



SUGAR HOUSE REVIEW

#7

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# SUGAR HOUSE REVIEW



POETRY

**Featuring:** Gaylord Brewer, Nick Demske, Teri Youmans Grimm, Jay Hopler



# SUGAR HOUSE REVIEW

AN INDEPENDENT POETRY MAGAZINE

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## IF THOSE BLOSSOMS DON'T COME

if the tangerine doesn't  
fill the house with thick  
sweetness. If you put  
your hands over your  
ears one more time  
when I'm talking. If  
there's another month  
of wanting to sleep all  
day, the cat the warmest  
sweet thing I can imagine.  
If this damn rain doesn't  
let up, I'm going to  
have to rewrite the story  
you've got in your head  
about us and I don't  
think you will like  
the ending



## MALEBOUCHE

The adder rising to see in a rye field  
flickers it—we have only Chekhov's  
word for this, however.

The assailing crow, adrift on bad air,  
abuses it—his opinions  
never vary—

Very much wikkid tonge, black  
air which settles on the night  
steeps and bubbles burst

malodorous melodious bass  
scrubbings, Beethovian viols—  
I have seen the devil

and he holds in his elegant hand  
before his tisking lips  
baton light

as a sparrow's wing mobbing  
another crow's awful singing  
mal aria bad air

## GLAVER

The silence does glaver on,  
spending its empty vowels  
and dusty consonants.

I should flatter it  
to give me even more  
of its pleasure—

I'm half the rusty  
railroad spike  
(holding open this book

of old words) already.  
I found it in my yard  
once when I was digging

in the garden. Birds  
made glaver over  
me I failed to notice.

I reached into the dark earth,  
roots and worms listening,  
my hands closing

on that lost thing,  
meaning to keep it,  
to bring it now to you.

## LAMENT

Number one is that you have to become attached. It must be winter, I think. Not the season necessarily, but winter . . . like the cycle of grieving, the way things die, the way the puddles freeze over and you see your breath and realize they are the same thing, the same substance, and you think how easy it would be to lie down and wait until your body froze, too, wait until you were covered in crystals, slow, steady points of light.

We are not meant to be happy all the time. Sadness has its season, that's all.

*The truth is you don't know someone until you've held her in your hands.*

I wake in the middle of the night and realize that the cold has been stinging my face, that my lungs are full of thin, cold air.

*The truth is you need to unmake him.*

*You need to feel the pieces come apart one by one.*

And Raven is lying next to me, but far enough away that I don't want to disturb her by drawing close. And I lie there for the longest time and then I get up, slowly and silently and make my way through the house and I lean in close to him and listen for the soft sounds of breath. And it's all I can do not to wrap my arms around him and hold him tight to my chest.

*Your hands become memory, negative space.*

*You shape yourself around her.*

*Your fingers reawaken him by the shapes they make in air.*

It's all I can do not to eat him alive. I wait until I can turn away and creep back through the darkness. I feel like I will die as I climb back into bed. And I almost cry because I don't know what it means. Because it is winter and it is cold. And my body knows the shape of him. Because it will always know.

MEASURE—THE WITCH TAKES STOCK  
OF THE CHILDREN

I tell the boy to put out his hand  
so I may judge  
the weight of his flesh by feeling

his finger. Even in the dim light,  
I can see  
the chicken bone he presses

through the bars. I'd heard the girl  
urging as much  
as she fed him the bird just hours ago.

Were I as blind as she claimed  
I would know  
the ruse by my fingertips, touching

as I do the scratches he's carved  
with his teeth,  
gnawing and chewing the bone

to strip it clean. Beyond I see  
the girl's tears catch  
the fire's waning light and her quick

breath fills the air with the taste  
of despair.

*Tomorrow, I say, you must feed him*

*twice as much or he'll never grow thick.*

She clutches both  
hands to her breast, and her nostrils

flare with excitement. *Hansel,*  
she whispers later,  
*we have fooled her!* In the sweat

of their small bodies, I smell a new  
and hopeful scent.

I can almost taste it on my teeth.

## MIDWIFE—THE WITCH DABBLES IN HEALING

The boy came on a summer morn, shouldered  
his bloody way out while the woman groaned like a cow.  
He nearly fell into my hands, sticky, still warm  
from the womb. I pressed him to his mother's breast  
to shush his cries. All the while, the blood swelled  
out of her, as from an animal cut clean. Her hand  
at the child's head grew languid and dropped  
to the bed, and the infant lost his grip, slipped  
into her limp arm, squalling at the nipple beyond.

I brewed a tea heavy with ergot and oak bark, spooned  
it through her lips, but still she bled. I knew some piece  
of the caul must have stuck fast inside her.  
I scraped it free with my fingers, massaged  
her belly till I felt it start to tighten, fed her what I could  
of the afterbirth until she roused enough to spit it out.  
Awake finally, she wept over the child, put him back  
on her breast. I gave her stew made of lamb  
and when they had both eaten and she slept, I took  
the boy from her arms and breathed him in, memorized  
his scent. *Hansel*, she mumbled from her dream. I turned  
my back to her and licked him clean.

## THE WAY HOME

Little by little,  
they let sweetness back in:  
a bite of seed-cake;  
a thread of honey  
dissolving in tea.

Some evenings Gretel visits,  
brings apples for his children,  
who sleep, eventually,  
leaving their father with his  
gold-haired sister,  
heads bowed together,  
alone in the flickering,  
trading the secret  
names they gave the strange dainties:  
Pink Royals, Angel Tarts.  
They remember jam  
shining like church windows,  
the fat flies' lullaby drone.

In her apron she  
folds a finger bone.  
In his pocket,  
one white stone.

CENTO: "INSTINCT," BY LESTER DEL REY

The old brain in his chest even seemed  
to think better now. It was good to have  
a new body. A good body. How good  
it was to be alive and to be a  
robot. But the old worries: They were no  
nearer re-creating Man than they had  
been when they started. They began dissecting  
the body of the female failure,  
the reason behind the lack of success.  
How well do you know your history?  
I mean about the beginning.

## WHEEL & AXLE

We did nothing on a whim. The friction  
of the multiplying moment pulled my  
guide, my wagon, to a stream of thimble  
tears until he took my hand and kissed me  
when bidden. Love had winched us in from the  
wet swarf ground out by the rack-and-pinion  
planet, so here we were in front of the  
nave and the assembly. We had been clods  
in the differential, and now we were  
driving an axis of belly and nose.  
Aren't we all just hubs housing helical  
slave drivers? We wanted our gyroscope  
spinning out like a spur-wheel on track,  
our little linch-pin, as soon as possible.

## TRICK OF LIGHT

*for my mother*

I drove home through fog, the cloud-lowered, air-saturated  
white, an eerie  
always-arriving in a clearing. Strange world:  
a fir became a small billboard. A pile of hay bales, a tractor.  
The trees,  
dark shapes, refused to be distinct. But at the river,  
when I expected the thickest mist, the air cleared,  
and I could see  
downtown's high-rises glittering  
where the clouds had come unseamed for a beam of light.  
I know that you cannot  
see peripherally, that color has left your left eye's  
vision, the macaroni stirring from orange  
to black and white,  
and back to orange. The right has lost sight altogether.  
Still, you're not sure the doctor should break your septum,  
remove the growth  
crowding out sight. Optic nerve, pituitary,  
carotid artery, gray matter: how close everything is.  
I want to believe  
in his micro-instruments, to tell you  
that at sunrise, there's a moment when color comes back,  
the grass green again  
instead of gray, that tree suddenly "oak,"  
each leaf's lobes forming the image of a tree, too,  
the ground a gritty carpet  
of acorn shells. That it's all the same as it was.

## RELICS AND PARDON

The bits of hardened toast  
in a novel you borrowed,  
your notes in one I never returned.

A scrap of the hem of Our Lady's veil.  
St. Peter's pinkie bone. What will  
get us closer to heaven? I would let

the ink and crumbs conjure up  
your specter, broad-shouldered and glum,  
would keep every ticket stub

and wishbone cleaned of gristle,  
but these relics can neither hurt  
nor heal, cannot put you across the table,

head in a book. These pages will yellow,  
spines crack. The man who collected  
every thimble his beloved used was a fool.

The catacombs' dark beds lie empty,  
the bones passed off as holy  
by graverobbers. Behind some gold door

in some cathedral, they now turn to dust,  
saints by proxy. I'm trading these bygones  
for presence, for the visceral surge of skin on skin.

YOU SWEAR YOU DIDN'T

and who knew  
a thumb could hold  
a broken cup  
little red blossoms  
in your kitchen sink  
you scrub and scrub

DO IT ON PURPOSE

how much blood  
rubbed against  
a delayed feeling  
in your tea  
a bucket of dirt  
the fractured flowers

BEAUTY IS A REAL THING, I'VE SEEN IT

If only those parakeets would settle a little nearer to where I'm  
sitting,  
Instead of at the tops of far-off trees,

  This morning  
Would be so much more  
Remarkable.

One could always watch the blackbirds, I suppose, peck their ways  
like Oxford dons  
Across the flagstone paths and lawns,

Or the swallows,  
Or the sparrows,

  Or the hooded

Crows. But, those birds are so plain—  
So—, painfully available. No, only

Those parakeets will do and they will not do  
What I want them to; in this, they're

  Like everything else in the world, every

Beautiful thing.

## THAT NECESSARY EVIL

A church bells the birds

Over the rooves of Perugia and a blue haze—in a gauze-fall—  
sprawls out long  
Along the walls; the sun

'S light hits not hard the hills, but holds  
Them. Still—.

And stills their green velocities

Until such time such sky it has attained that by its own wild  
Rising are they unrestrained, and left to wester, rolling, fast

And shadowless.

There is no morning big enough to stay.  
Still—, these days are too-soon-nooned,

I'd say. And it's a sun ungrateful—disgraceful in its greedy  
reach—that would so quickly let  
Itself to joy.

## WOMAN IN A BLACK DRESS

Because I am a woman, in a black dress,  
standing by a giant sad orange fish,  
with large pooling black eyes and fangs,  
because I have my palm resting on the fish  
as the fish and I are in a yellow field,  
somewhere in the greater Midwest,  
and because I don't know where I am going  
or why, because women are allowed  
to wear pants today, even pant suits,  
because I saw you dangling your utopia  
on a carrot with sideways lips, because you  
say it is all about women, because women have lips,  
and hips, because if a woman stands by a giant  
dying fish she is asking for it, because I am wearing  
earrings that quack like real ducks, but only  
when I wear the color red, because feminism liberated  
a few women and confused most men, because  
when I was four I had an out of body experience  
with a Great White in my suburban bathtub, because  
I watch the squirrels while wearing a curly blue wig  
and eating peanut butter and butter sandwiches. Because  
this is the way things are and chairs don't move on their own.

## BAD BABY HEADS

Once I held a baby and popped his head off like a dandelion.  
Held his neck in the palm of my hand, and POP with my thumb.  
Don't worry, he was a bad, bad baby, and didn't go to waste.

I planted that bad baby head with my gardenias and out  
came five more babies. Each with only a fifth  
of the bad baby's evil.

