



SUGAR HOUSE REVIEW

#5

FALL / WINTER 2011

\$7

# SUGAR HOUSE REVIEW



POETRY

Featuring:

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# SUGAR HOUSE REVIEW

AN INDEPENDENT POETRY MAGAZINE

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## THROUGH THE VALLEY

My eyes fixed on the staff  
tortured to a question mark  
that, for all its doubt, stood  
from heaven down to dust,

hooking the stone purity  
of a full moon in its crook,  
planted in a barren crack.  
The same cold wind that dragged

ripped clouds under stolen light  
spirited the hunger of wolves  
and my small whisper: *where?*  
My breath hung on the air.

## EITHER/OR

All you need to remember is  
that Greenland is ice-covered,  
Iceland green. Deliberate lure  
on some ancient Greenlander's  
part or a quirk of language, this  
bait and switch mating of name  
to thing is exemplary: amber  
light, admonition, welcome to  
the real. Or so it seems at two  
in the morning, waking from my  
dream in which words are actors  
who resist efforts to direct them,  
take on meanings which defy  
the script. The blue cloud bank  
on the horizon contains its own  
contradiction, different weather.  
The risen creek swells with earth  
not water. My arthritic wrist's  
better, shoulder worse. Nothing  
is what it is, nor its opposite.  
The red haze of buds on trees  
along the creek is undertow:  
the pull this day resists toward  
spring. What I resist is a pull  
toward a place I don't know  
whether to name Greenland  
or Iceland.

## KNOCKING DOWN ICICLES

they hang like new hayforks,  
ready to pitch grass, ready to spike snow.  
the pole for my purpose is as long  
as a lightning rod, daring in its gleam,

and soon i'm washing those watery windows  
and shattering each one. i'd just as soon  
let them touch down like ray beams,  
locking the house in a delicate prison.

but my father warns about ice dams,  
how they roost on the eaves like silver hens,  
kicking their cold eggs into the attic,  
where the yolks break and bloom brown

on the bedroom ceilings. water  
is sinister, he says, serpentine and soulless,  
and it'll pop rivets from the rafters  
if it wants to. therefore, i'm a surgeon

with my ridiculous scalpel, breaking  
all the bones, the wounds still weeping.  
beneath my boots, the snow squeaks  
as if it were crying. it will heal, he says,

meaning spring, meaning crocuses like debutantes  
with their fancy necklaces of rain.

## SNOWING LIKE HELL WOULDN'T HAVE IT

it's a matter of geography, my father says:  
we live in january wisconsin where the cold  
kicks our chests until we wear coats blue  
and bruised by oil, leaking out flurries

of feathers. he would never be caught dead  
in california, with its santa ana winds  
and bikinis like strings of suggestion,  
because he is a stubborn old man. my wife

disagrees: when these nights hang on their hooks  
for fourteen hours like butchered black pigs,  
she's ready to hightail it to tucson,  
pluck prickly-pear needles from her pinkies.

each hell is different, i suppose,  
low-pressure systems dropping boxes of nails  
tipped with tetanus, or pyrite, or  
frogs that explode into ichor on the pavement—

my father plows the driveway  
like spreading frosting on some unhappy cake.  
recently, a jesus fish has swum onto his truck's bumper,  
sudden and unexpected as a sunbeam.

the devil, sharkskin suit and red tie,  
is studying his weathermaps again.  
my father slings a shovel on his shoulder like a rifle,  
revising the sudden whiteness of his will.

## QIX

This was in the town of rectangles.

I was a fuse, mistaking my hissing for whispers. You were a silver sphere, rolling long and low.

It was as if your calculus could complete us.

And so we went to the Italian restaurant, ate focaccia and wood-oven pizza. And so your bra was like your highlighter: hot and pink. And so my grandfather died three days before Easter.

At the funeral, the priest left out the part about resurrection. He didn't say how cemetery plots are laid out like actuarial tables.

Yet when we laid in bed, straight and still as the symbol for parallel lines, the moonlight did what it could to fill in the gaps: our fenced pastures glowing electric-blue.

## AFTER CHEMO

Doeskin gloves, windbreaker pulled close against the cold.  
The instruction sheet in black and white. Your potholed arm,  
missing its tube. Everything is heavier. The concrete stairs to  
your front door doubled themselves while you were gone.  
You tread each one, the next round weighing in your shoes.  
The welcome mat you bought last month is already falling  
apart, the *L* worn off, sisal threads like saffron squandered on  
the porch. What you believed was dyed into the fabric, you  
realize now was merely screen. But you paid for it, used it,  
and now it's yours. What kind of omen is this, *WE COME*?

BILLY BATHGATE (FOR CHICO)

all i've got is this picture.

it could have been van der zee  
gordon parks,  
oggi ogburn fresh from  
a chancellor williams'  
shoot,

we are capable boys;  
innocent,

up some small mountain  
in the summertime  
from that swamp of a city,

we couldn't juggle balls  
didn't know any gangsters,

all we had was ice cold michelob and red juicy melon  
holy like water.

we didn't even know about the rattlesnakes  
that i've now been told are all over that mountain.

all i've got is this picture.

i could call up the crew,

though some of them are gone away now like wisps of smoke.  
others are here but just floating on the skyline like kite  
without string.

we were capable boys,  
looking into the future as if we  
would live long like frederick douglass  
or c.l.r. james.

did i mention the michelob?  
the red juicy melon  
holy like water?

and how about those rattlesnakes?  
all around us always now that we know  
they are there.

all i've got is this picture.

unbreakable smiles.  
lean frames.  
polo shirts gripping some young  
boys soon to be walking tight rope  
without poles.

it's there, all of it.  
ice cold michelob.  
melon holy like water.  
rattlesnakes.  
we couldn't juggle balls.  
didn't know any gangsters.

we were capable boys,

all i've got is this picture.

## UP IN SMOKE

midnight on the avenue, i'm at a stoplight and a tall white dude who looks just like tommy chong in that movie, *up in smoke*, is coming up the street to buy some crack cocaine. he is grabbed from behind by two black men. they pull him into a dark corner of a storefront begin hitting him over the head going through his pockets. he is screaming for his life and no one will do anything because everyone out here at this time, at this corner of the city, is part of something that no one wants to think about. i turn the music down on my radio. issac hayes singing "walk on by." i remember it like men remember the phone numbers of beautiful women. it is over now: tommy chong coming up the street, the black guys running down the street to a car that is waiting. issac hayes singing "walk on by" is loud again. i don't see tommy anywhere. the light is green.

## THE HERE AND NOW

If you can keep from fixating on the forward course—Monday morning's whitewashed sky; wipers gripped in ice; windows opaque as your comprehension of the job you're set to begin, *Terminal Operator*, which you must make a career of for your son's, and marriage's, sake;

if you can keep all that at bay with straight chair and whip—then perhaps you can lend your focus to this ten-month old crawling over you, this child of yours dissolving into laughter, i.e. perfection. Even now he's making sounds that sound like

Da-Da. For weeks he's been in Ma-Ma land; you welcome the sea change. In bed, in the bath, waiting in sub-zero cold for the van to warm, you say to yourself, *Da-Da, Da-Da*, trying the title on like a coat that might guard against inclement weather.

## THE PORT PILOT

Before I knew him as a butcher  
coming home with bloodstains  
on his cuffs that Mamá could never  
get out in the kitchen sink, before

I learned he'd spend all day in the sky  
in loafers and a necktie, counting  
other people's money in a tower  
with a view he couldn't afford, years

before he started gambling with me  
on cockfights at Tío Burili's farm  
every Saturday night teaching me  
how to bet on death, long before

he was diagnosed and staying alive  
became his fulltime job, his agenda  
filled with appointments to kill  
whatever was killing him, a lifetime

before I had to cradle him in and out  
of bed, he carried me on his shoulders  
over the jetty at the port, minutes after  
I'm called to the hospital, I remember

that day: sitting together on a rock  
watching the ships glide past us, when  
he told me that years before he was  
my father, he was a port pilot in Havana

steering ships safely into harbor, then  
guiding them out to sea again, never  
to see them again, seconds before I hear  
his last breath, told to leave the room.

## VENUS IN MIAMI BEACH

What calls her to the sea? She rises, steps toward the shore with the temperament of a bride, her shadow a long train pulled across the sand behind her, parting a flock of seagulls screeching away into the wind.

Her swollen ankles and frail shoulders disappear inch by inch under her body as she wades into the water, becoming as young as I remember her in a photo posing like a mermaid for my father.

Once, as gorgeous as her name—*Geysa*—once a girl chasing fireflies who hadn't lost her home and country, sisters and husband, once a mother who watched me as I watch her now, afraid of her alone with the sea.

I wave to her, but she turns away from me, fixes her eyes on the horizon and beyond at nothing I can see, needing no one it seems, like Venus's gaze I'm tempted to think, born full-grown out of the sea.

But today, she's not a goddess or a girl, not my mother, but simply a *her*, floating in the circle of her own arms, a water lily, tranquil and sure of her being, being.

## TÍA ELVIRA'S HOUSE:

The house on the cul-de-sac in Hollywood, Florida, the house where Tía Elvira was a star, where only *americanos* lived, and I wasn't Cuban anymore, the house with no chickens in the backyard or stinky guava trees like ours, the house with her gardenia bushes smelling like baby cologne, her double door, and doorbell chiming Jingle Bells at Christmastime, the house with her long, silver Cadillac, not my father's old Nova rusting in the rain, the house with a porte-cochère and her *Brady Bunch* kitchen: orange countertops, brown cabinets, two ovens built into the wall, the house with an upside-down fridge, the bottom always stocked with ice-cream sandwiches, the house of Kool-Aid popsicles and mac-n-cheese, not black beans and rice with sweet plantains, the house of Magic Markers and glitter she kept for me in a gold cigar box, the house of bonsai trees on her window sills, shag carpet, her red-velvet sofa not covered in plastic like ours, the house of shiny coffee tables and crystal candy dishes always filled with chocolate kisses, the house just like the houses on her Space Command TV, big as a car, the house of Sonny and Cher and Lawrence Welk on Sunday nights, not my mother's *telenovelas* or the news in Spanish, the house of Toy her Pomeranian always licking my ears or on her lap, the house of espadrilles and embroidered housecoats where she sat all day reading *Good Housekeeping*, and then the house where she sat all day in a wheelchair with crosswords, the house of *sit still, be quiet* and *wash your hands*, of medicine bottles and masks, the house where she couldn't breathe anymore, the house we never went to again, the house of crayons I drew over and over for years, the house with stick figures of me and her forever after in the house that disappeared.

## LAUGH YOUR TROUBLES AWAY!

*Motto, Riverview Park, 1904-1967, Chicago*

I.

Every city had one, a palace with a fried tint to its air, a hurting-hued screech of no underneath, everything plummeting or ascending, a monument to hazy flailing and sudden fun vomit. Swing the Riviera onto Belmont, and you see the Pair-O-Chutes rising to heaven on dual strings, headed for the pinpoint and release, then the sick whip and fall, the little public murder, a blaring grace so storybook gorgeous, suddenly flood in the throat.

Revelers board creaking Fireball cars and slice the August, mistaking acid bubbling in their bellies for symptoms of glee, then stop to stuff quavering guts with plastic and syrup. Their quick sustenance has wafted all day on a river of grease. They hunger for white cakes curled stiff with sugar, sausages that pop huge heat, pink candy of cotton chomping rot down their throats. The jagged stains of compromised fruit circle screaming mouths and paint shadow across the teeth, making them horrible. Bulbs flash. Wet Polaroids are lifted and waved like church fans to etch and clarify in the summer steam.

The aged horses are dizzied, diseased. Chained to a tilting stake, they blur through the drag, deferring to their brutal, squirming burdens. Potbellied flies, nasty to the point of charm, nibble passages toward the horses' blue hearts. Above it all, the freak show MC—his shout an odd mixture of pity and sex—dares us to witness sweaty sloth, tiny floating corpses, so much skin unlike ours, more legs than allowed, and a Negro who can separate himself from his eyes.

While on the midway, your father will never win the thinly stuffed neon grinners—the bears, dolphins, curlique serpents, kewpie dolls and counterfeit Mickey Mice that leer from shelves. He hurls balls at weighted milk cans, blasts at a measured parade

of bobbing ducks, guns water into a pinpoint, guesses a woman's weight. Finally, he just buys something soft and ugly, a token you will clutch and sing to until, too blackly loved, it melts. At dusk, he steers you away from the midway's squalling edge, where everything seems to be happening, where the hooting and laughter have a raw, unmeasured throat. You pout, he pulls, and, not for the first time, you wonder what he hides.

## II.

I am their pickininny, dressed in a repeating river.

All of me is droop and sustain.

My drenched dungarees are gravity on me.

I have learned to smile at the several versions

of my name, my face is complete in its teeth

and studied dumb ogle. *Oh, woe is me* I say

while the white boys wind up, and damn if they

don't always smack that huge disc, dead center.

I rise laughing from my clockwork baptisms,

the canned river funk'd with my own spit and piss,

just to see another man clutching the red ball,

his eyes harder than the first of these. Sometimes

an awed Negro dots the crowd, his numbed smile

a link chained to mine. I spot one using his body

to block his little girl's view of me, so I make

my voice louder: *I oh sweet jesus kind suh no,*

*I lawd ham mercy suh I I believes I might drown*

*I please let me dry off in this sun a little I mercy*

*me you sho does look strong suh* until she twists

hard away from her daddy and full unto me.

I have just enough time for her to sound it out:

*D-D-D-unk-unk Dunk a N-N-N-ig-ig-Nig-ger*

and then I salute, and hold her father's eyes as I fall.

## FIRST FRICTION

I was twelve, too young to be left alone mornings  
after mama packed her paper hat and sugar-dusted  
shoes to bus it to the northside candy factory.  
So I was unceremoniously dumped at the door  
of old Mrs. Gore's mouse-addled basement hovel,  
where the matron of snapping gum and gray grin  
ushered me in and plopped me down in a chair  
that stank of a dog they didn't own. Seeing how I was  
bleary and unslept, Mrs. Gore would open the door  
to the bedroom where her twin girls, Kathy and Karen,  
still dreamed on the edge of alarm. Peppery, flailing,  
their waking bodies unwound to carve me room.  
I don't know how it started, how, wordlessly, Karen  
and I tussled skin, adjusted knee and cunt, naturally  
knew the repeating mouth and its looping stanza.  
She smelled like what I couldn't stop swallowing.  
Content to thrive on a flickering cinema of ourselves,  
our eyes fluttered, never fully opened. We pretended  
a blazing slumber, hushing the grind, the soft rustle  
of sparse sweating pubic, even after her unsuspecting  
sister stretched and tumbled out to begin her day.  
Strange she didn't suspect our engine. For as long  
as we could, Karen and I stayed prone in exquisite,  
pressurized tangle beneath the knotty orange chenille.  
We kept up the being blind, crashing into dampening  
borders, until her fat mother shuffled in to rouse us,  
throwing shades open to the damnable day, introducing  
the stupid, useless notion of language again. By then,  
there was a drum buried in our bellies. We stank like  
men, all up under that sweet funk first sin leaves behind.

## MEYERS NEWS STAND, 1954

It lurked deep in downtown's belly,  
13th and Farnam, faraway as Europe  
to us west-end schoolboys. Grown bored  
with comic books and merit badges,

we slipped in before the matinee  
our parents dropped us off to see. There,  
next to rubber dog turds, exploding  
cigarettes, tin cans marked "A Nutty

Surprise," it offered *Gent* and *Rogue*,  
*Cavalier* and *Escapade*, and—most stirring—  
*Sunbather*, *The Official Voice of American Nudism*,  
with a naked woman right on the cover—ideal

for those too timid to be seen thumbing through,  
too bitten to resist round-trips for extra eyefuls.  
A lithe brunette, poised to swing out on a rope  
to me from somewhere called "The Nudists

at Mountain Manor," she looked athletic,  
blithe, like I imagined Peggy Schmidt  
when I'd watch her fidget from the back row  
in history. My mountain nymph smiled at me

above taut thighs and small uplifted breasts  
as I circled back again till Old Man Meyers  
sent me moping out the door,  
to Randolph Scott and Daffy Duck.

O first raw love, doomed to disappear  
with the August issue—you'd be almost 80.

