance Italy, the ideal woman had golden hair and white skin, as we see in classic paintings of Venetian artists in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, as depicted in this poem by Petrarch (ca. 1327–

1368):

*le bionde treccie sopra 'l collo sciolte,
ov'ogni lacte perderia sua prova,
e le guancie ch'adorna un dolce foco.*

*Blond waves loose upon her neck,
where any milk would lose in competition,
and her cheeks adorned by a sweet fire.*

But since many Venetian women didn't have naturally blond hair, they, too, used elaborate concoctions to lighten their tresses.

Amazingly, hair dye recipes remained practically unchanged through the end of the nineteenth century. In a *Barbers' and Hair-Dressers' Private Recipe Book*, published in 1868, the list of products included cream of tartar, lard, silver nitrate, ammoniac, proto-nitrate of mercury, spirits of turpentine, sulfur, and lead.

All that was missing were the leeches.

But then everything changed at the turn of the twentieth century. A French chemist from Alsace, Eugène Schueller, discovered a new formula. The son of Parisian pastry shop owners, he was a brilliant chemistry student who graduated first in his class in 1904 from the Institute of Chemistry. He had taken a job as a lab assistant at the Sorbonne when he was befriended by a Parisian hairdresser who asked him to create a safer dye.

This is the story of L'Oréal, and it starts in 1907 in a Paris kitchen, *rue d'Alger*. Schueller put together the first synthetic hair dye "guaranteed without risk," mixed it at night, and sold it to hairdressers, who were still using the traditional and toxic combinations of henna, lead, and hydrogen peroxide. The secret to Schueller's dye was paraphenylenediamine (or PPD), a dye until then used to color fabrics. The base PPD is colorless and requires oxygen to become a dye; thus, PPD dyes are usually packaged in two bottles, one containing the dye and the other a developer or oxidizer.

By 1909, when he was 26, Schueller founded the *Société Française de Teintures Inoffensives pour Cheveux* (the French Company of Inoffensive Hair Dyes). An early believer in the power of advertising, he launched one

of the first major campaigns in the world, and quickly became famous for his gold hair tints.

He changed the name of his company to L'Oréal, after the hair style à l'auréole, which formed a kind of halo around the face and was the cool hairstyle in 1900. Within a few decades, L'Oréal had taken over the world.

A 1907 black and white advertising poster for L'Oréal features side by side drawings of a woman with a *garçonne* haircut. On the left, her hair is completely white and she looks sad, eyes downcast; on the right, her hair is dark and she has a bright smile and happy eyes. The copy underneath reads: *Plus un cheveu blanc, toujours trente ans* (no more white hair, thirty forever).

Schueller had single-handedly created a market that tapped into the deepest feminine desire: dyeing your hair was now safe, fast, easy, cool.

And you never had to look old again.

With L'Oréal's help, a mere forty years into the future, Madame Arnoux might have had a chance with Frédéric, and their lives might have taken a different turn.

My mother was of the L'Oréal generation. Born in Paris in 1915, she became a young woman in the 1930s, a decade after the flappers and the *garçonnes*, and dove head first into the chaotic new world de l'entre-deux-guerres. Rebelling against all bourgeois conventions, she was a free spirit, sexually adventurous, provocatively outspoken, proudly going door to door to sell an encyclopedia of left-wing poets to raise money for the French Communist party. She embraced the new hair colors with gusto.

I don't think I ever saw her natural hair. In black and white photos of her in her teens and twenties, it is dark. To my eyes, she was a diva. Like Picasso, she had her periods: her platinum blond period; her flamboyant red period; her brunette period. In the bathroom of my grandparents, whose house we lived in until I went to college, the smell of hydrogen peroxide and ammonia wafted up and down the stairs when she did her monthly bleach and dye. She probably never knew when her white hair started appearing. None of the women in her generation sported gray hair. By the time she was in her sixties and seventies, she settled on an ash blond that would blend in better with her white roots. That was the rule: after a "certain age," a woman would gradually lighten her hair to avoid the clash of white roots and darker hair. To avoid inadvertently striking a man to the chest.

The existential fear at the heart of the beauty industry is the fear of aging.

L'Oréal and Clairol (its American counterpart) were genius at exploiting it—as ruthlessly as the tobacco industry later advertised the Marlboro Man. A 1943 Clairol ad claims: “Gray hair, the heartless dictator. Without justice or kindness, gray hair can rule your life. It can choose your clothes—confine you to a few subdued colors. It can pick your friends—from the older set.”

By the 1940s and 1950s, the hair dye industry had won the battle: Gray hair was out. Gray hair was taboo. Gray hair made you look old. If you wanted to remain cool, attractive, relevant, you couldn't have gray hair. Letting your hair go natural meant you were giving up on seduction; worse, it meant that you were letting yourself go all around. To pot. To seed. To hell. To a social grave.

“There's a reason,” Nora Ephron wrote in *I Feel Bad About My Neck*, “why forty, fifty, and sixty don't look the way they used to, and it's not because of feminism, or better living through exercise. It's because of hair dye. In the 1950s, only seven percent of American women dyed their hair; today there are parts of Manhattan and Los Angeles where there are no gray-haired women at all.”

Sure, women have braved the taboo. Patti Smith with her mane of steel-colored hair; Christine Lagarde, president of European Central Bank, with her halo; Jane Campion, director of *The Piano* and *The Power of the Dog*, with her white locks. But they looked a little eccentric, a little witchy. Over the last ten years, I've seen quite a few women in New York go gray. Beautiful, artsy women. A sculptor who lives across the street from me, hopping on her bicycle, her long curly mane floating behind her in gray tendrils, like an Amazon. Still, it was the furthest thing from my mind to consider starting on that journey. If you had asked me, I would have said, it's great, it's radical, but not for me. I'll stay a redhead for a while, thank you. The curly redhead of my fantasy.

It took a complete lockdown caused by a global pandemic, with all hair salons and stores closed and no end in sight, to lift the taboo en masse.

By September 2021, there were enough women—at least in the United States—who had decided to #ditchthedye, for *The New York Times* to publish a photo portfolio. For women who were tempted, but didn't have it in them to go cold turkey, *Vogue* published “A Guide for Transitioning to Gray Hair, According to Pro Colorists” in October of that year. Something I would have thought to be simple and natural—just quit the dye, sit back, and basta!—revealed itself to be a journey full of obstacles, for clients and

colorists alike.

"The lockdown definitely helped encourage women," Jack Martin told *Vogue*. (His silver-haired clients include Jane Fonda and Andie MacDowell.) The go-to colorist for seamless gray transitions is a champion of silver strands. "Usually once a woman sees a little gray," he said, "they head straight to the salon. But while quarantining at home, they grew it."

Some of the techniques are worthy of the Romans or Egyptians, involving foiling in various places to mimic the salt/pepper pattern, color extractors, bleach, lowlights, or adding glamour streaks à la Susan Sontag. Even if you let your hair go natural over time, visits might be necessary to avoid the dreaded line between artificial color and new growth. Not to mention a complicated regimen of products, adding blue/purple tint to tone down the yellowing, cooling it off or warming it up to match your color. Also, a plethora of serums, creams, and sprays for moisture and texture.

If you thought going natural was a liberation, *Vogue* doesn't quite see it that way.

But I think this is not—or not entirely—about services and products. I think there's a real dread of letting go.

Seeing my white hair for the first time, a friend, who has let her hair go natural without ever dyeing it and now sports long salt and pepper locks, told me: It must have taken guts.

Alone in confinement, I watched my roots come in, a fraction of an inch, then half an inch. It was April 2020, still chilly in New York. If I had to go out, I would stick a beanie on my head. The groceries were being delivered, no contact. All work—teaching, meetings—was done from home, on Zoom. But when I looked at myself in full daylight, I saw an older woman overdue for a dye job, a woman whose roots not only betray her age but also her self-neglect. So these were the famous "roots" that had to be hidden at all costs! Looking at them closely, separating the strands of hair with my fingers, I let the shame wash over me in waves. I felt vulnerable au naturel, naked. Without a trace of makeup, roots *showing*. Then I thought of Helen Mirren. My age. Proudly white-haired. So what? It's only hair. I was curious. Who's underneath the carefully maintained armor? White hair. No makeup. In sweatpants and sweaters or a hoodie.

At first, the white was barely noticeable, a ray of light, a sprinkle of silver dust on top of my head, and if I brushed my hair to the side, I could pretend.

Or so I thought. I was part of a Zoom film meet every month, where someone would introduce the film and we would watch on our computers, then convene and discuss. After a couple of months, the host, a friend, suddenly caught the silver reflection on my head: Are you dyeing your hair platinum blonde?

By summer, I stopped thinking of the roots as shameful. I started seeing them as tender seedlings pushing towards the light. I wouldn't hide them, I wouldn't abort them; I would nurture them with good shampoos and oils. They took on a new meaning: a source of delight and pride. Once enough white surrounded my face, I saw myself as Debbie Harry, a rock n' roll girl. Marilyn Monroe, Jean Harlow in *Platinum Blonde*, Hollywood's first bombshell! Or even Kim Kardashian in a silver wig, Lady Gaga in her white updo, Kristen Stewart or Gwen Stefani: suddenly I got it, why women bleached their hair to that pale, tender silver or buttery yellow: the color of the bombshell, "blondes have more fun." The color of Titian's Madonnas. The luminosity it brings to the skin is unparalleled, practically neon-white, the otherworldly youthfulness of the hue. This angelic halo, pearly, almost iridescent.

Suddenly white hair didn't look like the color of aging women who had given up, the color of my grandmother's hair upon her death at 97, combed flat on her skull, the color of death or near-death, the color drained of all colors, the color of the skin drained of blood. The white became the color of seduction itself. It became the color of the angels, the color of baby blond hair, silky and silvery, glowing in the light. The color of purity, almost translucent in the sun.

It didn't feel like a try-out. It felt like it was it. A long-stifled desire bubbling to the surface. To let go of what had become an obligation. It felt like—dare I say—a coming out: what a relief not to have to hide anymore. Hide my roots, hide the visible signs of age. So yes, in a way, giving up: on a fake appearance of youth. Dyeing is akin to not revealing your age. Coquettishly keeping the mystery. Like the L'Oréal ad from the 1950s: "Is she or isn't she? Only her hairdresser knows for sure."

It's as though femininity is all about hiding, creating, adding, decorating. As though an unadorned woman is not a true woman but an unfinished first draft. Perhaps even not really a woman, but a simple female version of a male.

Unvarnished. Just a female animal.

I had all these thoughts in my head: I was toppling into old age. The message was imprinted so hard into my unconscious that when a beautiful and youthful French friend told me a few years back, if you let your hair go white, you will look ten years older, I couldn't do it.

But it was exactly that this was about: stop clutching at what I used to look like ... when, twenty, thirty years ago? Stop trying to freeze time. Stop controlling the outcome. Stop the obsessive grooming, like a formal garden à la française, not a branch out of place, cordon-pruned.

I realized what my notion of femininity had meant: a lifetime of controlling; compulsively hiding the blood that risks "showing" through white jeans or a pastel-colored skirt; compulsively checking to make sure my underwear wasn't "showing" under a short dress. All that checking and hiding to avoid appearing "sloppy" or "trash." The roots fall into that category: a lack of grooming, a horror of letting nature run its course—while men can let it all hang out. A woman always has to be in control, of herself, her man, her children, her sexuality. In French, we talk about a woman "qui se laisse aller," who lets herself go. A woman who isn't trying to control herself any longer, isn't trying to please men, to tend to her femininity. The white roots are all of that rolled into one scandalous "appearance" of what should never been seen, or acknowledged—as though femininity isn't part of natural life.

In a 2017 article in *Allure*, a thirty-nine-year-old editor said that leaving her gray hair alone was too much to face. "I guess letting them grow out feels like a risk," she explained. "I don't want to be an invisible, middle-aged woman! I want to still be a little bit young and vital." And she's not wrong. A recent survey commissioned by Gransnet (an over-fifty Internet community) reveals seven out of ten women feel "invisible" as they get older. 43% complained of being passed over when waiting to be served at a bar or pub; 31% of being ignored in shops; 25% of being ignored when entering a restaurant, garage, or other service business; and 24% of being passed over by staff when in a shop or service business.

I run into an acquaintance in the street, a lovely woman, maybe ten years younger than I am. Her hair is light brown. But in the sunlight, now that I have become observant, I see a graying shadow on the top of her head. She says it's not for her, that going gray. Her skin is pink, gray is blue-toned, it wouldn't match.

The first women I followed online were those who never colored their hair. They let the gray come gently, with curiosity; some, very early, in their thirties or forties, like the model Linda Rodin, known for the line of skin care and face oil Olio Lusso, which she created in her kitchen and sold to Estée Lauder—which recently shut it down. On Rodin, now in her early seventies, white hair is a glamorous signature. “I never dyed my hair,” she has explained. “People have been telling me since I was 35 that it’s aging, that I’d look younger if I colored it! It just works for me.”

So, too, Marian MoneyMaker: a Ford model in her late sixties, with long gray hair that she has never dyed. She became a model only about ten years ago. “My responsibility right now,” she told *Harper’s Bazaar* in 2021, “is to show women that they don’t have to be pigeon-holed into an old granny look with a ‘poodle-do.’ They don’t have to cut their hair short and go hide. I’m truly owning myself at this point, and I want all women to know they’re beautiful at every age.”

Some of the Instagram #silversisters do complicated things worthy of top colorists to “ease” the process—“hide” the transition—with a mix of “low-lights” and bleach to hide the dividing line between color and gray. But mostly they chart the journey, posting every week, measuring the time that has elapsed, six months, eighteen months, since the last dye. It’s like the time since the last cigarette or the last glass of bourbon. Like a sobriety journey. I follow them and read the comments.

It’s a virtual AA sisterhood.

Is dyeing an addiction? A dark commitment to affirm your youthfulness and femininity? Is going white the latest frontier? The ultimate liberation? Even edgier, more radical, than getting a tattoo?

It asserts that gray is just another color, and just as beautiful.

It’s all smoke and mirrors, that feminine construct. Even to ourselves. After decades on this earth, we believe the adult we finally created, after many trials and errors, with whom we finally made peace, loved, and identified is the one. This is me, we say, approving our look in the mirror at forty, fifty, even sixty. A good haircut, good color, toned body. As though we were a sculpture to which the artist has put their final touch. And then, almost imperceptibly, the wrinkles start to crease the skin, the white hairs multiply, and just like that, we find ourselves in a new ballgame. The carefully con-

structed feminine persona is crumbling; it takes more and more work to prop it up. At the risk of not recognizing ourselves.

It seems strange to me that, among the outwardly visible signs of aging—wrinkles, sagging neck, soft belly, jiggling triceps—the flash point is hair color. Perhaps because it's easiest to see and easiest to fix.

January 2022. It is now almost twenty-four months since I started on this journey—cold turkey, alone, without the help of any stylist or product. I happily lived with bicolor hair for a year and a half, including when the university went back to in-person. I have had my hair cut three times since. Once before the summer, and another time before Thanksgiving, and another in spring 2022, when all the faded red got cut away. My students noticed immediately that I'd had my hair cut and that the colored ends were gone. They said they'd liked the ombré, bicolor look, although they thought the white was cool, too. I only had support, and even enthusiasm, from young women and from men of all ages, or from fellow "white hair travelers." The only reservations I heard were from some women my age who still dye.

DIARY

Creve Coeur

Robert Fitterman

“‘Rigor of beauty’” is what sort of quest and what for and for whom?
“Why even speak of ‘I,’ he dreams, which interests me almost not at all?”

I come from a place called Creve Coeur, Missouri.
Creve Coeur, loosely translated from the French as
broken heart, a sleepy heartbroken suburb of St. Louis.
The namesake originates from a dubious myth—
a tortured love between an Osage woman
and a French fur trapper, presumably Laclede,
in this case, the founding father of St. Louis,
and it ends with the woman’s suicide. Sadly,
this legend is retold about a lot of midwestern lakes
and it lands not too far from Disney’s Pocahontas—
the 11th member of the Disney Princess line-up.
Legend has it that when the lovers were torn apart,
the woman leapt to her death off the waterfall
and into the bottom of Creve Coeur Lake.

The body of water, then, formed the shape of a broken heart.
Hmm, the face of the Falls groans: it’s a story
I have to live with. A thin stream trickles

gently down the forehead

of the Falls like the steps of the Uthina amphitheater, slick with some vague Missouri silt, a layer of green scum. The Creve Coeur Falls has many names, including Dripping Springs, but it's more like a ledge than a waterfall—it's not very high nor impressive. It never seemed ideal to me, or even possible, for a suicide—lovesick or otherwise.



The Falls is anxious to address other Creve Coeur myths: a corrupt citizen's advisory committee on parks, the 1917 race riots and massacre, the infamous Pruitt-Igoe disaster,

whatever atrocities hatched at the Creve Coeur Monsanto Headquarters.

Power walking changes lives. The best way to describe power walking is to think of it as a low-impact alternative to jogging. Basically, it takes regular walking and ups the intensity.

If you put two walkers next to each other,
and told one to move at a moderate pace
with their arms at their sides,
and told the other to increase their speed while
simultaneously pumping their arms—

that's the technique!
Known in these parts, the Creve Coeur walker,
powers up the sidewalks, at dusk, in the softest
of soft shoes, speeding past sleepy residents
who are still nestled in their soft bedrooms
in the softest homes
on Earth. God willing.

Powering onto the sprawling
Monsanto Headquarters service roads, he adjusts
the volume on his Walkman and lifts his chest to the sky!—
managers, engineers, chemists start to roll into the vast parking lot.
Swoosh! is the sound of the walker's poly-cotton track suit,



also called Tipped Fleece,
a deep burgundy offset nicely by his stark white
just-out-of-the-box New Balance.
He picks up his pace:

powering onto the sidewalk at Schnucks,
onward past McDonald's and into a future

Creve Coeur.

I. Schnucks: A Giant Among Supermarkets

This is why I don't do self-checkout. I was at Schnucks with my dad and he was overcharged for 2 out of 10 things. This happens almost every time we do self-checkout. Dad is somewhat hard of hearing, occasionally stubborn, so I get it when he insists on using self-checkout, but then I'm the one who has to stand in line at customer service and unload everything onto the counter. Ragu Pasta Sauce was 3 for \$5. Dad got 3 but was charged for \$8. Chicken sausages were buy one, get one free. Dad got 4 and was charged for 4. It's embarrassing, and to top everything else off, dad was trying to return a bad batch of flowers, and since it wasn't on his Schnucks Rewards Card they made him jump through hoops to exchange it. My dad's a sweetheart but highly principled, and if crossed he's known to slam a bouquet of Carnations onto the service counter and everyone stands around unaroused, like there's been *some misunderstanding*.

