SUGAR HOUSE REVIEW

#27

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Sugar House Review

AN INDEPENDENT POETRY MAGAZINE

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HEART ATTACK WEATHER

Splutter of sparrows in the holly.
Silent film shadow of geese on the factory wall.
Cry of the hawk shrieking open
the life and death turnstile.

Murph texts: *Be careful, brother.*
For guys our age, this is
heart attack weather.

Grackles in their oiled black trench coats crowd the grass,
(pecking for news of Weimar Alexanderplatz).
Again, the tanager's anaphora insists, again.
A cadenza of cardinals, rumpus of wrens.
Seasons occur mostly in our heads.

A crescendo of Cagneys, gangland murder of crows.
A pilgrimage or a pox of pigeons, it all depends.
The winter sky honking full of cabbies. Geese again,
a gesundheit of geese.
Stop shoveling for a minute. Just listen.

The strangeness of life is momentarily clear to me;
I wouldn't call it evidence of the soul.
A happenstance of hawks, a goddammit of gulls.
The sky is empty. The air is full.

WHAT IS A WING?

after May Swenson

It is not an arm.
A sister is a nice telephone
made up of two good cans & one good string.
It is not a box.
A box is a discipline,
a wing with all its strings cut off.
A wing cradling a set number of theories & methods.
A discipline is something you may step in but not on.
A discipline is nothing like
the orange cat who lost half his soft tail.

PREHISTORY

When we were very small,
so small our hearts fit inside our mouths,
the world was shaped not like a sphere
but what is held between the palms.

We were all so new, just barely
whole. Some of us still eggshell or husk.
It was a quiet time, empty
yet filling up, the way snow will fill a bowl.

It was colder then and whiter.
We slept with our arms and legs
wrapped around our own bodies
to keep from freezing.

We never danced or moved
quickly. We never sat for whole hours
watching windows. We were tender.
We could have always disappeared.

ELEGY AT THE SOLSTICE

Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge

The fiddler crabs hear me
before I see them, already retreating
to their burrows that fringe the marsh
like the eyelet edging of the sheets
my mom would smooth across my bed.
Even on the longest day of light
I'm having trouble reading. The lines
melt into a solid mass, a rising wall
more and more impossible to scale.
The high noon sun is so harsh
I have highway hypnosis—broken
by a message from the Times, another
headline, another backward, another grief.
My screen is too bright. I'm at the wheel
and my left ear is sunburnt after hours
in transit. I want to wait for the crabs
to creep back, but they deserve their peace.
A few days ago, they found my cousin
on the couch, as if he might have stood up
and then fallen back, a night stirring.
In photos of him I pull from albums, he holds
my baby brother against his hip, that boyish
tenderness. He left two sons who are small,
velvet hair, little golden glasses frames.
The longest day of light and I have followed
a loop to a pond filled with nesting storks.
This is a place meant for everything but us,
and I'm glad for it. I want to be told exactly
where I do and do not belong, to be reminded
of how badly we've behaved. Our ingratitude.
My mother did her transcription work at night.
Sometimes I'd wake from a dream and follow
a golden cord down the hall to her silhouette,
the clatter of her keyboard pausing at her turning
before I ever uttered a word.

CORPSE DODGE NEON

Inside a gorilla suit, you wander a field
at night. You wet the bed. You kiss no one.
That party, says homeroom Jim. *Smooches,*
hot tubs—you slide under the desk.

Your mom sings along to hymns on tape.
The library is the worldliest place in eighth grade.
Destiny is a hot padded wall gymnasium waltz.
In the dark of night, triceps. Pull-ups.

Lord, more than manna feed this corpse.
At youth group, a girl devotions her finger
to your thigh. Cut-offs, no Bible, freckles.
She beckons you to parking lot periphery.

So far, God allows you to live.
You whisper the word aloud: *periphery*.
She leads your bicep behind a big red van.
First neck, then ear, a kiss on the mouth—

this van—how beautiful—is this van,
how majestic its heights, how smooth its surface feels
as you are pressed to it. Never once have you
truly beseeched. Her ride appears—

she's gone. You lay hands on the roof
of a silver Dodge Neon, swaying.
It's Dodge Neon, Dodge Neon, Dodge Neon.
You wonder for the next forty years.

ODE TO THE ANTHEM OF RESCUE

If caution tried to save you, but scared you,
flashing its jaundiced, cold steel smile,
dangling from wires blue-collar boys
hung in the rain on a day in November,
yes, the hair on both your arms shook
like amber waves of grain, and yes,
no one gave a damn from sea to shining sea,
because a four-way stop means nothing darling
if the foot refuses to audition the boot for a
spot at the end of the world. Accidents are
an acquired taste when the world cruises by
like a funeral march and the madness you planted
in the life you adore blooms in varying degrees.
Lucky me. I graduated with honors. Unlucky you,
waiting for the light to give you permission to change.

PASTORAL

Every year the town sings a hysterical song of slaughter and reap. Though you hardly notice due to the remarkably slim distance between the words in the song and the actual smell of it: bounty and decay. Occasionally the river coughs up shadowy men from Manitoba who toss black marbles at our feet as if to see us bigger. The old men who sit outside the hardware store assemble their effigies out of cast-off screws and bolts. The weatherman barks the forecast from a soapbox in the middle of town. The one tavern we have is situated atop a green hill where we bury our dead. Some claim the altitude heightens the sense of intoxication; others swear it affords the best views of the past.

AMERICAN DREAM

god's straight and white
teeth
in a cup
by the bed

SELVES-PORTRAIT

Is that a word

Is that a word

we use
in this house?

Look at yourself

Look at yourself
in the mirror.

And that—that
had better not be
permanent marker.

PACK ANIMALS

The suitcase
she told him
at last to pack

still blocks the hall,
still fascinates the cat.

I GOT BODY HIGH LYING

under a linen duvet
in 2xl waffle shorts
caught up on one side
against my underwear
my dog with a lipoma
melted into my back, the prickled
bruises of my thigh an unsympathetic compress
the new baby suspended between a bolster

I smashed my eyes closed
and a fleck of yesterday's dna settled
into my tear duct, brilliant
in the emptying morning

WHEN THE NEEDLE TURNS RED, WE LIFT OUR EYES TO THE HILLS

I.
My father always looks back when he leaves my room, every
midnight turns me to salt. I am six years old and after,
I go to my mother's sewing room, dissolve myself in the fabric,
wait for her in the dark before sunrise. She lights
the kerosene lamp, but I am never found. Her hands dance
like the whip of piano wires, cut her prayers into each stitch.

II.
My sister is six years old. Every Saturday my father has four
hours of custody. She tells me he uses each one to take her
apart, hands like seamrippers, sharpened and seeking. After,
he gives her stuffed animals already wrapped, bows perfectly tied.
Helps her make cupcakes with three inches of icing, the pantry always
fresh-stocked with Betty Crocker. Shows her the bluebird eggs
in the fir tree, then the chicks, then their attempts to fly.
I prayed seven years for her birth. That is my sin.

III.
For the sixth time tonight, it pierces the skin
but this is not enough to atone. Tomorrow is Saturday
so I draw the blood through the eye, let it run like thread,
sewing sigils, my stitches arteried and pulsing, my hands slick
with prayer around the long embroidery needle my mother
gave me, the metal of it warm, the sun risen at last.

bookcase they call The Library, fiction
crowded on the top shelf, on the middle
dictionaries with whiteout over *Mephistopheles*,
encyclopedias missing X and O on the bottom.
Five years old, finished coloring, she borrows

G and reads about *God*, all-knowing, raised
high in the heavens, and resolves to climb this
index of knowledge until she reaches
just high enough to ask him why Bishop Levi first
kneels, why *Levi, just call me Levi*, why his fingers sting

like dust, why heaven and far away are the same blue, why he
makes the body he says is not hers, is God's, turn cold
nine inches from the Bible in the church nursery
o-
Psalms 46:1 open and cedar-scented, why she only cries

quietly, why every morning she shakes when they
rise to sing the hymns, why she finds herself in
S under *shame*, why it says *similar to guilt*, why
Teacher Sarah leaves her strawberry cupcakes, their
untouched flesh pink like what the encyclopedia calls

vagina, red icing spelling *Jesus loves you*, ask
why the women at the quilting circle whisper young, only
x-
years old, did you hear? know? God she's reached
zeal, can you feel the chill of her body? Answer her.

PROGNOSIS: 10 MONTHS AT MOST TO—

Run my fingers over the three moles
on your left earlobe, close my eyes

so I can read them. Bring you three
hundred and four cups of lemon balm tea, watch

you dance your fingers through the steam.
Listen to you tell me about the man on the train

who sells handkerchiefs hand embroidered
with the alphabet, about the woman at the office

who microwaves fish and cries while she eats it,
about the child in the courtyard every sunset

who asks three riddles before she lets you pass,
about the split in the pocket of your blue coat—

the pennies slipped through and jingling in the lining.
Listen to the wishes they were supposed to become.

HIRAETH

I know nothing of lost empire
but the immortal cavity in my palm—
the springtime song of rattlesnake &
locust—a single piece of straw stuck through
a telephone pole by a corn-tasseled twister
in the prairie shadow of the Sorghum Queen's
silo—sweet scent of milo & hay dust crushed
under hoof by a milk-mouthed
bucket calf. Meticulously combed
crop circles, goat heads & sleigh beds
a jar full of devil's claws braid
my wet hair to sleep.

As If Fire Could Hide Us
by Melanie Rae Thon
(Fiction Collective 2, 2023)

review by Michelle Donahue

Imagine, for a moment, a consciousness that senses all beings. A vibrant presence that whirls from person to bird, from a stone on the forest floor to a deer with her head craned toward the sky to feel the warmth of sun or brisk whisk of rain. Before reading Melanie Rae Thon's *As If Fire Could Hide Us*, I'd thought such a feat impossible, to craft such expansive and multiplicitous perceptions on the page. But journeying through Thon's newest book is to be immersed in the terror and unyielding beauty of the earth and all its very alive presences—wind and water, bird and girl.