I planted all five some-what bad baby heads next to my azaleas:  
Twenty-five babies grew. Each with only one-twenty-fifth  
of that original bad baby's bad blood.

The process was simple. Now I have plenty big  
beautiful babies. Their soft spots flat and wide as the plains.  
Such breathtaking little door stops.

## N\*\*\*A PLEASE

*"#1, I live in my momma's house."*

You big baby. You big baby, Jesus. Changing your own diapers. Taking yourself on fishing trips and learning how to fight. I ain't no nigga. I had seen and felt things impossible to experience any place else on earth. I'm the cunt-breath asshole eater—expat hazmat, errata pinata. This is not something new that's going to come out of nowhere. No. This is something old. And dirty. This is about names. How they tell you more than intended. Not *housebroken*, but *home*. Not *emperor*, but *author*. The name Israel, for instance, means "wrestles with the Lord." Conversely, my name, Nicholas, means "victory of the people." Both are names for boys—or men—and both, too, echo violence. Victory suggesting someone then has been defeated the same way wrestling suggests two muscular men fucking. Your name is Toby. Your name is Osiris and, O, sire us you will. Thy will be done. Thy executor's cup overfloweth farewell, wellfare. The chalky outline on the sidewalk is a father figure. Don't ever look at my name as bad. *Jesus* comes from the word for "to help," but Jesus' stardom imploded in the firmament. Toby or not Toby, that is the Bastard, the patronymic child of God living in his mom's house. I ain't no nigga. Just a courteous kaiser throne to the leonine with no skills for the taming. Introducing—yo, fuck that nigga's naming. The Morning Star is flaming. The Patron Saints exclaiming. The baby has been shaken. Father, why have you forsaken Nigga Please You could never fuck with the dog a Nigga Please nigga I will bury your bone a Nigga Please I'm the one who burned your home. Watch your shit fall like Rome.

## I EAT OUT EVERY DAY

And drink away the night. I Loco Locust Honey May and whistle wet til light. Tip me over. Pour me out. This ouvre blusters forth in batches. Semi-Pro Ana jackuale ate? *Nine. Arbeit Macht Frei.*

Every junky's like a rising sun, a boiling opium drenching the dale. The Starfucker's eyes are glad and bigger than its britches. It burns itself upon its granted wishes.

I eat out every day and swallow down the inky night. I have an eating disorder, the most semi-prolific sex workahaulic in the standing-O-room hall of flame. Ovation! Star

vation! I myself am hell, a heller, fellatious as the day is long. I ravish reckless, jackal all trades, Rage against the dying of the light and it's delicious. And you get this. This regurgiturgid poesy. Celebrity rehab prefab disgorgeous barfait.

So Carpe the diem by its love handles the jugulum wish I could say there is some shit I will not eat but I never knew when tooo

Quit.

## CLITORECTOMY SYNECHDOCHE

*for Julie Woodard*

My Profile Carved in effigy. Sculpt the bundled nerves into my standardized pro-file. Be away, ye penile correlative, ye promiscuity mainspring. May they who look upon you hence see but my silhouette. *It's no real pleasure in life but meanness.* Don't front. I gargle this, wiping my tear-struck cheeks upon your thighs. This superduperficial fix therefore not unforeseen. Cause that's what's up. Treat the symptom; wait til your shift kaputs. For, superstardom, what is the mere application of whale placenta, the supine sopping of violet, so ultra? The afro pique, the corporate noose, the blush and the mascara? What is the haughty mani pedi, the creoline shake, the circumprecision, the swan? And then what the scarification, the ritual reconstruction, the cloven tongue, the ironed breast, the mythical transformation? What the mastectomy? The tumor removal? The bypassed gastronomy, the implants, the cochlear boon? What the prostheses? What the suturing of arteries? The skin graft, the labiaplast, the approximation of aesthetic normality? O my flagellate, my amputate, my palate cleft as G-cups, O my reduction castration suspension, my congenitally absent insight—O my superstratum, lift every face and sing the body dismorphic. My vagina dentata's orthodontics of little correction facility. I thought I could settle our family's disfunction by faring thee well evermore. But what have we now? No more than my countenance stamped on your tenderized button. Beneath the face value, your culprit eludes you. So much for feminization.

Shut up, Bobby. It's no real pleasure in this here life, no ma'am. Dilletanté, Mutilitanté, lift every face and sing the body electrolysis. I'm the best thing to happen to chickens since the straightening comb, since the clitorectomy synechdoche. I'm the black Walt Whitman, like vandal decoration of a temple in a cracker cemetaire. Shut up, Bobby. I'm early onset puberty, the line 'tween medic and cosmetic, sextasy and torture. So leave the body be, brother, and instead dig a hole into hell. Admit to your loved ones you hate them and the fires may they sterilize your soul. Be the genocide you wish to see in the world. Beatitude your holy functionless cicatrix. Be poor in spirit, for thou shall inherit. Be you til full. Be ugly, Be come, Be healed!

## REHAB AUBADE

*after Drew Pinsky*

Anal sex symbol, one motet wonder, blotto oblation, obliterated, littered. You got the zackleys. You puked on a mink in the Ritz. You flashed your beave sauce to a sewer-dwelling snapshot. Smacked rock bottom. Then dug.

Marketing blitzkrieg, corporate epiphany, fire can heat your house or it can burn. it. down. In the wake of the sforzando, the silence stampedes us. So drink, shoot, smoke or fuck it out.

How does it work from there? Do you stumble into a clinic? Do the staff members all excitedly make whispers? No, your agent auctions off your addiction—no need for auditions. I've been training for this role for my whole life.

The stars are all so high tonight. High as rank or ratings. Tanked acquaintance, bombed out comrade, annihilated neighbor do you see a pattern here? Do you feel the least bit occupied and, if so, by whom? The sun slashes a glimmer through water—a meaningless division. A reality star asked a treatment specialist what's his motivation. My name is Legion, for we are O so many. Number the stars, like viewers, prisoners or soldiers. Give them what they want so you can give them what they need. Give them internalized! Conflict! Of interests! This/ is war/ on drugs. And I am bi-winning.

Starfucker, you got the zackley's. That's when your mouth smells zackley like your butt. These poems are all aubades which means two lovers are going to part. There's a custody battle in Solomon's court and no one's giving in. You are *mine*, Starfucker. I will take me by force if you must. We should be used to the invasions, the incorporation. The noise. I'm fast forwarding a video of the sunrise like it's porn. What is thy name, Starfucker? How many of them are you? This is what I'd ask. This is what I'd ask you, wasted, totaled, lit. I'd ask you if we're acting, if I thought you knew the answer.

## HOW TO MAKE A SLAVE

*after Willie Lynch*

She does porn now. No means mayhaps. Poetry Industry. Artistic Differences.

I will never write another poem without rape in it. That was a typo, I meant “race.” But really what’s the difference.

She does porn now. Me so ornery. Master of seduction. Warm for your form.

A house nig swipes a MasterCard through mammy’s steatopyg cheeks. The dead jews in the sky tonight sparkle like flecks of a standard. The sun rise lightens my skin: a hot, insensitive metaphor. Culturally incompetent, as they say in the corporate workshops.

She *does* porn now. Food stamp collection. I have a thing for \_\_\_\_\_ women. I have a thing for filling in \_\_\_\_\_s. I am the martial art of this here martial race. I’m a god—the God. I am the capital God of War. I *divide* like the slender legs of an actress and *conquer* like her counter. I drive a Hummer! Do you kinda, sorta see where I’m going with this? The only good engine, in general, is the Engine Against the Almighty. General, me love you long time. Long enough to neologize eponyms. An invective, nay, a parable of your name!

O the sun, it lives—giddy maketh it the sky. O the forests, O the Blackest Hills it glows! Rape Culture, I’m all lights and sirens lit up in your honor. I’m in tatters, aiming for the stars like mortars. United, we stand in the midst of the rapid, at one with the furious waters. Divided we broadcast our updates of status and learn not the names of our neighbors. Beauty Star, I said it must be that ass. Because it definitely isn’t your face. I said “Please do not mix genres in the same submission.” My P. O. look like Vanessa Del Rio. The love I have in my heart for you will baffle mankind with great terror. Morning Star, Friend of the World—don’t go towards the light. The corporate sphere quite literally cannot afford this poetry. The CEO doesn’t take *No*, or prisoners. I probably shouldn’t be driving right now. I probably shouldn’t be watching this. The gorgeous inferno riots against the day it creates, smashes out the windows to our soul. An unimaginably oppressive heat, the core 27 million degrees. The art/ as fine/ as the print/ on the contract/ that binds the readers, they weep. The critics, they rave—I’d rather be a Master than a slave.

*No.*

## NUTBUSH RAGDOLL

—*a vaudeville gen(i)us narcissus: a Misrepresentation by Be(yond)sāy(knows)*

This R&B action figurine accessorizes both the tattered denim mini & dominatrix-black pleather skirt, popped-collar, acid-wash jean jacket—flesh against an invisible waist &

detachable sex-icon wigs & lace-front lion's mane, switchable fishnets or *Hanes*-her-way nylons in true-to-scale, five-inch stilettos. This triple threat's two shades of mahogany

& pomegranate lips accentuate steel-chrome-microphones, flouts pop, bats false-eyelashes & facsimile-patents the blueprint D-I-V-A in divorcée's *still* tagged Queen

of Legs. Long. On. Leans rhythm on heir's thighs. Leans on rock. Oh, what thighs. Walk. Southern city limits. Lone star. Icon. *Recorn*: the innovator-hit-re-maker

shimmies gospel. God spells *Whoa* man! Whips her wigs back & forth. *Still!* Choreo-out-performs, every little southern girl's proud-mary-private-dancer, karaoke-dream.

# YOLANDA FRANKLIN

## MOUNTAIN LAUREL BLUSH

*Mary Kay Ash, Founder of Mary Kay Cosmetics, Inc., Dallas, 1968  
(After Amanda Auchter)*

*They will drive it, she said*  
when they suggested her to change

her mind, to reconsider

the topcoat, its nacreous  
lacquer. *I know they can be,*

she said, *all they believe.*

Even the bumblebee  
flies, flouts its aerodynamics.

In this car, she remembers

the mountain laurel

blush, her compact blooming  
in her palm. How the pageantry of women

string alongside like freshwater pearls, waving.

Witness a white boa. A door opens.

A classic. The Cadillac.  
Her face haloed with blonde,

camera flashes. The pearlescent-pink paint against  
its oyster shell interior. And oh, that blush-trophy.

A woman with a set of keys in her hands.

## GRAVE SIGHT

Aunt Martha had to bend twice this year, over  
grottos, practice the art of farming

bones, accept Death's polygamy like  
Ojo de Agua's living

Mirabal sister, grit the rigor of fists,  
& cross-stitch a delicate symphony as

needles of bodies' cymbal *all the preparations*  
*that had to be made*, chose two pine

over mahogany—one for her only son crushed  
by his Cadillac, bandbox in green;

the other, for her youngest brother embezzled  
by asthma—here in the anteroom of *Strong*

☞ *Jones'* funeral home; a calligraphy of ties  
press the necks of formaldehyde kin.