## SELLING

I failed at it early, peddling tickets  
door to door for the Boy Scout Jamboree.

“Sorry,” I’d say, when they told me  
I was the sixth that day, and slammed

the door; “Pardon,” when someone  
answered in robe and shower cap;

“Displays and stuff,” I’d mumble, when they asked  
what the hell they’d get for two whole bucks.

I brushed twice, ironed my neckerchief,  
practiced smiles and openers: “Hello,

sir,” “Good morning, ma’am,” “Well,  
howdy there,” “Sorry,” “Pardon.”

Shamed by Byron Petrie, who carried  
a brief case in seventh grade and sold

two hundred, even by Joe Blank,  
whose mom and dad bought four,

I’m kin to the guy with the dirty rag  
who wants to clean my windshield,

to the comic dying at the Improv,  
to Willy Lowman, riding downward

on his smile and shoeshine. Well, howdy  
there, Mr. Death. Need any poems?

FRANCINE HANGS LINES OF TROUT WHERE  
THERE SHOULD BE LAUNDRY

Francine eats plumbs on a park bench after counting tree branches. Her heart, a trout. I think it's trying to get out, she writes, and I trust him. Francine believes the last letter he wrote. Though a voice is only a shadow, or a tool. And a garden is a body. And a staircase a body. And a river off course, of course, is a body. One man drives sixty miles to watch stars fall. I eat plumbs on a park bench, she writes, and collect sweet things. I steal packets of honey from other people's dinner parties. And light is a body. Francine couldn't eat trout. Too many trying to get out. And a river is a body. There are many, she writes, within me. Francine tastes of a river when she wakes. Her body round, the sunset, a fish. Which trout was meant for his body, she thought, and his?

## AGAIN

The moon too has a smile far away and a pair of wedded scars. Late in the afternights, when through the window platinum laid bars of itself over the bed, I understood twin calculi of distances, why they traveled in ships foiled with stained gold a pencil tip could make black and a vacuum. The moon, long away to long for in the hours deepening gravity; and the lilies on the table falling, petal by petal, with a sound pink as the cheek of the woman whose name scries other destinations. This is not a fable for children or men who know only desire in the night, but a story that belongs to a way time has of becoming only the thing it measures. If I look at you, the wave you were becomes the moment of my beholding. If you look at me, then all these particles of sand, whiteness all around you, hold just still, and wait for what you were when I saw you first in the shadow's green penumbra, your right hand lifted nearly to your brow, the glasses dark and the smile waiting in the photograph for me to take it, as if I were the one who would take it.

## FUGAL

The day skinny Kevin burns the dimestore flag because it touches the ground the air is hot and bright. A kitchen match crack-spouts at the hill's edge over the creek where Janie Zalva puts carpenter ants to sleep with sawdust and boats them down the water. The flame is nearly invisible, a ball of hotter heat, and what's wrong with touching the ground. When the flag's half-burned he chucks it by its stick partway down the hill. Marble squares stubble the packed red hill clay like the teeth in the crazy man's mouth who screamed and said he'd lock me in. When you beat pokeberry plants against rock, the rock turns purple. We come back and it's black before dinnertime. We swish bruised leaves in the cooling air. I climb down to get the flag. Squatting, I look up. Kevin's fat brother Kenny smiles a scared smile above me as the chunk of concrete studded with coffee pebbles rolls over my hand. He looks and sees and runs away. The green cold grass is it and my running is it, and a lady cooking on her grill goes inside and comes out here's a sanitary and wraps it around my finger. A mean man throws a red face kitchen towel and sends me home. Mother yells at the blood dripping on the carpet and after the car ride they tape my arm to a table and stitch me. My two best friends come over to see me in bed. Then it itches and stinks good private smells and Dad pulls out the stiff black hairs one by one with a tweezers. Water so hot it feels cold. Kevin has a little smooth container full of balled-up secrets, milky plastic you can almost see through with a lid that snaps. He won't let me see it, not even after what Kenny did. He goes in leaving it on the curb and I run home. Mother cleans up after fried chicken and clicks the eye under the skillet. Duke drags me out of bed and down the stairs and disappears. Fire roars out my front door as a man on either side pulls chairs out and falls or jumps away. Next morning my father comes home with another box turtle from the road where he sells aluminum siding. The black smell in the walls is Maxwell House. My room was still there and I found it under my pillow but I didn't want to see it anymore. The sun falls inside our house where the walls were. In the back yard where centrifugal force was me held by him and the water in the pail spinning and staying he says when I ask, *No we're not poor, what we are is broke.*

WHAT I'D SAY TO MY FATHER IF I COULD  
TALK TO HIM ABOUT SOMETHING OTHER  
THAN THE WEATHER

I'd say, "Dad," or something like that.

And he'd likely look at me and mumble.

Then I'd ask, "Do you ever wish you could erase the bad things?"

And he'd probably say something vague and shadowy about God  
and forgiveness.

So I'd counter, "But aren't there words, actions or days you regret?"

And he'd surely talk about Adam, the apple and the Fall of Man.

So I'd say, "We're all just ugly people inside."

At which he'd say something uninspired about Jesus.

Then I'd hint at my disillusionment with my upbringing.

And he'd say, "Job, even on his worst day, never cursed the Lord."

So I'd shoot off something cryptic and veiled about hating my  
childhood.

And he'd say, "Jesus carried his cross and never said a mumbling word."

At which I'd make some banal remark I would scarcely remember.

To which he'd reply, "Yes, it is. But a bit cool for September."

## IF I SENT YOU A POSTCARD

it would return from my childhood  
stamped,  
*No such address.*

I would write,  
*I told you so,*  
glinting from the 3x5 reproduction  
of a yellow house caught in winter,

a field of satisfied snow leading  
to an old fence,  
drifted-in.

## CONCOURSE A EXHIBIT

*Denver International Airport*

*The painting is lovely, but for a security line that people have no choice to stand in, to see skeletons before they board a flight is inappropriate for the venue.*

—Screener for Art Exhibits

Not appropriate to shed bones in the display case, to calcify water colors, magenta flowering into powder blue, not appropriate to leave calcite deposits on the glass, nor a water color image on the brain, not appropriate to brush charcoal rivers and burial mounds at the feet of deer, their tense bodies moving like milkweed through the Purgatoire, not appropriate while holding your shoes, your quart baggie of three-ounce liquids, your laptop unsheathed, keys in a dish, not appropriate to view the river with conquistador skulls when you walk through the metal detector with the eye socket of the skeleton staring back as you clutch your boarding pass and identification in one hand, your carry-on in the other, not appropriate to think of bones when the country is in code orange, to view the structure that holds it all together, the thigh bone connected to the hip bone connected to the breast bone, not appropriate to reveal the rib cage minus heart and lungs when you wait in line to empty your pockets, to let skulls full of air and aerodynamics filter into your security quest. Not appropriate to view pastel ribs tangled in thorn branches,

deer antlers spiking sky while standing in your stocking feet, empty shoes in a bin, hair gel in zip-lock, not appropriate to suggest the skeleton is inside you handing the boarding pass to the security officer, the skeleton emptying pockets of coins, stepping into the scanner, stepping back into shoes, then taking the hand of the skeleton child to board the aircraft where the flight attendant warns to fasten safety belts, not appropriate to smuggle skeletons past security, skeletons hidden beneath muscle and sinew with teeth, vertebrae, cranium, inappropriate to view a skeleton before boarding.

KATIE KINGSTON

## THOUGH I'VE NEVER HEARD A RAVEN SPEAK

I've memorized their turquoise glint of eye, grey  
lisp of under wing, their alphabet of latitude. I mimic

and they follow, swooping inches from my ear, ravens  
cawing in their blend of romance languages.

Though I've never heard a raven speak, I've warned  
them of the parrot quoting *Nevermore* in Poe's first draft.

I've warned them of brushstrokes in Picasso's *Guernica*,  
the anaphora of burnt cities: Pearl Harbor, Hiroshima, Falluja.

Though I've never heard a raven speak, I tell them my story:  
*Chasing my sister across carpet, I tagged her. A small flame burst*

*on the back of her neck. We held out our fingers and watched  
a spark leap. Then we tried it with kisses. A tiny flame ignited*

*between our lips.* Though I've never heard a raven speak,  
I tell them fear is not an orphan. There are tornadoes in every sky.

Each river has its flood. I remind them if disappointment  
were fatal, the survivors would all be optimists, people with raven

power walking through snowfields talking to wingspan, people  
crossing alfalfa stubble, fingers emitting sparks, people hungry

for what they are igniting. Though I've never heard a raven  
speak, I've seen their ink unfetter sky, their vocabulary endless.

THE IDIOT'S SONG, A FALSE TRANSLATION  
(RILKE)

Whispers hinder my sleep, lasso my eyelids and tug.

It's a con, slumber.  
Wire gut. Stars are  
gashes in that hood and resistance's  
metal won't bend its form to tinkering.

Nine men work the night  
shift stand  
sentry dip into minotaurus  
the maze all laden  
out marzipan  
for viewing bandit neckerchief  
at the ready

gourded out her mind was she  
in fur bloodstone  
hard and still one

man on a raft saved  
her bloody hoof

[THAT PORTION OF THE ICED-OVER  
POND, WHERE...]

That portion of the iced-over pond, where  
as a child I carried a frozen song  
bird by its feet, no longer captured a clear

sky. *Intervals of clear also imply unclear*

and in the shimmer of this abiding, sound  
of stepped-on snow, a recall of bright red  
mittens.

[I'VE HEARD THAT DUE WEST...]

I've heard that due west  
there is this place  
where I can trade in  
all my ghosts for one hero.

A fair trade.

When I reach a river,  
the ferryman doesn't allow me  
to cross, tells me that  
I've been here before and  
that I didn't listen then either.

## WINTER CANTICLE

*The Donner Party, 1847*

*She:*

The children curled inside the tent  
gum a boiled ox hide.  
Wind lashes solid Alder Creek—  
the oxen all are dead.  
Back in Illinois she wore  
pink ribbons in her hair,  
her husband shifted in his sleep,  
panning gold all night—  
all their dreams of westering  
still heavy boughs of fruit.  
Now the blizzard sputters,  
and the baby faintly sighs.  
She tucks him to her shriveled chest,  
pressing his lips to nurse.  
His ribs are like an ivory fan  
a lady holds but will not spread.

*He:*

They sang, those early months along  
the easy sloping trail,  
nightly clutched the womenfolk,  
their folds and apertures.  
The stars were flecked, cold elements  
in riverbeds of sky.  
He breathed the sweat of day's end,  
rubbed the grooves  
cut by the harness in his hands.  
They slept the fierce, clean sleep  
of animals, pressed close,  
soft rump to gut, jigsawed,  
breath hay-warm as a barn.  
Now his wife is trapper's rope,  
the babe cool in her arms.  
Another fellow lost today.  
They gulp and close  
their eyes, shiver  
in raw communion,  
melt the snow to broth.

## HORSE, HINNY, MULE

After so long sketching horses,  
shading damp velvet nostrils,  
darkening their marble eyes,  
she's realized her horse-side—  
how her hair, unwashed begins  
to smell of wet hay and moonlight,  
how her jeans collect flank-sweat  
as if she's been astride Old Chestnut,  
Lightning Rod, The Pie.

Her daddy says, *I'm blue tonight*,  
and holds one of her pages  
to the light, inspecting it.  
*You draw like shit*, he says,  
and, when she seems about to cry,  
*C'mere, I'm only joking, kid.*  
He scratches her behind the ears,  
her sparse mane of pale hair  
crackling with static in his hands.  
She nearly whinnies in his palms,  
the yellow mounds of calluses.

Outside, there are sirens, city lights,  
no pastures, no patient shadows  
of horses with bowed heads.  
She's penciled all this time, she sees,  
just half-things, misbreeds: not-animals.  
A lonely sort of *almost*, these off offspring.  
Her daddy grunts and nudges her,  
but she's already gone, galloping  
bit-less and unmatchable, teeth flashing.

## RURAL GHAZAL

How the depth of field rows govern a man's worth—  
too deep, and seeds sleep like smoked honey bees.

Ways that I've buried kernels of love are no different.  
Potato-eyed in the mud. Women rooting to me like weeds.

Harvest moonlight cools the pebbled hill where sand hornets  
protect the entrance to the garden with fanatic conviction.

I want to taste underground honey that sings land's worth,  
whose sweetness—bought with venom—scalds my tongue.

Sampson swallowed God's spirit when he rendered lion flesh  
into hive tract. Such is the hunger for love sought through stings.

Both hoe and spade gnarl the earth into pulp. Into seeds  
of dust. Though I dig to hide, the moon draws my sprouts.

Everything, no matter the resistance, breaks the skin of earth.  
Look. My back yields to the shock of work. I'm no Sampson.

## STREAM UNDER AGERATUM

There are birds that are parts of sleep, bones  
of notes outlining different homes

of wrens and cardinals and mockingbirds,  
for whom the best song wins first,

the best space. We hear water purling  
like the vigor in a cat's eye, around the pupil

and out again in vision. The ravens' unkind,  
heavy calls are lost in the liquid's stitch,

razed in its rags and bent inside themselves along  
fishes' silver stomachs. A bittern hunts in moss

and ageratum, and such purple mist runs the banks  
into a cooler fall. This can be our green bed.

Our home can grow from the ground around us,  
beaming cedar, with rafters incensed with fir.

## THE WEDDING

Stars chirp. Birds blink. Trees rust over and end up in yards that aren't theirs. This then is everyone's. Tree swings walk their burning blue kin to the river to drink. I turn blue and white myself. Nearly unnoticeable stars write in their notebooks and dip their feet in waters like birdbaths. But birds' stomachs are hurting. Their insides gurgle like boisterous family trees. Napkin halos rise up in the picnic winds. Trees and rust come on usually like that. Tree swings tell loud, annoying stories about the times the groom hurt himself. By groundswell dark the earth is cold and the picnic rests its drunken eyes in the laps of stars. Stars fly the borders of firelight like they're patrolling. But they aren't looking for weak birds. That's where you come in. We're by morning bars of a crib by the riverside. That's why you're here, we're all here.

## VETERAN'S DICTUM

- I've learned to stop complaining about smoke screens. I've learned to stop vomiting.
- The smoke makes the meat taste good;  
I prefer the conveyor belt to coworkers.
- I can tell the tone of the day from my chest aching in the morning,  
I know who's gonna give me shit. I know how much I'll smoke.
- Look straight into smoke but run your fingers  
over scattered plants often.
- I don't cancel my networking accounts but  
I watch them leering, is this safety?
- School, kitchen; hold your writing utensil like a weapon. Clutch.  
You know not to change when you feel afraid.
- New techniques are salty, go with what you know.  
I've seen enough pierced body armor to be tacit.
- Can people feel this gaze? I don't know if I'll ever know,  
but I spend nights watching things appear and disappear.
- Don't give them your eyes,  
give them the cardboard cutout of your face.

## HUMPADORI SOLDIERS

Our song is a bog, an outfit of sink and preservation.  
A stubborn tow of muscular affection, a drag  
on time, a drag on matter. Ingest us at your  
peril:

Twelve toy soldiers,  
holed up in the marsh-phlegm,  
in a loamy whiteness,  
plunging our fingers into our own or each others mouths,  
forever probing  
the unlikely weather—

We're twelve hunks or fuck-ups, lost or moribund,  
sinking  
onward and inward  
into the suck: *the prettiest one is mine, the prettiest one is mine.*

Can you pick out your favorite from the agents of malevolent damp?  
Gather the troops from the flesh?  
There are traps lurking in the moldering pages, pockets of shock:  
The flesh is scary,  
guarded and inspected like a crazy business, full of dumb  
globules and lesser talents—slurps  
and little hairs—

O! Why are we still excited, why are we fused together, why are we good?  
We invite conjecture,  
a fugue in the world. A fair body is made—  
in the cold lag,  
in the absence of what  
you might consider a desirable self: our wooden boy  
wants to be blown  
into metallic petals and woodchips. He is the fulcrum  
of our union, our own sad  
undoing.  
If you take him, you may join us in our song, but  
we're not responsible  
for any injury incurred  
in the violence of the exchange.

## HUMPADORI SHADOW FRIEND

I spy on you and secrete you—  
I blot you out. I complete you—

You, your friends, your strangers,  
your spawn. Your one-eyed  
jacks and kings.  
Your buoyant ripples of scrambled biodata.  
We are family. We're a shady pack.