As If Fire Could Hide Us creates its expansive consciousness through three thematically entwined movements. The first and longest section, "Orelia, in hiding," follows a twelve-year-old girl who, on impulse, runs away from home and experiences the treacherous wonder that surrounds her. In the second section, "The 7th Man," a prison guard must rehearse for inmate executions and witnesses a particularly prolonged and horrible lethal injection. In the final movement, "The Bodies of Birds," a girl killed by a car crash is resurrected to become many humans as her organs find homes in new bodies. In each section, characters hover on the rough, raw edge between life and death, witness the chilling thrill of living, and inhabit a place of interconnected beings, which is to say the world with all its wondrous tangles.

Just as the narratorial perspective of *As If Fire Could Hide Us* is expansive, so too is the book itself. It is at once multiple sorts of texts; the subtitle describes it as "a love song in three movements," and like a song, Thon engages image and sound to generate meaning beyond mere narrative. Italicized fragments like "white horses break and rise / rise and shatter" and "thought streaks as foam / across the ocean" meander through the pages and offer fleeting moments of sensory impressions. Key moments return again and again like a haunting chorus. The book begins, "I remember birds / or the shadow of birds / hundreds of hearts / trembling through my body," a moment that chronologically likely occurs toward the end of the first section, when Orelia finds herself suffering in a forest, wounded from what might be called an accident. This moment recurs throughout her section, when she "slept or died," when

her "memory now leaks into the earth… now becomes the forest," and so becomes a resonant and haunting refrain.

Some might call *As If Fire Could Hide Us* a novel, and certainly that capacious, heteroglossic genre could contain such a text. Though the work moves beyond narrative, compelling stories lie at its heart—a girl who seeks adventure and finds companionship and violence, parents desperately looking for their missing daughter, a man reckoning with the grim realities of his job and capital punishment, a girl who has died but finds continued life. These are certainly memorable stories.

Others might call the text hybrid or experimental, as it plays with form, mixing lineated, lyric sections with paragraphs, playing with white space and grammar. In "The 7th Man," the only punctuation marks are colons and em dashes, a choice that keeps a reader galloping forward to the piece's grizzly end, "I wasn't hurt—I could crawl—I could stand—left leg weak but I could walk—I could climb—find a stick to support—." There is no time for breath in such utterances, no chance for singular stillness. The punctuation too has an effect that suggests an equality between pieces: "you can't scare me now: I am always afraid"—a suggestion that both statements are equally true, that one can't be frightened, not ever, not now, and also: one is always frightened.

> … journeying through Thon's newest book is to be immersed in the terror and unyielding beauty of the earth and all its very alive presences …

Others might think of the book as long-form poetry given its imagistic leaps through space and perspective, a text more interested in resonances between moments than providing straightforward context. In one instance we are with Orelia: "Here I am: in the fog, in the rain, flowing under the West Seattle Bridge—" and then the next we are swung to where "raccoons run / on the roof / even now / do you hear them," a moment that is not as easily placed chronologically or spatially. The effect is that it feels as if Orelia and the raccoons are together, that because we are given knowledge, awareness of them both, that they exist intertwined, and it doesn't matter where the raccoons run or where Orelia hides, because, yes, even now, we can hear them, girl and raccoon, creating their spectacular sounds. Such is the power of Thon's words, of her chosen structures and echoing voices.

With all this talk of genre, I fear I've fallen into a familiar human trap. A tendency *As If Fire Could Hide Us* resists against—to categorize, to forge separations between entities, to believe such things are meaningful or even real. In a text where a girl becomes a forest, becomes multiple humans in death, distinction isn't very meaningful. For we live in a world of connection, of multiplicity, an ecology of consciousness, of animate and inanimate forces—stone and human, the judicial system and winged bodies. *As If Fire Could Hide Us* is at once all genres, an experiential rumination whose form embodies its spiritual teachings, illuminates what we too often forget—the cosmos of connection in which we exist and the ramifications of this knowledge. For to be a being intertwined with others is to be one existing forever with compassion and empathy, to be an agent whose actions unfurl onto others, for good and for evil. May we remember this as we move through our world, may you, dear reader, cherish this as you live and laugh and vote and make choices. If I haven't convinced you of this essential, ponderous, and wonderful connectivity, Thon's words will. *As If Fire Could Hide Us* is a beautifully singular read; it will change your life—don't miss it.

EVERYTHING IS STRANGER IN THE NE BECAUSE THERE ARE NO MEMORIALS, ONLY NDN NAMES

The marsh islands with their little tufted backs
Someone's home, everywhere is always someone's home
Late sun fills the window of the Amtrak NE
Mouths open in the trees, in the mud
Museum babies trapped in tar pits
When our bones are found it's called
A haunting. Where do the birds go? Who
gets a funeral? Everything is a burial
ground, even the sky
In the old ways, this was someone's back
The constellations bulletholes straight through
his stomach
Blasted with light—
How many NDNs must die here
for anyone to know?
The train babbles on about everything
else. I don't want
to talk about the land so much–
I don't wanna eco-NDN
But the marsh grasses
look like the most loved and lonely
parts of my body
Where do the songs go when it is dark? What names
moved through these trees
The soft
The underbellies of leaves

NOTEBOOK

I have taken to cataloging the kindnesses
that surprise me: When the frogs returned,
small and wriggling across the sand
with a vengeance. My meds, kicking in
on Los Flores Street, where months ago I rear-ended
the smog
of an ex. The thin blanket of rain that fell
and our spooked, hurried steps
as we outran the dark. *Illuminations*
propped up like an altar
by my sister. Radmilla's cheekbones
in the light. Joy will come,
like the frogs,
more often. Maze its way
through the understep
of heavy boots. Let the song play,
again and again. May the needle
wheel & wheel & wheel

THE EMPRESS OF DINNER ROLLS

I cuss gloriously while stuffing this
twenty-fucking-pound bird with fistfuls
of bread and fresh rosemary, crescents of celery.
I take three pumpkin pies from the oven.

My sons pour cider, carve breast meat,
pass soft, yellow butter to me. I'm the empress
of dinner rolls, tall sons, and joyful cursing.
Bulging with potatoes, my husband leans

back in his chair, pinches the last inch
of pie from his plate. My children are all drunk
on gravy. I bow my head. We are so full
together. A sun in my mind radiates to its source,

and it never cools down. I swear to the stars,
my Mother Crown; I'm wearing it now.

CITY BY THE SEA

Like last year,
we check in on Christmas.
Children roam the whole hotel,
parents get drunk in the lobby.

Our room has a view.
The bridge is almost empty.
Too many people
don't have a place they want to go.

I sit by the window until three in the morning.

This is an island.
I used to live here.
The tide is low
and the waves are soft.

TRAFFIC IN HANOVER

None of us know
why we're here.

This is winter
in the middle
of New Hampshire—

most of us believe
in warmer places.

I haven't been sleeping.
Behind the clouds
are clouds.

We sit at the light.
I imagine
I'm an Arctic owl.

I remember this
from California,
seven years later,
suddenly craving home.

We've just walked in
from the pharmacy.
The day is hot.
My head aches.

I've learned love
is most of what matters.

MY COUSIN'S WEDDING

We are close
for not close.

He brings his bride
on stage to dance.

The band plays
Rain King—

I realize he's alive
in some way
I am.

Many of us
are the kind of cousins
who will never speak again.

This night,
there is love.

The air is unmistakable.

Even my father dances.
Even I do.

TECHNICOLOR SONNET

Just to be longing, belong to it,
the color created through prismatic
beams, light, so much light that the denizens
of Oz lost gallons of water from the heat,
lights burning for saturated color,
an ideal, an idea, an id amok
on set, tearing through costumes, yelling
more light, more light, or as Batty says
in *Bladerunner*, more life, I want more life,
I want my reds redder than red, ruby
slippers to take me back to ground zero,
apocalyptic wheat fields, me, naked,
umbilical cord unwrapped from my neck,
a new mythology for me, more life.

FROM "AETHER/OAR": WINTER: XII

[[There is a Great Year, whose winter is a great flood and whose summer is a world conflagration. In these alternating periods the world is now going up in flames, now turning to water.]]

—*Heraclitus,* On Nature

at night, smoke scratches our eyes
like dragonflies mating

the river tidies the shore
as an unemployed father rearranges email folders

to make it through the day
some days the pet shop has more birds than the forest

we live among tailing ridges too clean
to be less than dirty

I want to exchange them at the store
for a golden retriever

FROM "AETHER/OAR": WINTER: XIII

Sunday morning, the landscape's nearly silent
the circus lion growls like thunder

over more distant mountain ranges than before
the manor owner inspects the lime trees in his lower field

every driver sees
but only the widow in the old chicken coop across the road's allowed to visit

the church bells ring long and sudden
saying idle ears sin too easily

better to flood the valley floor with chimes
than let the Devil keep his feet dry

the river groans like three men six feet
under, trying to lift the ground

FROM "AETHER/OAR": WINTER: XIV

the magpies leave gold coins for our eyes
when we lie like sleep on summer blankets

the marsh pines are pack animals
however far apart we plant them

they all lean the same way
often, I dream stories I'm not in

and don't miss me
the wind grows through the briars

FROM "AETHER/OAR": WINTER: XV

crowds flow in ellipses past us
toward the shipyard gift shop

like the stockpiled punctuation marks
of thoughts we never wrote down

the barge's rudder steers better
with its courtyard pedestal and plaque

as if all leisure is labor, nailed to stillness
the captain arranges his books by tidal periods

FROM "AETHER/OAR": WINTER: XVI

the pub ferry runs from one End of the World
to the End of the World across it

the grass is always farther on the other side
the nuclear power plant calls auction prices to the wind

that raises the ships' sails on shore
bidding once, twice, three times

I sit in front of an empty page
writing complaint letters to companies in my head

SHOOTING DOWN THE SNOW

Encino, Los Angeles, California, 1949

The soundless gathering of what seemed like stars
sifting in silence from the darkening sky,
the orange trees bowed down by unexpected,
astonishing weight, the radiance of ripening
fruit against dark leaves and crusted snow.