—"Say it. . ." nothing but
the friendly faces of employees.
Once upon a time, I worked at this Creve Coeur store
and once when I was out back for a cigarette break,
I set free a gold helium balloon trapped behind a dumpster.
In bubbly cursive it read: *Best Day Ever*.

From above, higher than the Schnucks rooftop,

high enough to make out the crack in the heart-shaped lake,
higher than the Schnucks dumpsters
and the crumbling asphalt, the shiny gold balloon,
long hair flowing, an unrequited love suicide,
mangled in the dead leaves, plastic bags,
and dried weeds, a tiny man, ancient, shouting—
twisting in the wind, the other side of the balloon reads:
Grand Opening! Every new mall like a fresh start.



Back then, there was a manager, Zach,
who'd intentionally hide trash in corners
to see if I was sweeping properly.
Um. . . I think you missed this area.

A man like that whose hair is very much in place,
like a tulip, knows how to bring an MBA degree
to grocery store management.

But Zach
was not a zip code unto himself.

Zach used to boast that he's worked in nearly every Schnucks location, either helping out or training new hires. He's seen good store management and bad store management, it usually depended on the area.

Zach claimed he wasn't prejudiced, but that the stores in North County, like in Ferguson or Spanish Lake, just weren't as up-to-speed as the ones in West County. He said that nearly every store had horrible deli department managers, except stores that had training locations—they always had top notch deli managers, especially in Kirkwood and O'Fallon.

Zach would tell horror stories from the deli departments, like when deli meats were dropped on the floor and then wiped off because the butchers felt that it was too much hassle to cut more. *Everything depended, Zach said, on the neighborhood.* Also, Zach complained that the Union was taking too much money, but *Right To Work* failed horribly, so it wasn't its fault for voting it down.

The Grand Opening of TGI Fridays
(now just Fridays having dropped the confusing "Thank God It's")
in the Westgate Mall felt like a big deal.

The buy one-entree-get-one-free coupon,
the stained-glass lighting fixtures,
the peppermint striped awning—
all added to the festive feeling.



My dad got the steak
and asked for the whiskey glaze on the side.
It came with the whiskey glaze on top, of course.

We anticipated a fuss,
but after a weighty pause, he approved
while pushing the sauce around with his knife.
I thought the dining room appeared dark

for a family restaurant.
The bar-waiting area was playing Gary Stewart's
I've got this drinkin' thing, to keep from thinkin' things. . .
It didn't help anything. Our table was sticky, too,
which reminded me of the whiskey glaze.

A few minutes later,
my Wednesday Burger arrived. I ordered it medium rare
and let's just leave it at that. The table next us
was enjoying an oversized basket of Nachos.
They looked pretty good. We talked about family in Memphis
and how hot it is there, how Uncle Leo called my mom flea
and how she enjoyed whatever
little attention she got.

I suggested we try the Nachos next time.

Mom and Dad looked like some horrible news
had just been delivered. Sorry I even mentioned
the Nachos,
and The Blue Raspberry Lemonade
was tempting no one at our table.

And it's a lonely thing... The power walker hums
along as he huffs. His arms swing with pride.
But it's the only thing. . . that heart broken
love suicide, the Falls, the memorial park
and the aerial view of the broken-hearted crack
at the mouth of the lake.

Howard Phillip Venable was a renowned ophthalmologist from Detroit. He graduated from medical school with honors in 1940 and became the first African American to earn an ophthalmology degree from New York University. In 1943, Venable moved to St. Louis and practiced as an eye doctor at the all-black Homer G. Phillips hospital, which had a reputation for training some of the best nurses and doctors in the country. Glaucoma and cataracts were a big problem in Black communities, so Venable wanted to prepare his residents to work with Black patients specifically.

One day in March of 1956, Dr. Venable saw a small ad in a local newspaper, promoting 22 vacant lots in Creve Coeur, an all-white community, sparsely populated with plenty of open space.

Venable purchased 2 of the lots. He paid up-front, in cash, and set about building his dream ranch-style home. Then some of Venable's colleagues at the hospital got interested in the area too. Soon, several more Black families started making plans to buy lots in Creve Coeur. But achieving the suburban dream was never going to come easy. Right away, some of the white residents in Creve Coeur started organizing against Venable and the other Black families. They devised a wholesome looking plan with a sinister twist to keep their new neighbors out. They would build a park on the lots. And they quickly raised \$25,000 amongst themselves to make it happen. This newly devised organization called itself the "Citizens Advisory Committee on Parks".

A wonder! A wonder!

The committee's first proposal stated that the city should use its police power to take any property in cases where a group of citizens was willing to donate half the cost to turn property into a public park. In short, the committee had turned to eminent domain—which is supposed to be how the US government takes private property for public use, but in reality was a tool used to maintain segregation. Within weeks, this committee sued Dr. Venable and made several attempts force him to surrender his property. Finally, he sold his new house to the county of Creve Coeur and started over.

His ranch house (the Furies hurl!)
reconfigured into a park
clubhouse

We were heading west on Ladue Rd. past the haves,
whose futures look bright
whose families have thrived
in the Ladue school district, then pass
some forgotten 70s condo units, where two
grown-ass men are
enjoying a front lawn lounge,

Bud Light koozies: *Life is sweet*
reads one T-shirt, *I Hate Everything*
reads the other,
likely from the George Strait song,
a kind of consolation prize,
or as my dad used to say,
a *constellation* prize!

A brief story: My mom worked for Studio Branca, very near Mason and Olive though I can't picture the exact coordinates as the boxes have shifted since—to the left of Dierbergs? same

strip mall as Pastries of Denmark? —and I'd have to go to work with her all the time as a child.

It surprises me in hindsight that she was allowed to do this—bring a 6 year-old kid into a spa setting where women are trying to relax—but there we were. And I'd just learned the word “uptight” and something about it really tickled me, perhaps one of the first compound words I'd really thought about or thought bizarre-sounding, nonsensical. So I sat in a vacant hair-cutting chair, spinning 'round, pumping myself up and down, while women would get their hair cut and colored and blown out. They'd offer niceties, I'd listen to their life a little bit, then hit 'em with: “Oh, you're just uptight.” That day was the last they ever let me back in. Calling a white suburbanite uptight is basically the closest thing we have to a slur, I guess. My mom nearly lost her job over it!

You know who never lost their job, though? My extremely racist stepdad who has nosed his way into a sergeant on the Ballwin police force after 20+ years there. He used to begrudgingly take me to St. Monica's elementary school as he listened to either the Bob and Tom show OR he had these CDs with songs about racist jokes. This is what pumped through my ears on the way to Catholic school.

Thanksgiving dinner with my mom's side was always like a smear campaign, like shooting lox in a brunchy barrel. She lives all the way out in Pacific, MO now, out past Six Flags, but we don't talk much anymore. If you think Creve Coeur is bad, the malintent out there is so thick you could slice it with a steak knife. In all of West County, the history is probably uglier but the camouflage is better. Growing up in Creve Coeur, though, the question wasn't: “I wonder what happened here in the past of this place?” but... “hey, who's got the best swimming pool?” At the front of the subdivision I grew up in is a massive cemetery, which has changed corporate ownership so many times I'm not sure what it's called anymore. You know the one, on Mason. I worked at a place called *Hair Saloon for Men* as a shoeshine boy, in between a cigar store and Lix—a pretty good custard shop, now long gone—attached to the Schnucks mall. My cousin, who would've been my age, has a memorial bench beside Creve Coeur Lake, apparently filled with the tears of that Osage woman (if memory serves, this is what the placard says... though if the eponymous conceit stayed true to itself, wouldn't that lake be pumped full of blood?). He died of a heroin overdose.

H. G.

And this, a more damaging myth: “By 1950, St. Louis City had reached its peak population forcing returning soldiers to look for housing in St. Louis County.

Wage-earners wanted bigger houses, more yard space, and places to park their new cars. The automobile industry had a vision of two cars for every suburban family:

one for dad to go to work, and one for mom to drive to the market or to the kids' activities.
The new affordability

in the automobile industry, along with the construction of highways, further pushed

the westward movement away from downtown.”

Put that expansion-to-the-suburbs myth
next to the real Harland Bartholomew,
urban planner, whose vision was
renovation by demolition.

For Bartholomew, the bulldozer
was the best tool for postwar
urban planning. His vision guaranteed
no people of color could inhabit
this westward movement

to the suburbs. In 1939,
St. Louis approved his proposal
to demolish over 20 square miles
of inner-city real estate,

over 400 apartment buildings
and houses, mostly renters, mostly
Black families. And with the destruction
of those homes, also came the destruction

of a bohemian culture
of bookstores and coffeehouses,
demolishing what was once
termed as the Greenwich Village

of the West. To this day,
massive stretches of downtown
St. Louis remain
either scorched or poorly

developed—handfuls of low-rise buildings
stand alone on empty lots and
stretches of highway on-ramps
headed west to the suburbs.

"Everybody has roots.

We go on living. We permit ourselves,"
Mr. Paterson, "to continue."
For who? For who wants to hear it?

What is the story, the myth again, the namesake?
Tell it, please. Can it be told with pictures?
Through The State Historical Society of Missouri?

Their archives? County libraries? court documents?
Can the story be told through transcripts,
revised transcripts, revised interpretations?

"Something else, something else the same."

THE GRRRREAT HISTORY of that

urban housing disaster

P R U I T T - I G O E !

Originally the Wendell O. Pruitt Homes and William Igoe Apartments

known together as Pruitt-Igoe

The most genteel part of this story is the namesake: Wendell O. Pruitt and William Igoe are not household names, or even well-known St. Louisans such as Josephine Baker, Maya Angelou, Chuck Berry, or William S. Burroughs. Pruitt and Igoe are known primarily for their association with the infamous Pruitt-Igoe housing project. They were chosen, in part, because the proposed units were to be segregated: the Wendell Pruitt homes (for Black residents, named after a heroic Black WWII military pilot) and the William Igoe apartments (for white residents, named after an Irish-American Congressman). This segregated proposal was deemed illegal by the time construction actually began on the projects, but the name stayed on.

Many would describe Pruitt-Igoe as the greatest disaster in postwar public housing. After WWII, the vast population of Black St. Louisans was zoned into the most depleted and uninhabitable areas of St. Louis, especially the northside. By the early 1950s, the municipal eyes of the city were looking towards tearing down the decayed northside and build-

ing an expansive housing project. Pruitt-Igoe was rolled out to be a modernist wonder: designed by Minoru Yamasaki (later of World Trade Center fame), 33 units of 11-stories complete with playgrounds, gardens and modern amenities. Yamasaki adhered to many of Le Corbusier's planning principles, but, due to the Korean War, the budget for building supplies had to be modified and cheaper materials were used. Still, Pruitt-Igoe was in the national spotlight. Architectural Forum praised it as: "the best high apartment of the year."

Pruitt-Igoe, however, is not famous for its Modernist design or its contribution to urban renewal, but, instead, it is an icon for a disastrous housing project failure. By the end of the 1960s, Pruitt-Igoe was infamous for its crime, gang violence, drug dealing, and general decay. There are many reasons that point to the failure of this expansive housing project, but nearly all of them include the lack of government funds to maintain the buildings. Dysfunctions in heating, elevators, garbage disposal, rodent control, are just a few of the failures that residents had to endure. The plumbing pipes were weather broken or frozen and, often, raw sewage appeared in the hallways. The compactors were perpetually broken, so the garbage piled up in the common areas. By the late 1960s, most of the units had missing windows in the dead of winter. As one former resident put it: "it's just unbelievable that they would spend the money to build these things but not the money to maintain them."

In addition to the failed infrastructure, Pruitt-Igoe residents had to endure humiliating regulations imposed by the Missouri Welfare Department. Most infamously was the "man in the house rules." At this time, the Missouri Welfare Department barred many fathers not just from living with their family, but from legally living in the state of Missouri! The "man in the house rules" prohibited women who received Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) from living with men. Women in Pruitt-Igoe were not allowed to have men in their apartments and receive ADC due to their perceived reproductive irresponsibility. Policymakers assumed that if men were in the home, poor women on welfare would inevitably have more children and cost taxpayers more money. So by 1959, women headed the majority of households in Pruitt-Igoe.

Also, this particular Pruitt-Igoe welfare office performed periodic visits to individual apartments to monitor women's actions. Women's apartments became a public space where the state intervened in and regulated the lives of women and their children. One resident, Quincie, recalled how representatives from the welfare office visited the family's apartment:

"We were visited to check on standards for cleanliness!

The walls always had to be painted white.

The welfare office restricted the type of food we bought,
the jobs we could apply for, surveillance was a constant fixture."

And then it all came crashing down, literally. In 1972, less than 20 years after it was erected, Pruitt-Igoe began to be demolished.

That April, the demolition of two towers was aired live on TV news and attracted great public interest around the world as a symbol of urban renewal gone wrong. Postmodern architectural historian Charles Jencks called its destruction: "the day Modern architecture died." As an aside, it is a strange coincidence that these two Yamasaki designs—Pruitt-Igoe and The World

Trade Center—were both exploded, toppled, and viewed around the world on TV. Since its demolition, more hidden information has surfaced about Pruitt-Igoe. In the mid 1950s, in order to test the geographic range of chemical or biological weapons, the US Army Chemical Corps sprayed zinc cadmium sulfide via blowers on the roofs of the Pruitt-Igoe buildings and at the nearby public schools. This was known as operation Large Area Coverage (or LAC, ironically).

At the time, local officials were told that the government was testing a smoke screen that could shield St. Louis from aerial observation in case the Russians attacked. But in 1994, the government admitted the tests were part of a biological weapons program and St. Louis was chosen because it bore some resemblance to Russian cities that the U.S. might attack.

On former resident of Pruitt-Igoe, Doris, was a baby when her father died inexplicably in 1955. She recalled a summer day playing baseball with other kids in the street when a squadron of green Army planes flew close to the ground and dropped a powdery substance. She went inside, washed the dusty film off her face and arms, then went back out to play. She watched four siblings die of cancer, and she battled four types of cancer—breast, thyroid, skin and uterine.



Is there a right way to power walk?

Any movement, no matter what you do,
is better than none. But if you want to get faster
and fitter, then it does make sense to pay attention
to your walking form.

There's plenty to think about
from head to toe:
how your feet hit the ground, the movement
of your hips, the angle you lean,
the swing of your arms,
even the direction of your gaze.

II. Sunday in Creve Coeur Memorial Park

Outside

of Furious 7

the entire Fast & Furious

franchise is just so-so, the power walker muses
as he goes over

the opening scene carnage:

two hospital workers huddled

behind an EKG machine—

an armed SWAT team slain
and scattered about the hospital
hallways, elevators, lobby

—the sinister assassin casually walking away from the hospital,
back turned to the grenade about to explode. . .

—BOOM! screeching away
in his Jaguar F-Type Coupé R!

The power walker shakes off the difference
between here and there

and strides ahead with a dedicated pace
along the Creve Coeur Lake path.
It's the quietest place on earth. He hums the chorus
of a Doobie Bros tune to drown out the bloody Furious scene.

Some dogs bark.

No one cares
about who you are, or who you say you are—
they care about belonging and they care about who
can accelerate that for them, and who can blame them
for wanting to feel like they belong and who. . .

Yadda! Yadda! Yadda!

—the world is harsh
and the comforts
are few!

'76 was the same year
I worked as a Sea Hatch busboy—an upscale
seafood restaurant in the Westgate Plaza:
half shopping mall, half corporate park with a Marriott.
According to the menu, the Sea Hatch legend reads:
"Spawned in the fresh clear waters of the oceans
of the world and then tenderly harvested
and air freighted to our doors. . .
If you look about we think you will notice
how management combed the world, literally,
to acquire many of our accouterments.
For example, our dining tables are all ship hatches
recovered from sunken vessels in the Caribbean,
brought to St. Louis, sand-blasted,
and then treated with a special epoxy to expose
the magnificent oak graining."

Sometimes after my Sea Hatch shift ended, my brother would pick me up and take me downtown to Herbie's. In the 70s, Herbie's was the gay disco in St. Louis. My brother would sneak me in and we'd hurry upstairs to the dancefloor. For \$5 you could buy a small bottle of amyl nitrite, poppers, from the DJ. Everybody had poppers. The dancefloor swayed like a

fish tank. One night, there was a police raid and the DJ cut off Gloria Gaynor's Never Can Say Goodbye to announce: everyone underage get out! No one left; everyone started digging through pockets for their Herbie's membership cards. After that night, Herbie's become stricter and had a doorman. The next time I went there, I was refused entry and my brother had to call me a taxi to go home—a taxi in Creve Coeur? What a scandal! A few years later, two of the managers at Herbie's died of AIDS, and they closed down shortly after. And a few years after that, my brother also died of AIDS.

American mink, river otter, yellow coneflower,
rose turtlehead, plains pocket gopher, red squirrel,
Bagel Factory, pied-billed grebe, woodland vole,

The Global

Quesadilla Company, eastern cottontail, muskrat,
Il Bel Lago, southern bog lemming, Pasta House Co.,
pine warbler, Lion's Choice.

On a stone bench by the lake, a young guy, maybe 16, strumming his guitar, and a bigger guy, with a thick beard (for his age) is standing next to him singing along—a proud and gregarious baritone. The song is a duet about rejecting fatherly advice. Some more friends mosey around the lake's edge: a few Imo pizza boxes, Marlboros, Busch beer... it could almost be a picnic, except for that one dude, his name escapes me, wasted on quaaludes, flicking his cigarette into the void. *Balthazar!* That kid's name was Balthazar!

But everyone called him Ballsy,
which, of course, he didn't like. I also heard him called Belief
because his father was a Pastor, anyway I'm told he now runs
a gun-shop out of a Sunoco station in Crestwood.

Dear H: We cannot ignore your honest letter and request to further discuss Provel cheese here. But there's a lot to explain if you're not from St. Louis. Firstly, let's be clear: it's disgusting and it's delicious. Even in our Gateway to the West city, few folks really know what Provel is, besides that it's smothered on pizzas and appears, mysteriously, like cheese worms, on many St. Louis salads at Italian restaurants. For starters, Provel is not even legally cheese. According to the FDA, Provel can't even be classified as cheese because it doesn't meet the requirements. So when I say "cheese," I'm really talking about Provel's official categorization: "pasteurized processed cheese."

