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m a g a z i n e

issue 6. spring 2017.



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Editor's Welcome	14
Gilmore Tammy	
• <i>Untitled</i>	15
The Embodiments of Desire, the Makers of Attraction, and the Sacred Delirium of Love: An Interview with Bill Wolak <i>(including featured collages by Bill Wolak)</i>	16
• <i>Searching Through Light's Memories</i>	17
• <i>The Password's Tingling Chaos</i>	17
• <i>The Increasing Complexity Wherever Time Becomes Incased in Matter</i>	19
• <i>The Dreamer's Baffling Escape</i>	19
• <i>The Magnetic Silk of Your Skin</i>	19
• <i>The Bridge of Tenderness</i>	19
• <i>The Curious Warmth of Astonishment</i>	20
• <i>Irresistible As a Reservoir of Light</i>	20
• <i>Haunted by an Erotic Engima</i>	21
• <i>The Whisper Lingering in a Mirror</i>	22
Power & Inspiration: Two Women Writers Talk about Their Culture and Art <i>by Melissa Gish</i>	24
James Gallant	
• <i>Marat Sings in the Bathtub</i>	30
Sophi Amado	
• <i>Threadmoons</i>	38
Terry Barr	
• <i>The Chah-Chah Plays Forever</i>	42

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Megan Ayers

- *Girl Lessons* 49

“Music of Place” : A Dialogue *by Erin O’Neill Armendarez & Jake Kaida* 55

Jake Kaida

- *Music of Place* 58

W.E. Pasquini

- *I Open the Window While Listening to La Bohème* 59
- *Nocturne* 60
- *At the Slave Cemetery in Estil, South Carolina* 62

Clinton Inmann

- *Elba by the Window* 61

Jeffrey H. MacLachlan

- *Terminal Hotel* 63

Patrick Cahill

- *Drift Prairie* 64
- *Shostakovich* 65

Jane Beal

- *Song of the Selkie* 66

Edward A. Dougherty

- *The Lighter (Rock n Roll Tangent #3)* 68
- *By Ear* 70

Daniel Pravda

- *Strumming in a Thunderstorm* 72

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Bruce Wise (*aka Cause Bewilder*)

- *To the Memory of Harper Lee: Lines Composed February 19, 2016* 73

Zack Rogow

- *The Sticky Blues* 74

M.A.H. Hinton

- *Disturbance at Drumcliffe Churchyard* 75

Kimberly Simms

- *Ugly Jug* 76
- *The Shortness of Summer* 77

John Stupp

- *Something Cool* 78

Yi-Wen Huang

- *Armand Ortega* 79

Yuan Changming

- *The Irony of a Snag* 80

Robert L. Penick

- *Submerged* 81

Judith Toler

- *YouTube: Marketplace Singers Mercado Central de Valencia* 82

Katie Darby Mullins

- *Air Drumming to “See These Bones” after Winter is Finally Over* 83
- *Gram Parsons Survives the Explosion* 84
- *Hotel in Evansville, Indiana (After the Fire)* 85

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Charles O'Hay

- *Struck* 86

Benjamin Goluboff

- *Leiber and Stoller's Magnum Opus* 87
- *Jimmy Witherspoon Buys Leiber and Stoller's First Commercial Release* 88

Tim Kahl

- *Incredible Water* 89
- *Sunset Blues* 90
- *The Vital Blurt* 91

Dan Sicoli

- *Doksana* 92

Maria Zalesky

- *Bone Music* 93
- *Marginalia* 94

Heather Newman

- *Bourbon Street, 3 AM* 95

David Anthony Sam

- *Of Bone and Limestone* 96
- *Past All Aging* 97

Joe Bisicchia

- *Sounds Like Home* 98

ARTISTS & AUTHORS

Sophia Amado

Sophie Amado is currently an MFA candidate and rhetoric instructor at Columbia College Chicago. She holds a BA in English and Spanish from the University of Iowa, where she created the continuing reading series Paper Tongues. Last year, Sophie won a Fulbright scholarship to Madrid, Spain during which she taught English to high school students.



Megan Ayers

Megan Ayers has been published in journals like *Bluestem Magazine*, *EDGE*, *The Emprise Review*, and *Moon Milk Review*. She has been nominated for The Pushcart Prize and teaches writing in Cincinnati, Ohio, where she lives with her husband, three dogs, and too many ridiculous chickens.



Terry Barr

Terry Barr is the author of the essay collection *Don't Date Baptists and Other Warnings from My Alabama Mother*. His work has appeared in *Blue Lyra Review*, *Full Grown People*, and *The Bitter Southerner*. He lives in Greenville, South Carolina, with his family.



Jane Beal

Jane Beal, PhD, is the creator of many poetry collections, including *Sanctuary* and *Rising*, as well as three recording projects: *Songs from the Secret Life*, *Love-Song*, and *The Jazz Bird*. She also writes fiction, creative non-fiction, and literary criticism, and she loves to sing, dance, and play flute. See <http://sanctuarypoet.net>.



Cause Bewilder (aka Bruce Wise)

Cause Bewilder is a poet of the American South. "I'll take my stand in diction," he once wrote, "and strive to resuscitate the art of poetry, maintain the sublime, and achieve the classical elegance of ancient Greek tragedy, while asserting Southern cultural values." Influenced by writers, such as Poe and Faulkner, and renegade Fugitives, like Ransom, Tate, O'Connor and Lee, he remains a stalwart New Critic crying in the present Wilderness. He is a close associate and admirer of "Wild" E. S. Bucaree.

ARTISTS & AUTHORS

Joe Bisicchia

Joe Bisicchia writes of our shared spiritual dynamic. An Honorable Mention recipient for the Fernand Fernando Rielo XXXII World Prize for Mystical Poetry, his works have appeared in various publications. His website is www.widewide.world and he is on Twitter @TheB_Line.

Joe Bisicchia's works have or will soon appear in *Philadelphia Stories*, *Muse-Pie Press*, *Qua Magazine*, *The Tipton Poetry Journal*, *Torrid Literature Journal*, *Diversion Press*, *The Wax Paper*, *The Path*, *The Poet's Haven*, *Sheepshead Review*, *Verse-Virtual*, *Balloons Lit. Journal*, *The Inflectionist Review*, *Black Heart Magazine*, *Dark Matter Journal*, *Poets Collectives Anthologies*, *Poetic Matrix Press* and others.



Patrick Cahill

Patrick Cahill coedits *Ambush Review*, a San Francisco based literary and arts magazine. He received his PhD in History of Consciousness at UCSC. Recent work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Left Curve*, *San Francisco Peace and Hope*, *Digging Our Poetic Roots*, *Otoliths*, *Forgotten*, and *Volt*.



Yuan Changming

Changming Yuan, 9-time Pushcart nominee and author of 7 chapbooks, published monographs on translation before moving out of China. With a PhD in English, Yuan currently edits *Poetry Pacific* with Allen Yuan in Vancouver, and has poetry appearing in *Best Canadian Poetry*, *BestNewPoemsOnline*, *Threepenny Review* and 1239 others across 38 countries.



Edward Dougherty

Edward A. Dougherty's fourth collection of poems *Grace Street* is available from Cayuga Lake Books. In 2015, he published *Everyday Objects* (Plain View) and his fifth chapbook, *House of Green Water* (FootHills Publishing). In May 2015, his emblems (small calligraphic artwork with a brief poem) were exhibited at the Word & Image Gallery at the Bright Hill Literary Center.



ARTISTS & AUTHORS

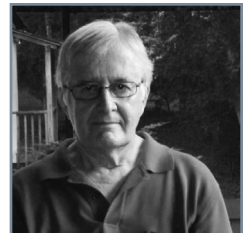
He is also the author of three previous collections, *Everyday Objects* (2015, Plain View Press), *Pilgrimage to a Ginkgo Tree* (WordTech) and *Part Darkness, Part Breath* (Plain View). After finishing his MFA in Creative Writing in Bowling Green, Ohio, Dougherty was poetry editor of the *Mid-American Review*. Then, he and his spouse traveled to Hiroshima to be volunteer directors of the World Friendship Center, where they served for two and a half years, witnessing the fiftieth anniversaries of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. They now live and work in Corning, New York, a place defined by the confluence of three rivers and a glass company you may have heard of.

Dougherty's poem "Snow Day" was exhibited as part of the Lyric Visions project at The State of the Art Gallery in Ithaca, New York, where artists selected submitted poems from which to create images. Illeen Kaplan painted from "Snow Day."

For more info, visit his site: <http://edwarddougherty.wordpress.com/>.

James Gallant

Fortnightly Review (London) is currently hosting a column written by James Gallant, "Verisimilitude: Essays and Approximations," and his second novel *Whatever Happened to Debbie and Phil?* is forthcoming from Vagabondage Press. Grace Paley's Glad Day Books published his first novel, *The Big Bust at Tyrone's Rooming House: a Novel of Atlanta*. His fiction and essays have appeared in *The Georgia Review*, *Epoch*, *Massachusetts Review*, *Story Quarterly*, *Mississippi Review*, *Exquisite Corpse*, *North American Review*, *Raritan*, *Witness*, and *The Chattahoochee Review*, among other magazines. His website is available on this link: www.jamesgallantwriter.com.



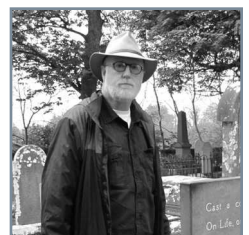
Benjamin Goluboff

Benjamin Goluboff teaches English at Lake Forest College. Aside from a modest list of scholarly publications, he has placed imaginative work -- poetry, fiction, and essays -- in numerous small-press journals, most recently *The Fourth River*, *Vending Machine Press*, *Bird's Thumb*, and *War Literature and the Arts*. Some of his work can be read at www.lakeforest.edu/academics/faculty/goluboff/.



M.A.H. Hinton

M.A.H. Hinton grew up in Montana, lives in Minnesota, and has been writing for more than 40 years. His publications include a poem in *Spitball* and several Western short stories.



ARTISTS & AUTHORS

Yi-Wen Huang

Dr. Yi-Wen Huang is from Taiwan and an Associate Professor of English and Linguistics at University of New Mexico-Gallup. She lived and attended universities in Long Island, New York and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Her research focuses on language and affect. Her hobbies include zumba, spinning, thrift shopping, edm, and traveling as a foodie and tea aficionado.



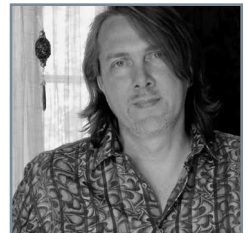
Clinton Inman

Clinton Inman is a retired school teacher, Renaissance painter, poet, and piano player, born in England, graduated from SDSU in 1977.



Tim Kahl

Tim Kahl (<http://www.timkahl.com>) is the author of *Possessing Yourself* (CW Books, 2009), *The Century of Travel* (CW Books, 2012) and *The String of Islands* (Dink, 2015). His work has been published in *Prairie Schooner*, *Indiana Review*, *Ninth Letter*, *Notre Dame Review*, *The Journal*, *Parthenon West Review*, and many other journals in the U.S. He appears as Victor Schnickelfritz at the poetry and poetics blog The Great American Pinup (<http://greatamericanpinup.wordpress.com/>) and the poetry video blog Linebreak Studios (<http://linebreakstudios.blogspot.com/>). He is also editor of Bald Trickster Press and *Clade Song* (<http://www.cladesong.com>). He is the vice president and events coordinator of The Sacramento Poetry Center.



Jake Kaida

Jake Kaida, author of *Blue Collar Nomad*, is a writer, poet, pilgrim, teacher and environmental activist who has spent time in all forty-eight continental United States and several Canadian provinces. He has had books published by several Indie publishers, and he is a long time contributor to the alternative press world.



Jeffrey H. MacLachlan

Jeffrey H. MacLachlan has recent work in *New Ohio Review*, *Eleven Eleven*, *The William & Mary Review*, among others. He teaches literature at Georgia College & State University. He can be followed on Twitter [@jeffmack](https://twitter.com/jeffmack).



ARTISTS & AUTHORS

Katie Darby Mullins

Katie Darby Mullins teaches creative writing at the University of Evansville. In addition to being nominated for a Pushcart Prize and being the associate editor of metrical poetry journal *Measure*, she's been published or has work forthcoming in journals like *The Rumpus*, *Hawaii Pacific Review*, *BOAAT Press*, *Harpur Palate*, *Prime Number*, *Big Lucks*, *Pithead Chapel*, *The Evansville Review*, and she was a semifinalist in the Ropewalk Press Fiction Chapbook competition and in the Casey Shay Press poetry chapbook competition.



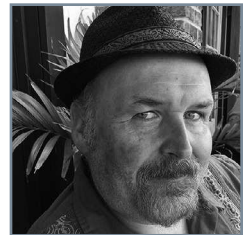
Heather Newman

Heather Newman is a member of South Mountain Poets (NJ) and studies at The New School (NYC). Her work has appeared in *Two Hawks Quarterly*, *New Verse News*, *The Potomac Journal*, *Erma Bombeck Writers' Workshop*, and *EChook*, and will appear in the upcoming anthology *Voice From Here*, Vol. II (Paulinskill Poetry Project, 2017).



Charles O'Hay

Charles O'Hay is the author of two poetry collections—*Far from Luck* (2011) and *Smoking in Elevators* (2014)—both from Lucky Bat Books. His work has appeared in over 150 publications, including *Gargoyle*, *Pittsburgh Poetry Review*, *Riprap*, and *New York Quarterly*.



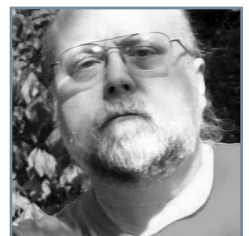
W. E. Pasquini

W. E. Pasquini's poetry has appeared in *Cider Press Review*, *The Meadows*, and *Fourth River*, among others. Pasquini has been a finalist in various book and chapbook competitions such as New Rivers Press's MVP Contest and completed an MFA in creative writing at the University of South Florida.



Robert L. Penick

Robert L. Penick's work has appeared in over 100 different literary journals, including *The Hudson Review*, *North American Review*, and *Plainsongs*. He lives in Louisville, Kentucky, USA, with his free-range box turtle, Sheldon. More of his work can be found at www.theartofmercy.net.



ARTISTS & AUTHORS

Daniel Pravda

Daniel Pravda picked up a guitar 26 years ago and still hasn't put it down. At least 1000 poems and 100 songs in, he feels fortunate new ideas still burst like mental popcorn. He's recorded four records for The Dunes (www.thedunes.us) and one book of poetry, *A Bird in the Hand Is a Dumb Bird*. Rock on.



Zack Rogow

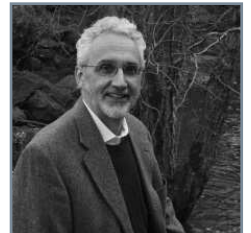
Zack Rogow is the author, editor, or translator of twenty books or plays. His most recent poetry collection is *Talking with the Radio: Poems Inspired by Jazz and Popular Music*. He teaches in the low-residency MFA at the University of Alaska Anchorage. More information can be found at www.zackrogow.com.



David Anthony Sam

David Anthony Sam was featured poet in the Spring 2016 issue of *The Hurricane Review*. His chapbook *Finite to Fail: Poems after Dickinson* was the 2016 Grand Prize winner of GFT Press Chapbook Contest and his collection *All Night over Bones* received Honorable Mention for the 2016 Homebound Poetry Prize.

In 2016, his poems were accepted by *50 Haikus*, *Aji Magazine*, *Arlington Literary Journal*, *December*, *Dual Coast Magazine*, *Folia*, *GFT Press: Gravel*, *Heart & Mind Zine*, *Heron Tree*, *Hurricane Review*, *Inwood Indiana Magazine*, *Jazz Cigarette*, *Literature Today*, *Meat for Tea: The Valley Review*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *Red Earth Review*, *Red Savina Review*, *Route 7 Review*, *Rust + Moth*, *Shabda Press*, *Smoky Blue Literary and Arts Magazine*, *The Summerset Review*, *Tanka Journal*, *Touch: The Journal of Healing*, *Three Line Poetry*, *The Write Place at the Write Time*, and *The Yellow Chair Review*.



Dan Sicoli

Dan Sicoli authored two poetry chapbooks from Pudding House Publications (Columbus, Ohio), *Pagan Supper* and *the allegories*. Currently, he can be found in local dives, saloons and barrelhouses banging on an old Gibson with an area rock'n roll band. He lives just south of the Canadian border.



ARTISTS & AUTHORS

Kimberly Simms

Kimberly Simms is a teaching artist, mother, and poet. She is a first generation American with a Masters in English from Clemson University. She was recently chosen as the 2016 Carl Sandburg Writer-In-Resident. Her poems have been published in a variety of journals including *Poem*, *The Asheville Poetry Review*, *Eclipse*, *The South Carolina Review*, and *The Blue Collar Review*. More information can be found on the following link: www.kimberlysimms.com.