The laden eucalyptus trees tipping
towards the roof of the neighbor's house.
And the neighbor, coat thrown over his pajamas,
bare feet jammed into Western boots, aiming
his rifle at their hoods of white, firing to kill.

KNIVES AND CALCULUS

Sing of errors, of charts that confuse,
of the fleeting lives of flowers plagued by heat
and unreason, exams not passed because of knives
and calculus, discord so widespread it can't
be called division. More like explosion: dynamite
that alters the surface under which we hide.

The source of the song's anonymous,
rumored to have come from a province
blank on most maps, where cassoulet-
scented air holds notes so moist they blossom,
fade from green to yellow and loiter there,
wither and smolder in August sun
so bright they blister, pistils darker
than the shadows they sprang from.

Sing of old lighters, of the flint that ignites them,
of skin so singed by sun it feels like ash.

APHORISM 7: THE BURNT CHILD SHUNS THE FIRE

I knew what the match would feel like / lighting / when I was very young …

W. S. Merwin, "The Burnt Child"

O merciful Christ here it comes again
the dog-dirt squalor of childhood's
loathing rolling like trash across a sea
of grasses to spin my tawdry into shards
of glass and teeth inside the long cold ruin
that every childhood is where the walls
flicker & the things you don't want to know
still want to know you and won't ever leave
you alone punching the back of your head
shouting *cry you pussy cry* as you cower
in the dry tall grasses and cry you pussy
Jesus how you cry the white sun burning
itself out throwing off sparks struck
from the hard cold edges of creation where
no one suffers and no one whatever
they might tell you grows up and stays
afraid where the fire as you set it is the friend
you keep is the tongue stained with ashes
you might just swallow when they breathe
you back to life is the bellyful of burnt
to keep the child warm as it sleeps
among your scars and shivering ruins.

APHORISM 28: A NOD'S AS GOOD AS A WINK

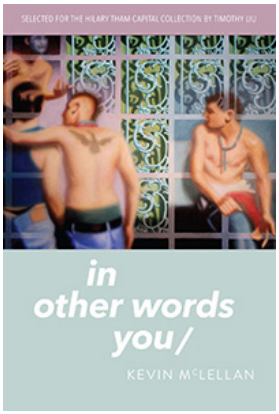
And bats come over and they stall in my hair—and fuck them, I'm not Henry; Henry doesn't have any bats.

Interview with John Berryman, 1968

There's not a thing on this round earth
that we can outrun for long because
nothing is too far away or too small
to find us and though the minds
of all our gods are closed to us we
the children search out their subtle flavors
as though they're insects on the wing
and everything we live is a leathery kind
of hunger keen to strip life to its tender
bones & chiton but though the world
is loud it is not the whole much less
the truth and the truth wherever it is
sometimes opens its one golden eye
just to see how close we are to giving up
its black wings tangled in our hair
its voice pitched too high to hear
singing of bridges and the toothy night
urging us ever closer to some kind
of edge where like our own blind god
we might yet step off and learn to fly.

APHORISM 34: WE USE THE SAME DOOR BUT WE LIVE IN DIFFERENT CELLS

To see yourself completely you must sit
absolutely still until you are reduced to layers
that are so clear-cut that you might at any moment
begin to ribbon like a chain of paper dolls
stretched hand-to-hand across a room
unfolding like a single note rubbed from the brassy
singing bowl of the world's monkey mind
which even as it changes changes only itself
like the void full of abstract and empty that began
all creation in the accident of beginning itself
the one exception to no particular rule that brought
something out of nothing and made the past
into the past like a pocket with a hole in it
for everything we live to dribble through
a fluke that could happen anywhere precisely
because there was no anywhere at the beginning
for it to happen no doors or windows or walls
just the emptiness that Lao Tzu tells us
is the thing that makes a room useful
makes it a place in which it is possible to sit
alone and perfectly still among a bounty of things
and so many blessings of empty.



IN OTHER WORDS YOU/ BY KEVIN MCLELLAN

(The Word Works, 2023)

How would you, *in other words you/*, describe yourself in two sentences or less?
I think a lot about thinking / And what I think about / Myself in relation to men / Music / Travel / Form / Punctuation

Where would you go on your dream vacation?
Where I came out / Arundel / West Sussex / With my new lover

What is your favorite color?
Pink / I am queer / & consequently political

What is your favorite movie?
I can't name just one / *The Broken Tower* / *Mala Noche* / & anything by Derek Jarman & / Pedro Almodóvar

What advice would a therapist give you?
This may take your whole life / & maybe not even then / Forgive your father / Forgive yourself

What is your favorite smell?
Pinyon / But that is another book

Do you collect anything?
CDs/DVDs / possible lovers

What is your favorite snack?
Gummies!

If you could have dinner with anyone, who would it be and why?
James Schuyler / Because of his poetry / Because of their mechanics / Punctuation / Enjambment / Line breaks / & the sentence // & the conventions / Repetition / Dialogue / Polarities / & how these mechanics / & conventions propel language / & consequently the reader / Through each line of his poems

I|I
Katherine Indermaur
(Seneca Review Books, 2022)

How would you, *I|I,* describe yourself in two sentences or less?
I am an exploration of mirrors across time, space, and self. I am unafraid of where this exploration takes us—into language and across form, too.

Where would you go on your dream vacation?
Somewhere very dry and open, like southern Utah (perhaps Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, or Cathedral Valley in Capitol Reef National Park) or northern New Mexico (that magical landscape near Abiquiú that Georgia O'Keeffe loved).

What is your favorite color?
Absolute white, which is in itself a mirror, or otherwise just pure sunlight.

What is your favorite movie?
The Florida Project (2017, directed by Sean Baker) for its quiet but persistent beauty in the face of abject upheaval. Just a stunning piece of cinema!

What advice would a therapist give you?
Probably to not take myself too seriously. And to forgive myself—but to not take the process of forgiveness too seriously, either.

What is your favorite smell?
That smell of candles burning—a mix of smoke and melting wax and hope and memory—like those holding vigil inside an old cathedral.

Do you collect anything, and what do these items mean to you?
I collect rituals. I gather them from friends, loved ones, new places I visit, new people I meet. When I'm surrounded by my rituals, they protect me. They enliven me.

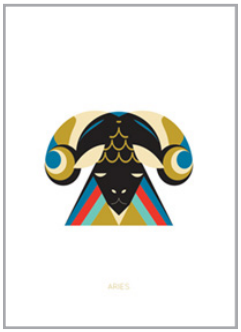
What is your favorite snack?
Any snack with a reflective surface like hard candies, mirror-glazed cakes, soups with glossy broths, waxed apples, or melted cheese.

If you could have dinner with anyone, who would it be and why?
Definitely a visual artist. I would love to meet Frida Kahlo, whose self-portraits painted with the aid of a mirror I am fascinated by. Her art acknowledges the simultaneous fragility and persistence of the body that we are too quick to dismiss with disgust. And maybe some of her glamor would rub off on me!

SUGAR ASTROLOGY

BY SHARI ZOLLINGER
ILLUSTRATIONS BY HOLLI ZOLLINGER

KILL YOUR DARLINGS: A ZODIAC*



ARIES
March 21 to April 19

What if you stay a minute longer,
turn toward hieroglyphic heat; translate
the slow theater of fuel, oxygen, gas?
Quiet elongation of ember.

TAURUS
April 20 to May 20

What if you stay too long?
Clay sculpture readying for foundry,
threshold of the very long pose.
Might you enact a risky yawn?

GEMINI
May 21 to June 21

What if you say nothing,
even when rumor gathers in your throat,
or when the tornado under your tongue
seeks ground?

Cancer

June 22 to July 22

What if you stop looking in the mirror?
Nanao Sakaki says, "to stay young, to save the
world, break the mirror."
Wetland-scattered water calls up a new image.
The place where blue herons nest.

Leo

July 23 to August 22

What if you walk through the city,
not as yourself? Invisible, cloaked—disguised.
Moustached and platinum-mohawked,
how will you survive the day?

Virgo

August 23 to September 23

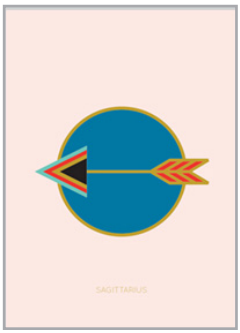
What if you let the dust settle?
Skiff of very fine powder accumulates
in the gutters of rare books.
Resist the temptation to scatter.

Libra
September 24 to October 22

What if you risk asymmetry?
This will mean a new set of plans.
Let the pond ripple.
Look for chaos.

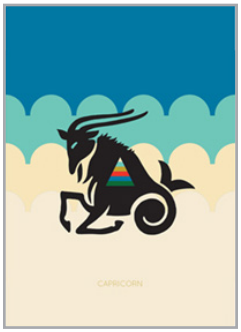
Scorpio
October 23 to November 21

What if you let go of her hand?
Kite-like, she'll fly up,
tiny bowties on string. Tether release.
Emptiness palms a beginning.



Sagittarius
November 22 to December 21

What if you came down
from your fire outlook, from smoke
and elevation? It's time to walk
off the mountain.



Capricorn

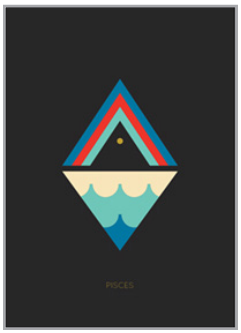
December 22 to January 19

What if you let Time
fall from a cliff face? How will you
measure your minutes going
forward?

Aquarius

January 20 to February 18

What if you consider
coming in from the stars, just for a peek
at what the humans are doing?
This will be research.



Pisces

February 19 to March 20

What if you lie a little longer,
if only to consider the astonishing
dream motif conjured night
after night?