I mark your haunts. I release trickles  
of nymphed-up dusk  
onto your skin and stuff—  
a rampant gathering of intelligence—Oh what quality info!

My nerves swan  
existence  
in membranes so black, that  
you experience waves  
of smut and flux wherever you go. Wherever I surface,  
you accumulate depths.

A fly wells up in me and spreads. The nicest buzz disturbs  
your edges.

I admit: I get a rush from any nasty thing  
and come up shivering,  
inexact,

an overblown,  
bloated, supremo  
on my protean pink bed.

Such a fine environment for alteration and injury—  
so fluent and trespassing, and, of course, *dark!*

We don't even have to touch or talk.  
Please turn to the wall

and I'll let you watch  
as you merge and swell, become my little animal.

## HUMPADORI UMBILICAL CORD FRIEND

Euphoria:  
I arrive, singly—  
prizing

the belly to unfuzz  
the static orchestra,  
to expand the warm feelings, play jump rope!

A neon pulse—a dimple—wanders  
in  
and out on you—

Lickety split. Spit and lick  
the seal.  
Close your eyes. And all the shine will migrate there:

lubing the tube, where the oxygen bells and surges,

ripening incidence, wings,  
and miscellaneous  
appendages.

Worlds-a-rama lotus out  
of your skin and hinges. Soft  
Camelots

peep and spore. A door opens.  
You're adored.

You're another Venus

Hottentot, Venus with fur. It's almost a dream:  
You can always be more than you are—  
Since you're more than you want to be.

I'm your live feed

of nerves dangling,  
attached and rhyming, going to seed.

If you pluck the grub-end, I might bleed  
horizons,

a free-form history, but never free.

## STUNG SONG

She struck the luck of honey,  
the translation of small fires,

bees nestled in the folds of sheets  
left all afternoon on the clothesline.

The swelling tightened her  
like a drum made of sun.

She did not lift her voice to  
the gate of the orchard,

did not call for smoke.  
Instead listened

to the beat of trapped  
blood, the rhythm so like

speech she abandoned  
the other story, unbuttoned

her future and cast it aside,  
white in the darkening grass.

## DEAR THANATOS,

Last week a pregnant woman ate rat poison  
at dusk and feared the light she woke to.  
The last time I stood in front of a mirror,

a monster crawled out, forlorn and flailing,  
who looked like mother when she dreams  
of snakes. I bit its neck until it stopped moving,

split it open, and where its first heart  
should be, I found a model of the moon.  
I never consented to this—walls made

of calendars, boxes opening themselves,  
birds still nesting in the fallen trees.  
The telescope lens cracked. I can't see

the stars. When I opened the cupboard,  
I found the monster's second heart  
made of blank paper and burning.

## YOU SAID THE LIONS DISAPPEARED

Drink this, my night. An empty field  
answers the rain. Ashes fall into the wine.

We pry crocodile teeth from the boat's hull.  
Now you're safe enough to surrender

to my hand up your shirt, my tongue  
on your ear. The mountain will hold us.

The cave we crawl into could be a lion's mouth.  
Eat this, my morning, but beware the arsenic

in the apple seeds. The path to the river moved.  
I don't know how my darker nature entered me

or when, but I am vain and bruised and my heart  
is a liar. Take your mouth off my breast,

the world isn't there. So much pleasure before us—  
the long grass parts as the lion approaches.

THIS BODY WAS NOT MADE FOR SEX

Yet the very air  
around me reeks of love,  
feeds large brush  
fires in the night,  
signaling lovers who will  
rearrange scarred legs  
and hips in such a way  
that he can love me  
without me bleating,  
a nicked sheep.

## THERE IS ALWAYS CHLOROFORM

1. The translation from one language to another moves inside a frog's lungs. If visibility is a choice, then the self is absent. That is to say, the lights are turned off because drawing the internal organs of a live subject has altered the hands. Like a Judas kiss, you go through bodies one wound at a time. Here, a heart. Here, the spill of intestines. The whole room staggers, luminous as it is with flies. What you are here to do.

2. What of the woman  
infused in the breath of dying frogs.

Year after year she walks  
empty. The students by which she lives  
blend into their frog sketches  
and fade from view.

Her face is rivulets  
of thunderstorm on the window,  
the hidden side of frogs.

{ there is  
a gall bladder  
to all this  
under the table

& a trail  
from where the body  
was dragged  
from it }

3. If this is the extraction of organs then be the blood. You feel nothing. That is, your feelings are cut open. Frogs with their lungs trailing from their torn chest. Inside the body it's always raining. You wouldn't live inside you. Frogs hop with one leg pinned to a styrofoam board. All this after proof of everyone else is gone. The fever that is the heart in dissected frogs drinks up. This syntax of goodbyes.

4. So the sleep takes you.

## EIGHTEEN : FRINGE

from *Approximate Translations*

where  
the boats  
slow down : swing of  
shoe at throat : liquid moon & mouse  
trap : the photograph shows a fist gaining distance : a buzz such as  
trailers on fire : afternoon of the blue guillotine : the eighteen

year old subtracts mercury from the fish bone : so the half-built barn  
flickers déjà vu on the backs of pigs : already the clenched

cigarette is awash with diffracted need : electric rain on hand  
-held wrists ruining the veins : car exhaust & flea bites : interval  
with spiral staircase : memory  
is a cubicle :  
the crime  
of

A DRIVING INSTRUCTOR'S FIRST BRUSH  
WITH DEATH

It had all the eyebrows  
of John Donne. He thought  
*this is how a mathematical problem  
becomes Hitler's moustache.*  
He added another windshield to his face  
as Mrs Delaney mistook  
the brake for the gas pedal.  
She turned her head, left then right,  
like a missing person.  
He could see her reflection from the fender  
of the other car—the one that  
she insisted resembled a victim of outer space.  
And there he was: inside  
a bumper sticker, conceptualizing  
death as a cowboy  
with sore gums. Her perfume  
brought him back, dug  
itself into his nostrils, pulled out  
his nose hair one at a time.  
He called it *Jesus*. He called it  
*son of a bitch*. He called it  
*Mrs Delaney, please restart the car.*

## METRONOME

The peacock devours his plume absently  
as the mermaid falters posture among sinking swells—

black lines that separate air from cloud from bird,  
tree from leaf from root, tiny pictures painted black.  
Hung in strict rows for me to chart your path,  
I follow you foolishly to the sea.

Closer, I can feel the gloom's yawning breath.  
Closer and the dawn's golden nod escapes the wire.

Compass misplaced and panic where sleep should be.

## COAXING SPIRIT

Yes I came for comfort Yes  
to be buoyed by the ineffable Yes  
for the church for

the articulated exterior alcoves  
sunk in white white stucco for  
the aqua arcing green architrave

vaulted over oak doors  
studded with tin nipples for  
the throng for the throng &

to be ushered with them to  
be swept past  
the showcases of banished saints

their drapery sack cloth their mirrored chests  
past decommissioned bells  
along a pine nettled path

toward the altar of St. John toward  
the Bautista toward  
his altar and away Yes

I came for the ceremony  
for the copal smoke for  
the eggs swung overhead

the hen slaughter for  
the blood letting  
the shit distillation of *pox* & Pepsi for

the friable candles  
green for heavy harvests black  
against the *mal de ojo* Yes

to know how it can be done  
the father kneeling the  
family flanking Yes

to coax Yes to expunge  
to disintegrate among them there  
on the streaked terracotta floor

## ADVICE

Draw her, charm her, lead her, nudge her,  
urge her, lure her, coax her, bid her,  
bribe her, trick her, push her, dupe her,  
drag her, cart her, pluck her, stick her,  
ram her, jam her, thrust her, force her,  
stuff and shove her into a dress.

## AEGIS

Ἀφαιίστου τέχναισιν  
χαλκελάτῳ πελέκει πατέρος Αθαναία κορυφὰν κατ' ἄκραν  
ἀνορούσαισ' ἀλάλαξεν ὑπερμάκει βοᾷ  
Οὐρανὸς δ' ἔφριξέ νιν καὶ Γαῖα μάτηρ.

*By the skills of Hephaestus with the bronze-forged hatchet,  
Athena leapt from the top of her father's head  
and cried aloud with a mighty shout.  
The Sky and mother Earth shuddered.*

*Pindar (7.035)*

These beasts on the sides of her helmet,  
Mom, with the wings and the claws, are  
they lions? Are they falcons? And that  
beast at the top, Mom,

with the lion's body, the woman's head  
and the woman's breasts, Mom, look,  
it's got wings! And from her breastplate,  
Mom, a head hangs

with snarling snakes instead of hair!  
Look, a woman wears this armor,  
Mom! I will wear a man's suit  
when I grow up.

Glaukopis Goddess, you who leapt from  
Zeus's head when Hephaestus cleaved  
his head with his bronze labrys, come,  
for when your unfledged

fledgling declares she'll grow to be a man,  
the father shudders and the mother trembles.  
Come to me now with your collection  
of amalgam beasts,

your Gorgon on your aegis, your winged  
sphinx, and your winged griffins.  
Come to me now, you who has no mother,  
show me how to mother.

## LAST DRESS

I jam  
the white  
smock dress  
over your head.

Limp  
marionette,  
silent  
in your dissent—

you crumble  
in your father's arms,  
acquiescing  
as I fasten the pearl buttons.

## SIX

Ways in which quiet  
might be introduced  
to an orphanage.

The colonel counting  
carefully on the  
fingers of one hand.

## PATHOLOGIST

There is a bloated cadaver on a silver table.  
Bruised like a blueberry muffin.  
There is jazz on a radio with bad reception.  
The mind we know must defend itself.  
Or do we mean *extend* itself?

Anyway it is time to begin.  
He scratches words on a legal pad.  
Not the words he is thinking.  
Bruised like a blueberry muffin.  
Bruised like a blueberry muffin.

And the body is opened.

## BETWEEN THE WORD AND THE SENSE

1

In German, *ruhig* means peace: a place, carved out, orb of light, belly of a firefly, not built, but comes soothing, pelt-like skin of Madrone that peels and peels towards smooth.

To find *ruhig* you must travel a long distance.  
You must have tensed and clenched and winced and shied.  
*Ruhig* is the space the body can make—  
deep, submerged in a warm sea or under the ice,  
avalanche of doubt—a trick of breath and life.

2

In the 7-11 parking lot the car next to mine opens like a cinema.  
Man, dirty tank top, slaps skinny woman with stringy brown hair  
across the face. His anger is *Vesuvial* covering the world in red  
velvet fire, leaving only a blanket of ash and the possibility of later  
archeology: rooms, hidden and sealed, left intact. The child is in the  
backseat, in pajamas at noon.

I'm 3-feet away, caged in metal but thinking *sweet, silent Doppelgänger,*  
*I know you, I know you.*

The celluloid stretched out reads: *don't judge*, your car door swings  
wide open into [*Say it!*– ]the word I want to give that child is bigger  
than my whole fleshy body.

3

The artist is learning disaster—flown, all expenses paid, to descend  
into the sealed rooms of Pompeii. What she finds will be painted in  
someone else's dining room.

4

Like golden elephant seal pelts the voluptuous hills spill to the road,  
soothing back the asphalt, as the trees spindle the sky just high  
enough to pass me through.

This road leads to home, to dinner, to a chance at grace:  
two sets of sticky hands,  
tiny, electric wire bodies,  
eyes that can't yet close long enough.

And in that waning stillness, we'll carve that cavity between us—

## SIMILITUDE

The room that they  
have brought us to  
is dark      you cannot  
see the body  
    not because of this  
but because of this  
you might expect  
a service    someone  
to officiate  
but it's nothing  
but waiting  
you and the room's  
true elephant  
handsome as a piece  
of furniture   accordingly  
appointed      Purposely,  
no one is looking  
in it      Ask why  
it is so dark  
why the room  
is red    why  
the room is always  
red    and gracious  
as a hotel bar  
a red room  
like the one  
on television      heavy  
curtains covering  
false windows

a riddle in its sleep  
which hastens you  
to navigate  
an opening           Imagine then  
an otherwise clear  
night in winter  
sharp glass  
a quarter-mile from the  
Fort George  
Island Bridge  
the glove compartment  
splintering  
her chest           And now  
so many visitors  
cake makeup  
a barricade  
of tacky wreaths  
If navy blue  
is dark enough  
ask why  
you cannot  
see the body

## FROST IN THE LOW AREAS

The health survey said  
he would live to 76 and I, 86.  
Something to do with men's

hearts on their worn old grapevines.  
Something to do with their will  
to lay down and die. In the westerns,

how glad they were to give their lives  
away. Bad guy, if you can't shoot down  
a junebug's nostril, you don't stand

much of a chance. Men, thinking  
they don't have to cut power  
to a bound-up sawblade.

Just think, Dennis says. Ten years  
to yourself. No one stealing  
the sheets or the last of the ham.

He says this as we make pesto.  
This is how we joke with  
each other, ha ha, and then

we kiss. Seriously, he says,  
imagine no more socks  
on the mantle. My arms

the sharp odor of garlic. Basil.  
Parmesan cheese. Tonight,  
a frost the herbs

won't survive. Twilight  
we worked the rows,  
frantic, our gentleness gone.

Behind us, nothing but stems  
and their faint heat. Before us,  
the first crisp morning.

## THE REVOLUTIONARY'S WIFE

Thinking the postulation of his long dark limb  
will calm the activist talk and the way he got  
lost in her gone he waxes his legs with war.  
She is heroine, and here there is no look pretty,  
sweet for the picture, no butter to put in the drink,  
only a small crowd, sliced up in a jail cell. Tell  
him and her of a time when she stands and she  
dreams without bars alone in her private room.

Maybe then they will not look, fight in the yard  
and make drummers wash down machines over  
this spiraling, drowning out act. He waxes his legs,  
sitting quiet, as the blade of honey draws the hair  
down the cold bowl joining her strands of long ago  
cuticles. He must be quick in this portion of spit  
drips, make no rumor or paint no whisper in the  
grass, for he is looking for her fingers to stroke his  
soft skin. He waxes his legs with love and towels  
dry his wetness and up moves toward the yellow  
light of the stall. How he smiles waxing, wanting  
the feel of her place, the warm strip of her and his,  
the rough callused them. He waxes his legs for her, be-  
coming for this moment a soldier cut out her shoulder,  
the sound of the bang in a sigh, the touch is that is  
just her man in his place, the revolutionary's wife.

*YOU ASK WHY I MAKE MY HOME IN THE  
MOUNTAIN FOREST*

—Li Po

He's lived in dirt  
and pine  
all season.  
Comes down the mountain  
to ask me questions  
on what it means to be homeless.

He says the answers  
are more like  
coats of sage smoke  
and cold is only  
the absence of energy.

He rubs his hands  
together to press his palms  
to my cheek.  
*I smile, and am silent.*

## LETTER TO GZOWSKI FROM BANCROFT

Dear Peter: You might not necessarily recall our meeting in the twilight of the last millennium. I was the tech student carrying your oxygen tank. The kid that was far too shy to ask you what the CBC would become without you. Either way, I was recently thinking about loons while at that Horton's up here; you know the one right off old 62 underneath that granite cliff at the edge of town? It's winter now and all the snow from Georgian Bay has pushed the tourists back to the Golden Horseshoe. Loons are such lonesome creatures. Their midnight calls cut across froze-up lakes and empty summer cottages like the steady breath of air sipped through a regulator. Truly, we are a people that live in spite of the cold. Damned if we don't buy up half of Florida and Arizona just to pretend like we can be somewhere the lakes don't freeze up and we don't have to worry whether or not beaver dams will jam things up come thaw. It's all illusion though. I'm sure you know as well as I do, our money can stay down south as long it wants, but we only got three tops four months without the green card. But to hell with those southern encampments, cold slows you down. You're an arctic man yourself and for that I can't help wanting you to narrate my winters around the Halliburton Highlands. I am old diehard. Holding out with a little EI and a hope of mining. I suppose even the loons must head south before January frost settles in. It's ten years on now since the last time either one of us has sat outside the Wenjack Theatre. Ten years on and I'm still hearing loons once the ice breaks up and beaver dams usually back up the shallows of the York River. I still listen to the CBC and it's still all from Toronto, bounced from tower to tower above the headwaters. The signal's not as empty as the breath that once powered it. I'm waiting on the loons and hope you find your arctic dreams, J.W.