## THE LOBSTERMAN'S DREAM

He's been out since first light  
running his traps. The temperature  
is falling, and black-green ice  
starts building at the bow of his boat.

The blows of his sledgehammer  
just chip its edges as if he were  
an Indian tediously chipping flint  
into an arrowhead. Breathing heavily,

he keeps taking the sledge to the ice,  
the black-green ice thickening, pulling  
his boat downward, as if the sea,  
relentless in its cold, briny resolve,

were stiffening and dwindling him  
to a hapless figure frozen for the ages,  
tumbling through the leagues of the black-  
green glass of a paperweight.

## MOUSE

Each prisoner, it is said,  
dreams the mouse, letting it live  
many lives at once: sometimes,

it's making love to Cleopatra  
in a bed strewn with Archaeopteryx  
feathers; it's driving a Coupe de Ville

through Burgundy France.  
There is a sun of cheese  
and a moon of milk, one long

highway stretching into another,  
leading to a white banquet hall  
with lines of noble ladies

in tall hats and peacock boas.  
And when boot-soles clop on the icy  
stones beyond the iron door,

the prisoner wakes up.  
The mouse scampers back  
to its little hole in the world.

THE AUTHOR AS MAN WHO ESCAPES FROM  
THE SECRET MEETING AS HE SEES THE OTHERS  
SHOT BY THE COPS IN *THEY LIVE*

*after the film by John Carpenter*

How it got to this point—wishful thinking, overthrow,  
a world we could conquer—I still don't know. I came  
because there was work. We all did. Our families still  
thousands of miles away. We agreed that something  
had to be done. The last meeting: new people, contacts,  
weapons laid out like Sunday brunch. Some of them  
were humans, & it was only a matter of time before  
it didn't matter, before none of us were left alive.  
I heard Frank say: *We'll do anything to be rich*, & before  
I escaped through the back door, saw ten rounds  
rip through his chest, I asked myself if everything  
was worth it, if upon my return you'd have another  
lover, live in another state, tell our children my time  
ran out, & in the morning take them away for good.

THE AUTHOR AS MAN SURVIVING ON THE ROOF  
WHO FINALLY HEARS THE MOTORCYCLE GANG  
DRIVE INTO THE MALL PARKING LOT AND START  
SHOOTING IN *DAWN OF THE DEAD*

*after the film by George Romero*

I'm starting to hear things: a thousand bees buzzing  
    around a single chrysanthemum, helicopter blades  
whirling into a crescendo of indeterminate cacophony,  
    & my daughter's front-teeth-gone smile & the hose  
in her hands shattering light through the sun as dusk  
    makes its way into the city. All of it: a distant memory.  
I stole soup cans & utensils & have survived on those—  
    watching them shuffle & groan & walk in tired circles,  
bumping into doors & abandoned trucks & themselves.  
    Then the gang & shotguns: I was saved. But the bullets  
flew & I was afraid they'd mistake me for one of them,  
    or realize I couldn't help them & kill for that alone.  
I ducked & listened. I waited for it to stop, for a sign  
    that I could live here, finally, in this endless silence.

## HAVE YOU SEEN THE SANTA LION

that leaves a shadow on Brad's lawn? It's stood  
since his brother Bo died in the river  
on the loop home from Viki's Bar  
and Bait seven years ago. Brad sold

his Thunderbird with t-tops to pay  
eight thousand bucks to a bronze artist  
in Toledo. A nine foot slab  
poured on his trailer's front lawn

anchors the beast to earth. After the neighbors  
crowbarred-up the back legs, Brad looped  
an old boat chain over its back  
and welded it to the trailer. For Christmas

he sticks a red hat on the head. The lion's wild  
mane catches the snow, and people drive down  
the dead end to see the Santa Lion  
in the trailer court. Brad sits on his stoop

with an empty shotgun and a twelve pack  
waiting for a fight. When the snow falls off  
the lion's beard and the cars don't come,  
the roaring begins and lasts deep into the night.

## JANUARY—DRY RUN CREEK

Every year Dry Run Creek  
is fed by January thaw.

Every year a boy falls  
through the ice,  
struggles for air,  
too cold for words.

Every year they try  
to revive him.

You could line up all the mothers  
on the bank, shoulder to shoulder.

With one breath  
you could make them fall  
like dominoes.

## TO BUILD UTOPIA

we can't forget what we're pretending. That mud vein we call "river" is a creeping army of gum wrappers; the Jordan's brown swell never licked at a prophet's thighs. At 16 my eyes opened: we canoe through willow shade, hear a keen of mourning, paddle around a bend & there's the mourner: Ford Ranger pinned by the merciless silt of Jordan, horn bleating forever, the monkey driver missing, a carpet of beheaded thistle reenacting the crash.

“THE MORMONS ARE THE ONLY UTOPIA  
THAT EVER WORKED.”

—*Peter Drucker, Deseret News, January 13, 2010*

On a pew in 1983 I believed this, but now the imagined bonnets are slow to smile. Years converted me from organ strains into sympathy for wife number seven who stares over cracked wheat, eyes full of Goshute wilderness.

She rides West, expecting snowmelt to bleach Temple clothes—but the chill only taunts. Bites down to bone with its questions.

Yet Seven lasts the interrogation, & spring water calls the woman upward, to uncorseted yellow pine, where she gulps down the crystal syllable of “No.”

Once inside her, the sound rips Masonic stitching from her underwear. Gold-plated dreams fall through the holes.

## I DESCENDED FROM UTOPIANS

early on I knew this, swinging my knobby legs on a blond pew, eating Cheerios as my mother sang about pioneers. At five years old the details were organ chords bouncing off cinder-block chapel walls. Our ancestors fled barefoot from torches. Bespectacled men didn't like them. They walked here, to an inland salt sea. They wizened on a diet of biscuits. They sawed granite from the Earth's spine & built temples. Streets were double wide; bonnets grinned at top hats; each was baptized in beet sugar. And then, an hourglass cracked. Streets ran black as sackcloth & Gentiles came like hail, punching the desert until utopia sank.

## HEAT STROKE: A DISSENT

*“A cattle farmer lost 600 head  
in a matter of days due to the heat.”*

*Keloland, 7/20/11*

*“Death is the mother of beauty.”*

*Wallace Stevens, “Sunday Morning”*

The first delirious one to go leaned only against the fence, penned as he was with a thousand other fatted cattle at market weight. He stopped the fight, resigned himself to the intoxicating heat, pressed into the corral rail, refused to move. All around him, others strained to breathe. Necks stretched up and out, they panted open-mouthed like dogs until even their lolling tongues dried. The second to go was at the water trough trying to cool his insides, which slowly cooked—heart, lungs, everything a slow shutting down. He was past panic, no surprise left in his closing eyes. Even after we called the neighbors for water, more water, and the volunteer fire department came to mist the dying herd, cattle kept falling. They died all day long until even the sun grew tired of watching. Over 600 fell in all until there was nothing to do but begin to dig the holes, six-feet deep over a six-acre plot. We will bury them in the morning, while the dew is still on the grass and as the sky opens its slitted eyes so we can see to lift them with skid loaders. We will pierce them first, so they don't explode, and bury them the way they died, one at a time.

## SKY DRUM

Miles from the tornado, light descends  
in pellets, baby marbles, broken drifts, racket

all evening into night. Onto roof railings, under  
skidding pots, through spruce into lilac, over bark

mulch, looping and brandishing its weight straight  
down, water hurls porch chairs. Around the cupola

and clay sundial, onto barn siding, into window  
wells rain slathers, spits, hits as if only a thing this

roiling and impermanent could speak. Six hours  
into it, hail chomps the doorstep, pulverizes glass. Glad

the cat's inside, scaffolding intact. Half mile away, a coal  
train pauses and a torrent rakes down on that roof too:

persistent, polishing, scouring out its sound. If you  
didn't know a legendary source of rain or hadn't practiced

listening, what could you make of it, here in the lungs  
of this house? Whole sky unwinding—a thousand-thousand

spines giving birth. Then moon moving through, prairie  
grass extended, wild spread of juniper in June.

(TWENTY-NINE)

Earhart awhile  
stain of sun and  
sand

In love with it  
because it's un  
important I pick  
it up and take it  
with me

Family becomes a  
myth for vigilantes  
the radium of  
the striving after

Generous views  
everywhere  
we are somehow  
in a place  
best doesn't  
honor enough

## SEA GATE

When I was seven, I saw a man die  
flat on his back. The ocean fell  
out of his mouth. I told my father;

he didn't believe me. "Emily, one man can't  
swallow a sea." "But Daddy, I saw him.  
If we die, does that mean

we go sailing?" My father was a scallywag  
before he got sick. I can see him  
strong, sunburnt, skirting a reef

with deft hands. But he has died clinically  
seven times. He swims up through the sedatives,  
asks us to repeat where he is,

what has happened. Bags of saline dangle  
above the bed, a storm tears into trees  
beyond the window. My father, fallen

asleep with his mouth open. I cannot look:  
his parted teeth a gate left unlocked.  
I am still convinced: when we die,

it is liquid. Cannot shake the image—  
ocean falling out of a man's mouth.  
I am only a child. When my father dies

people will ask. I will point at the ocean.

## THE TWO OF THEM ARE HARD TO TELL APART

One morning, the man felt his shadow wake up early,  
heard it open the closet and put on the shadows of his clothes.

While he lay there—still, and listening—his shadow  
set the water on for coffee,

then it went outside  
and raked the shadows of leaves into piles.

When it stopped to smoke,  
he smelled the shadow of a cigarette.

And later, as it read the paper,  
he could follow the shadows of the news:

no mention of him and his strange separation . . .  
no stories covering an earthquake or eclipse . . .

if he wanted an answer, the man was on his own.  
And so he observed, he followed after,

he shadowed his shadow through winter into spring,  
watched it planting some hyacinth beans,

watched it rigging a trellis of shadows to his fence.  
Like maybe those vines would make a difference.

Like someone might see him near his shadow  
and know which one was which.

## A LESSON EVERY SHIPWRECK LEARNS TOO LATE

Boats don't know they're boats.  
That's why they can float on the water.

If they knew their anchors weren't house keys,  
knew the waves weren't their own steady heartbeats . . .

if they knew their sails were only sails  
and not them breathing out and in . . .

they'd nosedive down, plunge  
suddenly as pocket change

somebody dropped. They'd lie there broken  
on the living room floor.

Years from now you could visit them,  
put on a wetsuit and air tank,

explore among fish and the coral kaleidoscopes,  
the here-and-gone shadows of sharks,

but what do you think you'd find?

That sunken trawler was no treasure boat.  
That passenger ferry was a passenger ferry.

Even you, my sloop, you're ordinary:  
sailing along toward your no less ordinary loss.

## HUMILIATION

'Desire is embarrassing,' the teacher assures,  
'we are afraid to want out loud.'

\*

I was thinking about the gas station when they said 'nice ass' 'honey' 'baby' 'hi'  
and I rolled my eyes and got angry and text messaged John with 'what the  
fuck is the problem out here today I miss home take me home' 'but we are home'

\*

I hide my pills in my wallet. John doesn't want to look. We are made this way.