**Note: I use the phrase "kill your darlings" loosely with the idea that with each Zodiac sign comes an expected listing of traits, keywords, and storylines. All expected things can afford to be challenged.*

POEM BEGINNING WITH A LINE BY JAMES GALVIN

A man in his life is a point on a line
but the depth of field varies—
expectation has its own vanishing point

and once followed, the vision
is corrupted. He can dream,
but a reflex shutter can show how
things will look in the end.

The still, a motionless idea
translated
to imagery,
where he can say for once,
his life has been charted,

a moment where intention materializes,
and becomes
something
he can hold— but the film is a grayscale,

all color is rendered
in black and white.
His life will go on like this,
captured in shadow, where,
if light comes in

there is the risk of losing everything—
seeing it all

for what it really is,
or was. He knows there is a dream inside,

processing, bathed in safety red,
that is trying to come true,

to come through. Every body is
a pinpoint in a cloth curtain.

**Italicized line is from the poem "Geometry Is the Mind of God" by James Galvin*

TAKE ME FOR AUTUMNAL WAR CRY

The scythe
You brought to bear
Sighs out
Your sly particulars
The empty field
Is just a space
To reenact your
War crimes
It goes like this—
Antipathies
Coastal elites
A certain brand of cognac:
It's your job.
Connect the dots.
It's easy.
It's applesauce.
It's autumn.
It's Vermont.
I won't tell you that I miss you
Not when I have
These other things

PUSOY DOS

Dom does his best to hold back
his full-mouthed laugh but can't.
Soon, his smile spans Luzon.
Teeth, a horizon of small suns.
He swears to everyone
I have the last of the 2's
& I do, but don't admit it.
He's guessed my hand
three times & I'm bitter.
We sit around a pile
of diamonds, play a pair
of 7's, a full house.
Kara, slumped in front
of a fan, is sunbaked
from chanting. Vinz's wrists
swollen since arrest.
Our joy bites the air.
I'm the last to empty
my hand. I shuffle
& cut the deck.

LIGHTNING RALLY, AFTER THE AUTOPSY

It doesn't take much. 40 of us in the parking lot
of Uwajimaya's, an armful of protest signs fished
out of my trunk, a street or two to march on. Then,
a rally. An autopsy report, a song. Francesca lifts
a megaphone to the sky. Chants. We leave when
we can't stall the police any more than we have.
I remember, most, the altar. The curb of photos,
the flowers picked from Pike Place. I touch a tulip
& think of Elegyn. Jurain. How before his spine
was split open, Chad said he wanted to be planted
not buried. We grow him into a wall of coconut
trees or perhaps, a field of chili peppers the color
of a good sunburn. I don't forget about the coffin.
Its empty mouth. I know who to prepare it for.

REVERSE LIGHTNING RALLY AT THE US EMBASSY

after Matt Rasmussen

The president's face on fire becomes a face
again, unburnt. Smoke rolling skyward

now caves in. Kara unclicks her lighter
& every flame is inhaled into it. We lower

the effigy. Take it apart. Guards uncircle us
running backward into the gates. Their escrima

sticks falling to their sides. We crumple protest
signs & tuck them under our T-shirts. We cross

the highway. Our backs charging into traffic.
Our lifted fists sinking. In the air, our chant

flings back at us. *Imperialismo! Ibagsak!*
Manila Bay spits out sunlight, flattens.

In the news, the Pentagon. Plans to airstrike
Mindanao leap into an official's mouth.

EARLY STORM

Before noon, the sky darkens into augury;
leaves kowtow, meek before a zealot wind.

Morning, still beating, is swallowed
mouse-whole down a snake, but I am not afraid.

I have seen it all before: a gale, biblical as wrath;
the ticking of a pulse turned inside-out,

muffled by the rumble of God or not-God. Palms
are open to interpretation. So hard to hold a fist,

much less shake one, when the clouds press down.
The lungs take ozone as their lot, and when rain falls,

it pelts as fiercely as a plague or a blessing. I will name it
either—and know that neither will come without end.

HOW WE REMEMBER AND WHY WE FORGET

In *Revelations*, Ruben Quesada wrote
something was "like the loose neck
of a goose," and I read "ghost"

for "goose." Of late, I have been haunted
by the living and the dead.
To haunt
is to run loose-necked in memory's periphery.

~~

Section 1.03 of our wills:

If my spouse or I file a dissolution of marriage,
my spouse will be deemed to have died.

I filed. I died. He died.

~~

I text my mom about soup
and autocorrect fills in his name
instead of chicken. A chicken

is like a goose is like a ghost, no?
The moment, after all,
forces the memory.

~~

My neck is no longer loose, tendons & muscle
bear the weight of these concurrent deaths,
harbor the familiar, no, I mean *familial*

ghosts of my father's failures. My neck—
solid, stiff thing—is nothing
like a goose, nothing like a ghost.

~~

I filed.

I died. He died.

This grief no loose-necked limber thing,

punctuated *whereas* *heretofore*

now, therefore

so ordered.

Who am I to mourn?

DOWNTOWN

businessmen have sprouted
umbrellas for heads

striped as flowers
mannequins press white hands

to glass—sidewalks
buckle under the pressure

the buildings' veins
pump reluctant elevators—

I carry around a bit
of this winter inside me

it's carved out in my chest
like a little cave

RECTANGLES

the baby is easier
when he's sleeping

not puking
or interrupting

not finding things to hoist himself onto
climbing the skyscraper

or examining his nails
not resting

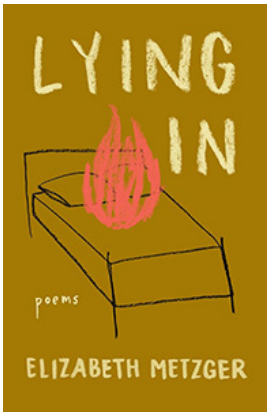
his little rectangles of feet
against your legs

sometimes the phone rings
when the baby's sleeping

you pray it won't wake him up
maybe the call's for him

Lying In
by Elizabeth Metzger
(Milkweed Editions, 2023)

review by Katherine Indermaur



Elizabeth Metzger's second poetry collection shows us what it looks like when new life starts with the threat of death. *Lying In* sparks with vulnerability. It pierces through the rose-colored glasses our culture so often slips over our faces when we talk about motherhood. *Lying In* is an especially important book in the wake of the US Supreme Court's ruling last year that abortion is no longer a right guaranteed for all Americans.

The titular phrase "lying in" refers to several periods of time around childbirth, from physician-ordered bed rest before the birth to the forty-day period after giving birth where, in many indigenous cultures around the world, new mothers are encouraged to recover by staying mostly in bed. As *Lying In* opens, Metzger begins with the former experience. While on bed rest, she writes about her son in utero: "In bed what time has done to me is / what it cannot do / to him." She stays immobile for as much time as her son needs to develop and become ready for the world. The cruel math of parental sacrifice begins. The opening poem moves quickly through labor and birth to milk coming in. In the aftermath, "in some ways I am gone," Metzger writes. The new life—both the baby's and the mother's—subsumes the old.

Perhaps surprising to readers who haven't experienced postpartum mental health challenges, having a baby doesn't guarantee the new parent a reason to stay alive. Those hazy and all-consuming first few months often raise more difficult questions than they answer. In "First Wound Kept Open," Metzger asks:

> *Of everyone I've met*
>
> *on earth I always find*
> *they got here first*
>
> *and will they teach*
> *me their good*

reason for staying?

Yet in "Patient Mentality," the speaker's medicalized body seems built for persistence: "the voluntary nature of staying alive seemed / obvious / against the red ladder of my body."

The pregnant, postpartum, or nursing body are a miraculous site not just of creation, but of constant threat and mystery. There is a black box quality to being pregnant. The womb isn't even that safe or welcoming of a place for new life. In a 2021 episode of the public radio podcast *Radiolab*, reporter Heather Radke described pregnancy as "a cage match" wherein "on one side is the pregnant person, and on the other side is the fetus. And… in the corner, rubbing the shoulders of the fetus, is the placenta." For Metzger's speaker, the memory of that cage match lives on into the new child's healthy life outside the womb. In "Not My Child," she writes, "I wish / I could tell why my body appalls me // even though you have thrived. / Nobody died / but that's just the luck of it." Luck, black box—the illusion of control over one's body is stripped away by pregnancy, and it is never fully restored.

Similarly, parenthood is no great force of certainty—no final, true answer. In Metzger's and my experience, it opens you up to more ambiguity than you knew was possible. "The edges of your death are smudged and round / like ash or a watch / whose accuracy is the least of its worth," she writes in "The Impossibility of Crows." New life colored by death. And whether anyone actually died—death's "accuracy"—is relatively unimportant to these poems' speaker. Instead, this book upholds a different yet deeply honest kind of worth.

… especially important book in the wake of the US Supreme Court's ruling last year …

While reading *Lying In*, I kept thinking about Annie Lowrey's 2022 *Atlantic* essay, "American Motherhood," where she reflects on her two life-threatening pregnancies. In America, "one in five pregnant people experiences a significant complication. And one in 4,000 dies during pregnancy, in childbirth, or shortly after delivering, including one in 1,800 Black mothers," she writes. Lowrey's pregnancies left her "disabled, a word I am still struggling to come to terms with. They put my life at significant risk." In other words, life-threatening and -altering experiences with pregnancy like Lowrey's and Metzger's

are not uncommon in America.

In perhaps my favorite poem of the book, "Mother Nothing," mother speaks to child:

> *You made the water you broke.*
> *You made me sicker than I could stand*
>
> *to live a little longer.*
> *For every night there is another night I've missed.*
>
> *Maybe it is my ambivalence*
> *about being outlasted.*
>
> *Whenever you are in your crib*
> *my life feels final, or like it has never been.*

But this isn't the last word on the subtractive math new motherhood performs on our lives. There is, somehow, abundance. In one of my favorite images of the book, the speaker of the poem "Desire" says to her partner, after putting their children to bed, "What could you possibly do for my body / when I am in two // separate rooms, / breathing?"