John Stupp

John Stupp is the author of the 2007 chapbook *The Blue Pacific* and the 2015 full-length collection *Advice from the Bed of a Friend*, both by Main Street Rag. His new book *Pawleys Island* will be published in 2017 by Finishing Line Press. He lives near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.



Gilmore Tammy

Gilmore Tammy has a story in Madison Smartt Bell's *Narrative Design* as well as several short essays in *Not A Rose* by Heide Hatry and *The Dan Clowes Reader*. A book of her poems was published in 1997, *The Small Time Smirker*. She has had essays, artwork, interviews and short stories published in *Chickfactor*, *Petrichor Review*, *Foliage Oak*, *Turk's Head Review*, *Pithead Chapel*, *Meat for Tea*, *The Drum*, *Vine Leaves*, *Gravel*, and *Sinister Wisdom* (cover, Winter 2016). In addition, she has written songs for three albums under the name The Yips, and has a record with her current band Weather Weapon on Bandcamp. In 2002, she received an MFA from Emerson College. Currently her agent is working on finding publication for two novels, one of which is being serialized online at Ohioedit. Tammy was Somerville's (MA) November 2014 Artist of the Month. Her performance poem video "THUNDER KITTEN THUNDER" was part of the European Media Arts Festival in 2016. Her artwork was on the cover of Mark Lamoreaux's *It'll Never Be Over For Me* (Black Radish Press, August 2016).



Judith Toler

Judith Toler has been an editor, English professor, union organizer, artist and award-winning poet. Dozens of her poems have appeared in literary magazines and anthologies, most recently in *Lummox*, *Malpais Review*, *Sin Fronteras*, *Santa Fe Literary Review*, *Voices de la Luna*, *Pushing the Envelope: Epistolary Poems*, and 2017 *Texas Literary Calendar*.



ARTISTS & AUTHORS

Bruce Wise (aka Cause Bewilder)

Bruce Wise is a creator of numerous heteronyms. Ubs Reece Idwal is the heteronym for his Pacific Northwestern poet's persona.

Ubs Reece Idwal is a poet of the Pacific Northwest, like Theodore Roethke or William Stafford, and is an intimate not only of Bud "Weasel" Rice, the nature poet, and Urbawel Cidese, the lover of metropolises, but also universalist R. Lee Ubicwidas.



Bill Wolak

Bill Wolak is a poet, photographer, and collage artist. He has just published his twelfth book of poetry entitled *Love Opens the Hands* with Nirala Press. His most recent translation with Mahmood Karimi-Hakak, *Love Me More Than the Others: Selected Poetry of Iraj Mirza*, was published by Cross-Cultural Communications in 2014.



His collages have been published in over a hundred magazines including *The Annual*, *Peculiar Mormyrid*, *Danse Macabre*, *Dirty Chai*, *Hermeneutic Chaos Literary Journal*, *Lost Coast Review*, *Mad Swirl*, *Otis Nebula*, and *Horror Sleaze Trash*. In 2016, he was a featured poet at The Mihai Eminescu International Poetry Festival in Craiova, Romania; Europa in Versi, Lake Como, Italy; The Pesaro International Poetry Festival, Pesaro, Italy; and The Xichang-Qionghai Silk Road International Poetry Week, Xichang, China. Mr. Wolak teaches Creative Writing at William Paterson University in New Jersey.

Maria Zalesky

Maria Zalesky is a law student who lives in Denver, Colorado with her cat and small pocket of Ukrainian emigrant family. In her spare time, she scribbles, podcasts, and creates clever games to teach herself the Federal rules of Evidence.



Editor's Welcome

Dear readers,

Welcome to the sixth issue of *Aji*, an issue filled with unique and intriguing sights, sounds, and ideas. I'd like to extend a sincere thanks to the magazine's all volunteer staff, talented, hard working professionals who freely give their time to carefully review submissions, to write interviews, and to design, produce, and edit each issue. Their thoughtful perspectives and creativity are responsible for *Aji's* success along with the high quality submissions we've enjoyed from writers and artists who won't even get a free copy for their troubles.

We started from the ground up, no money, just a vision and a true passion for the arts as well as a longing for the company of like minds. We have found it here in these pages, and we hope you will as well--welcome to a virtual concert hall filled with brilliant fortissimos hushed to the silences of forgotten cemeteries, the jazz-like, jangled cacophony of city streets, the sotto voce of receding tides, and the staccato, sharp tones of lovers' quarrels. We hope you enjoy all the sights and sounds packed into this issue. Thanks for reading!



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Erin O'Neill Armendarez". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

Erin O'Neill Armendarez
Editor in Chief





The Embodiments of Desire, the Markers of Attraction, and the Sacred Delirium of Love: An Interview with Bill Wolak

Katie Redfield: Where are you originally from and where are you living/working now?

Bill Wolak: I grew up in a small town called Ridgefield, New Jersey. It's a suburban town about five miles from the George Washington Bridge. Ridgefield's greatest claim to fame is that when it was considered an artist's colony circa 1915, Man Ray lived there for a while before he moved to Paris. The second chapter of Man Ray's autobiography *Self Portrait* is entitled "Ridgefield, N. J." Ridgefield's other great claim to fame is "The Ridgefield Gazook," an early Dadaist magazine produced by Man Ray while he was living in, you guessed it, Ridgefield. Now I live in Bogota, New Jersey, which is only a few miles from Ridgefield. In fact, when I'm sick, I'm treated in the same hospital in which I was born. There's something comforting in that.

KR: What cultural influences, if any, do you think appear in your work?

BW: The most important cultural influence would have to be the decisive effects of the turbulent 1960s on me as I was growing up. The Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam War, the Women's Movement, the sexual revolution, the assassinations, the Cold War, the social unrest and protests, all influenced me as I began to try and understand the world and my place in it. But it was the music, especially, that focused my attention on the possibility of a world that contained more than crass materialism. Through artists like Leonard Cohen, Joni Mitchell, Judy Collins,

The Incredible String Band, and all the rock bands that appeared and grabbed the country by its ears, I was inspired to create my first songs and poems. I began studying French in high school, and out of that encounter with language and culture the second most important influence emerged: my encounter with Surrealism. And it was the art that first attracted me to Surrealism. Artists like Max Ernst, Man Ray, Salvador Dali, René Magritte, Dorothea Tanning, Yves Tanguy, Paul Delvaux, Leonora Carrington, Hans Bellmer, and Leonor Fini transformed the way I looked at the world. Only later did I read and become astonished by the Surrealist poets such as Paul Eluard, André Breton, and Robert Desnos.

KR: When/how did you get started in visual arts?

BW: I started tinkering with collage back around 1979. I'd already been writing and publishing poetry for about ten years. I founded The Somniloquist's Press, and I published a surrealist magazine called Dream Helmet, as well as some chapbooks, and broadsides. Just at that time I was introduced to the English surrealist poet and collage artist John Digby. John became my mentor in all things surreal, and we have remained friends since that time. John did the collages for my first book of poetry *Pale As an Explosion*. Now he runs his own press with his wife Joan called The New Feral Press out of Oyster Bay, NY. The Digbys remain two of the great joys in my life; we get together frequently, and they have been kind enough to publish nine of my books over the years, all collaged by John and designed by Joan and John.



Searching Through Light's Memories (above - top)
The Password's Tingling Chaos (above - bottom)

KR: What inspires you to create?

BW: This is the most difficult question, and I'm not sure that I have a satisfying answer for it. But it seems to me that I create as a means of connecting with others. I want to share these images with others as a way of opening up a dialogue about what is most meaningful in life.

KR: What do you think makes art an important part of our culture?

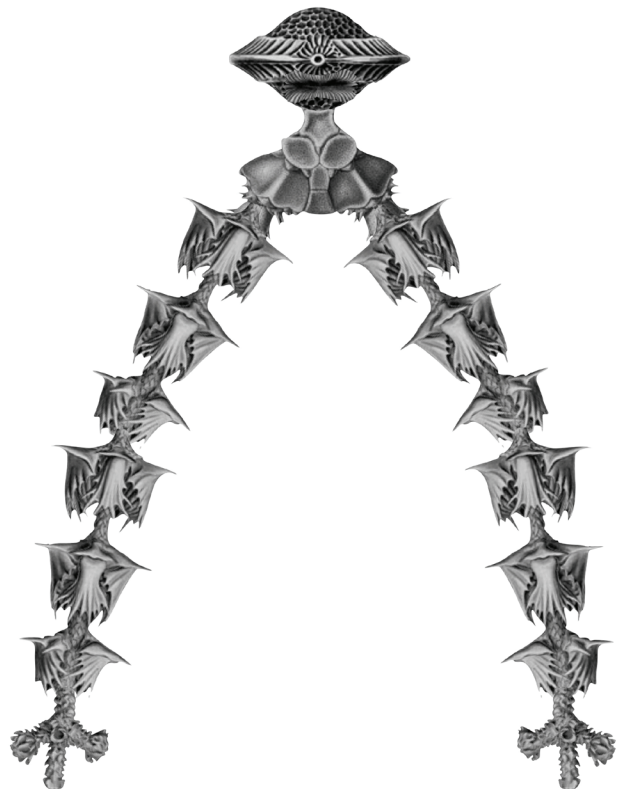
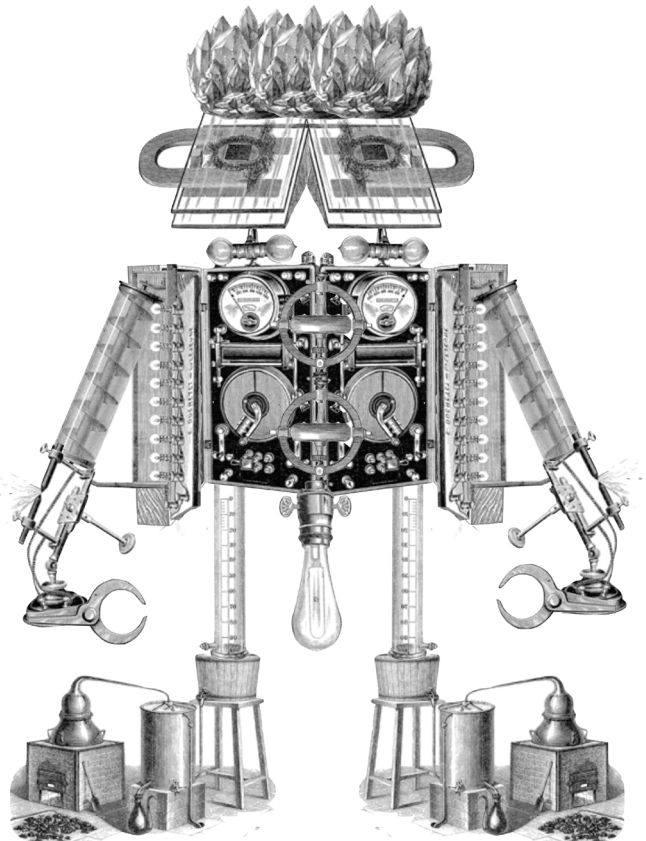
BW: The tendency in society these days is definitely towards things superficial, facile, and frivolous. The trivialization of "truth" today is a good example of this trend. Art, on the other hand, demands something deeper from the individual. Art demands a meaningful connection to the experiences and emotions of the viewer. In addition, art demands time. It is not something that can be understood at a glance.

KR: Who are/were your mentors and role models?

BW: One of my early mentors was Bill Wolf, who was a friend of mine since high school; he had studied photography with Philippe Halsman. Bill taught me about light and the clarity of the image. Later, as I have said, John Digby taught me and encouraged me to experiment with the scissors and paste of collage. Afterwards, I was also influenced by the poet/photographers Ira Cohen and Charles Henri Ford.

KR: When did you know you wanted to make collages?

BW: Well, I was attracted to surrealist collage when I first came across it in high school. I was especially fascinated by Max Ernst's collage novel *Une Semaine De Bonté*. Later, I discovered an early book by Ted Joans in which he made collages out of medical prints. These had a decisive influence on me. But it was not until I was introduced to John Digby's collages that a new possibility opened up for me—the possibility of making collages myself. Digby



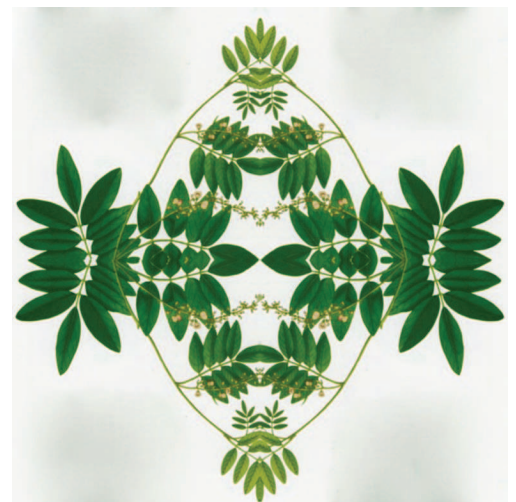
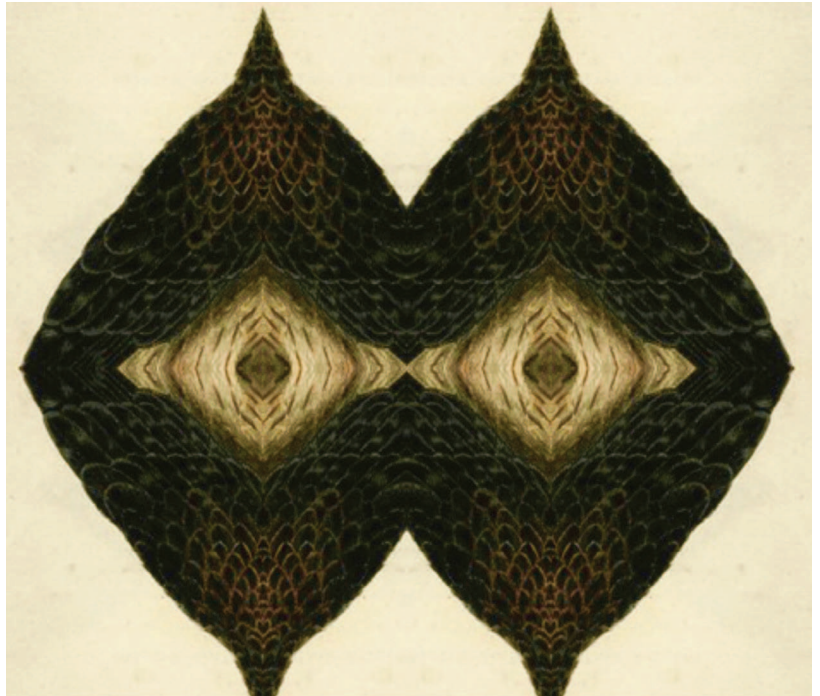
encouraged me to experiment with collage, and it is because of his help, advice, and support that I was able to make progress with collage. So I first started working seriously on collage about 1979, when I was assembling my surrealist magazine *Dream Helmet*. I decided to attempt to make collages for the page numbers. This is where my collage career began.

KR: Your work seems to draw a lot from nature. Can you tell us a little more about that?

BW: I'm happiest hiking in the mountains, swimming in the Delaware River or at some lake or, as we say in New Jersey, "going down the shore." Even a drive in the country is enough to cheer me up. The appreciation of nature probably is rooted in the Transcendentalists, such as Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman. In addition, I have taught the English Romantics and have been influenced by their enthusiasm for nature, especially Wordsworth and Shelley. In painting, the equivalents would be Turner and Caspar David Friedrich. I'm also interested in finding ways to show our interconnectedness with nature. For me, this quest to show the deep mystery of nature is expressed in certain illusionist techniques that I first came in contact with in Giuseppe Arcimboldo and Salvador Dali.

KR: You also seem to have some very mechanical pieces. Did this style evolve out of the more natural pieces or did it come before?

BW: That's a funny story. I sent some collages to a magazine, and they were rejected. However, the editor was kind enough to ask if I had anything that would fit the upcoming theme of "automatons." I had never dreamed of doing collages made of machines, but this request from an editor pushed me to explore new territory. After making a few mechanical collages, which I now refer to fondly as "Wobots," I found that I really enjoyed these types of constructions. They connected me with the sense of wonder and awe that I experienced playing with some of my early toys which were robots like Mr. Machine, Robby the Robot, and Robot Commando. In addition, the science fiction robots of the movies, comic books, and television fascinated me as a child.



The Increasing Complexity Wherever Time Becomes Incased in Matter (pg 18 - left)

The Dreamer's Baffling Escape (pg 16 - right)

The Magnetic Silk of Your Skin (pg 16 -above, top)

The Bridge of Tenderness (above, bottom)



KR: Can you describe the process from the spark of an idea to the culmination of a completed piece?

BW: To begin a piece, I select some sources—either color or black and white. If I'm using magazines or prints or old books, I cut out some images or parts of images that interest me. Then I start working on a background or some other sort of chance construction. Much is left to fleeting insights. These are tiny miracles of inspiration. Depending on whether I'm using scissors and glue or digital images, each collage could take several hours. Sometimes it takes several days or even weeks to know if a collage is finished. Much depends on the kind of collage and the size.