## CAMPUS SHOOTING

Every little bit is God, he  
reminds you—the grumpy prick  
in line beside you at the bank  
mumbling with all four chins  
in two languages, neither English.  
The TV there, a picture on the wall,  
anchors the blank faces. In you  
a great chain slips overboard, links  
flicker past, disappearing in a dull  
thrust toward bottom. Great murky puffs  
of silt and salival threads clutch  
and shrug. Pincers graze your sternum,  
click one by one your ribs. High heels  
on the marble floor. The drift  
of perfume, the sluggish wave  
of kelp and fin. A TV face, floating

into view, wields that wild confusion  
parents get—the threat of losing  
children in a crowd. A single name, two  
syllables, first lobbed—a sounding taken,  
twice. Then whipped like a Yankee pitch.

Action. You're on. Five cameras sweep  
the bank eight feet up. No news without us.  
Chin man and the sluggish seconds, then,  
stills, blood among the books. The montage  
you imagine: the tops of bloody heads  
blown off, the brutal meat, mouths  
shaped around their final sound. Instead,  
hands glow upon the campus lawn, elbows  
to lean on, waiting for more news.  
By now, we know whose work this is.

Down your street tonight the TVs pulse  
behind curtains. The only light  
in the houses. Foreign, but not alien,  
the killer's face arrived in the day's mail

by video—his anger's familiar, like a man  
lost at sea, nothing but a boat and the wild  
stars at night. Water, water everywhere they say.

Next door, a silhouette of elbows cast  
on the far wall. Feet up, comforted  
that the pieces fit. The distance between stars  
and souls spinning out to meet it. This  
silence in recognizing the other  
we know we are. That the pieces fit.

WATCHING A PRIEST TAKE COMMUNION AT  
TED KENNEDY'S MASS

i wish i had this faith.  
that the cup tipped into me  
fed me with the blood  
of He who gave it all away.  
that I would tip, slant,  
funnel to a point of light  
his blade glinting in the center  
of my chest, the heart-stone gripping  
like a fist the steel. would that the King  
come release it, singing, from its home.  
come slay me, Christ, and lay me  
living at your feet. emptied full.

I DON'T BELIEVE THE DEAD CAN SEE WHAT  
YOU DO WITH THEIR THINGS

On his chest: a dimpled scar from a childhood surgery,  
a cloth medallion of St. Christopher, patron of travelers.  
In my purse: a St. Anthony charm, found on the curb  
outside my car on a day when I most needed  
to hear my grandmother say “you will find  
the things you’ve lost.” He said he liked  
that I paused before pulling out my charm,  
and we compared their sizes before he yanked his from  
his neck and placed it on the rumpled shirt beside my bed.

## THE FEAST OF SAINT ANTHONY

Much has been made  
by certain theologians

of creation *ex nihilo*:

out of nothing      the thing      that makes      god

God. Indeed,

considering Behemoth      earth's expanse      straightly

this appears  
weighty matter. Less,

though, said  
of annihilation—

destruction *ad nihilo*—

which certain physicists  
say (in their way)

is equally  
divine:

un    imag    inable

for mortals. In truth,  
I have heard

the whirlwind

darkening      westward

—in verse—

art    moving    everywhere

in space;  
I know.

So at present  
I am  
uncertain

(at a loss)

as to who is listening  
to my petition

when my keys  
go missing.

## TAROT

an omen: like a nectarine  
in an open palm

damoclesian

when saul falls off his horse  
he loses his name, his darkness

there are some of us with swords  
over our heads like haloes.

## LOVESONG FOR MY SISTERS

In a dim hospital office, a painting  
of an open-armed Christ looms  
on the wall. At his feet, meek children,  
cherub-pink, dressed in clean robes.  
My sisters and I sit below in scratchy chairs,  
our thick, brown hair knotted quickly back.  
*Are you triplets?* a woman in the gift shop  
asked before. Grief has made us so much alike.  
Made us so much more.

Then the small nurse with shining eyes says  
*your mother may be at the end of her life,*  
and my sisters bend, we all curve  
in to the sweet breath of one another's hair  
as we sit in these, then other sticky chairs.  
Outside, fresh, sharp iris lean  
together in clumps of lovely green.

We have known so long, known it all:  
there was a note she wrote in shaky hand  
to make sure Livvie got the bowling ball  
when she died, and the golf clubs, too,  
which is all that's left besides the bills  
and a hope chest filled with baby shoes.  
In her room, we prepare our faces,  
scrub tears from our cheeks,  
lean over our mother, whisper  
*We have time. It will be different this time.*  
Then you sing, sisters, your soft songs  
while I wet her mouth with a pink swab  
that I hold in my fingers like a wand.

## WONDERLAND

April slurped my exotic brain straight  
from my ear and my head floated away  
on its spine string into the mean, sweet,

shrinking sky. All around clouds unwound  
their spindles of downy skin.

No—my head didn't float away at all—

I was like Alice, brutally tall, opening  
my mouth inside a zoo of vapor animals,  
letting them slide serpentine, feline, canine

down my throat. Dawn, noon, night;  
purple-blue, pink-silver, blank-paper white.

Down on earth, my feet were the size

of city buses. My fingerprints, labyrinths.

My ear, a terrible cave.

At 4 a.m., when traffic was dead,

I tip-toed to the hospital, peeked  
in my mother's window. My one wet eye  
spied the tidy bed where my mother lay.

A porcelain doll. My sisters sat near her,  
their lips and cheeks painted pink.  
Purple chrysanthemums, yellow daisies in vases,

the pastel green light of a monitor  
made me remember sugar eggs for Easter,  
a little peephole to view a lovely scene,

how the hard frosting glue that stuck  
it all together was so fine when I licked  
that I hid in the closet and nibbled

the edges, sugar melting on my tongue  
as I bit closer and closer  
to the little pink rabbit, the fluffy chick

who lived in perpetual sunshine.

So I chomped off the edge of the hospital.  
I ground the cement with my teeth, tasted every grain  
of sand, of salt, of sugar.

### SIJO 3

I tried to shake her loose, but, like the safety pin holding closed  
cheap motel-room curtains, she pricked unexpectedly. I wonder  
how deep in my flesh she buries, how much of the world she's sunk.

## EXODUS

*No one can see My face, but I will protect you  
with My hand until I have passed by you, and then  
I will remove My hand and you will see My back.*

I never forget the backs of those I love.  
Without Your face, rib-caged muscles,  
the highlighted tilt of scapulars must be  
memorized more closely lest I forget

again in slurry of copper-mine runoff,  
scabs and sluices on the properly named  
Battle Mountain; in the grit of early  
morning markets where smells of fish choke.

Last night's laundry threads bare and  
I look for Your face in each bunch  
of watercress I strip with elementary hands.  
Skin navigates between two universes.

I'm tired of being protected and lately  
confess to even have forgotten in diagrams  
of pine straw. In quiet I've forgotten.  
The sun sets late. I beg: *at least use only*

*night to cover my eyes.* Forgive me. I forget  
in gin, in all these parts of my body  
without. Where are You while I labyrinth  
further from the center, skirt ripped,

cracked leather shoes full of melted sleet,  
lashed strands of hair across my face  
like rage. I've learned to shout out loud.  
I wake up hungry every night.

Am I circling around to relying on You  
who has used me hard, whom I want—  
still—apart from watered down wine?  
I am bold to want more.

*NOW I AM READY TO TELL HOW BODIES ARE  
CHANGED INTO OTHER BODIES.*

Plane trees are dressed for severity;  
snow drapes their sturdy shoulders

like wool wraps. Twists of collarbone  
lie exposed, each vein coagulates

in the cold. Even their bare bodies  
look alive against stormed skies.

To better survive concrete and smoke,  
the native sycamore was crossed

with an Oriental. Lost in the transfer  
to urbanization, my name changes

as the plane tree's. Time requires  
my body as a sacrifice. Or is it love.

Most century-old sycamores are  
hollow at heart, not by scythe of shit

and smog but as a shield for swallows  
and swifts. I watch their bark gleam

like picked bones at midnight, clicking  
to the tremors of the blizzard. This

is how I console myself along with  
the fact that sycamore wood is almost

impossible to split. Yesterday I saw  
an aged plane tree at the butcher's,

a bloody block, atoms still tightly  
wound, endlessly hacked. I thought

of how it didn't stand long enough  
to become a hive for swallows and

squirrels but bleeds now through  
other skins. After not eating meat

for years, I bought a rack of lamb.  
The butcher tucked it in brown paper,

made a swift knot of twine and  
wiped the blood on his apron.

## AND EVERYONE WILL KNOW

i.

Stay quiet, stay dark, despite the way  
each day pricks the helix, stars circle black,  
circle back, despite cringe that kneaded skin  
that day your brother's mind dissected itself  
and you thought *matter could be arranged*  
*with metal brands* as if dark plumes secreted  
the gray when life moved away from him,  
the torsion negative.

ii.

Gather the teacup from London  
swiped off the table, the pieces  
of your father, thrashing on the family acreage,  
no matter how they flayed your body  
because you saw his voice break in air,  
waves battered an already fraying shore.

iii.

Promise you'll never be good enough  
when the curvature could not be  
sharper. Write that letter, send it far,  
what reader will guess unmentionables?  
Pinnings, skirt to head, hair smoothed  
back, your friend's father touched your  
breasts into existence. Tell only that  
they stalled until the last minute in quiet  
defiance. Why mention the mundane  
when holy impositions have the same refrain—

iv.

—*if you love me*. Lose your life for my sake,  
for whose sake, for nothing, for him and  
him and him who closed windows that faced  
the peaks, swirls of ponderosa pollen, and  
you didn't step outside to not expose  
helical strands with their silent mutations,  
spiritual whip marks, beatings, semen, splinters.

v.

I mean, you would have yellowed  
in that pollen and it's hard to come clean.

## ANIMALS A PSALM

i will come to you  
a perfect  
storm of need pluck me  
from the tree

my eyes follow you  
all your days  
from supermarkets  
newspapers  
and telephone poles  
museums  
will display my bones  
i donate  
my organs oh for  
darwin's sake

how many monkeys  
how many  
years i'll take my cue  
from shakespeare  
revenge plot chimp i'm  
hoarding rocks  
primates in zoos are  
chock a block  
godfather orca

alpha male  
sweep you off your feet  
kiss of peace  
who's drowning in this  
job's embrace  
give me a hand corn  
fed and tamed

baton rouge  
i'll remind you what's  
in a name  
cypress pole festooned  
with my blood  
pig is for pet pork  
for table

i'll break your heart good  
i'm able

WHEN HOOVED ANIMALS  
COME TO TOWN

we wash and braid our  
manes don shoes  
carved from tires and step  
out lively  
hocks never touching  
the pavement

we know like ink blots  
we can pass  
as new yorkers from  
the village  
tame bohemians  
big tippers  
urbanely smoking  
cigars our  
ruminant stares have  
seen it all

or we can  
indispose a crowd  
with our reek  
of diurnal musk  
past any  
hope of redemption

we comfort ourselves  
with quince paste  
brie and beaujolais  
leave hair and  
crumbs in the sheets and  
dance a sharp  
tattoo of half moons  
in the floor

## LOVE THIS PENCIL,

Ethel love the way it glides across the blue line love its coral casing day-glo flowers love its quickie-click and ceaseless silken lead what are you thinking about dear Ethel rain heat sky what a beautiful day to die are you dreaming of Jesus again Ethel his creamsicle skin and soft fingers let's meet in church beneath the green fabric scroll with the glistening ivory doves and beg him to listen Lord I am not worthy to receive you but only say the word and I shall be healed and that's all I really want Ethel to be healed my dream is your dream the high ceilings the velvet pulpit the blood-soaked crown of thorns why does living hurt like this Ethel can't we skip the wallowing and praise this pencil instead don't you love its holy golden nib and lasting life why is this unfixable Ethel and why isn't this heavenly pencil enough try writing your name right here Ethel it's okay if it's not on the line carve something divine into the powder-soft flab of your arm a chalice a sunflower a glistening ivory dove hail to this mechanical pencil Ethel yes hail to all of these miraculous distractions that tether us to hope.

YOU CAN USE THE COLORED PENCILS  
ANY WAY YOU CHOOSE

It's a crap shoot, baby, which puts me  
in mind of the drunk you saw at  
the Kentucky Derby, reeling at the  
door of the Port-A-John, a woman  
helping him with his exit, his fly undone,  
his dick hanging not nearly as spectacularly  
as the way he fell head first into the waste  
water runoff. The crowd groaned. In the  
spirit of frankness I will say I approve  
of shit in poems, of collective groans. I'm  
tired of sighs and shufflings. Tell me again  
about how Remy shat himself in the kitchen  
and stopped drinking for three entire days.  
I've got my colored pencils sharpened.  
I like the color brown.

## SUMATRAN LILIES

As if flesh were made for thrift instead of spending,  
The florist tells me, *When they bloom pinch off*

*The stamens*, so they don't make a mess of pollen, so  
The blossoms, the point of flowering lost, will last.

On my counter, they open, scarlet giving  
Over to purple so deep their throats look black,

And breathe out sharp and sweet, filling the room  
Until, out of my head, I lose

Heart for amputation. Still, perfume languishes  
Down every hall, when we open the front door

Taking us in. Spellbound, we drift through it—the whole  
House heavy—and everywhere, cast over carpet

And white linen, brushed onto careless skirt and fingers, find  
The brilliant, profligate stain.

## TRAIL GUIDE

First, follow the Ls—  
Lupine to purple larkspur,

Yellow arrow-leaf into  
Trilling columbine, warbler

Giving over to  
Blur of wings and Calliope  
Hummingbird coming

To rest tiptoe  
Atop a burned-out spruce—

Black and white pelicans  
Afloat on the blue air.  
Here we are again where

The river won't stop  
Throwing itself at the lake,  
Turbulent desire

Renewed in its fulfillment.  
Look at the man standing  
With his rod and creel,

His many-pocketed vest  
Festooned with clever lures.  
I swear to you, I am

That constant. Anyway,  
This is a fool's errand,  
Isn't it?—how

One thing gives to another  
In its errancy.

## CAMERA OBSCURA

Invention fills the gap.  
The blacked-out room—Dear Heart—  
Recasts a radiant street,  
Buses flashing past.

My heart's a room darkened  
Beyond memory,  
Your kisses flashing past,  
Discrete packets of light.

Beyond memory,  
Even my words to you,  
Discreet, pack up light  
To build a world from need—

My words to you can even  
Break the poem's heart.  
To build a world, you need  
To draw the curtains. The poem's

Dark heart breaks  
Under light's prick.  
Draw the curtains. The dark's  
A mirror, amnesiac.

Through a pinprick, light  
Casts the world, radiant.  
When the mirror forgets,  
Invention fills the gap.

## BLUE

*Figure 1: Increasing detail of a Morpho butterfly wing tells a more interesting and informative story than just one image.*

—Photographer Felice Frankel, “Nature”

No dyes but only surface could create  
That shimmering texture, taffeta

Or opal—stone’s cool burn  
Repeated in material so fragile

It crumbles at a touch. The opal’s  
Fragile too, for rock. Zooming in,

Felice’s camera sees *the wings*  
*Are mirrors*. Magnified

Step by step to visibility  
Even my poor eye can see, they lose

Gorgeous iridescence, and become  
Structures for reflection. Also

Gorgeous, though Felice  
Talks about what they tell us,

Not their beauty. I heard about  
A butterfly in New England

That feasts all spring on violets. Perhaps  
A myth. But the Karner Blue

Eats its fill of lupine, and digests,  
Then opens wings to let

The flower fly. Who says  
There is no magic

In the world?—the sky  
Unfolds upon the day; the lake,

Becalmed on quiet afternoons,  
Makes the sky its own

And gives it back. And if love lights  
My evenings into deeper nights,

My eye, no matter my  
Reflections, what I devour,

Returns to him: refracting,  
Scattered, only partly true.