Despite the popular myth that Provel is a combination of provolone and mozzarella, it's actually a mix of white cheddar, Swiss, and provolone cheeses (but doesn't taste like any of the

three). With a low melting point and gooey texture, Provel is used on most of the pizza in St. Louis and when it cools down, it becomes kind of like a plastic-y buttery substance.

"People from St. Louis love it," said the owner of Joe Fassi Sausage & Sandwich Factory on the Hill, the city's Italian neighborhood. "When we switched to provolone, people wanted the Provel." Others comment that Provel is a bit sharper: "Provel has more bite, more smokiness, more tang than, say, mozzarella," says a researcher at the St. Louis Central Library. It's a mysterious cheese my friend, no doubt.

In Autumn, the red and yellow leaves rest
on the cracked face of the Falls. *Pay attention*
the Falls calls out the squirrels, *no one*
is saying the circumstances make good impossible.

Newlyweds pictured on glossy brochure

holding hands, a wavy blonde
affluence, her bright print dress,
his striped bell-bottoms, leaning against
the stone—

combating waking

hours unknown death

"piecemeal."

Under a clump of bushes, two teenagers are
in love, they look up at the stars. . .
it's around midnight. . .

they talk but they stop suddenly.

Four orbs cross the night sky
—one announces how fucked up he is
and slams the Bronco truck door.

The sound of gravel turning
beneath their boots,

unsettling the serenity of the lake.
The lovers behind the bushes stay

still. . .

one last stoned
guffaw wild in the distance. . .

It's so quiet, can you hear?
The face of the Falls is rested,

the folds in the limestone, more
the majestic wrinkles of an elephant than
the eroding steps of an ancient ruin.

Is haunting the thing that doesn't last?
The dreaded aura around the parked truck?
Where did they go this late?

Does the park ever close?
What's the best way back to Fee Fee Road?

Walking —

A different day but the same trail, the power walker takes great pleasure in the routine
of his Sunday exercise above the bluffs, looking down on the empty
gravel parking lot littered with cans of beer.

Getting back to love, or more
accurately, love loss, since everybody is singing about it,

making up stories about the heartbroken

leap from the Falls—who's there?

Up here.

A cop points
to a sign nailed
to a tree: *here lies the city!*

“Hunger,” “Red Bath,” It Is Not a Bridge,” “The Hart”

Sarah Maclay

Hunger

The slip was not satin, but poppy.
A linen sky gone pale and the long
cascading drapes and walls that same cool white
but the cypress, its fallen needles, the rooftops
were umber, the fence, the beginning of night:
small, invisible cries, and like a wing, that wooden
fence grew large with shadow as its shape
entered the window, umber,
amber bulbs exposed below
the flaring black shade,
plump with filament, lit, pendulous
and, it seemed, beginning to rise
as the languor of too many months-without-end—
enforced, unnatural languor—
had gathered, like silk, into the crack of thigh
against bent knee, the seam of fleshy upper arm,
crease of elbow, the mystery
of triangle made by the shade of red cloth fallen high over leg,
the shape the covered nipples made as the breasts splayed

to balance a hand flung backward, out of sight and
into foreshadowing, into the scent of the ganja filling the hallway
—nearly strong as skunk—curving its way below the door and into the room
through the rough-hewn gap where light crept through at night
across the closed face, brow held tight as scar above the nose,
kohled eyes focused by a dust mote on the floor or the inner
lip of the terracotta urn.
Scent of sugar, sweat, tobacco seeping through the old pipes,
clinging to the pillows like a second skin.
Galangal nights. Arpeggiated dawn.
Empty Newport pack on the hellstrip.
Mind like ribbons. Leather bangs.
Time beyond girdle, the giving up,
the belly abundant, the giving in,
again, again, again, again, again.

Red Bath

It bothers you, the ocean—
the thousand-thousand surfaces colliding in cold light,
the way the water seems unjoined
and distant—
not because of looking down from this great height,
but something else.
They've put you in first class.
You don't feel first class—
or, really, anything.
But you can't stop thinking—turning over
and over that online article
about Bonnard, the recent exhibition, and that painting:

two lovers—

one about to be his wife
at the base of the picture,
facing in, three-quarter profile,
something else occluded

in the brushstroke, yes, but brushstroke as execution

of the same perception darkening
his gaze, much later, in that angular
and razorlike self-portrait
in the mirror of the bathroom,
as though shaving or about to shave.

The other lover, central, is a source of light—

several alterations later maybe it's grown hard
to identify the exact measurements and colors
of the eyes—but their effect is unmistakable. Recognized.

And maybe her hair
was really that bright—more light than pale, more midday
haystack under sun than moon, her face a ruddy
outdoor-colored hue of pink.
It's her effect
he gets at with his brush, more than her features.

We'd recognize her even
in an airport, even from the back.
Or from the side.

Or from a whiff of something emanating
like perfume—not scent, exactly. Something else.

And as you recall the many tiny shingle-lights of paint

and how they pull the feeling of a moment
closer than the canvas, almost like a hologram,

you begin to see more clearly something far below the ocean
—or its surface—something vaguely red, not bright,
but like the color
of old blood, dried blood—

perhaps an immense encampment
of kelp or maybe, after all, the sea incarnadine, incarnate

as a low animal, amorphous, bigger than a whale, below the topaz—sea
grass?

the water itself?—stretching for miles beneath the troubled, vacant surface
now grown clear or opaline or gray—

a vast and transparent collection
from the world's spittoons,
windowing the lower layer of self.

Some say she shot herself, the blonde—designed the moment, the tableau
for him to see.

Others suggest that when he finally chose, conclusively, she arranged
a far more fluid exit in the bath—

different in tone from the ones he painted, would keep paint-
ing
of the chosen, who remained, a constant presence, hovering near doorways
in glances, or profile, or silhouette, or partially

hidden or rearranged in the tub by the clean refractions
of yellows and sea-green blues, her body,

some observe, never quite coherent
as body, anatomically adrift,
almost melting into the thicker warmth
of the fleshlight of the afternoon,

hard to make out, precisely,
or cut off above the legs—
as happens when one is walking casually by an open door,
after cradling, say, in one's hands, a tiny dachshund, like a second beating
heart,
and remembers to look in:
never vivid. Never whole. Never, ever, a ghost.

And you drink the coffee as if
you're drinking coffee, though
you can't make out the taste

as you wonder how he'd sketch the almost
browning
sea
on the napkin, as they say he used to do,
how the brush would catch the splitting,
untethered
surfaces in light, this ruffling
of these almost-iron
shifting shavings of some giant knife,
or the gradual seeping up of those other colors.

It Is Not a Bridge

The bed red wood with scrolls —along the side, black ink—

the bed or the coffin above the river— the water filled with
bats

—or birds—

I stand on it— on top of the red wood bed above the river

in wind— my hair—long, black— and all of the layers of my
clothes—

swirling in wind like some cubist kimono —the swirling squares of my
robes

and maybe the blankets I am now standing in as I raise my white
sword—

my sword, my reed —my quill— long white yellow

—as I raise my long sword toward the fish above my head

riding my sleeve like a sleigh, like a basket— riding my sleeve

like a silk bassinette —that whiskerfish ready to jump in the water

before I fall before I strike—

The Hart

—And I to you of a white goat . . .
(Sappho, tr. Carson)

And so I imagined the way we'd come across him there,
the creature—
gazing at us squarely, loosely chained
—that palimpsest of horn
a singular, curling pentimento—
his throne, a bed of rosemary and bracken
and birdlime.
It will not surprise you that he caught us staring—
or that this was the way he simply caught us.
You will remember—I'm certain—how he wore his crown:
like a cuff.
There was the way his hooves were split
and the way he opened time.
We had to notice that the sky of his neck
was golden: a collar:
how it blended perfectly
into the metal expanse of light.
Sound was the water flowing from the fountain—
steady sound.
Runes had fallen like petals
from the roses.
You will, of course, receive this
(already know it).
Mood rang through the moon—
an oval in daylight,
sinking slow.
This is realism.
Under the fragrant rosemary.
The fog opens, closes.
We live inside these hills.

FICTION

The Depressed Baby

Elizabeth Crane

The depressed baby is not actually depressed, but he is a baby. His mom will consider his expressionless little face and it's true, this baby is not a smiley baby, but the depressed baby's mom takes this to mean something other than what it is, which is just that this baby's worldview is maybe a little more advanced than his language. The depressed baby is just not going to smile for no reason. This is his plain face.

Questions

The depressed baby's mom will literally and regularly ask the baby questions like *What do you have to be depressed about, baby?* or *Why so down?* and the baby has some questions too, like why does she always bring this up. He's not lying there moping in his crib. He engages with her and everyone else, as well as with his blocks and the bead thingies and even the stupid mobile, at least when the cat gets in and bats at it. (But here's a question: do mobile-makers think all babies are exclusively interested in clouds and kittens and ladybugs and terrible plinky music?) In the tub, he splashes, and laughs and laughs when the water goes all over. That's funny shit! The baby is fine; he's just a little more serious than the next baby.

Tones and Percentiles

The depressed baby does not understand a fair number of the words said by adults, but his comprehension of tone is in the best percentile. The depressed baby knows about percentiles from his visits to the pediatrician, but he can't remember whether the good percentile is the lowest number or the highest number; he can only remember the pediatrician's tone, which he feels has an edge of condescension. The depressed baby wonders why words are even necessary when tone tells him everything he feels he needs to know. His mother has been waiting a long time to hear the baby say *mama* or *dada*, *mama* first she hopes, but she's going to have to keep waiting. The depressed baby will use words only when he feels it's critical. There is a range of tone in the baby's home, for example; he has a toddler sister whose tone is very consistently bright and also always on, unless she is asleep. So sometimes that's a lot. The mom's tone is also often bright, but has a cast of artifice. The amalgam of the parents' tones is on the dull side, hard to parse out, especially when they're in the next room, not offensive but no lullaby either, with an odd staying power, like a weird chemical after-taste.

Worldview

The fact is, though he truly is not depressed, the baby, both outside and at home, has a clear, if baby-level understanding that the world is not a perfect place. He doesn't look up at birds chirping or flowers blooming and coo at the beauty of it all, though he absolutely sees beauty. He just has a more complex idea of beauty than the next baby.

The Cat and The Dog and The Dad

The depressed baby loves the cat and the dog equally, for different reasons. The dog is old and slow, and the depressed baby weirdly feels a bit of a kinship there, and he likes the texture of his fur, which is pleasantly scratchy on top and smooth on his droopy belly. The depressed baby and the dog can just kind of hang out and vibe. The cat has actually been known to make the depressed baby smile, but no one in the family has ever seen this. But he thinks it's high comedy when the cat comes into his room

during naptime. The cat has this way of sauntering that cats do, where it looks like she's just walking around and climbing on things, deciding where to settle in for a bit, until you realize she's looking for the perfect item to bat off a shelf. That time she batted that stupid, google-eyed stuffed giraffe off the dresser made him laugh so hard. Then the dad heard him laughing on the baby monitor and came to pick him up from his nap. *I knew you weren't depressed*, he said to the baby, like it was a secret between them.

Books

Both of the depressed baby's parents as well as his sister read books to him, and he considers himself a big reader, but their choice of books often displeases him. Head, eyes, tummy, knees, got it, snore, plus those dreadful shiny pages, *Pthhbbbpt!* Is there really a big baby audience for this? Even when they read him books with stories, there are no real arcs, in his opinion, oh no, will the hippo learn to share his watermelon with his new friend? Will the used car with the missing headlight ever get picked from the used car lot? Will the sun get over their rainy mood and come up ever again? Is there no other baby in the world who would love to read about what happens when the sun stops coming up? The baby may not know there are words for this, but he does understand that if the sun didn't go up and down, the light on things he was interested in looking at would maybe not be as interesting. (What the baby does not understand: photosynthesis, or anything like that. Not really. But if it were part of a sun not coming up book, he would be interested in it for sure.)

The illustrations leave the baby with almost a baby headache, primary colors all the time, nobody giving babies any credit for appreciation of nuance there either. Because the depressed baby is not ready to speak, he has tried different methods to indicate his book preferences, such as throwing a book on the floor or pulling an art book off the coffee table; even just studying the covers of the art books, there are bolder colors on the Basquiat cover, but their composition doesn't insult his intelligence; it inspires questions, for example, if there was such a thing as a depressed baby, Francesca Woodman might have been the one. He bets she was, at the very least, as misunderstood a baby as he is. Anyway, the point is, those photographs are black and white and if he could, he'd just look at the art books over and over. He'd know everything he needed to know and maybe if they

just let him do that instead of snatching the books away or putting them up high just because his fingers don't work as well as yours, he'd smile for you. But he hasn't resorted to that yet, because the depressed baby might not be depressed but he is stubborn. Thank god they finally moved past those stupid little square books his sister obviously chewed on when they were hers because she was probably hoping they tasted better than the dreadful content inside.

The baby had some small hope that he would be recognized as pensive rather than depressed when his parents read him a book of baby facial expressions (honestly, again, so basic, *sad, angry, happy, the end*, though in this six-page book, pensive is arguably a real plot twist). His motor skills failed to land his little fist on the pensive part of the page in such a way as to clearly convey *This is me. You're seeing this as depression but I'm this*, but he leaves his hand there long enough that the dad appears to get it. *He's pensive! Yes you are, you're our little pensive baby!* The mom shakes her head, unconvinced. *I still think he's depressed. Nah*, the dad says, looking back at the baby. *You're just thinkin' about stuff, arentcha baby?* he says. The baby has never felt so seen. *It's his resting baby face!* he says to the mom, cracking himself up.

The Depressed Baby Is in Love

The depressed baby's sister's best friend is Riley, who lives next door. Riley is magnificent, with long and messy brown hair. Riley is being raised with they pronouns until they decide otherwise. The depressed baby knows nothing about this. He is aware that he has a physical self, less so about how anyone makes meaning of its individual components. He has heard his mother call Riley she more than once and then correct herself to they as though this is an inconvenience, but how he feels about Riley is entirely unrelated to their unknown components. Again, words aren't the baby's top priority, but his love for Riley is about their magical essence, and if he did choose to use words, he would for sure call Riley whatever Riley wanted to be called. The depressed baby is called so many things and no one is asking for his input on that, son, brother, baby, boy, he, it all feels meaningless to him, just a way for them not to say *Hey you*, though he might prefer *Hey you* to *Depressed*.

The depressed baby's sister loves her brother, but not as much when she

wants to play alone with Riley. But Riley loves to pretend the depressed baby is their baby, and the depressed baby, who talks a big game about nuance, cannot tell that how Riley feels about the baby is not the same as how the baby feels about Riley. When Riley calls him *Baby*, it sounds to him like a song, like a pet name, not like the thing that he is. The depressed baby is in love.

The Pediatrician

The dad and the mom take the baby to the pediatrician however often it is they do, seems like a lot, though the baby doesn't know if it's more or less than other baby checkups. (It is.) Because the baby still doesn't talk, the mom continues to be concerned about his development, though each time, the doctor proclaims him healthy and showing no signs of unusually delayed development. *But some babies are taking steps by now, aren't they?* she asks. *Sure*, the pediatrician says, *but there really is a range of ages where this happens. Your baby is fine. He crawls, he sits up, he can see and hear, he stands up, don't worry.* Unknown to everyone involved, in the middle of the night, the baby has stood and taken steps around his crib one or two times just to see how he felt about it before drowsily lying back down. So late, he'd thought, where am I going anyway.

The Sign Language Experiment

Not long after this when he still hasn't said any words, the mother takes him to a developmental specialist who does further tests and again finds no cognitive differences, assuring the mother that the baby is still well within the range of when babies say their first words. The depressed baby thinks about fucking with the doctor and his mother, maybe pointing to an image of a shoe when asked which one is the banana, that kind of thing, but he does want them to know he is smart, which unfortunately leads to the sign language experiment. It is then that he knows the jig is about to be up, that it would be easier to just start speaking than to learn a whole new language.

Words

His first one, finally, is *No*, which comes not long after the sign language

experiment begins, and is very specifically about continuing the sign language experiment. His mother is relieved, excited actually. *No! Yes! Haha-hahaha!* But as soon as he decides to say it, it's the only word he says for a while. He knows what it means, and only uses it when he means it, which is often, but you'd be surprised how far *No* can go when it's the only word you can say, because think about it. *No* makes the baby a little drunk with power actually, because he's able to get almost everything he wants with just this one word. But when he tires of saying no to the same old tired ass books they read to him night after night, he decides to speak his first full sentences. *You don't get it, the baby says. I like art. Just let me see the art.*

Oh! Oh! the mom says. Her idea is to get the baby some baby-level art books, but the dad knows what the baby means. The mom and the dad quietly mumble some sounds to each other as though the baby isn't right there. He doesn't know what's being said but their buzzy tone indicates that even though he's finally asked directly for his needs to be met, it still may not happen. And sure enough, the mom brings home some art books for babies which are still super basic, so the dad secretly shows the baby the grown up art books once or twice. Some of the text is dense and doesn't even make sense to the dad. The depressed baby doesn't care that much about the words though; that's just a way for them to stay on the pages longer, to hang with his dad longer. The baby is for sure going to be an artist when he grows up.

The Dad and the New Dad

One day the dad is not there, and the next day there is some new guy. It may be the case that it's not quite this speedy, as the baby's sense of time is not as good as his sense of tone. The baby did notice as the dull tone of his parents became silence, and that he saw the dad less often, and then never. He wishes he had said *Dada* sooner maybe, to try to get some intel on that. *New Dada* is the entirety of the story he is given. He's thinking about throwing some new words out there soon though, because he wonders.

Riley Again

Today is one the best days of the depressed baby's life so far, because

Riley shows him a Vivian Maier book while he sits in their lap. Riley tells the baby that this book is from the depression era because they just learned about it from watching *Paper Moon* and now they think anything in black and white is depression era. Riley doesn't read the words because they can't read either, but they'll try to describe what they see in the images, or make up a little story about it.

This little girl is dirty today because she got in a fight with a bad kid from down the street, but she stopped when he gave her this watch. Also this little girl is prolly a they but back in these times you could only be a she or a he, but this kid would throw themself on the floor when you tried to put them in any kind of dress, which is why they're wearing this t-shirt. This poodle is waiting for someone to help him make a phone call. This is what phones used to look like in old times, baby, you had to go all the way out to the street to call someone. This poodle hasn't talked to his brother for a really long time. But no one will help him because he's a poodle.