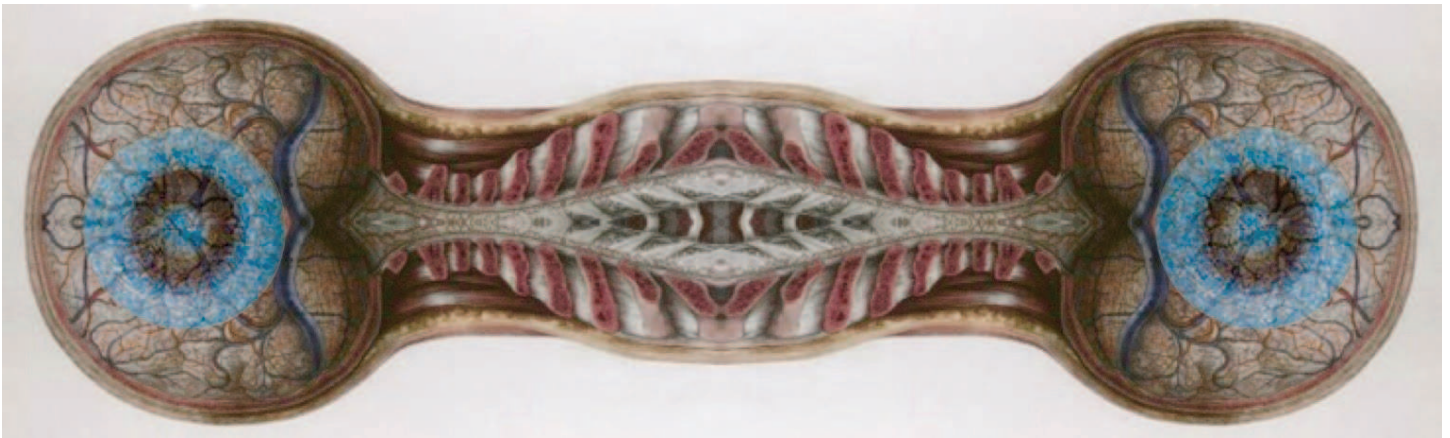
KR: How do you know when a piece is finished?

BW: This is a very tricky question. Sometimes I feel that there is always something in a new piece that I can improve. So what I do is allow each piece some time to settle. Then, I look at it again with, hopefully, fresh eyes, not as an artist in the heat of creation, but as a critic searching for its flaws. I begin by asking myself, "How can I simplify this image?" Another question I frequently ask myself is, "Why should anyone be interested in this image?" These questions and others directed at a new piece, help me to hear when my "bullshit detector" goes off about any new work. The "bullshit detector" saves me from excessive sentimentality, pseudo-profundity, outright imitation, and repetition. Another way of answering your question, however, is that I know that a work is finished when I give it a title. Once a work has a title, for me, it has passed scrutiny and is ready for the world.



The Curious Warmth of Astonishment (left- top)

Irresistible As a Reservoir of Light (left- bottom)



KR: Your work is often symmetrical. Can you share a bit about that and what motivates you to create in this way?

BW: Well, to begin with, I'm certain that the symmetry in my work is an attempt to impose order on my otherwise chaotic life. I'm deeply influenced by the Renaissance notions of harmony and balance. Also, an early influence was biological works concerning form and pattern in nature. Later, I became interested in fractals. In addition, a good deal of my work involves constructing or reconstructing bodies and faces, which are predominantly symmetrical.

KR: Some of the work seems to have a sexual undercurrent. Is that intentionally woven in from the beginning or does it naturally manifest itself into the piece?

BW: So one of the aspects of nature that is especially interesting to me is sexuality in all its complexity and manifestations. So this is a theme that naturally manifests in my work. Therefore, many of my collages deal with the embodiments of desire, the markers of attraction, and the sacred delirium of love.

KR: It seems that you use a combination of traditional hand drawn work and digital enhancements. Can you tell us a bit about that process?

BW: Most of the materials I use in my collages are either black and white or colored engravings, but on occasion, I will use hand drawn works as well. In addition, sometimes I use advertisements from glossy magazines. In most cases these days, the materials are digitally rendered and enhanced one way or another.

KR: Can you tell us a bit about how you share your work? For example, have you done gallery shows or do you prefer to share in other ways?

BW: Yes, I do gallery shows when I can. I've been selected to contribute to a show called Naked in New Hope, which is sponsored by Sidetracks Art Gallery in New Hope, Pennsylvania, for the past four years. I've also done individual collage and photography shows at various galleries and libraries. Most of my work, however, is published in poetry magazines, a market with which I am familiar since I also contribute to them as a poet.

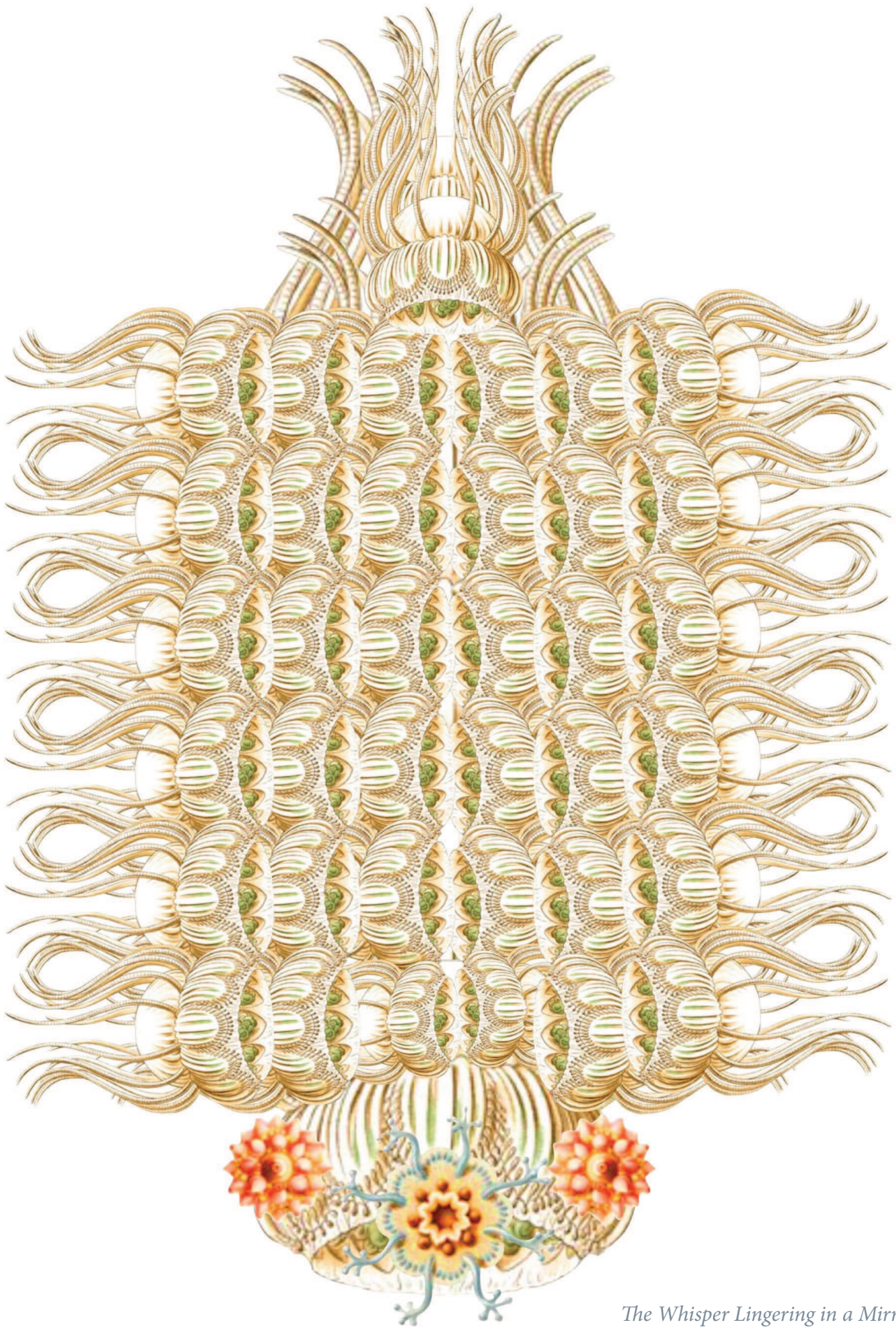
KR: Do you share your work to people as it is in progress or wait until you have a finished piece?

BW: Usually I try to have a collage completed with title before I show it to anyone.

KR: Do you work alone or within a community of other artists?

BW: I have many friends who are artists, and we share our work and support each other. In addition, there are many magazines, websites, and blogs that support my work and encourage me to persevere with new creative projects.

Haunted by an Erotic Engima (above)



The Whisper Lingering in a Mirror

KR: What tools do you use to grow and develop as an artist?

BW: I guess the most important tool I use is Youtube to keep abreast of the ever unfolding wave of technology in the digital world.

KR: What goals do you have for your art in the future?

BW: My greatest goal for my art in the future is to keep exploring new ways to express the mysterious perplexities and wonderment of living.

KR: What other artists would you recommend we check out?

BW: I would recommend John Digby, Cheryl De Caintus, Valery Oisteanu, Tushar Ramchandra Shinde, Corina Chirila, and Ratna Kaji Shakya.

KR: What advice do you have for aspiring artists?

BW: The best advice I can offer to any artist it to be relentless. Be relentless in the creation of your art and be relentless in the quest to find an audience for that art.



POWER AND INSPIRATION: Two Women Writers Talk about Their Culture and Art

by Melissa Gish

This past winter I read an engaging and heartwarming book called *Life without a Recipe* (W.W. Norton, 2016) by Diana Abu-Jaber. Diana was born in Syracuse, New York, to a Jordanian father and American mother of Irish-German heritage. This is the author's second memoir, after the delightful *The Language of Baklava* (Pantheon, 2005). In both books, Diana grounds her revealing, touching, and often funny truths about being part of a multicultural household in her family's culinary traditions. Food is at the heart of both conflict (Diana's American grandmother once cooked ham for Diana's Muslim father) and compromise. I talked with Diana, who teaches at Portland State University, about her life as a writer.

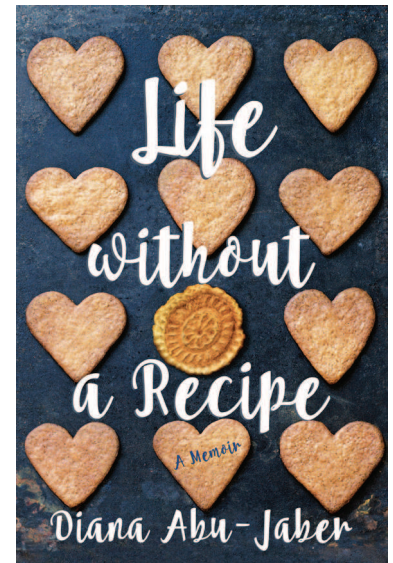
I asked Diana to describe how her cultural heritage contributes to the invention and creation of her writing.

Even though I was born and raised in the States, my father's Jordanian culture permeated every aspect of my upbringing. Dad loved to tell me and my sisters, over and over, that we were Jordanian girls, not Americans. We were expected to abide by his beliefs and value system and he worked to make our home as typically Arab as a house in Syracuse, New York could be. In many respects, it was a rich and wonderful experience—Islamic art, Bedouin music, and Palestinian, Lebanese, and Jordanian cuisine were a huge part of my cultural education and imagination. My father's patriarchal

bent meant that he also tended to dominate the conversation, so telling stories also gave me a way to hear my own voice, to tell my story and to help me understand my experience.

The Language of Baklava is a memoir of Diana's youth. I asked her what made her choose to write this book.

In a sense, The Language of Baklava grew out of the research I did for Crescent [W.W. Norton, 2004]. Crescent was about an Iraqi-American chef and her restaurant in Los Angeles, so there was a lot of cooking in it. I did quite a lot of research for it, including cooking, tasting, and testing recipes. My editor proposed I just keep going with this theme for the next book and try telling my family story through food. As I wrote, I think the book also became a way for me to evoke my favorite meals, to try and crystallize the precious, sensory artifacts of childhood, to attempt to create a narrative record for myself and my family.



Life without a Recipe cover art
[W.W. Norton, 2016]

I asked Diana about her childhood experiences in a multicultural household and how these experiences shaped her as a woman and as a writer.

My father's strict, traditional Bedouin background played a big part in his parenting style, so this meant I wasn't allowed to talk to boys, go on dates, or go out to parties. When I went to college, he sent me with a handwritten list of things I wasn't allowed to do. But as soon as I arrived at school, I tore it up and sprinkled it out of the tenth floor of my dormitory. In many ways, I think my sheltered upbringing created my deep hunger for freedom and independence. This shows in my work especially in the desire to tell my stories as honestly and directly as I can. At the same time, of course, I find it's also frequently a struggle to overcome those old parental injunctions to be "good" and "sweet," to avoid ever upsetting, displeasing, or angering anyone. Which is a ruinous impulse for a writer! I often wrestle with myself as I write, and many of my characters turn out to be strong women who like to second-guess and sabotage themselves. My second memoir, Life Without A Recipe, traces this wavy path in my life—between tradition and risk-taking, family and friends, safety and danger, constraint and breaking free.

Diana's first memoir is very different from her second one. I asked her to talk about these differences.

My first memoir, The Language of Baklava, is very much a book written about and from the sensory and physical memories of childhood. I wanted to talk about those foundational dishes that were at the heart of my own upbringing, a sort of remembrance of family through my father's cooking. Life Without A Recipe is meant to be my book of adulthood, in a sense it picks up where the first book left off. But my new memoir is also meant to be about my own approach to life, my own "dishes," if you will. There aren't actual recipes in the book—it's about my own experience with struggling with other people's prescriptions and advice and finally going off-script. Making it up as you go along. I hope it will help readers to think about new ways to create a creative life, how anyone can claim their own path.

“Work to inspire and support other writers. Be generous. It’s good for the soul and it will help you endure the wild ride of being an artist in a capitalist society.”

-Diana Abu-Jaber

Diana has written six books to date and is working on a young adult fantasy novel titled *SilverWorld*, due out next year. I asked her how she thinks she has evolved as a writer.



Diana Abu-Jaber

When I wrote my first novel, Arabian Jazz [W.W. Norton, 1993], back in the early 90's, I had the sense of writing into a vacuum. It wasn't until college that I started getting a chance to read the works of women and writers of color. Even then I still hadn't yet found novels by Arab-Americans. I wasn't sure if American readers would even be interested in my sorts of stories, if a plotline that reflected my own experience could possibly be considered literature. Arabian Jazz was somewhat autobiographical and humorous, and I think those elements came about in part as a result of my own uncertainty. I wasn't really conscious of it, but I think I had the feeling that I was going to need to try and beguile—even trick—people into reading my novel.

Thankfully, that insecurity has subsided a bit as I've gone on to write and publish more—though I suspect it never really disappears. I feel more confident of my voice as a writer, and I've always been driven to explore and experiment with different approaches. While my first book was more comedic, Origin [W.W. Norton, 2007] was a thriller, Crescent was a romance, and Birds of Paradise [W.W. Norton, 2012] was a family saga. Each book is its own new journey.

Diana has some good advice for aspiring writers.

Read. Read widely and learn about the writers that fascinate and compel you. Study their work, buy their books, go to readings, participate in a literary community. Join a writing group and work to inspire and support other writers. Be generous. It's good for the soul and it will help you endure the wild ride of being an artist in a capitalist society. Make writing an integral part of your daily life, build it into the schedule. As much as you can, don't worry about the end game—publishing, promotion, and publicity. Focus on the process, on the getting-there. That's where you'll find your power and your inspiration.

Also this winter, I read *A Thousand Horses Out to Sea* [Mongrel Empire Press, 2017], a collection of poems by Erika T. Wurth, the author of the novel *Crazy Horse's Girlfriend* [Curbside Splendor, 2014] and the poetry collection *Indian Trains* [West End Press, 2007]. Erika is of mixed heritage—Apache, Chickasaw, and Cherokee. She grew up in Colorado. Her work reflects a respect for the traditions of her native heritage while also examining their evolution in the modern world. I talked with Erika, who teaches at Western Illinois University, about her writing.

Like the question I had asked Diana earlier, I wanted to know how Erika feels that her cultural heritage contributes to the invention and creation of her writing.

You know, I think I'm not unlike Salinger or Carver in the sense that my job is to poetically render what I know. But there did come a point when I understood that no matter what I wrote, I would have to answer for how Native Americans live or how we look or a multitude of political issues, again and again. So I decided to have some good answers for those things. Ultimately, I'm really influenced by native language. I grew up hearing Navajo and Lakota and Spanish too—and sometimes Ojibwe, and I've come to understand that even though I don't speak even the languages of my tribes well or any languages of any tribes, how deeply important those things are for native people culturally and creatively.

I believe the voices in Erika's poems are authentic. I asked Erika if the voices in her poems were drawn from her own life history or from another source.

