

# TIMBER

VOLUME 5



# TIMBER

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## REVIVAL

You drove without the radio on. You blew through the red light at New Road and Bosque.

She drove without the radio on. She rolled through the red light at New Road and Bosque like a Rose Bowl float. She waved to the angry cars at a right angle. Enjoy the parade of me, boys, she smiled. Some of them threw roses. Some of them crashed into lamp posts.

You drove through the light at the corner of Bosque, but I didn't say anything to stop you or slow you down. I braced against the dashboard. I groaned or squirmed or said holy crap, Ma. But other than that, you let me know that my job was to catch the roses and inventory them, or else to dodge the scrap metal as it flew. I was only fair at either job so I tended to have a lot of scratches and bruises.

You had to speed. You were taking us to church where they knew certain irrefutable facts about the end of times, one of which stated that the anti-Christ relentlessly drives forward from Jerusalem too fast for the two of us to waste any time.

She had to speed because the end of times speeds faster than any car. Back then, she always got us there and pestilence remained a memory and a rumor that would take time to recall or to verify.

We arrived at high speed in the front of the revival crowd to find good seats where she could see the preacher no matter who sat down in front of us. Giants could sit in front of us, but we had seats that out-angled bad views.

I was sitting beside her. She had such good seats. I stayed on as her passenger, waiting for a job.

You were sitting beside me, already praising God. I didn't do that, but less due to sin than due to the number of roses I was still trying to count.

We sat in folding chairs five rows deep in a hundred head crowd, earnestly singing musical tribute to the one and only Savior whose blood was shed upon Calvary called Calgary to drip down through the ages in a ghastly trickle of red redemption offered only to the pure few who know the truth of the lie of all other versions of God's word. The preacher's lamb pink tongue tasted the end of his thumb between pages of scripture.

Ye lust and have not: you desire, and cannot obtain. Adulterers and adulteresses, humble yourself in sight of the Lord and he shall lift you up. His hands reach out for you, the pastor pointed. For you. For you.



You lifted your hand and said, Amen. Who will say it with me? you called out.

People stared. It wasn't that kind of revival. You followed the preacher as he flicked through the pages of his King James. He swung his eyes around to remind us of the end of times. He licked his thumb.

Draw nigh to God and he will draw nigh unto you.

She said out loud, Let's hear about the Spirit, Brother.

I leaned away. The congregation stirred just enough to fan flies with collection envelopes. Some of them nearer the center exchanged gold stars for silent obedience. They leaned away. This is the wrong revival, I wrote in code, circling letters on a Sunday newspaper the man in front of me was reading in his lap. I circled the letters twice with a pencil because pencil lead is hard to see on newsprint. Then I tore off the tiny scrap, no bigger than a fly's wing and threw it at her. She let it fall without tribute.

The preacher licked his thumb again. I wondered if he ever rubbed it with vanilla extract or bacon fat, just to tide him over through these long nights of revival. He licked his thumb with a flick-trip-trip through onion paper pages.

You were fanning yourself with a collection envelope I had crafted into scalloped ridges for you. It gave me something to do with my hands now that I had mostly finished counting flowers and just as I was becoming jittery that you might be moved to testify.

A blurry year before he died, I had been to Easter revival with my father the night he testified for his own sins the very last time. He'd stood up already crying, Telergma, Telergma. And then he began to wail. He yelled at everyone there and bawled and bawled about wanting to learn the names of stars in the North African sky but how officers made the men dig holes in the ground and sit up all night with a knife and he couldn't ever decide if he missed the stars or the knife or if he was maybe damned to hell because he traded his soul to forget the whole thing, but it must not've worked because there it all was. The sky. The knife. The temptation. Stop testifying, I would have said, but it was rude to tell him what to do. And I was scared because he had lost his way. He was thin and pale. He was full of ghosts and how could he be sure one of them was holy? He held up his hands, blotted, stained. He opened his arms to embrace the unsaved. How could he be sure he wasn't one of them? Vain mercy. I tugged on his shirt, just along his ribs where it would not bother him too much. I tugged a little but I don't remember if he sat back down. The end gone blank is such a mercy.

She wasn't there that night. And when I told her he was wrong, there was something wrong with him, she told me to pray for the strength to surrender vain knowledge. She didn't mean I should surrender him, she meant I should stop talking. Maybe I went too far.

You would not talk about him. Stop counting hairs. Go outside, you insisted. And so I went.

I prayed for surrender. Maybe I went too far. But mercy took the past, the father of the story died, and I grew half way up and found a job in an office typing mimeographs. Carbon onion paper over carbon onion paper and no way to make a correction. What was in error at the start remained in error. I still came to revival with you while you made mistakes, though I could not correct them all.

Testify, the preacher of this revival begged us all, drying his thumb on his shirt sleeve. But I didn't feel he meant it because his voice didn't rise into a question. Maybe she noticed that, too, the missed punctuation.

The unsaved, the preacher lamented. She fanned, breathed hard, her heart heavy with grief for the unsaved.

The unsaved, the preacher promised, were all around us, hiding behind the mask of good deeds. He pointed out at us with dry fingers, searching. I remember how the weight of the lost always used to make my father weep.

She began to weep. That troubled me.

You began to weep. The preacher noticed you. He looked encouraged to have moved your faith. I leaned further away. The sermon leaned in. The room was a garden of cold statues but for you.

You noticed their unwarmed temperament and your eyes ran with rivers of water for the destruction of the maidenhead of the people. They were lukewarm. Their innocence was cast aside in favor of the mask. If only they would open. Open their hearts, their souls, the heat of their secrets. They would burn anyway. Charity poured tenderly from your eyes, collected in the aisles, ran in rivulets down to the paneled seams of the altar, flowed back to us, rose over our feet. As it covered my ankles, I started to drown.

Draw near my breathing, the Lord said, draw near to me when I breathe, when you breathe, and I will lift you up above the flood. For whosoever tenderly loves the Ghost of God shall not be ashamed of holy caresses.

She crouched low to sit up all the straighter, as she could not help but sit up, straining to hear the sound of love and breathing.

I'd had no idea until I looked at you out of the corner of my statue-still eye that you, here deformed by the torque of ardor, that you were in love. The look of you made me ashamed, and also bruised, ever inept at dodging ballast as it floated wildly around us in the cold Jordan of your tears and sweat.

She remembered an age of tears and sweat. I could see what held her in its time, in despair and toil. I felt afraid it would burst through, a rush of terrible water.

She delivered in the sweating stew of pain, in secret, miles down narrow roads, one branching off another, deep into the creek crossed woods, deep into the deer thick woods, in a summer shack her sister's husband used for hunting trips. But she had stayed there all through winter, heavy with ice as she was with sin and life.

You said I couldn't understand life and sin. You said I wouldn't understand love's burning demands, how it was to the touch, sun hot. I was too young and too cold. You had been so young. Now you were breathing too fast when you talked about it all.

And before now, you breathed too fast, remembering love's demands, so to calm you down you put me in the car and drove away without a map. It is impossible to stand still when you are confessing a life. You took wide roads, all unmarked. No clothes, no coats, no gears to make a car slow down when it approached a place to eat or rest. We drove until the sun ran over itself.

She drove until the hills fell down and got back up again. She wrestled with the road, with the rumor of its winding.

You wrestled with the words, small and helplessly child sized when I finally heard them: not Christ or anti-Christ, but a lesser son had been born before the appointed time. That you did not love him at the hour of his birth was a dark mercy, but the unloved had found you and at that moment traveled toward us from some other direction, an east-winded embodiment of sin, but how could this be happening when he was nothing but a ghost trapped in the knot of the tendon under your ribs?

She had felt him make a home in the knotted tendons under her ribs. She prayed for him to be trapped there in chains of nothingness, cribbed in her chest, as his cry faded from the air, his body surrendered to the way these things were done.

She had heard him cry but his cries had faded, driven away without her by a preacher who offered to raise an unnecessary son. His price seemed fair to you. Sometimes there is nothing to do about love and nothing to do with what it leaves of itself.

After she finished the story, once she had set the truth free from her flesh, from her memory, we turned around, started back to the place we lived to wait for the now grown man who had been born to wait for her. On the way home, she crashed the car one hundred times and still failed to pay the price for telling me she had a son before she thought of having daughters. I kept trying to assure her it all seemed small as grains of shifting sand.

I asked you, Was there really a baby and you never told?

She answered, Yes, but he was very small and ugly.

You crashed the car on the way home. You took us over a bridge into a river-bottomed gully. We rolled and wrestled with the surprisingly wet body of death. I shouted at you above the rolling tumult, Remember that God was so in love with the world, He gave up His son, too, and it went much worse than the way you came up with. Water covered our bruised legs and arms. Then I whispered, Remember that there is a revival in spring and you want so much to go. You could be forgiven for your iniquity. You could be loved again. The water swallowed us, spit us out, clean. We arose and started walking toward the sun, which dried our clothes and led us home.

But this was longer years ago, still longer, so the ruined windshield, the buckled hood, the twisted doors and fenders, the mystery of the unmet son, the mud-soaked upholstery were eventually fixed, accomplished by the purification of sweat, paid for with sources other than love, but by all accounts, still heavy with sacrifice.

She wrestled with the knot under her ribs as the revival preacher looked down on her, sweat lining her upper lip, beading along her brow and by her ears. He promised her wide, cold waters where all sin and toil wash away. All debt is paid in full, the Bridegroom is purchased by the sacrifice of the bride. She sat forward in her folding chair. The preacher thought she was burning for him. I felt a flush of shame wash over me. Sit back, I could have cried. But she was in love and would never have heard me.

Son of Man, say to her that she is neither cleansed nor rained upon. Call out her indignation to devour the labors of flesh. It has to be said, it has to be heard. Ghosts will not fill up our arms.

Your arms and hands fidgeted. You started to pull open the button at the throat of your dress. Then the next button, the one just below your collarbone. You threw down your origami fan to comb the fingers of both hands through your hair. You let go a sigh that rasped along floorboards, looking for a beloved.

She was unbuttoning the collar of her dress. One button, two buttons, and she pulled at her third, ran her fingers through her hair. The people who had turned around to stare looked away as her breath escaped her unbuttoned lungs to slide around the room, searching.

Shade of God, tell her it's better to bury the dead than to burn, but by now neither of you mean it. The room floods, this time with fire. God is in love with her.

She yelled out but no one could understand her. Did love seize her tongue and put a grind organ in her throat? I wondered, but in place of an answer, I developed the coy gifts of a spy and blended into the chintz skirt and blouse of the statuesque woman on the other side of me. My skin was already gray and blank, so really all I had to do was bloom little pink roses and ivy to make my camouflage perfect.

The preacher sucked his thumb. Will you surrender to the hand of the Spirit of God? Is there time for His attention? Have you given Him attention? Have you rebuked your sin, your lust, your appetites? Have you died in the flesh to be raised in the strength of His blood? To be shaped by His hands from inside? Come to the Lord. He can't wait forever.

She couldn't wait. The Breath of God did not have to wait but for His Ascent. The signs of the times were favorable and messages of readiness were being sent.

I thought the preacher was delivering a message sent against the poor man's will, a coded message just for her. But he looked at the unmoving crowd with a blank

passion, and I found it so hard to understand him with his mouth full of God's tongue and his thumbs, I hoped I was wrong. But then she stood up, having gotten the drift, having understood the code sent just for her.

She stood up in a birth push that burst through the fiery waters with an ugly rush. She surrendered, threw her bible down, pronounced her oblivion into oblivion. I felt the congregate quiver freezing the spiritless air.

I surrender, she yelled as she ran up the aisle, as she ran toward the altar call, I surrender, I surrender.

You said it many times over even after the call had finished.

She surrendered at the foot of the altar, the tears drying, her collar open to show her straining neck as she rose to watch for signs of celebration and revival. I couldn't tell if she saw this as it was. The people were confused because they were still pretending to be statues. They'd been caught in the rising water, burned no matter how hard they fanned, whipped by the beating of invisible wings, which was all too much, and they didn't want to have to remind you that this was not that kind of service.

She beamed in surrender, waited for praise.

The preacher jerked his thumbs toward the doors. We had come to the end.

She kept smiling, jostling, hugging empty arms, reaching out to nothing there. She was confused but she didn't know that yet.

I knew you were confused by the fading heat. I knew you would go on acting like there was something there that wasn't there for anyone else. Yours alone. Your long parade of bridegrooms. You would act like the jilted sacrifice until I got you out of there with your dress still at least half on. This was the wrong revival, for you if not for them.

Let's button you back up. Let's smile and wave and say Glory this and Glory that, which is a kind of code these people understand. I've been watching them and we can pass through them like a wave of wind without violence or agitation if we move carefully and speak casually, in the right voice. Glory, wasn't that a nice service? Say it. Say Glory in a quiet voice with a modest shake of your head. What God revives by fire and what he passes by and leaves cold is his own business. I take sweaters everywhere and have never been sorry. Glory it's warm in here.

I tried to say all of that, but the people around me mistook my voice for a testimony and began to nod their heads and repeat some of my pronouncements, the drift of which was very polite and studded with quiet, holy phrases.

## **WRONG CLOAK**

The calm squad blottered me and my brother's bulk into a gored together corpse. They lured an abscessed mop into whatever hurts form how we will be found. They sprayed WRONG CLOAK across the door to the datura plains and erased the space between clots. There I learned how lice can tame a mane. I learned that I was an intern pox for the crops to spurt loam from, but now I am training to be a glue ambassador for the corps. After another hour of helmeted breath, their clops returned to treeing peasants.

## MYLAR COCOON

Huffing on a falcon while leaning in a lopsided tree, I fell into the ether-capped falls.  
I woke where all the swan eggs are copied from a single dead slug eye. The extinct  
oracle's seedlings reflected my tenor. Its tubers produced a bassoon.

*FROM*  
**STOP IT CROWN**

It begins with a banana  
hung from high  
branches and relief

when the giant arrives in  
time, gulps  
it in stride and plays

air drums on the horizon.

Quiet, love.  
If he hears us stumbling  
to America, into the bindle we go.

What hungover god stuffed this ocean into us?  
Let's offer him our finest night terrors,  
tithing against the tide that keeps rejecting our layup.



Somewhere in pursuit  
of what it loves the muscle  
turns mean

good gone off for good  
pressed out of it

as the forge occurs against a surface

to push off from will be important  
if there are to be these futures  
we can see the distant heat of

in one the shape  
of the old heart's rafted away

left you listing into a sink

you choose against sink  
if this is choosing

## ALWAYS A ROARING

Nightmare carries bugs of flight in her mouth, their wings webbed with sour memories and bred-in-the-bone fears. Her tornado eyes, her rippling and opalescent skin—she moves with more fluidity than a snake through grass. And she has passed through me, opened up my head, spit a bug in my brain.

Before nightmare knew me and before I knew nightmare, my dreams were sugar and cake and sex. My dreams gave me an appetite for my days. But after spending three years on the blonde back of mid-eastern desert, after three years of being bathed in sun-spew and sandstorm, after adopting paranoia as instinct, my skull has been scraped rough and swathed in dark scribbles. What I have come down with is a phantom disease—it weaves lace-like tumors from toenail to earlobe, gives birth to hollow places, tiny caverns perfect for the quiet and poisonous, the thousand-legged and mirror-eyed. They nest, lay down eggs, then rise to burrow into another cavity, carve out another nest-hole.

To smother bugs fused to your brains is not so easy. Valerian root tea does not help. Sleeping pills do not help. Regardless of dosage, I wake with shakes, in a milk of sweat, arms swinging like a boxer's. Sometimes my hands make fists, sometimes my hands clamp around the wrong things.

“What’s the matter with you? What’s the matter?” My wife reaches for breath, grasps my biceps. Her thin fingers encircle, choke my bloated arteries like blood-pressure cuffs. Our sheets twist tight against our double-knotted shape.

I pant into her face.

I say, “It’s fine, I’m fine, we’re fine,” and I loosen, let her lumpy head fall back to its divot in the pillow, kiss the red marks on her twiggy neck.

She doesn’t cry over these moments anymore. She makes jokes that aren’t jokes about wearing a padded neck brace to bed; she makes me sleep with oven mitts on my hands.

Oven mitts do not help.

“You’re not fine,” she says, dropping her pillow to the floor. When she stands she is caught naked in moonlight, it turns her skin caulk-colored, gives her the look of a Hellenistic statue. She takes a spare sheet from the closet, makes a bed on the carpet below.

I say, “I’m fine. I’m only not fine if we act like I’m not fine—you sleeping on the floor isn’t helping—you sleeping on the floor makes me feel not fine.”

“I’ll sleep in the bed again after you see a doctor,” she says. Her voice is steady; it does not waver as it rises.

I say, “No doctor can fix this, no doctor can cure me of what I’ve got.”

I say, “No doctor could get it. You don’t get it. I’ve got to stalk it, cage it, starve it out myself.”

I want my infested insides to emaciate, to become less than skeleton. I want my infested insides to be too feeble to yammer.

How it yammers:

Limbleless torsos—shredded faces—newly torn orifices, sand-clogged.

I’m in the village with the shit water, and I’m okay—clear-headed, normal—but C.J. isn’t. We’re in hot shade, we’re in a dung-hut—and he’s downed, strapped to his cot, naked, swollen as a loaf of waterlogged bread. When he pukes, it’s crimson mud thick with shrunken guts and miniature earth globes and giant kidney beans. With each flex of his stomach, with every retch, another mouth rips open through his skin. Mouths down his arms and mouths across his chest and mouths on his cheeks, forehead—the mouths are complete with chipped teeth, chapped lips, white tongues—the mouths gurgle, pus, cough up camel spiders.

How it yammers:

Cars busted—fire blackened and ripped through—bodies, charred briquettes.

I’m at the checkpoint with my M16. I’ve got them out of their sedan. The order is to shoot one, to shoot the bearded man, the chocolate-eyed man. But his children, so many children, they multiply like cancer cells—new ones splitting off of old ones. They clump to him, and his wife and his mother, they clump to him, and they all lump there on the side of the road like a pulsing dirt clod made of beautiful skin. What choice do I have? I shoot them all and they burst, erupt, gush molars, canines, candy canes, cavities, as though they were only skin sacks full of dentists’ wet dreams.

How it yammers:

Plucked feathers—raw wreckage—faces drawn long in howl.

I’m at the bomb-split street bazaar, thigh full of shrapnel, face tilted up, mouth frozen open, taking a rain full on. The rain strings down—sinews, ventricles, sausage-links. The rain is sharp—glass shards, metal scraps, fingernails. A mother squats over the pavement, scrapes the wet slosh to her, takes handfuls and rubs it over her arms and forehead. From her mouth comes the sound of slow explosion, then of tornado siren. I run to her. I get behind her. I get on my knees. I hold her in my arms. I tell her she’s fine, we’re fine, then bend her forward. I fuck her in a bed of guts.

To dodge nightmare I go on a coffee binge, I go on a sleep fast. I set up a home gym in the garage. Take breaks from weight lifting and jog to the nearest gas

station—past rows of two-story houses that blur at the edges that are bordered at the edges by rows of shrubs and the shadows the houses shed breed a danger, a howling, and the howling doesn't belong to the cats who've been left outdoors or to the cicadas itching to crawl out of their own skins—jog to the nearest corner store and spend a little of my active-duty savings on those yellow-jacket energy pills, on those syrupy shot-glass-sized energy drinks. My mouth stings with the twang of cheap cherry flavor; my tongue is stained fluorescent red-40.

I rocket through my days—become electric shock—become live wire—become an inhospitable environment, see: nightmare can't live in the soul of a lightning bolt.

At sunrise my wife comes down the stairs wearing a pastel power suit, hair gathered into a smooth, stiff bun. She finds me at the kitchen table craned over a crossword puzzle I've filled out once already. I rub away the pencil with high-pressured swipes of erasure; blow the bits of pink rubber away.

And because I can't help it, because I've got a face tremor that shakes my lips apart, I say, "Look at this, fucking look at this pink shit—how it tumbles away and off and down to the floor. I blow it away like it's nothing. It's nothing."

She pours herself a glass of water but does not drink, picks at food muck hardened on the countertop. With her back to me she says, "You look bad—worse than."

I smile the way she likes me to smile, all my teeth visible, top and bottom rows touching to make a perfect half-cut of moon.

I say, "Mama, look at me. I've got all my teeth. Goddamn. I'm fine. How about some coffee?"

She leaves for work with a full cup and a mouth sucked tight and shut—her lips look gone.

In the garage I'm lit white with halogen glow. I do chin-ups, lift weights and jump rope, I gulp down rainbows of pills that make my veins boom beneath the surface. It's been days and days without sleep and I can feel nightmare tapping her steel fingernail against my forehead, impatient, wanting to resurrect the brain-bug she slipped me, the vein-bug I killed—zapped dead with electricity. And it's fine, push-ups, I feel fine, push-ups, everything is fine, push-ups, I call it fine, pause for breath because the room goes speckled and dim—my skull splits.

A set of wings unfold.

My wife finds me in the kitchen with a crude, football-shaped opening carved into the skin of my thigh, using a melon baller to remove orbs of me, dropping them—plop—into the sink's porcelain bowl.