Relatable, thinks the baby.

Later

The baby decides today is the day. *I know you're not my real dad*, he says to the new dad. *Where is my old dad*, the baby asks him.

Gloria! the new dad calls into the next room, handing off the baby when the mother comes in. *He knows*, the new dad says.

It's lunchtime, the baby's mom says. *We'll talk about this later.*

Later comes and goes.

A Bad Day

It starts out great, Riley reading the baby a Saul Leiter book, but then they take the opportunity to break some news by pointing to a blurry street scene. *We're moving to here*, Riley says. *This place is called New York.* Much like his concept of time, his concept of distance is about as blurry as the photo, so for all he knows, New York is only a few blocks away. But then Riley tells the baby that they'll miss him. Had Riley not made any comment on the photo, the baby might have lingered on his appreciation of the colors, the composition, the mood, but *New York* and *miss* you fuck his shit up, even though he still doesn't know what *miss* means. The tone of this

miss is giving off a new kind of bad vibe. The baby is still not depressed, but he is heartbroken and sad.

Up to now he's been mostly a What baby but he's going to be a Why baby real soon, wistfully looking back on those simpler What days.

The Sister Is No Help

Where's dad? His sister hasn't been given much more information about it either, although the mom has adjusted her level of non-information to be age-appropriate for a first-grader.

Mommy told me he's in a better place now but she was trying not to cry so I dunno how much better it could be. "You'll understand when you grow up" was what I was told, the least true words said by parents across time and around the world. She said she'd tell me more when I'm bigger so I'll tell you as soon as I know.

Do you think dad moved away to New York with Riley?

No, they would have said.

What the baby doesn't have words for even in his own head: How could it be better without us?

Bigger

That bigger thing floats around the baby's brain for a while. He knows what miss means now. He misses Riley, he misses his dad, and he really wants to get a grip on this better place thing. Going by the big people he knows, nothing seems better for having the extra mass. He wonders if staying small is an option.

Baby Asks New Dada About Old Dada Again

It's not my place to say, baby.

Take me to your place to say, the baby answers, and tell me there.

POETRY

“Nat Turner’s Dream,” “The Morning Sky,” “More Words,” and “On Television”

W.S. Di Piero

NAT TURNER’S DREAM

was not a dream. In daily visions blood fell
“in the form of dew” that ran like branch
to root: across the heavens, stout angels
black and white hacked each other with bowie knives
and machetes. The blood caught fire like dead leaves.
The warrior seraphs burned but didn’t expire.

Their dew ran through bean rows and indigo,
and soon they got new Springfields and minié balls
that splintered bones and doors. When he was hanged
from a tree in Jerusalem, his angels sang
blood hymns they still sing while white and black
kill among the birch and larch. He saw that, too.

THE MORNING SKY

The red-gold soot foams and condenses
a sea of smoke that soaks the ether
and smolders across the roofs and ground.
I taste the ashy char of kindled drought.
Faraway fires thread the window sash.

Lightning pricked a pasture in the Sierras,
and the cooked planet gave its angry answer.
I watch the rouged smog from inside out,
with no inside, no out. The fires belong
to us. They live in us. We live in them.

MORE WORDS

The soldiers of my heart,
the totalitarian heart
that doesn't deliberate,
words that are gristly desire
and a surge of orange leaves
around my anxious feet.

They spit at birds, get drunk,
howl down strange country roads.
Revise that. The heart's words
are plasma oak iron virus
cotton candy hot chocolate
and oversalted chips.

The addicts, the liberators,
who never mind their business

and kidnap desire while
they convince desire to dance.
They feel like moist matter,
fetal, synovial, flushing

around the fatigued heart.
They are lagoons, riptides,
plankton and hermit crabs
and almonds and green jam.
I'm here and bound again
to count their ways and serve.

ON TELEVISION

She irons now,
half-watching whodunits;
freshens hankies and shirts
to restore a pace
and shape of things
moment to moment
in the aspirated steam;
fingers her hair,
as if to sift desires,
in life, for life, terse
and melancholic;
mutes the remote;
rehearses lines
of Pergolesi's Stabat;
sings softly
and folds tidy piles
of tomorrow's
colors and whites.

Pursuit Is Everything: A Conversation with W. S. Di Piero

David Biespiel

Last March, near dusk, I walked from my hotel on Divisadero Street in San Francisco to W.S. Di Piero's Cole Valley flat for a warm dinner he'd prepared of chicken, potatoes, and green beans. Lots of wine.

Di Piero, who is 78, loves to cook. He tends to the doings at the oven as he does most everything: writing, reading, conversation, dancing (in his youth, he briefly pursued a career), even basketball. Intensely, studiously, joyfully.

The apartment is at the top of a small walkup, and the kitchen bay windows overlook the west side of the Sunset District. On a clear day, you can see the Pacific. The living room is lined floor to ceiling with books; there's a computer in the kitchen, on a small desk.

It is here that Di Piero works.

We spoke for a few hours that first night and another eight hours during the following two days, including a late-night session at the Metro Hotel the night before I returned to Portland.

I've known Simone (as Di Piero is known to friends) for thirty years, beginning in 1993, when I studied at Stanford as a Stegner Fellow and he was my teacher. We've spent many hours together over the decades, and sometimes during this interview, it appeared hard to know when we were just talking, poet to poet, friend to friend, and when we were formally on task.

W.S. Di Piero was born in 1945 in Philadelphia. A poet, essayist, art critic, and translator, he was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2001. He traveled to Italy on a Fulbright scholarship in 1972, where he began working as a translator. A contributor to *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *Poetry*, *Threepenny Review*, and other publications, he is the author of some two dozen books of poetry, criticism, and translations. As Christian Wiman observed when Di Piero was awarded the Ruth Lilly Prize from the Poetry Foundation in 2012, "R.P. Blackmur once said that great poetry 'adds to the stock of available reality,' and that's certainly true of Di Piero's work. He wakes up the language, and in doing so wakes up his readers, whose lives are suddenly sharper and larger than they were before."

David Biespiel: I wanted to show this to you. *Poetry* magazine's golden anniversary issue of 1962.

W.S. Di Piero: You own this?

DB: You want it? You can have it.

WSDP: Where'd you get this?

DB: I can't remember. A used bookshop somewhere. I know that the *Poetry* of that era, for you, was seminal. Henry Rago was publishing a lot of West Coast writers.

WSDP: Look at this! Look at this! Jim Cunningham is in this issue. And Robert Duncan and Alan Dugan. Thom [Gunn] is in this. Denise [Levertov] is in it. Merwin, of course. Merrill. Who is Rosalie Moore? "Poet as Bull-fighter." Delmore [Schwartz] is in here. "Time is the fire in which we burn." That's the great line of Delmore's. Interesting, about a third of these names are gone forever.

DB: Henry Rago, as editor, was important to you, yes? What were his editorial values, the curatorial values, that inspired your writing?

WSDP: When I was eighteen years old, I subscribed to *Poetry* magazine. What affected me was whatever it was I found there.

DB: Can you remember when it came in the mail what it felt like?

WSDP: I didn't quite have to hide this stuff, but it had to stay in my room. And my bedroom was small. I was also beginning to buy books with whatever money I had in my pocket back then. *Poetry* became part of that. It was all this protoplasmic, amorphous searching for meaning in me and a purpose in my life.

DB: You read Denise Levertov?

WSDP: I loved Denise's work. I owned a couple of her books. When I was nineteen years old, I wrote her a letter telling her how interested I was in her poetry.

DB: How was your relationship with her at Stanford when you two taught together?

WSDP: It was collegial. Until it wasn't. We were friendly her first couple of years. Then that friendship and collegiality thinned out. In part, because Denise would say things like, "I read this poem of yours. It's very iambic." Something pissy. Because she had her ideology, and it wasn't mine. But, as a young writer in particular, I thought some of her poems were beautiful.

DB: She was gigantic.

WSDP: She was. She was everywhere. Denise could be really prepotente. She could be a bully. And if you had to work with her, you had to push back. If you pushed back, you got into a fight. So we became estranged for a number of years. Those years coincided with when I got quite sick. In 1995, I had a nervous breakdown. I didn't know why or what was happening to me. My marriage was coming undone. I hated going to Stanford. Because it took me away from my work, and I couldn't process any of it or deal with it. I was trying to support the family. All this other bullshit. So I broke down. I cried a lot, too much. That's what it was like. I hope this doesn't embarrass you, my saying this. I did seek help. I was just in a bad place, man.

If you have any consciousness left or self-reflectiveness left, you realize that you reach a point where suicidal ideation—that's the term they like to use now—is becoming less and less ideation. Right? You start cutting on yourself. You start driving suicidally. You want to self-destruct. Well, that's what I was. And the marriage was ending. So that was a rough ride. It took me a couple of years to get my legs under me again. Emotionally, to survive.

I came to Seattle once. I had a reading somewhere. Denise had retired to her place in Seattle. And I wanted to see her. I just wanted to talk with her. No Stanford and all that pushing and shoving. She could be so manipulative, I mean, as an academic, and she knew how to use power. She knew how to do that. And I didn't give a shit about that stuff. She was also a public poet who very few people dared to say no to. She had a very large sense of her own importance. So, that time in Seattle, I went to her place at the lake. The first thing I remember she told me, the first thing she told me, she said, "You look different." I said, "What's different?" She said, "Your face is clear." I know what she meant, because I was on the mend finally. Because I hadn't been sick for quite a long time.

Until you get like this, you don't understand that you have some degree of psychosis, until you get so sick that you can't function. And, then, if you're lucky enough to have a good doctor, the doctor tells you what it is that was going on. This required a lot of work, a lot of attention. We had a marvelous talk. We would both cringe at this notion of a healing session, because that's not what it felt like. It was just trying to return to whatever it was we first had as just two poets.

DB: Did you meet Robert Duncan?

WSDP: Yeah. Oh, yeah.

DB: They were close, Levertov and Duncan.

WSDP: They were, until they weren't, and then they were again. They had this big fight. If you were a poet, it passed for a public fight. Because he said things to Denise that nobody else would say. He said, you're using politics for self-advancement. This is ideology. This does not have to do with poetry.

They had one of these enormous fights. It's all worked out in their letters. Eventually, they made their peace, as Denise eventually made her peace with Adrienne [Rich]. Because they, too, had a big falling out. It was over very similar things. When I think about Denise now, I remember that her early work was beautiful. And when I was a kid, it meant a lot to me.

DB: What brought you to San Francisco in the late 1960s?

WSDP: I was twenty-one years old. I'd never left Philadelphia. My plan was to gather my resources, whatever they were, and to leave. I had applied to San Francisco State. I wasn't sure I was accepted. And I didn't know how I'd pay for it. I wasn't married yet. I wasn't thinking about where, really, I would land or how comfortable the landing would be. I wanted out of Philadelphia. But it was also a forwarding. I wasn't just leaving something.

DB: Literary ambition?

WSDP: It was more general than that. It was a setting out. It was a drivenness.

DB: Were you trying to prove something to people?

WSDP: I wasn't trying to prove anything to anybody.

DB: Did your family think you would make it?

WSDP: The last thing my mother told me was that she hoped I failed and came back. Shit like that. But what are you going to do?

DB: Coming from South Philly, that Italian neighborhood, did you move to North Beach?

WSDP: I didn't identify with that. And over the course of my writing life, I've had to make that decision, over and over again, when occasionally, you know, somebody pops up and says we're making an Italian American writers anthology. I cordially decline.

DB: This was Bishop's position, too. She didn't want to be in anthologies of women poets.

WSDP: There you go. I wanted independence. I didn't want either Italian Americans or non-Italian Americans to read me by referring to me as an Italian American poet. That didn't matter. That's what was given to me as a writer. That's all that matters. It was given to me. But, as a representation, how I present—I don't do that. And I wasn't doing it then. And so I developed over the years, over a long course of years, an alertness or cautiousness toward any writer who presents as a member of a group.

DB: So much of contemporary American poetry is X-hyphen American.

WSDP: I get it. In the 1970s, after living for two years in Bologna, I came back to the United States. Although I was offered a job teaching at University of Bologna, I didn't want it. Emotionally, I felt like an American. And I wanted to get back to my country and to write out of that. That's the way it was.

DB: Did you feel like you were writing as a tourist in Bologna?

WSDP: Not the way we lived, my wife and I. We couldn't afford to feel like tourists, not in the Italy of that time, the early 1970s. I want you to hear this. It's amusing. This is not special pleading. We lived wonderfully for two years without a telephone. So, living in Bologna in the early 1970s, it was like living in the Gilded Age, when people would stop by in their carriages and leave cards, saying so-and-so will call on you at a certain time. Once a day, we would go to the local bar and buy these tokens. That's what you needed to do to use a public telephone. Right? We lived mostly by giving English lessons. I did some commercial editorial jobs. We were flying by the seat of our pants.

DB: Who were your teachers at San Francisco State?

WSDP: There was a fiction writer there, Herbert Wilner, who took an interest in me. Herb was a pretty good writer. He was a serious man. Just full of literature, full of reading and writing. At the time, I didn't realize that some-

body was actually taking an interest in my work and in me as a writer, you know, when he would suggest things to read and he would take me to lunch and talk about stuff like that. There was also a Professor Renaker who taught Renaissance literature. I think he was bored by teaching. But that didn't matter to me. All I needed were titles of books and the reading lists.

DB: Where did you live?

WSDP: I landed, in the first two weeks, in a hotel in the Tenderloin. Then I rented a room in someone's house. Then I lived at three or four other addresses over the next couple of years, in the Inner Richmond, which I loved, West Portal, Eureka Valley (before it became known as the Castro), the Inner Sunset.

DB: And you were writing poems? What motivated you?

WSDP: It was passion, drivenness. That was the foundation. I was driven by aspiration and desire.

DB: Who were you reading?

WSDP: When I was still living in South Philadelphia in my mother's house, when I was going to college, the first three books I bought were by Thom Gunn, Philip Larkin, and Laurie Lee. How weird it is to talk about this. I was eighteen years old, nineteen years old.

DB: Laurie Lee?

WSDP: Laurie Lee was as famous as the others, then.

DB: You and Thom became friends in San Francisco. Did you ever meet Larkin?

WSDP: No.

DB: Even if I didn't know those were the first books you bought, I'd make that connection. The other poet I don't know, Laurie Lee. But Gunn and

Larkin, in terms of all three of you possessing a high degree of comfort with making poems out of lines, that's one place I see your poems in conversation. Another place is being concerned with precision and the peculiarity of real life. That would be, in Larkin's case, resiliency. In Gunn's case, a care for the erotic.

WSDP: Larkin was a great poet, and I don't like his work much. Except for maybe three or four poems.

DB: Which ones?

WSDP: "The Explosion." It's one of the best. One of the best poems ever. "The Whitsun Weddings" is a beauty. "Church Going" is one of the first poems I read in college.

DB: Were you attracted to the argument of "Church Going"? The rejection and the power of faith?

WSDP: I was eighteen years old. I wasn't that sophisticated.

DB: In "Church Going," there's a feigned slackness. There's "stuff ..."

WSDP:... at the "holy end."

DB: He pronounces, "Here endeth," too loudly. But at the end, he acknowledges the spiritual draw. That's the Larkin move. Mock, reassess, ask what does it mean? Then, finally, come to see the world afresh. Especially in your earliest poems, you were trying to navigate that space also, sacred and secular. You've written that the arc of art and poetry begins in religious intensity and moves toward estrangement. That characterization is reflected in Larkin's poems, in Gunn's, and in yours.

WSDP: Thom was an atheist. That was fundamental to him. He was a man of such expansive intelligence. He could write about religious desire, but it's not because he shared it. "In Santa Maria del Popolo" has this quality to it.

DB: Is the arc of poetry beginning in religious intensity and moving toward

estrangement a fair characterization of your earliest poems?

WSDP: I suppose. It's because I was a believer when I was younger. I've fallen from Roman Catholicism—I'm still falling.

DB: It's a long way down.

WSDP: Yes, it is. Then I became more of a suspecter, an inspector, of the relationship among actuality, immanence, and transcendence. That's still true for me.

DB: That's still a quality of your poems.

WSDP: Absolutely.

DB: The endings of your early poems typically pivot toward the mysterious as religious expression because that is what you knew. I mean, you were young.

WSDP: As I revisit those early poems, I wonder what feeling that came out of. I'm sure it came out of a feeling of: *If only. If only...* it was true. *If only...* I could make an argument against, say, Wallace Stevens in "Sunday Morning," that heavens are imagination.

DB: You admire Stevens, yes? And Hart Crane? Two poets for whom the medium of poetry is supreme.

WSDP: I like a lot of Stevens. I love Hart Crane. And Hopkins. My feeling about them is, I don't need to understand them. They each crafted their own expansive, musical idiom.

DB: Keats, too.

WSDP: There's no question that Keats is everywhere in Wallace Stevens. To my mind, Hopkins is very different. He didn't quite invent a language. But he came pretty close. And he insisted that his language was common speech. "I caught this morning morning's minion, king- / dom of daylight's

dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding / Of the rolling level underneath him steady air ..." What is he thinking!? We all develop whatever it is that sustains us in our pursuits. Pursuit is everything.

DB: I want to ask about your family.

WSDP: Come, look at this. *[We gather around a wall of black and white photographs in the kitchen next to his desk.]* See that brick facade. That's where I was raised. That's my grandmother. That's her husband who died shortly after this picture was taken. That's my father, right there. He was a babe-in-arms when they came over. That's South Philly. *[He points to another photograph on the wall.]* That's my grandmother working in a sweatshop.

DB: Your grandparents emigrated?

WSDP: Yeah. My mother's mother was pregnant with her when they made the journey over. S, she was born just after they got here. I'm a first-and-a-half generation American.

DB: Your grandparents came to the United States from Italy in the nineteenth century?

WSDP: No, sometime in the early twentieth century. My father's father's name was Aurelio. The Italian version of Aurelius. He came over first. He was in his late twenties, early thirties. It was just a standard thing. The wage earner would come first, establish himself, and migrate to a community where a lot of people looked like him, and thought like him, and could help him find a job. Then, my grandmother made the crossing. My father was a babe-in-arms. They made the journey from Abruzzo to Naples, then ship and steerage to New York. From New York, they went directly to South Philly because that's where everybody was who came from their community.