I think like any writer, I am a human being who is influenced by what is around me. And Native Americans experienced genocide and so whether you are an urban Indian like me or one who grew up on a reservation, we are going to be exposed to "western culture." And frankly, since people really don't know anything about native life, I'm not sure that an outsider would know what is supposedly Western and supposedly not. I think for the most part, people have incredibly comedic ideas of how Native Americans live right now and lived before colonizers got here.

**"I think like any writer,
I am a human being
who is influenced by
what is around me."**

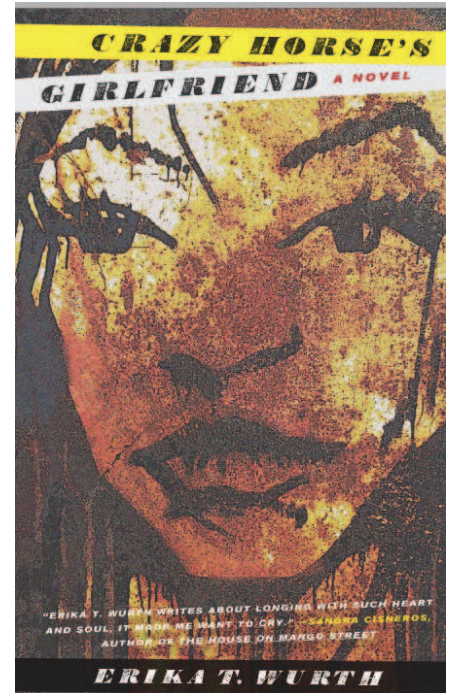
-Erika T. Wurth



A Thousand Horses Out to Sea cover art
[Mongrel Empire Press, 2017]

Many of Erika's poems give a voice to women struggling against the odds, women in bad relationships, in hopeless situations, in danger. Similarly, the novel *Crazy Horse's Girlfriend* is dark and sometimes disturbing, but I believe these are qualities that confirm its truth. I asked Erika why it was important for her to reveal these aspects of contemporary Native American life.

I'm interested, cliché as it sounds, in cycles of abuse. I saw that all around me growing up and there something incredibly compelling about writing about those things, even if it's depressing. And I think giving light to those things gives light to those people, so that if people, whether they are like those women are not, see these portraits of these people, they can see how complicated and human these situations and people are. What people think about Native Americans is sometimes nearly grotesquely comedic. We are human beings and we have experienced genocide and that affects us to this day. Language matters. Culture matters. And simply being able to live a healthy life with choices matters. And I do want to show complex portraits of those lives.



Crazy Horse's Girlfriend cover art
[Curbside Splendor, 2014]

I wanted Erika to tell me more about *Crazy Horse's Girlfriend*. Her characters struggle with poverty, drug abuse, and violence. The results are heartbreaking, yet the characters, particularly the main character, Margaritte, provides an undercurrent of hope. Why, I asked Erika, did she make this choice.

I've read so many novels where the end is totally desperate—and far too many novels where the ending is just unrealistically hopeful. So I didn't want to give any reader the notion that native people are destined to live terrible lives, because that reinforces a very conservative idea about Native Americans, that we deserve what we've gotten. But neither did I feel right about giving something cute and hopeful and unrealistic. That's immoral. And I'm pushed to do that a lot. For example, my agent has had hell selling my current novel, which is about Native American gangs, because it's just too "unrelenting" and "depressing." Which are terms that I see my white male peers being lauded for. I'm being punished for them. And that's especially grotesque when you consider that there are factors in Native American lives often, not always but often, that are so incredibly difficult and need to be talked about.

I asked Erika to describe her latest poetry collection, and I asked her if she thought it was important for women to write about women. Here's what she said:

The collection of poetry is a sort of dark, feminine collection, and one of the most autobiographical things that I've ever written. People can write about whoever—but for minorities, we have to walk in the white world to go to school or get a job. And that is the case for women as well, we have to walk in a male world in order to simply

exist. And that's not the case the other way around. So I think it's incredibly important for women and minorities to write characters that they grew up with and are around. And it's also important because women and minorities read, and we write, and there needs to be a sense that we are full human beings capable of rendering our own existences.

I asked Erika if she had any advice for aspiring writers, particularly minority writers.

Read widely and listen to others. But completely stop listening to others when they're telling you how to write women or minority characters especially if they are not women or minorities, unless they're pushing you to write complicated characters. People want to speak for you and they want to shut you down and you have to not let them do that. And you have to build a community that will be hard on you when you need it, but will still lift you up.



Erika T. Wurth

*“I think it’s incredibly important for women and minorities to write characters that they grew up with and are around.”
-Erika T. Wurth*

Marat Sings in the Bathtub

He was the illegitimate son of the Prince de Conti and the Marquise de Silly. His noble father sent him to the seminary of the Abbot of Venicourt, hoping religious enthusiasm might replace the boy's musical passion. One was as absurd as the other, but were Guillaume to become a prelate he would at least have a social identity.

Guillaume hid a chord book and the neck of a guitar beneath the mattress in his dormitory cell. Late at night, fingering make-believe chords on the guitar neck, he sang *sotto voce* the songs he had written.

A fellow seminarian, proud of having just understood the meaning of idolatry, discovered Gatayes in this practice and accused him before the Abbot of sorcery. The Abbot, understanding that strong boyish interests should be directed, not repressed, supplied Gatayes with an actual guitar and lessons.

So equipped Gatayes escaped the seminary and hiked to the Mediterranean coast where he became a street musician.

He was not doing very well singing songs of his own invention--

Love is just a child,
Don't chide him
Scoff at him,
He'll depart.
Give him freedom,
Access to the heart—etc.

And:

I send to you this letter,
Because je t'adore.
I know 'twould be better
Had we met before

But that would not occur
In a world as dull as this.
My wet eyes are a blur,
As I pen these words, my kiss.

--when he met Beauchant, the blind *chanteur de rue*, who said, "Son, you've got a voice, and you play decent guitar--but you've got to stop singing those silly songs!"

From her Gatayes learned songs like "Au Revoir, Bastille," "They Hang from the Lampposts," and "Ten Fine Heads in a Row."

Nobles drunk with blood and pride--
Tremble, enemies of Man!
The sovereign people will advance.
Headless tyrants I descry!

Beauchant cranked a hurdy-gurdy for accompaniment as she sang these songs. Her milk-white eyeballs rolled around in her head.

The timeless perspectives of the seminary had reinforced the apolitical outlook of Gatayes' noble parents, and when he first heard Beauchant's songs, they might as well have referred to the adventures of Robin Hood, or the Knights of the Round Table. But when the two began traveling and singing together, she educated him in the realities of French politics at the end of the eighteenth century. They ate when and where they could, stole what they had to, and improvised sleeping arrangements in parks or on beaches.

Gatayes was grateful to her for rendering him musically *au courant*, but as they settled down for the night, she began saying things like, "You know, I have juicy fat breasts," or, "Wouldn't you like to visit the damp basement?" What finally set him on the road to Paris was her warbling in his ear

A young man lately in our town
Went to bed one night.
Had no sooner laid him down
Than came to him a vicious sprite.
What the demon urged with force
Will-power couldn't banish--
The exorcism that was needed
Wasn't, I think, mannish.



Paris was overflowing with buskers. Gatayes feared he might not be able to earn enough there to afford a roof over his head, but he was in luck: Pigeons had invaded the attic of the house on the rue de l'Eperon and painted the floor white with excrement. The landlord, having learned what proper roof repairs to keep the birds out would cost, offered Gatayes free attic rent in exchange for swabbing the floor and swatting with a tennis racquet any pigeon that dared enter.

The night after he moved in, a torch-bearing throng appeared in front of the house chanting, "The head of Marat, Robespierre, Danton, and all who defend them!" What was that all about?

Gatayes did well enough in the streets singing songs he'd learned from Beauchant. If it had been possible to miss their drift in the south of France during 1792, this wasn't possible in Paris the spring of '93. Earlier that year, a mob crying, "Vive la Republique! Vive la nation!" had watched the executioner swing by its hair the bloody head of Louis XVI.

Not all street-singers were of the liberal persuasion. One fellow sang:

These sans-culottes destroy
The temples of the gods and kings.
All is violent change,
Accidents prevail,
Hellions trample Paradise.

Gatayes, of no party himself, had contemplated adding a few songs like this to those he'd learned from Beauchant before he saw the singer of that song face down in a gutter with a knife in his back.

Alone in his garret at night Gatayes sang the songs he'd composed no one in the streets wanted to hear. One night, accompanying himself on the guitar, he warbled one of his earliest creations:

I Jean sing my love of Jeanne
I Jean sing my love of Jeanne
Maids none as fair as Jeanne
Or lads half as kind as she.

Jean loves Jeanne. Does she love Jean?
Jean loves Jeanne. Does she love Jean?...

In situ, it really was quite stupid he thought, and he'd just decided he would never sing it again when the door at the foot of the stairs leading to the attic opened, and he heard footsteps ascending. He stopped singing as the head of a man with a shock of red hair appeared over the top step. His nose in profile was a hawk's beak. There was a pistol in his belt.

The visitor seated himself in the stairwell. "Don't mind me, carry on," he said.

Gatayes began singing again hesitantly, casting occasional sidelong glances at the man. He went through all six verses of "Jean and Jeanne," and then he sang

The flute's sigh recalls for me
The love I won't forget,
Joys I thought undying
I shared with sweet Lizette...

and by the time he'd finished that song, the man in the stairwell was snoring lightly with a contented smile on his face. When Gatayes blew out his candle and lay down on his tick mattress, the visitor was still there in the stairway.

He was gone in the morning when Gatayes, guitar in hand, descended the stairs to the foyer of the house. He was about to enter the street when a sturdy young woman with a pretty plump face called to him from a door that opened onto the foyer: "Are you the lad who sings the songs?"

He was, yes.

"Bless you for the service you have rendered France and humanity!"

Gatayes blinked.

"You do know that your visitor last night was Jean-Paul Marat, the Voice of the Revolution?"

Gatayes had heard the name bandied in the streets, but it had no definite associations for him.

“His life is stressful, as you can imagine, and he needs his sleep. But his mind is going constantly.” She twirled a hand at her ear. “Last night he slept soundly for the first time in weeks, thanks to you. We are so grateful!”

Gatayes was getting a rather late start, and sensing the woman might go on in this vein indefinitely, he’d reached for the door handle when she said, “Marat asks if you will dine with us tonight, and sing for him again.”

Gatayes released the door handle.

The woman introduced herself as Marat’s wife Simonne. Gatayes, having learned the hour at which dinner would be served, entered the street happy in the knowledge he would not have to spend all he earned that day on food. He might be able to afford soap.



Gatayes had no idea what being the Voice of the Revolution entailed, but he thought it must pay well, judging from the spread of food on Marat’s table: thick lentil soup, beef, cheese, cabbage, a bread spiced with shallots, and good red wine. Gatayes hadn’t eaten so well since Beauchant and he stole the picnic basket in Marseilles.

Marat, who’d barely acknowledged Gatayes’ presence at table, was a small, intense man with a deeply-lined pasty complexion scarred with eczema. He had a dirty rag wrapped about his head. Eyes blank, he shoveled food into his face, juices running down his chin. Occasionally a word or phrase escaped his thoughts in mumbles: “intolerable...the very precincts of liberty...a silver crucifix? Hah!”

Simonne’s attention moved in a narrow circle from Marat to her plate and back to Marat.

Marat was suddenly alert. “Did you hear that?”

Simonne placed a hand on his arm. “No, dear.”

Marat rose from the table and withdrew the pistol from his belt. Pulling back the edge of a window curtain, he peered into the street.

“He imagines things,” Simonne whispered to Gatayes. She extended the meat platter toward him, urging him to take the last piece of beef, and then left the room. Gatayes dispatched the beef quickly, lest the Voice of the Revolution upon returning to the table should challenge his right to it.

There were sounds of running water in the distance.

Marat gazed quizzically at the empty meat platter for a moment, then mopped gravy from his plate with a piece of bread he washed down with the last of his wine. He engaged in a rapid, intense, cat-like licking of his fingers, and left the room.

Simonne reappeared. “Jean-Paul contracted a skin disease while hiding in the sewers. Medicinal baths relieve his itching. He would like for you to sing for him while he soaks.”

Guitar in hand, Gatayes followed her into a compact bathroom where Marat sat in a shallow, high-backed, copper-lined tub. He was scratching away with a quill on a board stretched across the tub when Gatayes seated himself on a stool, tuned his guitar, and began singing in a clear, sweet, tenor voice:

Tremble, enemies of France,
Kings drunk on blood and pride;
Tyrants soon will fill the coffins,
The people now advance.

Marat looked up from his writing. “No, no--that’s the kind of thing that keeps me awake at night. Do ‘Jean and Jeanne.’”

Gatayes, his stomach pleasantly full, sang all six verses of that banal ditty, and then he sang:

Time is flighty,
Violets lovely
Just in spring.

Flowers blossom
Fade and die
Love is lost

In the blink of an eye

By the time he’d finished this song, Marat had laid his pen aside and was leaning into the back of the tub, hands clasped behind his head, gazing at the ceiling. A thick-lipped smile softened his gruesome face.

Gatayes sang:

Would I were a fern
Whose pleasure is
As twilight falls apace
To be some shepherdess’s
Favorite resting place—etc.

For a change of pace, he sang:

My father makes illegal whisky,
Mother brews mean gin,
Sister sells herself on corners,
Lord, the money’s rolling in!
It’s rolling in, it’s rolling in,
Lord, the money’s rolling in!

Marat's giggle was girlish, and as Gatayes sang the second verse, the Voice of the Revolution joined in on the refrain, singing off-key,

*It's rolling in, it's rolling in,
Lord, the money's rolling in!*

"You know," Marat mused, "I excelled in thought from my youth, but I have always regretted my inability to make music, because I love *hearing* it."

Gatayes was about to remark that, having always excelled in music he'd never regretted his mental incompetence, when he noticed Marat's eyelids drooping, and a moment later his head sank slowly onto the board, nudging forward his arm which overturned the ink bottle. The Voice of the Revolution lay slumbering tranquilly in his muddy bath.



When Gatayes descended the staircase the next morning, Simonne greeted him in the foyer: "Guillaume, you're a magician! Jean-Paul has never slept so well since I have known him." She embraced him and kissed him on the cheek. "Dine with us again tonight --*please?*"

He did so, and sang again for Marat in the bathroom. He did the same the night following, and the arrangement became permanent. Marat's favorite song continued to be the idiotic "Jean and Jeanne," and like a child enamored of the some parent-numbing bedtime tale, he wanted it repeated night after night, and would insist on singing it off-key with Gatayes—an offense to the musician's sensibility that sometimes kept *him* awake at night.

Gatayes' silences magnetized Marat's loquacity, and as May proceeded Marat's bathtub rants concerned the increasingly tense maneuverings of Jacobin and Girondin factions in the Convention. A leitmotif was his disgust with the Marquis de Sade, once a faithful ally. Marat believed the cause of Sade's deviation into moderation had been his fear that the guillotine would cut short his sexual atrocities.

A faint note of hostility was detectable in Guillaume's relationship with Simonne, his ability to usher the Voice of the Revolution into Dreamland having exceeded hers.

One day in his garret Gatayes heard a guitar being played in a manner strange to him, and when he looked from his window into the small courtyard below, a lovely dark-haired young woman was playing ravishingly melancholy Arab-inspired music. Gatayes knew immediately that he must learn to play the guitar as she was.

He went below and introduced himself to the guitarist whose name was Carmela. She had just come from guitar studies with the Cistercian monk-guitarist Father Basilio in Madrid, and she was intending to teach the instrument herself in Paris. Gatayes announced his desire to play the guitar as she did, and she offered her services as instructor.

"That would not be possible," Gatayes said. "I could never pay for lessons."

That wouldn't be necessary, she said. He would be her first student. Teaching him fundamentals would be valuable experience for her--and perhaps he could assist her with colloquial French?

Before they parted that day she had transformed his double-strung guitar into a single-strung, six string instrument. “Eventually, you will want to replace this with one more appropriate for solo performance,” she said, “but for learning the basics yours will suffice.” She played a little on the guitar, bringing from it a volume of sound Gatayes would not have imagined possible. Plucking the strings with right hand fingernails, a technique she had learned from Father Basilio, enabled such volume, Carmela explained. She showed him her long nails and recommended that he grow his to similar length.



Radical Jacobins seized control of the Convention from the moderate Girondins at the end of May, and there were rumors of Girondin counter-revolutionary activity in the provinces during the weeks that followed. Girondins at Caen, Normandy, were said to be organizing armed resistance.

Marat had gone to his bath and his scribbling one night when there was a delicate rapping at the door of the apartment. Gatayes and Simonne were still at table. Gatayes, where he sat, watched Simonne open the door tentatively to a slender, pretty, thin-lipped young woman whose curls peeked out around the edges of a fashionable wide-brimmed bonnet. She requested an audience with Marat.

“He is ill, he is seeing no one,” Simonne said, and she was closing the door when the visitor inserted a leg between the door and door jamb—a gesture whose aggressiveness seemed incongruous with the woman’s delicate appearance.