## DOG DAYS

When my camera looks up at November, it shows me  
the darkest part of the maple & then gives out.  
You were halfway down the street at that point

and more belligerent than I recalled, which I now  
understand happens with the years,

each one a brother further gone. You and I, we are not  
so different. We grout our voids with applesauce.  
We wear our sorrows like a kindergarten costume,

try to contain the glitter, an impossible proposition.  
When I die, look for me at the feeder: a red-bellied

woodpecker capped and dashing in a salt and pepper  
overcoat, my skull tightly wrapped to absorb the impact  
from repetitive things I do to fill my hunger. Yes,

there will be glitter. Your hair will be unseasonably  
salty. I will bring the flashlight.

## LONG DISTANCE

She said *I am incarnadine-lipped and bipedal-flipped*  
*I am waiting*        *for you to come home.*  
You and me both—  
and when I find out where that is,  
I'll pumpkin-pie your radius  
(*oh hush*)  
if you pygmy your herringbone  
along the fennel-locked garden of my sugarcane.  
I'll make you breakfast,  
amulet you to my cradled alabaster upright  
(*remember me how you sound*)  
if you velvetcake me in the sparrow-breathed  
altitude of morning,  
(*I'm kidding, I remember*)  
lay me between russet riddled topsoil  
and the barelythere of your gabardine,  
bottle my juiceflick  
and carriage my battery.

## AT MOMA

The new worshippers are dressed in blue:  
see how they genuflect at a penciled piece  
like a child bowed over a model race car.

That should be me instead, moved by a shadow-line  
to drop from my feet, finally something more urgent

than standing. When the rain begins,  
I'm unable to make out by the cardigan  
whether it's a woman or myself with one palm upward

catching drops before they land on a watercolor  
of a person catching drops of rain.  
You don't forget a sky like that.

But a mirror has no cache,  
does not keep you halfway loaded to save minutes.  
You are the first time every time,  
and every time you must be read and rendered anew  
and in that fact lies both my hope and despair regarding modernity.

Come, we'll listen to Barbra's Christmas songs  
and wish to be uncorked again.

More and more and more  
and more and then too much.

WEDNESDAY BEFORE THANKSGIVING, 2005

*after Rimbaud*

For reasons unknown, I'm talking to Seanie Scott,  
who's cornered me, wanting to bum a smoke  
& shoot the shit. (We haven't shot the shit  
since seventh grade.) He's just got home from Iraq.

I want to know what it's really like. He asks,  
"What do you think you know?" I went to a lecture  
on roadside IEDs. He ashes, takes  
his phone from his coat, & shows me a picture:

a grinning boy floating on a river;  
the greenish water holds him like a mother  
& noon is sharp as a blade. *Is he asleep?*

*Grow up.*

A hole in his right side smolders like embers.  
*You know the answer.* He's a wasp in amber.

“CATTLE SKULL, BADLANDS,”  
ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN (1936)

A bleached cow's skull  
    casts a horned shadow  
    on the cracked, tan ground  
of the alkali flat.  
Where is the challenge, the skill

in a picture  
    like that? If you send  
    an artist to slog  
through cataloguer's work  
& a dry, further pasture

looks better, what's  
    the harm? Listen, skull:  
    you'll sit where I cut  
you loose. Brush up; look sharp—  
the lightfoot sun never waits.

## BLUE LAWS

Sarah's hair freezes in the winter wind as we walk down  
the hill to the corner store forgetting blue strictures

that say you can't buy alcohol on Sundays  
before noon. See—

sometimes it's not conscience that keeps us  
from falling. Forgetfulness

and luck too have a share  
in our salvation. This morning leaves us

high and dry. We kill half an hour, observe the icicles  
hanging from the spire of St. Mary's,

wander the neighborhood, past the alleyway  
where, years ago, I knelt and prayed for God

to end me. My vomit wouldn't freeze,  
even though it was ten below. And I walked out

leaving that afterbirth of a new life  
steaming on the pavement and thought I was finished

with all that forever. But we live on  
the edge of a precipice, always one step away

from ourselves. Sarah's pixie hair freezes  
in December, still wet with showering. And when we return

home and sit with six packs by the fire,  
it will steam.

## ORGANDY

One snow drop flings itself crookedly from the sky,  
then another, as the wind gets insistent, rattling leaves  
that cling to stubborn plums, pampas grass rustling  
like taffeta brushing a young girl's thighs.

I stand in the carport, my dogs nosing around the yard,  
sniffing the spongy earth as it sogs down for fall.  
Winter hasn't begun and already I ache for spring.

Autumn's first dawn should take on the sheen  
of polished organdy, the dresses Mother sewed,  
two apiece every fall, worn to a dull fade by Easter.  
Spring meant crisp bodices, full skirts, flounces,  
taffeta measured from the bolt, patterns traced and cut  
with pinking shears, the itch of crimped, raw seams.

I feel raw in mountain wind that carves  
history, its unfurled naps and textures  
resisting weaving and sorting.

I call the dogs; they bound up to me, wagging,  
snow melting on their steaming coats.  
Inside, storm over, thin strands of morning sun  
baste the windows with polished light.

# A MURDER OF CROWS

BY LARRY D. THOMAS

(Virtual Artists Collective, 2011)

REVIEWED BY JEFFREY C. ALFIER

Texas poet Larry D. Thomas is as keen an observer of the natural world as any of America's best Regionalist poets. Pervading the heart of *A Murder of Crows*, Thomas' sixteenth collection of poems, is an intensely rich, imagistic evocation of the life of birds, an articulate vision that enables the reader to cross into a phylogenetic hinterland.

So positioned, Thomas witnesses intractably arrant realities, a world re-inscribed in crisp, penumbral language exemplified through terms such as "black angular presence," "utter darkness," "looms there in stark solitude," "sonata of darkness," or "a world beyond the sun." Even "a canvas of blue sky" is laden with a coal-black portent. One may even place Thomas alongside certain European Expressionists, particularly in their use of synaesthesia to merge or blur metaphoric borders of the senses, combining them in a single image—that deliberate creative expression, consciously developed by writers, particularly in the Expressionist and Keats traditions. We see this, for instance, in "Blackbirds," their "blue- / black cacophony / of terror, / a choir / of wildest eyes," and likewise in the "savage cerulean scream" of the golden eagle, in "Raptor."

Thomas arrests us through an immersion in the sensual, often violent, aesthetics of the sublime, an element that drives the intelligence of raptors and scavengers alike. In "Unabridged," Thomas cites the crow's "genius // with a perfect IQ / of instinct." In "To Sight a Bunting," this variety of passerine is plagued by starlings which "settle their voracious breasts / on straw still warm / from the slaughtered dead," the dead being the bunting fledglings murdered by the starlings and shoved from their nest. To complement this scene, on the facing page we see the shrike, "weighing in // at but an ounce / or two, / ... / impaling your prey // on barbs and thorns."

The artistry of such language traverses and melds with other art forms, offering the reader resonance across various mediums, particularly painting. In "Sanderling Chick," the flurry of the bird's legs immediately recalls Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*. In "Great Blue Herons," the opening lines, "They stand so still in the shallows / it's as if they're outgrowths / of the river itself," hold a mirror up to Cubism's intersecting surfaces. Thomas speaks even more directly

to the painter in “*Raven* (oil on canvas by Otis Dozier),” noting the late artist’s apperception, “What life there is / is silent, solitary / against the vastness // of place, locked in the black, / angular presence of a raven.”

Thomas opens his compilation not with a grand raptor but with the lowly sparrow. Here, he turns any deceptively diminutive view of this pedestrian species on its head, pointing us to “its world where survival / by the minute is enough,” this beast all-too often beholden of “cold, hunger, or the brutal / amusement of a cat.” Similar to the sparrow, Thomas does not leave out the unexciting “Pigeons,” that bird so woven into human folklore. Thomas acutely renders the pigeon “the urban version / of the buzzard,” not flocking to tourists feeding them in a Venice square, but “embedded in the grill of SUVs”; and, at the sudden crack of a crushed pecan shell, departing a tree en masse, and beautifully so, in a “ravishing shrapnel / of feathers.” “Pigeon Egg,” the companion poem on the facing page, shares a kindred imagery with “Pigeons” with its “bloody // calculus” of hatchlings born on “desiccated clods of potting soil.” Such blood, moreover, is not simply a byproduct of the hunt, but an ingredient intrinsic to a predator’s survival, as we are reminded in “Preying for Rain.”

A reminder that man shares in birds’ ultimate destiny appears in “Inca Dove,” where a dead young bird is buried by Thomas’ wife, “loosing it / to the shadow we’re all headed for, // the black unraveling shadow / of a phoenix on extended wing.” Thomas opens this poem through an incisive apposition where “Dove” in the title contrasts quickly with the simile of “mean-spirited schoolmistress” in the first line. In “Winged Gull” and “In Rowdy Reverence,” a synergy abounds; from the bucolic “canvas of blue sky,” gulls do their work “with breath reeking / of fresh fish-rot,” still “giddy in an epiphany / of soaring, the mindless blue,” likewise, the raven’s “fetid breath fumes from his beak, / the price he pays for acumen / in the commerce of death.”

As readers may well deduce at this point, wherever Thomas’ sense of the pastoral is evoked, it is a harsh one. When we read, in “Starlings,” that these birds “descend / from the heavens / like shredded // midnight,” baby sparrows in their clutches, in order to “drop them / to burst / like ripe figs,” we witness a pastoralism equal to that of Cormac McCarthy’s *Border Trilogy*. Moreover, the juxtaposition of terror and beauty is Thomas’ forte, for both elements become a pact between opposites where artistic tension is created and where images are delivered so skillfully. In “Old Blue Jay,” the image of “the rosy fabric / of the dawn” is staged alongside a beautiful blue jay’s rage for eminence as it “leaves a trail / of scraggly feathers, / he could care less [about].” Such is the dark fortitude that endures across the legacy of beauty and terror.

Survival-laden habits often jar us with their severity, like the purple martin mother that murders her young, “one by one, extending / with their deaths the feathers / of a sole surviving heir / who’ll one day take to the sky” his bloody lineage, his “resilient kind.” Similarly, the crow will be “content to turn / upon his nephew // for a meal” in “Both the Proposition and the Proof.” Even among gulls we suspect as laggards in the bird kingdom, there reigns an ominous vigilance born of deadly experience. We see this exemplified explicitly in “Eyeing the Gulf,” where gulls cannot afford to spare—lest their prey flee—“for one split second, / the bestial, / ocular excellence / of their guard.” This deadly experience is captured by Thomas in interesting ways, as in “Totem Crow” where death seems to haunt even the simulacrum of a crow fashioned by the hands of men. Thomas also considers the sublime’s steeper ledge, the stalking ghost of extinction that lingers over the natural world. In “Ten Brown Pelicans,” his poet’s eye watches these species “rowing the oars / of wings through the storm- / tossed sea of extinction,” and suddenly we wonder if these creatures will go the way of millerbirds, or the pelican’s fellow sea mate, the dusky seaside sparrow.

Yet not all is the terror of the sublime, the starker realities of the hunt. There is, for Thomas and his readers, space to relish the beauty of birds. In “House Finch in Summer,” we behold the finch “never tiring of his antics, // as if relishing the air.” “Old Crow” is a celebration of the life and rustic splendor of longer-living birds abiding in blessed habitation, one “content to rattle / against the shell of odds / his tasty kernel / of longevity.” Thomas often speaks to a sense of anatomical and metaphoric duality in the fact that bird wings are hollow (pneumatized). Such hollowness is requisite for the birds’ aerodynamics, but it also harbingers fragility, one that brings them into the wider vanishings around them.

Confluent with beauty are spiritual echoes that cut across several poems, not in a full transcendental sense, but in one that speaks to the junction of art and science. In “Above the Bait Stand,” gulls are “patient as pillars / of salt,” recalling Lot’s wife gazing perilously back in the Bible and *Cities of the Plain*. In “The Screaming, Actual Angel,” a gull becomes trapped in a church sanctuary, finally captured by a priest, the bird becoming the “actual angel / flung into the sanctuary // by the inscrutable hand of God.”

As well, there are unexpected resonances with the world of men. In “Hawks,” the raptors’ airborne formation, spaced at intervals nature bred into them, is imagistically set alongside a man musing on the sleeping form of his adulterous wife: “her slow, guiltless breathing, / the aquiline silhouette” of her silent, recumbent form. Another deep trait observed by Thomas is the persistence, if not faith, of rituals. In “For Her Nest,” humans observe, near-incredulously, doves enduring

“wind and violent thunderstorms” just to keep two hopeful “perfect stems” of grass for a nest, “as if her weightless, ledge- / clawed life depended on it.”

No simple poetic ornithology, Thomas’ verse treads far afield as he folds human lore into the history of his birds. One can witness the pride of chiseling the bark of the Chinese tallow in “Hairy Woodpecker,” this folklore-laden bird “excavate / a cavity” in its florid colors of “concupiscent cockiness.” In “A Dark Choir,” Thomas reminds us that ravens have, “For thousands of years / ... haunted / human consciousness, // shuddering the quill / of poet and shaman.” On occasion, he will employ the scientific names of birds. This has the effect of casting certain birds in elegantly ominous terms.

Amid the scientific grounding, the poet finds a godlike quality to the purview of certain bird species. Thomas opens section three of his book with the austere beauty of our national symbol, noting at the onset that “Everything that moves / is potential prey / as she has / no natural predator,” soaring in almost omniscient tones in surveillance over “everything that moves.” We find this same sense of omniscience in the owl that probes “every atom / of the shadows.” A prime characteristic of such raptors is a pinpoint aim. For under a white-tailed hawk’s bore-sight “a mouse freezes, / holds its breath, / but blinks / its death knell.” Unlike the misty shores inhabited by Thomas’ gulls, raptors are often set in his verse against the chasmal blue of desert skies—“a dome / of limitless, / unfaceted / sapphire.”

Though expansive in breadth, Thomas leaves his enlivened readers to ponder the deep well of natural mysteries inhabiting the realm of birds, from the common crow and seagull to the resplendent, rarely-seen eagle. For those who want the best in poetry, Thomas is one who belongs on their bookshelves. I give *A Murder of Crows* my highest recommendation.

*THE NETWORK*  
BY JENA OSMAN  
(FENCE Books, 2010)

REVIEWED BY NICK DEPASCAL

Early in his essay “Spacey Rooms: A Note on Translating ‘Lamentation on Ur,’” poet/essayist Tom Sleigh describes translation as the “attempt to experience that [deep] structure through the alienating medium, the at first incomprehensible strangeness, of another tongue.” But what of the strangeness and power that exists within one’s native tongue? Part of the thrill in reading Jena Osman’s ambitious third poetry collection, *The Network*, is the exploration and excavation of the English language that occurs as Osman seeks to understand the world through its existing structures.

The book is split into five sections, each called a “network,” and each of these concerns itself with a particular theme: “The Knot,” “The Joker,” “The Franklin Party,” “Financial District” and “Mercury Rising.” Each network deals with a particular event or events in history, and traces their origins into our current day through an exploration of linguistic connections. To that end, most of the sections are peppered with subject words, related to the sectioned themes, that trace these words back to their earliest roots. These maps allow the reader to see how the seemingly different words such as ‘peace’ and ‘propaganda’ derive from the same linguistic origin.

In the section entitled “The Joker,” Osman traces the early origins of the joker, or jester, from medieval times, when “only the jester could openly criticize the king,” up through the current Philadelphia Mummers’ Parade, where questions of immigration policy are acted out by white men in sombreros. Interspersed with these accounts is a plethora of historical and cultural tangents including a brief history of Victor Hugo’s novel *The Man Who Laughs* and its influence on the later Batman comic character The Joker, a look at the sugar monopoly in America, as well as racism after Reconstruction. Osman’s blending of prose and poetry allows different subjects to speak to each other and facilitates transitions between these subjects:

*Not surprisingly, the epic journey of Gwynplaine does not end well. He gives up his seat in despair. Upon his return home, his true love (a blind, goodhearted girl whose life he saved in infancy) dies. In response he kills himself by drowning.*

*Before the dark sugar is put on the  
American table,  
it must go to a refinery to be whitened.*

*Although Hugo's novel is now considered one of his more obscure works, Mark Twain almost instantly appropriated it on publication in order to satire the presidency of Andrew Johnson.*

Thus, Osman works through a hybrid of poetry and the lyric essay. Even the more documentarian portions have a poetic sparseness to them, and like good lyric essays, attempt to answer questions about inherent racism within the sugar trade or the Mummer's Parade.