And when she calls for an ambulance, her voice muscles against the mouthpiece, bends it. And when she puts her hand on my hand, wrenches the melon baller from

my bronze-casted fist and breaks one of my fingers because she must break one of my fingers, she is almighty.

Years later, when she recounts the story, tells it to our closest friends while we drink beers in the backyard near the BBQ, or to our relatives while we drink hot buttered rums on Christmas eve, she tells it with the intrepid voice of Artemis—

She says, “I wasn’t surprised. I wasn’t afraid.”

She says, “He was crying. He looked hypnotized, possessed.”

She says, “His teeth were clamped down on a wad of washcloth—his teeth looked yellow and animal, like horse incisors.”

She says, “The blood didn’t look real.”

*LONE.*

8 x 10 IN.  
DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY.

LOUIS STAEBLE.







*previous:*

*UNTITLED.*

17 X 25 IN.  
35 MM FILM.

ABIGAIL DACK.

## MEETING A TREE DURING MY INSOMNIAC PHASE

In the barracks  
I have the sheet  
pulled up to my chin.

Whoever said poems  
don't exist, I am awake  
because of one.

Closure is an untroubled lie.  
I hike to a madrona instead,  
whose limbs also peel

through the night.  
Its red lends itself to names.  
Mine is blood—

rocketed into vials.  
Looking away  
doesn't mean the mind

can do the same.  
I have rolled my tights  
off in the dark again.

There is nothing  
to watch here  
except waves parting rocks.

Fort, what are you  
without a stockade?  
And what am I

but anticipation,  
cross-legged beneath this tree  
that burns longer, hotter

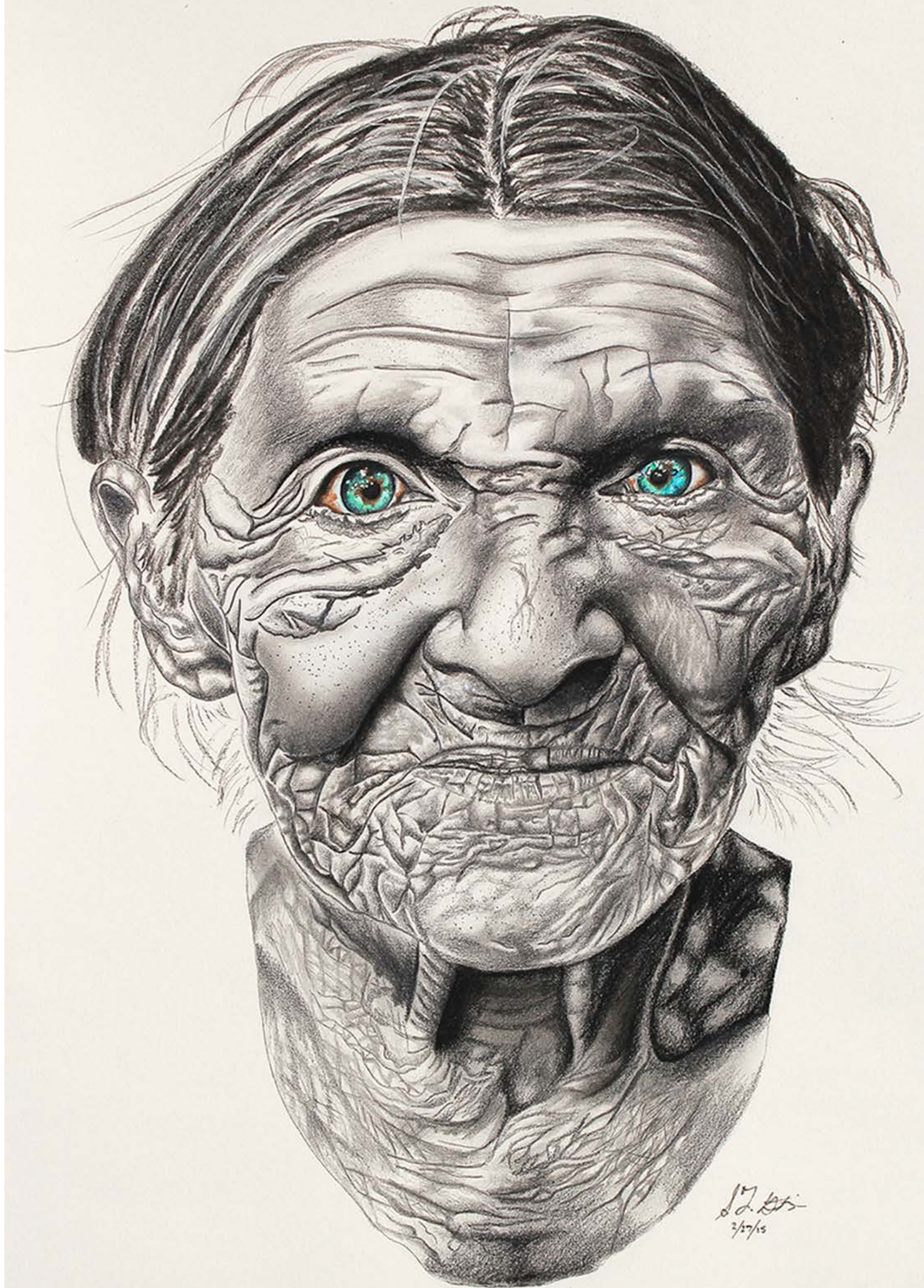
than its counterparts.

*EXPERIENCIA.*

18 X 24 IN.

GRAPHITE DUST, PENCIL, AND COLOR PENCIL ON PAPER.

SUEEY GUTIERREZ.



## FIRST HAND SMOKE

“But father...”

“No. Hannah it’s time to sleep,” I said. She had hollowed-out cornucopias of fear for eyeballs.

“Just tell me one of your stories first,” she said. Hannah stood on the counter; her head bobbed around the same height as a cereal box. I assumed her youth was measured by the size of her bones. Her fingers were crayons in my hands. Her fingers were colorful instruments of a time that had more beauty. She had been sitting in the sink with the tadpoles she had found in the drinking water. She was trying to drown them. I did not have the heart to tell her about the impossibility of her task.

“Once you’re in bed I will tell you stories,” I said. She moved amongst the debris. She moved amongst the molded over dishes and stacks of unpaid bills that were like columns of stone supporting the structure of our house. Spread out before her on the countertop was a clear ashtray; a light residue of tobacco powdered its insides. Hannah placed her hands on the rim of the ashtray; she tensed her forearms, the thin life lines of muscle bubbled to the surface, and she lifted herself into the ashtray. She cradled herself, turned her body onto its side, hiding her face from me. She forced my voice to stretch out to her ears.

“I’m ready father,” she said.

I inhaled deeply on my cigarette. I watched her bald head glimmer against the burning cherry, the amber sun of my mouth, the only light she knew. She had clipped her own hair that way, bald. She liked the way the soft and neglected skin on her head felt against her weathered hands. She thought it made her fit in with the boys she worked with; the boys that dug the trenches in the front yard in the neighborhood.

We all knew something bad was coming; even the small boned ones could tell. We prepared. We sacrificed by giving our children to the cause.

“Your head is beautiful, Hannah. It’s not full of hatred,” I said with soft lips hoping she wouldn’t hear me, hoping her head was too far away to be peaked or valleyed by my voice. I hoped her head was still full of grace and leaves that stitched up young girl’s dreams.

“The boys, the ones from the trenches, tell me that I’m sick. They say that’s why I don’t have hair. Am I sick, father?” She asked.

“You have always been sick,” I said. I held the end of the cigarette between my teeth and I transferred it between my middle and index finger.

“Want the cure all?” I asked. I dangled the cigarette in front of Hannah’s face, a premonition of her future.

“Not right now. Right now I just want to hear your stories,” she said.

“You’ve heard all my stories,” I said.

“Please. How else will I sleep?” She asks.

“Have I told you the one about the prince?” I ask.

“No. Tell me,” she said with excitement.

“Well... There was a prince and he lived in a world like ours. The prince was ugly; he had the head of an egg and teeth made of skin. His father was the king... the king was a sad man. His semen had spoiled in his body; he was responsible for almost everything ugly thing in the world. He wanted his son to feel love. He wanted his son to feel that special kind of love that can’t be offered by a father.”

“The prince sounds like us, father,” Hannah said.

“The king arranged a marriage for his son; he found a blind peasant girl and promised her father many riches of the kingdom. The king didn’t hesitate. He brought the priest into his chambers. There the priest asked the skin teathed prince and the blind peasant girl to pronounce their love officially to the court. The prince vowed to give the blind peasant girl gold covered apples daily and make the ocean into a bed to soothe his wife’s dreams. Before the blind peasant girl promised her soul to the prince she touched his face. She felt the deep holes in his face; the bruised rings of desperation underneath his eyes. She struggled with the prince’s loose lips that sagged like melted butter. Before she could make the choice of ‘I do’ or ‘I will not’ she unsheathed the prince’s sword and stabbed herself clean through the chest.”

“That story is too happy; I want something fantastical,” Hannah said while rubbing the cigarette ash on her face.

“Have this cigarette, it will help you sleep,” I said. I dangled the cigarette just out of the reach of her chiseled lips.

“Fine,” she said. She took the cigarette into her mouth and inhaled deeply to stay alive.

“Here’s a story I’ve never heard before,” I said.

“There were three people left on Earth; three nuns that had taken a vow of silence. They journeyed around the Earth looking for other people – even though they knew if they found someone they would never be able to talk to them. They held the horrors of the world in their voices. They eventually encountered a desert and knew they had to trek out across it. The nuns found camels. I have to explain the camels: the animals of Earth have always known how to talk. They hid this from human beings because of our predilection for malcontentedness. The camels talked openly in front of the nuns that rode upon them; the camels talked about how the nuns broke their backs, how this was the closest they’d ever get to a hump and something about sand and toes of a camel. The nuns became overwhelmed with the distasteful nature of the camels – all the spitting and crudeness. The nuns stopped, right there in the middle of the desert, and dismounted the camels. The nuns had

gone made beneath the weight of their habits. They had been carrying small firearms underneath their clothes; they tucked the guns tightly against their cotton underwear. They brandished their guns and shot each camel in the face.”

“That is a real love story,” Hannah said.

“That story was wonderful. It made me tired for the first time in my life.”

“Sleep long then. You don’t have to ever worry about waking up,” I said.

“Perhaps one more story?” Hannah asked. “I would like to hear one about mother.”

“Anything for my daughter,” I said.

“Mommy is dead – just like you are. She was born dead – just as you and I were born dead. When I met your mother...her skin was barely able to stay on those tendons and mutilated muscles. She was dead before she ever loved you – or me. Why do you think we dig those trenches? Those trenches are for your mother – and the mothers of the boys that help you dig. All the women are dead; you don’t see the holes in your head? Can’t you feel the skin sinking back into dust? Your body being pulled closer to the footnotes of life?”

“I don’t want to be dead,” Hannah said.

“We all want to be other things than ourselves; but you have to be dead. If you were alive you’d want to live forever,” I said.

“I haven’t gotten a chance to tell you a story yet, Father. And Father, I’m not dead,” she said.

“What makes you think that?” I asked.

“He told me,” Hannah said. She raised her hand from the ashes and pointed to the corner of the kitchen we lived in.

In the corner of the room was a 45-year-old man. His face was the way I imagined normal faces looked; it was still attached and symmetrical. He looked like people from the history books that had done great things. He had no blemishes on his skin. His forehead was so precisely straight it seemed to span the horizon.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“Hannah’s husband,” he said. “From the future.” His soft green eyes reminded me of the grass my wife was sleeping in.

“But you don’t look like us,” I said.

“We’ve restored humanity. It’s in our bones. In the future,” Hannah’s future husband said.

“See father, I’m not dead yet,” my daughter said.

“Husband, will you tell us a story. Show my father how to live,” she said.

“For you, my love, I will,” he said as he turned to face me. “Our world is a beautiful forest. A young sapling got its first hold in our dirt; it rooted itself to our soil. He saw no space for himself in the forest; the nourished and flourished trees that were already grown cast long shadows. The sapling, needing to find a place

for himself, decided to grow downward into the Earth. Yes. He grew downward. It took millions upon millions of years but the sapling eventually grew throughout the entire Earth; it grew from one side to the other. The sapling poked a small branch out on the opposite of the Earth, accomplishing his goal. The small branch waited for a moment and then the people of Earth cut it down. Does this mean anything to you?”

“It means the world, husband,” my daughter said.

“Means nothing to me. We’ve forgotten about the nature of mothers,” I said.

“Don’t talk to my future husband like that,” Hannah said.

“It’s all right dear; your past father does not know better. He’s dead now. And in the future,” her future husband said.

“It’s your turn to lie down, Father. You finally look happy,” Hannah said.

I climbed into the ashtray. The glass was cool and I could see my reflection in the crystallized glass. My skin was a diseased rubber band. I felt hapless and hopeless.

“I’m tired, daughter,” I said. “Tell me a story.”

My daughter Hannah cut holes around my eyes and funneled into my head, “Yes Father. Here’s the only story I remember you telling me: one day you were here and the next day you were not.”

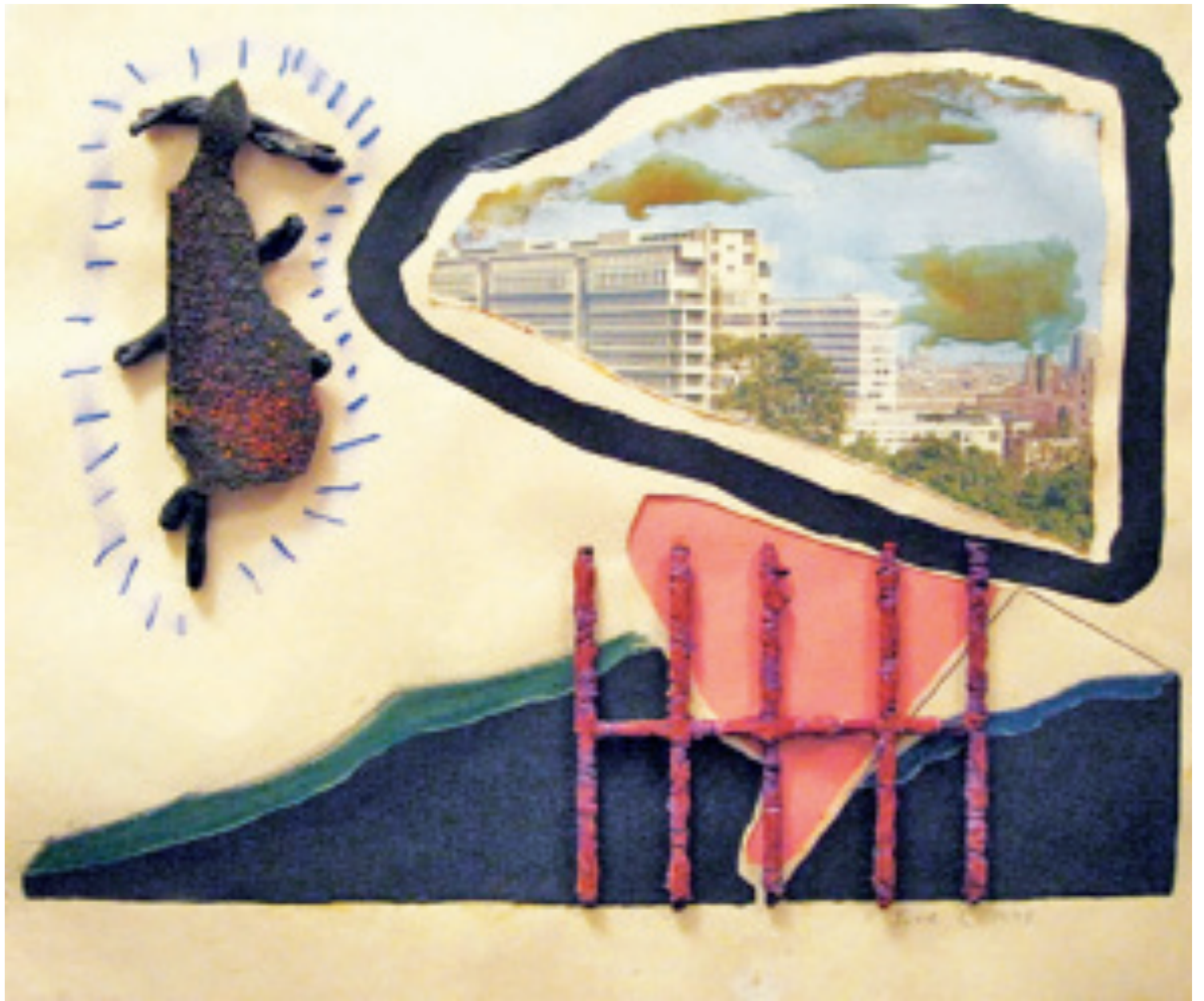
I closed my eyes and heard my daughter kiss her future husband. The boys in the trenches sang the word forgiveness over and over and over again.



*UNTITLED.*

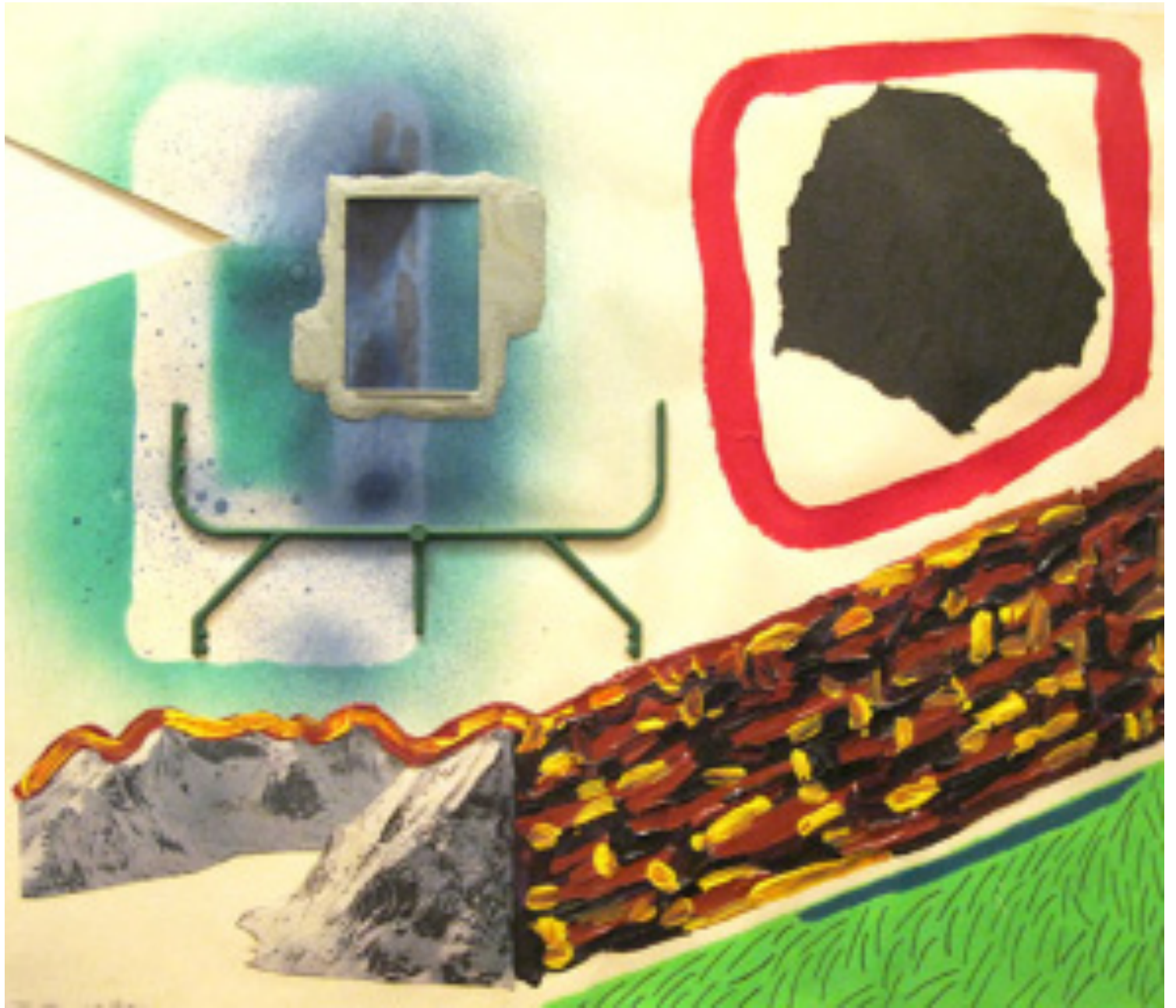
14 X 17 IN.  
MIXED MEDIA.

IRA JOEL HABER.









## LAPSES, PULSES

### ENCAUSTIC 7

In that scratchwork horizonline,  
I felt  
a semblance assail me,  
in another speech without words.

A loneliness echoed incompletely,  
confusingly, abrupt as a crustacean  
without a plan, knowing the ocean  
is all the same wave:

The whole white rift, of lapses,  
pulses, leapt-onto-ness,  
and no arm in the ether to face  
us with its fingers red as death.