“I have heard he is not well,” the visitor said. “I am an ardent admirer, and I certainly wouldn’t want to disturb him. But will you see that he receives this letter? It contains information that will interest him. I am from Caen.”

Simonne shut the door and took the letter to Marat. Gatayes followed after, hoping to determine if his services would be required that evening, because he was eager to begin work on some new etudes Carmela had provided him.

Simonne described the author of the letter to Marat as a “young woman,” without mentioning her self-characterization as an “ardent admirer.”

“Really very interesting,” Marat said, looking up from the letter. “She claims to know the identity of Girondins plotting against us at Caen. But she fails to say how we might contact her.”

“Don’t you find that suspicious?” Simonne said.

Marat shrugged. “A youthful omission.”

“There was something about her I didn’t like.”

“There’s something about everyone I associate with you don’t like.”

“I fear for your safety.”

Marat grinned at Gatayes. “Was she pretty?”

Simonne left the room.

“You up for a little ‘Jean and Jeanne,’ my man?”



Gatayes continued to dine with Marat and Simonne, although political developments left Marat less and less time for either songs or sleep. After dining Gatayes would go up to his garret, or to Carmela's room, to practice guitar. Carmela complimented his rapid progress, and they began playing simple duets together, their evenings together concluding always with an embrace and a kiss.

Examining Guillaume's right hand nails one day, Carmela declared them long enough for plucking. She showed him how to level their natural curvature with a file, and provided exercises for right hand development.

Marat, following a tumultuous day in the national assembly, had retired one night after dinner to his tub and his writing. Gatayes and Simonne were still at the table when two feminine voices in the foyer were audible, and then a rapping at the door. Gatayes' impression was that Simonne had not intended to respond, until she heard Carmela's voice.

Carmela had a guitar case in hand. The young woman from Caen was at her side. "If Guillaume's not busy," Carmela said, "there's something I'd like to show him," and she and Gatayes had started up the staircase when they heard feminine voices arguing below, and then Marat calling, "Let her enter, Simonne."

Carmela asked Gatayes to seat himself at the music stand in her room, and withdrew from the guitar case a six string solo guitar with a soundboard edged in pearl which she handed him.

"What's this?"

"A proper guitar for my favorite student."

"You could no more afford this than I."

"*Non-sens*, it cost scarcely anything."

"I don't believe you."

"Go ahead, play it for me!"

Gatayes placed the guitar on his knee and played a little, and it was vastly superior to the instrument he'd brought with him to Paris. He rose from his chair. Holding the guitar out in his left hand, he was hugging Carmela with his right arm when he noticed over her shoulder a tear in the critically important long nail of the forefinger on his right hand.

There was a sharp cry from somewhere below.¹

Gatayes held out his damaged nail for Carmela to inspect. "What does one do when *this* happens?"

She looked at his nail. "You can either cut *all the* nails back and play with just the finger pads--or you cease playing altogether until the nail has grown back."

It was as if Gatayes had been stabbed in the heart.

¹ Charlotte Corday, having gained access to Marat that night, plunged a dagger into his chest as he lay in his bath.

Threadmoons

On a spring-transitioning-into-summer-day, I sat in Hero's Coffee Bar in the South Loop of Chicago, my favorite hole-in-the-wall of that neighborhood. I was waiting for a friend who I catch up with a few times a year when out of nowhere, a pigeon flew into the café. Since it was a spring-transitioning-into-summer-day, the door was open, allowing the pigeon access into the establishment. My uninteresting moment at the café suddenly turned into a small sitcom aside. The feral bird wacked its wings around realizing that it was not in its natural elements; it was not safe. I was sitting by the window at this time and the pigeon flew right into the glass, flapping its wings wildly from the pain and for what I assumed was the fear that there was no exit back to the outdoors. I wish I could have seen the scenario from a bird's-eye view because, at that moment, the pigeon was no longer a bird, but a giant pest and I reacted the way most people do around large bumblebees. At the same time, it was hilariously pitiable that the bird kept making the same mistake. Whack! Right into the glass. Over and over. After many attempts to leave, a customer reached for an umbrella for the outdoor seating that had been leaning against the wall and he guided the pigeon to the doorway where it finally flew away.

My friend walked in the café a few minutes later. It felt like such a remarkable moment, though, nothing had really happened at all.

There was a full moon that night.

Another friend of mine always makes the joke that women are menstruating during a full moon. He brought it up so much that I ended up looking this up after several of my cycles coincided with his generalized statement. I once read an article online that said full moons do have several side effects: epileptic episodes, psychiatric break downs, emergencies, injuries, menstruation, animals gone wild, lack of sleep, earthquakes, high tides, suicides, violence.

I never used to believe in this stuff, the way the planets or stars could shape human behavior on earth. But during this particular week in downtown Chicago, the week the pigeon flew into the café, I started picking up on moments of violence and lunacy. Bizarre occurrences that I used to refer to as coincidences. Now, I'm not as certain.

Saturday came along and I was off to my part-time job at a bar in Lakeview. Upon arrival, one of the bar backs approached me. "Did you see the Snapchat I posted?"

Thinking back to the night before, I did remember glancing through some of my friends' pictures and seeing an image of a black screen with white letters that said, "I almost got arrested" followed by an irritated emoji. I didn't think much of it at the time because as soon as it went away, I was fixated on the next image.

"Oh yeah, I did see that! What happened?"

"Julian came in late yesterday so I went up to him and asked, 'Why are you late all the time?' He got all upset and said, 'Hey, you're not my boss. Don't tell me what to do!' So again I asked, 'Why are you late all the time, bro? Why don't you do your job?' And then he got right in my face all mad and shit. And since he was so close, I pushed him away and was like, 'Don't get close to me!' And then he called the cops."

"What?!"

"Yeah."

"Hold on. The cops were here last night because you pushed Julian? Because he got too close to your face?"

“Yeah, can you believe that shit?”

“But, like, what did the cops even do at that point?”

“They asked us what happened and basically told me not to do that again even though I had the right to push that fucker out of the way. He was getting really close to my face and I’m like, don’t do that man.”

I wondered if a call to the police was warranted for that kind of behavior. I then thought that my boss must have been enraged. Cops on a Friday night at his neighborhood bar could lead to a bad reputation.

Later that night, I was working at the back patio bar. It was the first hot weekend in Chicago and the heated tent that usually covered the beer garden had finally been taken down. The locals swarmed to grab a beer and sit outside as though they were at a camping ground. Business was good because Chicagoans relish the warm weather that comes as a reward after long, harsh winters. I was on the left side of the bar while my coworker, Peter, was on the right. I had been scooping ice into a glass when I saw that Dave, a bar back fondly referred to as Big Country for reasons unknown to me, was arguing with a very large drunk customer. The customer started wailing on him, punching him in the gut while BC fought back. All at once, the two men were behind the bar and BC had pushed the man up against the swinging door so that now we were all stuck inside the narrow bar without an exit. The man put BC into a headlock and started pulling at his hair, yanking so hard that I thought BC’s hair was going to come right off like an uprooted vegetable. I froze and Peter hurled towards the man and then three other bar backs ran over to detain the attacker.

“Call the police!” a customer yelled looking right at me. “I...I don’t have a phone on me!” I cried back, thinking of jumping right over the bar at any second.

Another bartender who had been working inside approached the guy and started yelling, “Hey, listen man, we’re gonna get you out of here, but you have got calm down, alright?” I was petrified by the scene happening so close to me, stuck in the left corner of the bar. I don’t remember how they eventually left, but then things went on as usual. “Can I get a Bud Light?” a customer asked me. “Yeah, sure, one sec,” I muttered going up to Peter first. “You okay?” while BC readjusted his glasses and put his hair back into a ponytail.

“Yeah, I think so.”

“You can take a minute if you need to.”

“Yeah, yeah I think I will. That guy could have really fucked us up. He was huge.”

“People are stupid,” was all I could think to say. Then Peter went to smoke and I unbottled a Bud Light. I broke a glass later that night and poured three people the wrong drink.

After my shift, I googled “full moon theories.” I found a link that mentioned how the body is made up of seventy-five percent water. Some people think that means we have inner tides that are affected by a full moon, like the ocean. Others think this is bullshit. I began to weigh both options.

I woke up after my midnight research session still shaken up by the brawl as I phrased it. I found out that my boss preferred Peter’s term, a “fray” and I wondered why that even mattered at all. I suppose a fray at a bar sounded cleaner, less severe, than my term. While questioning these semantics, I received a text from an old friend who was in town with her husband, Nick. Nick had just returned from a ten-month deployment at sea with the U.S. Marines. The text read: “Joey (nicks brother) told nick that he didn’t care that nicks friends died in Afghanistan because they aren’t his friends. Then called him a murderer. Nick punched him in the face...and we left.”

I instantly thought about how a few months before this friend and I had been on a trip to Nashville. We went out downtown for a music-themed bar crawl and decided to meet up with her college friend at Hattie B's for hot chicken. Her friend, Max, had the greenest eyes I'd ever seen and for that reason alone, he seemed trustworthy and kind. After dinner, we walked to a bar called Winners located next to a bar called Losers. Inside were people from the crawl, which had ended three hours prior. A woman we'd met from Iowa wearing a cowboy hat and a big buckled belt grabbed me in an embrace and yelled, "My girls! Oh my girls how are you!" I didn't really know this woman, but I did know she was drunk. Everyone in the bar was. Then, she noticed Max. "Who the hell are you?" He stuck out his hand in introduction, but she gave him a glare that looked like she wanted to spit on him. "You don't know these girls! These are *my* girls. You don't know my fucking girls!" Then, Iowa girl slapped him across the face with me still stuck in her embrace. "Well, that's not the first time I've been slapped in a bar and it probably won't be the last," Max said rubbing the side of his cheek. Something was off and I could smell it in the air.

Looking at my friend's text during this spring-transitioning-into-summer-weekend, I went back to my computer after work and looked up the moon's cycle for the week we had visited Nashville. Another urban full moon fray.

The same week as the bar fight, the pigeon, the text from my friend, I boarded Chicago's blue line train and sat idly in the corner. A man with ruffled curly hair and a white shirt sat in front of me while a young couple sat perpendicular to us. The man in the couple was showing the woman something on his iPhone when out of nowhere, the man in front of me leapt out of his seat and slapped the phone out of the man's hand. "GIVE ME MY FUCKING PHONE!" he yelled. The man just stared at him while the woman clutched his arm. I was trying to determine, after thinking of an escape plan for myself, if she was restraining him from hitting the man who yelled or if she was holding onto him for safety. The man who yelled sat down and was muttering to himself while the man in the couple slowly picked up his phone from the floor. They left after the next stop. I got up as well, looking for an escape just as I had at the bar. Just like the pigeon in the café.

Climbing up the stairs of the L, the sun radiated light on the street and skyscrapers. I then thought that maybe it was not the moon to blame for these violent outbursts, but the sun. In one article: "hot summers produce a bigger increase in violence than cooler summers."

There are more people who go outside in the summer. It makes sense. More interactions, more petty arguments, more reasons to feel belligerent, annoyed, hateful, mean.

My mom told me one summer's night when I was a baby, a night that had proceeded a similar spring-transitioning-into-summer-day as I'd experienced, she parked the car into our garage when a man followed her inside. He tried opening her car door and she screamed. My father saw the intruder and called the police, who didn't come for over twenty minutes. In the meantime, he came down with a baseball bat, swinging at the man and threatening to kill him if he didn't leave. I was asleep upstairs in the house.

Who's to say that this couldn't happen in the wintertime? During a non-full moon?

August last summer in Chicago: ninety-two homicides. In December, thirty-eight. In my mind, coincidences were turning into fact.

Which brought me to my real question: did space control us? Or was I making too much of this?

I have a friend who is a Pisces. She claims that every characteristic associated with this sign (strengths include being compassionate, intuitive, and gentle while weaknesses include being fearful, an escapist, and a

martyr) is true to her personality. Other people would claim that astrology and horoscopes associated with them are too generalized. After all, can all Pisces really be the same? Or can this be another way that we look at space for explanation of human behavior?

Sometimes I butt heads with my best friend who is an Aries. I'm a Taurus. Those signs both have horns. More coincidences probably.

Theories suggest that the axis in the Earth is askew so that the astrology signs that once were are now inaccurate. When reading a daily horoscope, we are reading of another person's prospects. But forget about horoscopes. I started thinking about the stars.

The sun is just one giant star that can make or break a good day. If the sun isn't shining, SADS kicks in. If the sun is too hot, fights ensue.

My horoscope from a site the day of the bar fight on May 28th:

"15:18: Moon (Aquarius) Square Mars (Scorpio)

The square let you behave quarrelsome and act prematurely... It does not make a difference whether you are male or female - some trouble could arise. Extravagance and wastage concerning financial matters are accompanied with passionate and delicate moves."

Maybe the combative man was also a Taurus. I would never know. I'd soon forget about this theory entirely.

My grandfather used to always tell me when there was a visible full moon. Whether I was being watched by my grandparents or in my own home, he would call or say, "Look, look at the moon. See how full it is?" By the time I was six, I was with my mom one evening and she said, "Look, it's Grandpa's moon," which is now what I always think about when I see a full moon outside.

Space used to be a wonder. Now, I think of the consequences.

And yet, I thought about my own moments of violence. I've never been in a fight and only once was I ever even close. During after school day-care when I was young, I was sitting in a loft looking at a *Where's Waldo* book when a classmate of mine climbed up. She insisted that I had to leave, that it was her turn in the loft even though there was plenty of space for the both of us. I said no and she punched my arm. "No way!" was the only thing I could think to say in my shock. Then, I walked away.

Do bodies worship the moon or fall victim to the sun? Do humans become combative during high tides? Does being a Taurus really make me a different kind of person than those born outside of April 20-May 21?

Then I think about how people used to think that the moon was made of cheese. How people saw a man in the moon. Or a woman. How there are myths that man never landed on the moon at all. How one of the first films, *Le Voyage Dans la Lun*, is about exploring the surface of the moon inspired by Jules Verne's novel *From the Earth to the Moon*. How vast space is, in theory, and how much of it we don't know, how much of it is a mystery still. How every little kid wants to become an astronaut, but may end up in trouble with the law instead. Or in debt. Or punching their best friend while drunk. Or sitting on a couch smoking a joint. Or doing nothing really remarkable at all. Maybe that's why I was so fascinated with the pigeon making the same mistake over and over on a May's promising summer day. Perhaps a full moon, a hot day, a constellation does nothing but make us wonder.

The Chah-Chah Plays Forever

The DJ's name is Kami, and he's working hard at a posh Knoxville, Tennessee, clubhouse in the Cherokee subdivision. I don't know if he does this for a living, or if this annual event is his big deal, his one-night only appearance. But he's been going for almost three hours, spinning tunes for all ages, all persuasions, national and international.

Iranian and American.

These are bad days for Persian-Americans. Displaced, their native land torn apart by war, by religious zealotry, by rapid emigration and aggressive inflation. And it's only 1986. To say the least, this bad time will continue for the next three decades, and seemingly on and on forever, in the motherland of this disenfranchised people. People like my wife and her family who can't put the past behind them, and in so many culturally positive ways, haven't even tried. They can't let go of who they were, are, and I'm trying so hard to understand and accept them for what they can never "not be."

I know little about Persian pop music because the olive-complexioned members of my wife's family are composed of blue-bloods. Not monarchists, but ultra-refined lovers of antique Iran, the days when the kingdom and the would-be republic rivaled Beirut as the Paris of the Middle East. My mother and father-in-law describe clothes, hair styles, and women's eyebrows as "Chic," and when I first hear them use that term I think they're kidding because to me "Chic" is either a Disco group or a satirical term used in a *Saturday Night Live* sketch.

In our front hallway my wife hung a photo-portrait of this pair, taken some time in the 50's. My father-in-law, in a dapper brown suit and single-knot tie, handkerchief correctly displayed in front pocket, looks like Douglas Fairbanks; my mother-in-law, dark hair woven in place, lipstick only a shade lighter, looks like Joan Crawford. They're glamorous, suave, "Chic," and people you'd want to do the town with. Though if you did, my father-in-law, an early riser, would likely fall asleep on you by nine, and my mother-in-law would begin reciting you Rumi's poetry, for she knows hundreds of his poems from memory. She wanted to be an actress, she says, Iran's Audrey Hepburn. Instead, she married, had children, pleased her husband, though she was never a housewife.

In those early days of my courtship of their youngest daughter, when I'd be invited for dinner, we'd sit and talk, and they'd play Persian music on their daughter's dusty cassette deck. Persian classical music, and by classical, of course, I'm not speaking of European-styled symphonies.

I'm speaking of the Cha-Cha.

Not the one that infiltrated American cities back in the 50's and 60's either. It's actually called Chah-Chah, and to my untrained American ears, it sounds like discordant strings backing a singer who half-keens, half-yodels the musical scale:

Ahahahahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh....

It feels like it goes on much longer than that.

Since my Farsi confines itself to words of basic greetings and food, my wife's cousin Sam (Hassan) often translates the Cha-Cha:

“My soul is killing me. I want to die. I want you to die, too, so listen. I am in such pain, so much pain. Pain like this has never occurred in such quantities and severity to any human being before. Or at least since the

last time I sang this very song. Because you don't love me and left me to die. I want your soul; I want you to mourn me after I die. I want my pain to be yours. You've made me want to die.