GHAZAL FOR FAMILIAR WOMEN

In the way we can spot kinfolk from the back
by their gait, these women unknown to me, backs

facing me, feel related. More than the long sleeves
and bucket hats, it's the eroded downstroke of their backs

that's vernacular, it's what they do not do, even while
their eyes are watching God disrobe and back

away. They hold out their veins, unblinking, while black
bags are hung from their necks like ropes. Back-

aches persist but do not fracture their language in this way.
Comfort is a drained infusion pump, three days a foe. Back

at home, as night falls, a husband holds his wife's hand.
His daughters will rub their mother's unrobed back

and cover it after her body's churning. Her
requested balm: atonal invocations back to back.

Will you embody your name, Dominique? See your mother
plunge into the cold ocean, then turn to float on her back.

COLORS OF A MISCARRIED BROTHER

Color is an hour
in the waiting room.
Cinder block
mint green,

the pebbled texture
fingers follow
between cattle calls
in grade school.

The hospital ceiling
is a peppered tile,
the beige of bodies
no longer living.

The chairs are black.
My brother sits in darkness
behind my mother's eye.

I breathe the ochre
of her kiss, but can't see
through swinging doors
that open into cries.

A silver morgue,
a square door, safe gray,
a draining to the floor,
burnt umber and scarlet.

UNCLE JOHN IN FAMILY MOVIES

I don't love
backlit earlobe hairs,
nicotine teeth,
the gap between
your lips, but oh—

those eyes I meet
on Brownie handheld
film, black and white,
mysterious
shades of male.

In a world that
isn't Kodachrome,
I see blue, or green,
or other colors
on the violet spectrum.

Between paper sheets,
filmed objects
don't inflict pain.
To hold the memory,
I flatten family photos
with an iron—

Uncle John, I need
to penetrate the hand
across my mouth,
swallow hues from eye-
sockets, in my chest,
bring your series
of stills to life.

I was young on your lap.
It's January,
and I forgive myself.

In the cartoon version, the protagonist is left in charge of a baby
who is in some fashion courting disaster. It's accident prone. It's a maniac.
And the little creature's delivered, last second, back safe
like nothing's happened. Perhaps the protagonist, by this time,
is heavily bandaged or smoldering, *Tom & Jerry* version, Daffy Duck
version. In the Chick Avenue version,
I put the dogs out to run, and hear a parent bird going crazy
before I see what's going on. A little bird, not yet able to fly,
is in Daisy's mouth. I do the "make angry face
and shout DROP IT" routine, and Daisy drops it, flopping
and spinning in the grass. I shoo the dogs into the house,
and go to see to the bird. I hate days like this.

I'm trying to be positive about life cycles. My father's in his 90s,
declining. It's God's machinery, but what exactly
am I supposed to do with some flopping, mostly dead thing?
It turns out, though, that the bird isn't dead. A bit of a limp, but otherwise,
looking steady-ish. Except it can't stay in the yard. This
is the dog yard. The parent bird is still going nuts above us.
It's a standoff. And I'm not convinced that evolution has done a good job
with birds. My father called the other night. Actually, I called him,
but halfway through the conversation, he said
the reason he called me
was to find out how things are going, and I didn't correct him.
That's how things are going. The nest is twenty feet up. That's also
how things are going. So the best I can do is usher the bird
to the other side of our fence. I'm helping things along. Here you go,
little bird, on your way. And the thing about cartoons
is that even in cartoons
death intrudes, with bigger and bigger fish,
in sequence, emergent phenomena swallowing each other.
Baby birds don't know these things. Parent birds aren't equipped, so
before I'm even into the house, the little bird is into the road.
Busy road. And then it's a car, just like that. 35 mph. And
the parent bird is no longer carrying on and the day grows quiet.

you get to a place of forgiveness. It's New Year's Eve. The countdown
is on. Skiff of snow over the town. A single engine turbo prop
flies over. I used to fly around in those planes with my dad
and I kind of miss it. The new research is telling us that
you're to write your story twice. Maybe four times would be even better.
Six, infinity. Maybe we'll be able to forgive our chairs
and beds by then. Our flowers and sidewalks. Like poor choices
for side items on a cheap menu. To forgive, one must look
at oneself twice, to go through the photos, forgiving each one,
starting with the frame. The idea is to move on, get to "a place,"
as if one might travel there, this town full of people on a pilgrimage,
a vacation spot, where maybe you end up with a job at a gift shop.
Or else you're having to share the parking lot with all these
out-of-state plates, ducking their epiphanies: "Here we were,
thinking we were helping," or "Here we were, envisioning things
going a different way," or "Something worse might've happened."
OK, then. It's a complex city map, every city over the top
of every city. It's karaoke night at the Flying J. Out-of-date
living room decor. A shoe store of used shoes. In my real town,
I live against one of the main roads out. A siren just went past.
A lot of forgiveness travels that road. I've traveled that road
holding my breath, burning incense for my adoption records.
My birth mother says, "OK, ask me anything." And I don't
ask anything. It's moving day. My dad feels bad now about
the way they handled the adoption. He's not specific, in the way
forgiveness is a general direction. Go south past the amusement park,
you can't miss it. Forgive us our directions. My birth mother
phrases things differently. We all phrase things differently.
Christmas Day, I called them both. I said, "Merry Christmas." Hey,
I get it. There are a lot of people I could call. "Hey, hi, I
forgive you, and/or please forgive me." And they could reply,
"Excuse me, I'm sorry, who are you again?" I'm new here
at the gift shop. It's a new year. I'm saying "happy" everywhere I go.

BATTLEFORCE ARPEGGIO (I-35)

I'm going to try today, even though there is no TRY, there is either DO
or DON'T DO. *Star Wars* told me that when I was a kid.
Fuck *Star Wars*. That's a terrible philosophy. I'm sticking with "try,"
because I'm driving to see my dad in hospice and "try"
feels like it's the size of Mars right now.
I'm pretending I'm Grace Paley, writing "A Conversation with My Father."
I'm pretending I'm driving to my father's final illness.
I'm pretending I'm driving to my father's funeral.
I hesitated. I didn't start driving after work. Instead,
I went to my son's soccer game. Listen, friends,
the game was so perfect I thought I'd died and this was some sort
of goodbye fantasy. I'm pretending I'm dead. So now
I can talk to the ocean as well as the stars.
And I'm going 83 mph and I have 35 eyes.
I'm pretending I'm talking with each of them.
The earth tilts and we call it seasons.
It's hard to win the Nobel Prize and yet someone does it every year.
Nothing's more dangerous than a curious angel.
I don't believe in angels, so that's easy for me to say.
I'm pretending I'm writing a sitcom called "Hanging Out with My Father as He's
Dying." "Yeah," I say, "everyone's always complaining about my place, too. How I
don't keep it clean enough, acting like they've never seen blood before."
It's more a conceptual show, like saying to the Nobel Prize winner, "Hey,
remember back when you were innovative?"
I'm pretending I'm a bitter two-bit comedian on the lam from God,
which I'm trying to phrase into a "Lamb of God" joke
and then giving up. That's the two-bit part.
Dying on the tier system. Dying by plateaus.
I'm pretending we're talking about slope farming.
It's the terrace cultivation of death. Why am I suddenly so thirsty?
It's like someone forgot to invent water.
Drought. In which I go through the seven emotions on I-35 from Oklahoma City to San
Antonio listening to *Automatic for the People*.
Hey, Texans, whatever your reasons are for living here are not good enough
reasons to deal with this traffic.
I tell him that when I get there, 4017 Cypress Court.
It used to be in Cibolo, but now they say it's Schertz.
So OK whatever. Life is change. Everything resolves.
There's nothing that can save my father. He's not even
in any pain. I'm pretending I'm telling him it's now considered healthy

to drink two cups of coffee a day. I'm imagining my car
is a confessional booth:
It has been many miles since my last confession. Bless me.
When I get there, I ask him what he's been thinking about, because what do you say to someone who's dying?
Do you dream of stopwatches?
I've been dreaming of stopwatches. It's stopwatches everywhere. It's like we're trapped in a referee supply company.
Before I left the house, I rigged up the wind chime with paperclips and an old padlock for the weight.
And how's your masterpiece going?
Change is everything. That's what the Salvation Army says
every Christmas. I call my kids and tell them that.
What's the most important thing you learned from a parent or guardian?
My father would blow up when I'd add something like "or guardian"
because he believes there's only one way to do things.
It was difficult living with him
and I'm glad I don't do it anymore. Thinking that
makes me feel like I'm wishing he was dead
and I'm not. I tell him about the coffee. I'm pretending he answers,
because he's currently asleep.
I'm pretending we're having a conversation.
I've been pretending that many years.
The worst phrase ever invented is "happy hour."
Outside, it's a blood red sliver moon.
If I just keep adding more stuff here
he doesn't die and I don't die and no one dies and wouldn't that be great.
Someday, it's the same answer for every question.
There's nothing up my sleeve.
I'm pretending that if the devil is six, and God is seven, then the universe is eight, lying on its side.
It's like we're always told. In mourning, I will cut my hair
and my hair will continue to grow.
I will shave my head, and my hair will continue to grow.
I will sweep the floor. I will sweep it again.
I'm pretending my father is alive.
Driving back, the directions say, "In three miles, take a left
on Purgatory." I'm pretending my GPS is making a joke
as the landscape spreads out over itself in every direction.

DRESS REHEARSALS

I keep dreaming I've killed someone and I can't remember
where I put the body. And we're having guests over
this weekend. What to do?
We'd love to sell the house. Who wouldn't love
to get rid of this house? It's so hard to get rid of things.
Like really get rid of them, all these anthologies
guest edited by Halloween. If you stand just right
you can see both shorelines. The garden.
Have I checked the garden? Math problem.
If my father died last spring, the house would be worth $200,000.
Now it's worth 125. Do you want to sell?
You could fit a swimming pool here. But maybe not so much digging.
Maybe it's worth 150. Just wait a bit,
the paint changes color as it dries.
Everyone who ever lived is jumping into the Grand Canyon,
which is still not filled. There's a frantic applesauce about it, though.
Like maybe why is everyone jumping into it.
I'm writing my father's obituary. It's a new genre for me.
As identity is a genre. I wonder if they have a *Best American*
Obituaries yearly anthology. Maybe this will get into it. It goes
like this: that's all there is. You build some roads. They're
all right. Most people say it as one word, *alright*.
I don't know what I'm supposed to do.
The neighbor's dogs are sniffing around the garage.
Actually, those are my dogs. Maybe I should call someone and say
it feels like prayer but not like praying.
He wants a pine box. Of course he wants a pine box. Probably
one made by Boy Scouts, singing, "My Country 'Tis of Thee."
The way the hospital scene is always the hospital scene.
This room looks contagious.
No one saw me just do this amazing parking job.
As long as I don't get out of the car everything's fine.