My grandmother had two kids. When she was pregnant with her third, her husband died. She was thirty-five. So she was pregnant, the husband dies, and she doesn't speak English. Sounds very familiar, right? She has to start to learn English, and she has to go get a job. The important thing is to get a job where people don't speak very much English. My first lesson in Marxism

was when I asked my grandmother what kind of work she did. And she said, I make bathing suits. I said, What do you mean? She said I'm a seamstress. I make bathing suits. I said, What kind? And she said, Jantzens. None of us could afford to wear Jantzens bathing suits. So here was this immigrant woman doing that kind of work.

DB: How old were you when she died?

WSDP: I was in my twenties. I had already been to Italy and back. I remember, when she was dying, she wanted to dictate letters to me for her relatives in Italy, in English, and have me translate them into Italian. Apparently, this is a common thing, that when immigrants age, even if they develop really good English, it returns. The armies come back. The armies of words. And so, I'd be talking to her in her late years, and Italian words just popped out of her mouth.

DB: Was your grandmother devout? Where did she locate herself in Catholicism?

WSDP: Everybody went to church. There was no question. Everybody. Protestants were very exotic to me. I wasn't quite sure what a Protestant was. My grandmother came from a Roman Catholic village. They didn't know from Judaism or Protestantism. And when they emigrated, they emigrated to neighborhoods where everybody was a Roman Catholic who looked more or less like them. Just the way it was, man.

DB: What were the qualities, do you think, of her religious feeling? Spiritual fervor? Inner reflection?

WSDP: It wasn't fervor. I never experienced it as fervor.

DB: Did she like the incense, the rituals, community, ceremony?

WSDP: None of that. I did. The incense above all. As a kid, I didn't give a sweet goddamn about community. But the sensuousness of High Mass, of being surrounded by all these sculptures in walls and stations of the cross? I saw suffering. You know, I was at home. On my father's side of the family,

the Di Piero side, they were quiet-spoken people. They were church-going people. They had a moral compass.

There's a whole thing about names on that side of the family. When I went to live in Italy in 1972, the week before I left, my grandmother said, Oh, I have to tell you something before you go, because you're going to go to Abruzzo, and you'll meet our people. She said, they don't know you by your name. I grew up being called Bill or Billy. When I was born, my grandmother on my father's side, she wanted me to be named after her husband, Aurelio. And my mother said, Are you crazy? This is America. We'll give him the American equivalent of Aurelio, which is William. But that's not right. The English equivalent of Aurelio is Aurelius, the English equivalent of William is Guglielmo! So, my name was a mistake from the very beginning. Fortunately, as a middle name, they gave me the name of my grandfather on my mother's side of the family, Simone. So, before I go to Italy for the first time, I'm an adult. And my grandmother says this is something you need to know. She says from the time you were born, in all my letters I've always referred to you as Aurelio. She says, they had no idea that you're called either Bill or Simone. So, when I finally arrive in Abruzzo with my wife—we were young marrieds at the time, and this was real long time ago, right?—here's this cluster of robust, beautiful people waiting for us at the train station in this remote part of Abruzzo, calling, "Aurelio! Aurelio!"

DB: Your father was born in Abruzzo, and he came to America as an infant. He died when you were very young.

WSDP: He was forty-three when he died. I was seventeen.

DB: What is your memory of the days and months after your father died?

WSDP: It was a time when, in certain cultures, if you were a teenager and you lost a parent, that's just what is given to you. Nobody ever told me to tough it out. But nobody ever said, "You want to talk?" This isn't special pleading. I want you to know that. And because I was seventeen years old, I never got it back then—though I have since—what it must have been like for my mother to lose her husband when she had two kids.

DB: What images come to mind when you think about your father?

I grew up in a beer and shot culture. The men of my neighborhood, they worked jobs that they didn't like. They were hard, dangerous, dirty jobs. And many of them, when they came back to the neighborhood, they would go to Mike's. That was the name of the tap room on the corner. They were all Italians, except for the occasional Pole. I remember my mother saying, "Go to Mike's. Bring your father home." I did that quite a lot. And why would they want to come home, especially if you're someone who, like my father, I think, was chemically given to depression and darkness? Who'd want to go home to my mother? The first thing—you walk in the door—she starts scolding you. She had her own point of view, I'm sure, her own story. But that's not a story I can tell. I can only imagine what it must have been like for my father. The images are of a cowl. He was a sad man. He was a depressed man. He was an alcoholic. His own father died because he got sick during an influenza epidemic. What I remember is wanting to be left alone.

DB: From both your parents?

WSDP: Basically from the inherited culture. It grew into that. And, you know, it was a time when my mother would say, why don't you go and play, go out in the street and play. And if you go out and play on the streets, then you're going to get into trouble. On any given day, somebody was going to step in front of you and say, "What the fuck are you looking at?" What I don't remember from my childhood, and I should, is tenderness of any kind from anybody. It's just the way it was.

My parents were mismatched—but there was no concept, no structure for even thinking in that way. These were two really beautiful people. My father was quite a handsome man. And my mother, she was literally a pinup girl. Her picture was in the knapsacks of thousands and thousands of GIs in World War II. I don't know how that came about. But she was one of these girls that was scouted, and they took her picture to give to GIs. If they ever wanted to look at a pretty girl, all they had to do was take this picture out and look at her. That was the grandeur that was lost in her life.

DB: Tell me about your ancestors through your mother? Are they from Abruzzo?

WSDP: No. They came from a town, a village probably, somewhere between Naples and Pompeii. They were basically Neapolitan. They were called Girone. But like so many Italians, they anglicized it by dropping the terminal vowel. They said Gee-Rhone. Girone is also the word that Dante uses for circles in Hell. Because girare, in Italian, means to turn. So girone is a path, a level, a tier. That was their name.

DB: Do you think of who you are as what your stories are?

WSDP: That's a hard question. And the reason it's a hard question is because it's the ongoing task in life to try to change. Pursuing origins, if you take it seriously, is a species endeavor. I mean, it's not just the origins of family, it's the origins of species, and the origins of one's own development as an artist, as a writer. I don't want to get too intense, it's not good for me—but, as a writer, being aware of origins of every kind, whether Abruzzo or Giacometti, is foundational.

DB: There's a shift in your poems over the decades, from deep musical play to expressive clarity. I would point to "Skirts and Slacks" as the poem where the border is clearest to me. From that poem onward, your writing moves in a new, less sonic direction—not sonicleless but less richly hypersonic, the old echoes from Stevens or Hopkins, Dickinson or Keats, where the medium is everything. Over the last few decades, you have treated the medium differently than you did earlier.

WSDP: Yes. Beginning with the collections *Shadows Burning* and *Skirts and Slacks*, something changed. It happened when I gave myself over more, gave my work over more, to an accounting of what it feels like to be physical, to be embodied.

DB: As opposed to, previously, what was more literary?

WSDP: Yes. Earlier it was a more literary aspiration, rather than an aspiration coming from out of the body. Being cellular.

DB: When did you acknowledge that a change occurred?

WSDP: The change, I now know. We don't know these things as we're going through them. Maybe Yeats knew it.

DB: But was it something you forged? Lowell forged a change in his writing from the stiff early poems to the looser iambics in *Life Studies*. Roethke forged a change from the Yeats-inspired rhythms of his first books to the expansiveness of *The North American Sequence*. You know what I'm talking about.

WSDP: Yes, I do. But it was not my experience. I was engaged in a pursuit. And I was dissatisfied with the kind of poetry I had been writing, the poems that came before I wrote *Shadows Burning and Skirts and Slacks*. This was 1995. I was fifty years old, and I was killing myself doing it. I had a conversation with Thom about this. We were talking about early work, middle, late. This is the kind of stuff we'd talk about when we'd be having lunch, when he wasn't talking about fucking. He was a fabulous man. He said something in passing that stopped me. He said, your early work always struck me as being symbolist. I told him, that's the worst thing. I hate to hear that. But when you think about it? When he said it, I got it.

DB: A younger poet is looking for hand-holds, something with authority.

WSDP: You know, when you're young, first of all, and if you're me, you have too many other voices in the room. Biblical. Medieval. Renaissance. The whole lot of literature. Now, the voices in the room are just my select guests. That would be Keats, for aspiration and texture. And Hart Crane.

DB: When you think of Keats, is it his sensibility that everything is in play all at once that you feel connected to? When I read your poems, I'm continuously aware that everything is perceivable all at once. Almost simultaneously, in a single poem, you could be on Downey Street in San Francisco, while there's an overlay of a street in South Philly, and then, too, a piazza in Bologna. All at once. That's a lyric sensibility.

WSDP: That all-at-onceness is how it has lived in me. I still experience this, that everything is happening all at once. If you're lucky, you continue to be able, just physically and mentally, to tolerate that. Because it's painful, man. It's overload. If I bear these kinds of recollections, whether they're personal recollections in my life, or they're recollections that somehow are affixed to poems that I've read, not to speak of the poems that I've written, then—and this is not a generalization—I experience it very often as pain. It's an emotional pain.

DB: A delight in pain? Enlightening pain? A wound?

WSDP: It's enlightening pain. But it's also a wound because there are sources. It's not as if one claims one's pain because it's a good resource for poetry. That's not what it's about. For me, it's always about what has been given to me in my life and what I have lived into in my life, and all of that is: now. And that can be painful.

DB: Has doing translation helped?

WSDP: I don't know. I do know I translated Leonardo Sinisgalli because of the plying of experiences of his work: his origins in pagan Lucania, to which he returned throughout his life, layered deep into his professional life as a graphic designer in Milan and Rome. I translated Leopardi in part to go with this consciousness of our most darkly skeptical thoughts.

DB: In your translations, as in your poems, you're someone who is attentive to the sonic qualities, the musicality, of language. Was that an early field of play for you as a poet?

WSDP: My plan was, from the beginning, that I would be a poet who also knew how to write. Wanting to be a poet who also had some presence in the public life, even if the public life meant another language. Even if the public life meant writing reviews. When I started out, my notion was I would be able to earn a living by reading and writing. I would be able to earn enough money translating and doing literary journalism. That's how I launched myself.

DB: What did you take from your work as a translator into writing your poems?

WSDP: A respect for the mission, a desire for clarity, a desire, which was hard for me to realize, of being in words and around words all the time.

DB: I take that to mean a care for noticing how words and the world coincide. And yet, you know the risks that come with that. You've written that the danger of holding too rigorously to enthusiastic noticing is that enthusiasm, finally, will be made to do the work of the imagination. Yeats calls this the problem of the will doing the work of the imagination.

WSDP: Someone once asked me about what he said is an unusual degree of specificity in my poems. And my answer was the true answer. It's that this is how I'm wired. It's my nature. And that the details of physical reality can sometimes be difficult for me to bear.

DB: This is what Giacometti says, too. He says, I'm not trying to make long heads. It's just how I see them. I know Giacometti is important to you.

WSDP: It all dates back to what I first saw in his statues, how he could have a vision materialized in the human. I didn't know, at the time, any of the paintings. I came to love the paintings later.

DB: I find the paintings more interesting.

WSDP: For me, too.

DB: To me, the paintings feel like they're always in formation. He puts the lines in where the movement of the head sets or the eyes go, the mouth, and then he leaves them in there so that view and vision come together.

WSDP: I always thought it was some kind of scarification process. Screams, scars, and then deciding the scars don't look good. Changing them, scraping them down, until a human is going to emerge from all of these. And it was his presentation of something. I could not articulate this at the time. It was some articulation of life as passion and life considered as a suffering,

that life is something we suffer, that this was the nature of us. "Speaking of Giacometti" is one of the first poems I wrote. It was about that piece called "Head on a Rod." I had no idea why that Giacometti sculpture had such a special hold on me. I had no way to think about this stuff. All I knew was that it jumped on me and said that you need to come to some recognition, some accounting.

DB: When you think of the process by which Giacometti worked, and what he produced, how does that relate to you in terms of, generically, the writing of poems and, personally, your own writing? How does that transfer into your work as a writer?

WSDP: The way it transfers is, nothing is ever finished until your life ends.

DB: I know you care deeply for Brancusi, too. How do those egg-shaped sculptures impress you?

WSDP: Brancusi is my early poetry. Brancusi, in his way, was the anti-Giacometti. That was probably the appeal. Because his work shows no effort, except, what I learned later, after the fact, that he and his assistants, his studio assistants, they never stopped polishing those things that were finished. Brancusi was a Romanian woodworker. He made that—I don't know what the specific title is—but that column that he built in Romania. Well, when I was first thinking about that piece of Brancusi's, I was also reading Eliade, who was also Romanian. Eliade wrote about Brancusi's thing, which he called "The World Tree," because in virtually all indigenous cultures and ancient cultures, there was some figure of some kind which connected our middle earth to what was yonder. And, if it penetrated the earth, it went down to where Dante went. That was the vision, an extreme, ecstatic feeling and whatnot, a deliverance. It's a deliverance from our mineralized, material condition. We are these animals who can aspire.

DB: Assuming that one has certain tastes across the arts, who would be the Brancusi equivalents for you in poetry?

WSDP: Oh, what a question. The closest recent poet who has something of Giacometti's ethic about constantly working a thing is Alan Dugan. His po-

ems are beautiful. They can be raw and gristly. He's unafraid of extremities of feeling. And yet, there's always this formal intelligence that's holding it all together.

DB: What poets come to mind—poets you care about, that is—who you would say are unafraid of extremity of feeling?

WSDP: Hart Crane. Berryman, Neidecker, Plath, most recently Dugan. And for extremities of lift-off, Jerry Stern.

DB: Your attraction to Stern surprises me. I say this as someone who has been deeply influenced by his poems and his materials. He has this pleasant rhythmicity, but not a great ear. He's much more interested in the sentence than he is the line.

WSDP: I agree. I mean, the thing about Stern is his shamelessness. His shamelessness about desire, aspiration, and ecstasy. Merwin was unafraid. I'm thinking of particular books. I'm thinking of *The Lice* and *The Carrier of Ladders*.

DB: What about Lowell in this context?

WSDP: Too willful. From beginning to end, there's something in Lowell's work that is willful and bullying.

DB: Let's change the cultural landscape. How about Miroslav Holub, Czesław Miłosz, Joseph Brodsky, Adam Zagajewski?

WSDP: Those aren't the faraway poets that matter to me. I would replace those names with Antonio Machado, Marina Tsvetaeva, Zbigniew Herbert, Miklós Radnóti, Osip Mandelstam, and Anna Akhmatova.

DB: These are non-Sternian poets who you just named. These are poets uninterested in the erotic or the ecstatic, although you might make the case that Machado and Mandelstam are, compared to the others.

WSDP: I'm attracted to their formal fearlessness. I'd say the same about the

great Lorine Neidecker: fearless, a range of effects from dry to marshy, an imperious humility. Also, she and the others didn't have cozy groups around cheering them on with oohs and aahs.

DB: Muriel Rukeyser?

WSDP: She was a very good poet. She comes and goes in the public mind. I don't know why that is exactly. But she comes when somebody decides to make a new anthology. Then she fades.

DB: We were talking about the danger in enthusiastic noticing.

WSDP: In the post-war period, especially with the influence of Williams, the act of noticing became so predominant in our poetry. All of us came of age under it, even if we weren't aware. It was wired into us. That was my preoccupation. I guess the difference between a poet and other people is that a poet doesn't let go. You're trying to get what's noticed and turn it into whatever equivalency you can get in words.

DB: You don't mean mirroring when you say equivalency?

WSDP: No, no.

DB: Dramatization? Simulation?

WSDP: For me, poetry has not been the work of explanation. It's not the work of interpretation. It's, first and last, a work of expression.

DB: As you think of expression, expressiveness, expressionism in visual art, what is your relationship to all that?

WSDP: One of the things about the visual arts and painting, above all, is it jumps on your nerves the way poetry does not do, because of the way poetry has to live through time—in the making of it, and the reading of it. It's got to live in time. A picture? It jumps on you. Paul Klee's "Fish Magic" made an impression on me when I was quite young. Another picture that made an impression on me was de Kooning's "Door to the River." What those pictures did, and I didn't understand at all what was happening at the time, was

it gave me a physical response because I felt like they were pushing back. They were pushing me back. It was a physical experience.

DB: Pushing you from where to where?

WSDP: From curiosity to feeling like I was being overcome by something. You see, it all goes back to Philadelphia. It all goes back to where I got my free education, which was at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Ever since those primary experiences with pictures, I've had the notion that I could make poems do that.

DB: What you're saying puts me in mind of what de Kooning might have called—is this his word?—"slipping" from one perception to another.

WSDP: That is his word. He says, "slipping glimpses."

DB: The phrase, "slipping glimpses," makes me think of a poem's lyric space, where something's happening, and then something else emerges from that. Simultaneity is a poem's lyric space, where intensities of connections occur. It's in the shared detailing. You say something akin to this in *Mickey Rourke and the Bluebird of Happiness*, when you write: "I want to say small things intensely."

WSDP: I made peace with the fact that I'm a descriptive, scenic poet, and my ambition has been to be that kind of poet without being merely descriptive, merely scenic. I didn't want to be a poet who indulges in local colorism, in "slipping glimpses." I love those lines in *Briggflatts*, when Bunting is addressing Scarlatti and the sonata form, and he says one of the great things about Scarlatti is that his art shows "never a boast, or a see-here." What I mean is, I've always been shy of global statements. I've been shy of wisdom. At some point, I thought of myself as—and this is not a very sophisticated view of what wisdom actually is—but I thought of myself as being an anti-wisdom poet. There are no generalizations. There are no global statements. All truths are local, specific to one's experience.

DB: What if your interest is in, say, grace?

WSDP: Well, it is. There's this poem of mine called "Some Voice." And it's

very specific about place. It's this tiny campo in Venice. And it has three time zones, overlapping. It's about being in this place, and the window is open, and a voice comes out. The reason I say this is because the ending of the poem is "We take what's given and work / with that. The rest is grace." Both parts of that are important to me. Recognizing what the rest of it is, that's grace, that's mysteriousness, while also being able to live with the mystery, while you continue to interrogate it.

DB: Related to that, you once said, "To write a poem that's a sustained concentrate, a feeling, and that's, at the same time, about that condition, that effort to live intensely, write intensely, and not be able to tell the difference." That's self-instruction, yes?

WSDP: That's a belief.

DB: You have also written: "I wanted to write a poetry that enacted what it felt like to live in that impossible moment when a lived instant seems to recapitulate every previous instant." To me, that is a characteristic of lyric time. When you are experiencing one occasion, multiple things or multiple occasions are also occurring vis-à-vis your consciousness, your memory, and your physical contact with the world, triggering some other connection.