I love you."

"That's basically what they're saying in all of these songs," he adds.

Yet as we listen, tears spring from my mother-in-law's eyes as the singer dies for our ears only. Maybe my father-in-law doesn't love this stuff as much as his wife, but at least he's quiet. Or asleep.

My wife grew up hearing these sounds, and to her, they're simply woven into her being, her memories of life in Tehran before the revolution living in a plush suburb of the city where her family would buy fresh bread in the morning, fresh fruit in the afternoon, and she'd play with her cousins all the games that anyone else would play: football, dolls, backgammon.

Sounds of an idyllic life before she and her family became refugees. Sounds conjuring emotions similar to what I would feel, perhaps, if suddenly Guy Lombardo music emerged from my iPod.

I love so much about Persian culture, but I detest this music, doubtlessly in the same way my father abhorred certain records I used to play. John Lennon's Arthur Janov Primal Scream induced "Mother," for instance, or Led Zeppelin's first AM radio hit, "Whole Lotta Love," which my father likened to "pigs caught under a fence." My father never refined his rock and roll taste. And lately, I've come to understand why.

Not that long ago, a singer my mother-in-law adored announced a concert in suburban Atlanta, a single performance.

"This might be her last performance," my wife said. "Her voice is going, and Mom would love to hear her. It would mean the world to her. Ghorbunet Beram (an endearment which translates into either 'I would give my life for yours, or more idiomatically, 'I'm dying for you.')

My mother-in-law is in her mid-eighties, and this might very well be her last concert too.

"Well, what sort of music does she sing," I asked. "Not that Cha-Cha stuff?"

"Oh no. Her voice is gorgeous, melodious, joyful. Dad used to listen to her all the time."

And maybe he did. Time and memory do funny things to a daughter's profile of her father. My father-in-law passed away twenty-five years ago, just after he found out that we were expecting our first child. He was a kind man, a good man, a practical man. I don't know if he liked the Cha-Cha, but as far as I know, he never ran from it.

So on this Sunday night, my wife, her mother, and I make the five-hour round trip to the show. Scheduled to begin at 7:00 pm, the performance doesn't start until 8:45, owing, as word has it, to the performers' plane being delayed, which could have been true. It's clear to me, though, when we arrive at 6:40, that the show won't be starting exactly at 7 anyway, because people are still arriving en masse and keep arriving past 7, 7:15, and 7:30 in absolutely no hurry even though they know, we know, everyone knows the scheduled start time.

This is the concept known as "Persian Time."

Persian Time derives from the reality that Iran is fully 8 ½ hours ahead of us.

"What do you mean," I asked my wife when she first presented me with this notion. "That's impossible. Everyone in the world is on the hour."

"Everyone except Iran," she smiled.

Her cousin Sam told me later that the reason that it is 8:30 in Iran when it is twelve noon EST in America is that at some point in the past, the Northern half of Iran (the more sophisticated, cosmopolitan half which includes Tehran) got into an argument with the Southern half (the more provincial and religious half where the holy city of Qom lies) over adjusting to Daylight Savings Time.

"So they split the difference," Sam said.

That makes sense because, apparently, this mutual decision occurred before the Ayatollahs, when compromise was still an option.

In any case, the ensemble appears on stage promptly at 8:45 to thunderous applause. Maybe 300 Persians, and I, have gathered in the Roswell Civic Arena. It's an odd feeling still: after thirty-one years of being the "Waldo" figure in family pictures, once again, I'm the only fair-skinned, red-haired stranger amongst a jet black or henna-haired throng: A throng dressed as if this were a Kennedy Center gala. I look past my wife to my mother-in-law's eager joy. Okay, this is a good thing we've done, I think, and so I settle back in my seat, prepared for roughly an hour-and-a-half of sultry Persian sounds.

And then they begin.

"AhAhAhahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh..."

The Cha- Cha.

I look over at my wife, but she keeps staring straight ahead. I try daydreaming. I check my phone to see if the Yankees have won, but this is October and the Yanks were retired for the season by the Tigers a couple of weeks ago.

I endure almost two hours of the Cha-Cha, and then in a moment of near silence, the singer speaks to us in Farsi. People cheer and clap, and the lights go up.

Relief floods me. We can get home by maybe 1, time enough for decent sleep before we have to be at work by 9.

“Okay, so are we ready to go?”

Finally, my wife looks at me:

“Go? It’s only the intermission!”

I spend the remainder of the show sitting in the lobby, checking the entire 162-game schedule of next year's Yankees. Finally, at 11:45, the crowd exits the hall. I know that my mother-in-law's age will ensure that she's one of the last to exit, so I wait as patiently as an American man in a Persian concert hall can. When they emerge, I stand to greet them. I'm a hard-headed man, or so my mother has told me:

“Okay, are we ready to go?”

With one of her many variants of that smile, my wife says, “They’re coming out soon to sign autographs and CD’s. Mom wants one.”

I know this smile like I do all the others. I know the look in her eyes, too, the one that says, “We’re on Persian Time, and if you don’t want me to start doing things on the quarter-hour, you’d better fall in, buddy.”

We're the next-to-last group to greet the performers, mainly because my very sweet and extensively polite mother-in-law insists that all the young people precede her.

I almost die over and over that night, especially when we take to the interstate, where even with classic rock hitting my face, I still feel myself drifting into another lane, another time zone. We get in bed some time after 3, and arise un-refreshed four hours later.

This, then, is the decidedly un-Pop Persian music I'm familiar with.



Those who don't understand or who fear the nation of Iran most likely can't appreciate its non-religious, anti-political culture, or its history with America. For instance, in 1951 Iran democratically elected a president, a man who wasn't a Mullah, Shah, or member of any royal or religious dynasty. Now that was chancy. Mohammed Mossaddegh was a socialist, and true to his ideology, he wanted to nationalize his country's oil industry.

Oil. Black gold. Texas tea.

You might remember American cars of that era: long Cadillacs, speedy T-Birds and Vettes. I could be ahead of myself by a few years, but they were coming, and they were transporting us from a mainly urban society to a suburban one: A dream society of vast space where we drove everywhere and loved it. Followed by the Space Race, the Cold War, commonplace Trans-Atlantic flights. Oil, not God, was our God, and man, did Iran produce a lot of worship toward its American-owned petroleum companies.

Anyway, in 1953, enter the CIA and British Intelligence and exit Mossaddegh-- to imprisonment and detention in his own home where he lasted until 1967 when the flights of angels sang him to his sleep.

Enter then Shah Reza Pahlavi, and re-enter the American-owned oil companies. The rest is history. People got rich, the Shah got deposed, and Iran became a republic under a man named Khomeini who, according to my in-laws, betrayed the revolution he had promised. They say this with bitterness and despair even after all these years.

And yet, when I so very selfishly consider these events, one of the stranger realizations I make is that without Khomeini, I wouldn't be here. More correctly, I wouldn't be married to my wife, wouldn't have conceived my two daughters, wouldn't be standing at a No Rooz party waiting to dance to anything but the Cha-Cha.

Out of one family's bitterness of despair and a home-life that couldn't endure such a radical change comes the greatest joy I've ever known.

One thing that has endured, and always will endure, is the logic and reality, the green color of No Rooz, the Persian New Year which forever and ever has been celebrated on March 21 in the Western calendar, give or take a couple of days in the Persian. Still, for all practical Iranian-American purposes, it's the first day of spring, known also as the time when Nature is reborn, fresh. New.

So while time is a concept that most Persians consult only when it's time for afternoon tea--noon and panir (bread and feta cheese), gerdu (walnuts), and in summer, vatermelon (watermelon)--the timing and commemoration of No Rooz couldn't make better sense. Much better, say, than starting your New Year eleven days after the beginning of winter. I know there are reasons why our calendar is structured as it is, but how many Americans, much less Westerners in general, can tell you what that reason might be?

The beginning of spring, however? What better time for a massive celebration of an ancient people's renewal? A time when men and women of all ages dress to the nines and party like it's 1399 (which it will be in another four Iranian years), drink from large bottles of Johnny Walker Red and dance to Persian Pop, but also to Michael Jackson, and for some very odd reason, The Pet Shop Boys.

There are too many No Rooz rituals to name: giving children crisp new bank notes; jumping over fire several days before the new year (a Zoroastrian rite); calling all long-distance, elderly relations and yelling the Cha-Cha through those phone lines whether they are in Iran, or Seattle. It is the duty of every younger Iranian on this sacred holiday to call her elders and yell at them, a pitch that my wife says she must attain so that the elders can hear her. I hear this happen for hours and days at No Rooz time.

Then, there's the ritual No Rooz meal: sabzi polo mahi (greens cooked in rice, served with fish, preferably a white fish like sturgeon which is indigenous to the Caspian Sea). "Mahi" means "fish" in Farsi, and Persians get a big laugh at restaurants that serve "Fish Fish." What does "meatloaf, meatloaf" translate to in Farsi, I wonder?

"Eide Shomal Moberak," everyone greets each other in seemingly endless succession as they kiss on both cheeks.

At the party, after dinner is served buffet style, with the tahdig (the slightly-scorched crunchy part of the rice scraped from the bottom of the pan), going faster than anything, the most senior, most revered Persian man or woman will deliver a talk that, to my knowledge, allows the gathered multitude to reflect on the history, the culture, and the love of this proud Caucasian people.

But sometimes the debate over who gets to deliver this speech turns, shall we say, a bit acrimonious, at least for my wife and her sister who staunchly believe that their mother should be the one to speak. A former Superintendent of Education for a school district just outside of Tehran, and then the Counsel to the Iranian Minister of Education, as well as a gifted orator who peppers ordinary talk with literary allusions, including allusions to Shakespeare and Faulkner (she has read *The Sound and the Fury* in Farsi!), my mother-in-law has given many a No Rooz dedication, referencing Hafez or Rumi for a very reasonable five minutes or so.

Another camp, however, a stately family known as Knoxville's "Pahlavi's", supports a different candidate: their patriarch, Agah Hashemian (Agah means Mr. or Sir). I have no idea who Agah Hashemian played in real life, though his sons run some sort of import/export business and have done quite well. Once, I saw them at the airport and the elder and his three sons were all carrying smart brief cases, so there's that. In any case, the Hashemians have prevailed on occasion, too, much to everyone's general dismay.

Sometimes it's actually a benefit being the only one in the crowd who can't understand Farsi, or so my wife tells me. This is particularly true when Agah Hashemian speaks. But even though I don't understand his words, I equate this experience with the sort of boredom that once caused my father to say of televised golf that it was like "watching paint dry." He would have valued a wedge shot from the thirteenth fairway, though, had he been forced to endure Agah Hashemian's rhythms, which lasted somewhere between the length of an extra-inning baseball game and the time it took Northern and Southern Iran to agree on their compromise.

"He's telling us the entire history of Iran," my sister-in-law whispers, "and he's only up to the Mongol hordes right now."

Sensing that forty-five minutes is quite enough reverence to their beloved "Baba" (father), however, the eldest son, Hashem, seizes a moment of pause and begins a spontaneous round of clapping and whistling. The old man seems bewildered at this, tries to go on, but at a hidden signal, Kami cranks the music up again. Louder.

"Oh, it's a Kurdish song," my wife exclaims in my ear. "Mom's people! We have to dance."

I love to dance as long as I'm not the first one on the floor, but no worries: Iranians flock to this song as if to a samovar full of steaming tea. I follow the dancers' lead, moving my feet in ways I didn't know they could move, but mainly swaying my hips and arms. Iranians dance with their arms more than any other people I've witnessed. And if that sounds funny, all I can tell you is that when a raven-haired woman with eyes and eyebrows so exotic that

Sofia Vergara and Kim Kardashian would blush at the sight looks right in your eyes while swaying her arms and hips in that way...well, you, too, would drive your mother-in-law ten hours to hear a singer whose tones make you want to stick sharpened pencils in your ears.

So I dance with this woman I married for love, not caring in the least where she was from, and slowly our rhythms find the common beat.

I don't recall experiencing such joy at American New Year's parties, no doubt because it's hard to enjoy when you can't feel your hands.

So I'm in love with an adopted holiday.

And if that isn't enough, Kami the DJ shifts gears. "Billie Jean" begins its initial throb, and the Iranian teens and twenty-somethings invade their elders on the floor. "Billie Jean" segues into "Borderline," into "West End Girls." But what really gets me is that somewhere in that Brit-American pop mix, another song I know and adore spins into me, The Pet Shop Boys' "It's All Right," a nine minute anthem with pulsating piano and words I don't fully get then:

"Dictation being forced in Afghanistan

Revolution in South Africa taking a stand

People in Eurasia on the brink of oppression..."

As my wife and I keep up with the only slightly younger dancing boys and girls of Iranian America, I glance over at her father who is watching us and smiling. His eyes are glittering at us, at his baby and her husband; at a life he never foresaw, but for these moments, at least, has truly embraced.

"Generations will come and go

But there's one thing for sure

Music is our life's foundation

And shall succeed all the nations to come

Cause the music plays forever

On and on and on forever."




It's past midnight and the dancing has waned. Older couples, revered elders, are being escorted to waiting Lexus's and Mercedes. Apparently not all the wealth got abandoned in the homeland. My back is aching from the hours of dancing, standing, making the small talk of people who want to be closer:

"Do you like Persian food? Can you speak Farsi? Do you want to go to Iran one day?"

Yes. A little. If it ever becomes safe.

But what I notice above all, what I've seen before me all evening, is the most distinct way No Rooz is different from American New Year's parties. It has nothing to do with the seasons, though in an oblong way, it has everything to do with time.

For everywhere, even up to the end of this celebration, I see kids around me, from those who can barely walk to unabashed adolescents. They play together, dance together, and often a Baba or Maman will lead them to the floor



and dance with them. Sure, by the end of the night most have fallen asleep on someone's lap, on two chairs pushed together, or on a sofa in the anteroom of this upscale clubhouse. Their shoes dangle to the floor; their little suits or ruffled dresses show the wrinkles of time and joy. How carefully were they dressed for this celebration. How lovingly. How memorably.

You might see a few clutching the new money handed to them by doting relatives. You might hear a few crying because they're so tired. But you know they'll remember this night, as my wife has, as our children do and will, when one day they return with their own children and dance to the music that goes on and on as long as we want it to. Maybe these children won't be so fluent in Farsi, or even care about the history of a land that experienced both empire and conquering cultures from the East and the West.

I hope they do, though. And I hope that there will always be someone as wise as Kami there, playing songs, even the dreaded Cha-Cha: mixing music that makes everyone want to dance, to celebrate, to love the traditions they were born with or have gratefully adopted out of love, out of family, and out of the reality that these times really don't stand still but endure, on and on. Maybe even forever.



Girl Lessons

1.

There is quiet in the afternoon dark of the house.

A small child trembles at the top of the basement stairs, while the mother, just behind her and on the phones, nudges her forward.

The child, a girl just less than two years, buries her face in her mother's skirt and reaches up to her, pleading to be carried, comforted.

The mother, still phone-bound, looms above, swatting the child's hand away.

"But are you okay?" she asks into the phone.

In the silence of listening comes the crack of thunder, another blast of wind which rattles the windows in their frames. Down the hall, the grandfather clock clangs at the quarter hour.

"Yeah, our power is out, too. We're about to go to the basement."

The small child is again nudged to start down the stairs, and she again tries to absorb into her mother.

"Love you. Be safe," her mother finishes, and then scolds the child with more pressure on the small of her back.

"Pick me!" the child exclaims, her arms raised to her mother, eyes moist with panic.

"No," the mother says plainly, "You're too big and you'll hurt the baby."

The child has been reminded of her little-sister-to-be many times this summer. When she cried for her mother after a bad dream where a giant slug was sliming into her crib, raising her hands—"Up! Up!"—in the yellow night light's glow, her mother redirected the energy of the child back to bed and under the covers before she could begin a tantrum, shushing her with a line about the baby and how she was to be a big sister who would need to be brave.

Now, staring down the dark stairwell with her mother pressing at her back, the child tries once more for comfort.

"The tornado is coming!" the mother insists, "Go!"

And at last, the child does what she is told, going down, step by step on her butt, holding her child's terror close to her, like the stuffed dog she rescued from the yard when the sky turned green and yellow and black, and the older kids' moms called into the wind for their children to grab their bikes and get home.

Toward the bottom of the stairs, a dank basement smell, the mother brushes past the child with a radio on as the town's distant weather warning horn wails. The radio crackles static with each lightning strike, and a dim, ghost-tinged light leaks from the dirty basement windows. The child walks slowly toward them, as the mother fiddles with the radio dial. The little girl moves slowly across the uneven, concrete floor, between boxes, to see if there is anything to see. She climbs atop an old armchair to peer out the window.

The mother barks at her to stay away, and the girl leaks into her big girl pants. The mother has been trying this week to potty-train her using M&Ms and a sing-song voice. She says things like, "You'll be the Big Sister when the baby gets here, and that means you'll be a Big Girl. Let's use the potty like a Big Girl."