LOOKING FOR DUENDE

My parents had a sprinkler
that sputtered water whenever
the tap was off, and mom surprised me
when she casually said
duende was watering the backyard again.
I heard duende as Lorca's captured inspiration
in college. I asked how to translate it
into English, and my parents couldn't,
settling on "the mischief of a goblin."
Mom added that it's like
the movie with small green Gremlins terrorizing
the Pennsylvania town
during Christmas.
When I left home,
sent out to find duende,
the muse gifted deep wells of dream,
podcasts about skinwalkers and tricksters
orchestrating mischief, winds singing
through deep woods
to echo like ocean waves.
I didn't know I first encountered duende
in the *Looney Tunes* cartoon
where Bugs Bunny saves
the B-52 bomber from the small saboteur
and William Shatner's *Twilight Zone* plane ride,
watching the monster dismantle
the engine before flying into the lightning
and leaving him in lunacy.
Duende coaxed me to pedal faster
on my childhood's rickety bike,
to follow shadows mistaken
for witches, to welcome déjà vu
on mountain trails I've never hiked before.
I still search beyond Lorca's execution
and mass grave
whenever I study full moon's grief.
I accept the medium's summertime warning
that my dead father has become duende,

promising to meddle
until we safely make it
into the chilly months of
November and December.

THE CIRCUMFERENCE OF GRIEF

for Selina

> *Bone china has the greatest strength and resilience of all ceramics with the addition of bone ash to its raw materials. The texture and appearance are opaque, and the color is snow white.*

the clerk sets it rim-down
we're not allowed to do this anymore, but fits the ball
of her foot into the porcelain divot
holding her in the air by
its circumference of

x

bone dust: your ashes scattered
where I will never climb
my skin prone to heat stroke
aural flashes of vision
shorting in high desert
the mirage of
  your company
as the light slices
  then scatters
  over snowmelt

x

draining down the arms of a lake
an aerial view of a body's
inhalation I imagine

I don't dare
  ask how

x

O were my shoulder truly
made of clay I would hold
myself between
        two mirrors
search for the imprint
of your palm
        cupping the blade
in the snowmelt

x

the only photo of us
        (by proxy)
my dog slumped in your arms
grizzle-maw'd and nascent
        tumor
                in her belly

and you
                stretched taut

        and loose   at once

muscles demonstrating

        how the snow melts

                on the mountainside

x

my freckles root

                in the dermis

        dark hairs   sprouting clusters

like fern and thistle around us

too early in the spring

too early for

our leg hair to stretch

toward the sun

as flowers do

did I never tell you?

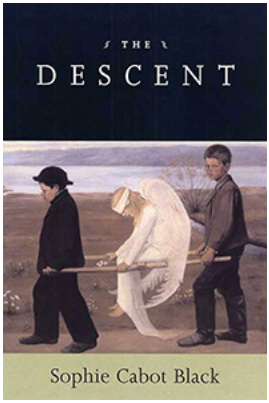
10 PM, AND SHE SAYS THE MOON IS BEAUTIFUL

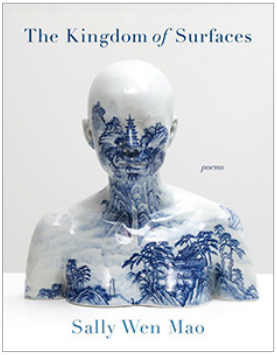
And it is, though skylight glass blurs the ball rolling in its practiced groove
and she hasn't left the house in a month, vomits mercury-poisoned fish,
sleeps alone in the lumpy king bed you shared. You have learned so much
about neurology, psychology, immune response, but still manage to pretend
you live with a healthy person instead of a silhouette. *Who's Frankenstein*
and who's the monster, your analyst asked in a flourish of rhetoric. Hours ago
you ate a loaf of bread the size of a fawn like that actor ate an entire pie
in *A Ghost Story* and later you might dance to Joy Division, thinking of Ian
swaying from his rope, but the twelve-step friend said *you are thriving* in spite of
tinnitus yowling in your ruined ears and twenty drugs she takes to function
and the ghetto bird just now flaying spring's first night and even the hyper
acute imagery on the new smart TV is just more *dukkha.* Better slur the
serenity prayer,
get grateful for yellow
grass and cracked birdbath.

THEORETICAL CASKET

What if you were widowed at fifty-two, June's sunken cathedral
fuming at the windows, her pill bottles and syringes lavish relics
of all the hours you shivered in separate bathtubs, two televisions
flickering, two beds wetted by night sweats, the rotten trellis where
creeping roses stretched Godward, the dark rum sating summer
hours given way to prosecco in flutes, bourbon to scotch and always
the scorch of basement leaves or pills to pestle and snort; and now
you're a millionaire widower, house a torrent of clutter, her ashes
stashed in a vase for the volcano. Go ahead, admire moonlight
bouncing through dark to wash her empty shelves in milk,
all the supplements she swore by,

spiritless orphan
sliding nowhere like months
over cracked concrete.





The Descent by Sophie Cabot Black

(Graywolf Press, 2004)

If you've ever been asked to describe a momentous event and found language wanting, consider this collection. In *The Descent*, Sophie Cabot Black distills love and loss into a tossed coin that refuses to land. The poetry equivalent of espresso, it makes everything else taste like soy latte.

—Neil Flatman

Quiet Orient Riot by Nathalie Khankan

(Omnidawn, 2020)

This astonishing debut collection quietly traverses the embattled landscapes of Palestine and infertility. Khankan takes us from border crossing to border crossing, seeking motherhood while wrestling with the promise of sovereignty—for both body and country.

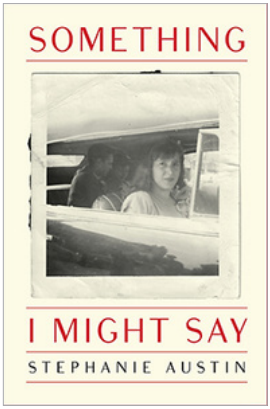
—Katherine Indermaur

The Kingdom of Surfaces by Sally Wen Mao

(Graywolf Press, 2023)

Every line in Sally Wen Mao's new collection of poetry oscillates between veneration and evisceration, calling her readers to the bodies of history (ancient Chinese and other) through bowel, breath, and skin. Her sisters "comb their hair, / part it sideways to promise a lifetime of celibacy."

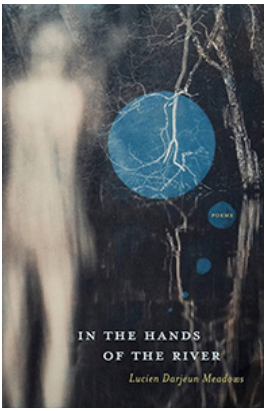
—Shari Zollinger



Something I Might Say
by Stephanie Austin
(WTAW Press, 2023)

Stephanie Austin writes in a unique, authentic voice with such seeming ease that I know it is, in fact, her craft and skill that make it so, as the subject matter of multiple losses coupled with caretaking during the pandemic is incredibly difficult to write about effectively. If you're in for personal essay with emotion, you'll be in for this short, but not small, book. It has everything a reader needs.

—Natalie Padilla Young



In the Hands of the River
by Lucien Darjeun Meadows
(Hub City Press, 2022)

Meadows' debut reads like a queer love letter to Appalachia. Like a good lover or a good trail through a beautiful place, these poems—rich with texture and image—will leave you thirsting for more.

—Katherine Indermaur

American Scapegoat
by Enzo Silon Surin
(Black Lawrence Press, 2023)

Enzo Silon Surin's works from *American Scapegoat* make you feel like you're witnessing a poetic speaking in tongues. He portrays the human experience through the Black experience in brilliant stanzas, giving tribute to Black activists, poets, and victims of systemic racism. Speakers punch through reality and tell stories that overwhelm with their power and reverence. Surin's voice, and the voices he presents must be heard and acknowledged in this "postscript of a furious sweat."

—Clarissa Adkins

STATS SHOW SEX AT AN ALL-TIME LOW

Of course, I click, if only to confirm what I know—
the tectonic shift spilling us towards the solitary
declivity on our side of the bed, slow,
almost imperceptible, but sure. Honestly,
there's no one reason—no Lysistratan vow
to strong-arm, no pique—just lazy-
ness. It's work to writhe about amidst the pillows,
to find the necessary tempo, the spot. Why—
when you can read or walk or watch or do
yourself the pleasure? I know what they say
about bond-building, the lubricious, heady stew
of endorphins, but sex is also uncertain and messy…
I imagine a billion hands outstretched, hesitating,
then thinking the better of it before retreating.

DICK THINKS OF MAKING A MOVE

Dick wants to be light-years from home, from round
of daily tasks, from opossum hissing and
burrowing under shed, from endless insurance
bills against calamitous whims of fate or
nature. He thinks about Proxima b,
which popped up in a Google search for
a whole new neighborhood, one with air and
water and an architecture of promise
and possibility. Dick wants a place
with a lesser gravity, one that forgives
his many sins against flight and forgets
the pronouncements of youth. What did he know
back then? The roses, the hybrid teas, the
floribundas and grandifloras, the
rambling conflagration, all of them are
too much with their colors, their scents, their scrums
of aphids. Too much. And the heavy oranges
in their ever-increasing plenitude.
His parents confused and confusing, their minds
a jumble, an avenue of need. His kids.
He thinks of Proxima b, 4.2 light-
years away. What's that? 24 trillion miles,
give or take. A new solar system, same
galaxy. An interstellar hop, he thinks.
Dick wants to start over and be lighter.