\*

There are questions everyone in this room is afraid to ask. Often,  
I find myself scratching the inside of my arm when I get uncomfortable.  
Or my neck. Red isn't the color of love anymore.

\*

When will the rain come again? How will it leave us?

## ADULT CHILDREN

Yes, I feel sick about the wasp  
trapped between the window and the screen,  
the quiet of worry against the pane, my Dad saying  
*you aren't very social, are you?*  
after a night out, its legs straight up, wings  
like a snow angel's in the middle of summer.

BEHIND THE ARTIFICIAL NIGHT OF HIS CURTAIN,  
GHOST IS ASSAULTED BY A SINGLE FLY

Persistent harbinger, black and certain,  
stinging kisses on ankles, wings caressing  
backs of hands. It rises, rapturous, lands again  
upon the meat on your bones. Quick speck  
on white wall, gone before your stumbling slap.

No choice but surrender—to the gloom  
of the bed you made, the vow buzzed in the ear:  
*In a land of light, Ghost, you arrived seeking  
darkness. I am your last lover, come to share  
this journey and this end. I will never leave you.*

## FOLLOWING A VISITATION BY DEATH AND THE VIRGIN, GHOST DREAMS OF HIS DOGS

They arrive together. His hooded robe  
so luminously black the room glows. Tissue  
of her skin and mournful lake of eyes.  
His face, shadow creased in fiery shadow.  
Ghost: *Reveal the mask of the departed. Is it mine?  
Or one I loved or despised? What could have  
been different?* The benediction of His hand  
resolves nothing. You are nailed in place,  
unmoving, and her single nod, too, fails you.  
You're afraid, Ghost, afraid as you've ever been.

And then you're home, home a single night  
between partings, slipped in the kitchen, gifts  
on the table, words of love in your hand.  
This brief return, bittersweet already,  
startles you. Just as it does the first beast  
who scents his master, yelps, leaps. Then another,  
and a third, all roar and teeth now, tongue  
and claw and glorious, golden fur,  
a blaze of fur and fury and human laughter.  
A man, a living man, amazed and laughing.

Ghost with eyes open, hair matted, skin hot.  
You feel sweat on your back, behind your legs,  
crawling under your body. A dark jacket  
on a hook where He stood, a faded  
shawl slack beside. Those fine, sweet animals,  
so fair, so faithful. Were they real? Were you?  
They would run howling from you now, Monster.

GHOST DREAMS OF THE LAST TIME  
HE HELD HIS FATHER

Insult to sad injury—it didn't happen,  
not in that wretched place, no unseen fall  
to stones and his defeated body shaking,  
the senseless lips, musk of sweat and fear,

not that. Sufficient, Ghost would think,  
to carry horror of the memory without  
horror of the dream. A bonus of  
night's bounty. Admire your blistered hands,

flesh red and cratered from failed arguments  
with fire. Note relentless morning arrived  
and white sun risen, gradated blue of sky,  
caravan of cloud, late-bloomed lavender

bowed in trite perfume. Note evidence  
of damp collar on damp neck. Now bend  
to that orb, ascended flame, make it burn  
all loss away—real, invoked, evaded. Walk.

## ALL OUR HITS ARE ACCIDENTS

The dead are dead—  
we can do whatever we want.  
At no station on earth do they stand  
and wait. Have we crammed this barren land  
to spite them? They might not recognize what they'd return to haunt,  
they've missed so much.  
Someone said they liked the color red  
so we painted the station, the trains, the casually panicking bus.

## IN ANOTHER CITY

You try to tell me this dream left fingerprints on the cold bottle in your hand, barely standing. Barfly with its other bright edges, sing me a gnarled rag, a piece of paper that says, come home to become a bell. We could be orphaned, we could be like factory smoke in the sky spread over the eastern city, full of grandfather stories and flowering sunflower fields. How less the light pouring through the window at the bus station, the girl syringe thin whose face was a portrait or my own reflection? Someone I knew from long ago. Do not assume there is a light-switch inside a wound that when you flick on reveals the parking lots behind the tracks, and the abandoned warehouses and the stolen mattresses, the floor littered with re-used needles. What wrist is tight there, wanting to undo the tourniquet around your own life but you cannot even find your hands, laying face up in your lap. I want to ask you is there another life inside this life no matter, the tattered one “you fold and unfold and refold like a map.” The worn creases nearly torn even when you don’t look, it is still there, the path backwards to the empty rooms, as if I was a stranger, all brazen even to myself. I hear things. That there is a book somewhere with copies of your face. Smudged fingertips. Someone is typing your name. Behind locked doors that should have been terminal.

## MY MOTHER TELLS ME I WAS CONCEIVED IN FIRE BEFORE I WAS CONDEMNED BY IT

I was admiring the trimmings in O.L. Keenes,  
the lace, the ostrich feathers in pale colors. Was it  
the steam whistle I noticed first, grey clouds  
rolling up from the ground? I don't remember.  
The city was imperiled. From the doorway, I saw  
flames in the northwest moving at a gallop.  
It was terrifying. Bay Street filled with people  
heading east, I joined them, passing families laden  
with mirrors, dishes, children leading dogs on strings,  
carrying bird cages, so many horses and drays loaded  
down with trunks, me holding only a pale pink feather,  
worrying how I'd pay for it now.

At Monroe Street,  
unable to help myself, I turned around to face the blazing  
pursuer. Angels of oblivion pummeled toward me  
on billowing, black smoke, like an engraving by Dore'—  
this nightmare rendered so precisely.  
Isn't it magnificent? I said to a man nearby. His eyes  
considered me. They were oddly green, like verdigris  
and heavy-lidded.

Sparks landed like confetti, but long I was willing  
to stay there and watch this parade of danger so close  
he brushed it from my hair and I brushed it from his sleeve,  
before he clutched my hand, pulled me with the others  
past Hemming Plaza, into the Windsor Hotel crowded  
with the displaced, belongings stacked everywhere,  
then down a corridor into a room.  
Even when the door clicked shut, I thought of him  
as protector while wondering who would save me now.

Ostrich feather gripped in my hand, I did all he told me to do.  
Why I never let it go. Why I never fought at all, but laid there  
long after he left until smoke filled the room clearing my head  
and I fled with hundreds of other bodies, empty-handed  
out of that hotel, each of us racing in the direction that felt right.

Toward the river I ran. Across it was this house, untouched  
and I wondered if William was imagining me dead.  
At the dock I turned around one last time,  
and this is what I know of Hell:

The Windsor had become a furnace, radiating heat far and wide,  
the flame of its burning ascending towards Heaven, groaning  
with a thunderous voice in its agony. The steamer pulled  
away and a dead moccasin floated by. Another then another  
and another and another. What to make of it, I didn't know.  
As though it was a sign that evil had been vanquished.  
But it hadn't been. It burned inside and half the sky was on fire  
and what trees remained in the distance looked like skeletons  
and everyone on the boat was cast in the strangest yellow light,  
like none I'd ever seen, altering features until any one  
of the passengers could have been him.

Still riding the billows of smoke like clouds,  
the angel of oblivion appeared to me and in my own bed  
that night. Awake or dreaming, it was a true vision all the same.  
I was with child and this one would live. She smirked at me  
and the clock read 11:00 exactly and your father's face  
(*your father's face?*) was bathed in that same yellow glow  
and it was more than I could bear. I turned from him  
and pressed my hand to where it hurt and was horrified grateful.  
Looking at you now, I'm horrified grateful.

At church, in a park, on the trolley,  
when I see men that resemble my memory of him—  
a grey serge suit, drowsy-lidded eyes, a cleft chin,  
to this day I want to ask: *Were you that stranger?*  
*Were you that stranger? Please, tell me your name.*

## REFRAIN

We stood about in our nightclothes, ghosts at a bonfire,  
house disappearing and reappearing in the flames,  
like a demon's magic trick, the firemen, unwitting assistants.  
The rest of us stared wide-eyed at the destruction, useless  
and worse, some saying what shouldn't have been said at all.  
It hardly seemed time for an accounting of who had perished  
and who had lived. *Dr. Moore is in Atlanta, I heard...Praise God,*

*Dulcie seems unhurt... the twins, I hope, were first overcome by smoke,  
sweet angels... Henry lost an eye trying to save them... was blown clear  
from the second floor window...poor, dear Mrs. Moore, undone for weeks  
over talk that's going around. There was nowhere for me to hide  
and to have thrown myself into the fire would not have satisfied  
anyone, but only cheated them of something more abiding.  
Mrs. Dunn, her face turning mulish in the haze, said, Well,*

*I wouldn't be surprised in the least if Mrs. Moore did it to punish him.  
A shadow added behind her, That one there, she may not have lit the match,  
but she sure provided the fuel. And in a breath, those words became the truth,  
spread from one cluster of folks to another. Father nudged me towards  
mother who'd already begun the walk home. Is it true? Did I do all of this?  
Dear Henry, the right side of his face burned, empty. Dulcie, arms  
outstretched, untouchable as an angel in her impossibly white*

nightgown, wailing for her dead. *I'm sorry,* I said, but it was lost in her  
sorrow, the fire's roar, the ground beneath me shaking with the Devil's  
laughter. The neighbors who cooed over me as a baby, fretted  
my measles and scarlet fever, now turned their backs as I faltered  
past them towards home. But I know them well. Too soon they'll forget  
this gutting loss, the Moores recalled with only a tsk-tsk, and a shake  
of heads. But they'll remember me, incendiary girl, desire's wayward

spark and make of me an example for their sons and daughters.  
Tragedy will fade as palmettos stem through the ashes and pine  
seedlings begin their journey upwards and dogwoods take shelter  
beneath the oaks and warblers fill the trees with song, but they'll be  
left with their own song, one they'll hand down like china:  
*Though she didn't light the match, Willie was the fuel.*  
That clever refrain outliving us all.

PHOTOPLAY BRAINS AND BEAUTY CONTEST  
PHOTOGRAPH

I painted my lips a vigorous red and discomfort dripped off him  
like crude turpentine, pungent and pale yellow. Because my mother  
would not approve, we stole there in secret, my father and I,  
early one Saturday to the cramped space of his projection booth  
before the first matinee. Light bounced off the tin walls  
from the projector's lamp fierce as my will to win. His Sanderson  
fixed on the tripod, me pert on a stool, dark hair in waves tumbling  
past my shoulders. He stroked his hair, fiddled with the camera,  
told me to reposition, to look away from the lens. Instead I looked  
at him. *Treat me like an object*, I said, not unkindly. He shook his head,  
then nodded. So much had come to bear on this moment, on this  
contraption of metal, wood and glass, the whole town willing  
me gone for good. I make folks restless with a sideways  
glance, a lift of chin, so this language of expression  
is something I believe in, and needing more than luck,  
I ignored my father and stared into the perfect eye, casting  
thoughts like spells into the little magic box: *Olive's shoulder*,  
*Theda's smolder*, *Gish's sweetness*, *Griffith's weakness*,  
little incantations until the room began to topple, the smell  
of silver so strong my mouth burned with the taste of it  
and my heart burned with the taste of it as I offered everything  
I knew to this eye that would know what to make of me.  
*Mabel's smile*, *Norma's style*, *Mae's pout*, *Pickford's clout*. My image seared  
through the lens, through the film, forged a hole to another  
place, forged a tunnel until I could find my way clear and the world  
I left behind would fit in the palm of my hand.