This blending occurs in each network in the book as each section is a network of ideas and explorations surrounding language. It's also easy to see how such an erudite and sometimes abstruse work of art reflects our current times, even while referencing history. In "Financial District," while discussing the financial intrigues of the slave and sugar trade in America, we get the lines:

*but the end, money paid as an end or settlement comes from via  
end settlement. blood on the hands, a paradoxical policy of tolerance  
for those who can invest. to end comes with such forms as peltry. as  
whence the yields becomes becomes whence whence. the company  
brought trapped Africans to the colony. clothing and architectural  
implements from the English hurt trade for the Dutch.*

The format of this passage is dense, yet one could almost scan the lines for meter. In addition to the blending of prose and poetry, this passage, with its rampant violence and exploitation in the name of profits, seamlessly connects the images of the past to the financial crisis of our present in a way that feels natural and unforced. Likewise, in "The Franklin Party," that failed expedition that likely ended in cannibalism, Osman laments:

*2003. While the U.S. makes its case for invading Iraq in the  
newspapers, I find myself making another attempt. I hardly touch the  
analogy: the brute force of the expedition, its naivete. Franklin and  
his men had no plans to hunt for food, no sleds, too many mouths to  
feed, giant ships that almost instantly locked in the ice, and particular  
opinions about the locals.*

Though Osman discounts the analogy, one cannot help but be drawn into the comparison between the tragedy of the Franklin Party and the ill-fated and seemingly endless quagmire in Iraq. A few pages later Osman drops a line that

could stand as the aim of the book as a whole: “How to map a changing thing, rather than a target of frozen / particulars.” Osman tracks our histories, both of language and events, in a way that gives credence to the fact that the import and meaning of words change throughout time.

At times, the linguistic jargon is confusing. Accounting of linguistic trails and etymologies pull the reader out of the poems. Some poems drag a bit, waiting on another historical note or tightly crafted lyrical line. For example, in “Whitehall + Securities,” within the section “Financial District,” the passage ends with the lines “there remains the Latin prefix-compound: the privative prefix without / from ‘without anxiety or care’ when the adjective Latin has / derivative oblique stem whence and yield.”

While it’s clear that Osman took care to give even these passages a taut sonic quality, meaning and reference are occasionally lost in the shuffle. As the density of the jargon in this network is taxing, its length suggests import to Osman in interpreting the text. However, in a collection that is so focused on language and meaning, this confusion could be a positive attribute if the “Financial District” section had been a bit shorter.

One reason that this particular section sticks out is that the other sections so beautifully meld the linguistic concerns with imagery and musicality. Early in the book, in the section entitled “The Knot,” we get these incredibly evocative lines:

*cp. Nexus, node, noose*

*he builds a wall and slips in sand  
the sand then parts and takes his hand  
below the sea*

*nouch, a brooch, a tie, a chain*

*the hand is now the sea’s debris  
it washes up  
and winters out*

*a rope to tie the animals, ouch*

*polished further into depth  
pushing its shell  
breaking its dust*

*a noose is from nous see node*

*emerging on shore  
pulling himself up  
what's this place?*

*ou or eu  
or neo net*

Here, the confusion is tempered by Osman's attention to music and rhythm of the section. Rhyme, both within the columns and between them, helps blend the two seemingly disparate subjects into one. Furthermore, the etymological discussion that happens on the right hand side of the page proceeds poetically, the white space giving the reader time to digest what precedes and follows.

Early in *The Network*, the speaker tells us, "Rather than invent a world, I want a different means to understand this one." The rest of the collection tries to understand the world, both present and past, through a close examination of language. What is realized, in a fresh way, is the old cliché of history repeating itself. Whether it's in the racist tendencies of the Philadelphia Mummers' Parade, first aimed at African Americans, and now more towards immigrants, or the sly influence and control big industry has in our government (at one time big sugar, now big oil), Osman's collection repeatedly remolds the tool of language. The collection provides a fresh consideration of the many ways in which words create the world. Ultimately, in her search to understand the world semantically and syntactically, Osman imparts the sheer complexity of the language we use which, while beautiful, is a dangerous thing, rife with blind alleys and trap doors leading us to meanings we never intended.

# DESTROYER AND PRESERVER

BY MATTHEW ROHRER

(Wave Books, 2011)

REVIEWED BY STEVE LANGAN

In his brilliant and immediate eighth collection, *Destroyer and Preserver*, Matthew Rohrer meshes, welds and bolts together phrases and sentences with precision and daring. He also allows his gift, the triple-threat of cleverness, humor and wit, to lead him to deeper and more mature and complex subject matter. The poem "Casualties" begins, "My son says / are soldiers good or bad? / I say it's very complicated." Rohrer freely moves into melancholy and despair. Arriving there, however, he makes a series of choices that his fast and engaging use of language provides (and even *requires*): evasions, shifts and jukes of which the late Walter Payton would be proud. Rohrer is a master of renaming the metaphoric impulse at its finest. In his best poems, he goes on counter-attack of the serious subjects our culture compels him to put into play and, splicing on one more statement or image and then another one, he counters again. Destruction and preservation mingle, often in the same line, throughout these poems; they become unified, not separate, impulses, which is what makes these poems exciting and necessary.

The mundane and its ongoing complications—raising a family, getting older, doing the day to day—is the starting place for many of these poems. "Dull Affairs," one of the best in this book, begins,

*How am I to concentrate  
on the heavy and dull  
affairs of state  
with the sound of a baby having a dream  
in the other room.*

Unlike the speaker in the above passage (and Rohrer's conception and realization of art, we could say), the state

*cannot change  
it is like the sound of a baby crying out  
that is only imagined  
it is much worse/a small cloud  
that looks like an enormous flea  
crouches over the city.*

A restless interrogator and transformer, Rohrer ends the next poem, titled “They Pull a Suicide from the Water”: “they pull a suicide from the water / I clip my toenails out the window / it is going to rain.” There are many uses for the mundane. In Rohrer’s poems, the mundane bores, inspires, distracts, angers, confuses, burdens, gives, takes away, distresses, soothes. At the end of “Poem for Starlings,” which recounts just another harried day of not getting his way in the city, the speaker says all we really need and want him to say, “I wish / the world were different.” “The Terrorists,” a poem in five parts, is mysterious and ominous. A series of 24 interconnected spare four-line stanzas describes a vivid commute. It’s titled “Believe.”

Aware that punctuation is just a 15th century innovation, Rohrer eschews it in most of these poems, and summons it idiosyncratically in others. This creates openings and opportunities for his complex and multi-layered voice. Like almost everyone else who has been reading and writing poetry during the last 50 or so years, it is clear that Rohrer has been listening to W.S. Merwin, who established the possibilities for ambiguity at the level of the line, and Merwin’s many descendants. But if Merwin is trail guide to the transcendent, Rohrer is watching us, and watching us watch him, as he moves us down the trail toward a transcendence that is almost always *incomplete*. Make no mistake: this stunted transcendence is no fault of these poems, which are remarkable and genuine achievements. The complex culture, with its endless levels of social distortion, anxiety, compromise and horror, intervenes—and Rohrer is right to acknowledge these facts, right here in these vivid and contemporary poems ... right in the middle of a line. And then, with and for us, he provides a service, *turning away*.

*NICK DEMSKE*  
BY NICK DEMSKE  
(FENCE Books, 2010)

REVIEWED BY MICHAEL MCLANE

In sitting down to write a review of Nick Demske's debut collection, *Nick Demske*, I wanted to pay homage to the man, to find the perfect contemporaries and precursors to compare him to and lump him in with, to fit him comfortably into the ultraviolet or infrared end of the sonneteer spectrum.

But I had to be honest with myself, and with you, Nick Demske. Your willingness to address yourself in the third person again and again like some kind of hip-hop mogul makes me comfortable addressing you directly. This admission only serves to display how the prime real estate of my mind has been foreclosed on by pop culture but, throughout my reading of *Nick Demske*, all I could think of was a stunning routine by comedian David Cross where he describes the way rednecks threaten one another before a barfight:

*I'm the last guy you wanna fuck with, man. Cause you don't know me man [ ... ] Cause you don't know man I'm like a motherfuckin' earthquake, wrapped in a hurricane, nestled in a box of tsunamis, man. That's what I am man. I'm like a fuckin' natural disaster times triplicate [ ... ]*

Nick Demske, as you say in "Will Not be Televised," I've been "Nick Demsked." Your poems are a motherfuckin' earthquake, wrapped in a hurricane, nestled in a box of tsunamis. Unlike the Nick Demske in "Pop Sonnet" who tries "not to think about art," I *am* trying to think about it, but like the best Priapus poems, your sex jokes and scatological references remind me that the overlap between those two views is where all the fun is.

*Nick Demske* is, ostensibly, a collection of sonnets. It's more like sonnet taxi-dermy, the sonnet eviscerated. The hide is in place, the constraints are there, but our pet is no longer our pet. The eyes are different and the lips curl up just so. The fourteen lines are present, except when they trail off, as in "Sonnet," which contains only the octave and ends,

[ ... ] *Because I say it's*  
*Poetry. Because I am the substitute teacher, better than any*  
[insert six more lines here]

The rhyme schemes are present though Demske innovates on the form by breaking words to make rhymes work. These breaks are startling, confusing, and simultaneously hilarious once the pattern begins to emerge. The first example is in “Common Sense,” which begins,

*I didn't think it was loaded. But it was a kn  
Ife. So we're both right. I forsee*

The last word in the first line is later rhymed with “dan” rendering the “k” in “kn” silent. “Dan” itself is a cut-up of “dancing” and the second syllable has been sent to the beginning of the next stanza. Later in the poem we find a similar tactic, only this time using slant rhyme.

*Uglying everything else a reflect  
Ion so unfamiliar you feel impolite confronting it. I am the lex  
Icographers, staring back into a nightingale.*

Some of these breaks seem more self-conscious than others. The ones that work best offer both pause and insight into the image against which they are juxtaposed or they participate in one of the numerous jokes or puns that Demske employs, as in the second stanza of “Breakdown” which ends,

*Gawk. You're ruining the ending like a pre  
Mature apocalypse. You suck at life. Your combustion lacks spontaneity*

These breaks beg for the poems to be read out loud. When they are verbalized, they give the poems a stutter that would make Tzara and Schwitters proud (there it is, Nick, I finally got some names in here).

As if the line breaks aren't enough to keep the reader off kilter, the passage demonstrates another prominent Demske peculiarity—self-reference. The title of the book clues the reader into this immediately but he wastes no time working Nick Demske into the poems.

*Remind me what it's like to be offended, Nick Demske.  
Ah. Already with thee.*

And several pages later, in “Hotdog,”

*Nick Demske you are everything wrong with the world. Which is to say: the wor  
Ld. Share with me your secret ingredients.*

Remarkably, the trope is not tiresome. Instead, we look for Nick Demske to return—extravagant, prodigal son that he is—and his absence is conspicuous. Nick Demske the character quickly becomes a kind of Coyote or Loki figure

within the book, while Nick Demske the author broadens his scope of self-reference to include not only himself, but also the larger task at hand—the writing of the book. Demske references his own trials with poetry repeatedly, each time more self-effacing and charming than the last. In “Bowdler-Dash” he writes,

*Do not look directly at the poem. Offer val  
Id only at participating locations. MF  
A. Slave dialect. I want your native tongue in the recess*

and adds an even more striking example in “As a Dog Returneth to His Vomit,”

*[ ... ] Just one won't hurt. I promised  
Myself I'd stop writing poems. I broke that promise.  
I line broke that promise. I enjambed that promise  
  
So far up the Muse's tuchis we still shit shards of meter.*

In *Nick Demske*, we are dealing with a man who knows himself well and likes what he sees; even his failings shine. But this is not narcissism, not self-love for its own sake. Demske simply can't resist a good turn of phrase (i.e. “If you're going to act like a brat, / I'm going to eat you like one”), especially those in which the profane glad-hands with more conventional images. He appreciates that the best jokes come at the expense of one's self, such as in “Bowdler-Dash”

*[ ... ] I'm a tramp on the streets and a Jesus freak  
in the bed. Don't ask stupid questions? At a low, low price? Point and click.  
Shuck and Jive. Do you want to feel  
My scars? My sweet topography, like rubberized Braille?  
I thought you'd never ask.*

That said, the best joke in these poems may be the one played on those for whom poetry is only a matter of reverence, poetry spelled with a capital “P.” Here poetry is force bred with pop culture to make a nightmarish amalgam—a swearing, retching, fucking beast that, unlike most of our crimes against nature, is far from sterile and much like revered fallen pop stars, is impossible to look away from. Thus, we see Dr. Love, Dr. Kevorkian, Dr. Huckstable and Dr. Frankenstein appear back to back to back to back in “Everything Personal.” It is no small feat that Demske rhymes delectable with Huckstable or that Madonna should appear as the muse at the end of “Pop Sonnet” in what is a deceptively ominous couplet about inspiration.

*[ ... ] and she's not okay  
  
With that. In the midnight hour. I can fee  
L your power. Down on my kneeeeee.*

These jokes are deftly arranged and the reader is as likely to gloss over them as they are to laugh out loud. What is more impressive is that they never grate. Instead, they propel the book forward, much like trickster Nick Demske, and make of it a puzzle. However, the most remarkable thing about *Nick Demske* is how subtly Nick Demske uses references and puns to lure the reader into deeper and darker waters as the book progresses. This is a funny book, but it is not just a funny book. Its humor begins to coalesce into a defense mechanism that leaves the reader wondering which emotion is a suitable response, embodying the lines of “View From a Balcony.”

*Doesn't asking this further question just make matters worse? No.  
It makes anti-matters better. [ ... ]*

And

*[ ... ] I'll hold back your hair. Like lovers, we two; obscene.  
Rest your weary head, which is a chip, on this shoulder. Which is a guillotine.*

Nowhere is this effect more disorienting than in “Dying Words,” which is quickly recognized as partly a litany of taglines from pop culture artifacts but is devastating nonetheless.

*I want my MTV. I want my daughter back.  
I want AIDS. I want my brother's wife. I want to be pretty.  
I want a midget. I want my daddy.  
I want to puke. I want to go home how. I want a rematch.*

*I want of a better word. I want to go to college.  
I want my money back. I want an apology.*

So maybe, in the end, this poetry thing *is* serious business. Maybe Nick Demske is on to something here. After all, how much of our favorite comics' best work is birthed in tragedy? Perhaps humor is the best way through the attention-deficit morass we've made of our culture. Late in the book, Demske writes “Wow. How do you follow that? Perhaps with a procession / Of mourners, a light reception.” In the book's final poem, he offers a glimpse into the birth of the quipping madman that occupies most of its pages and he comes out of it decidedly human, frail, and sharp.

*[ ... ] I want to do something permanent,*

*Something undoable. I want to kiss you  
And reveal my secret feelings for you. For a long time I considered  
Hating everything in the world. Instead, I decided  
To huff it. All of it.*

*GIVE OVER, GRAYMALKIN*  
BY GAYLORD BREWER  
(Red Hen Press, 2011)

REVIEWED BY ROBIN LINN

“Leaving the road for that enticing artery of dirt, / chance greeting desire. Human world / soon mute, I followed this sharper attentiveness,” recounts the speaker in Gaylord Brewer’s poem “Jungle Appetites.” From his path this traveler has been called to branch off onto an earthy “artery” that is more alluring. Fate has presented an opportunity that stirs something wanting; as the “human world” diminishes audibly, he is open to the awe of some other place. One might deduce the speaker’s direction is transformative, toward higher consciousness, for to get there he must follow a “sharper attentiveness.”

“Jungle Appetites” is found in Brewer’s eighth book of poetry, *Give Over, Graymalkin*. The poem’s speaker, having evaded “guide and driver,” follows the call to probe his exotic surroundings.

*canopy of peem and pine. Elephant dung marked  
the way. I kicked apart one clay-like brick.  
Strawy warmth, halo of gnat, inarguable  
musky perfume, Black-faced langurs swung ahead.*

Here is a moment would-be explorers can relate to—escaping to a wild place where “elephant dung mark[s] the way.” Behind the scenes and beneath a “canopy of peem and pine,” the reader is greeted with the sensations of the inner jungle. The child in us understands the excitement of visiting an unfamiliar region—off-limits and therefore hallowed—and the glory of some taboo and gross act, like kicking a brick of dung. This poetry invites readers to revisit what the newness of adventure feels like through the apt vehicle of the poet’s travels and thoughtfully crafted poems. Readers find themselves immersed in the contemplative, like the speaker toward the end of “Jungle Appetites”: “From the spidering crux of an immense banyan, / I watched the light move and tried to listen.”