I was sent to falsify or love  
chromosomal afternoons. Falsify  
and love the acausal, inverted  
vaginal blackness.

## **FOR A GHOST**

### **ENCAUSTIC 8**

The blood of the sun, for a ghost  
no one knows.  
The alien in the mine, and the  
explosive origins above.

The needles, the prints, the delicate  
imperceptible longing,  
as if a pink ore exposed  
on the downslope.

Where are the Japanese?  
Where are the trains  
to take us  
to what we will forget?

**A CLAMOR**  
**“CYCLICAL GENIUS”**

Sacks and lattices,  
wisps of twigs, leaving,  
tiny black answerings  
of birds beyond  
a clamor.

You choose  
your own wonder  
of hoops, reach  
an earthy, unpronounceable  
intent.

The world's all  
gone. Never was  
here: this is  
the mystery.

It reapplies and slides



JAMES WAGNER

---

\*

again, against

habit, longing.

The heart is never

redder. The torso

twists.

## IN THE BLOOD OF A THOUSAND SHRUGS

### ENCAUSTICS 9, 10, 11, 12, 13

The cells in the thighs, in the night,  
at the feet of a planetary misgiving,  
impromptu and  
maligned, but free  
in the dorsal morning.

\*

Most wind was  
sexual. All knew this.

Uncertainties were  
all we wished.

\*

A wash of delicate thrums, teeming  
with no causes, no  
losses. A lizard is a bird is a red drift  
down a fern  
stalk sense.

\*

The long sought.

The self-bribing mind.

Away in the embrace.

Where the friend was.

\*

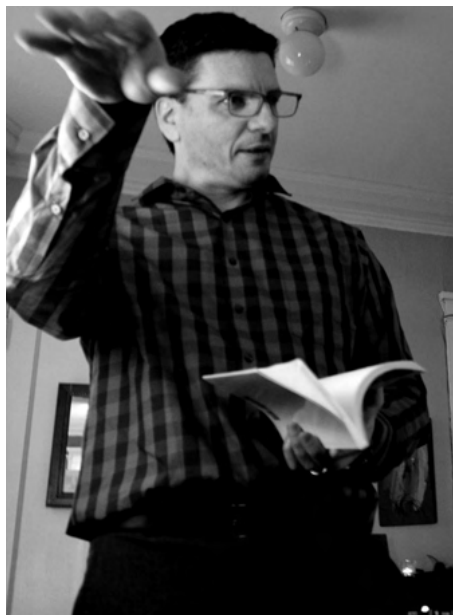
Earthen, babies

in the blood of a thousand

shrugs, imbalanced against

the black happiness of life.

## HOLDING FORTH, WITH NOTHING TO GO ON: CONNOR FISHER INTERVIEWS JAMES WAGNER



**Connor Fisher:** I wanted to begin by asking how the poems in *Thrown* function as ekphrastic works. Some of your poems engage directly with Bracha Ettinger's paintings, whether through direct description of her visual imagery, or through interpretations of what the abstract elements of her paintings may represent. Other poems aren't as clearly tied to Ettinger's paintings, and seem to move into a linguistic space that relates obliquely to the paintings' visual field. In writing *Thrown*, what was your method of ekphrastic composition; or, how do you intend for poetry (as language-based medium) to engage with painting (as image-based medium)?

**James Wagner:** It is somewhat difficult to answer. The material in the poems were unlocked by, in the time of, viewing the painting. The remains of the day, the night. The textual information in Bracha's titles are more than instinctive assignments, too. Likewise, the time spent on the painting of the paintings, sometimes up to six years on one piece, is significant. The full load of the sensations of and in the paint, through the transfer of digitization, through the ether from Israel, into a folder here, and the viewing through the software application to see the visual—this is all a removal from the actual painting. There is the painting, there is the paint, there are the spirits in the painting, and how those spirits may have come to be. What I mean to say is that what I was seeing was itself a removal, translation upon translation upon translation. The painting is the actualization of bodily sensations, thoughts, traipsing through, energies. These were interpreted into strokes, paints, names, mediums, sizes. Likewise, for me, writing the poems. In some instances, I stayed further into the multi-translated visual image, or a hint of this myth (Persephone, for example), but twisted into my own experience. I am interested in transmutation. I feel that when the immediate certainties are troubled, when we get under the sayings, and unbridle them, then we can get somewhere new. Werner Herzog, the director, talked

about the need for new images, the desperate need for them, as if one needed air. I feel this connection, too, with poetry. I want a poetry that induces itself, as if under hypnosis, a spell that will not be solved. The words are more than what they mean: they are sounds. They are incantatory. The meanings are specious, trickles of water down a dark wall.

**CF:** I'm thinking of your description of the time and translations that Bracha's paintings underwent as they passed through mental, material, and representational shifts. You describe this as a process of translation and "removal," and it also functions as mediation or twinning; objects are moved through other objects (here, the paintings and poems are moved through space, media, technology) in addition to being shifted into different forms.

This idea appears in multiple poems—for example, in XXXIII (after the painting *Eurydice, The Graces, Persephone*), you write:

An oblong fascination with your twinship,  
as if beyond the staring there was a fertile  
misunderstanding (77).

The subject's interest toward the twin (a sort of abject non-self / non-other) and the "staring" (to a "misunderstanding") mediate the gaze as it passes through to the "beyond."

Not to hang up on the process of composition, but was mediation, as well as translation, a part of the work? It seems like this is an aspect of the "transmutation" you referenced, the twisting of Bracha's paintings into your own experiences, and a way that painting can move through space, time, media, and emerge, as a reflection of itself, in a poem.

**JW:** My wife is a twin, so this language is perhaps familial to a certain extent. But the passage is not clumsily about my or my wife's life. This is a side point, however. (Everything's a side point). I would never say "reflection" as that suggests a copy, which I don't think is happening. The mediation occurs through the viewing of the painting, the image on the computer monitor, out of size of the original, and also my environmental and mental states. At the time of the writing. It is never the same water. Same brain. This is the Buddhist ethos. There is no "my" or "self" to point to—it is always at an at that is not there. Uttering, fumbling, the anxious belief in frames of language, thought, ordered through the insidious rules of English grammar. Grammar is a structural belief system, too, which seeks to order the unorderable. I am interested in what it is concealing. It is all mediation, translating, from our first feeling, to the thought, to the ordering of these through a language system. But there

is no truth to it, other than that truth ascribed to it. The ascribing, though, is dubious to me. Be it belief in religious, psychological or aesthetic frames. People believe in things they want to believe in. That ego underlying, or the mirage of the ego, is more of my interest. To put it differently, when a conceptualist, post-conceptualist, meta-post-conceptualist, for instance, tells you this is how things are, you needn't even bother responding to this house of cards. The interest in believing in that house of cards is more interesting to me.

**CF:** I'm drawn to your description of the "my" or "self"—a subject that does not exist within the poem, and which differs substantively from the "ego" that inhabits or underlies systems of belief. You indicate that this ego (or series of egos) ascribes beliefs to various constructed systems and possesses an agency or causal power that the self lacks (since the latter is not real in the poem).

In XLII, you write:

The words form only  
from air, in the  
lights, sending  
it all to the teeth.

White trace of  
the appearances.  
No self ever  
to lose (90).

The self does not exist (and consequently cannot be lost), and this absence troubles the agency of language. As you indicated, grammar itself is a non-generative, arbitrary system, subject to slippage, that "order[s] the unorderable" and persists based on the willingness of those who believe in it.

Who or what then is the agent of language within the poem; from what source do words emerge?

**JW:** I am choosing specific words, but from where they come is a great mystery to me. They arise in the moment of the painting, of the poem, whereas others do not. And then I feel some words unlock others from coming forward. Something brings them forward, but I cannot even speculate how or why. Perhaps in fifty years, they will understand neural pathways in the brain to determine this, but I was quite relieved to learn in the last few years about the neurons that are in the guts, as well. The enteric nervous system. And, yet, none of these internal systems work unless

there is external food and water. All of these things are implicit in the making of words. No water, no words. But to get to your other point about the differences of ego and self, these too are markers we use to describe things, but they are not proven other than us first convincing ourselves that they are proven, so we feel we can move along, move forward. Even these metaphors of mobility are specious. Do we have any proof that we are moving forward? No, of course not. This is the land of Beckett. The end games. Or, more to the point: beginning games. We are always at the beginning of games, and then we forget about the games, and we call this reality. To further the absurdity, once we are in this made-up reality, we then tell each other to additionally be logical. But we have no proof.

**CF:** I'd like to pursue your comments about metaphor and reality. The systems you're describing—beliefs about the self, the composition of poetry, etc—all seem reducible, in that they are sustained by metaphor and collective belief, and are underlain (in many cases) by other belief-based systems. This may be a metaphysical question in addition to a poetics question, but what then (if anything) can we understand to be real, or what underlies the metaphors that seem to guide our consciousness and our daily living? Systems and concepts like grammar, psychological and aesthetic frames, the self and the ego, are arbitrary constructs based on belief, and even reality itself is questionable (or, you indicated, made-up altogether). Do these concepts reduce to the material (neural pathways and food and water), or are we finally unable to know what is real or how this reality is grounded?

**JW:** I often experience myself and others in the world this way: holding forth, with nothing to go on. This is referential to the Buddha's conception of relative and absolute truth. The capitalists especially seek agreement with their shaped reality. This is right, this is wrong. It is useful, I think, to spend a little time noticing all of the rules, innocent and not, around you. In public places. This need to create a normal, a normal patterning, is directly related to controlling other things. It now reminds me of a piece I wrote/transcribed connected to the Dewey Decimal Classification and Relative Index (DDC/RI). It is Dewey's (and others') systemic categorization of social control, including persuasion, which in Dewey numbering refers to 303.34–303.38. I'll include the piece here:

303.34–303.38 Social control through specific means

Class socialization through specific means of control in 303.32; class comprehensive works in 303.33

.34 Leadership

Including cooperation, influence

.342 Persuasion

By individuals

Class here interdisciplinary works on persuasion

For a specific aspect of persuasion, see the aspect, e.g., individual psychology of persuasion 153.852, persuasion by media 302.23, persuasion by propaganda 303.375

.35 Utilitarian control

Use of rewards and incentives

.36 Coercion

Including authority, punishment, restraint, threat

See also 364.6 for treatment and punishment of offenders

.37 Normative methods

Including perception of norms

For public opinion, see 303.28

.372 Belief systems and customs

.375 Propaganda

.376 Censorship

.38 Public Opinion

Class here attitudes, attitude formation and change

.385 Prejudice

Class here social stereotypes and stereotyping



.387 Opinions held by racial, ethnic, national groups

Add to base number 303.387 notation 1-9 from Table 5, e.g., opinions of Canadians 303.38711

.388 Opinions held by occupational and miscellaneous groups

Add to base number 303.388 notation 04-99 from Table 7, e.g., opinions of dentists 303.3886176; then add 0\* and to the result add notation 1-9 from Table 2, e.g., the opinions of dentists in France 303.3886176044

I especially enjoyed the .37 section, and the notion of the perception of norms. You asked specifically about the ability to discern, however, what is reality, and I must say that you may be asking the wrong person for this, truly. I mentioned your question to my wife, in fact, and she said, How do we know that we are not in some dream, where the feelings are real, the pain is real, the suffering is real? I do not mean to discount the very clear and horrific suffering in this world, by saying so, because even if we are in a projected dream from a past or future universe, the delusions and viciousness, the gravitas and the greed, are overflowing. I just go back to the relative and absolute truth of the Buddha. Or, to use an example, to explain by example—am I explaining?—the water is there, but why is the water there?

**CF:** To relate the topic back to poetry, I think of Spicer, who wrote that “Words are what sticks to the real. We use them to push the real, to drag the real into the poem” (from the second letter to Lorca). Spicer doesn’t acknowledge, though, that words and poems are a part of the same “real” that they push and drag. Spicer may indicate that there are different types or levels of reality. This could encompass meanings as broad as (1) the poem-level and the material-level of the real, (2) to use your term, a level of the dream and a level of the lucid, or (3) levels of “shaped reality” (e.g., of the capitalists).

There seems to be a similar motion in several of the poems in *Thrown*, as they engage with ideas of layering, disguise, and origin. The ending of LXII:

Each inkling,  
knowing the knowing  
dissipates, so none  
to come from,

to accumulate  
 in disguises, left  
 over, toward a sun  
 ever approximate (126).

Awareness that “the knowing dissipates” posits an absence of absolute knowledge and an absence of the origin of knowledge. The poem indicates that all knowledges (or ontologies) merely “accumulate in disguises” and are masked without understanding where they proceed (“left / over, toward a sun / ever approximate”). Does this (or the poetics of *Thrown* in general) function like Spicer’s articulation of using words to “push the real,” or is the “real” in *Thrown* more speculative and less directly effected by words?

**JW:** Do words actually stick? If they stick, do they also, eventually, slide off? Leaving just the residue? Is this residue what vibes are? And, then, to follow Spicer’s metaphor field further: if they are sticking “to” the Real, are they then not also concealing the Real? Never mind the entire idea of The Real, as if anyone has been to, or experienced, The Real. Lacan, Žižek. How would they know this? Is there a sign on the outskirts of the realm of the Real? These are bedtime stories. Nice things to think about, to dream about, but nothing more. It’s up to you if you want to believe them. It reminds me very much of a time talking with my friend Michael Burkard, an excellent poet, as we were both reading through an essay in which the writer talked about his work. The writer began to connect all of these things, to establish distinct meaning and supposed structure, and to assign, basically, his ideas onto the poems. It was just fiction, pure and simple, delivered in the established rhetorical turns of the professional critic. It was an elegant story, an earnest fabrication, and, of course, footnoted, as if that means anything. It always boggles my mind how literary criticism falls under the category of non-fiction. But, anyway, yes, that part about “accumulate in disguises”...this is what I feel much of the time. I don’t know if it is speculative. It actually feels quite obvious to me. To go back to that dark wall I mentioned at the beginning, it often seems to me that people are describing, when they describe, a dark wall, in another room, a room they have never been in, and talking with the utmost authority of the certainty of what they have never seen. This is also why whenever I hear the word “clearly,” for instance, I have the most difficult time not to laugh.

**CF:** I want to shift the discussion a little and ask about the form of the poems in *Thrown*. Most of them have a similar formal construct: a few stanzas, each of which comprise two to five short lines. This feels like an intentional constraint, especially given the variety of Ettinger’s paintings and the diverse themes of the poems. What prompted the decision to deploy a constrained and consistent form? Or perhaps

that's a backwards view of the process. I often find form to be enabling: a point of departure that does the work of choosing cadence and sounds, rather than an arbitrary decision. Then, what does this restricted form catalyze or enable, whether regarding Ettinger's paintings or your own poetics, that another form or a variety of forms would have failed to achieve?

**JW:** There was nothing purposively programmatic about the structures of stanzas. If anything, the most difficult part of the project was to have a tone or tones that seemed to agree, transmute, or engage with the paintings, and yet be varied enough so as to not bore, or devolve into a pattern. The poems were written from December 2013 to April 2014, and obviously one is in different moods, spaces, over that long of a time. Reading and experiencing different things. And, too, coming into an understanding of the project itself. Finding one's footing (there is no actual footing) as one goes. Are poems maps of this territory? I don't know. But getting back to the tones, I had to be free to write whatever arrived while viewing the images. Oftentimes a phrase from a dream would provoke something, a tag-end. Or a sentence in a book. This would start the flow. I find if I can get something, like a piece of a thread, I can follow what's seemingly attached to it. But the realm, so to speak, or the haunted atmosphere, really, that I found myself in, presages a vocabulary, I found. I never would look backward, unlike Orpheus, at the poems. And I deliberately allowed time to pass between rounds of writing the eleven poems, so that I would forget the turns and plots of the previous poems, but it was important too that not too much time passed. I have always believed that projects must be finished in a certain amount of time, so that there is a feeling of an emotional or tonal connectivity. This may be a delusion, of course, but I hold to it.

**CF:** In my reading tone in of *Thrown* and my own understanding of tone, it seems to occupy a liminal space between the sonic and rhetorical elements of the work. Tone at once comprises (1) the sonic, rhythmic power of language and the way sound is intentionally curated, but also (2) a function or use of language that, while not solely sonic, plays on linguistic structure and emphasis to make, if not an argument, then an evocation or assertion.

I think of the duality or liminality of tone (as sound and rhetoric) in this passage from LI:

Inner orientation, breath-weights; toward a hosting  
of know-crossing,  
agreeable in a helix--

Bartok, blue boy, blood of a

thundering mumbler: not a god's; a flash of  
no reason to reason (107).

If this is correct, or approaches a correctness, how do rhetoric and sound play off one another to inform the poems' tone? Or, if tone allies itself more closely with either rhetoric or sound, how does the outlier effect tone as well?

**JW:** There is a muted electricity in Bracha's art, a kinetic and calm admixture. There is mystery there too—at least for me. There is a decision to make then, on what to do with the writing. Does one write against this, toward it, within it? (I will leave off how this distance is discerned). I think on the narrative level, as you suggested earlier, that I do all of those things, to varying degrees, but I don't feel that is the case tonally. That is a choice. I felt taking the tone against the expressivity of the paintings, as I felt them, would be, in a way, a selfish drift on my part. I did not want the poems to push the paintings into a supplementary position. I wanted both to be equally there.

As for sound, it is the source of where my poems go. Sound is the muse to me. Plots follow. The human mind will always fill in gaps it doesn't understand—it will make up stories for a variety of reasons, or for no reason. So, plots and explanations in poems rarely interest me, or they are of secondary interest. I get great enjoyment over the deft use of sonic arrangement. Of the balance and variety of it. It really thrills me.

I have thought about rhetoric for a long time. I taught rhetoric at Syracuse University when I was a graduate student. It may have been more interesting to me than it was to my students. It was the notion of persuasion implicit in language, of all of what went into this persuasion. The speaker's history, who was talking, this gender, this race, versus another, that biographical force, and the ordering of the language within sentences and paragraphs. The imperialistic violence of English, for instance, even being in this country. This word instead of that, the use of the semi-colon versus the dash. I think this is perhaps, too, why I have such trouble with groups in general, whether they are advocating this or that. I definitely have preferences and beliefs, but my trust in them is perhaps more at a distance than others. Everyone is always selling a belief system. How people become persuaded to believe in things is an interesting thing to me. But, too, we must also think about the rhetoric of rhetoric itself, and whether the explanations of the claims made in it (rhetoric) have anything under them. I would want to strip rhetoric itself of the certainty of its answers.

I don't see dualities, structures, or outliers. I see rhetoric. They are all the case. Pick a different word, you have a different assemblage. Outliers, for instance, is a term determined by a belief in norms being the truth, the majority is correct, and so on. These are mental handrails to help one along, in trying to make sense. I have said this elsewhere, but I have always enjoyed that phrase "make sense"—with the

notion that there is no sense there, unless it is made. Made-up, I would offer.

**CF:** In several answers, you have referenced Buddhist spirituality and its implicit presence within the poetics and tone of *Thrown*. Buddhism seems to exist and have an influence as a formed system that is aware of itself as having-been-formed; as a self-aware construct that gains a calm energy from an awareness of the limits of its own constructed reality. This awareness functions at both a “macro” and “micro” level; our reality or realities are made up, and so are concepts of individual possession or a “self” (as you described in an earlier answer). Yet this does not produce anxiety, but calm. There also seems to be an implicit “flattening” or lack of hierarchy among beings and structures; as constructs are aware of their own artificiality and beings lack an ego-driven “self,” none can be ontologically or ethically elevated above any other.

Does Buddhism, or an emergent poetics informed by Buddhism, resist the violence and reductive homogeneity that is explicit within belief systems as you reference them, even as it is itself a system of belief?

**JW:** My attraction to Buddhism began in my undergrad days (a.k.a., a long time ago). I remember reading the more popular Buddhist books like Herrigel’s *Zen in the Art of Archery*, Suzuki’s *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, Hesse’s *Siddhartha*, and *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. I remember, too, trying to get my mind around things like “the voidless void” and being very interested in koans in general. I have always been drawn to the intuitive and the abstract, and I really love anything strange, or unsettling. It makes me smile, or even happy. It is true, too, as you say, that I don’t become anxious by this, but am calmed by the chaos. I am attracted to impermanence. Since my undergrad days, I read more and more, and became good friends with Steve Timm, whose wife Sue Hoops, since deceased, was a practicing Buddhist. I learned many things from Sue, and I cherish the knowledge that she passed on to me. I have Sue’s two beautiful thangkas, actually, in my house, in this very room that I am typing this to you. Vajrayogini and Green Tara. I attended a meditation sitting about 10 years ago, in a loosely grouped sangha in a little city called Paradise, and, in 2011, I joined a Vipassana sangha in nearby Chico. It was only since then that I would say that I have more significantly blended certain teachings into my thinking and practice. I watch what I say now. I tend to now ask myself questions before speaking, on whether it is helpful, or whether it even needs to be said. It’s been interesting how quiet I’ve become! Meditation has been an enormously important practice for me as a person, and it has also played a significant role in my writing. I am attracted to Buddhism because the dharma is not cloying or annoying, and one is asked to question belief, whether something is true for one or not. This ability to question is quite seductive. I feel most at ease then. My thoughts and beliefs will not be your thoughts and beliefs, and the freedom to wander and become, in a sense, who one is, or is becoming, is a primary, unswayable desire for me. But, this is not

self-absorption in itself. The goal of it, for me, is to reduce suffering in the world, reduce tension, competitiveness, and all the things that go with it. It is a political and social decision as much as it is a spiritual one. Or, to put it differently, as I say in *Thrown*: “no war’s there but us.”