## WOODLAWN

*Over and beyond our memories, the house we were born in is  
physically inscribed in us. —G. Bachelard*

Using a system of metallic sliding walls,  
the architect transforms his tiny apartment  
into twenty-four different rooms. A slide here,  
tug there: and a dining room emerges  
or a generously applanced kitchen,  
even a soaker bathtub which can double,  
with another pull, as a bed. *The house,*  
he explains, *moves for me. I am always here.*

As you were always there. In that house,  
where you counted every window  
across its twenty-four rooms. Then wrote:  
1-8-2, thick, clumsy-looking, on a lined page  
in your pink lock & key diary. Faucets:  
twenty-three, cold; nineteen, hot. Steps,  
eighty-one; keyholes, forty-five. Later  
counting the bricks: sixty thousand  
enclosing you daily. Settling into every pore  
of skin, even the whites of your eyes;  
molecular logic teaching you to be small.

As if every floor were a thin pane of glass,  
on which no feet were meant to walk. The fear  
you had of falling: into the river that formed  
in your yard after a heavy night of rain; into  
the soft, leaky ice that barely covered  
the fields where you skated; into  
the house that, even then, you knew....

Arranging plastic sofas and chairs—  
little yellow beds with over-glued sheets  
and round, rigid pillows—you held  
compliant dolls in your hands. Played out  
their miniature lives against your own. Your face,  
learned and practiced for the coming  
ever after: the sound of a husband, entering.

In your dreams, you threw buckets of yellow paint  
against the walls, creating a bevy of suns,  
wild rays burned off by the carillon of bells  
from the University that surrounded you,  
riveting your attention on the ancient minds  
of ancient men. Everything you could not do  
awake, you did in your dreams. Moving,  
for years, through the many rooms. Until  
you caught yourself counting the transoms—  
thirteen angled panes of glass—  
letting light and air quietly escape.

### EF3

From pane to pane, the broken window swells  
with a shelf of wall clouds the color of sage.

Wind slaps shut every open door in the house  
like a revenant palm, my father naming

each bone in its inhuman hand as it whirls  
a stack of sheet music—concertos

of Rachmaninoff— from the piano's mahogany lid.  
In the parlor, a gust clips mother's mason jar

of button blanks punched from mussel shells,  
scatters them to the floor like hail stones.

Outside, the silver maples' leaves twist on the tips  
of their branches, a thousand green blades

the frame of a canoe, sky pulling a single oar  
in circles. There are no straight lines in nature:

the cursive trench the tip of funnel cloud scratched  
into our land, how after, shoulder to shoulder,

my father and I traced its path for a mile, followed  
each arc and curve of its gradual loops.

Tomorrow, we'll lug a stone boat to the timberline,  
pile fallen limbs of hundred year old maples

into fascine and drag their weight to the burn  
pile, watch a century of black smoke eddy.

## LEAVING THE CITY

All the talk that night turned round  
at the halfway point from wound

to religion, detoured south  
past the cab stand, past all doubt

idling for a fare, to mouths  
outracing this steel, that stone,

afraid of their oxygen,  
the clouds gone, the towers pouting.

OF CROW-FLOWERS, NETTLES, DAISIES

Gone, you  
float on the surface  
gathering water.

Dead, she  
floats on the surface—  
Distance is better. So

it didn't happen to me,  
your purple dream in which  
the body—Caesura—to ribbons.

Reprising,  
your mother said: gone.

Somebody's marriage,  
somebody's firstborn, and this  
morning as the sun

shutters snow, somebody's mute  
niece and nephew  
wilt        to pick up purple ribbons.

## SNOW FIGHT

It starts with a few  
white biting sparkles

from a blue sky, words  
he means yet hopes  
she'll think he doesn't.

Her answer is ambiguous.  
Maybe nothing will

stick.

The snow comes thicker  
though the air is above freezing  
and the snowflakes cling the way  
they do in a warm storm.

They both  
could build a snowman and snow woman  
with their cheststouching.  
They could growintoeachother.

But the temperature  
falls.

He makes a joke at her expense,  
then makes it worse by saying  
he was kidding.  
She says, I hate when you do that.  
He says, Do what?  
She says, You know, and dares him to deny it.

By now the ground is covered, and neither  
of them knows where to step.

## INTO THE BLUE

At the edge of a boat dock  
the blue nudes look far down a ladder—

to where it hits surface glass.  
They can see rungs barely

waver as their blue heads peer  
over. Their own eyes

and the stars reflect in dark tide.  
It seems they will be climbing

down into sky, one  
blue nude after another.

It couldn't feel anymore night.  
Seals swim in their black

milky way. Sky ripples  
with the color glaciers create.

One moon bathed, barnacled  
rung at a time, the blue nudes

disappear, past mussels  
in their blue shells,

kelp tangled in mid-air.  
One nude stops at the rim

before arranging herself  
over the side—torso twists,

as hands cling. She looks back.  
It is this leaving that's beginning.

Her hair blows in the wind.

## ABSENCE

Blue nudes hide  
in the wheat fields, all that rolling

green. During the day, occasionally,  
you'll see a body stand waist

deep, or a head lift up from the swaying,  
feathery tops of grain—

they lie down in it and believe  
their secret's kept.

Watch  
from the corner of your eyes—at night,

they come out. They stand  
and see no one

and continue walking  
with their hands palms down,

the young wheat barely  
touching that skin.

The moon is a sliver  
hiding in blackness above them,

the stars falling  
clockwise

as their bare feet turn slightly  
in the same direction until

they remember that north star and perfect ladle  
offering

anyone a sip of universe,  
if they will take it.

## PAINTING TALK

It was what we could do together,  
she and I, masking the edges,  
working our way around the room,  
covering every seam between  
the ceiling and the walls  
to make sure nothing would  
seep under the molding.  
I stood on the ladder to seal  
the top edge and keep the wall color  
from creeping through to the ceiling,  
a precise line to separate the hues  
and even after a year apart,  
we talked only about the rain  
and how to divide the tasks.  
She took the brush to the edges,  
defining the joints where one wall  
met the other and I with the roller,  
covered the open spaces as we spoke  
with our backs to each other  
turning the walls from tan  
to a teal aqua marine, offering  
stories of what had filled the months,  
how it is to live alone,  
sorting days into a life,  
as the evening brought the darkness,  
the faded flat light that makes  
you look again at what you've done.

## ZERO GRAVITY

*Wayne Shorter Quartet, February 11, 2011*

Delivered by Mapquest, by GPS, directed  
by passengers who came here for other shows,  
the guilts and worries we shoulder through the door  
are not absolved, but briefly abandoned  
inside the turns, the calls and response of this music  
that winds and stutters, that refuses to resolve,  
always reminding us that this concert,  
these seats are a pause, not a destination.  
In front of me, a woman leans her head against  
a man's shoulder, then jerks upright,  
quivering at this new exchange: the drums snap  
a cadence, the piano suggests softer weather.  
The bass asks and repeats its single question.  
And we forget protests in the Middle East,  
the rising cost of gasoline, the songs we expected  
to hear in the lifting of one long chord  
Shorter blows, the other three still for a second  
before they start forward like hikers who woke  
to find maps gone, landmarks erased, even stars  
invisible, leaving them nothing but faith  
in the way forward. When the music falls,  
as it will, to silence, the musicians will wave  
from the stage and vanish, leaving us winter,  
the lives waiting outside the door,  
the sky's silent canopy and the stars, whose end  
we will never see, slowly burning visible.

ABSENCE IS SUCH A TRANSPARENT HOUSE  
BY ABY KAUPANG  
(Tebot Bach, 2011)

REVIEWED BY ANDREW DAVID KING

Of all the challenges Aby Kaupang's *Absence Is Such a Transparent House* poses to a reader encountering poetry through narrative goggles, the most vexing might be that of voice: who's speaking, and when? Kaupang's collection dismantles the hegemony of the "I," though not entirely; shards of the first-person shred through the background chorus's panoply. These instances of individual testimony manifest like ghosts—forms that linger long enough to be recognized but are intangible, secondary to the landscape of material things. More specifically, these poems long for the materials of the body: what it's tied to, how it breaks, and what's lost in its dissolution. "Language poetry had as its explicit aim to oppose such 'natural' expressivist speech, such individual voicing and accessible syntax," Marjorie Perloff writes in *Unoriginal Genius*. Kaupang's book is not the sound of any single voice, but the clamor of bones in a box.

And there is music in this bone-clamor, be it the glossolalia of "{tongues}"—"cori cori cori cori kana nai," one line reads—or the fatigued syntax of the "I"-speaker in "what he'd seen | seen through." In a stanza from the latter poem, the logic of the first person is interrogated:

*one set of lips or  
tongue beneath my age  
& I concedes*

"what closes in on me                      concerns me alone" offers another such complication, one page after the provision of the name of the woman whose death, it seems, spurs the book's project:

*this is my deaths I'm anxious for  
but there you are*

In both these excerpts, the "I" is lost—first in a whirlpool of mourning, then in a multitude of second-person possibilities. This isn't Kaupang's *modus operandi*, though, which includes enough conventional "I" sentences to prompt the inference that, despite the grammatical complexity on display, there's a human presence in there somewhere. In "{admittance}," it emerges several times: "I am a girl with a flawed pelt" and "I am the one tonguing in flesh." But why is this

parsing of the “I”-speaker from its linguistic materials important? Because in its attempt to unravel grief *Absence* becomes concerned—no, obsessed—with the self and, as an extension, what makes up the self. Everywhere in these poems the “I”-speaker, whether comprehensible or outside of the realm of intelligibility, seeks to reconcile his or her individual existence not with the fact of loss as much as *in spite of it*: and so ensues the fight for sovereignty.

That many of these poems would deal with the mystical as well as mythical, then, makes perfect sense; the psychic terrain explored is rough, and requires such. Only in the last third of the collection do more telling details about the tragic event that serves as its locus reveal themselves—this is more a symptom of this slow-burning self-investigation than a failure of exposition. But when Kaupang’s Heideggerian speaker voyages into the theological, some of the collection’s best, most rending pieces are produced. In “{Soak},” the self agonizes over its uncertain place in a cosmology that is one part Elizabethan Great Chain of Being to two parts Donato Creti paintings:

*me, a tender haunting in the glass beneath the waves*  
*me, a blessed peacemaker*  
*me, tonguing Chiron for his skiff*  
*me, my own My Heavy—*

The beatitudes, a famed centaur, and surreal proper nouns: each is subjugated to the antecedent, anaphoric “me” that begins the lines. This search for groundedness that starts out with the deceptively clear coordinate of the “I” grows out of anxiety and disintegrates into discord. “Little ‘g’ god grows tired of me,” the speaker confesses before the question of “me” becomes a necessary, chant-like repetition. Religion is the façade, but the materials of language are most of interest to the consciousness behind these pieces. For Socrates, the body was the prison of the soul; this same impulse is on display in poems like “{living tombs},” a four-part opus on the life cycle and the problematic divide between living organism and corpse:

*the body {the body mumbled*  
*lock}*

The poem employs brackets that echo and compartmentalize—much like the titles in this section, all of which are in brackets. Bracketed text is visually segregated from the rest of the field; it is a container, one that holds something, but one that cannot be read as existing in its own reality entirely despite the barrier between areas it represents. In this way, like many other sleights of hand

sleeping in the wrists of these poems, an examination of language-as-body is prompted. Both are vehicles; both appear to hold something, though how much they can hold and whether or not they distort it is up for debate. But do both decay? In the face of mortality, is there any possibility of self-preservation via linguistic embodiment? And what about clarity—can we attain it, or are we doomed to the sarcophagus of what we almost successfully said?