WSDP: *Lyric time* says it. My feeling about that is—and I know I'm not alone in experiencing this—it's living with this constant feeling of all-at-onceness. Many of us live with that. It's a condition of heightened consciousness. If you're a poet, you choose to write out of a pursuit of recognitions. Writing is a way of continuing to try to clarify exactly what the experience is, what it has been.

DB: I've been repeating to people, anyone who will listen to me, two things you say in the *Mickey Rourke* book about writing and rewriting. I think they're related. One is about authenticity and artifice. The second is about revision. "If poets are artists really," you insist, "authenticity and artifice are a single act of the imagination."

WSDP: I still believe that.

DB: “Practice makes perfect,” you suggest. “Revision is a poet’s practice, just as musicians practice hours a day, reiterating sounds of those who have come before, been internalized, while also testing unknown chord changes, combinations, etc., while playing—as a child plays in a sandbox—over and over the sound one knows. Practice makes imperfect.” The part about revision as practice, I feel, is fantastic. I’d like to hear more about artifice and authenticity being a single imaginative act.

WSDP: I can only speak for me. I’m always aware of pushing words around. Practice? I re-copy lines and poems endlessly because the repetitiveness will yield something, usually a mistake, a “moral” for a “mortal.” You knock a poem off its axis by changing “and” to a “but” or by adding or subtracting or modifying a beat.

DB: That could be a good day’s work right there.

WSDP: It’s a terrible thing to admit.

DB: You’ve defined what you call the office of poetry as “to use shapely speech to express the radicals of existence and all their ambiguity.”

WSDP: That’s right.

DB: Also: “To answer idiosyncratically, privately, to a public world, given over to falsehood, fake facts, scuzzy rumor, casual murderousness, comedic denials, manic, vicious wind tunnel ideologies, to answer palsy language with vital language, gaiety of invention, and fabulation over opportunistic mendacity. If poetry can’t or chooses not to reveal what it feels like to live as a sentient being in a perilous enchanted world, then maybe it really is marginal or beside the point.”

WSDP: I believe all that. It sounds a little strange to me. And it is political. Though I’m not a topical poet.

DB: Would you say you’re a poet of class consciousness? What has been your interrogation of class?

WSDP: First of all, I've never made a big deal of it. But I have never shed my identity to myself. It's not something I talk about. I don't try to make a fuss about it. But I remember my origins. My origins are still in me. I'm still a union man. This is visceral. This isn't intellectual. I distrust management of virtually every kind. I distrust landlords and deans. Anybody in a position of power, I distrust. Stanford was the last place I ever should have been. Took me awhile to understand why I was getting so fucked up when I was there. This new book I have in manuscript is called *Burning Money*. So, class, yeah. I've written out of a class concern that's been internalized. And then, if I internalize it, I know it's going to surge when I'm writing poems. I don't have to present it. It's just going to show up. It saturates your being.

DB: You've written: "Poets aren't aware of their astonishment in the presence of reality until they've written out the astonishment."

WSDP: Sometimes, I'm aware of living in an occasion that might be an occasion for poetry. It doesn't often happen that way. I've never been the kind of poet who thinks—the first time I heard this phrase it just made my skin crawl—of getting a poem out of an experience. Right? There's a cynicism so deep into that it's just unacceptable. But, sometimes, I do have that feeling. It's an indulgence in mystery and a pursuit of clarification at the same time. It can be a very painful condition to live with. The process of the work, sometimes, forces me to get preoccupied about things. And recently one of my preoccupations has been wonder, the fact of wonderment, and awe. And how fine it would be to write out of my deepest sense of wonder of existence. The density of existence, the densities of consciousness without saying that's what it is.

DB: When you describe moving toward wonder, I'm reminded of something else of yours, a bit of a longer passage: "A tradition in Abruzzo, where my father was born, was to take a newborn after it has been washed and wrapped and set it down on the earth so that it touches its first mother and its soul is grounded. I like to think my father was thus grounded, though I have no proof he was. Born here instead of over there, I should have been made to touch the ground. It might have helped me mineralize the vapors of imagination." Will you talk about what you mean, to mineralize the vapors

of imagination?

WSDP: Mineralizing really means to keep moving towards something that's solid, weighted, textured. Everything we associate with material reality, with the fastness of things, you know.

DB: It reminds me of this, also by you: "Coleridge, mad dog of discriminations and divisiveness suffered the differences among things: 'Sea, hill, and wood, / This populous village! Sea, and hill, and wood, / With all the numberless goings-on of life, / Inaudible as dreams!' He suffered most the abyss separating nature from consciousness. Wordsworth is the surveyor of things come together and mutual blessing. He views consciousness. He doesn't suffer it." That's so right, by the way! And then, this: "He's quick to admit strangers to his banquet. Coleridge must first question any stranger about his origins and destination and means of travel. Then he goes back to the kitchen to revise the evening's menu." Which are you?

WSDP: I guess I'm closer to Coleridge than to Wordsworth. It has to do with a preoccupation with the particulars of existence and separating them out so that a poem becomes an occasion for bringing them together, for making a pattern out of them. Coleridge seems to me to be more honest about his feelings. He's less extravagant and grandiose when speaking of a life of feeling than Wordsworth is. Coleridge is closer to physical reality.

DB: What part of the preface to the 1795 edition of *Lyrical Ballads* do you feel is Wordsworth's mind and what part is Coleridge's?

WSDP: I think whatever is interested in separating one thing out from another, anything that's analytical, that's Coleridge. When it has to do with synthesizing and gathering, accumulating, collecting, recollecting, that's obviously Wordsworth. I just wonder what kind of conversations they had because Coleridge was, you know, an exhausting talker. He would just wear people out.

DB: That's what Keats says in his *Letters*. It's an interesting divide, a Coleridge vein and a Wordsworth vein, two kinds of Romantic thinking for poets writing in English: the tactile and analytic, to use your terms, and the

mutual blessing of synthesis. Then, modernism takes place and disrupts everything. What would you say modernism's relationship is to those two veins?

WSDP: Modernism probably owes more to Wordsworth than to Coleridge.

DB: One outcome of Wordsworth's continuous wavelengths, the going outward, is the eventual fracturing and slippages that are the imaginative foundations of modernism.

WSDP: My head just now started spinning off into how important Browning was to those early twentieth century modernist poets, too, and how alive the dramatic monologue was, and the appeal of that particular kind of psychic migration. And how, of all the practices that carried over from the nineteenth century to the twentieth century, dramatic monologue is the one most in disrepute now. My favorite lines in all of Browning are from "Fra Lippo Lippi." You know the poem. He says that what he learned in his life is "This world's no blot for us, / Nor blank; it means intensely, and means good: / To find its meaning is my meat and drink." The power of those lines, emotionally, they get to me. The forthrightness of it. You pursue the things of the world. I do more pursuing the things of the world than I do in pursuing things of other worlds, the otherworldly. Now, that's the kind of pursuit that has given us some of our greatest poetry. But it has not been the kind of poetry that I've written because, at some point, I became too skeptical of religious belief, skeptical of faith of just about any kind, for good or ill.

DB: I have a formulation about the arc of your writing. I'd call these braided arcs. There's the arc from writing poems with a literary basis of perception to, in your more newest poems, simply trying to represent the world as it comes to you. Also, I think there was, at one time in your poems, a reliance on Catholic religious resonance. I don't mean that as totally artificial, just that was the vocabulary at hand. And that language of Catholic feeling often reveals itself near the ends of those early poems. The more recent poems don't require that but have found the spirit-resonance in things and in the relationships between you and those things. Finally, I would say the earlier poems tend toward "sensation and force," to borrow a phrase of yours, while the later poems act more like a gathering of the materials that are

present and trying to put them in relationship to each other. If I had to pick one poem where the switch takes place, it would be "Skirts and Slacks." That poem marks a change, so far, ever after.

WSDP: Your characterization is a fair one. I knew when I wrote that poem, and poems that immediately started to issue after that one, that I had found something new for me. Mostly in how much less I needed to say. How much more important it was to be as exact, as physical, and not to assume that my aspirations carry over into adequate expression. If you don't have the means to do that, then aspiration simply sounds like heavy breathing of over-enthusiastic religiosity, because, literally, the grounding isn't quite there.

DB: In my reading, there is a precursor poem to "Skirts and Slacks" that bridges these two eras: "Shrine with Flowers."

WSDP: I knew that's the poem you'd single out. I knew it. That's how it happened. I found things in the writing of that poem, "Shrine with Flowers," that I did not know I had to say. I was punching through to things formally that I knew for me were new and useful and instrumental.

DB: To read "Shrine with Flowers" in the sequence of your poems is like coming upon the end of a literary hill, and then, after that, it's a more naturalistic terrain. The way you handle the whole metaphor of the illness of the neighbor, Louisa, and, because there are two homes in that poem, by studying one home you are also revealing something going on in the other ...

WSDP:...and the garden and the racoons...

DB:...and the neighbors, the garden, the house, the illness, the marriage—all that is presented, segmented, and sequenced in a way that one thing opens or slips into another, and the intricacies aren't neglected.

WSDP: That's all accurate. They establish a field of meaning, a pattern of relatedness. I was also writing that poem when my marriage was breaking up.

DB: Linkage is everything.

WSDP: Linkage is everything. Yes, that's true.

DB: What about your poem "The Depot?" Formally, at least, it behaves not like a sequence but a series, an overlap.

WSDP: It's like a transparency. It's like two imaginations being on top of each other. That's the thing about the imagined waitress in that poem.

DB: "The Depot" leads to "Blue Moon," the Halloween poem that begins, "They're gathering now / cone-head ghouls Spider-Man / fly-by-nighters' burnt-cork cheeks ..."

WSDP: That's a post-9/11 poem.

DB: The way "Blue Moon" shifts in the bottom half is similar to the way "The Depot" shifts.

WSDP: But the feeling tone is very different at the end of each of those poems.

DB: I mean, the overlapping consciousness is similar.

WSDP: We're back at that conversation about all-at-onceness. If you take two things happening in two time zones, then it's only in what you're calling lyric time, lyric space, that you can do this. Because that's what we do. Poets are not analysts. They're synthesizers. One of my intellectual interests, preoccupations, for years, has been neuroscience. As I read more about it, as I live more, and as I continue these fruitless interrogations of what might or might not be a transcendent order, and if so, how can it be transcendent if it's immanent? I mean, this is the kind of thing you start going around and around. The brain has produced the most fabulous imagined states of being for centuries and centuries. Fifteen or twenty years ago, I started reading Antonio Damasio's books and other neuroscience books. Only later did I realize that, without knowing I had such an interest, I was reading all of Oliver Sacks's books. And then I started reading about memory as a kind of brain

circuitry, memory as physical organic reality.

DB: As in dialects of a memory?

WSDP: In place of dialect, I'd say *idiolect*. I love that word. I got it from my friend J.T. Barbarese. I didn't know what it meant. The word turned up in a letter. It's something person-specific. Language can be a person-specific thing—as dialect is a culture-specific thing. Any poet who merits re-reading has a distinct idiolect. Ammons does. Schuyler is this way. The idiolect is some kind of emotional, psychological signature. It's only yours.

I got an email today from this friend of mine, and he had read some of my new things, and he wrote back to me. And he just quotes some phrases. He quotes lines from a poem I wrote about Nat Turner. The line is: "stout angels black and white hacked each other." He quotes from a poem about Hopper, the painter: "Windows inflect an ethic of the washed" and also "the average, creamy, bumpy wet light." That's me! Never too many adjectives! Never. And what I'm going to say from now on is what he calls my work: "Di Piero's tide pool life." That's it. And why is that accurate? Because it goes to my feeling for wanting to get everything in without doing it in a way anywhere close to what Whitman did to get everything in.

DB: You once said to me, decades ago, that the way you can tell one poet from another is by the imprint of their consciousness, the imprint of their mind.

WSDP: I still believe that. I confess to having borrowed the language of that from Henry James. What James said his fiction had to do with is—and the phrase is—"the moist, moral impress one consciousness makes on another." That's a fiction writer's rendering of something similar to what I'm saying there. I do think that, with the good ones, if you put three, four lines of a particular kind of stanza in front of somebody, they will identify the sound and discern which poet is which. It's like listening to Coltrane. You know the sound.

DB: You can't mistake a line of blank verse by Wallace Stevens for a line of blank verse by Robert Frost.

WSDP: If you're an artist, you're an artifice-er. You cultivate many things at once. I have. I've cultivated a complete sluttishness of consciousness. Anything goes. Everything can be thought. Let everything through.

EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

Intermezzo

Karen Tongson

We are thrilled to feature an excerpt from editor-at-large Karen Tongson's new book, Normporn: Queer Viewers and the TV That Soothes Us, published by New York University Press in November, 2023. The following section is from Chapter 2, "An Intermezzo on Alternatives: From the 1990s to Normaling and Normcore."

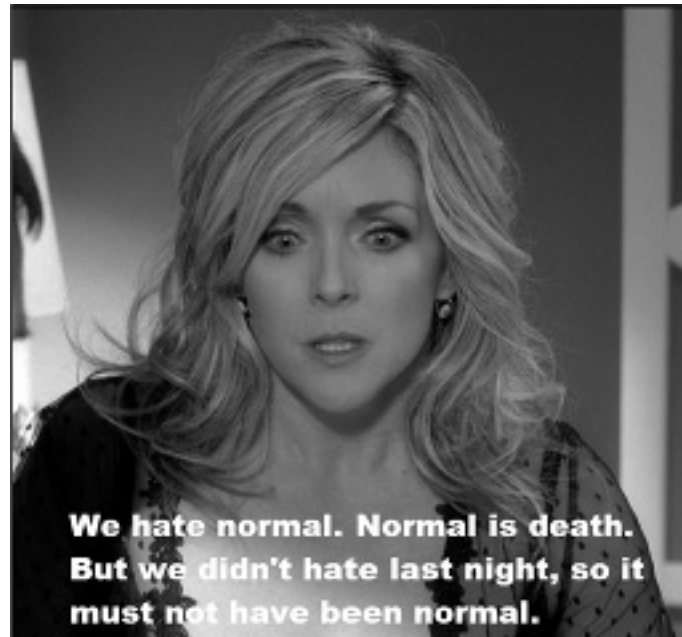
New to You

In the penultimate season of *30 Rock* (2012), the sitcom's resident kink-meisters and genderqueer lovers, Jenna and Paul, are faced with a profound sexual crisis.¹ After chatting about their day, they pass out fully clothed, nestled together beneath an afghan. Unable to accept this egregious lapse into long-term companionship, Jenna and Paul conclude that "normaling" must be a "whole new fetish," a heretofore undiscovered playground of genuine

1 Paul L'astnamé, played by former SNL cast member Will Forte, is not only a female impersonator by trade, but his signature drag persona is Jenna Maroney (Jane Krakowski's character on the show, who is a narcissistic comedic actress on an SNL-style variety show).

perversity.

Comedy writers like Tina Fey and her team of *30 Rock* scribes were prescient enough to comment on the fact that “normaling” was becoming a thing as early as 2012. Indeed, the televisual landscape was littered with references to a “new normal,” including a short-lived Ryan Murphy production



about two gay men and their surrogate. As sitcoms like *30 Rock* (2006–2013) and *The New Normal* (2012–2013) make apparent, all the hoopla about these purportedly “new” varieties of normalcy in the early teens were bound up with the sense that queer lives had been absorbed into the matrimonial and reproductive matrix.²

Meanwhile, scholars and cultural observers argued that heterosexuality itself—the purported baseline for normalcy—has become more flexible.³ Gay marriage has been legal across the land (though it’s imperiled by an over-

² On the heels of these comedies parrying with gay normalcy, Honey Maid graham crackers released an ad depicting gay fatherhood as “wholesome.” This inspired GLAAD’s approval and incited relatively little controversy given some of the flare-ups that occurred in the 1990s about any form of gay representation. GLAAD’s coverage of this treacly TV moment is archived here: <https://www.glaad.org/blog/video-honey-maids-wholesome-ad-includes-gay-dads>.

³ See Jack Halberstam’s chapter on “heteroflexibility” in *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal* (New York: Beacon Press, 2013).

reaching Supreme Court as I write this) since *Obergefell v. Hodges* in 2015. Queer folks in all configurations have popped out “gaybies” left and right, and self-identified “queers” have been complicit in gentrifying urban neighborhoods all over the world for thirty years. Meanwhile lifelong cis-heterosexuals are now, and really have been since the late 1990s, officially allowed to call themselves queer. If the 1990s were about imagining the possibility that “we are all queer,” the postmillennial period between 2008 and 2016 told it to us straight: we are all, in fact, normal.⁴

Within two years of Jenna and Paul’s discovery of “normaling” on 30 Rock, life—or at least the New York Times version of it—began to imitate art. In 2014, a new lifestyle trend called “normcore” caught the eye of fashion observers from London to New York to Los Angeles. Trend-forecasted in the Times’ words by “a theoretically minded” group of brand consultants at a company called K-Hole in New York, normcore eschewed both couture and fashion-forward street trends to embrace off-the-rack basics: untrendy clothes easily sourced from big box shops or free corporate giveaways, which suburban tourists might wear unwittingly, and definitely unironically, to Times Square.⁵

K-Hole, a quintet of graduates from RISD and Brown University, introduced normcore to the marketing world with a forty-page white paper, which was also a manifesto expounding upon the “difference-seeking” and increasingly niched patterns of consumption and behavior among young trendsetters. Titled “Youth Mode: A Report on Freedom,”⁶ the report presented normcore as the next edge, or more precisely, the no edge.

4 Not all of us, of course. My arch use of the royal “we” here is not to say that everyone has equal access to the status of “normalcy” (which has always been reserved for a primarily white, cis bourgeoisie). This is obviously far from the case, and increasingly so as we are consumed by the metastases of end-stage capitalism. But insofar as this book focuses on the question of what is “representable,” especially in the televisual world driven by ad dollars and the consumer capital of the middle and affluent classes (or those who aspire to join them), the “we” signals precisely those among us—like academics and cultural critics—who have both the cultural and financial privilege to fret about our relationship to normalcy to begin with.

5 The better part of a decade later, normcore has evolved into more niche regional versions like the NYC-based Zizmorcore (<https://www.thecut.com/article/zizmorcore-nyc-fashion-trend.html>) and Cheugy, which was purportedly spawned in Beverly Hills by a tween.