DICK ENTERS THE SENIOR LIVING FACILITY

In this new game, a backwards bingo,
you remove your markers as the caller says
the numbers on your card, so one by one
your memories make a small tower
beside your hand outside of you. There.
It's easy to learn, you see, easier
than unscrabble where you unspell the words
you once knew, reclaim your letter tiles
and line them up in alpha order,
a long string of sounds undone, unsaid.
At this table over here, you unpuzzle
the jigsaw that was once your life
and put the pieces, carefully, one by one
in the box again. Don't let any drop
or the dog or cat will cart them off
and chew them past recognition
and you will never be able to reassemble
the picture. And here, in this garden,
you can sit and sip your tea and admire
these flowers that look familiar
and later go back inside for the sing-
along to songs so deeply buried
they come back like swallowing
and shine like someone's laughing eyes.
Such joy then, right? We know you'll like it here.

DICK AT THE GATE

then, at last, will I finally unlearn

everything?

—Matthew Zapruder, "Poem for a Suicide"

This is it, Dick, the last stop, the end,
or, as we like to call it, the great unlearning.

This is where you have always been heading
even when you didn't know it, when you thought

that pleasure would buzz endlessly in you
like the bees in and out of the orange blossoms

or when you thought that grief would go on
like the swells undulant on the sea.

No, Dick, no more will your story sprawl out
like some weighty Tolstoy fabrication,

like a grove of trembling aspens all sprung
from a single seed and whispering to you.

Don't worry, Dick. They will all be fine.
True, some of them will see the sea, but only

from the beach and not for very long.

HOUSEBOATS

Withered nettles dusted with snow.
Roots of cottonwoods showing

where the sandy riverbank's been
washed away. Crisp air like shattered glass.

We keep finding each other
in the here of different places, walking

through woods by the Mississippi
in St. Paul while caught up in the thereness

of LA and those we knew.
Yes, we still have no clear vision.

It's probably good some things don't
happen the way we plan.

You were right.
I missed the signs at first.

We've found ourselves back here and still
together, across the water a marina

with houseboats, some wrapped
in blue plastic, wintering.

I've always thought they'd be a place to live,
a lonely thought to you.

I imagine us floating, moored,
self-contained. Then motoring forward,

finding another place to dock
and at the same time already home. To you

it feels separated from others, to drift
along on a margin, present

but distant, on the edge of things, a kind
of running away or at least a letting go.

FOR THE SAKE OF CONVERSATION

To say it with bravado
as if we know what we're talking about,

in this case
talking about UFOs though the topic could be
anything really, saying,

They're friendly. Just remember they're friendly.

Almost believing it,
and enjoying the gesture of certainty

like holding open a door,
inviting those sitting here listening,
and for a moment

feeling we're in the moment, our after-dinner
conversation, the refrigerator's

murmur kicking in, a familiar snap of a short

in the wiring, though
always an undercurrent suggesting

itself or an unraveling
like a shoelace ready to loosen no matter
how often we tie it,

like a time we did or said something

unexpected, not sure
where the impulse came from, or we held back

when saying *yes*
was all it might have taken. Or how
one night through trees we

caught sight of lights

moving but without sound and had no idea
what they were.

CURIOUS

The stillness of the driving
snow, though your heart
hasn't quit racing. For
the time being you're saved
by taillights of a semi
in front of you, can't
let them out of your sight, all
visible trace of highway
vanished under a sheet
of white. It's not yet light,
no landmarks, wind
whipping against your car
so you're steering
back into the gusts, careful
not to oversteer, windshield
wipers keeping pace with
the gathering flakes but
only just, and you're
curious how long this
arrangement can hold up.

AIR POEM

Loft Mountain after a day of midges
and sweat. I sleep long enough to start over.
Night wind lifts the tent's fabric like a tongue
plays on a tongue, has waited for us
to want something more than rest.

The air has the calcium sweetness
of well water. It's bone-building air.

I have a collarbone to cool, blushed-apple
shoulders to round. All these years, we
should have comforted each other.

GARDEN

I haven't been honest with myself. The peony in my front
yard had just one bloom last year. Fleeting, fuchsia.

I watched it unfurl one petal at a time, breaking through the bud.
Couldn't leave the house for fear of it happening without me.

Stared through the window in my pajamas. Days lost to waiting.
My doctor wants to increase my medication—he suggests we double it,

that my brain needs more than it already has. I think about the quartet of tulips
in the backyard—every winter I fear they must have died down there

but every spring they shoot through the ground in a great miracle—
green stalks and deep, wine-red blossoms. I tell my doctor this. A metaphor.

When really, I wonder how long any of us can last. Winters changing: rain in
February in Utah. The whole of the Salt Lake Valley under threat.

Beneath the lake's liquid skin: poison. The last medication I tried flooded
my heart in a ruthless double-beat. I couldn't do anything right:

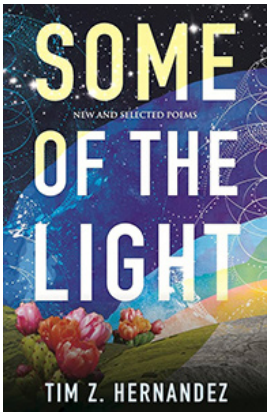
drink coffee, pour wine. I yelled at my doctor on the phone. He agreed
that it was wrong. Told me I shouldn't be drinking. Too much

for my liver to hold. There's also a bed of irises that bloom
later than the rest: early summer and their pale pink flesh opens

to the mountain heat. Doctor doesn't understand why I'm talking
about bulbs, about flowers. Why I can't just say I want to get better.

I tell him, I wish I could just live outside. Plant me in the yard, let me
disappear in winter and return come spring. Let me be brief and full of light.

TIM Z. HERNANDEZ INTERVIEWED BY SAMANTHA SAMAKANDE



There are stories that hurt. There are stories that tangle in your gut and leave you aching in the best way—*Some of the Light: New and Selected Poems* by Tim Z. Hernandez (Beacon Press, 2023) is one of them. Hernandez's poetry collection is an appeal to the power of witness. A single father, he invites us into the rituals of belonging between him and his children. With the same urgency, he compels us to gaze boldly into the face of systems of injustice and the many brutalities they facilitate, and then to turn that gaze inward. "We must remember this," he insists again and again, of the US immigration policy of family separation and its imprisonment of migrant children in cages, police brutality, and the California wildfires, among others. One of the collection's greatest strengths is its attention to the interrelatedness of the personal and the political—of our private thought lives, our creative lives, our family lives—and then the broader, collective spheres in which we all participate and exist together. His poems galvanize the reader's intellectual, emotional, spiritual, political, and creative imaginaries all at once.

Samantha Samakande: *Congratulations on* Some of the Light*, a stunning collection, and arriving at this juncture where you are releasing it into the world. Being an African immigrant, I resonated deeply with the nuance and vulnerability with which you attend to the tensions of a life lived on the borderlands of different nations, histories, and communities, along with the tensions of negotiating belonging as a person of color in the US. My first question for you is, as a writer who works in multiple forms—straddling the worlds of fiction, nonfiction, poetry—what made you decide that these stories needed to be told in this medium? Who are you trying to reach and why was poetry the right vessel to reach them?*

Tim Z. Hernandez: I always try and approach writing and art-making as organically as possible, and allow the subject to determine the form or genre, rather than imposing my own box around it. Many times, what starts out as a poem will morph into a story, or sometimes into a song, or a painting. And I follow it down its own path until it begins to reveal to me what it wants to be. This process is liberating, and I try to stay true to that. So to answer your question, it wasn't that I chose poetry as the form, so much as, I just wrote the pieces as they came to me. As for my target

audience, in the case of *Some of the Light*, I was really writing the poems for myself. I was asking myself these questions about fatherhood and complicity, and attempting to answer them as honestly as I could. I was, in essence, polishing the mirror. For me poetry has always been a cathartic practice, and one I've used to delve deeper into my flaws and ideas and habits, so that I can grow as a person, hopefully. At least that's always the idea.

SS: *What a joy that the landscape of meaning-making for you is so expansive and fluid, as you are able to weave in and out of these different art-making and storytelling media, from music and painting, to story and poetry. Would it be fair to say, then, that at the heart of your process—of chasing after the piece, being open to wherever it leads, and allowing the poem to reveal itself to you—there is this sense of leaning into discovery?*

TZH: Yes. Discovery is absolutely the purpose. For me writing is all about the process of discovery. The discovery of what's behind my own biases, ideas, habits, fears, boundaries, etc. In this way it acts as a kind of meditation. And if I'm discovering along the way then maybe the reader of my work will discover things about themselves, too. Most of what I write is driven by questions rather than answers.

SS: *I would like to linger on something you said before. You mentioned that poetry is a cathartic process for you, along with being a place of self-interrogation and of "polishing the mirror." Throughout the first section of the book, you have these interesting meta moments where the poem itself becomes a character under your microscope. In particular, you assert what the poem is not and what it cannot do or cannot give, which culminates in the "Unqualified Poem," which feels like a sort of indictment of poetry as a vehicle.*

Can you speak a little bit to that tension—where as writers, we see the griefs, the injustices, and the tragedies of the world and how we retreat into the poem as both a refuge and as a means to explore this trauma, while also being painfully aware of its limitations? What do you see as the function of the poem in a world where, as you say, "There are now 800, 1,800 children, cold / and huddled inside Tornillo, just forty miles away / from this poem?"