Above, the phone rings again, and the mother lumbers upstairs, leaving the child alone in the dark. She climbs on the chair again to get a good look, and can feel the vibration of the storm against the glass. It feels like the bus they take into the city sometimes.

Outside, beyond the storm streaked glass, the child sees the small trees her father planted: one for her, one for her new sister, and they are on the ground, roots ripped. The rain turns to hail and the ice balls bounce across the lawn, pound the house, threaten the rocked windows.

The child is lost in it. How small and giant it is at once; how new and ancient she feels as lone witness.

And then her mother is dragging her, pulling one arm, down from the window and across the floor, tripping on boxes, yelling about windows and tornadoes, about babies and fathers getting home safe.

The child cries and then stops. She will receive no comfort. Her mother hunches on the ground, arms crossed over the back of her head. The girl knows this position and copies it, hating the itch of the tears on her face, her hot breath into her knees, and the stink of her soiled pants.

They sit next to one another, the hiss and crackle of the weather announcement punctuated by lightning strikes. Their breaths sync. It is still inside the cocoon of her head and arms: the cool of the basement floor beneath her wet bottom, the humidity of her breath into her lap, the hulk of her mother's cumbersome body next to hers.

Already, the child knows how the world is working: opposites at once. In four months, her sister will be born in a blizzard. In four years, a brother arrives in the car on the highway. In decades, her own storm-born child who will reach for her in the dark, find nothing, then turn away.

2.

The girl palms the bathroom door open. Standing in the hazy, post-shower air is her mother's naked body, bent at the waist, turbaning her limp brown hair.

The child intuitively dislikes what she sees: long, veiny, flat breasts that part over a protruding belly which shadows the dark undergrowth of pubis. Thick, cellulite-pocked legs end in splayed, blocky, purplish feet. Her skin-rich arms swing in opposition to the toweling, and she calls to the girl, "You're letting all the warm air out!"

With her hand still on the cool doorknob, the child steps backward out of the bathroom, a little breathless, embarrassed, disgusted, confused. She has never seen another adult woman naked to compare, but she knows her mother's body is not beautiful to her. It is so unlike her own, scares her with its very being, its size, the smell of it which seeps out of the sheets when her mother shifts in the bed. A dead musk, moist, older than the little girl could ever be. She avoids that body when she can, and feels ashamed because she knows that what she feels is not *nice*.

Her own body is newish and pink, smoothly freckled. She is covered in a light down fuzz, and soft, like a plush toy, or a hot, sleeping puppy. Alone, she explores it and it feels good and right. There is no one else, just her center: timeless, mutely whole, turning darkly inward and then out.

She is now in the small space between her parent's bed and the wall, and she is lost in her finding. Sensing eyes, she looks up for a moment to see her mother watching her from the doorway. The room is still. There is dust, like a pelt, between the blinds. A small ball of cat fur sits undiscovered in the corner. A shoe without a visible partner is half under the bed, obscured by the bed skirt. The bedside alarm measures silence between the seconds.

Her mother's chin lifts and her eyes narrow. The child knows from her mother's face that she has been bad.

"What are you doing?"

The girl already knows to lie a lie which will demonstrate a childish understanding. She knows that she needs to take the power away from what she was practicing by herself. Quickly, she answers brightly and with a comic Lamaze breath, “Delivering a baby!”

The motherly judgement is disarmed--“A baby! You’re too young to have a baby!”—and now it is a game: whatever happens won’t matter because it’s not real, a farce.

“I’m old enough,” the girl ventures, “I’m five years old,” and thrusts her open palm in front of her to show that she knows how many five is.

“You’re too much,” says the mother, and crisis averted, leaves the room.

Again, the child is alone. She closes her eyes, curls tighter into the small corner with her hand between her legs, where she hopes to never be discovered again.

3.

The girl is eleven, on a trip to St. Louis with her select volleyball team. It is the national tournament for this league, and this is her first time in such a large city.

The team stays in hotel suites, four girls to a room, it is said, so that they can bond.

The three other girls in her room are divided into two groups. There are two well-liked, out-spoken, girls who are popular on the team. They are brunettes with brown eyes, have slim boys’ bodies, and are perpetrators of sly and vicious attacks, as adolescent girls can sometimes be prone toward. Another is blondish, showing breasts and hips already, and she is unliked by the other team members, though the fourth girl doesn’t know why. She knows, with mounting anxiety, that she will be lumped in with this outcast, because she is not a part of the popular girls.

It is encouraged that all members of the team do everything together. They eat every meal as a team; they sight-see as a team; they sleep two to a bed and carpool with the parents of the team. The girls are rarely with their families alone, despite the fact that many families have sacrificed summer vacations to be here.

It is the second day of a four-day tournament. The girls sleep two to a bed: the well-liked girls in the plush, King-sized bed with the TV on a stand across the room, and the outcast girl and she squeeze into the sofa bed, musty with under-use.

The popular girls find, early that second morning before the unpopular one rouses herself from the bed, a wadded-up pair of blood-stained underwear, hidden at the bottom of her clothes pile. They laugh. They are disgusted. They pick them up with the complimentary hotel pen and try to throw the dirty panties at one another, squealing and dodging.

The unpopular one lies in bed, her eyes closed to the ruckus just feet from her, and the other outcast girl suspects she is pretending to save herself this grief. The girl sits quietly, watching the other two plot to wake their victim.

First, they yell her name into her exposed ear. The sleeping girl does not flinch.

The girl, trying to remain invisible, immediately recognizes that things will escalate. She is scared for the young woman, and for herself. She can’t stick up for this outcast, because she’s one herself.

Next, they throw water on the girl, small amounts flicked out of water bottles. Then then begin spitting the water into her face.

“Wake up!” They yell at her and spit, “It’s time to GO!” they say, punctuated with a slap on her upper thigh, her back, her head, bright red hand prints outlined on her exposed flesh.

The girl is scared, embarrassed, completely ill-equipped to manage this situation. No one in her life is treated this way, and she is struck dumb that this scene is unfolding before her.

But the victim remains deadweight, playing opossum on the bed, while the popular duo grabs the underwear, making a show of how revolted they are by the stained panties. They take the pen and shove the dirty underwear into the poor sleeping girl’s mouth.

It is then that her eyes bulge open, wet with tears, and they look directly at the girl, pleading with her to stop being invisible, and she bolts upright, wailing. The two aggressors squeal in delight, racing out of the room toward to lobby, where the team is expected to meet in the next fifteen minutes. The girl follows slowly behind, too horrified to see the aftermath of the attack.

In the lobby, the team gathers to go to their first game. The parents work out who is going with whom, and calls are made to the rooms where the girls are late. The coach is told by parents that the victimized girl is not feeling well, and won’t be able to play that day. There are whispers into ears and giggles from the popular one which infect the other girls. Word gets around that she is not sick, but instead, on her period.

The next day, she appears, ready to play. The team does well, winning throughout the day, but she is quiet and removed. She is clearly unwell. Her bedmate stays away from her, from the other girls on the team; what if she is next?

After their final win of the day, as the parents roar in the stands, and the team piles on one another in celebration, the girl looks into the stands for the parents of the victim. They are away from the clot of cheering and proud parents, arms crossed over their chests, frowning at her.

4.

She has lied to her parents about where she will be.

He drives her in his terrible clunking car down close-ridged hills with no lights or homes. They listen with the windows open and cigarettes ablaze to his band’s demo-tape, and he tells her he wants to show her a special place. She is fifteen or sixteen. Young, trying not to be.

He parks at the top of a ridge, overlooking a lake, and beckons her to follow. They pick their way down an overgrown path in the dark and stop at an overhang. The ground is flat and covered in long grass, cool in the night air. He spreads a blanket and the two sit and stare down at the black lake, and then lay back to absorb the night sky.

He begins to kiss her, and soon, as these sessions predictably play out, her clothes are coming off. His stay on, but his pants become unbuckled.

Even though it is late summer, the air on her naked skin is cool and damp. His mouth is taking up all of the space and air around her, and he presses against her, hard. They are a tangle, a fever, a sighing, four-legged, writhing creature. He moves his face between her legs, and she stares up at the sky, holds her breath, wants to be inside out, to melt. And then, a transition so quick she doesn’t realize it until it’s done: they are face-to-face, and he has slipped inside.

“You’re so beautiful,” he moans, not really looking at her.

She’s never done this before, and feels like she can’t stop it, since it’s already begun. She wants to cry, or fight, or surrender, or own it: all of these seem legitimate options. She’s confused but curious.

He quickens, faster and harder, and she is being jostled. He moves her like a play thing, legs here, arms there, flips her over, turns her around again. She remembers playing with her Barbie and Ken dolls in the same way: Ken kissing Barbie, Barbie embracing Ken with her bent arms, and though they could lay on top of one another, Barbie could never open her legs to receive him. No, only doggy style for Barbie, she thinks, realizing she's been transformed from a person into a pliable apparatus; she's Barbie, but with better working parts.

He rises to his knees and drags her by the legs into him, her back lacerated by the stone and gravel beneath her, as the blanket has long been bunched elsewhere. Her legs are guided around his back and he grabs both of her breasts and slams into her harder, making animal noises in the back of his throat. He goes deeper, faster, thrusting so that she's having to take breaths in at rhythmic intervals. Their skin slaps together and he grunts and frowns, and then his sweat begins to splatter onto her face and neck. With a slight shift in the breeze, she hears a car pass below them, the song on the radio wafting "Night Moves" in Doppler effect, and as the irony dawns on her, he is electrified, crying out "I love you," and then collapses on top of her, breathing loudly into her ear.

She thinks about all of the girls he has probably taken here before her. She knows she is only special because she is here, now. There will be others after her, and more after them.

5.

A young woman drives home from work in a city. She is listening to a show on NPR that's threatening to make her cry. She is loath to go home, as she and her new husband have not been communicating. She's on automatic with her route: scanning traffic, using her turn signal, checking mirrors. He's not touched her in weeks; she doesn't know why, but has learned not to broach these topics as it makes him angry, and when he gets angry, she gets yelled at, and since she doesn't like being yelled at, well...

She zips onto a side street to avoid a specific intersection, and there is a tall, strong-looking man standing on the sidewalk. His hands are large in his pockets, and he makes solid eye contact with her behind the wheel. Time slows. It is as natural as sleep to stop.

She pulls to the curb in front of him, the eye contact unwavering, unlocks the seatbelt and smiles at him through the windshield. She leans over to the passenger side and rolls down the window. He smiles back and she motions for him.

"Can I take you somewhere?" she asks, as though this is not a bold and unfamiliar thing for her to do.

His gaze doesn't waver. He walks to the car, opens the door, and plops into the passenger seat.

"Home," he says.

She drives. The story she was listening to on the radio has changed. Now, they are reporting on a genocide.

"Turn left, here," he says after a bit, and she takes her eyes off the road to look at her passenger. He is looking right back at her.

"Right at this next intersection," he says, and her eyes are back on the road.

She should be going in the opposite direction, back to her own home, her husband. They were married a couple of months ago, after dating for a decade. It seemed like the thing to do after so long, so they went to the court house on a Friday afternoon, rainy and cool. She wore a dress she'd picked up on sale at JC Penny. She'd worn it to work that day, and when she washed her hands in the public bathroom, she looked in the mirror and said out loud to the empty stalls and cool fixtures lined in a row: "This is my wedding dress. Today, I am getting married."

When her voice echoed off the tiles, she didn't know if she felt anything.

After a six-minute ceremony, it was done. Their witnesses were strangers; another couple waiting to be married, and she and her new husband returned the favor, though she was sad to note that this other couple seemed so much more in love than they were.

They had driven home in silence. She'd fixed some tasteless dish and they ate it watching television, and then went to bed. They hadn't even had obligatory or celebratory post-wedding sex that night. A couple weeks later, he started acting strangely about his phone, only checking it when she wasn't around, and then stopping quickly if she walked into the room. She'd known his password for some time, his birthdate, and when she went to snoop, he had already changed it.

Her passenger speaks: "It's up here, green house with the white fence."

She finds a spot near the front of the house, parks, and turns off the car.

He gets out and begins walking up the walk toward the front door, and she follows without being asked. She's always been good about doing things before they are asked of her.

And now they are in his room suddenly. She is afloat in an uncertain space where choice is the same as fate, and she can feel it unfurl inside of her, wild and dark, her breath in unison with his, their skin on fire and boundless. He is all there is in the room, and then they are together in bed.

His role as stranger is exciting, contagious. And she is also a stranger, she realizes, and is somehow freed from whatever was pinning her to herself. She cries out, pants, shakes, becomes stronger than she has ever been. She forgets who she is, is ravenous, and then it is over. He kisses her deeply, and their breath untangles. They lay next to one another, still in the afternoon light. She smiles a small smile that feels larger on the inside and then realizes what she has done, what cannot be undone, and begins to cry.



“Music of Place” : A Dialogue

For every wonderful poem included in this issue, there were several others not accepted for publication. *Aji* staff regretted turning away quite a bit of well-crafted work in order to achieve a balanced issue of the best work submitted. The following correspondence between Jake Kaida and *Aji*'s Editor in Chief illustrates the subjective nature of editorial decision making. No two readers will ever read any poem in exactly the same way, no matter how carefully written. Through this dialogue, poet Jake Kaida takes the time to respond to commentary received from Erin O'Neill Armendarez on his poem “Music of Place,” which will open this issue's poetry section. Decisions on what should and should not be included in the various literary canons have always been, to some degree, subjective. This limited discourse illustrates the deeper understanding possible when debate is courteous, open, and honest. We offer it to you here in precisely that spirit, hoping it will stimulate thought and dialogue on how we as writers and editors conclude a piece is or is not suitable for publication in a particular context.

December 13, 2016

Dear Jake Kaida:

I see you've got two poems in the hopper here--and our reviewers really liked “Music of Place.” We believe both poems have some really nice lines. We're just jam-packed for our spring 2017 issue and have had to make some tough choices.

We'll reopen with a new theme for the fall 2017 issue in late May or early June. I'm not sure what the theme will be, but we accept work that is off theme as well.

Try us again?

Best,
Erin

December 13, 2016

Dear Erin,

I understand the space issue, but is there a way that you could fit “Music of Place” in with this issue, as it really fits your theme; and, I have been holding onto this poem for a long time for the right place to publish it.

Please let me know if you can slide it in there.

Peace,
Jake Kaida

December 13, 2016

Jake,

I'll give it another look--I understand what you're saying. I'll let you know as soon as I can.

Erin

December 15, 2016

Jake,

Okay--I've looked very carefully at your poem to consider whether or not, given the amount of music-related poetry we did not accept for this issue, we should publish it.

Understand, I'm a poet myself and I understand the connections writers have to their work. My decision is subjective, but since you've asked, I believe I owe you a concrete explanation. I really like the first and last stanzas of the poem. The music in the last stanza (the only stanza that is music related) has a transcendent quality, and that's hard to pull off in a poem of simple images (which is the kind of poem I often like).

However. In my opinion, the stanzas on the squirrels and the horses don't quite carry themselves--first, there's no sound, just the description of action and scene. Some of the language, especially in the squirrel stanza, comes dangerously close to the sentimental, and the sounds don't seem right for a poem like this one. I know "munching" could be a sound--but--I don't know how I could get close enough to hear in the space of the poem. Maybe I could hear the swishing of horse tails, the breeze in the grass, but you haven't described it. "Kelly green" seems dangerously close to a cliché.

I can't hear this music the poem is centered on.

This morning, I spent I don't know how long trying to figure out how to describe the sound of a parrot diving into the shadows of the Amazon canopy--I wanted the sound of the screeching call, the whoosh of wings, the echo, but also in the same line I wanted to suggest the dappled light and dark patterns of the branches and leaves of a dense tropical forest. I'm not sure at all that I have it right.

Yesterday, now that I think of it, I was again struggling with words that would evoke the sound of winter leaves shifting on the ground late at night--anyhow, as poets, we struggle to meld the simple words with the deeper resonances our works evoke.

We publish many different types of poetry that operate in very different ways in Aji, and we publish poets from all over the world of all different ages and backgrounds. Diversity is important to us. We want a magazine that is alive and breathing, not just hollow workshop exercises. There is no perfect in poetry, but a piece has to have enough of that essential quality to capture readers and to hold them from beginning to end.

There is life in your poem, and it does bring me to a beautiful place every time I read it. But I honestly don't think it's where it needs to be with respect to its theme. It is a visual poem, by and large.

I don't claim to be the arbiter of what is/isn't high quality poetry. I could be wrong. I just want you to know that I've thought very carefully about it. I have regretted some of my decisions in the past, but my mistakes don't keep anyone from succeeding as a poet.

Anyhow, if you want to take a shot at revision, I'd be willing to read. It's an understated poem, so I think the language, image, and sound should also be understated. The p.o.v of the poem as it is keeps shifting--a close up of the squirrels, and then a sort of time lapse on the horses. Maybe if you picked one vantage point to sketch these things along with the sounds it would work better.