6 K-Hole, “Youth Mode: A Report on Freedom” (October 2013), the original white paper that spawned normcore, can be found here: <http://khole.net/issues/youth-mode/>.

K-Hole open their position paper (or in branding parlance, their “trend report”) by reevaluating the developmental lifecycle as it unfolds through the logic of cultural capital. I quote here at length:

It used to be possible to be special—to sustain unique differences through time, relative to a certain sense of audience. As long as you were different from the people around you, you were safe. But the Internet and globalization fucked this up for everyone. In the same way that a video goes viral, so does potentially anything. . . . The assertion of individuality is a rite of passage, but generational branding strips youth of this agency. Belonging to your generation becomes an inescapable truth—you’re a Scorpio whether you believe in astrology or not. At the same time, responsibility for generational behavior is partial at the max. (“It’s not you, it’s your whole generation.”) For a while, age came wrapped up in a bundle of social expectations. But when Boomerang kids return to their parents’ Empty Nests and retirement fades into the horizon, the bond between social expectations and age begins to dissolve. We’re left using technological aptitude to divide the olds from the youngs—even though moms get addicted to Candy Crush, too. Demography is dead, yet marketers will quietly invent another generation on demand. Clients are desperate to adapt. But to what? Generational linearity is gone.

AN AGELESS YOUTH DEMANDS EMANCIPATION⁷

Filled with sweeping generalizations, K-Hole’s white paper makes facile transitions between eras and generations, with a mix of some critical reflection about the negative impact of “globalization.” In short, technology, specifically “the Internet,” has made it so that differentiating one’s self is pretty much impossible. Typologies as disparate as generational branding and astrology (though implicitly these are just stand-ins for the many other marketing niches and demographic strategies available) have reduced everyone into lumpen masses. Not only are individuals no longer special, but the mere idea of specialness—the bread and butter of advertising and millennial capitalism—is off the table. “Clients,” meaning brands and other corporate entities, are at a loss for how to market amid this apparent loss of neat generational distinctions and the expansion of youth cultures and tastes to include the olds, or those “moms addicted to Candy Crush.” And yet, one of the first conclusions at which these purveyors of normcore arrive is recog-

⁷ *Ibid.* *Emphasis in original.*

nizably almost queer: “an ageless youth demands emancipation.”

Queer writers and thinkers as far apart in era, style, and orientation as Oscar Wilde to Jack Halberstam, with plenty of subtler pivot points in between, have relied upon the stubborn attachment to youth and an antinormative relationship to developmental time—birth, marriage, children, death—to theorize queer difference, and ultimately queer emancipation. This emancipation, at least in a strand of queer theory from the last thirty years or so, has been routed through the subcultural. This is the gist of the argument in Halberstam’s *A Queer Time and Place*, and much of his oeuvre from that point on, which contrasts “normative time” and space with the subcultural undoing of generational propriety.

In his critique of David Harvey, for example, Halberstam catalogs some of those who purportedly “opt out” of living in normative time and space, and thus also “the logic of capitalist accumulation: here we could consider ravers, club kids, HIV-positive barebackers, rent boys, sex workers, homeless people, drug dealers, and the unemployed.”⁸ Halberstam then incorporates this motley assortment of opt-outers—bracketing aside the fact that perhaps the unhoused and the unemployed have never been given the opportunity to opt in—as potential “queer subjects.” Obviously, this notion of the queer outlaws who extract themselves from the demands of a plodding normative life is a captivating one, and has been since figures like Wilde were put on trial for their perverse relationship to age and desire.

I gently critique this line of argumentation in *Relocations*, my first book, largely on the grounds of its sustained attachment to subculture, and eventually take issue with it casting its many avatars, including an atavistic relationship to “the wild,” as an unproblematic and necessary site for queer politics and cultural resistance.⁹ As I and many others argued then, the discourse about anti-normativity still thriving within subcultures, especially in the vein Halberstam argued, presupposes one’s ability to opt in and out of normative demands, while expecting the continued, unadulterated existence of subcultural formations, even formations named outside of culture

⁸ Jack Halberstam, *A Queer Time and Place* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 10.

⁹ See Jack Halberstam’s *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), which in effect rebrands “wildness” in its many guises, with an emphasis on its queer iterations, as the oppositional force to normativity. “Wildness” as a feature of queerness, according to Halberstam, is what shines a light on what underlies the normative taxonomies of sexuality.

that are purportedly anarchic or “wild.”

As we’ve come to learn, punctuated by the time the GAP began selling Lesbian Avengers T-shirts during pride season in 2021, this isn’t really the case anymore. The aesthetic and political economic framing of queer life as perpetually outside and against a mainstream still fails to acknowledge how fundamentally interwoven, and indeed complicit, queerness has become with mainstream, corporate political economies since at least the 1990s, largely by becoming normativity’s edge play since that era.

Obviously, I’m nowhere close to being the first person, nor am I the only queer theorist (whatever that is anymore), to point out the shiftiness of norms and normalcy.¹⁰ One of my favorite writers and intellectual touchstones, Lauren Berlant, has written volumes about the caginess of norms, constituted as they are by our most wily, if not necessarily wild, desires. “Our” desires are wily because a sense of what’s ours is always imbricated with what is “theirs”—with a collective unconscious as well as consciousness about certain structural, formal, generic, and nationalist impulses and demands.¹¹

To break this down for any general readers who may have just wandered in looking for some stuff about TV shows: norms, though they are meant to

10 Michael Warner’s classic The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life (New York: Free Press, 1999) disabused a broader readership of the idea that all same-sex relationships could be construed as nonnormative, especially with the centering of gay marriage in mainstream activist agendas. In 2003, Lisa Duggan established the term “homonormativity” to describe this process and its increasing dominance and circulation in LGBT “equality” discourse. As she writes in The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy (New York: Beacon Press, 2003): “the new homonormativity... is a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormativity assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (50, italics in original).

11 Berlant has explored these questions and tracked the entwinement of norms and affect across several popular forms in the U.S. in books like The Queen of America Goes to Washington City (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), Cruel Optimism (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), and the short primer Desire/Love (Brooklyn, NY: Punctum Books, 2012). My own efforts at classification, taxonomy, and generic specification here are deeply inspired by the meticulous work they have undertaken to describe the processes of normalization as they are routed through desire and “national sentimentality” in forms like the romantic comedy, the melodramatic novel, and political theater itself.

POETRY

“Love the Flicker,” “Mothers”

Kirsten (Kai) Ihns

LOVE THE FLICKER

i love every thing that flickers
and a fresh hole
keep the cone in my step
when the body entered the action so i painted it

afraid your actions don't belong to things
like a disappointing throw—now who is that for?
fog, lamp, candle,
camera, odor, pool
these are my things
the only things i like

MOTHERS

i indeed
am flappable, i need to clean the printhead

dad's a basic octopus, mother is millions of offspring
they sit in the sea, food & eaten
then she's a tearing and shriveling
sad rag on the seafloor

one time, an artist made MOTHERS hugely out of neon tubing
set it on steel I-beams painted black, beneath a low ceiling

another time, he turned the lights on and off
on people

POETRY

So You Want to Travel the World

Sandra Smith

Saltwater swamps.

Everything is hostile
but the good news is
you won't starve.

Make a fire.
Find a termite nest and
tinder.

Eat something.
Fish, infested with parasites
Eels, discharge 500 volts or more
Piranhas, present in the Orinoco
Birds, cunning
Snakes, tasty

Protect yourself
against high tide (also
crocodiles, water snakes, electric catfish

chigoe and centipedes
mosquitoes and leeches
dysentery, botflies, parasitic fungus
and the candiru, which will swim up a urethra given the chance)

Don't: Forget
decay is rapid
monkeys shit in the water
the candiru has a dorsal spine

Don't: Think about
dry socks
clean teeth
hot coffee

In all cases, remember:
boil the water
cover your genitals
leeches will fall off when they're ready.

Last Day

Jacqueline Herron

I have been incarcerated for four years and one month, and my last day at the California Institution for Women is not so different from most. Another day of “hurry up and wait.” Of plans being foiled. Another day of physical and emotional discomfort. Of surrendering to the understanding that the only thing I control is my response to situations.

Another day of friendships proving to be more powerful than barbed wire, bars, and badges.

During my time in prison, I’ve seen plenty of people leave and noticed a change as their time approached. Most become kinder and more generous, giving things away that in prison are priceless but on the other side of the gate would be considered junk. Like a jaggedly sewn handmade pillow or a faded pair of contraband pajama pants that have been passed down for twenty years.

When someone is about to leave, they start experimenting with their hair or makeup and trying on outfits. Other girls offer to do their styling or let them borrow clothes. People ask questions like: “Where are you going?” And: “What’s the first thing you want to do or eat?” They try to give advice, or at least feel compelled to say, “Don’t come back.” Recidivism is real. I’ve seen more than a few short timers come back to prison after parole. Either way, whether it’s a short timer or a lifer leaving, it’s exciting. It’s like a com-

munity effort to send someone off the right way.

Now it's my turn.

I've saved an outfit for this morning, and given away every other thing I had. Little by little, each item finds its perfect new owner. My roommate, Layla, gets most of my hand-me-down contraband clothes—the soft purple pants from Jen, the hospital scrubs from Princess. I leave her my hair straightener so she can continue to make grilled cheese sandwiches without me. Angel gets my TV and those misshapen pillows made by Anna. Ella gets my workout clothes, Sandra the “sexy” jeans I bought from her last year. (Recently she thought she was leaving, gave all her jeans away, and then discovered she wasn't going anywhere for another year.) Colleen gets my thermals and sweaters because she is always cold. I give Gypsy the tie-dyed tank top I bought from Taylor for one soda. Ceil gets my Nike slides, packs of tuna, and tank tops. Kara and Kailey get colored pencils.

My release outfit has been chosen by my best friend Nayeli, who paroled in September 2020. It has been held in R & R (“Receiving and Release”) for the last 28 days, as part of what is called a “parole box.” This is an option I didn't mention to my family because I figured the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) had already gotten enough money out of them. I never even thought about it, really, but once Nayeli told me she had picked clothes for my first day of freedom, I was filled with excitement and gratitude. It is something I didn't know I desired until it was there.

I got a lot of unsolicited advice at the beginning of this journey from other inmates. Most common was: “You come in here alone, you leave alone. Don't make friends.” That advice, plus my assumption that I would have absolutely nothing in common with anyone, made it surprising that in jail and prison, I learned how to be a real friend. The joy and value of female friendship was something I had taken for granted, but I would form the deepest bonds I ever had while incarcerated.

I know what I am going to wear on the walk to R & R. I've planned it with Angel and Ceil. I noticed Angel as soon as she moved into my unit because she never smiled—not uncommon in prison, although she wasn't trying to act hard; she was just in her own world. Her thick, espresso-colored hair curtains her face, usually covering one of her large eyes. She reminds me of a much taller Wednesday Addams. We became instant friends after I asked her roommate, “What the heck is wrong with your bunk?” I made it my mission to make Angel laugh. We have been laughing our asses off ever

since.

When not locked down, we would go on long walks with Ceil or visit her room for “tea time,” a routine of drinking tea while “spilling the tea.” Ceil has done more than twenty years of a forty-five-to-life sentence. She was born with a serious heart condition and has had multiple surgeries while I’ve known her, yet she walks ten miles a day when she can and does tricep dips and lunges. I am constantly inspired by her resilience and the fact that she won’t give up on her health. Ceil was the go-to person for greeting cards and portraits. She once had a stroke and lost her eyesight in one eye...but her paintings are so incredible, you would never know.

Everything about this day has been perfectly planned, down to where to go for breakfast with my mom and stepdad Larry once I get out. Without the internet to look up menus or reviews, I’ve polled certain correctional officers (COs) for suggestions and sent my mom the list so she can surprise me.

That final morning, a constant barrage of people comes by, starting as soon as our doors unlock at 6:15 a.m. As people arrive, I stop whatever I am doing—mascara in one hand and one eye’s lashes done—and listen as they wish me well. With tears in her eyes, Ella reminds me about a letter I wrote on her behalf in 2019 when she went to court for a possible resentencing. She tells me that when she came away with twenty-five years taken off her sentence, her relatives added me to their nightly prayers. Nikki is next, and I open the door, concealer dotted around my face, and try to give her my full attention as she reminds me of moments we have shared in coding. I end up giving away my makeup right after applying it.

Even with the interruptions, I am ready on time.

The outfit I have selected:

- One high quality, relatively new Nike shirt—tight and white. I got some stares and compliments the first time I wore it in 2019, so I have kept it unworn after that, saving it for my walk to freedom.
- Pam’s old bra, which Kara gave me. Why? For one, we are not allowed underwire bras so this must be a relic from the early 1990s when female prisoners could get packages from whatever store they chose. It’s super comfortable and of such good quality, the only thing that makes me feel like a woman. But mostly I treasure this bra because Pam has a beautiful soul and when I wear it, I feel her good energy close to my heart.

- Over that, my pink Nike sports bra. Because I want it for jogging.
- One pair of silky lavender panties with a Nordstrom tag. Also contraband, probably from the 1990s. Left to me by my former bunkie Jen who also had such magical energy that I don't hesitate to wear her underwear.
- Very light blue jeans with lots of natural rips, which I got from Bonnie, who grew out of them when she started eating too many honey buns and adding creamer to her coffee. She bought them from Crystal, who needed money for drugs. I don't know where Crystal got them. Somehow I have gotten away with wearing these jeans to coding, to medical appointments, to groups and Shabbat services, and no CO has ever stopped me on the yard. I wear them about once a week after acquiring them from Bonnie (who only dared wear them in our unit), sometimes avoiding eye contact with the cops and sometimes not, depending on my mood. Each time wondering: Is today the day these jeans get taken? Then, I feel a small victory at the end of the day, as if I've gotten away with something.
- My Adidas classic shoes.

By the time my departure day arrives, I'd have thought I'd reach my goal weight, but I haven't anticipated so many people bringing ice cream from the canteen and cooking for me. People keep saying I look great, though, and despite a slight fluff, I feel like the best version of me. I'm looking in the mirror pondering that, in this moment, it's quite possible that I accept myself. Then, I hear the announcement. It's the same kind of announcement I hear at least a few times a week for different reasons: "Herron, Officer Station." Sometimes it's to go to a ducat. Sometimes it's to sign for legal mail or go to Property. But today it means I'm going home.

*

As soon as I hear my name, I realize it's not our regular staff. It's not soft-spoken and always smiling Mr. Romero, nor hungover and usually sleeping behind his sunglasses Mr. Silver. I step out of my room and Angel, Ceil, and Jezebel—the aloof (cat-trapped-in-a-dog-body) raggedy-looking golden-doodle Ceil is trying to train—are waiting to walk me to the gate. They reach

out to grab my bags. Bags containing journals, books I can't bear to part with, and every letter that's ever been written to me in accordion-style expandable folders.

As they lift the heavy bags, I feel a terrifying lightness, like I'm no longer tethered to the ground. I hear hooting and hollering and the applause that begins. The girls in the hall reach out and touch me as I pass...because most of us believe freedom is contagious.

But I am not in my body. I'm not feeling well at all, to be exact. My mouth is suddenly dry, and my palms are sweaty. Heart—is it still beating? Or is it beating so fast it's sprung from my ribcage like a hummingbird? I grip Angel's solid arm like a flotation device as I swim through this sea of people and energy, leaving behind all the familiar sounds and smells. The concrete and metal. The ugly things we think we hate serve as anchors and I'm floating away too fast. My lungs can't seem to fill up with a satisfying amount of air.

But no one knows because I'm smiling.

Before I can slip into a full-blown panic attack, I see a correctional officer I don't know emerge from the office.

"You're not leaving this unit dressed like that," she says over the celebratory noise.

Naively believing there's a misunderstanding, I try to clarify. "Oh, no, I'm paroling right now. I'm Herron!" I say excitedly.

"Not looking like that, you're not. I can see your sports bra through that shirt. And your jeans are ripped. You need to change." And just like that, my hummingbird heart returns to the cage of my chest and morphs into a crow. A familiar anger centers me in the moment. I hear hushed whispers: "What did that bitch just say to Jac?" "Are you fucking kidding me?"

"I've already given everything I own away. I have no other clothes and as soon as I get to R&R, I have a parole box waiting for me," I tell her respectfully.

"I can't let you leave this unit wearing that. You're not free yet."

The smile on my face expands, a spontaneous reaction as my panic breaks. Maybe it's not possible to feel both rage and anxiety at the same time. There needs to be a new word for the kind of anger when you're at someone's mercy. The impotent rage of incarceration. Impotent because you can't yell or leave or even say what you feel. It's never a fair fight. And it doesn't matter who you are or what you look like or what type of crime you

did—if you're incarcerated, you will at some point be made to feel this hot rage at the hands of your captors. In the past four years and one month, I have been sexually harassed by COs, threatened with being written up too many times to count, told Jewish "jokes," and just recently (for the first time in my life) called a kike. I've had to hear comments on my weight, shape, hair, clothes.... And I've had it very easy with the COs compared to others.

Some people cope with drugs, some cope with food. Some sleep with their captors to feel like they have some control. People act out every day—verbally, physically. And the guards love that. They love a fight. Any reason to use their pepper spray and batons. For me, the first time I felt this new kind of anger burning my insides, I knew it wasn't sustainable. If I allowed it, it would burn me down. This is the energy of cancer. The energy that precedes a bad decision. This is the type of fire inside that causes you to reach for gasoline...just to get it over with. But I refuse to self-destruct.

When they call me "INMATE!" or mispronounce my name on purpose, a still voice inside says, "I am not my name." When they "search" my room (destroy and/or take my stuff), that steady inner voice says, "I am not my things." When they joke about my crime, the wise one inside says, "I am not a story." Whenever it feels like a brick has been thrown at me, I step on it and become a little taller. Certain COs—the ignorant, the rude, the down-right sadistic—serve as sandpaper for my character and my mind. Every bullshit moment becomes an opportunity to rise a little higher. To develop more self-control, to learn how to soothe and care for myself. So when this woman I've never seen tells me, "You're not free yet," my higher self in its powerful whisper of a voice reminds me: I've been free this whole time. To have this thrown at me in my final moments is a perfect encapsulation of my time in prison, a final test, and a reminder of the biggest thing I have learned, that I am free and in control, no matter where I am.

So I smile. And turn around to see so many disappointed faces. I shrug, making the universal gesture for "Now what?" Immediately, a girl named Cooper—who I've lived twenty feet away from for three years yet never really gotten to know—runs up to me with her blues.