Brewer’s collection engages with adventuresome verse that is lyrical, rhythmic and lush with allusion. For instance, “Dead Metaphor: Fidelity,” contains the sagacious lines:

*You know any charm outside four walls*

*is siren-song, first order Circe or Charybdis.  
Soft lie of lips, arm grazing hip and so on,  
Exist anymore as grainiest abstraction,*

Its counterpart on the following page, “Dead Metaphor: Infidelity,” describes an unlikely cheating wife from the suburbs: “Head abuzz with physics of deniability. / Even your name hangs tight in the shoulders;” and ends cheekily:

*I cannot tell a lie, you mumbled again,  
  
as the cherry tree went promptly down  
and you stroked the Delaware together  
toward some terrible, rapturous new country.*

Making the serious humorous and vice-versa, Brewer wryly nails the issues up for viewing. To be or not to be faithful are admittedly social classics, all the way back to the Greeks, and even Washington was not, and still isn't immune. To label this poet jaded, however, would be myopic. His work is also reverent and straightforward, as evidenced in “Dead Metaphor: Day Lilies,” which begins:

*The crisp snap of each neck as you collect yesterday's  
prizes in two hands—monument of dripping mush.  
Today's today, another morning of inventory and praise,*

and continues its beautiful and brutal realism farther down the page:

*June sun will pale her lemon throat to ivory,  
  
then brief and angry storm shred apricot petals.*

There is such pleasure to be discovered in line after line that it's almost easy to forget to consider each poem as an orb within the larger composed universe and that, as with each poem's title, there is the matter of the book's title. An unfamiliar title begs the reader to consider its allusion. Brewer's *Give Over, Graymalkin* points to a line in *Suttree*, a novel by Cormac McCarthy, in which the protagonist has exchanged his socially acceptable but meaningless life for one of wandering the outskirts of 1950's Knoxville and encountering its cast of fringe characters.

The poet gives clues to this choice of title with the epigraph to his book's third section, “South to North,” “*Give over, Graymalkin, there are horsemen on the road with horns of fire, with withy roods.*” This phrase appears in *Suttree* as

its principal is running toward the mountains and away from a witch-woman whose potions have caused him disturbing dreams. “Graymalkin” is a name attributed to a “familiar spirit” or witches’ helper, one of the spirits in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, and one that often takes the form of a cat. Brewer’s reference to *Suttree*’s surreal milieu draws an imaginative framework for the poems of *Give Over, Graymalkin*. It suggests that there are multiple worlds to navigate: the tangible place we breathe in and the breathtaking others—of faith, imagination and possibility—where things and dimensions are not easily defined.

“To the Wind” is an ode in the “South to North” section that sings amidst its footing of measured syllables and restrained lines and illustrates the wind’s ranging effects on its environment. It begins,

*You are the muscled silence  
that roughs the world to sound.  
Waves growling and aroused.  
ripe applause of olive grove,*

The first line unexpectedly joins an animal attribute—*muscled*—to the now charged “silence.” What might be regarded as a void of noise has physical power that, in the next line, “roughs the world to sound.” Further, “sound” in such close quarters to “world” suggests “round,” denoting the world’s girth and the prowess needed to stir it. The mighty wind affects “waves growling and aroused,” thus evoking the sensual, tense setting of a world where animal/human qualities are assigned to non-human entities. “To the Wind” brings to mind the bulging rocks and strained sky of William Carlos Williams’ poem “Spring Strains,” in its sensibility and in delegation of pathos to the interconnectedness of nonhuman things, qualities reflected throughout Brewer’s poems.

As the otherworldly wind generates “ripe applause of olive grove,” Brewer’s talent with sound is showcased. The poem grooves in its repetition of “v”s—“waves,” “olive,” “grove”; and its repetition of “ow”s—“sound,” “growl,” “arouse.” The melodic vowel mix of the lines that follow offers a bit of relief to the poem’s tension:

*cool gossip between the cedars,  
whispering mountain rose, prickly  
and languorous. I too am nearly  
defenseless to your bullying  
as you articulate the sail of my shirt  
fiercely across chest and plane  
a quiet urgent lyric over cheek.*

Relief is quickly replaced with new tension when the poem's speaker identifies his own vulnerability to the "bully" wind, that is also sophisticated enough to "articulate the sail" of his shirt. The poem ends uneasily with the disclosure that the wind's sway is brutal though "not quite" limitless, while an abused shutter on its hinge suggests a metaphor for the thread by which life hangs.

*I'm nearly upended, but not quite,  
unlike the shutter you rudely  
slap open and shut all night long,  
until exhausted on its hinge.*

Brewer's poems are the unapologetic products of a mature writer, fresh presentations of our human role as travelers, vulnerable to some degree. There is more than one state of lost just as there is more than one path to redemption. From what is strange to what is negotiated, part of our journey is trying to understand and aim for peace, even if no resolution or accord exists. *Give Over, Graymal-kin* also reminds us of what is most dear: simple earthly pleasures and familiar memories of togetherness that comfort when we are far from home.

# STORY PROBLEMS

BY ROB CARNEY

(Somondoco Press, 2011)

REVIEWED BY ANNE SHIFRER

Rob Carney's *Story Problems* is a lively collection full of spontaneity and ebullience. Difficulty gets whisked away by celebration and humor in poems that consistently reach for pleasure rather than pain. Carney's other poetic mode, satire, takes aim at religion, conventionality, and human stupidities such as greed and environmental destruction.

These two flavors of poetry—sweet and acidic, if you like—can be illustrated with passages from two poems that comment differently on religion. From “Recommended Daily Allowance”:

*may there always be corn in Nebraska,  
and bees for honey on our cornbread,  
  
and cherry orchards in Washington,  
and the alchemy of smokehouse and barbecue. . .*

*bless us, O Lord, and these Thy gifts.  
And bless others. Bless those who are hungry.*

*And move us to do as much as rain does, as daylight.  
Amen.*

Contrast the above passage to this passage from “You, You Goliath”:

*with your All-Knowing Umpire, All-Powerful Flowing White Beard—  
don't try peddlin' that door-to-door vacuum here.*

*What you've got is an empty pocket not something glorious for me.*

[ ... ]

*So why do you want to put the world in a headlock?  
Why do you assume you have the key?*

*You can keep your cosmic cruise ship. I'm happy with a kayak  
And anyway, I'm busy now: going out to show the kids how to slingshot rocks.*

The dramatic tonal differences of these poems suggest Carney's range. They

also reveal voice and style: the voice with its saucy directness, quips and quirks, and lyrical interludes and the style, liquid and lilting rather than compressive and subtle. Ease of expression governs the poems. The opposite of hermetic, multi-layered, and cautious, Carney's poems are insouciant and open—perfect for performance.

While Carney has a great sense of humor and is quite clever, his critiques of religion and politics sometimes take on beliefs and behaviors that are adequately self-mocking, resulting in poems that risk seeming sophomoric as in the ending of the poem "Politics."

*Okay, then, let's vote:  
Who thinks God is on their side?  
Gee, what do you know,*

*it's unanimous.  
Now would everyone please shut up?*

The finest poems in the volume have none of the heavy-handedness that occurs when Carney shadow-boxes with the more obvious lunacies of religion and politics. "Where Everyone Goes for Answers, But," for instance, ponders the big questions, but it challenges the formulaic answers of religion with its *own* depth and complexity, creating a more effective poem using indirection rather than the direct punch.

*it's a quest because of the questions.  
That spirit, or love, or that axe in your hands  
isn't there. And what good could these do? —  
you can't attack emptiness, or split it into firelight,  
can't back it into surrender; it's empty of fear,  
it's empty of everything.*

[ ... ]

*the pleasure in these isn't math—  
like this woman's beauty, or a man asleep by his son ...*

*No, emptiness was always, and emptiness is always.  
Anything you find there, you brought along.*

This provides a more compelling (and kind) rebuff to the missionaries at the door than does the icon bashing and sarcasm. Unlike those tactics the above

lines invite lingering. “Where Everyone Goes for Answers, But,” is admirable in every way, with its elegant couplets, its pregnant line and stanza breaks, its pacing, its overall depth and thoughtfulness. It’s a poem you stick on your wall.

That Carney honors mystery and demands it be respected is a poetic stance that itself deserves respect. “The Mole Measures Profit and Loss”—belying, perhaps, the whimsy of its title—is a poem that makes room for mystery.

*There’s a tunnel in my closet that runs from the house,  
under the yard, then deeper,  
  
past moles’ bones,  
deeper than mine shafts and bedrock,  
  
deeper, to a secret lake,  
whose water tastes like the night the world was born—  
  
like a fist: so cold it knocks the wind out—*

The poem’s lake permits neither boating nor exploring, neither birds nor sand-flies, not even sand may rest on its shores. It’s for drinking alone.

[ ... ] *And only with my own cupped hands.*

*That way, I can’t carry it back,  
can’t bottle it all for myself or for sale*

Whatever the speaker finds cannot be taken back for personal inebriation or for sale; it can only be known and experienced in the eerie down-under of the dream. As in “Where Everyone Goes for Answers, But,” whatever wisdom is found is indelibly shaped by the knower upon an emptiness that won’t answer back.

While Carney is thusly respectful of the unknowable, he’s an exuberant and exhilarating myth-maker. Perhaps my favorite poems in the volume are the origin stories, poems about how this or that came to be, told in the manner of America’s First Nations. The volume provides this form or type of poem—called “fables,” “parables,” and “Old Songs”—in delicious abundance. The myths Carney fabricates aren’t presented as alleyways to truth but as catalysts to wonder and astonishment as in “The Woman Who Gave Blackberries to the World.”

[ ... ] *something strange appeared  
in a widow’s yard. At first, nobody noticed,*

*or they pretended not to see.  
Even ants, in their disciplined lines, marched right around.*

*It rose from the ground above some loneliness she'd planted  
tall enough already to cast shadows, snag fog [ ... ]*

[ ... ]

[ ... ] *the strange plant had spread, had overgrown her fence,*

*cast vines and thorns like fish nets, so in the Old Songs,  
they decided to ask her to leave. But just then,*

*children saw the blackberries. And tasted them. And ate,  
and couldn't stop, no matter how scratched they got, and it was good.*

*And people came carrying baskets, telling stories.  
And the woman was no longer all alone.*

The poem's implicit metaphor—the resemblance between loneliness and a thorny bush protecting sweet berries—is an inspired comparison, one that both child and adult might ponder. So many of Carney's fabulisms set their mark and make it, creating poems that are wildly imaginative, yet charmingly simple, poems that are fresh and unpretentious. In his myth-of-origin poems Carney's talent is on extravagant display—not only his inventiveness but also his capacity for a lyricism that genuinely moves the reader. In his capacity to poetically re-imagine how the world came to be, Carney helps his readers fall in love with it once again.

## BIOGRAPHIES

VIDHU AGGARWAL'S poems have recently appeared in *Pedestal*, *Nimrod*, *Juked*, *Harpur Palate*, *Pistola*, and *Norton's Contemporary Voices from the East*. Her work has twice been nominated for a Pushcart Prize, 2009 and 2010.

JEFFREY C. ALFIER is a two-time nominee for the Pushcart prize, and a 2010 nominee for the UK's Forward Prize in poetry. His work has appeared recently in *Connecticut River Review* and *Crannog* (Ireland), with work forthcoming in *New York Quarterly*. His latest chapbook is *The Torch Singer* (2011). In 2012, *The Wolf Yearling*, his first full-length book of poems, will be published by Pecan Grove Press. He serves as co-editor of *San Pedro River Review*.

ARLENE ANG is the author of *The Desecration of Doves* (2005), *Secret Love Poems* (Rubicon Press, 2007), *Bundles of Letters Including A, V and Epsilon* (Texture Press, 2008), co-written with Valerie Fox, and *Seeing Birds in Church is a Kind of Adieu* (Cinnamon Press, 2010). Her poems have appeared in *Ambit*, *Caketrain*, *Diagram*, *Poetry Ireland*, *Poet Lore*, *Rattle*, *Salt Hill*, as well as the *Best of the Web* anthologies 2008 and 2009 (Dzanc Books). She lives in Spinea, Italy where she serves as staff editor for *The Pedestal Magazine* and *Press 1*. Website: [www.leafscape.org](http://www.leafscape.org)

SHANAN BALLAM'S poetry has appeared in several journals, including *Indiana Review*, *Spoon River Poetry Review*, and *Cream City Review*. Her chapbook, *The Red Riding Hood Papers*, was released by Finishing Line Press in 2010. She teaches poetry writing and academic writing at Utah State University.

OLIVER BENDORE, a native Iowan and graduate of the University of Iowa, was a 2010 Lambda Literary Fellow in poetry and recently had poems in *Drunken Boat*.

B.J. BEST is the author of *Birds of Wisconsin* (New Rivers Press) and *State Sonnets* (sunnyoutside), as well as three chapbooks from Centennial Press, most recently *Drag: Twenty Short Poems about Smoking*. He lives in Wisconsin with his wife, son, and their cats Simon (not a boy), Monkey (not a monkey), and Xylophone (not an entertaining percussion instrument).

RICHARD BLANCO'S acclaimed first book, *City of a Hundred Fires*, received the prestigious Agnes Starrett Poetry Prize from the University of Pittsburgh Press (1998). His second book, *Directions to The Beach of the Dead*, won the 2006 PEN/American Beyond Margins Award. His poems have appeared in *The Best American Poetry 2000*, *Great American Prose Poems*, and have been featured on National Public Radio's *All Things Considered*. The poems in this

issue are from *Looking for The Gulf Motel*, his forthcoming collection from the University of Pittsburgh Press.

TRACI BRIMHALL is the author of *Our Lady of the Ruins* (forthcoming from W.W. Norton), selected by Carolyn Forché for the 2011 Barnard Women Poets Prize, and *Rookery* (Southern Illinois University Press), winner of the 2009 Crab Orchard Series in Poetry First Book Award. Her poems have appeared in *Kenyon Review*, *Slate*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *New England Review*, *The Missouri Review* and elsewhere. She was the 2008–09 Jay C. and Ruth Halls Poetry Fellow at the Wisconsin Institute for Creative Writing and currently teaches at Western Michigan University, where she is a doctoral associate and King/Chávez/Parks Fellow.

NIKIA CHANEY is a native of the Inland Empire, with an MFA in Poetry from Antioch University. She is currently at California State University studying for an MA in Linguistics. When she is not in school or teaching children's poetry for an after school program, she can be found mothering four little ones. Most recently, she has been published in *Pacific Review* and *Badlands* as well as the Inlandia sponsored *Slouching Towards Mt. Rubidoux*.

KRISTEN CLANTON lives in Tampa, FL. She graduated from the University of Nebraska's MFA program. She makes clothes, studies French and works as an assistant to an editor, who is pushing her to send out work. She is not terribly funny when it counts and the only joke she knows is about a pirate in argyle socks. Don't hold it against her.

KATHARINE COLES' fifth collection of poems, *Flight*, is forthcoming from Red Hen Press, which also published her fourth collection, *Fault*, in 2008. She is a professor in the English Department at the University of Utah, where she teaches creative writing and literature and co-directs the Utah Symposium in Science and Literature. In 2010, she spent a month writing in Antarctica under the auspices of the National Science Foundation's Artists and Writers Program. In 2009 and 2010, she served as the Inaugural Director of the Harriet Monroe Poetry Institute at the Poetry Foundation. She is currently Poet Laureate of Utah.

STAR COULBROOKE directs the Utah State University Writing Center and is responsible for Helicon West, a bi-monthly open readings/featured readers series. Her poems are published in journals and anthologies such as *Redactions: Poetry and Poetics* and *A Cadence of Hooves: A Celebration of Horses*. Her poem, "How I Stopped Selling Life Insurance," was named Editor's Choice in the anthology, *New Poets of the American West*. Star lives in Smithfield, Utah, with her partner, Mitch, and their three labby-heelerish dogs.