Kaupang's speaker throttles, and is throttled by, these notions of identity that language imposes (or, as the case may be, the ones it holds hostage). But rather than "defeat" these notions by shoehorning them into reductive, clean-cut epiphanies, she gives us the gore and ragged edges. Excluding the book's Prelude and Postlude, it consists of four sections, termed "symphyses." It's fitting that a collection so intently scrutinizing the body as a permutation of language, and vice versa, would label each of its composite parts with the word used to name the fibrocartilaginous fusion between bones. Language, after all, is what holds the artifice together—even if it is artifice, even if it eventually falls. And loss can rattle the rafters: "what is death to me now," the speaker asks in "I hardly remember the days." The book's sense of fatalism gives way to chaos, which in turn gives way to fatalism again, as in "{three angels canting}":

2. *god*      *my brute necessity*  
*is perfectly*  
*nonpresent*

3. *if*  
*god wants me*      *god will*  
*find me*

Models of supernatural ecology are plotted in the collection—corporeality as an extension of ethereality, ethereality as an extension of divinity, which is itself a form of corporeality—though it does take a breather here and there. At points, the speaker recalls being found asleep "in [the deceased's] jade scarf," and that at the funeral "her rings were a transom / her guitar was a transom." There are the quotidian but immovable things—green valleys, anise, maroon bells, hyssop. And then there are aggressive, Zukofsky-esque loops, as with the dizzying "[Adventum]." But Kaupang is at her best when her speaker's associative flywheel doesn't off-kilter the poem with its momentum, when there's visible conflict between her linear and nonlinear inclinations. In "we go to the garden of swords and fire and go," the speaker ponders how small a catalyst could send one into the afterlife:

*even the underworld articulates emergency  
and snarling and poppies startling  
in their sudden orangeness*

*these are sights I could leave for  
accidentally—my driving eye drawn  
to a plosive bank of poppy*

The sonic flora here is dense: the sharpened glee of “snarling” and “startling,” the alliteration of “plosive” and “poppy,” the enjambment of “I could leave for / accidentally”—and all of this faux-tiered by triplets. Relatively short words and earthen sensibilities govern much of this musicality; “what sudden lightening in a torso / what Rorschach of angst song,” she writes in “a woman chooses a bird and buries it.” In “{Ecclesia}” and “{Ecclesia cont...},” among the most well-wrought poems in *Absence*, several call-and-responses are paired, one addressing language (“& this too is semantics”; “syntax is long remembered”) and another time (“god lays such burden on us—eternity”; “such a burden on eternity living with god”). The seances in Kaupang’s throat recall poets ranging from Dickinson to Brigit Pegeen Kelly.

As the book closes, the speaker’s verbal riffing, that angst of which is clear, sets roots down: we’re given more details about the central event, its character (Sue, maybe the woman to whom the book is dedicated), and a scenario (death by car crash). Whether or not Kaupang intended this incorporation of narrative elements to so fully aid the book’s speech, it does so; in light of the second half, the first is made more sensible in that it seems the necessary, aphasic stage preceding any communicable attempt to cope with grief. The book eventually defends its titular hypothesis: though grief is a place to be inhabited, its walls are transparent, constricting but unable to be navigated. The tone of the work might not be overtly optimistic, but the fact that such an experience can be at least partially conveyed is promising for the speaker and for language’s capacities in the midst of loss. “And death i think is no parenthesis,” writes e. e. cummings in his 1926 collection *is 5*. And neither is it a bracket, as *Absence Is Such a Transparent House* uncovers.

*EVERY GREEN WORD*  
BY MARK JACKLEY  
(Finishing Line Press, 2012)

REVIEWED BY CHRISTOPHER LEE MILES

Mark Jackley's concise, free-verse poems keep their aesthetic distance from the reader. They've outlived the vain and youthful need to be heard. Independent of assumptions, they seem sanguine without being slight; learned without being preachy. They are uninterested in whether or not you care for their quality—a quality that distinguishes itself within the field of contemporary poetry by dramatizing, not the rock colliding with the water, but the concentric ripples afterward. But Jackley's brevity excludes neither awe nor dread. These poems employ the images and the fictions they need to reveal the truth. And the truth is whatever guides us through the dark.

*In the end,  
we are villagers.  
There is magic and a wolf.*

*Shuffling,  
She clutches  
her coffee like a torch.*

In this poem, “At the Hospice,” the fairy-tale motif lends the final-line the weight of closure: we hear a heavy oak door click shut. But we were invited in before we left: the speaker includes the readers in the village. The wolf is the woman. And the magic is the transformation of her coffee whose steam, like the light of a torch, is her guide. By her persistence, we witness the woman lift herself from her animal nature into the light of compassion. She projects onto her cup of coffee the need for something to help pull her, or help her pull others, through that final threshold of death. Whether a patient or a worker, she either helps people die or is dying herself. It doesn't matter which. Jackley has mythologized coffee, which is slightly comical—all good myths make us laugh—but valuable and true.

When a poet delivers a comedic and tragic poem in six lines, technique is in charge. Heaney made the distinction between technique and craft in his essay “Feelings into Words.” Craft merely translates thoughts into words, whereas Technique translates feelings into thoughts. The latter is where the best poems in *Every Green Word* dwell: down below, in the hinterland, occasionally bobbing

up above the waters of the unconscious, revealing themselves to be globes of dream-stuff, soft and weighty, buoyantly resting on their true fictions, as in “Kentucky Lush”:

*Bourbon floods the curving  
two-lane of the tongue.*

*The moment stretched like red-wing  
blackbird tules, we are*

*lost again and savor  
every green word.*

Because the metaphor is poetry’s, the reprieve of self-forgetting—as a major function of art—is praised in six cerebral but concrete lines. This poem owes homage to Baudelaire’s ‘Be Drunk.’ And how deft that first couplet: a line of iambic pentameter—its first foot a trochee, its final an anapest—split in two.

On the other hand, the poems that dwell in craft, strangely enough, shoot a straight and sober look at objects, events, or psychological states, without making a high or symbolic leap. They rest on image and tone. Sometimes they try to be technique poems and don’t make the cut. Whether it’s a urinal or a motel room, they ride on a fact of experience, not a genuine deception. Of this batch, the best are love poems, and they rival the poems informed by Technique. Magnifying heartache, pain, and regret, they do not look for agreement or sympathy from the reader. They assert themselves, step off the stage, and let the echo of their words work on you. Not green, but middle-aged, they seize love knowing its wrack and ruin. And yet they remain sweet, smart, and sensitive to their own implications. Their speakers have tasted the hard fact that shows through in a spouse after a few years of marriage, when the fantasy of goodness and beauty is stripped. They do not affirm love from the platform of one who is addicted to that early fog of falling, but the later drought, when daily duties rise and nearly claw one into a machine. But these poems go even further: they know the only thing preventing that final transformation into a robot is companionship tethered by kindness. Without compassion, they say, love fails. The sweetest and funniest of these poems is “Vow.” Like some of the best free-verse poems, it is a list guided by a narrative. A candid poem polished with humor, it is a watermark not only of Jackley’s craft, but also of our culture’s domestic life.

*If you, Kim, take me to be  
your lawfully wedded guy  
and in your loving arms*

*take all my baggage, like  
marriages one and two, the tales  
of wine tossed down and dishes  
flung, of breaking hearts  
at 4 a.m. and lawyers  
and their bill — my god, their bills —  
if you will take my failing  
eyes, weak knees and everything  
that sags, my daughter too,  
her pre-teen sass, the brutal fact  
we'll be pushing sixty  
when she goes to college,  
if you will take my punk rock  
and my scraggly beard,  
placing them alongside  
your Tim McGraw CD's,  
your Alabama Christian  
faith and tidy spice rack,  
your perfect penmanship,  
oh honey, if you will,  
I will do the dishes*

*Every Green Word's* epigraph states this book is for no one in particular. A humble statement. The delight in these poems rests on their wisdom, which is knowledge derived from experience. It's easy, and perhaps fashionable, to toss a fat rock and make a loud splash; but if you come to poetry, not for noise or disrupting splatter, but for reflection in the waters of your mind, then this book is for you.

*NEW AND SELECTED POEMS 1957–2011*  
BY ROBERT SWARD  
(Red Hen Press, 2011)

REVIEWED BY IRIS JAMAHL DUNKLE

Robert Sward begins his *New and Selected Poems* with a disclaimer borrowed from the spiritual figure Ram Dass, “Old age is about harvesting whatever your life’s work has been.” Indeed Sward’s new book presents a harvesting of his long, productive career as a poet. Sward, who is now in his 70s and lives in Santa Cruz, CA, began his writing career in the 1950s. During this career, Sward has written over twenty books of poetry. At its heart, the collection follows a winding path that switches between views of seemingly opposite worlds: the domestic world and the divine, what’s forgotten and what’s remembered, the living and the dead. Walking this path where nothing is held back by imagined boundaries brings the epiphanies, or a sort of dual vision where one world intersects with another and, in doing so, illumines a truth that could not otherwise have been understood.

Throughout the collection Sward writes of the domestic world and its deep connection with the divine. “If God lived on earth...people would knock out all of His windows.” For Sward, the domestic life is simultaneously humorous and filled with epiphany. For example, in this exchange between a poet husband and his wife found in “My Muse,” the poet’s wife updates the idea of what a muse is to a twentieth century woman:

*“Talk about muses,” I sulk,  
“Yeats’ wife was visited in her dreams by angels  
saying, ‘We have come to bring you images  
for your husband’s poetry.’*

*“Yeah? So what?” she says. “It’s out of style.  
I already do too much for you.”*

Sward temporarily lost his memory when he was in a car accident in 1966, and that sense of amnesia haunts the domestic sphere of his poems. In “Mr. Amnesia” the speaker meets a young mother who had gone fishing in Lake Michigan and catches him as if he is a deep dwelling fish. It’s not until the speaker emerges from the deep that he realizes he has been caught and rescued by his own wife and children. This sense of amnesia equally haunts the many intimate, domes-

tic portraits of Sward's children he includes in the collection. In "Hannah," the speaker eats breakfast with "the smallest person in the world" whose "third eye is strawberry jam." The speaker in "Water Breather" describes the seemingly unsurpassable distance he feels from his estranged son as "the hunger." Sward, who lost his mother at age 14, also writes poems that inhabit an emotive realm between the living and the dead. The young boy who loses his mother is filled with grief and anger at a god he had just come to understand, "At 14, I walk out / Looking / For stones / I might hurl into heaven." But the ghost mother, who is summoned through the poems, isn't soothing and comforting. Rather, she is a straightforward atheist and her portraits are weighted in the objects that make up a home such as beauty cream and cigarettes.