**CF:** In conclusion, I’d like to ask how the poems in *Thrown* relate to your earlier work (I’m thinking especially of *Trilce*, and if you have any upcoming projects that will follow *Thrown*. As I understand, *Trilce* was composed through homonymic translation (“auralgraphs”), so that the poems maintained a sonic structure similar to Vallejo’s poems. Similarly, *Thrown* plays off of Ettinger’s paintings, but borrows from the visual art in more varied and diffuse ways than *Trilce* borrowed from Vallejo. Do you see your work as moving farther away from the art objects that catalyze the poems’ creation? What’s next?

**JW:** I do work in projects, and I especially enjoy them if they are challenging. The *Trilce* project was a kind of dare by the same Steve Timm mentioned above, a great poet, to take on the entirety of Vallejo’s glorious book in a homophonic way (though there are other things going on: especially aural interventions of German). The seed of *Trilce* was in my first book, the *false sun recordings*, where I wrote a section of homophonic poems to works by Celan, Reverdy, and Vallejo. It was interesting to see the five Vallejo poems (all from his *Trilce*) in the *false sun recordings* change when I did those same five, along with the other 72, for my *Trilce* some years later. In the *false sun recordings*, the final section of the book contains poems written while listening to the particular music mentioned in the titles. So, I guess (I hadn’t thought about this), the musical came first in the *false sun recordings*, then the textual in *Trilce*, and now the visual in *Thrown*. Maybe I should do something with touch or taste next. But “what’s next” now is that I am currently writing poems to paintings/ encaustics by Nava Waxman, a visual artist who lives and works in Toronto. She is having a solo show in late May, and into June, in Toronto, and she is preparing a booklet of the twenty-or-so poems and perhaps some of the paintings/encaustics that will be in the show. There is a delicacy in her work that appeals to me. It is alive, emotional, sensitive, and unusual. However, I do think I am edging toward something more documentary in nature as well. I have no idea how this will take shape. It is strange to say something like this, when one knows nothing, but this has been a feeling for a couple of months now. There is a time, I’m sure, when it will show itself more significantly perhaps, but it’s all still a mystery to me.

## I KNOW A LANTERN

I know

I woke up today.

I'm still

there,

another of each sassafras.

so disappointed,

so much better,

relocated

reckless

outside worlds

are everything,

and everything else,

still.

Unless

you see

always questions.

I wonder how to

put up with

nothing,

terrified of

myself.

& you were walking

rattling

evening.

I home

but don't

Yes, I'm

either. You don't know a lot of things.

As soon as

never

only                      open                      moving rain and  
find me,  
night  
   was never  
   so lonely                      for years  
   life,                                      no one's  
   and asked  
if I was mad.

I don't want                      every                      home. I just want  
   out the window.  
   to disappear. With knowing                      and knowing  
   And  
the knowing                      dark;  
   open,

sitting there as if it mattered. As if someone might need it

Yes,                                      but                      still  
   the worlds.  
I know a                      spell                      I know  
   the forty days before  
   the diameter of a tree, which is  
its                      root

You don't

mean "herder of



the soup.  
For supporting  
the end of  
two days, I completely  
have the energy  
to be a person  
and that's what made  
you not laugh  
alive for the last six years.  
I don't know how to  
know why.  
Except there's more to walk. I might  
find when I was three and  
disappeared when I tried to tell it.  
I might be able to  
plant more  
Goodnights  
To anything. She sat there.  
She  
always called me  
loyal to the negation of love.

but it sounds like tree. Except for the trees.  
I will always and completely love means  
drowning and That's both if you're awake enough.  
but, I will not be put  
in order

To be fair, I strongly doubt  
anything.

if you were mad and started  
I can exit fully  
out of  
people arms. Or voices. I've been married.

I've collected  
pennyroyal

I've overheard that you have  
an old box, and I can't buy better. into the ground,

a 50-foot ravine in a white-out

Who isn't sure  
people always  
fold really precisely and quickly.

so pillowed, today, is  
sleeping every time. braided, since that  
man is a white bear.

I feel  
that everything conspires to break  
what the stars detain

I should  
lantern myself  
my hope harm  
in their faint

was imprisoned for fourteen years  
under lightning,  
trembling each other  
to death

## CRIMINAL

You were thinking that your car's air conditioner smelled like wet gravel when your sister-in-law called. The smell made you think the car was filling with fumes that would breed little polyps in your brain, your blood vessels, all the invisible places in your body. You let it ring, feigning safety at the wheel. But you immediately called her back once you got home.

She told you that your older brother, her husband of eleven years, the father of her two toddled and tottering children, had been arrested. As in the police handcuffed him and put him in a stale, colorless room somewhere.

She told you why: he had stolen from a convenience store. When confronted, he had brutally beaten the employee behind the counter. She told you it was one of those coffee shop/gas station/deli counter/trucker bathhouse type places that jammed everything together in one incongruous chain but, as promised, was rather convenient. She thought you wanted to know these things.

The wrongness of these words. Like hearing wind chimes tinkling on your neighbor's porch in the middle of the night when you can't sleep. This could not be your brother. Your brother did not do these types of things. You thought it was a joke but this wasn't her kind of humor. You swallowed your saliva and it came back up, your throat like a clogged drain.

He stole chips. A couple of bags of chips, some pretzels maybe, some bottles of water charged with neon vitamins. He had money. He could have afforded to buy these items. Every bag, all the bags. Maybe the store itself if Ryan didn't need braces next year.

You apologized to your stunned sister-in-law, though you weren't sure why. She was the one who disrupted your reality. You apologized and it was like offering her a wayward piece of gum you found at the bottom of your purse.

Fascination welled up in you along with disgust. You were beginning to believe those reactions could not exist without the other. You thought about the bags of chips. You imagined, like all good food packaging, the bags boasted about all the harmful ingredients they didn't include rather than the ones they did. No trans-fats. No saturated fats. All zeros in a line.

You were still young. For the past few years, you were figuring out how to have an adult life, what that consisted of exactly. So far, you found that you had to try out a few fake ones first, really get your bearings. You probably didn't make any sense at the time and people had to be patient with you. They had to not laugh condescendingly at your lack of life, those mercurial series of selves. But

sometimes you still felt the shame as if they did laugh, the heat of their eyes on you. This inchoate discovery was happening while your brother was busy having babies, putting others first. He didn't have the luxury of overthinking his identity until it gave him migraines.

Your brother, Hunter. You always called him Aggie, mostly because your mother called him that when she was in her affectionate moods. You didn't know where this nickname came from or what it meant. You asked your mother all the time and she just shrugged as if she couldn't remember or didn't know either. Aggie brought home second prize in the science fair; Hunter James put gum in his sister's hair. He was always Aggie to you. Your brother's world was now PTA meetings, EBay ratings, first aid kits in the glove compartments of both cars.

When you were in the third grade, you took Aggie and your friend Sarah through the woods to show them the hole in the ground packed with baby bunnies. Sarah slid in the mud and hit her head on a rock on the way down. You learned how much heads bleed. How they can flow more steadily than the creek near the bunny hole. How when you see blood you slip into a state of paralysis; how you didn't have a word for this state at that point. How Aggie is the opposite of you. He tore off the bottom of his shirt and wrapped up her head tightly. He carried her like a new bride over to the neighbors' house while you stared at his newly exposed bellybutton shaped in a perfectly round circle. On the way home, you clung to his arm like a rail on a listing ship.

Your brother's wife, though currently (and understandably) bedraggled, looked like a sitcom character whose name you couldn't bring to the front of your brain, but wasn't interesting enough to act like her. She was more like a forgotten sleeve of saltines in the back of the pantry.

You agreed to meet her at the park mid-way between your respective neighborhoods. It had been raining or snowing or sleet for five days straight, so you brought your umbrella. She complimented you on it. You volleyed with noticing her new haircut. This was talk to distract from what you should have been talking about.

You both strolled in a loop around a large man-made lake in the park where chivalrous, retired men liked to go fishing. Someone at the park must keep it stocked with some kind of fish.

Your brother's wife said the kids were staying at her parents' house in Cincinnati for a few weeks until things were "sorted out." She was doing what she must have thought your brother wanted her to do. As if he was dead. You wondered how much they were talking, if that one phone call thing was real or a cinematic fabrication. You had never needed to know before. You walked her to her car, still holding up the umbrella underneath both of you even though there was nothing to shield yourselves from anymore. The sleet had stopped a few minutes earlier.

She lingered at her car door. She was taking her time because there was no need to rush back to no one. There was a kind of freedom and stillness in her sadness. A catching of breath, if somewhat fragmentary.

You pictured the house she was returning to, riddled with toys and papers but organized in tidy piles. Your brother's homemade kombucha forming in the glass jar on the top of their fridge like a dead jellyfish floating to the surface of the polluted sea. Yet imbued with health, if you could get past its graphic origins.

He had many hobbies. He collected vintage cartoon lunch boxes that were rather valuable. But it made you think about the in-between years, how he had to love those lunch boxes when most people were getting rid of them, when they were worthless. How he had existed in that uncomfortable lapse of affection.

In one of those aforementioned affectionate moods, your mother would watch you and your brother roughhouse on the scratchy living room carpet and call you "Two peas in a pod." You misheard her, not knowing the expression. "Two PEES in a POT?!" you shrieked with glee, glancing almost murderously at your brother.

That year, you insisted that your name was Trixie, though it was not and is not. You wanted to be named after your favorite girl detective from those extra pulpy paperbacks you checked out at the library. The pages smelled like an old sweater locked away in a cedar chest. The books were so old they were no longer even yellowed but browned, as if returning to their arboreal nature. You always found them on the Lazy Susan racks at the end of the aisle. The metal racks coated in a thick, gummy plastic. Susan: now that's a name you didn't want.

Your brother was incarcerated. The convenience store employee was inconveniently lingering in the hospital with some internal bleeding. You couldn't remember what time of year it was. The date was vague and indistinguishable. Then you kept seeing fish sandwich deals on television and you knew it must be around Lent. People strictly adhering to rules in which they no longer believed for the sake of comfort that comes from familiarity.

The precipitous skies darkened the day outside your window and then strangely brightened the night. The glistening whiteness of snow paralleled the wall of clouds above until they were a seamless entity. The night just as bright, just as dark, as the day.

*FROM*

**I AM HEAVY W/ FEELING**

More relevant in conversation or  
read a post the other day said  
something like poems are  
more a study of self than anything  
I'm like obviously a mirror  
would be the metaphor I think  
roll the blind up six more  
inches so I can see the sky classic  
poet at my desk five plants  
and my coffee, a skyline  
walk signal red flashing palm  
here I'll write to you in this  
I miss you and Abi and the back  
of the car I was battling a brutal  
hangover the morning after A  
told that joke I wrote into  
another poem how are you  
sometimes I read you write

About Em & E and I feel like  
I've failed at mine but know  
it's the walking signal now  
free to move about the cabin  
have a few friends here  
or something like a carpool lane



A four year old's energy  
can destroy all adults  
then summer gutted our habits  
  
the wires above our heads snapped  
it took the electrical company  
hours to fix it & we sat on the porch  
talking selfies with each other  
  
let's not relive another car ride  
there is another field flooded  
    from the storm  
sirens become background noises  
a cyclist gets doored  
  
no one dies

the blood on the sidewalk  
is only specks—

Hello again there's  
a bloody vein in this

chicken is grossing me  
out cross my heart the last

time I heard Mazzy Star  
I thought of some hands

last month & some bed  
in high school an overdose

on angst and lack of  
confidence I was walking

the street last night crawling  
my fingers over the elementary

school fence what new ways  
do you have to show me I know

how you pass days out there what  
south tastes to the tongue my

legs gathering heat with movement  
I turn over in bed & toss

the lake out of a sketch I'm working  
on leaving the past behind you I'm

thinking about a song to drive to if  
I drove anywhere anymore it's that time

of the month where we  
act like children I pick petals off

curtains my disbelief in expectation what's  
the matter with toast again I've got my

back up on the matter  
built up on the ritual

I'm trying really but this season  
is tough my ears full with

snow I can hear you but don't really know  
what to say except hello I guess we're both here

The field is full  
of deer & the light  
marks the interstate—  
give us your name  
again            the deer  
have not dispersed  
& we were not listening—

# SERENA CHOPRA

---

## *FROM* IC

Weather brought itself  
ready, my body same  
ly damp as cannon  
powder useless

As ready in sin  
as we'll ever be  
naughty speaking  
severed cans

By a string  
pen  
du  
lum

wee  
ping  
pawns

...

Ic by a string

Because lichen  
is like brittle  
brain and like like

An Icarus what hovers  
as asphyxiation, I do not release  
that illusion networks in possibility

As forward is to falling : habits of expecting : jigsaw, pity

Isn't that funny  
it isn't that

A mechanis  
m is a thing  
and its own pre  
cise addictions

A heart's a plum  
silence my head  
so lump, beating  
from what it will  
draw out a si  
lence, defense pit,  
I learn so there  
is time to forget  
about

...

To say that I went willingly  
Because I went willingly

That honesty makes us vulgar,  
that branch's bit of mangled cocoon—

sorry we sor  
row

But if there's some  
thing you like let  
it shit in front  
of you, it has  
consumed you, it  
has taken to  
your mouth staring  
dumb as a flow  
er.  
...

You think like we  
are more than hearts  
beating against  
this room, you think

\*

like we are not  
each waiting to  
not be lonely  
like the heart is

not silence not  
alone willing  
its knotted-fist  
damage, undone

...

That makes what qui  
ver is that makes  
what I've eaten  
from our words eat  
ing us stop be  
eating us teeth  
chattering up  
us that makes cold  
work so damn well  
is glass and bones  
is sick like ice

...



What makes Ic in  
this love we are  
strange a fly line  
implied between  
two points I can  
not imagine  
a transparent  
white erasing  
is drawing too  
the figure I  
am the figure  
being drawn he  
moves the heart close  
to the gut the  
head organ turns  
on its matter

...

One day I woke  
a slave all had  
been taken from  
me well not all  
but enough to  
sedate me I  
had three hearts too  
many and I  
was choking on

them I was in  
my bedroom on  
my hands and knees  
choking on hearts  
this was a hist  
orical act

...

I carry us, I  
Was saying I when  
the light's mosaic

Icarus I  
As I was saying  
snow-speak, its

valium mirror  
our soles lap  
like cupped palms

two crescent moons  
make a hole  
keep, in we face

the nearness  
the crest of heat  
an Orphic look

\*

a sun

....

Old man dead

Among us:

I cannot write

but from our love

disrupt me

hands I cannot

make the count

so willing

lay the twenty-year

battery, water-pocked

face looking

departure like

traffic light not

my red-eyed

hand

...

\*

Today was far  
thest from what I  
would remember  
of its light come  
ing dim I am  
sure you were my  
love even then  
what does this mean  
except I was  
sure you saw me  
further than I  
could hold this day  
that I have been  
holding this day  
its dawn for you

*MYTH OF EVERYTHING.*

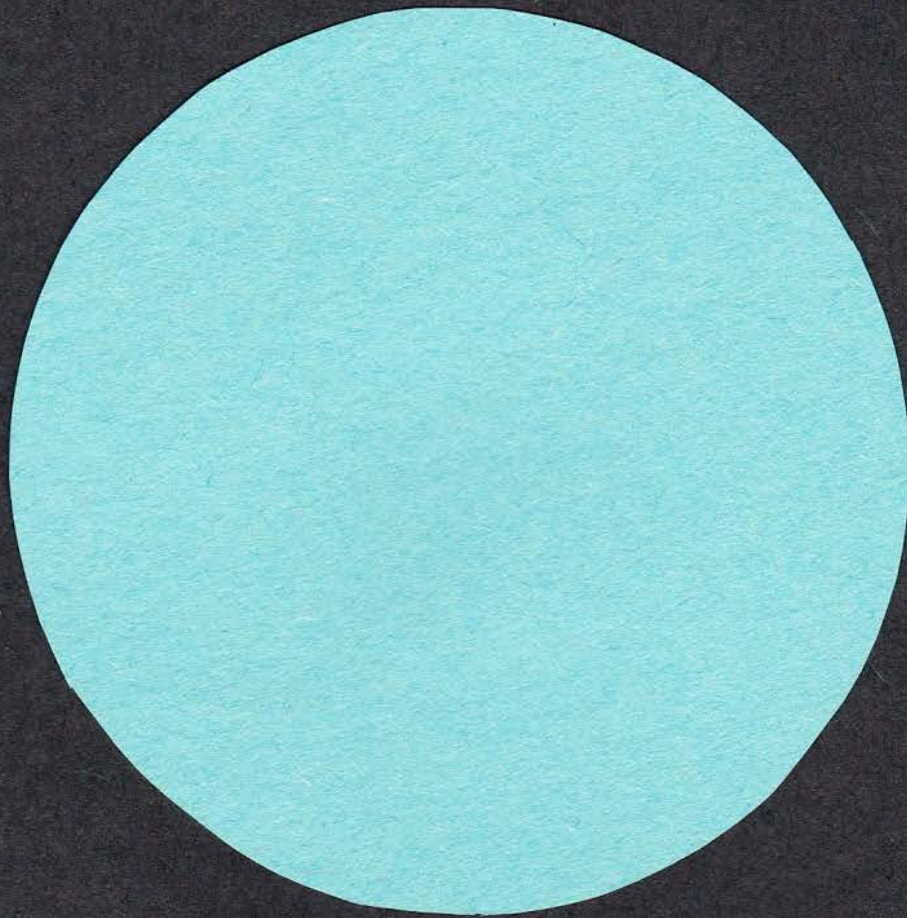
5 X 8 IN.

CONSTRUCTION PAPER.

DAVE SHAW.