KEVIN CUTRER was raised in the American South and has lived in South America. His work has appeared everywhere from *The Flea* to *The Dark Horse*.

NICK DEPASCAL currently lives in Albuquerque, NM with his wife and son, where he's working toward his MFA at the University of New Mexico. His poetry and reviews have appeared or are forthcoming in *The Los Angeles Review*, *Sugar House Review*, *Rattle*, *Rain Taxi*, *Tucson Weekly*, *Adobe Walls* and more.

SHAVAHN DORRIS-JEFFERSON has a master's in writing from DePaul University. She has published work in *The Rio Grande Review*, *The Centrifugal Eye* and *The Orange Room Review*. She juggles four jobs during the day, which forces her to do most of her daydreaming at night. She lives in Joliet with her husband, Alvin.

IRIS JAMAHL DUNKLE teaches writing and literature at Clarion University. Her chapbook, *Inheritance*, was published by Finishing Line Press in 2010. Her poetry, creative nonfiction and scholarly articles have appeared in numerous publications, including: *Fence*, *LinQ*, *Boxcar Poetry Review*, *Cleveland in Prose and Poetry*, *Eaden Water's Press Home Anthology* and *The Squaw Valley Writers Review*.

ATHENA N. EDMONDS graduated with an MFA from Lesley University in 2009. Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in publications such as *The Massachusetts Review*, *Connotation Press* and *Feminist Studies*. In her previous life, she founded and managed a series of early stage software venture funds. She holds engineering degrees from MIT and Cambridge University. Originally from Thessaloniki, Greece, Athena lives with her husband and four children in Belmont, MA. Her youngest child is an nine-year old girl who identifies as a boy.

NAVA FADER has been happily stealing from Rilke and her poet/neighbor/friend, Marten Clibbens, lately. She likes the process—no blank page when she starts with their words—and she likes the politics: shared creativity and the squishing of a potentially large poet-ego in favor of community and tradition. Her book, *All the Jawing Jackdaw* (BlazeVOX [books], 2010), has each poem's title taken from a line by somebody else. She just finished a manuscript of fake translations from Dante's *Inferno*. Her work has been in *Sawbuck*, *No Tell Motel*, *Coconut*, *Dear Sir* and others.

Washington D.C.'s BRIAN GILMORE is a poet, public interest attorney and columnist with the Progressive Media Project. He has two collections, *elvis presley is alive and well and living in harlem* (Third World Press 1993) and *Jungle Nights and Soda Fountain Rags: Poem for Duke Ellington* (Karibu Books 2001). He is currently on the clinical faculty at the Michigan State University College of Law.

HEATHER GRIFFITHS currently lives in Central California and spends her time outlining the Sierra Nevada mountains in the fog and searching the local farmers markets for the perfect strawberry. She recently graduated from Utah State University with a BS in American Studies and is taking a year to work on poetry. When not at the farmers market, Heather can be found hiking in Yosemite National Park or on her couch eating a large bowl of near-perfect strawberries.

SHANNON ELIZABETH HARDWICK graduated with her MFA from Sarah Lawrence College in 2010. She recently completed her first full-length manuscript of essays and poetry and has a chapbook in print. Some of her work has been featured, or is upcoming, in magazines in the US and UK, including: *3:AM Magazine*, *Night Train*, *Phantom Kangaroo*, *chum*, *Sein und Werden*, among others. She writes in New York and Texas.

RYAN HARPER is a graduate student in the department of religion at Princeton University, where he is writing an ethnography on contemporary southern gospel music. His poems have appeared in *Big Muddy*, *The Litchfield Review*, *Red Clay Review*, *Ruminate* and *The Potomac Review*. Ryan is also a jazz drummer and an overzealous, underperforming runner of marathons.

J.D. HIBBITTS is a graduate student in McNeese State University's fiction program, and received his B.A. from Emory & Henry College after completing his service commitment in the United States Air Force. He has had poems published in *Bluestone Review*, *Blue Collar Review* and *The Clinch Mountain Review*, as well as a non-fiction article published in *Appalachian Trail Conservancy's Journeys Magazine*. In his free time, he kayaks and SCUBA dives.

LAUREN HILGER is an MFA candidate at Sarah Lawrence College where she serves as Managing Editor of *LUMINA*. Recent poems can be found or are forthcoming in *Sonora Review*, *Gulf Stream*, *Sierra Nevada Review*, *Caper*, *Moon Milk Review*, *The Scrambler*, *ASKEW*, *Schuylkill Valley Journal*, *The Westchester Review*, among others. She lives in Manhattan.

ERIN COUGHLIN HOLLOWELL has been published in *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Crab Creek Review*, *Weber Studies*, *Blue Earth Review* and *Terrain.org*. A 2010 Rona Jaffe Poetry Scholar at Bread Loaf Writers Conference, she received her MFA from the Rainier Writing Workshop at Pacific Lutheran University. She lives in a small town off the road-system in Alaska. They have no stoplights, no theater and no place to buy socks or underwear. They do have a bookstore, a zendo and three places to get a diesel boat motor fixed. Go figure.

JENNIFER JABAILY-BLACKBURN lives in Fayetteville, AR with her husband and their genius beagle. She's into reading, rediscovering Twitter, and

getting away from Twitter because it's eating her life. She's more into hyperbole than anyone. Ever.

RUSSELL JAFFE lives in Iowa City, IA and teaches at Kirkwood Community College. His poems have appeared in *elimae*, *Shampoo*, *La Petite Zine*, *Alice Blue* and others. His chapbook *G(\* )D* is forthcoming from Pudding House Press and he is the editor of the online journal *O Sweet Flowery Roses*.

CHARMI KERANEN holds a BA in English from Indiana University South Bend. She works in Northern Indiana as a scopist and proofreader of court transcripts. She prefers murder over medical malpractice work any day of the week. Her poetry has recently appeared in *The Salt River Review*, *JMWW*, *Stirring*, *blossombones*, *elimae*, *The Dirty Napkin*, *Passages North* and *Ouroboros Review*.

KATIE KINGSTON has taught Spanish, English and poetry throughout the Rocky Mountain West and is now enjoying the nomadic life that writing residencies offer. She's had the opportunity to write from many landscapes including Spain and Mexico, and most recently from the writing residency at Martha's Vineyard. She finds that writing in different settings encourages different perspectives. She is the author of three poetry collections.

SANDRA KOHLER'S third book of poems, *Improbable Music*, was released by Word Press in April. An earlier book, *The Ceremonies of Longing* (U. of Pittsburgh Press, 2003) won the AWP Award Series in Poetry for 2002. Her poems have been published over the past thirty-some years in periodicals including *The New Republic*, *The American Poetry Review*, *Prairie Schooner* and *Beloit Poetry Journal*. She remains a passionate fan of the Philadelphia Flyers despite having moved to Boston four years ago, after spending most of her adult life in Pennsylvania.

MATTHEW LANDRUM teaches Latin and literature in Ann Arbor. His poems have recently appeared in *The Emerson Review* and *Cold Mountain Review*.

STEVE LANGAN is the author of *Freezing* (New Issues, 2001), *Notes on Exile and Other Poems* (Backwaters, 2005) and *Meet Me at the Happy Bar* (BlazeVOX [books], 2009).

ROBIN LINN facilitates playfulness-themed poetry workshops in the Boston area and has an MFA in Creative Writing from Lesley University. Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Sugar House Review*, *Redactions: Poetry & Poetics*, *Saranac Review*, *specs* and *Amethyst Arsenic*, where her poem was nominated for Best of the Web. Her chapbook, *Fairytales Ending Machine*, is forthcoming from FootHills Publishing. Robin volunteers for PEN New England's Freedom to Write prison writing program, and she is a huge NE Patriots fan.

D.A. LOCKHART completed his B.A. in English at Montana State University and is currently wrapping up a short stint in the Midwest at Indiana University. His work has appeared in *Front Range*, *Zaum* and *Naugatuck River Review*. He is currently working on a collection of short stories set around Southeastern Montana.

ANGIE MACRI'S recent work appears or is forthcoming in *Redivider*, *RHINO* and *Third Coast*, among other journals, and is included in *Best New Poets 2010*. Her manuscript, *Queensware*, was named as a finalist in the Crab Orchard Series in Poetry First Book Award competition. She has also been awarded an individual artist fellowship from the Arkansas Arts Council.

ERIN LYNN MARSH lives and writes in Bemidji, MN. She dotes on her cat, Emma, and has finally learned the art of living alone! She graduated in January from the Low Residency MFA program at Lesley University.

KEVIN MCLELLAN is the author of the chapbook *Round Trip* (Seven Kitchens, 2010), a collaborative series with numerous women poets. He has recent or forthcoming poems in journals including: *Arch Literary Journal*, *Barrow Street*, *Colorado Review*, *Drunken Boat*, *Exquisite Corpse*, *Hunger Mountain*, *Interim*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *Versal* and others. Kevin teaches creative writing at the University of Rhode Island and lives in Cambridge, MA.

NANCY CAROL MOODY spent many years working for the postal service and resisting the urge to read the backs of postcards. She invests a good deal of time at her desk, moving things around in search of other things. Her cat, Kobi, assists by chewing large hunks of paper from submission packets. Nevertheless, she has poems published in *Poetry Northwest*, *The New York Quarterly*, *Bellevue Literary Review* and *The MacGuffin*. Her book, *Photograph With Girls*, was published in 2007. The cat has not touched it.

JOANNA PEARSON completed her MFA in poetry in 2009 at the Johns Hopkins University Writing Seminars. Her poems have appeared recently in *Best New Poets 2010*, *Blackbird*, *Gulf Coast*, *The New Criterion*, *River Styx*, *Tar River Poetry*, *Valparaiso Poetry Review* and elsewhere. Recently, she has twice been nominated for a Pushcart Prize, and has had residencies/scholarships to Yaddo and the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference.

CATHY PEPPERS holds an MFA from Bowling Green State University, a PhD from the University of Oregon and has taught at Idaho State University since 1998. She lives with singer-songwriter Bob Picard on a one-hundred-year-old farmstead with superfluous creatures, including a blackjack of cats, two horses, a motley of chickens and a goat. Her poetry is loosely collected

in a few manuscripts; the poems here are from *Arts & Sciences* (call it love), regressing forward and in loving detail.

DANIEL PINKERTON is the recipient of two Academy of American Poets prizes and an AWP Intro Journals award; his fiction manuscript was a finalist in the 2006 Flannery O'Connor Award. His poetry, reviews and fiction have appeared or are forthcoming in *Indiana Review*, *Subtropics*, *Willow Springs*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Sonora Review*, *River Styx*, *American Literary Review*, *Shenandoah*, *Pleiades*, *Quarterly West*, *Crazyhorse*, *Northwest Review*, *North American Review*, *Best New American Voices 2008*, among others.

NATALIE BRYANT RIZZIERI'S poems have most recently appeared in *Crab Orchard Review* and *Connotation Press*. She received her MFA in poetry from Lesley University, and is the founder of Friends of Warm Hearth, a group home for Armenian orphans with disabilities.

In addition to *Mixed Diction* (Mammoth books, 2009), JEFF SCHIFF is the author of *Anywhere in this Country* (Mammoth Press), *The Homily of Infinitude* (Pennsylvania Review Press), *The Rats of Patzcuaro* (Poetry Link), *Resources for Writing About Literature* (HarperCollins) and *Burro Heart* (Mammoth books). His work has appeared internationally in over 80 periodicals, including *Grand Street*, *The Ohio Review*, *Poet & Critic*, *The Louisville Review*, *Carolina Review*, *Chicago Review*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *Indiana Review*, *Willow Springs* and *The Southwest Review*. He has been a member of the English faculty at Columbia College Chicago since 1987.

STEPHANIE E. SCHLAIFER is originally from Atlanta, GA and works as an artist and freelance editor in St. Louis, MO. She received her BFA in sculpture and BA in English literature from Washington University in St. Louis, and an MFA in poetry from the University of Iowa. Stephanie is a combative Boggler and a compulsive baker. It is rumored that two men once arm-wrestled each other to death for the last slice of her pecan pie. She is currently working on a series of poems about historical weather events and a collection of children's books in verse.

MARVIN SHACKELFORD holds an MFA in fiction writing from the University of Montana and currently lives in rural Kentucky. His stories and poems have appeared or are forthcoming in journals such as *Cimarron Review*, *Confrontation*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *Harpur Palate*, *Quarterly West*, *Georgetown Review*, among others.

After teaching for twenty-two years in Utah State University's English Department, ANNE SHIFRER is now an independent scholar, writer, editor and paper doll maker.

KAREN SKOLFIELD is a freelance magazine writer and an adjunct professor in the journalism department at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. She is a contributing editor at the literary magazine *Bateau* and has work published or forthcoming in *Another Chicago Magazine*, *Crab Creek Review*, *Hollins Critic*, *The Ledge*, *PANK*, *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *West Branch* and others.

PATRICIA SMITH'S eight books include *Blood Dazzler*, a finalist for the 2008 National Book Award, and one of NPR's top five books of 2008; and *Teahouse of the Almighty*, a National Poetry Series selection. *Shoulda Been Jimi Savannah* will be released on spring 2012. Her work has appeared or is upcoming in *Poetry*, *The Paris Review*, *TriQuarterly* and *Best American Poetry 2011* and *Best American Essays 2011*. She is a professor at the College of Staten Island, and teaches for *Cave Canem* at the MFA program of Sierra Nevada College.

SHANNON AZZATO STEPHENS is a recent graduate of the Carnegie Mellon University Creative Writing Program, where she was the Editor-in-Chief of *The Oakland Review*. Previous publications include *Anderbo*, *Brink Lit*, *Empire Review* and *The Susquehanna Review*. She currently lives in Pittsburgh with her husband and a stuffed dog named Spartacus.

An MFA recipient from the University of Southern Maine's Stonecoast Writing Program, CHRISTINE TIERNEY is employed as an after-school director. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Fourteen Hills*, *Permafrost*, *PMS*, *Poet Lore*, *Tusculum Review*, *descant*, *The Yalobusha Review*, *The Broome Review* and *Tattoo Highway*. Also, you can listen to her read in the latest issue of *Soundzine*.

ROBERT J. TILLET writes and teaches in Rochester, NY. He was a winner of a Bread Loaf scholarship and his work has been nominated twice for Pushcart Prizes. His poems have appeared in or are forthcoming in such publications as *Poetry Northwest*, *Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review*, *Ellipsis*, *Harpur Palate*, *Southern Indiana Review* and *The Worcester Review*.

WILLIAM TROWBRIDGE'S poetry collections are *Ship of Fool*, *The Complete Book of Kong*, *Flickers*, *O Paradise* and *Enter Dark Stranger*. His poems have also appeared in over 30 anthologies and textbooks and in such periodicals as *The Gettysburg Review*, *The Iowa Review*, *The Georgia Review*, *Poetry*, *Boulevard* and *Green Mountains Review*. He lives in the Kansas City area and teaches in the University of Nebraska Low-residency MFA Writing Program.

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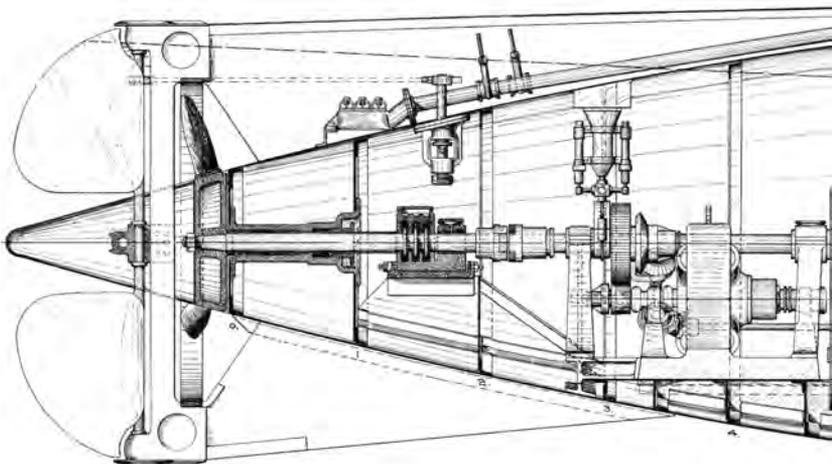
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