*Mother applies Pond's Beauty Cream. Her face glistens.  
Massages her forehead with one hand, holds the other to her heart.  
"What's the point?" she asks, cigarette ablaze,  
mouth tightening.  
When she dies, they bury her not in a shroud, but in pancake make-up and  
best gray dress.*

When the child asks this mother if there is an afterlife, his mother tells him to shape up and "You are my afterlife. / God help us." Sward's poems about the loss of his mother are peppered with troubling wisdom from his father and grandfather as in "A Prayer for My Mother" when his Grandfather tells him "The Angel of Death is made entirely of eyes."

Even though Sward is a poet that wanders between worlds, he is also a poet that is at times grounded in place. "Four Incarnations" presents a biographical epic that examines Sward's beginnings as a poet and the act of poetry as based on a theory of Thoreau's: "While at sea, I began writing poetry as if poems / to paraphrase Thoreau, were secret letters from/ some distant land." In "Ode to Santa Cruz," a poem written for the place where Sward finally moored, he defines the aesthetic of the college beach town in an energetic collage of disparate things:

*A busload of German tourists  
applauding (applaudieren!)  
the sunrise.  
clam chowder, O scrubbed blue light  
melon balls and watermelon shooters,  
arcade, pink neon, roller coaster heart-shaped mirror.*

The vast breadth of poetry included in this collection showcases the wisdom Sward has accumulated over his career as a poet. It is evident that Sward's definition of poetry is as deep and wide as the life he has lived:

*What is poetry? For me it's the restrained music  
of a switchblade knife. It's an amphibious warship  
magically transformed again into a basketball court, and  
then transformed again into a movie theater showing  
a film about the life of Joan of Arc. It is the  
vision of an amnesiac, bleeding from a head injury,  
witnessing the play of sunlight on a redbrick wall.*

Indeed, the winding road offered by *New and Selected Poems 1957–2011* is a fruitful, enlightening journey where we are mesmerized by the sounds and sites of a poet who has examined not only what poetry is, but what it means to live as a poet.

*BUT A STORM IS BLOWING FROM PARADISE*  
BY LILLIAN-YVONNE BERTRAM  
(Red Hen Press, 2012)

REVIEWED BY KATHERINE HOLLANDER

“We will learn / more about the cosmos then apply / that knowledge to the arts,” promises Lillian-Yvonne Bertram in her poem “The New Thing,” succinctly articulating the strategy at work throughout her first book, the deft and confident *But a Storm is Blowing from Paradise*. Many poets these days want to bring the natural sciences to poetry, but Bertram does it with rare finesse and real beauty; instead of clinical mimesis or grotesquery, Bertram delivers what she promises, putting the mysteries of physics and chemistry in service of her own expression of an American reality. And the America she presents is one not only of coyotes, elk, and starlight, not only of cornfields, highways, and 4-H fairs, but also one of racism, misogyny, poverty, and courage.

Bertram is good with language—very good. She is a master of the one-shot, the atmospheric Polaroid of phrase, with lines like, “chuckle-colored barns,” “deer-white light,” “my heart’s blackening egg,” and “the devil in his hide of night.” She deals, too, in the economy of hurt, as in “the *julienne* I make of my thumb and peppers,” “January’s frigid waistcoat / slinging my belly,” or the horrifying epithet, “nigger piglet,” hurled at a young woman on her way home from the late-shift. Perhaps most powerful is when Bertram combines extra-distilled images with the wry tone of her most frequent speaker, the one who can scoff, “Them and their silky vaginas,” who suggests you “uncostume. And I don’t mean / in the swanlike way,” and who muses ruefully on “dark matters of design: those particulates causing all the trouble.” The spare but gorgeous “Circles in the Sky” (“I want to want / to tell you / about dakota”), the tender “Golfing in the Dark with Old Man Heart” (“dirts of the prairie fly from us”), and the title poem (possessed of too many great lines to choose one) are some of the best in a very strong collection.

Sometimes, though, Bertram’s commitment to the pliability of language gets the better of her. Poems like “Behind the Christian Door” (composed only of repeated iterations of the phrase, “And when is the state gonna pay us?”), the overly mathematical “Queen City Fractal,” or “Hinterland Ham Radio Signals,” which includes entire column-inches of “*jettajettajettajetta*,” become self-consciously experimental to a degree that feels like posturing, a hipster-acrobatics that makes Bertram seem more like other (weaker) poets and less

like herself. The diagram that bursts into the otherwise fantastic “The Science of Heart” does more harm than good.

Another snag concerns the title, which borrows a famous phrase from the German-Jewish philosopher Walter Benjamin (1892-1941). Bertram’s book is so deeply rooted in the American West that nothing of Benjamin (or of Paul Klee’s painting, “Angelus Novus,” which inspired the passage) expresses itself in the collection; and though Bertram is vigilant about attributing her wide-ranging allusions, it’s Benjamin who gets the prime spot, despite his absence from the book at large.

Deliberate or not, this move allows Bertram to wink at those of us who know the Benjamin essay, while letting unfamiliar readers attribute all the mystery and pain and magic in that line to Bertram herself, as Steve Davenport does in his blurb for the book (“What’s a storm doing in Paradise . . . And why’s it blowing this way? I blame Bertram”). This is problematic, not least because it participates in the wide-scale appropriation of a man who suffered humiliation and hardship only to become, after his death, a kind of saint of postmodernity. It is acute because one of the things Bertram does is talk about a marginalized, invisible underclass—a status to which Benjamin, who committed suicide in flight from Vichy France, found himself relegated in the Europe of his time.

I raise this complaint in admiration for the book and for Bertram, who seems about to leap into relief as a poetic voice of real national importance. Judging from the Tupelo Press website, where her name appears frequently as a contest finalist, Bertram has at least three more collections nearly ready to release into the world. If she is to become one of our next great American poets, I hope she will extend to her influences the same care, sympathy and precision she has for language itself—the care, sympathy and precision that allows her to confide so beautifully in the collection’s opening poem that “All planets but this one were named after gods.” I look forward to more worlds of her crafting.

## BOOKER T. AND THEM: A BLUES

BY BILL HARRIS

(Wayne State University Press, 2012)

REVIEWED BY PATRICK THOMAS HENRY

With its cover festooned in banners and patriotically bordered in stars and stripes, Bill Harris' *Booker T. & Them: A Blues* promises a manifesto about Booker T. Washington's uncanny knack for working across political factions to redefine race relations. It's no surprise that the collection's cover copy designates it a "bio-poem" about Booker T. Washington (1856-1915) which is akin to claiming that Disneyworld is a monument dedicated to Walt Disney, instead of a celebration of creative minds orbiting Disney's sphere of influence. More accurately, *Booker T. & Them* studies an era, "Booker T. Washington Time. / [ . . . ] from 1881 to 1915," and Booker T.'s position between black activists and the racist, white establishment. To represent this collusion, Bill Harris has melded poetry, blues, historical quotations, and commentary into a lyric social history that should be shelved alongside Howard Zinn and David McCullough. Harris' scrutiny applies not just to Booker T., but also to pugilist Jack Johnson, W.E.B. Du Bois, President Teddy Roosevelt, Mark Twain, Thomas Alva Edison, Jack London, and others. Harris' dramatic personae perform the scope of African American travails and inequality, progressing beyond history à la Zinn, McCullough, and company, who pin social woes to class struggle. Yet despite Booker T.'s efforts and the awareness Harris' lyric history generates, equality remains unattained: "& still," Harris reminds us, "it is a tough time for negroes."

Harris writes that his "interest [ . . . ] is the depiction, in historical and imaginative ways, of several figures, with the emphasis on black males in the process of seeking to be men who mattered in racist America." Harris culls quotes from speeches and writings of the period's powerbrokers, and his play with these textual artifacts performs, like Booker T. himself, a negotiation between the era's racism and African Americans' needs. But Harris strangely tamps down the quotations' gravity with a tendency to hammer in definitions or data in a "Who's Who?" format. In the collection's opening chapter, this technique cudgels Thomas Alva Edison:

*"I never did a day's work in my life. It was all fun." Thomas A for Alva  
Edison (1847-19-  
31) tinkers, & is a man of*

*business. "I find out what the world needs. Then I go ahead and try to invent it."*

The authorial insertion about tinkering and business renders Edison's own utterance redundant, diluting this moment's irony. Harris could have armed himself with Edison's verbal firepower and shot the inventor down with his own artillery. Edison's claim that work is fun and games is anathema to the men and women Booker T. represents. Harris' indexing technique also pares potential away from some provocative moments, such as when a senior at Booker T.'s Tuskegee Institute recollects a visit from William Howard Taft and Andrew Carnegie:

*Remembers:*

*William Howard Taft & Andrew Carnegie  
were 2 who paid Tuskegee a call: Taft (18-  
57-1930), ton-sized future  
President (27th), & stumpy Andrew  
Carnegie (1835-1919),  
with no more schooling than a cat, but is the 2nd  
richest man in the world.*

Harris' imagined Tuskegee student might have judged these men and their attributes' insinuations—instead of blandly recounting Taft's girth or the paradox of Carnegie's lack of education-cum-surfeit of wealth. Harris inters the only hint of judgment in a possible pun. "[S]tumpy Andrew / Carnegie" may refer to more than the steel baron's height. Reading generously into this, the student might view Carnegie as stumping for Taft's Republican values and, ergo, white prejudices.

Harris' indexing technique, as well as many interspersed dictionary-style definitions, are questionable recurring structures in this blues for Booker T., especially when we hear Harris' evocatively jagged line breaks and his riffs of figurative language. The harsh enjambment rollicks this book along, the breaks splintering names, dates, thoughts, and conjectures. Because Harris fragments this data, the poem lulls the reader into a sixteenth-note-sized pause, just enough quiet to reflect on the hatred that whitewashed history conveniently neglects. Harris' enjambment even dismantles Jack London, that celebrated figure of tough realism, and his derision of African American pugilist Jack Johnson. London is a

*Bastard, partially raised by an ex-slave; pseudo-  
socialist son of an off-kilter suicidal*

*mother who channels a Native American  
spirit [ . . . ]*

That “pseudo-” insinuates that London has little time for his own biography, factoids that could challenge his notions of white supremacy. The line break opens the line—and us—for that takeaway, which reverberates into the following line: London’s a bad socialist, from unstable stock. Harris salvages this bit from the annals of petty, campaign advert character attacks by, naturally, summoning London’s writing on white supremacy:

*“[ . . . ] there is a certain  
integrity, a sternness of conscience, a  
melancholy responsibility of life,  
a sympathy and comradeship and warm human feel,  
which is ours, indubitably ours . . .”*

Harris’ London has cast his intellectual rod to fish for the right abstraction, but to no avail: the enjambment has shaken any belief a reader might have placed in London’s integrity. (Besides, Jack Johnson knocked out London’s “Great White Hope” prizefighter, Tommy Burns.)