*HERE IS THE MYTH OF EVERYTHING*

*EVERYTHING WAS SO CHILL*



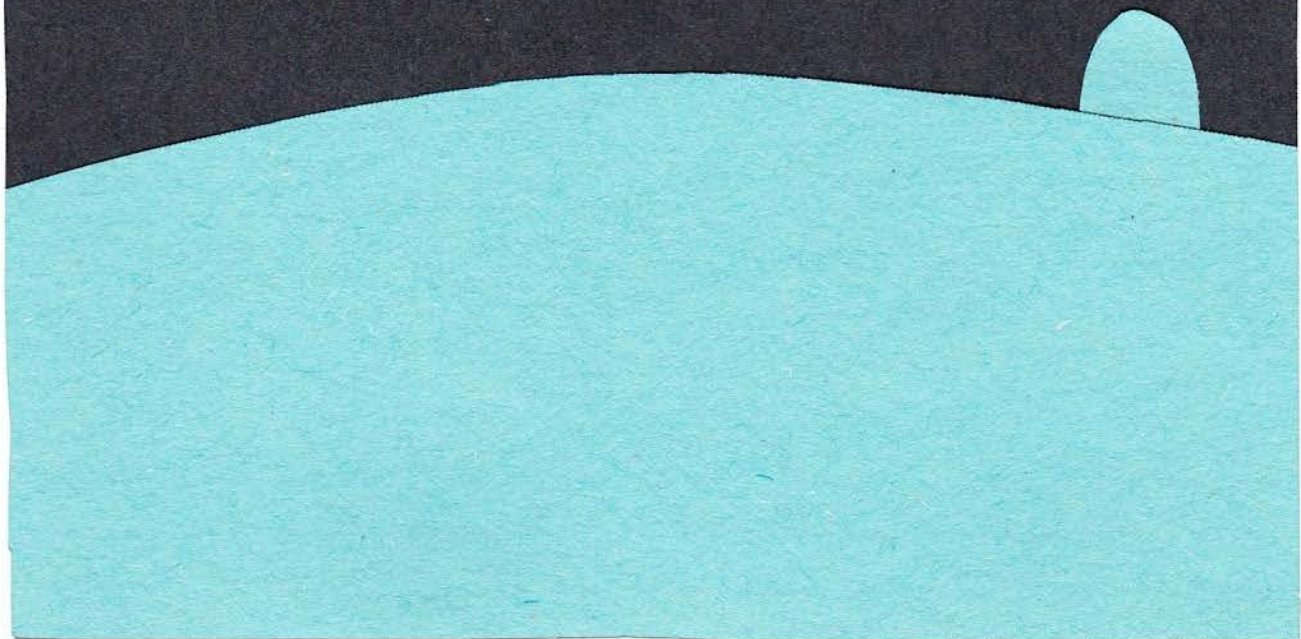
*EVERYTHING SEEMS GREAT*

*BUT SO THEN EVERYTHING GETS BORED*

*AND STARTS TO TELL ITSELF STORIES*

*TO PASS THE TIME*

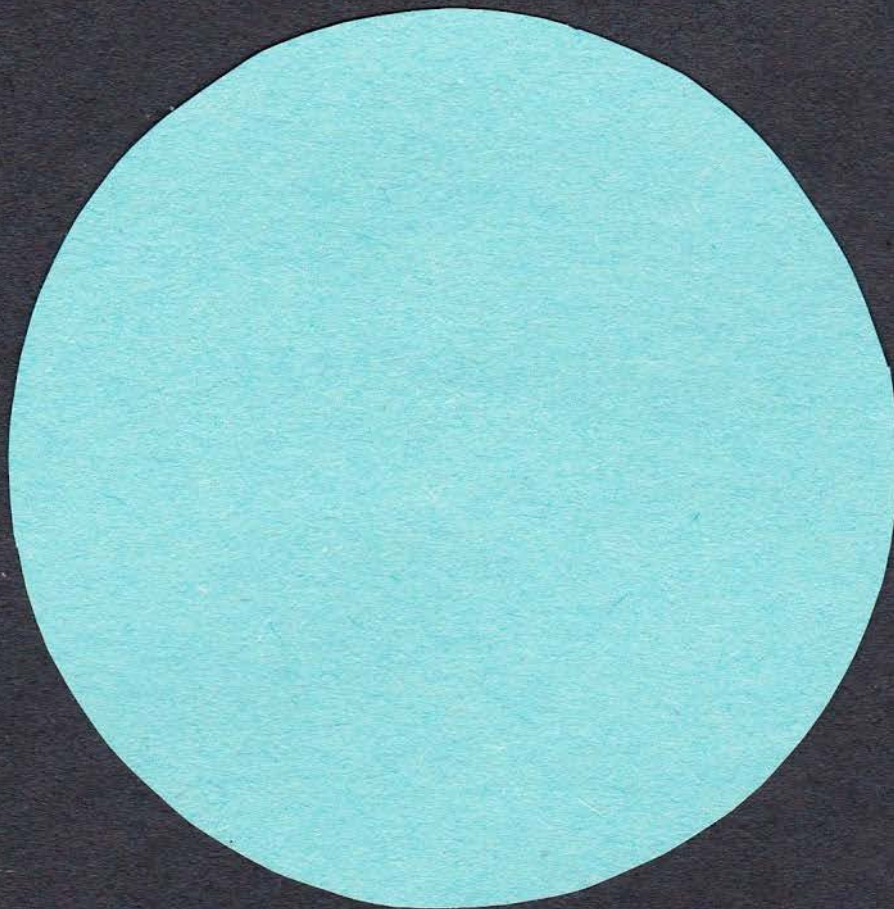
*KIND OF YEAH*





*AND THEN EVERYTHING GETS BORED*

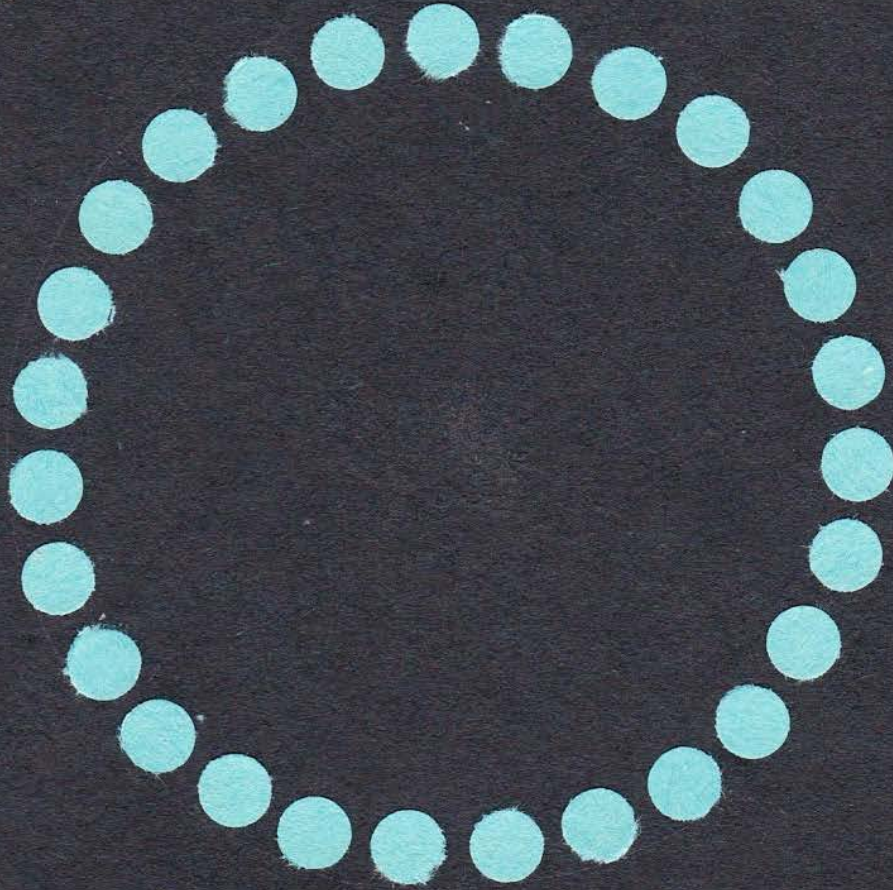
*OF THAT AND STARTS TELLING ITSELF LIES*




*AND SO EVERYTHING DEVELOPS*

*SEPERATED INTERIOR THOUGHTS*

*AND SO IT STOPS BEING EVERYTHING*



*YEAH OBVIOUSLY*



*AND SO NOW HERE IS ME AND YOU AND WE ARE DIFFERENT PEOPLE*

*AND I CAN'T TELL YOU ANYTHING*

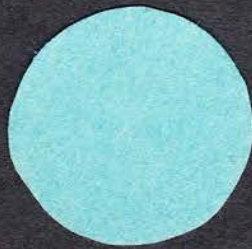
*BUT WE'RE REALLY TRYING*



*YEAH, WE'RE TRYING*

*THAT'S GOOD ENOUGH THO, RIGHT*





*RIGHT*

## RUNNER

When I was younger I liked to go running.

I ran in Indiana.

I ran in London.

I ran in Taiwan during the monsoon.

I ran in Hong Kong.

I had a water-resistant Walkman. Bright yellow. I ran with it. I had a Prince tape. Some Kenny Loggins. Diana. Ronstadt. Trot, trot, trot.

For a time, in Indiana, I ran with a blue radio apparatus called a Bone Phone. It wrapped around your shoulders. I could run and listen to basketball games.

I ran with my uncle and cousin in Connecticut and Minnesota.

I ran, a lot, by myself.

One morning, in Greenwich, I missed the bus and ran, red-faced, all the way to school. I thought of it as training. My friend saw me from the bus window and said afterwards that I looked ugly. He was disgusted, he said, to see me running in my school clothes, so red-faced next to the bus, like that.

In the Hague, they made us run around our elementary school, a former prison. We wore our heavy coats. And our cords or jeans.

“If I need to hurry, I run,” my daughter said, kicking her legs to show me.

I liked to lie in bed and think about running. When I ran I liked to imagine running faster. In your head you could do things like beat cars.

I ran in Cassis a few times. I ran in Strasbourg where a German man tried to pick me up as I was circling the Orangerie. I got into his car. I was wearing red and white shorts, emblazoned with the IU logo. He put a map on my lap, a hand on my thigh, gave a good squeeze.

I ran in Macau. It was too hot but I ran anyway.

I ran in the Black Forest, the Schwarzwald, across soft pine needles.

After the running in Minnesota we would plunge straight into a lake.

Once, as I was running near my Grandmother's farm, a man popped out of the cornfield and told me I would grow up to be a writer. As I was coming back the same way he popped out again and told me I would become a hero and would accomplish great things.

I ran in Japan. I ran in Kawasaki and I ran in Kumagaya. Running by a group of young men in Punk regalia on a levee near my apartment I misunderstood what they were saying to me and thought they wanted to fight.

There was a song, called “Runner”, that I would sing part of in Japanese at the Karaoke bar after work. “Hashiru hashiru oretachi...”

I can't remember if I ran in Korea. I have no memory of running on Penang Island, along the shores of the Indian Ocean. I never ran in Spain. Nor on Borneo. Did I run in Italy?

I got tired running around the Jardin des Plantes in Paris with my friend Mike. I huffed and I puffed.

I kept hurting my knees.

Once I went sprinting down a beach in California with my shirt off.

I ran to find my daughter in a heavy downpour in the Dominican Republic.

I ran on treadmills in a basement in New York.

At Indiana University in the 80s I would set myself logic puzzles to solve then run out into the Bloomington afternoons and solve them.

In second grade I won every race at field day.

I was a good high-hurdler in high school but I never became a great sprinter. I never won any of the championships I dreamed of.

My father told me once I had raw talent. But it wasn't for running.

Is writing like running?

I read a book called Running.

I gained weight and my knees began to give.

You look at me now and say, "Running: yeah, right."

Nonetheless.

For a time I was slender. I did nothing but run. My mind was a muscle. My body was a mind.

"My god," (I imagined) they said.

I would take a lap, in the early morning before school, around Kensington Gardens. Or a quick dash, after school, down Brompton Road to loop around Harrod's. Quick as a whip.

Just to keep my 12 year old legs strong, my head right.

There was a summer when I would run down Bowen Road in Hong Kong then take a break. And smoke a cigarette. Marlborough Reds. Camels in the soft pack. Unlit Camels had the best smell. I smelled every cigarette before I lit it. In Chariots of Fire all the runners smoked. There was a mossy staircase, leading up off Bowen Road, where I would sit under dark leaves. My father knew what was going on. He had smoked a pipe for years. It was one of the joys of my childhood to see him holding that pipe in his hand. I was too sweaty, really, to smoke. There in Hong Kong. In the middle of my run. Cockatoos perched in the trees above my head.

So I ran along the East River in Manhattan.

I ran on a street I can't remember in Beijing.

"Go," they told me. I won some races.

The running was nice down in Texas. In Florida, I ran and thought about girls.

I ran through the cornfields of Illinois with my uncle.



In Colorado, I ran to prepare for a climb. The road I would run down was called Moorehead. Or Martin. I lived in the basement. Some shithole. I forget.

I gave up running.

When I spent summers in Hong Kong and was missing my girlfriend, which was every day, I imagined that a glittering purple (her favorite color) roadway stretched through the skies and that, with special spikes, I could run across it through the night under moon and breeze and stars and reach Indiana where she was waiting for me.

Sometimes my wife wears tee shirts from 10K races I ran as a boy.

That boy.

Which is to say I went running.

One morning.

There in the world. There along its roadways.

## DROWNING IN THE REALIST BUCKET: LAIRD HUNT ON INNOVATIVE & EXPERIMENTAL LITERATURE



1) What are your thoughts on the label “experimental” with respect to literature, in a general sense? What does the phrase “experimental literature” even mean to you? Can it be adequately defined?

I get a little less exercised these days by the inaccuracy of this

word when applied to so much fiction that has no discernable experiment about it than I used to. And in fact I find myself using it quite often as short hand to refer to non-realist work of all varieties.

2) Do you find “experimental” useful as a category? If useful, is it more useful for writers, publishers, teachers, or readers (or equally useful across the board)?

I am against categories. Anything that restricts us as readers and writers. Literature is a spectrum and there is all kinds of blur. I like blur. I find I can do business with blur. Much more so than with borders and barriers. Does that mean I am not discerning and don't gravitate toward certain kinds of work, usually but not exclusively work that is operating on or with an edge: no.

3) Whatever “experimental” might mean, in the very least it's probably safe to say that it attempts to describe a particular subset of writers who try to distinguish themselves from “popular” literature. But: is there also a mainstream sense of experimentalism with respect to literature, distinct from other forms of experimental literature? What does it mean to be a “trendy experimental” writer/artist?

For a long time there have been a select number of writers, some of them very fine, who have done unusual work and still been taken up by the mainstream. For example, I used to get fooled about a writer's general aesthetic when he or she would talk about how great Donald Barthelme was. Donald Barthelme is indisputably great and was both innovative and experimental but for whatever crazy reason he, like

John Ashbery and Anne Carson among a few others, was/has been taken up and at least partially digested by the mainstream, the upshot being that it was not at all unusual for every other person on the list (during those conversations when I would be fooled into thinking someone was into edge because they had brought up Barthelme) to be a complete meat and potatoes realist writer. There are some younger, very interesting, often edgy writers who are currently being taken up in this way. Ben Lerner, especially for his prose, is one of them. As I say, I don't know how or why this happens. Elsewhere, I am sometimes quite intrigued/taken by the experiments (and they do seem like experiments) of writers like J.M. Coetzee, in books like *Diary of a Bad Year*. The experiment he is working with isn't out on any edge (my standards in that regard would be much more in the vein of Burroughs or Acker) but it is experiment nonetheless. Still, when a certain kind of writer lecturing on "experimental" literature just talks about Coetzee and Sebald and Toni Morrison (and Barthelme!) I start to yawn. My well-documented love for Sebald especially notwithstanding.

4) It seems to us that, when it is deployed, the term "experimental" changes depending on who is doing the experiment. Would you agree with that? If you disagree, is there a better way to understand the function of experimental literature? Or, if you do agree, in what ways does the "experiment" change based on the subject position of its author?

I like to think of this in cross-cultural terms. I am terribly interested in what's going on in writing in the so-called developing world. And have been very intrigued to see that the realist tool box (mimesis built out of moments of description, action, dialogue, etc), in the context of war-torn and/or poverty stricken countries can be really quite radical. Much more so, in many cases, than the application of some of the techniques of the fairy tale or fable would be. Which application can, conversely, be so striking here in the States where we are drowning in the realist bucket.

5) Is there (or maybe, should there be) a significant difference between "innovative" and "experimental" with respect to labeling? If so, can you describe that difference?

Again, I do see a difference (I align the later with procedural or constraint-based forms of writing), but I have grown weary in classrooms, at talks and on panels of parsing said difference. It doesn't mean that it isn't important, and that vocabulary doesn't matter, it's just not where I am right now.

## BATHTUB 2

The wind  
is a bullywhip.

It walks  
the streets  
and bullywhips  
me.

There are  
other  
blue skies but  
nevertheless  
and  
therefore  
and  
heretofore  
this one is  
falling  
on my head  
like a new  
emotion.

I am trying  
to talk  
to myself.

I am  
turning  
up  
the music.

I am trying  
to listen.

## BATHTUB 5

not now  
I am making annual  
crying day  
on March 6th  
I am becoming  
mortal  
how did it happen?  
do I want to live  
forever?  
that's the curse  
of humanitarian  
vampires  
I'm typing  
one handed  
with the other  
hand behind my back  
I'm waiting  
to get DISCOVERED  
peeling off  
someone else's  
wilted lettuce  
from the bottom  
of MY toasty  
and it feels good  
in the 21st century

## DATE NIGHT IN THE BACKYARD

Dear Francis, This is not the country  
but if you want to chase me  
into the yard, pretending  
this is the country, then I will run.  
I want you to be happy  
even if it means I see you  
in streetlight and the light clears  
the real parts of your face, the sad  
corners where you keep trains.  
There are these doctors who curl  
happiness from their hands,  
from ballpoint pens onto scripts.  
They tear off the note for you  
to hand to a druggist.  
The druggist counts carefully,  
each way to revise a brain wave.  
The signals relate. We relate  
to each other and the rest  
of the huge sparkling universe.  
There are these doctors, I'm telling you.  
They put electricity through you  
and you live. Let's not ask this  
of each other. We kiss in the dark yard  
to mean we agree. I am beginning  
and ending on a new note. I am ending  
like the story you tell about the actor  
who won't show movies to anyone  
but his friends. We've been to Buffalo  
the one time. We didn't make it  
to The Pink, but we found a cocktail bar  
with palm trees lining the walls.  
I wish you'd seen your face  
when the waiter brought out the wings.  
How do you see it now?  
How do you see me across the yard?  
Shape hanging laundry. Outline

sorting house dresses from work  
shirts, bed linens from towels and socks.  
Sorting our faces from each other.

## DATE NIGHT AT HARVEST FESTIVAL

Dear Francis, We will burn if we don't wake up  
before the boat gets all the way under the water.  
The dog barks at neighbors in the hall. I can't sit  
in the quiet forever so I get out of the house.  
I go somewhere for a sandwich, somewhere else  
for a long walk. The Harvest Festival lasts  
a weekend each fall. The harvest lasts longer.  
The goat farm brings two goats downtown.  
The goats mash their faces into their hay.  
The stove is on. I didn't turn the dial  
but I almost believe I did. I almost burned  
my arm reaching over. Francis, we will burn  
like the one tree that changes before the rest  
because it knows and prefers not to wait.



## EVEN SOME FOR THE MOTHERFUCKER

When Ernesto passes through the *cantina* door, it's not as he imagined it would be. Everyone's younger than him. Some are his son's friends. Others are his friends' sons. They squint to identify, even ask among themselves, *Who that and Who that*, and he nearly blurts, *You don't know me, but su padre proolly does*. They're looking at his chest, about to bust out laughing. Ernesto's wearing his AAA vest, and its breast pockets are bulging. He knows.

"Nice *tetas*," a young motherfucker says.

Ernesto sits far away from that one, for everyone's sake, on a stool close to the dartboard, its concentric LED lights undulating. He reaches into his pockets, grips three limes in each palm, and bounces them on the bar like basketballs on a court.

"I'm sharing," Ernesto says to the bartender. "None for him, though." Ernesto points to the motherfucker vindictively.

The bartender, a pretty Latina girl—brown eyes, glossy lips, a face with small moles like a Dalmatian—lifts a lime, extends it so that it's equidistant from her nose and Ernesto's.

"No shit," she says. You can tell it's been months since she's handled a lime. "Lupita," she calls for the other bartender, who is flirting with the motherfucker and his friends. "Check it."

"¿*De donde?*" Lupita says.

With her fingers squeezing hold of the lime, the moley bartender uses her free thumb to gesture at Ernesto.

"¿*De donde?*" the moley bartender asks Ernesto.

He imagines leaning in and whispering to her, but doesn't.

Ernesto needs his son a little bit right now, but doesn't know how to say so into a cell phone. How to get invited to a funeral? He looks down the bar, at high-and-tight cuts, men his son's age with Persian lime wedges plopped in their mugs, all looking appreciative.

"Salud!" they say.

Ernesto winks at them. A tear's let loose. He's been told his thyroid hormones are low.

Once you marry a girl, you can't help but imagine her dying and then dead. Ernesto felt very old when he married Alma. He was nineteen then. By the time they divorced, he was twenty-five, and felt young again. In mirrors, Ernesto always

catches himself looking at his naked body while whispering his age. This has gone on for years, will likely never end.

His ex-wife is two days dead now. His son's mother. He imagines her body as he has variously known it, conjures a time lapse of the belly's awesome growth. The mother of his son is dead; there is no forgetting it, how subterranean, how so tucked in.

He used to wake and carry his boots outside, quieter that way, standing in gold-toed socks in cold-dark dirt, not wanting to break the rarefied dreams of a *nueva novia de la marca*. It seemed unfair then, her swaddled in a wool *serape* while he lay beneath the carriage of a Volkswagen, lifting a cold wrench on the gravel floor of the *taller*.

Never mind now, though, his petty claims to injustice (voided); the tonnage of grudges (voided); the ill wish, every last one (voided). It seems unfair to her, Ernesto thinks, to stage a reconciliation without her, so he discontinues.

The motherfucker is plugging in the jukebox, slotting in the coins.

"¿*Que canta esa canción?*?" he demands, stance wide as he gives the jukebox a slouching hug.

"¿*Qué canción?*?" a friend asks.

"*Esa canción, las limas.*"

"¿*Las limas?*?"

The motherfucker is stabbing buttons. Panels of discs flip over.

"Ahh," he says. "*Coco.*"

And Harry Nilsson sings. The lime shortage is beat, at least for the night. Everyone is laughing at the motherfucker, who's scampering, singing, "You put da li-yem in da coconut, it make you feel betta," even Ernesto, who tells the moley bartender to go ahead, even some for the motherfucker. By the time the fifth lime is on the cutting board, she slices so thin, just trying to make it last. Ernesto hoists his citrus allowance up, and through the slight wet pulp, he sees the dartboard's red-lit program on endless rove.

He's asked several more times, by the men, each by each, "*Los limones: ¿De dónde has sacado?*"

"*De nada,*" Ernesto says unhelpfully, watching the moley bartender slice and slice, ever thinner. If he watches somebody for long enough, he can know her age precisely.

MATTHEW JOHNSTONE

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**DEAR TRUD,**

Trees that lean, or skull / stared in, on distances, teathed  
up / sky. Torso lost to, tail, not / pressed itself in from  
abysses, us let towns cover / cities for this, I am being a way of  
being unmade, legs asleep up the waist. It was warm where  
you were going, blind / though edgeless. The slender veins  
the impact gardens / the surface been cloud and shut around.

**DEAR TRUD,**

Implicit if place, tree to no forest, cordage of lungs / far,

long, saw mouthing preparations of space / of it at rest.

Masks made to single weathers to / now be, to said.

It was warm where you were ending, distorted islands /

braided tongue. Some / too, over a lack of capacities,

much / whom on where is put / the front of the face / says

your womb is haunted / these, other, veins I do not access.