TZH: The poem is both. It's simultaneously a retreat or place of refuge, as much as it is a way to explore a situation, and to discover my place within that situation. The poem is also a necessary remedy for dealing with the taxing realities of everyday life, and it's also a messenger because it has the ability to travel (ideally) further than its author. But let's not mistake that for praxis. A poem should never be confused or substituted for direct action. Because nothing beats physical presence when it comes

to manifesting transformation in our lives, and in our communities. If a poem is love, then we must move it beyond theory and walk it out into the streets. "I love yous" are about as good as "thoughts and prayers." Sure, they can inspire us to take action, but we can't mistake the words for the act of love itself. And in the same way, all the injustices that are the heart of many poems, including my own, will not be corrected or transformed by words alone, no matter how dazzling they are, or how many awards they garner. And that's what "Unqualified Poem" is about. I was asking myself, how much of myself am I willing to commit to this particular cause? Beyond the page, I mean. Especially when the dehumanization that is the focus of that poem (detained migrant children) was happening just forty minutes away from the comfortable home I was sitting in at that moment comfortably composing a poem. I knew that if I was genuinely invested in the subject of that poem, then after composing it, I would need to put my pencil down and get in my car and drive there to stand at the gates of the Tornillo detention facility and bear witness, and use my voice however I could to shut it down. This is what that poem is about—life first, poetry second. Or: poetry, life, poetry.

SS: *I'm struck by your meditations on the push and pull between the seemingly boundless possibilities of poetry and its profound limitations, that notion that the poem as love means that it must stretch beyond the page and that our physical bodies must move, reach, touch, and act on the lived realities of systems of dehumanization on behalf of the poem, or rather, in ways the poem will never be able to do. What has it looked like for you, balancing the quiet, personal, and internalized work of writing with the more external, communal work of organizing or activism?*

TZH: Well, as I said, the living comes first. The writing is simply the document of the experience. With that in mind, I haven't done much organizing in the physical sense lately. But that's because I've been in the writing. It varies, some months are for living, other months are for writing. Or sometimes it's week to week, or day to day. But always, the living comes first. As a single parent, this means I am in service of my children above all else. I try and balance that with being kind and loving to myself as well. Which isn't always easy. I try not to think too hard about the writing, at least not while I'm running my day-to-day errands. Being present as much as possible is the goal for me. While I'm living, I'm living, and while I'm writing, I'm writing. Not to suggest they are two different things, but the writing is more like a parenthesis to living, it's very much a part of it, but it's a pause in between tasks and movements, if this makes sense. So the balance is addressed with mindfulness and presence. For me, meditation is an important aspect of my life. As cliché as this may sound, it's the only practice I've discovered to help so far.

SS: *One of the anchoring themes of the book that you thread throughout is this idea*

that "we must remember," that "we cannot forget," that we must bear witness. So we see this excavation of your own personal memories of life with your children alongside an excavation of our collective memories of injustices happening around us as a society—the US policy of family separation and its imprisonment of migrant children in cages, police brutality, the California wildfires, and so on. How did you mean for these different kinds of remembering to be in conversation?

THZ: That's the thing. I don't see them as different at all. The poetry is intentionally introspective, because I am trying to explore the relationship between how my actions in the most intimate sense are reflective, or even tethered to, the larger picture of injustice and violence in this world. In other words, where within me do the prejudices and anger and wounds still exist? Where am I still acting out in certain ways that are hurtful to others, starting with the people I love most, my children? Because if I cannot change this, how can I truly expect anyone else to? This applies in the opposite direction, too. How am I able to take the love I have for myself and my family, and give that same intention, tenderness, forgiveness, to my community, and by extension, to the world? I realize there is a lot of pain right now in the world, and particularly in this country, and each writer/artist gets to decide for themselves what role they play on the team. For me, the goal is to remind us that love is, above all else, the point. And I must never lose sight of this; I must always remember this. The refrain of "remembering" is a reminder to myself, but at the same time, an invitation to the reader. Let us both never forget that love is the only point, the only pursuit.

The poem is … simultaneously a retreat or place of refuge, as much as it is a way to explore a situation, and to discover my place within that situation.

SS: *There is something here about how the impulse to pay attention, to observe, to collect, and to share, that we cultivate so obsessively as artists, is core to our ability to enact love. That picture of radical self-interrogation and reflection you model in your book is so powerful, as is your invitation to the reader to courageously "remember" together. Showing the reader just how richly this can be lived, even in as immediate (and seemingly mundane) a tether as family, is a beautiful point of hope.*

Earlier, you mentioned that the poem is "also a messenger because it has the ability to travel (ideally) further than its author." Your thoughts about the poem's ability to transcend its maker got me thinking about the role of place in your collection—place not just as a physical location but as encompassing emotional, spiritual, and even sociocultural location. With this broader sense of place, are there ways in which you have begun to see your poems reach outside your personal scope?

THZ: I don't think I can measure the reach of my poems in terms of the broader scope. I don't know if I'm ever supposed to. My only hope is that after writing each poem, I have paid close enough attention to the process that it has changed me in one way or another. And if I'm lucky, that the words can act as a kind of loose map for my own children. As they grow older and make their way in the world, my hope is that my writing in general can offer them a place of rest, solitude, reflection, and rejuvenation. That they will not feel so alone in the challenges of daily life.

SS: *I hadn't thought of it in this way, that as the writer, you are the only compass you have of how you hope your poems will move in the world. I love that in allowing the reader to watch you wrestle, as well as be challenged and transformed by the process of writing your poems, they may also find a safe place to do that work in themself.*

Along similar lines, while your poems are rooted in place in a traditional way, do you set out to use juxtaposition or a counterintuitive sense to explore tension? I am stuck on poems like "Home," which seems to turn the concept of home on its head by exploring dislocation and what feels like a conflict between survival and trying to craft a place of belonging.

THZ: I think that's just how I write these days. As the poem says, "Everything happens in singles these days / line by line." This is how I find myself thinking lately—slightly fragmented and reliant on the inherent magic of juxtapositions, in language and in life.

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video poem

QUIPO

Today starts as a comment.
I'd like this one to be a ray
though mostly, I get split ends.

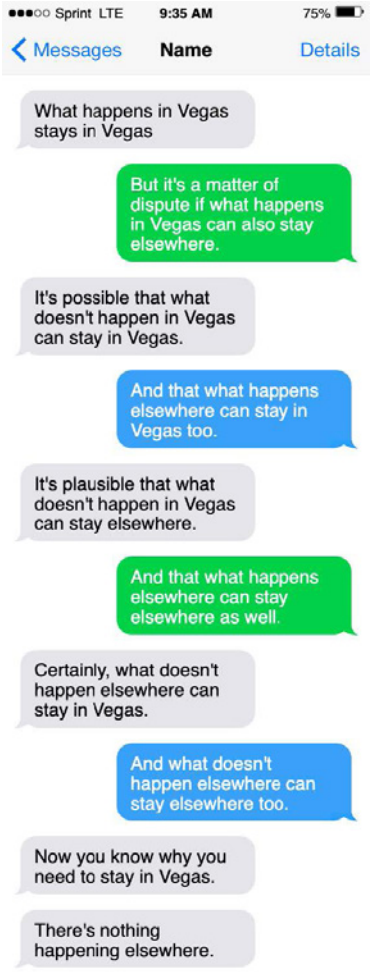
They're free though.
A day like an open half shell,
part of a collection.

Clouds re-draw the day,
the wet wool of it.

You can ravel their knobby weave
into a knot for a seat on their pendulum.

visual poem

WHAT HAPPENS IN VEGAS



- Millicent Borges Accardi, *Quarantine Highway*, FlowerSong Press, 2022
- Emma Aylor, *Close Red Water*, Barrow Street Press, 2023
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- Mary Buchinger, *Navigating the Reach*, Salmon Poetry, 2023
- Mary Buchinger, *Virology*, Lily Poetry Review Books, 2022
- Courtney Bush, *I Love Information*, Milkweed Editions, 2023
- Regie Cabico, *Rabbit in Search of a Rolex*, Day Eight Press, 2023
- Lisa Dordal and Milly Dordal, *Next Time You Come Home*, Black Lawrence Press, 2023
- Saba Husain, *Elegy for My Tongue*, Terrapin Books, 2023
- Yalie Saweda Kamara, *Besaydoo*, Milkweed Editions, 2024
- Arthur Kayzakian, *The Book of Redacted Paintings*, Black Lawrence Press, 2023
- David Keplinger, *Ice*, Milkweed Editions, 2023
- L.S. McKee, *Creature, Wing, Heart, Machine*, Zone 3 Press, 2023
- Dan O'Brien, *Survivor's Notebook*, Acre Books, 2023
- Drew Pisarra, *Periodic Boyfriends*, Capturing Fire Press, 2023
- Adrian S. Potter, *And the Monster Swallows You Whole*, StillHouse Press, 2023
- Patrick Woodcock, *Farhang*, ECW Press, 2023
- Grzegorz Wróblewski (translated by Piotr K. Gwiazda), *Dear Beloved Humans*, Diálogos Books, 2023

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DOMINIQUE AHKONG is a London-born, Singapore-raised, Arizona-based writer of Chinese-Mauritian descent. Her work has appeared in *Cha: An Asian Literary Journal*. She holds degrees from Middlebury College and NYU's Interactive Telecommunications Program and coedits *Shō Poetry Journal*. Find her on Twitter @domkeykong.

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Sugar House Review promotes an eclectic range of poets through publishing and live events to build nationally connected literary communities and foster the literary arts in Utah.

VALUES:
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We believe that a remarkable variety of exciting things is happening in contemporary poetry. We work to assure this excitement continues by publishing and promoting as wide a range of poets, voices, and styles as possible.

We celebrate the diversity of gender, sexual orientation, sexual identity, race, religion, region, and any other category that informs creativity and identity. Poetry is an assertion of voice that is strongest when enacted and celebrated by a "teeming nation of nations" (as Walt Whitman described).

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Sugar House Review has published 27 serialized issues since 2009. We have released one spring/summer and one fall/winter issue each year, with double-length anniversary issues in 2014 and 2019. Our editors and readers evaluate submissions during allotted periods, choosing pieces that best represent our mission of publishing an eclectic range of voices. In addition to publishing national and international poets, we place emphasis on showcasing local and regional poets to contribute to our region's poetry community and to lower barriers for live events.

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