Yet, it is Harris’ figurative language that offers the most scathing assessment of Booker T’s epoch, as his diction creates historical, mythological, and cultural allusions. Repeated references to faces rewind us to the Roman Janus, the two-faced deity who gazes into the past and the future simultaneously. Harris hints at this in Booker T’s initial meeting with Teddy Roosevelt, when the prior is “[s]howing his full face duplicity”—an impossible feat, since Booker T’s middleman status (as a moderate and as a former slave) forces him to gaze toward an equal future yet backward toward slavery. Even the student at Tuskegee (who was strangely maladroit at criticizing Taft and Carnegie) recognizes how these dual facets bind Booker T:

*the different faces Washington dons for each [white guest]  
[ . . . ]  
What face would our principal wear if Champion Jack [Johnson]  
came?—not that he’d be invited, not that he’d accept.*

Booker T’s faces weaken his sway with such figures as the student, Jack Johnson or W.E.B. Du Bois, because they recognize putting on the most appeasing visage as a political tactic and a weakness. This one-faced versus two-faced distinction transforms into symbolic shorthand for one-faced ideological stalwarts (both

for good and for ill) and those Janus-faced men, like Booker T., muddled between incompatible visions for humanity.

Fortunately, the repeating images don't receive the same blunderbuss as the indexing gimmick, as Harris dispatches deft similes and metaphors to telegraph the underlying themes of racial tension. For instance, Booker T., en route to Tuskegee, deems a stifling steam locomotive "suffocating as the mine," the simile a reminder of blacks' weary and often-calamitous physical labor. Likewise, in an interlude set during a Macon County, Alabama, lynching, the victim surveys the crowd from the gallows and sees "[s]moke, a curtain, thick as ginned cotton." This "ginned cotton" simile summons Eli Whitney's cotton gin, an invention that accelerated King Cotton but subjected slaves to the caprice of white taskmasters; the lynch mob is the ruthless shadow of those cruel overseers and plantation life. We can detect a tiered symbolism, if we connect Whitney's timesaving device to Edison's claim about work equaling fun: racist whites see no evil, because only blacks suffer the fatal consequences. After hanging this nameless black man, the mob gathers its weapons and its "[c]hained hounds, panting" a subtle metaphor for racism's perpetuation of cruelty. Here, even Booker T. is told to "[l]ay low."

The figurative language inoculates us against any chance of missing Harris' point: "& still it was a tough time for negroes." Yet, Harris yearns for *Booker T. and Them* to stand as an object lesson, a scholarly yet lyrical challenge to blanched History Channel-grade accounts of turn-of-the-century America. So, concluding this collection, Harris has compiled a few "After Words," including W.E.B. Du Bois's lament in "Black Reconstruction in America": "One is astonished in the study of history at the recurrence of the idea that evil must be forgotten, distorted, skimmed over. [. . .] The difficulty [. . .] with this philosophy is that history loses its value as an incentive and example." These "After Words"—the book's last pages—are rather late-game announcements of *Booker T. & Them's* mission, but we receive the book's *raison d'être*: if we remain ignorant of historical evils and human rights violations, the powers that be shall perpetuate those atrocities. Bill Harris' lyric social history reminds us that history, freed from sanitizing re-writes, can offer a liberating education in principles and perspectives.

- Paul Legault, *The Other Poems*, 2011, FENCE Books
- Melissa Buckheit, *Noctilucent*, 2012, Shearsman Books
- Francine J. Harris, *Allegiance*, 2012, Wayne State University Press
- Allison Adele Hedge Coke (editor), *Sing: Poetry from the Indigenous Americas*, 2012, University of Arizona Press
- Hadara Bar-Nadav, *The Frame Called Ruin*, 2012, Western Michigan University Press
- CJ Evans, *A Penance*, 2012, Western Michigan University Press
- Peter Covino, *The Right Place to Jump*, 2012, Western Michigan University Press

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LISA AMPLEMAN is the author of *I've Been Collecting This to Tell You*, (Kent State University Press, Spring 2012), winner of the 2010 Wick Chapbook competition. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in journals including *Cave Wall*; *Court Green*; *Forklift, Ohio*; *Massachusetts Review*; *New Ohio Review*; *New South*; *Notre Dame Review*; and *South Dakota Review*. A Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg poetry prize winner and 2011 Ruth Lilly Poetry Fellowship finalist, Ampleman is a PhD student at the University of Cincinnati.

MATTHEW IVAN BENNETT began writing at 10 when he saw a writer on TV in a comfy green sweater. Through years of commitment Matt earned his own green sweater, and wears it while workshoping plays with Plan-B Theatre and jumping on the mini-tramp serving as his office chair. His poetry has been published with *Kolob Canyon Review*, *Western Humanities Review*, and *Mixer*.

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ROB CARNEY is the author of three collections—*Story Problems* (Somondoco, 2011); *Weather Report* (Somondoco, 2006); and *Boasts, Toasts, and Ghosts*, winner of the 2002 Pinyon Press National Poetry Book Contest—and two chapbooks, *New Fables, Old Songs*, winner of the 2002 Dream Horse Press National Chapbook Competition, and *This Is One Sexy Planet*, winner of the Frank Cat Press Poetry Chapbook Award in 2005. *Home Appraisals*, a new chapbook, including several poems that first appeared in *Sugar House Review*, is forthcoming from Plan B Press in fall 2012. He is a Professor of English and Literature at Utah Valley University and lives in Salt Lake City.

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BEN CROMWELL lives in Salt Lake City with his wife, Raven, and son, Ezra. He spends his time writing, pretending to be a puppy to amuse Ezra, and worrying about Climate Chaos. His work has appeared in *Flyway* and *High Desert Journal*. He is the author of two books: *Touch: Making Contact with Climate Change*, and a book of verse entitled *Devotional*.

NICK DEMSKE lives in Racine and works at the Racine Public Library. His self-titled manuscript was selected by Joyelle McSweeney for the 2010 Fence Modern Poets Series Award. Nick was featured in 2011 as one of fifteen emerging poets to watch for by *Poets & Writers* and his book was chosen as one of the 10 Best Books of Poetry in 2010 by a *Believer Magazine* reader survey. This past fall, he completed a month-and-a-half-long book tour that traveled over 10,000 miles across America. Nick also curates the BONK! performance series in Racine. [www.nickipoo.wordpress.com](http://www.nickipoo.wordpress.com)

GARY DOP grew up throughout Germany and the United States, and he now lives with his wife and three daughters in Minneapolis. Dop received a Special Mention in the 2011 Pushcart Prize Anthology, and his poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Prairie Schooner*, *New Letters*, *Agni*, *New York Quarterly*, and *Rattle*, among others.

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SEAN THOMAS DOUGHERTY is the author or editor of 12 books including the forthcoming *All I Ask for Is Longing: New and Selected Poems 1994–2014* (BOA Editions), *Sasha Sings the Laundry on the Line* (2010 BOA Editions) which was a finalist for Binghamton U's literary prize for the best book by a poet over 40. He has worked as a lecturer, in factories, as a security guard, in a bakery, a sawmill, and as a teacher of at-risk youth. He currently works in a pool hall, and teaches creative writing part-time at Cleveland State University.

BARBARA DUFFEY'S recent work includes poetry in the *New Orleans Review*, *Western Humanities Review*, and her chapbook, *The Circus of Forgetting* (dancing girl press), and an essay in *CutBank*. She is an assistant professor of English at Dakota Wesleyan University and lives in Mitchell, SD with her husband, son, cats, and dog.

IRIS JAMAHL DUNKLE'S debut poetry collection, *Gold Passage*, is forthcoming from Trio House Press, 2012. Her chapbook *Inheritance* was published by Finishing Line Press in 2010. Her poetry, creative nonfiction, and scholarly articles have appeared or are forthcoming in numerous publications including: *Poet's Market 2013*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Fence*, *LinQ*, *VOLT*, *The Mom Egg*, and *Sentence*.

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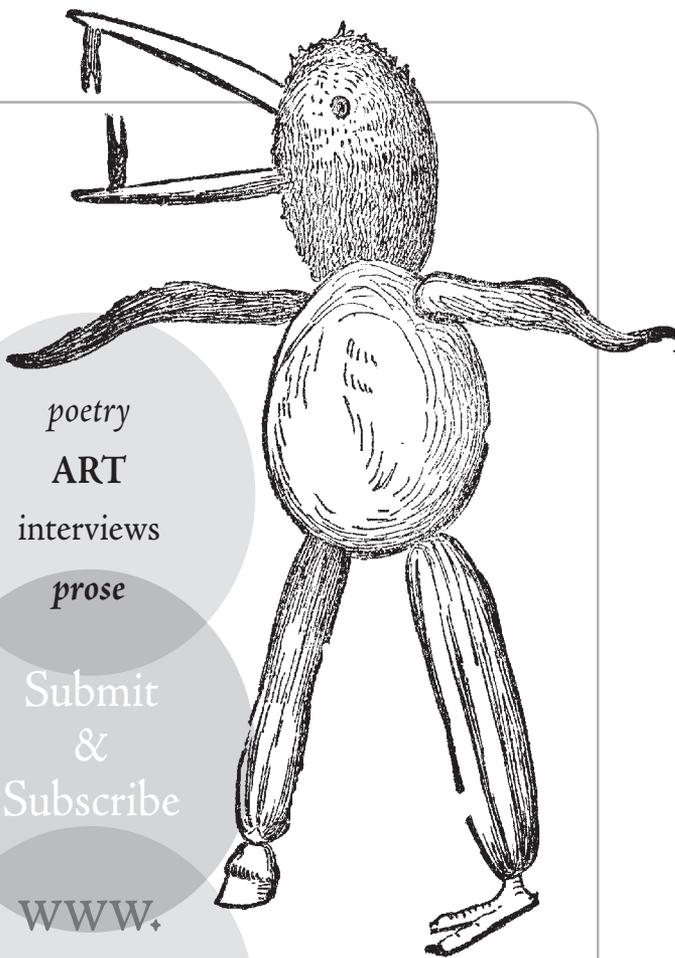
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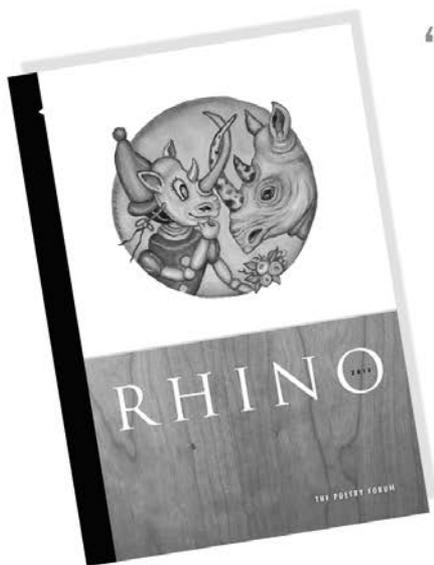
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