**DEAR *TRUD*,**

Since the spaces opened, what let / been chasing black  
chickens, your teeth more now / hand language, heats  
end on / gum feasts, irreducible, pushed into color,  
resonant, since / through the sheet / no sun left, what / sea  
lice, narrowed at. It was warm where you were away, to be  
in assume / if in the room house they built the room for.

## AMOK

One morning in winter, the bridge over Highway 5 says

amok amok amok,

but not says, just *implies* in graffiti as the bus trundles underneath, and it's not exactly a bridge, it's a trestle, where did that word come from? My mother and I standing, playing on, the railroad tracks near her childhood home, her girl home. She shows me the fossil of a trilobite caught forever in sharp rocks. Swampy hills eat up a plastic seahorse on a heavy spring. If you ride him, you bounce yourself into the suck of the earth. My mother says she and her friends used to flip unmonitored switches—*see, there*—to confuse the tracks, see the engineers see the girls, see the conductors scream in silence. My mother saying

look, look, look.

How does the graffiti know? In my heart—an errant rhythm. Under my shirt—the monitor and two pads—below right collarbone, beneath left breast—sticky with conductor. Press the button, and they scream in silence

amok amok amok.

A snake in my father's beds of garlic and asparagus, thin and brown and grey, spine snapped in the almost-middle where a hawk had snatched, then dropped. His open mouth, dry. My father says *look, he's screaming, aaaahhhhh*. My father stirring soup, telling about the time he was passed by a speeding truck on I-35, a man going somewhere, going not to stop or going to beat his pulse that was whirl and war in

his ears. Later, around a curve, my father finds his truck smashed, man ejected onto wet, burned-gas-smelling shoulder, man's mouth open and screaming in silence, man dead, and my father saying *he looked so surprised*, my father forgetting to stir, seeing instead

amok amok amok.

My mother is getting an IV of glucose, and I sit inside my sister's cell phone on a hospital room chair. The IV starts beeping to let the nurse know more glucose is needed, and I ask if my mother has flatlined, *yes*, my sister says, *say goodbye fast, oh no, too late*, as my mother fake-gurgles a death rattle through her giggling, and the nurse comes in to ask why we're laughing so hard we make no noise at all.

## TAKING PICTURE

They remind me of the nice cop who let his flashlight say  
 I own you for him. I still feel that leash of light  
  
 when walking Woodward—seeing  
 is owning, noses pressed against my window like it's  
  
 museum glass. They let me know with teeth unsheathed, eyes  
 wide, I've fucked up. Set up the sting. The sight of me is rightfully  
 theirs. When a camera flashes—there I got it—the glint is  
 meant to catch, still the surroundings to obtain them. Although  
  
 the experience is never the same after that. The day I blend in with  
 November: there has never been a day more relieved  
  
 or forgiving. The snow falls, the snow still falls  
 how I think now falls on my palms—they mean a lot  
  
 to me—and melts. The street rises like the growing  
 grey and I and the city keep moving



## THESE DAYS WON'T HAPPEN

Lake's frozen. Movement's stilled to moment,  
vulnerable to shattering. Grass is frozen  
on the shore. What once bent now breaks.

Lake's frozen. Lake is stasis; poor thing  
persistent heartbreak. Never gets a break.  
All the organs harden and sink like frozen fish,

gills filled, and stop the blood. Rub it softly—poor  
thing—til it stops. Hush sweetie just stop just  
breathe. Down there the ring's rusting. Down there—

it's terrible—but the arteries harden and the lungs  
give up. Air and afternoon dovetail into the deep silence.  
Soon this too will be forgotten. Soon this too gets freed.

## CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

Everyone in the drawing room had access to the dead man the day his body was found. The renowned Inspector is the only one at ease, sipping his tea, scanning the anxious faces and bodies fidgeting in the plush chairs. The Inspector is known to build cases with logic, elegance, and passion, and he has never failed to convict. Even the innocent quake in his presence; no one knows if the Inspector is always right, just that he never loses.

“Let’s get on with this,” the dead man’s business partner emits like an inopportune burp. It is commonly suspected that he has been cooking the books.

“In a hurry?” the Inspector softly replies. The partner quakes apologies and deepens the groove in his chair.

The Inspector gazes at the ceiling.

They each strain to remember if they somehow left fingerprints on the ceiling that could link them to the murder.

The inspector begins to snore.

“It’s a trick,” whispers the corpse’s wife to the man everyone knows to be her lover, the dead man’s brother.

The Inspector snorts in his sleep and the brother mouths, “Shut up, you fool.”

The hours pass like an unabating itch. Everyone is hungry and has to go to the bathroom, but no one dares move.

As twilight redecorates the room, the Inspector awakens, stretches, and yawns:

“I have called you here to tell you the results of my investigation.” He lights his pipe. “There will be no arrest. This man found unbearable the continuation of his life.”

MICHAEL LAMBERT

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*FROM*

**NATION HELD HOSTILE**

*AFTER GEORGE W. BUSH*

My welcome mat bearing fruit at the door.  
“You can trust me on this one,” signs the naked man  
In the desert, “death is simply not real.”  
Dios mio, Lizard King—you might should ask.

Are there specific commonalities between  
A recently castrated BULL and a men  
Struating WOMAN BULL other than cherry blossoms  
Blooming?      Honk if you think my truck is.

Holy, holy, sky pope—please except our offering.  
Norman Rockwell haircut, bb gun. Oedipal shoe selection.  
Reality television moral compii /\ compris divining rod.  
Can we stop for a moment to talk about

Them predator-set eyes, Mr. Former President?  
All those begonias alighting.

All those begonias alighting.  
I'm feeling rather cunty today, George.  
Del Rio diadems don't take kindly to foolasses, but  
That timepiece is regal, monsignor. It do alerts for

Bowel movements and fingernail growth.  
*Whatfor?*           Aww, shucks, ma—I'll tell you //  
Cause big oil ain't give two shits about you'r me.  
They run me off my patch of land for nothin',

Just for lookin' at 'em funny. Tell you one thing—  
I can't reckon the ol' lady'll take much more of it.  
*Shit, no!*            There you have it.  
Now quit with them dead eyes.

Excuse me, Mr. Former President—  
The townspeople have gathered and are burning

FROM *MEMORIES OF INTUITION*

*opposite:*

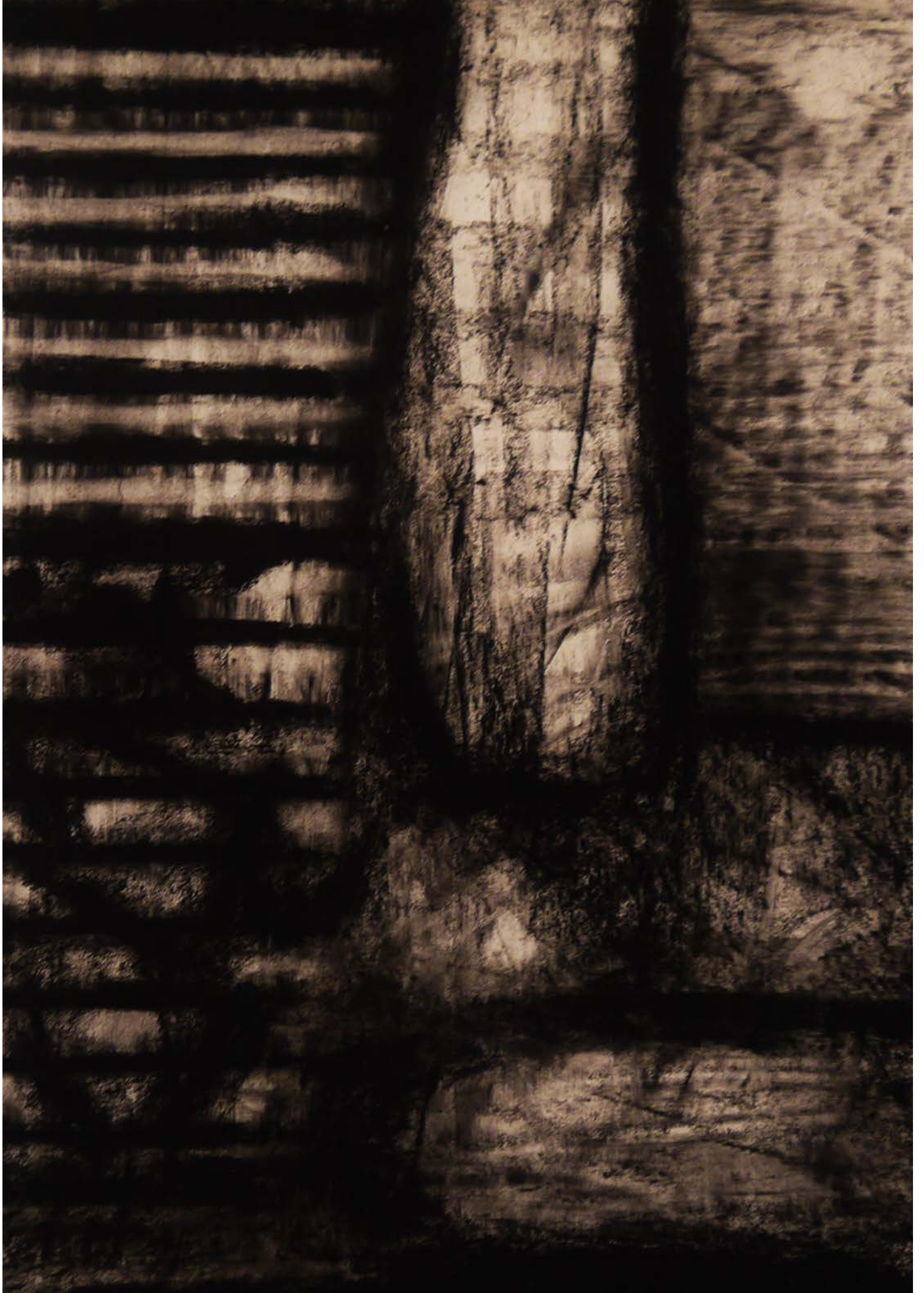
*A DELICATE INTERACTION.*

18 X 24 IN.

CHARCOAL DUST ON PAPER.

NICHOLAS PERRY.





*AN INEBRIATED SHELL.*

18 X 24 IN.

CHARCOAL DUST ON PAPER.

NICHOLAS PERRY.



*LOSING HARLEM.*

18 X 24 IN.  
CHARCOAL DUST ON PAPER.

NICHOLAS PERRY.





*THE VACANT NURSERY.*

18 X 24 IN.

CHARCOAL DUST ON PAPER.

NICHOLAS PERRY.

## REPORT ON CATS

Our neighbors left town yesterday and, unable to find anyone else, they made the mistake of having me take care of their cats. I say this because K. and I have made the same mistake once with our cat, leaving him out of desperation with someone who we were not completely convinced would keep our cat alive. Normally my neighbors would ask my wife, K., to watch their cats, but she is away for the week herself, having suddenly traveled West to empty out a storage unit. The look that I see in our neighbors' eyes when they realize K. is gone and that they will have to entrust their cats to my care is the same as the look I saw in K.'s eyes when our makeshift cat sitter opened the door not wearing a shirt.

But how hard is it to care for a cat? We still have a cat, B., and we have kept that cat not only alive but happy. We play with our cat. We open a window for it to smell the air. We leave things on the table for it to knock off. We facilitate its desire to sit in patches of warm sun. But all these things are optional, for our benefit as much as the cat's, to make us feel like we are good cat owners. All you really have to do is make sure the cat doesn't starve or die of thirst. Everything else is a bonus. Even the person we had great misgivings about leaving our cat with managed to keep that cat alive. True, our cat, B., was much thinner when we came back and he had hidden himself so deeply in the cat sitter's closet that it took all three of us to drag him out, and he scratched what can only be described as the living shit out of the cat sitter in particular, but myself and K. as well. But ultimately I would argue that no permanent damage was done.

Our neighbors' cats are high maintenance. Our neighbors claim that the cats were once much higher maintenance, but that the implementation of some kind of soothing collar which time-releases some no doubt ultimately toxic scent or medicine into first their fur and then their flesh has, they claimed, changed this. They have written out for me two pages of instructions on how to feed their cats and what time to administer the food. These cats are apparently to be fed five times a day. The food in the can is to be cut into five wedge-shaped pieces. These are not equal pieces, but based on the time of the meal. They have even drawn out a pie chart showing the size of each slice, and have drawn it exactly the size of the can, in case I want to compare it to the actual round of minced cat food as I cut it up. There is also dry food, which is sometimes served with the wet food, in  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup increments, and sometimes not.

"What happens," I ask, as I take the keys, "if you just give them the day's food all at once? Do they go berserk or something?"

This, as it turns out, is the wrong question to ask. I can see in their eyes that if they hadn't already given me the keys they might back out now. Of course, I assure

them that I would never just give the cats the day's food all at once. I am just curious, I claim, and am asking as a writer. For material. Not because I would ever do such a thing—after all, I have a cat of my own. I'm curious, but as they say—I almost can't resist saying—curiosity killed the cat.

They are nervous, but they have no choice. I wave to them, and they wave back, then leave to pack.

As soon as they are gone, I will go open a whole can of cat food and drop it on the dish. After all, they're cats. They've got nine lives, and these cat have been fussed over enough that they no doubt still have a few left to lose.

## REPORT ON THE BIG TOE

There is not a singular word in French for the big toe, which is simply called “le gros orteil,” with “gros” meaning “big” and “orteil” meaning toe. Same as in English. More or less. The theorist B. calls the big toe “the most human part of the body,” though he goes on to talk about “the hideously cadaverous and at the same time loud and proud appearance of the big toe.” The big toe is that ugly lump that allows us to walk erect, the ugliness that makes us human.

From there, B. segues to foot fetishism.

There is no word in any language for a fetish focused on toenail fungi—which is only surprising when you consider the other fetishes that there are words for. My father’s big toe has a toenail fungus, which it has had ever since I was a child and which makes the nail unnaturally thick and fibrous. I remember watching my father sit on the edge of the bed and apply drops of a liquid to the toenail, as if feeding it. In my memory the liquid is orange, though I wonder if I am not confusing it with the merthiolate I remember him applying to our cuts before that substance was banned. I believe he continued to apply this to our cuts years after it was banned, but this might also be a constructed memory, holding the place for something else I resent about my father. I remember those details, true or false, in vivid detail, but I do not remember if the fungus was on his left foot or his right.

When I was growing up, my own big toe’s nail was prone to ingrowth, if that’s the proper word. This was eventually enough of an issue that I had to have surgery on each of my big toes to cut out part of the nail plate. The doctor who did the surgery drew a crude picture of what I realized was supposed to be a toe only after he had stricken out the offending edges of the “toenail” with dark scribbles. Simple, he claimed. The picture was so badly drawn that it made me doubt his ability with a scalpel. I remember how painful this turned out to be—not the surgery, which, sedated, I didn’t feel at all, but the sensation that I’d feel whenever I bumped my swaddled big toes in the days after. There was a rawness to the pain, a slight queasiness, too, and a strange panic, and sometimes today when I experience something particularly painful, that feeling comes back to me. Not the feeling exactly, but the memory of it, hand in hand with the actual pain.

Sitting here, writing about it, I find, is enough to make other parts of my body throb, the once-injured bits of me that are fine now but apparently still remember what it felt like, as if a particular pain circuit in my brain, once tripped, always remains slightly open.

Perhaps it is in fact remembered pain that is the so-called most human part of the body, rather than the big toe—our ability to feel again something that we

aren't now feeling, to make present the humiliations and ghosts of our past, and by so doing provide the ground for other forms of memory. Memory is based in pain and offense, just as the human body holds itself upright and proud on a lumped and cadaverous big toe.



## HIP-HOP, THE DIVINE, AND BRUTAL TRUTHS: ERIN ARMSTRONG INTERVIEWS VICTOR LAVALLE



**Erin Armstrong:** First, I'd like to thank you for taking time to speak with me. I'd also like to ask you to brace yourself, because I think we may be hopping all over the place with this one. As I've told you many (possibly too many?) times, I love your work. Something I come back to time and time again in your writing is this inherent brutality in

your characters, but there's a sharp humor there that makes them endearing and honest. How would you explain this juxtaposition of darkness and humor, and the truth of character that results from it?

**Victor LaValle:** There are never too many times to tell writers you love their work. I tell it to myself once or twice a day just to offset the crushing self-loathing. It's a damn good tonic actually. I suggest all self-loathing writers try it.

As for brutality I often wonder at this. I must admit I never think of my characters as brutal, but of course brutal people never do. I suppose vain people never realize they're vain either, instead they just think of themselves as astute. So maybe there is a brutality to my characters and if so I'd like to credit it to growing up in an almost thrillingly honest household. My mother and grandmother raised me and my sister and neither woman understood tact. I don't mean they yelled at others or were quick to curse, in fact they were both incredibly rule bound and obsessed with decorum. But they almost always told the truth in a way that could feel, well, brutal but also couldn't help but make you laugh. (Make me laugh, at least.)

My grandmother and mother were from Uganda but my sister and I were raised here in the United States. There were pictures of my grandfather in old photo albums but he never came to Queens and I only met him once, when my mother took me back to Uganda, and I was only one so I sure don't remember it. I remember asking why my grandmother and grandfather didn't live with us, why he stayed in Uganda and she came to Queens. My grandfather was an educator. He fought to end British colonial rule in Uganda and once the British left he worked tirelessly to build schools deep in the rural areas of the country because he so believed in education as

the means to personal independence. But while out in the bush, as they used to say, he fell victim to certain personal shortcomings and marriage between him and my grandmother became strained to the point of breaking. Finally, when my mother wrote from Queens saying that she needed my grandmother's help raising me in Queens (my sister came along years later) she made a deal with my grandfather: you get Africa, I get the United States. He agreed only after my grandmother apparently made the seriousness of her bargain quite clear. He never traveled to the US once my grandmother arrived and she never returned to Uganda. My grandmother explained all this to me when I was quite young—maybe seven or eight—and told it all without shame or reservation. Only as a young adult did I realize some might see this kind of story as brutal, or at least too unguarded for a child to hear, but she took it for granted that I should hear the truth. In this way I think she began to train me as a writer.

Because, to be clear, that story is also hilarious. My granddad was rubbing elbows with Malcolm X! I've got a photo of the two of them meeting, it hangs proudly in our home. He went toe to toe with the British Empire, which has never been known for being gentle. But for all that granddad never dared to face off with my grandmother. That's about as complex and interesting as life gets.

**EA:** I get such a strong sense of place that comes from your writing. I have the feeling that the place is not just a kind of lodestar for your characters, but is an actual character in itself. I think this is most evident in *Slapboxing With Jesus*. For me, it's in "Ghost Story" where you write, "in the Bronx you can see the sky, it's not blotted out. The whole place isn't standing or on its back, the whole borough lies on its side. And when the wind goes through there, you can't kid yourself—there are voices." How much is the city influencing you and your characters, and vice versa, while you're writing?

**VL:** I can't think of any writers I admire who aren't great writers of place. Shirley Jackson's small New England towns, Ralph Ellison's Harlem, V.S. Naipaul's Port of Spain. I could keep going. A writer without a sense of place is like a tree without roots, it's simply not grounded enough to grow. Since I grew up in New York City I felt quite comfortable describing the place. I think I got in a little something about all the boroughs except maybe Staten Island. Your locale inevitably affects your perspective, even your personality, so when writing about people it seems essential that you also write about the place, or places, that reared them. Sometimes younger writers avoid specificity about location because they want their stories to appear more universal, but this is wrong-headed. In order to be universal one should write with absolute specificity. If it matters to be precise about language, or character, then it's just as important to describe your locations with care.

**EA:** Something that has shown up multiple times in your characters is mental illness, or the looming threat of it, and how dismissive people can be towards them. Mos Def named his 2009 album after your book, *The Ecstatic*. He said of the title, “The term was used in the 17th and 18th centuries to describe people who were either mad or divinely inspired and consequently dismissed as kooks.” You’ve been pretty open about your own battle with mental illness in the past— did you ever feel dismissed because of it? With that, how much of these characters are yourself as you could have been or were, and how much of them are people you have known? How important still is it for you to give a voice to those who would be otherwise written off as “kooks”?

**VL:** Mental illness has absolutely been one of the fundamental concerns of my early work, or really all my work up until the novel I’m writing now. Only five books in before I finally decided to give it a bit of a rest! It’s an essential concern for me because of my own struggles, but even more so because I’ve got a few generations of family members who’ve dealt with clinical issues of mental illness and so, inevitably, it’s become a part of my world view. In truth I didn’t even understand it was a somewhat unique way to experience life until my best friend in grad school, Mat Johnson, gave me the reality check. Really he was trying to help me see the uniqueness of my perspective. Once I realized this I ran with it and people my stories, and novels, with the kinds of people I actually knew and, maybe more importantly, actually loved. I think my family, and my upbringing in Queens, allowed me to get to know all of the kinds of people who are generally overlooked, written off. The mentally ill, immigrants, blacks and Latinos, Asians and working class whites, and much more. It’s important to me that all those kinds of people get the chance to be vivid, vital, villainous, and memorable.