"Put these on over your clothes," she whispers, "and then just give them to Ceil to bring back to me."

I am touched by her kindness. I duck into my room and pull on the baggy, state-issued, dark blue misshapen pants. They are, as usual, the consistency

of cardboard, with legs that could fit three human legs in each side and a waistband fit for a ten-year-old. I button the faded extra-large blue shirt over the shirt that has just a few minutes ago gotten so many compliments. I feel momentarily disappointed that this is not how I've envisioned looking on my final walk across the yard. Then I take a deep breath. "I am not my clothes," I remember.

I walk back down the hall with Angel and Ceil flanking me, no longer anxious or even angry at all. Again, the woman stops me. "You have to go to Medical," she says. "They need to see you before R & R."

I smile and say thank you.

"These fucking assholes!" Ceil mutters as we walk out.

Angel looks at me as if studying my face. "I love you," she says.

I look up at the sky and my breath catches. "Look!" I point. "Look at the clouds and the color of the sky." I have never seen a color like this before and the clouds are wispy strands like a trail of white cotton candy leading me home. I stare at the great expanse of the sky and wonder if I will miss this place.

"This is how the sky always looks," Ceil says. "It just looks different because you're going home." A part of my heart breaks at the thought that I'm leaving and they're staying on this side of the gate.

The air is no longer crispy as it was last week. Beads of sweat form under my two shirts and two bras and I tug at the tiny waistband of the blues every now and then for some relief. The walk to Medical is about half a mile and I wipe my hairline and dab at my brow and upper lip, sweat threatening my makeup. I think back to this time last year, after Sandra painted my toes and blew the extra glitter off them. Then she left our cell and I remember lying on my top bunk with my feet straight up, pressing the ceiling. I whispered to myself, "These look like free toes....They should be out there." I kicked them around a bit and imagined I was in an apartment and had plans later to go out with friends. It was a Saturday night, after all. I wondered what I would be doing... just then, I felt a gust of heat.

This was May 2021, exactly a year ago, and we were all dreading the hellish CIW summer to come. There is no AC here. There are tiny fans for those who can afford them. Flashbacks of sleepless nights, dumping water on my head to cool off. Cold showers fully clothed before bed. On this Saturday night with my glittered toes, my release date was December 2022.

"I can't do another summer like this, God," I pleaded in a whisper. I

squeezed my eyes shut and shook my head like a little kid on the verge of a tantrum. "Please let this be my last summer in prison," I mumbled. I whispered prayers and cried.

I remember this day because it was one of very few pity parties. And now, as I walk through the yard for the last time and feel the first sneak preview of the upcoming summer, I realize my prayer has been answered.

I keep trying to grab my bags but Ceil and Angel won't let me. Even Jezebel the dog is walking with purpose, not pausing to stare down gopher holes or chase weasels. It's like she knows this is serious.

When we get to Medical, the CO, an annoyed-looking blond guy, explains that because of COVID, people have to check out first with a nurse before paroling. He explains that there are no nurses in the building right now.

"Why don't you just sit down? Get comfortable." He nods toward the metal benches by the door where Angel and Ceil are standing. Jezebel is lying in a fetal position. I feel my eye start to twitch. It's been doing this on and off for a week now. I walk back to my friends and relay the message. We stand in the doorway and discuss the craziness of this place. I steal glances at the clock.

"Fuck this!" I finally mutter and unbutton Cooper's shirt and throw it to Angel. When I start to pull down the ugly clown pants, the CO jumps up from behind the desk.

"WHOA, WHOA—" he starts before he realizes I'm wearing jeans underneath. I'm trying to get the pants off without removing my shoes and at one point, I'm hopping around on one foot, kicking and stomping the other pants leg down. I can feel my face grow red and realize my behavior could be regarded as erratic when I look up and see the CO is standing on alert, hand hovering over the pepper spray hanging from his belt.

"I just got hot," I explain, kicking the pants towards Ceil.

"I'm so sorry, you guys," I say to my friends. "You can go. Seriously. Just leave me here." Of course they don't. I talk about how Mom and Larry are on the other side of the gate, and I feel a wave of grief over all I've put my family through. Every time they came to visit, took my calls, emailed, sent me money. Rode the roller coaster of false hope with me. They did this time with me. This experience has fucked with them just like it's fucked with me—right up until this very last second. I march over to the CO.

"Excuse me. Dude.... I only have twenty-four hours with my parents until I have to parole to a different city. Every minute I'm sitting here is a minute

we don't get together." My voice is cracking. "Please. It's been four years and...I really miss my family." A tear escapes, quickly followed by another. "And now my makeup is getting ruined," I add, tilting my head up as if tears are only an issue of gravity.

After carefully wiping my eyes, I look down to see his face soften. He makes a call, and after hanging up, he tells me they really can't let me leave but the nurse should be back shortly. I nod. Time bends and stretches and my friends and I play with it like a piece of shared Silly Putty. We talk, tell stories, and whenever I get agitated, Angel explains that my family doesn't know what's going on. That for all they know, this is how long it takes.

"I just feel bad for subjecting them to this," I say, blinking back more tears. "All this time, I never had a mental health crisis. Wouldn't it be something if I lost it right now? Just started screaming or ran through that window? I mean...what if this is the last straw for me?"

"You should fake a seizure," Ceil suggests sarcastically. "That's the only way to get anything done around here." We laugh some more. Avoid eye contact with the clock.

Once the nurse shows up, I have to sign some papers and then we nearly run to R & R. I hug my friends, not processing that I won't be hugging them again later or tomorrow. All I can think is: "Got to get to Mom."

I rush into R & R, out of breath and sweating. "I know I have a parole box, but I'd like to take it to go, please," I say. "My family has been waiting long enough."

The CO on the other side of the desk gives me a sad look. "Are you sure? You should walk out of here in something new," she says.

"It will only take a minute," a deeper voice chimes in. I look, and next to her is a gorgeous man I have definitely never seen before. He looks like a stripper pretending to be a cop. It makes me wonder how I look. Pit stains and raccoon eyes, I'm guessing. I take the Fedex box she's just sliced open and hurry to the dirty bathroom. I pull out a maroon push up bra, the kind I used to wear. Pam's bra has no padding. This is something I forgot was possible. I put my nose to it and breathe in the scent of something new. The smell of "store." There are yellow sandals with a gold chain and my mouth is hanging open. Black capri pants that fit perfectly with a little silver butterfly on the butt pocket. A plaid blue and white shirt with buttons... Down the back! I change carefully so that nothing will touch anything in here.

When I emerge from the bathroom, stripper cop wiggles his eyebrows

flirtatiously and smiles.

"Well now, isn't that better?!" the other CO says.

"Do I...look...normal?"

They both nod vigorously. And I kind of believe them.

There's this awkward moment where you are looking at the parking lot waiting for the gate to open. I don't know if it is seconds or minutes of staring at Mom and Larry. The gate opens and I embrace them. I hear cheering, clapping, and my name being yelled. I remember that Kinzie and Kelly are in Visiting with their families and have been on the patio waiting. Another pang of survivors' guilt. I wave and yell goodbye. Mom is crying. I feel a strange numbness.

In the car, I gaze at the prison from a new angle. Larry is driving slowly and I realize I've been silently staring out the window while they both look at me.

"I've never seen it from the outside," I explain. I try to tune into my feelings but I'm drawing a blank. The sound of the GPS startles me. I don't like it.

"Can you turn that down?" I whisper. Mom hands me a gift: a new iPhone. It feels terrifying. Too skinny. Somehow I keep accidentally summoning Siri. After about ten seconds, I hand it to her.

"I can't deal with this right now." She tells me all the people who want to hear from me and I'm nodding, staring out the window feeling like the car is going too fast. Next thing I know, she is trying to hand me her phone—she has called someone for me. I shake my head, waving my hands. and she looks confused, politely telling them I'll call later.

I just want to be present right now.

As we arrive at the diner, I realize I'm starving. The waiter hands us menus. I lift a fork and experience the heaviness of it. This is the first time, I realize, that I'm going to eat with real utensils, not a plastic spork. This is my first sip of water out of a glass. The walls are cluttered with signs and old-time tchotchkes. I can't stop staring at everything. I wonder how I must look to other people. I feel like there's a sign on my forehead. The waiter comes back to take our orders and although I know what I want to eat, I haven't anticipated the question about drinks.

"I ... uh... "

"Do you need a minute?" he asks.

"No...I mean, no it's just...well...there's coffee. Or juice? I already have water," I mumble.

I see him glance at my parents and wonder if he thinks I'm brain damaged. I can't have that.

"I'm sorry, I just got out of prison!" I blurt. Quickly, I cover my mouth as if to stuff the words back in. Mom and Larry gasp. Larry laughing uncomfortably, mom glaring at me. I'm looking to the waiter wide-eyed.

"Wow," he says. "Congratulations. My uncle is in prison."

We all exhale, relieved.

POETRY

“Hither,” “Submission”

Jessica Goodfellow

Hither

-for Pete Collings

Ritual is six parts repetition, one part magic.
In this way it differs from the dragonfly—
two parts repetition, five parts magic.

To hover is to be on the edge of spiral,
a stasis that could ravel any moment,
unravel any summer, a tesserae of tension

that makes equal what is not:
how movement is what renders still-
ness possible, as proven by this body

flanked with equal signs for wings.
Those cellophane slivers, veined
a-shiver in the updraft, are rafts

a-glitter in the river of the wind.
But unequaled in the ether, there is no
such thing as walking for dragonflies.

They live in a world riven: river / sky.
And like anything of two minds,
they circumcircle an echo of three

hundred million years. Again, Earth spins
her ancient ritual, as dragonflies
trace the shaken origami of the air.

Submission

I looked up
the word anneal,
to see if it meant
the heating up
or the cooling down,
and it turns out
to mean both—
the whole process
of making metal
more workable or
glass less likely
to shatter.
And I thought,
how strange,
that anneal sounds
so much like kneel,
because I can
think of nothing
done while kneeling

that doesn't do
the same
as annealing—
heat up and
cool down,
make ductile and
make durable,
metal and
glass.

CONTRIBUTORS

Pearl Abraham is the author of five novels, most recently *American Taliban*, *The Seventh Beggar* (Koret Int'l Award, shortlist), and *My Father's Court*. Essays (some notables) and stories have appeared in various publications, including *Longreads*, *LitHub*, and *Michigan Quarterly*. *Animal Voices/Mineral Hum*, a hybrid collection in progress, was shortlisted for the 2018 McCarthy Prize. "Four Entered Pardes: Five Poems" is forthcoming in *Amethyst Review*. Founding editor of the former sentence craft page *S* and an Associate Professor of English & Creative Writing, Abraham now lives and writes in Columbia County, NY.

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Elizabeth Crane is the author of two novels and four books of short stories, most recently the novel *The History of Great Things* (HarperPerennial) and the collection *Turf* (Soft Skull). She is a recipient of the Chicago Public Library 21st Century Award. Her work has been featured on NPR's Selected Shorts and adapted for the stage by Chicago's Steppenwolf Theater. Her debut novel, *We Only Know So Much* (HarperPerennial), has been adapted for film. She teaches in the low residency MFA program in creative writing at UC Riverside Palm Desert. Her debut memoir, *This Story Will Change*, is out now from Counterpoint Press.

W.S. Di Piero was born in 1945 in Philadelphia. A poet, essayist, art critic, and translator, he was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2001. He traveled to Italy on a Fulbright scholarship in 1972, where he began working as a translator. A contributor to *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *Poetry*, *Threepenny Review*, and other publications, he is the author of some two dozen books of poetry, criticism, and translations.

Robert Fitterman is the author of 15 books of poetry, including *Rob's Word Shop* (Ugly Duckling Presse), *No Wait, Yep. Definitely Still Hate Myself* (Ugly Duckling Presse), *This Window Makes Me Feel* (Ugly Duckling Presse), *Rob the Plagiarist* (Roof Books), and *Metropolis*, published in four volumes. Forthcoming in Spring 2024 is *Creve Coeur* (Winter Editions), a long poem that transposes WC Williams's Paterson onto the suburban Midwest. He has collaborated with several visual artists, including Serkan Ozkaya, Nayland Blake, Sabine Herrmann, Natalie Czech, Tim Davis, and Klaus Killisch. He is the founding member of the artists-poets collective Collective Task. He lives in New York City and teaches writing at New York University. He can found online at www.robertfitterman.com.

Kristen Gallagher is the author of three books: *85% True / minor ecologies* (Skeleton Man 2017), *Grand Central* (Troll Thread 2016), and *We Are Here* (Truck Books 2011). Recent work appears in *The Baffler*, *Peach Mag*, and *Trilobite Bond*. A collaboration with Human Scale, *85% True/minor ecologies*

gies, an infinitely generative audio piece using sounds of Florida, is available through the Human Scale app. She was recently awarded a NYSCA Artist's Grant for a collaboration with filmmaker Tara Nelson. Videos from this collaboration can be found in *Air/Light* and *Distantia*. Her Instagram is @minor_ecologist.

Jessica Goodfellow is the author of *Whiteout* (University of Alaska Press, 2017), *Mendeleev's Mandala*, and *The Insomniac's Weather Report*. A former writer-in-residence at Denali National Park and Preserve, she's had poems in *Ploughshares*, *Scientific American*, *The Southern Review*, *Verse Daily*, *Motionpoems*, and *Best American Poetry*. Jessica lives and works in Japan.

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Kirsten (Kai) Ihns recently finished her PhD at UChicago, where she studied a form of attentional prosody she calls "aspect choreography" in contemporary experimental poetry and film. She makes short films, and is the author of one full length poetry collection, *sundaey* (Propeller Books, 2020), and a number of pamphlets, most recently with the Earthbound Poetry Series, slub press, and The Creative Writing Department. She lives and works in Chicago.

Sarah Maclay is the author of *Nightfall Marginalia* (What Books Press, 2023), her fifth collection of poetry. Her poems and essays, supported by a Yaddo residency and a City of Los Angeles Individual Artist Fellowship and awarded the Tampa Review Prize for Poetry and a Pushcart Special Mention, among other honors, have appeared in *APR*, *FIELD*, *Ploughshares*, *The Tupelo Quarterly*, *The Writer's Chronicle*, *The Best American Erotic Poetry: From 1800 to the Present*, *Poetry International*, where she served as Book Review Editor for a decade, and beyond. She teaches at LMU and offers workshops at Beyond Baroque, roaming between LA and her native Montana.

Diane Mehta was born in Frankfurt, grew up in Bombay and New Jersey, studied in Boston, and now makes her home in New York City. Her second poetry collection *Tiny Extravaganzas* is out with Arrowsmith Press (October 2023). Her essay collection *Happier Far* comes out in 2024. New and recent work is in *The New Yorker*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *American Poetry Review*, and *A Public Space*. Her writing has been recognized by the Peter Heinegg Literary Award, the Café Royal Cultural Foundation, and fellowships at Civitella Ranieri and Yaddo. She was an editor at *A Public Space*, PEN America, and *Guernica*. Her latest project is a poetry cycle connected to *The Divine Comedy*. She is also collaborating with musicians to invent a new way of working through sound together.

Kristin Robertson is the author of *Surgical Wing* (Alice James Books, 2017). Her poetry appears in *Ploughshares*, *The Kenyon Review Online*, *The Southern Review*, *The Threepenny Review*, and *Harvard Review* among many other journals. Kristin is an assistant professor at Mercer University and lives in Georgia.

Sandra Smith is a freelance editor and teaches creative writing, English, and editing at the university level. Her work has appeared in *EQMM*, *Cleaver*, *Shotgun Honey*, *Sky Island Journal*, and *The MacGuffin*, among other publications. Her short stories have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net.

Brian Kim Stefans is a poet and professor of English (contemporary poetry and new media) at UCLA. His recent books include *Word Toys: Poetry and Technics* (2017), *Festivals of Patience: The Verse Poems of Arthur Rimbaud* (2021) and the poetry collection *For Trapped Things* (2023). He can be found online at <https://arras.net>.

Catherine Texier was born and raised in France and writes both in French and in English. She is the author of five novels, *Chloé l'Atlantique* (written in French and published in Paris), *Love Me Tender*, *Panic Blood*, *Victorine*, and *Russian Lessons*. Her memoir *Breakup* was an international bestseller. *Victorine* won *Elle Magazine's* 2004 Readers' Best Novel of the Year Prize. *Love Me Tender* was a *Village Voice* bestseller. Her work has been translated into

10 languages. Her new novel, *After David* (whose first chapter was excerpted in Issue 7 of *Air/Light*) is coming out in February 2024 with ITNA Press.

Caitlin Thomson has writing in numerous anthologies and literary journals including *The Penn Review*, *The Moth*, *Barrow Street*, *Wraparound South*, and *Radar Poetry*. You can learn more about her writing at www.caitlinthomson.com.

Karen Tongson is the author of *Normporn: Queer Viewers and the TV That Soothes Us* (November 2023), *Why Karen Carpenter Matters* (one of *Pitchfork's* best music books of 2019), and *Relocations: Queer Suburban Imaginaries* (2011). In 2019, she was awarded Lambda Literary's Jeanne Córdova Prize for Lesbian/Queer Nonfiction. She directs the Mellon-funded Consortium for Gender, Sexuality, Race and Public Culture at USC, where she is also Chair of gender & sexuality studies, and Professor of gender & sexuality studies, English, and American studies & ethnicity. She is also co-editor of the award-winning book series, *Postmillennial Pop* with Henry Jenkins at NYU Press, and cohost of the podcasts *Waiting to X-Hale* with Wynter Mitchell-Rohrbaugh, *The Gaymazing Race* with Nicole J. Georges, and the limited series *Angels International: A 2023 Women's World Cup Digest* with Jennifer Doyle.

Marci Vogel is the author of *At the Border of Wilshire & Nobody* (Howling Bird Press) and *Death and Other Holidays* (Melville House 2018), winner of the inaugural Miami Book Fair Prize for the Novella. Her cross-genre work appears in *Jacket2*, and the forthcoming collection, *XENO » GLOSSIA: An Illuminated Study of Christine de Pizan* (Parlor Press). A first-generation scholar and former USC Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow in the Humanities and the University of the Future, Vogel teaches at the University of Southern California.

Matthew Zapruder is the author most recently of *Father's Day* (Copper Canyon Press), and *Why Poetry* (Ecco). He is editor at large at Wave Books, and teaches in the MFA program in creative writing at Saint Mary's College of California.