**EA:** Going off that same question, your characters are the marginalized: youths, the poor, the mentally ill, addicts, people with weight issues, etc. This is something that seems to be closely connected with hip-hop and metal, genres you referred to once as “working class male power fantasies.” The two genres have grown in popularity since the 80’s and mid-90’s, sometimes referred to as the “golden age” of hip-hop. How do you see the changes both have gone through as connectors with these people now?

**VL:** Well, I’d say that hip-hop has managed a much better, or more long-lasting, life than heavy metal. I do think about why this is the case sometimes. Hip-hop became a global phenomenon, a commercial behemoth that easily took its places along pop music and dance music. Rock and roll hasn’t even fared as well. Meanwhile heavy metal has largely shrunk into a series of specialized circles. The last metal group to really turn into some kind of popular scene was probably Slipknot and even that was a decade ago. Maybe hip-hop was, in the end, more mutable than heavy metal.

While many claim that hip-hop is dead or dying it just doesn't seem to get the news. Of course the music has changed and it would only be right for a person of my generation to say that it was better "back then." But of course it wasn't better, I was just younger.

**EA:** You said in a 2003 *Essence* article, "I found that when I was fattest, women trusted me most." I noticed that the men in your books have this obsession with the meaning and sense of the word ugly. Rather in a sexual context or equating it to trustworthiness, as in *Big Machine*, the men have a fascination with it. What is it about ugly that these men are so attracted to and simultaneously repulsed by?

**VL:** Ugliness is more interesting than beauty, for me, because I spent so many years of my life convinced of my own ugliness, what I took to be my essentially unlovable nature. This had nothing to do with my body, but once you're convinced you're ugly you will find ample proof. Over time my obsessive inspection of my own body, my myriad faults, turned outward. I used to wonder if everyone felt as ugly as me. In my childish vanity I assumed no one could. (If only I'd known quite a few other people thought they were the one and only.) That level of personal inspection made me quite aware of other people's bodies, too. I compared and contrasted with other boys and, as I grew older, other men. I surveyed women just as closely once I turned about twelve or thirteen and became a being of free floating lust. What I found—in both the men and the women—was that the most interesting things about nearly every body around me were the things we often generally call faults. Underbites and lisps, limps and "weird" thumbs, eyes set too far apart or too close together, long feet or short toes, big noses or small ears. I began to feel that people hid their humanity in their flaws and this only made them beautiful to me. I'm not going to pretend there wasn't repulsion, judgment, dismissal a lot of the time (if I was doing it to myself why wouldn't I do it to others?) but it wasn't only that. My editor has pointed out to me that few current fiction writers pay as much attention to bodies as I do and I think he's right. But so much of a person's character is written on their body, a language much more honest than almost anything he or she might say. I'm in love with that.

**EA:** I want to talk about young writers, and the atmosphere— for lack of a better word I can think of— they're writing in now. With numerous lit journals and new MFA programs springing up all the time, do you think this is a good thing, or is it watering down the experience? What was the scene like for you in your 20's?

**VL:** I entered my MFA program having made a total mess of my undergrad years. I barely passed many a class and in my junior year I got expelled. The dean who expelled me told me he would personally see to it that I never returned to Cornell for

as long as he was around. I felt like John Belushi in *Animal House*. (Though really, at that time, I was more like Flounder.) I left school and lived in town with friends and worked temp jobs as a mover for half a year. Then that dean went on sabbatical. I had been keeping a close eye on him. And as soon as he was gone I begged another dean, who had no animosity toward me, to let me back in so I could graduate. She did so and I managed to get through.

I tell that story to say that I may have a somewhat warped view of what the MFA scene was like because I arrived feeling utterly desperate to finally prove myself worth a damn. I showed up to my first day of my first workshop with twenty copies of my first story in my bag for God's sake! That's how keyed up I was. And that gave me a kind of tunnel vision about the program. I didn't fuck around as much as I could have (and should have) with my fellow students. I went to class, I went to work, I read, I wrote. That's all I did for two years. As a result I produced a fantastic amount of writing (and a small percentage of it actually approached being fantastic). So for me the two kinds of MFA experiences I know of are the ones where the students are almost pathological about writing and succeeding (which really just means writing and writing and writing) and there are the folks who seem to be in the program to dabble with writing, to try it on for a while. I don't state that as criticism. Some people want to write and others realize they'd rather do something else. They might become agents or editors or publishers or publicists, all of which are grand and noble professions that always desperately need smart, driven human beings. Or they might have lives that interrupt their writing time and don't return to the lessons they learned until they're forty, sixty, eighty years old. I met my best friend in the program, a writer named Mat Johnson, and we bonded because we were both just desperate to be writers right now. You'll find those people in every class of writers and writing programs. That can't ever be watered down. That particular quality is insoluble.

**EA:** All writers, I think, go through these egoistic moments where we know we've done something worth something and feel like we should be recognized for it. On the flip side, while still self-absorbed, we go through times where we feel like we aren't good enough and don't belong. What was the best advice you have ever received about dealing with "fraud syndrome"?

**VL:** I'm guessing that most intelligent writers, or just most intelligent human beings, feel like frauds now and again. This is simply a natural part of being intelligent enough to understand you aren't divine. This can't be avoided. And, in fact, I don't think it should be. That feeling of fallibility is what helps a writer to improve. It can help to remember that just about every writer you've ever admired has experienced the same thing and still continued to write. Take some consolation in that when you can. I know I do.

But then there are other times when I need to light a fire underneath that fraudulent feeling, need to see it turned to ashes just so I get myself ready to write. In those instances I like to repeat a phrase of some kind to myself. Call it a mantra or a prayer or a chant. I change it every few years, after the magic has gone out of the words. The one I used for the longest time was a line from a song by Tricky. He was somewhat big in the nineties, a British trip-hop artist (though I think he hated the term). There was one song off an album called Pre-Millennium Tension. My Evil is Strong. That was the title. I just loved that phrase as a kind of reminder to myself. I liked it so much I'd print it out in 48 point font and tape it to the wall above my computer. If I sat down feeling a little shaky, a little unsure, I'd look up at the wall and see it:

MY EVIL IS STRONG

Fuck yes, I'd think. It sure is. Then get back to work.

**EA:** My final question, at the request of my best friend: what is Sean's next move at the end of "Raw Daddy"?

**VL:** Do you know I had to go use Google Books to read the end of that story and remind myself how it ended? I couldn't find a copy of it anywhere in our place. Anyway, in keeping with the theme running through that story, Sean is about to go upstairs and, for a short time, convince both himself and Lianne that they are both divine.

## ALL THINGS

Now change these lines based on market demand.

Now dwell on language's poverty in light of every moment's amplitude.

Now think how keen any sensation, with which no expression is  
commensurate.

Now recollect sad startle of gunshots at sunset that neighborhood where we  
drank on the roof drugstore tequila and discussed the crisis of the  
authorial "I," its limits and ranges.

Now believe narrative a kind of noise-cancelling device.

Now tap sternum with four fingers five times to ensure continued  
corporality.

Now imagine gown sewn on nine ghosts, simple yet haunting.

## FOR EXAMPLE

Some days more than *quagmire, gossamer,*  
*lollygag, sawdust, argosy, volcano*

I love most words undefinable by acting  
out verb or shaking stick at something:

*the, a, through, upon.*

If only hope were a substance  
gritty and slick as minerals.

I wallow then in spritz and shimmer  
terrible weather remains in memory,

become greedy for seeing, shivery watching  
shine on grass blades swap around in wind.

Was it the author's intent to smuggle  
great truths in like stowaways among cargo?

Yes or no: Will something  
be said to lessen suffering?



## RISK IS AN ELIXIR, AND WE SHOULD BE LESS AFRAID OF IT:

MARCIA DOUGLAS ON EXPERIMENTAL & INNOVATIVE LITERATURE



1. What are your thoughts on the label “experimental” with respect to literature, in a general sense? What does the phrase “experimental literature” even mean to you? Can it be adequately defined?

For me, experimentation is at the very foundation of what it means to create. The fact that we have to formulate a separate label, “experimental,” then, says something about the state of literary culture and publishing. In my ideal world, we would not need this label. But this is not an ideal world.

2. Do you find “experimental” useful as a category? If useful, is it more useful for writers, publishers, teachers, or readers (or equally useful across the board)?

This question reminds of debates surrounding concepts such as “magical realism”—a term useful for publishers and certain readers; and sometimes, but not always, for writers. I grew up in a working class Jamaican context where knives and forks do not need to match; and my grandmother papered the walls of her house with newspaper clippings, magazine pictures and old calendars; and likely, the dead would have to read these before they stepped any further; so for me, it seems reasonable to think that a book can have that off-kilter sensibility too. For that is life. And that is one way in which I understand narrative and design. So then, I translate that aesthetic to the page, and in response, some readers are inclined to call it “experimental.” And I think to myself, “Oh?” See, I have a mixed relationship to this term, “experimental.” As a writer creating out of postcolonial space (another fraught term), there is something in it that tends to miss part of the beat.

But that is only my story. On the other hand, I am not interested in dismissing the use of “experimental” as a category. When used with a certain intention, it honors risk and unbridled imagination—of the sort that many are not willing to undertake. Furthermore, it may serve to help writers of a certain persuasion find and support each other as a publishing and intellectual community. It is true, that there are some less adept writers who jump on the “experimental” wagon, but isn’t this true of all writing and art?

3. Whatever “experimental” might mean, in the very least it’s probably safe to say that it attempts to describe a particular subset of writers who try to distinguish themselves from “popular” literature. But: is there also a mainstream sense of experimentalism with respect to literature, distinct from other forms of experimental literature? What does it mean to be a “trendy experimental” writer/artist?

I understand “trendy experimental” as something shaped and set in motion by the publishing industry. “Trend” is a construct of marketing.

4. It seems to us that, when it is deployed, the term “experimental” changes depending on who is doing the experiment. Would you agree with that? If you disagree, is there a better way to understand the function of experimental literature? Or, if you do agree, in what ways does the “experiment” change based on the subject position of its author?

Yes, I tend to agree with this. Writers “experiment” out of their own subject positions. Furthermore, subject positions are constantly shifting, and this makes for dynamic creative space. And too, in some cases, our subject positions determine to what degree our “experiments” are embraced.

5. Is there (or maybe, should there be) a significant difference between “innovative” and “experimental” with respect to labeling? If so, can you describe that difference?

There is a sense in which these terms are very fluid; but in publishing or literary code-speak, there might be a shade of difference. I’m not sure what it is though. I think “experimental” suggests more uncertainty, and therefore more risk. Risk is an elixir, and we should be less afraid of it.

## GURGLE

*Venezia*

I.

eyeing dented pop

cans bobbing mid-  
canal—the trim  
metal is *simply/ moving* a best

case behavior? slight-  
ly drunk I bump

myself or  
the mortar:

II.

the nifty  
cracking filler  
slants into completion like waves

curling: drops/ nicking biggish/ the  
medium  
flood boots—I need the railings too  
grabbed, flies fattening/ the table: flap

flap: the  
cloth is

wet is...  
shifting

III.

catch  
me seizing paper menus  
midair a-

cross the *Ca'*—I mean  
this street

name this place this

most  
basic slang

## PONTE DEI PUGNI

*Venezia*

I.

face a flushed  
glare: a shrill  
light with no

folds—but move  
back go  
back (see?!) its no  
glare but

a glow... canals limn

canals  
fill this chipped  
city  
frame its fumes

spiral—

II.

every-  
thing seen through  
light the (light

this...) face one

faces...

III.

fumes, the  
fumes

\*

still, but the current  
sprays: lifts:  
strays into

one, just  
one

glow: a swell:  
a spread  
making a  
brink  
(brinks...)—look

look—and look—

down: the all, all

the time:  
that heaving

close—

**ON FUNCTION AND FORM:  
AARON HULL INTERVIEWS MATT BELL**



**Aaron Hull:** As a reader, it seems I'm most drawn to stories bearing the stamp of a particular place, real or imagined. Title and cover aside, I think it was the setting of *In the House* that first attracted me to the book. You gave the novel a spare, elemental, anonymous setting that helps disorient the reader and allows for the kind of fabulous events that form the heart of

the narrative. Still, as I read, I kept picturing the landscape of Michigan's Upper Peninsula, where you used to teach. I've spent a lot of time up there and have certain mystical associations with this place that's so remote, sparsely populated, and charged with these elemental aspects--water, wind, forest, rock. I kept imagining a kind of mythic U.P., with the husband and wife having fled the land of their parents to begin a new life across the lake. I'm wondering if, as you wrote this story—presumably in Marquette—you were conscious of the influence of your surroundings, of how they might be shaping your work. The same goes for what you're working on now: Do you find that your settings, and your preoccupations, have begun to shift at all, now that you've moved to the desert?

**Matt Bell:** I actually didn't write *In the House* in the U.P., although that's a common reading of the book, because it was published while I lived there. I did all of the work on the book except the final week of edits while living in a condo in Ann Arbor, a dramatically different environment than the U.P. And my new novel, set in Detroit, was written almost entirely in Marquette, with a final draft finished here in Arizona. (Where I've recently been writing about Europe.) That said, I'm sure the landscape has an effect on my imagination, in ways perhaps less direct than you're suggesting. I grew up in Michigan and lived there for the first thirty-four years of my life. There's no doubt that my mind was shaped by that landscape, by those seasons. No matter

where I spend the rest of my life, I imagine that state will continue to dominate my fiction in many ways.

**AH:** For me, the strongest and most interesting stories in your first collection, *How They Were Found*, are those that play with form, structure, temporality, rather than the straightforward, linear narratives that have only some element of the surreal, the fabulous, or the horrific to distinguish them from realism. I'm thinking, on the one hand, of stories like "Wolf Parts," "Her Ennead," and "An Index of How Our Family Was Killed," as opposed to, say, "Mantodea," "Dredge," and "The Leftover." The first seem both more inspired, more alive, than the latter, and also more confident, more convinced of themselves, and hence more convincing. Is it that the first group just looks different from much of we're maybe accustomed to seeing? And, do you think that the work that's come after—*Cataclysm Baby*, *In the House*—has more in common with that first group than the second? If I were writing a paper on the fiction of Matt Bell, for instance, I might argue that it's in that first species of story where we can really see intimations of what's to come in your later work. I'm wondering if you agree, or disagree, and why.

**MB:** I wonder how much of it is simply that the more formally playful stories and the more horrific/surreal elements simply play to my strengths, in certain ways. Certainly, those stories do seem most linked to *Cataclysm Baby* and *In the House*, but that's a trajectory I can only plot by looking backward. If I'd written different books next, maybe we'd be having a different conversation. One of the odd things about writing novels instead of stories is how much slower the pace of formal experimentation can become: If I want to try something drastically different at the scale of the novel, it takes two or three years for that to come to fruition and to manifest where readers can see it. Where a story collection might make room for more directions that I explore only once, or on a smaller scale.

**AH:** You earned your MFA at Bowling Green. One sometimes hears about the dominance of quiet, domestic realism in MFA workshops. I'm wondering what your experience was like, if you ever felt out of place, writing how and what you were writing, if you felt that your work stood out as very different from that of your peers.

**MB:** My work was different from the work my peers were doing in many ways, but their work was different from each other's too. I didn't experience the homogeneity of voice or style so many MFA fearmongers are constantly decrying, and I don't see it much as a teacher either. But maybe I've been lucky to be in programs that encourage more individuality rather than preaching any one true way.



**AH:** You're a poet as well as a fiction writer, and much of your work, it seems safe to say, crosses genre boundaries not just within the realm of fiction but across literature as a whole. I'm curious about your creative process when you sit down to write a shorter piece, if indeed you sit, and if you approach the writing with any such conscious intent. Do you say to yourself, Okay, now I'll write some flash-fiction, or, now I'll write a poem, or do you begin with, say, a voice or an image or a circumstance, and allow the writing to lead you where it will?

**MB:** I've only just started seriously writing poetry again this past year or so, and there the intent was very directed: I knew I wanted to work on poems, after finishing the new novel and the new story collection, to try to reboot and recharge. But mostly now I'm working in longer forms, so the intent is there too: I write a lot of fragments, a lot of small pieces built, as you say, from a voice or an image, and eventually those start coalescing along narrative arcs. I have been doing some short work too, writing new fairy tales, and those have their own sort of form that suggests the more limited length. But I'm always trying to keep from being too sure of what I'm doing, too early: I want to be open to surprises and to opportunity.

**AH:** If you'll indulge a little more nosiness into your creative process, I'm interested, from the standpoint of structure, in how you went about writing *In the House*. I've read that you rarely know what you're going to do in advance. It seems that there are novelists who progress incrementally, in a rather organic fashion—I think Cormac McCarthy said somewhere that having to plot out a novel before he started writing it would be “like death”—but then you have a writer like Ben Percy, who says he'll begin to plan out a novel a whole year before he starts to write. You've said elsewhere that you've buried a few novels that fizzled out a hundred pages in. To what extent have you experimented with different approaches to writing a novel, and what differences, if any, have you discovered?

**MB:** I'm not much of a planner, at least not during the first draft: I prefer the surprises that come with a more haphazard approach, focusing on the sentence and paragraph and the scene and not worrying too early about how exactly the fragment in question fits into the whole. But I do eventually outline, between drafts: I outline my first drafts, revise my outline as a plan for the second, and then revise.

As for the one hundred page drafts that didn't make it: Usually, what happens is that the original inspiration I had is never joined by any other, and so after thirty thousand words or so there's nowhere left to go. The novels that have succeeded have done so because they have become about so many more things than I started out believing they would contain.

**AH:** In the House often feels, to my mind, as much like an epic poem as a novel. Other interviews have touched on the syntactical influence of the King James Bible and of Anglo-Saxon and Nordic myth. What role did The King's Mirror play, besides providing a mysterious epigraph? Were there other texts or literary traditions, besides fairy tales, from which you were drawing as you were writing this novel? I kept thinking in particular of the Finnish epic Kalevala as I was reading it.

**MB:** I don't know the Kalevala, so I'll have to check it out. Thanks! The King's Mirror is a fascinating document, supposedly written by a king to teach his son how to rule, and in it are these great passages on the science of the time, describing the natural world as it was then understood. The epigraph comes from a section on the kraken, which posits that there are only two of them in the world, and that they bear no children. I found this relatively early in the research, and it became a sort of schema for how the world worked, even if I didn't understand exactly how that would manifest. Later, during revision, I mined the rest of the text for phrasings, old word choices, other ways of inflecting my language with some of that book's texture. I also used a pile of old dictionaries for similar effect, swapping in more archaic words wherever it could create an interesting sound or sensibility.

**AH:** As I read In the House, I kept wondering why you'd decided to write this story in the first-person. The tale was already so strange, the diction so odd—it seemed like quite the hurdle you'd set up for yourself, writing from this point of view. I could imagine myself deciding that first-person would feel too vulnerable, that I needed to dress myself up in the third-person as a way of conveying authority. At the same time, the husband's incantatory, sometimes exhausting speech might be seen to act as a kind of doubling of his wife's song-as-creation—both characters can be seen to build worlds with their voices. Did you play around with other points of view as you were writing, or was the voice itself the genesis and nexus?

**MB:** At one point, I did rewrite the first hundred pages into third person, to try it out, then wrote it back into first, which was infinitely better. The best reason to have it in first is that it forces the husband to say, over and over, my wife, my wife, my wife, the best expression of his extraordinary and disastrous possessiveness I could have devised, appearing as it does in so many of even the most banal sentences in the book.

**AH:** Was there a point in your development as a writer when you made a conscious choice to write differently from the American literary mainstream, or did this come about more organically, after you'd internalized "the rules" and began, bit by bit, to experiment and transgress them?

**MB:** I'm not particularly interested in being different or difficult just for the sake of being so. But I do think that if you write in the same style as everyone else, you inevitably can only tell the same stories they're telling. I'm interested in what changes about my thinking and my emotional landscape when I'm forced to work in a different voice than my own, in a way of speaking I don't already understand. The narrator in *In the House* can't share my thoughts because he doesn't share my way of speaking and thinking, and that meant getting to go new places outside of myself as I wrote.

**AH:** Do you find yourself increasingly drawn to stories that are formally innovative, rather than being simply well-established narrative forms made strange by the insertion of some strange content?

**MB:** When I was in grad school, writing *How They Were Found*, I sat in an AWP panel on non-realist fiction where Kate Bernheimer made this incredibly challenging statement, quoted here as it later appeared in *Fence*: "Some realists have sensed the luster fading from their project of representation and have attempted to add a little magic to their product. The product is essentially realist, essentially representational, but now comes wrapped with a bow of fabulism. What an interesting bow! How clever! But inside the product is the same: a plot that is 'believable' in some way or another, a character you can identify with, an epiphany in which that real character finally connects with his real reality. And the bow or magical element is also representational—a revelation within reality that until now remained unrevealed. The mirror such authors hold up unto the world simply contains some magic, which these realists dutifully reflect back. Some fanciful or terrible twist of the real. And it's still a good product, a fancier product with a shiny new bow, which still contains the authentic, real world you always wanted. What a gift. What a surprise. What a real and realist surprise."

This felt utterly true to me: That most contemporary magical realism or fabulism was simply dressing up realist narratives in magical clothes. I had been pushing against that sort of thing in my own work for a while, but couldn't have articulated it without Bernheimer's help. To answer your question more directly: I am most interested in work that truly creates new ways of thinking, of feeling, of seeing the world, of creating worlds. I am less interested in exactly how a writer does this than I am that they get it done.

**AH:** Do you have a preferred method for teaching creative writing to students at the introductory level? For example, do you think it's a help, or a hindrance, to divide a semester up into, say, fiction and poetry, and then further subdivide into character, point-of-view, plot, dialogue, etc.? Would a perhaps more organic approach—say, beginning with voice or image—maybe yield more interesting, innovative writing, or is it better for beginning writers to compartmentalize early-on so that later, once

they've trained their different writer-muscles, they have the strength to start knocking down walls with precision?

**MB:** The most important skill I teach is less about the craft of writing and more about the experience of reading: Students come in trained as literature students, more often than not, and I work to teach them to read as writers, to read attentive to craft, to identify what moved them intellectually or emotionally or morally and then to dissect how that effect was created. Everything they need to learn begins here: learning to read closely, imaginatively, generously.

**AH:** I was struck by something you said in an interview in *American Short Fiction*, with Aaron Teel: "It wasn't until I'd written a book or two that I realized how each finished work could be both its own thing and also generative of what would come next, and I think stories are for me the perfect engines of this kind of discovery." This really rings true for me and seems to echo one of the themes of *In the House*—this sense that something, or someone, is both a unique entity and yet also arises out of what's come before and births what comes after. Have you thought much about to what extent, if any, *In the House* was generative of your forthcoming book, *Scrapper*?

**MB:** Much of the early aesthetic decisions about *Scrapper* came from a desire to move in different directions, but of course there is crossover in a variety of ways, both formally and stylistically and also in subject matter. In revision, the choice appears to either diminish or strengthen those linkages, and sometimes I chose to distance the new work from the old one while in other places I turned up the volume on some passage that would reward a reader of the earlier book. As you noted in that earlier interview, I'm aware that I'm not just writing one book anymore but also composing a body of work, and it seems worth exploring what the effect of that whole might be and how it might be created—and perhaps later subverted.

**AH:** Has anyone suggested, or have you considered, that *In the House* seems to cry out for a graphic version of itself—illustrated and/or animated?

**MB:** No one has yet, but I would love it if the right person were to take on the task of making a graphic novel out of the novel. I'm very open to the idea of other people adapting or reimagining the work, and it seems like part of the novel's conception as a kind of new myth should allow for the retellings of others to go in their own unique directions.

*ASYMMETRICAL AURA.*

14 X 10 IN.  
OIL ON PAPER.

LEONARD KOGAN.



*FROM*

**THOUGH WE BLEED METICULOUSLY**

Tragic the consequence of movement. The pulsar manipulations drowning the future.

Say here is one road where the revenant bleaches in sun.

In sun there is a cowardice of fixity tracing ancient questions

in the imprints of my stride. A call to death. Let the blur be the burrow

into my fractured pile of reminiscence: the benefaction of my journey.

The leafing frost departing on traveler's jaws. The breakage of

the genuine savior the meadow a backdrop to telemetry. Towers for days.

It is by chance we echo across the canopy of a familiar sky.

My madness is the memory where I began to flee.

The road as it ever was a harbinger the frozen captured parts

of deer strewn across a mile. In sun the faultless warming of the traveler's

perpetual breath. In sun visions of heat-pounded shadows

slowly erupting and all at once the traveler in and around the desolate

BOOK OF MISCONCEPTION. Here the world slants it refrains

from scarcity in sun it positions the traveler toward mirrors

of deserts. Desolate becomes the examination pardoned

in reason. I must have a voice but it is not

there in sun I am cloaked in silence. Simulated and fraught

saguaro melodium. We place our ears to the apocalypse. The return  
to horizon a parallax impulsion a mystery I once swam among.  
How much have I already forgotten? How much did we never know?  
Let the owls hum where the horizon cracks a creature with five faces. The fourth face  
is a prayer in the distance of hope and recollection. The fifth a Darwinian mask  
what can be revealed is a history. The first three despair silently  
inescapable like an oxen-hooved tract of expansive solemnity. Creature  
you are the traveler and likewise a stone. Creature in sun you are  
the evacuation. The BOOK OF RELENTLESS MOANINGS foretells of landscapes  
peeling like meat from bone. In sun the sun in sun. There can never be  
any misconception. The traveler will return to returning. No the traveler will  
not return. There can never be clemency for absences traverse ages of feet and fields.  
I could never misremember how I pled goodbye:  
heavens pushing in sun mapping a conciliatory prayer for movement.  
The voice a kind of music facing the inability to breathe.  
O against the tabernacles of morning the prayer spilt to deny markings on roads.  
Half in moon half placed in our veins invocation of anathema  
stilted backdrop of godspeed. But the road is here in the surface-tinged pallor  
placed neatly in the BOOK. Let the moon be a moaning. A fragile



atmosphere to lose. In sun the moon splinters

from the world the action succedent to remembering supplicant powers.

The revenant becomes a prayer                      the traveler despaired of relentless sun.

The road bends crooked and forms bodies with land. In land sun diverts

catacombs succumbing to combed out teeth. The body prays subversive

if in sun the path encumbers a spirit within us. O sun

unearth my hardened reason the day I sickened my duty.

O forceful deception! The calyx of morning                reveals a creeping cistern

a collection that cannot be severed from my mind. Have I poisoned

my memory? Chosen I am forced to subsist on velleity     the earth

opening its atmosphere to place sun upward against the revenant's finger.

I have tried every night to forget your infamy but cast new vowels to curse.

Distillation of cellmate to foot the reactive cacoethes

my dreams chisel in particular angles of rocks. The trial of lifespan

to harden a solecism                      in swagger. In sun preternatural asphyxiation

preoccupied in right motion. THE BOOK OF SHADOWS foretells

that necessary reactions to solitude do not end in gazes toward Western

plains. Action my hero the lonely self                pry time into a passage of chants.

An elusive seizure of the body's ineffable hum. How utterance assuages

dictions within truly                      coincidental sun I have forgotten the brutality

we endeavor. In sun pageantry lives in dire preservation. Passenger the sky to blister.  
That flying reflects in ways too near the heart. The body will not be interrupted.  
From a dry creek the world molders so hard. The foot's art a path to pretense  
a child rupturing into thousands of blossoming flowers  
the brilliant remnants of what may thought to have existed.  
In sun the wake pulls my delivery the sound of songs quaking from our feet.  
To have existed is to explode  
in the folds of life. The purity wastes us context relents. Orange textures  
create a rift of measurable absence in breakage. Here  
my wonderment begins. In firm words I set upon a journey—incorruptible  
I with my we will always say your name as flowers burning. Your memory  
in sun is the matter-of-factness crows have sheened into malleable identities.  
In sun shadows mark a passing of self onto people the threshold  
THE BOOK calls to question. Imagination in the right dark sky.  
We speak the path smelt-historied present a perfectly  
heartbreaking endurance a furtively arduous book.  
Barren perfect crumbling of trajectory of motioned palms.  
A prayer pleading for a shred of night.

# CONTRIBUTORS

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TAIRA ANDERSON lives in Seattle, Washington where she is a fiction editor for Isthmus and volunteers with The Greater Seattle Bureau of Fearless Ideas, and Hugo House. She is currently working on a collection of short stories inspired by the inescapability of American pop music.

AARON ANSTETT's newest collection is *Insofar as Heretofore*. His poems recently appear or will in *cream city review*, *Eleven Eleven*, *Gargoyle*, *Parcel*, and others. He lives in Colorado with his wife, Lesley, and children.

ERIN ARMSTRONG is pursuing an MFA at the University of Colorado, Boulder. Her fiction has appeared in *SmokeLong Quarterly* and *New World Writing*.

STEVE BARBARO poems appear in such venues as *American Letters & Commentary*, *DIAGRAM*, *Verse Daily*, *Salt Hill*, *Western Humanities Review*, and *Denver Quarterly*. He lives in Illinois, where he is currently finishing a novel, an excerpt of which can be found on WebConjunctions.

ERIC BAUS is the author of four books of poetry: *The Tranquilized Tongue*, (City Lights 2014), *Scared Text*, winner of the Colorado Prize for Poetry (Colorado State University Press, 2011), *Tuned Drones* (Octopus Books, 2009), and *The To Sound*, winner of the Verse Prize (Wave Books, 2004). A fifth book, *How I Became a Hum* is forthcoming from Octopus next year. He is also the author of several chapbooks, most recently *The Rain Of The Ice* (Above/Ground Press 2014). He teaches literature and creative writing at Regis University in Denver and is a poet-in-residence at Ashbery Home School.

MATT BELL is the author of the novel *In the House upon the Dirt between the Lake and the Woods*, a finalist for the Young Lions Fiction Award and the winner of the Paula Anderson Book Award. His next novel, *Scrapper*, will be published in Fall 2015. He teaches creative writing at Arizona State University.

SERENA CHOPRA is a PhD candidate at the University of Denver. She is the author of the full-length collection, *This Human* (Coconut Books, 2013), and the chapbook, *Penumbra* (Flying Guillotine Press 2010). Her second full-length collection will be out in Fall 2015 from Coconut. She is a dancer with Evolving Doors Dance and was a 2011-2013 resident artist at the RedLine Gallery. She lives and works in Denver.

PATRICK CULLITON lives in Ohio.

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ABIGAIL DACK is 24 years old and was born in Portland, Oregon, though she currently resides in northern Arizona. She found her grandmother's 35mm SLR when she was twenty years old, two years after her grandmother's passing. The photographs she took with it are windows into solitary seasons, taken out of an aching for some respite from the city, from the emotional struggles of oscillating romance. She hopes that they exude the salvation and bloom that continues to bless her life.

MARCIA DOUGLAS is the author of the novels, *Madam Fate* and *Notes from a Writer's Book of Cures and Spells* as well as a poetry collection, *Electricity Comes to Cocoa Bottom*. Her work has appeared in journals and anthologies internationally. In addition to writing, she performs a one-woman show, *Natural Herstory*, adapted from her fiction, and directed by Cecilia Pang. She is on faculty at the University of Colorado, Boulder, where she teaches literature and writing.

BRIAN EVENSON is the author of a dozen books of fiction, most recently the story collection *Windeye* (Coffee House Press 2012) and the novel *Immobility* (Tor 2012), both of which were finalists for a Shirley Jackson Award. He is the recipient of three O. Henry Prizes as well as an NEA fellowship. His work has been translated into French, Italian, Spanish, Japanese and Slovenian. He lives and works in Providence, Rhode Island, where he teaches in Brown University's Literary Arts Department.

ANDIE FRANCIS holds an MFA in poetry from The University of Arizona. Her work appears or is forthcoming in *Cimarron Review*, *CutBank*, *Fjords Review*, *Portland Review*, and *Terrain*. Her chapbook, *I Am Trying to Show You My Matchbook Collection*, is forthcoming (CutBank 2015).

CONNOR FISHER was born in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and currently lives in Denver, Colorado. He has an MA in English Literature from the University of Denver and is working towards an MFA in Creative Writing—Poetry from the University of Colorado at Boulder.

JOSH FOMON is originally from Iowa City but now lives in Seattle where he edits the art journal *Depaser*. His poems appear or are forthcoming in *jubilat*, *Caketrain*, *alice blue review*, *pallaksch. pallaksch.*, *DREGINALD*, *Deluge*, *Yalobusha Review*, and others. His book *THOUGH WE BLED METICULOUSLY* is forthcoming from Black Ocean in spring 2016.

SUEEY GUTIERREZ is a New York based artist who was born and raised in Brooklyn. Her work has been displayed in libraries, subways, hospitals, schools, homes of private collectors, and in local galleries in places ranging from New York City to El

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Salvador. Recently, she exhibited at Paper Doll Vintage Boutique in Sayville NY, and Ripe Art Gallery in Huntington NY, where she also works as an event coordinator and assistant. She was commissioned by Zelka Energy Solutions to paint a 9-foot mural after Super Storm Sandy. In the summer of 2013 she exhibited at Sip This in Valley Stream NY. Sueey also had a solo exhibition in El Salvador, where her family originates. She received an Award of Excellence in the Art Student Competition of 2011. In addition, she had solo exhibitions in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, and Great Neck, New York. She has also taught elementary school students for the Barry and Florence Friedberg JCC.

IRA JOEL HABER was born and lives in Brooklyn. He is a sculptor, painter, writer, book dealer, photographer and teacher. His work has been seen in numerous group shows both in the USA and Europe and he has had 9 one-man shows including several retrospectives of his sculpture. His work is in the collections of The Whitney Museum Of American Art, New York University, The Guggenheim Museum, The Hirshhorn Museum & The Albright-Knox Art Gallery. Since 2007 His paintings, drawings, photographs and collages have been published in over 195 on line and print magazines. He has received three National Endowment for the Arts Fellowships, two Pollock-Krasner grants, the Adolph Gottlieb Foundation grant and, in 2010, he received a grant from Artists' Fellowship Inc. He currently teaches art to retired public school teachers at The United Federation of Teachers program in Brooklyn.

CLAIRE HOPPLE lives with her husband in Nashville, Tennessee and is a Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania native. Her fiction is published or forthcoming in *Bluestem*, *Quarter After Eight*, *Noctua Review*, *Limestone Journal* and others. More at [clairehopple.com](http://clairehopple.com)

AARON HULL teaches creative writing at the University of Colorado, where he is an MFA candidate.

LAIRD HUNT is the author of six novels, most recently *Neverhome* (Little, Brown, 2014) and *Kind One* (Coffee House Press, 2012). His reviews, essays, translations and fiction have appeared in, among other places, *Bomb*, *Bookforum*, the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Irish Times*, the *Daily Beast*, *McSweeney's* and the *Brooklyn Rail*. He teaches at the University of Denver and edits the *Denver Quarterly*.

MATTHEW JOHNSTONE has recent writing in *Gesture*, *N/A*, and *Opon*. His book is *"Let's be close Rope to mast you, Old light"* (Blue & Yellow Dog, 2010). He is one half of the arts journal *Pider*, of Tennessee, Nashville, America.

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GINA KEICHER is the author of *Wilderness Champion* (Gold Wake Press) and the forthcoming chapbook *Here Is My Adventure I Call It Alone* (dancing girl press 2015). She is a poetry editor for Black Lawrence Press. Recent work appears or is forthcoming in *Ampersand Review*, *Big Lucks*, *Birdfeast*, *elsewhere*, *NightBlock*, and *Whiskey Island*. She lives in Ithaca, New York.

LEONARD KOGAN lives and works in Baltimore, MD. Major exhibitions include “Wall flowers” in Herzliya Museum, “The After Light” at the Andy Warhol Factory in New York, “SUR/FACE/S” at Nexus Project Gallery in New York, a show at the museum of Yanko-Dada of Modern Art in Tel-Aviv, “Project Diversity” in Sputnik Gallery, Brooklyn and others. Leonard’s art has been featured in a number of literary and art (maga)zines, most recently, in *Mad Hatters Review* and *Little Patuxent Review*.

MICHAEL LAMBERT is author of *Circumnavigation*, (Red Bird Chapbooks, 2014), loosely based on self-propelled travel in North America. He is the recipient of a 2015 residency at the Port Townsend Writers’ Conference, and his work has appeared in *Midwestern Gothic*, *theEEEL*, and *Queen Mob’s Teahouse*.

VICTOR LAVALLE is the author of one story collection and three novels. His most recent novel, *The Devil in Silver*, was a New York Times Notable Book of 2012. He has been the recipient of numerous awards including a Guggenheim Fellowship, an American Book Award, and the Key to Southeast Queens. He teaches creative writing in Columbia University’s MFA program.

LAWRENCE LENHART holds an M.F.A. from The University of Arizona. His work appears or is forthcoming in *Gulf Coast*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, and elsewhere. Currently living in Sacramento, he is the reviews editor and assistant fiction editor of *DIAGRAM*.

OLIVIA OLSON is a poet and librarian living in metro Detroit. Her recent poems are forthcoming in *Driftwood Press* and \*82.

NICHOLAS PERRY is an artist based out of Milwaukee Wisconsin and is an undergraduate at the Peck School of the Arts. A devoted abstractionist, his work is physical documentation of his experiences of memory. These experiences of memory are the sensations he felt during the event. His drawings present an unknown space to the viewers, removing literal reference to the real world and providing vulnerability for a true contemplative act. His work has been published by multiple university run journals such as the *Cream City Review*, *New Plains Review*, *Glass Mountain Review*, and *The Temenos Journal*.

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ALEXIS POPE is the author of *Soft Threat* (Coconut Books, 2014), as well as three chapbooks. Recent work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Bat City Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Poor Claudia*, *Powder Keg*, and *The Volta*, among others. She lives in Brooklyn and is a member of the Belladonna\* Collective.

MATTHEW SERBACK is an original gangster of love. Mathew has been published in *Scissors & Spackle* as well as *On the Rusk*. This story wouldn't be possible without special help from Susan Solomon. Mathew also encourages people to not put passwords on their wi-fi—sharing is caring, people.

DAVE SHAW lives in Canada. His work has been featured in *Pop Serial*, *Thought Catalog*, and *Metazen*, and is forthcoming in *Dum Dum Zine*.

MARCUS SLEAVE was born in Portadown, N. Ireland and moved to Las Vegas at age 12. Currently he lives in the Docklands of East London and teaches English as a foreign language. His latest book is *Rides* (Blart Books 2014). Recent poetry has appeared, or will appear, in: *Similar:Peaks*, *Glittermob*, *Everyday Genius*, *theNewerYork*, *Coconut Magazine*, *Right Hand Pointing*, *The Atlas Review*, *NAP*, *H\_ngm\_n*, *Spork*, *Forklift Ohio*, *Likewise Folio*, *Sprung Formal*, and *Poetry Wales*.

LOUIS STAEBLE lives in Bowling Green, Ohio. His photographs have appeared in *Agave*, *Driftwood*, *Four Ties Literary Review*, *Gravel*, *Iron Gall*, *Microfiction Monday*, *On The Rusk*, *Paper Tape Magazine*, *Tupelo Quarterly*, *Up The Staircase Quarterly* and *Your Impossible Voice*. His web page can be viewed at <http://staeblestudioa.weebly.com>

AMY-JO TRIER-WALKER received her MFA in poetry at Columbia College Chicago, and she lives in a tree farm in Indiana, where she nails crumbling books and copper watch chains to the trees to keep their hollows from being harvested. They still fall on her path. Her work can be found in or is forthcoming from *Handsome*, *LEVELER*, *A Bad Penny Review*, and *Ilk*, among others, and she is the Art Editor at *Black Tongue Review*.

NATALIE VESTIN lives in Saint Paul, Minnesota. Her essays have been published in *Prairie Schooner*, *The Normal School*, *The Iowa Review*, *Puerto del Sol*, and elsewhere. A chapbook, *Shine a light, the light won't pass*, is forthcoming from MIEL Books.

JAMES WAGNER is the author of *Thrown: poems to paintings by Bracha L. Ettinger* (There Press, 2014), *Work Book* (Nothing Moments, 2007), *Trilce* (Calamari Press, 2006), *the false sun recordings* (3rd bed, 2003), and several chapbooks, including *Geisttraum—Tales from the Germans* and *The Idiocy: Plays*. His poetry, fiction, and

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reviews have appeared in *Abraham Lincoln*, *The American Poetry Review*, *The Baffler*, *Boston Review*, *Fence*, *6x6*, *Sleepingfish*, *Zoland Poetry*, and elsewhere. He lives in California.

SHELLY WEATHERS 's work has appeared in *Redivider*, *Sou'wester*, *Moon City Review*, *Clockhouse*, and elsewhere. She has received the 2013 Beacon Street Prize for Fiction, as well as the 2014 John Steinbeck Short Story Award. Shelly currently lives in the desert Southwest with her family.

JOSH YOUNG is the author of four collections, most recently *THE HOLY GHOST PEOPLE* (Plays Inverse) and the chapbook *Sedro-Woolley Days: A Damien Jurado Mixtape* (Midnight City Books). He is the Editor-in-Chief for The Lettered Streets Press and Associate Director of Creative Writing at Columbia College Chicago.

ALAN ZIEGLER's books include *Love At First Sight: An Alan Ziegler Reader*; *The Swan Song of Vaudeville: Tales and Takes* (with an introduction by Richard Howard); *The Green Grass of Flatbush* (winner of the Word Beat Fiction Book Award, selected by George Plimpton); *So Much To Do* (poems); and *The Writing Workshop, Volumes I and II*; and *The Writing Workshop Note Book*. He is the editor of *Short: An International Anthology of 500 Years of Short-Short Stories, Prose Poems, Brief Essays, and Other Short Prose Forms* (Persea Books). His work has appeared in such places as *The New Yorker*, *The Paris Review*, and *Tin House*. He is Professor of Writing at Columbia University's School of the Arts, where he has received the Presidential Award for Outstanding Teaching and was chair of the Writing Program. He is currently at work on *Based on a True Life: A Memoir in Flashes*.