You'd still have your original version. Anyhow, I consider it a privilege to communicate with poets about their work. Thanks for caring enough about our spring 2017 issue to write me back.

Best,

Erin



December 16, 2016

Dear Erin,

I was pleasantly surprised at the amount of time and effort that you put into your response. It was very reflective, and I got to understand a different perspective on the piece. Your reading of the poem, and subsequent notes on it, opened up a new dialog about this poem, making me really clarify within myself what it was that I was trying to relate. As I was working as a chef and counselor for at-risk youth from Washington D.C. on a ranch outside of Jackson Hole, Wyoming, when I wrote this, there are certain contemplative qualities that I wanted the piece to capture.

For me, the music in the piece is interior, until the last stanza, where it moves out into the environment and becomes the soundtrack of the place. I purposely did not put any creative sound descriptions into the piece, for I wanted the reader to create their own sounds, or silence, as they went along with the piece; until at the end, where an environmental harmony is fully summoned from the images of this "long sunny Sunday".

This poem is a contemplative look at how a place can create interior music from its own essential nature. I watched city kids abandon their boom boxes after the first week in order to sit quietly and listen to this "country music". From my spiritual formation work with both at-risk youth and senior citizens, I find that simple, understated yielding leads to greater harvests than if I had described everything to them. This way they have to think and imagine and create within themselves, ultimately leading to a greater understanding of their own lives and where they are, which for at-risk youth and senior citizens is very transformative and healing.

Whether you decide to publish this poem or not, I want to thank you for being engaging and thoughtful about the different ways that we relate music (which includes silence) to others through our poems.

Peace,
Jake Kaida



Music of Place

The long sunny Sunday
is proffering its final big sheen
onto the land.

Two ground squirrels
use their nimble paws
to bend clover, dandelion and buttercup flowers
down into their munching mouths.

Slim Shady (our black stallion)
stands solitary in the vibrant green pasture,
while his comrades lay in cool hay inside the stables.
He rotates between feeding on the Kelly green grass
and gazing up at the illuminated mountain clouds
languishing across weightless blue sky.

There is music carrying to my cabin
from somewhere in the valley.
It sounds like country music.
Out here, it all is.

I Open the Window While Listening to La Bohème

Even with my elementary Italian, I should have connected
 stanza with stanzas. Room,
in Italian, I always thought of as *camera*, that little
 square that lets in light and traps
the dust of memory. There have been
 rooms bathed in the light that comes
just before fall that I remember as golden, tightly
 bound with two-hour lunches
and the laziness that follows a liter
 of house wine—the laziness
that allows copulation to flow
 until there is nothing but summer
cascading through the body and all
 its limbs of glass. I have shattered
in those rooms, my verses
 spilling out of me in lines etched
like the veins of the arms that held me.
 And every time I hear Pavarotti sing,
“*Che gelida manina*,” I am once more racing
 across that chamber, wrapping on your white
cotton shirt, and releasing the window latch
 as the tenor in the apartment below burns
with all the lust of newfound love.
 I turn in time to see my image
flash within your amber eyes.

Winner of the 2008 Bettye Newman Poetry Award

Nocturne

The moon doesn't relieve the darkness; it only shows how deep the tendrils of gray and black extend back into the woods.

Lullaby, psalm, canticle—

birdsong. The music of the woods has its own darkness. Even now, a voice goes silent—

and the stars from the sky are ripped.



Clinton Inmann
Elba by the Window

At the Slave Cemetery in Estil, South Carolina

Just before dawn, I sing into the dark and the greening throats
of birds flute back. This kind of call and response reminds me

(Listen, do you hear?)

of pine trees cut in early winter and bleeding under icy skin.
Sometimes you only see the resin after death—the tree shanked,

(I hear the word of the Lord!)

sliced, and manufactured into planks and struts. The owls
coast the woods searching for new homes, their great wings

(Listen, do you hear?)

pushing the silence of ghosts through the air. Elsewhere, the trees'
chewed bark recasts itself on someone's sometime lawn.

(I hear the word of the Lord!)

A rhythm drums on: darkling, starling, black birds, and the caw
of a rough wind's answer to the blades of dead grass tilled

(Listen, do you hear?)

into half-frozen earth. There is so much sound left in the earth,
hidden under frost and thin snow, then bleeding out with each turn.

(I hear the word of the Lord!)

A hunter sits in a stand high above the felled trees waiting for a deer
to slip in silent and nibble at the needles, held like fingers above the dirt.

(Listen, do you hear?)

A rotted board groans under the weight of dead limbs and nudges
the white bones wrapped in linen rags. Then a click and the slick

(I hear the word of the Lord!)

of a chambered round and the sky erupts in recall, ta-pum, ta-pum,
each boom rupturing the rest of all the silenced songs.

(Do you hear? Do you hear?)

Terminal Hotel

Boardwalk fog is routinely guillotined
by johns slamming windows and lamps.

They wield a sandy
key that unlocks mini-bars

filled with expired sweets and sample wine.
The Terminal Hotel keeps fresh girls,

white quilts, and rope. Every room
drones from decaying aquariums—

drowned anthelia coral clasping and unclasping
delicate hands. Outside, the midway

is misty and sparse. The midway
shakes with occasional hoarse

voices from unused dark rides and roaches
materialize between glows of exit signs.

Back in the lobby, the bellboy
is stoned. He watches the hotel's

bricks separate and crawl
to the shoreline and wait

for the tide's white hooks
to tow them into the Earth.

Drift Prairie

Killdeer, our noisy country plover, cries its name as it hurries ahead, drags its broken unbroken performer's wing. Hatchlings? Watch your step. Against the black furrows a flurry of late stubborn snow, just before a prairie wind. *Coteau des Prairies*. An indirect expression of a direct impression. *the purpose of life*, he wrote. To follow the sentient disjunctive sentence into the noise, that stratus of birds, encrypted clues? Horses would help, their calculated lines against a middle-distant plowed disorder. Insect bother, cattail clutter. The slough seeping under us, it spoiled us then. Surface arias' vernal ice. These lakes bowls of glacial melt, glacier's pothole ghosts.

Shostakovich

after Su-Mei Tse's "Mistelpartition" – video and music

A moving row of poplars, leafless images across a wall. Their irresistible invisible road beneath our feet. Borderland. The monotony of equinox to solstice, solstice to summer's solitude, fabric of our gaze. A cello's measured solicitude compels the trees and our regard. Random lights flash their incantations, a code of little explosions among the leafless branches, layered over an image of winter air, our winter's distant present. A bluing sky's blue illusion—music's invention.

Song of the Selkie

for Augustine Vegas

I am a singer, and I must sing:
that is what few people understand.
Whether in love or death,
I must sing the enchanting song
that draws listeners closer to me.

You don't know how many men
I have seen drowned in the deep of the Deep,
the sailors we tried to rescue
as the water filled up their lungs
and they, and their ships, sank to the floor of the sea.

Some wrapped their arms around our necks,
and we swam with them to the surface,
so that they breathed, and lived, and went back to shore
where they told the truth about us and our songs –
the selkies who saved them from storms.

Some told lies. They said that we sang
the enchanting song, a serenade of death,
and filled them with desire to plunge into the flood,
to seek love and death and oblivion in our arms –
like sea-witches, like goddesses or shee-demons.

How little those liars know! What have they seen,
under the waves, of the faces of the pale dead?
The swollen eyes, fully dilated and black,
the mouths open and expressions distorted,
the arms and legs floating, helpless, without strength?

You don't know why I sing. You don't know who I have
saved from drowning – or who I couldn't save.
You never transformed your true self into the image
of one who died, a pregnant woman who flung herself
from the starboard side of an ancient wooden ship

in despair from her pain, to give birth to a dead child,
in the sea, and you don't know how we carried her
back to the surface, and her baby to an invisible grave
in the heart of the sea, in my heart forever, the stillborn,
and her mother, crying, until she finally stopped.

You never became one of the lost ones
to try to deal with your grief, the incomprehensible
sorrow of watching someone die, before your eyes,
as their pupils open and yours narrow
in the dark beneath the Deep.

You never walked upon the shore, human for the first time,
or wondered about the love of a man in a Lighthouse,
who tries to save the ships by guiding them home
with a beacon to declare the source of safety –
you never thought he might understand.

You never went back from the shore to the sea,
knowing that a man in a Lighthouse
is different from a selkie, from a woman water-creature
who saves men in the sea, who brings the dying
to the surface to breathe.

You never rocked in the cradle of the loving waves
and watched from their embrace as a pirate
held a pistol to the heart of a prince, and pulled the trigger,
so that the prince fell, already dead, blood flowing
from his chest into the sea.

The Lighter (Rock n Roll Tangent #3)

for SRW

*Is there anybody
out there?* intones
Pink Floyd on
 The Wall. My cassette tape
Of that album got stolen
 at gunpoint in Chester, PA.
 The last thing playing
 on the boombox they robbed.
 *There is no loneliness
like mine*, each of us sighs.
At Woodstock, after rains
 shocked The Dead
 (and acid
 elongated “Turn On
 Your Lovelight”)
 John Fogerty
and CCR faced
 a midnight crowd
 of the flaked, burned,
 or passed out. After “Green River”
Fogerty shouted
 Is anyone out there?
 From the dark distance
one concertgoer
 flicked his Zippo and shouted back
 I’m with you, John!
When I told my Chester story
 a millennial
 burned me a CD
 of *The Wall*. We just want
 someone to notice,
 but neither Waters
 nor Gilmour could remember
 the session guy’s name
who played classical guitar on that track.
No performance—
anyone’s life. We long
 to be heard, and since
 listening’s
a form of love
your friendship
 makes me
 want to go on.



By Ear

for Will

—i—

Stripped down standards
ache the air. Keith Jarrett
with chronic fatigue
recorded “I Got It Bad
(And That Ain’t Good)”
in sessions so short
he sometimes ended
before the song. Imagine,
a lifetime of music
pared down to a verse,
half the chorus.

—ii—

Each note contains more than one,
the string vibrating in half, third, quarter,
each giving us its own overtone.
Set the fork ringing, touch it to wood,
and the whole instrument hums along.

—iii—

Though weary and in pain, Jarrett
opened his Hamburg Steinway
when he could and played
as he could. The knife of time
is sharp and works quickly enough.
But sweetness is its own measure.

—iv— \Like dead reckoning,

which sets a course
from a previous,
known position and so
compounds variables
to run aground,

beware of the Pythagorean
Comma, tuning up
the circle of fifths
to end much higher
than you began.

Beware also the pure note,
the absolute tone
as harmonies do not
adhere to abstract
mathematics.

Tune, instead,
this instrument, these
strings which stretch
octaves as they do.
Tune this room on this day.

—v—

The choral director arrives early,
before the tuner completes her work.

He hangs back, stands in the hall,
listening. A rest between strings:

she moves the mute, listen:
the small click the hammer makes

fitting the peg, *listen*: how waves
cancel each other then fall in step.

The sound so much more than sound.
He receives it by more than ear.

Strumming in a Thunderstorm

for Bob Dylan

The rain can't play guitar. Thunder
can't jam the trumpet. You can knock
out my tv, my fridge, my tall lamps,
my computer but you can't stop
me from fondling my acoustic, turning

muscle into music, spontaneous
generation from wood and nickel strings,
a warm blinding sun scattering rays
from within the blackest cloud, the darkest night,
the most frightening unknown.

Can't argue the rain keeps a beat
like the legs of a drunk centipede;
can't fight lightning's right
to change us all to children.

The rain can't play guitar. Mortal clouds
melt and meander to the gutters of time.
When "power" returns, it takes a second
for the clock's hands to resume rhythm,
jokes the G string to the bridge.

To the Memory of Harper Lee: Lines Composed February 19, 2016

by Cause Bewilder

Postmodernism's mockingbird has fallen from the tree
at an assisted living eldercare facility,
gray upper feathers and a paler body falling down,
down in Monroeville, Alabama, down, on to the ground.
She sang all through our day, a lyric, whistling chireep,
up in the chinaberry trees, so sweetly, clear and deep,
a simple serenade, her mimic, many-tongued descant,
a soulful sound that could be heard across America...
And now as per her wishes, her death ashes can be placed
into the crook of our oak tree where she may rest in peace.

The Sticky Blues

Catch the 8:19 to my desk
Down in Silicon Valley
Would I rather be blind drunk
In some blind alley?
Now you know I've got those
Got those Baudelaire blues

What's with all these jobs
That drain your hourglass of time
The work I want to do
It doesn't earn a dime
Now I let it slip I got those
Got those Baudelaire blues

My body craves that music
Slinky notes of Sarah Vaughan
Gonna stay up till the sun
Forgets how to dawn
And I got a bad case
Bad case of Baudelaire blues

Drink a flight of blue wine
From an alabaster cup
Carve myself some lilies
When I sit down to sup
Wish I could eat away
Eat away these Charles Baudelaire blues

Puedo escribir esta noche
Los versos mas tristes
Sinking fast like a ship
Tossed in holy water these days
These days I even got those
Got those Pablo Neruda blues

I just wanna be done
With this sticky state of mind
Can I ever shuck this mood
And throw it far behind
Tell me how do I shed
Gotta shed these Baudelaire blues

Disturbance at Drumcliffe Churchyard

what does this flock
of quarrelsome crows
have to do with you?

their croaking
should not be
overheard here

they quarrel over
some religious matter

over some fine point
of crow theology
nothing more

begone
you black-robed theologians

leave this holy place
to those
who still believe
in *gentle* places
and faeries
and poetry

Ugly Jug

Daddy's been in the ugly jug.
Them took it out in the woods.
Now Daddy thinks he is in love
with a squinty face toothy tight.

Them took it out in the woods.
They got a fire and all night
with a squinty face toothy tight.
The moon, tonight, shines so bright,

hell, they got a fire and all night.
Them hammering on banjos
under a moon is shining bright.
Later the boys will come to blows.

Them hammering on banjos
falling over, laughing stitches.
Later the boys will come to blows.
Mama's bout to pitch a fit.

Falling over, laughing stitches,
now Daddy thinks he is in love.
Mama's bout to pitch a fit.
Daddy's been in the ugly jug.

The Shortness of Summer

In late summer, when long days seems more dim
Unfold these short verses upon your knee
Then remember her tender gaze. Recall
The softness of her hair upon your cheek.

Though many loved your lightness, valor and good face
Though some danced with your soldier heart but were untrue
One woman glimpsed the old soul in you
She loved the brokenness of your dark embrace.

Light a flickering candle, sip rich cognac
Hum, a bluesy tune on how a heart can melt
How sweet love tasted like a ripened peach
Then be renewed that upon one season
Such a woman was within your reach.

Something Cool

June Christy
and Pete Rugolo
had it right
I'd like to order something cool
she sang on the radio
in the 50's
then the horns came in
but cool is a relative concept
in a foundry
at Ford
in the summer
the temperature hit 120 degrees
in the furnace area
where workers walked on the sun
near the pouring ladles
but only 90
in the core room
so was that cool?

It figured then
that ice cream and air conditioning
were big sellers in the cafeteria
and soda
and salt pills
likewise
suction from a thousand water fountains
drained Lake Erie and its ore boats dry
and get this
some guys wore coveralls
without underwear
like they do in hell
some even wore swimsuits
but there were no lifeguards
and no girls
and nothing cool

Armand Ortega

Shiny

Shiny crystal ball

Rainbow glass on the hill on the New Mexico desert all the way

It's my way to work and coming home

Well, is that a reflection of the pavement, or is it broken glass??

Like a rainbow

or are they so dangerous that my tires are going to blow?

So many different colors

They are doing drugs and getting drunk and high in these hills in the high desert night

They could be living in there inside these high desert trees and bushes

The carvings, the heads, the horseman, the cowboys, and the hidden treasure

The Irony of a Snag

1/

You have long since died
But you will never fall

Standing deadly among leafy growths
Your body embodies a rebirth
Greening close to your rotten cycles

2/

No one cares how you got
Into the waterway
But you keep trying to return
To the ocean, where all life

Originates, where your skeleton
Poses a navigation hazard
To any boat heading towards a port

Submerged

They're in the car, there, in the water.
There, beyond the concrete boat ramp
and the bright, pretty sails of the marina.

He and her, she and him,
a foot slipped off a brake, a small sin
forgiven.

Who knows if corpses converse
after all their time
is stopped?

Perhaps they float silently,
minds absent as boiled sugar.

What would it mean
in the shifting currents
if their hands touched?

YouTube: Marketplace Singers Mercado Central de Valencia

We have fallen into the place where everything is music.—Rumi

In the hubbub of buying and selling,
suddenly music fills the Mercado
with a waltz so buoyant
the shoppers stop, then turn like sunflowers
toward the greengrocer selling oranges
who has started singing to his beloved
across the arcade.

Enchanted, they watch as he leaves
his stall and walks toward the woman
wearing an apron who walks
toward him, singing, too . . .
and then a woman pushing a cart
joins in, and then another man,
who in the opera will become her lover.

All transformed from marketplace
to the ballroom of the Lady of Camellias,
a tale which will have a tragic ending
(as operas are wont), but now is jubilant
in song and in the glowing faces
of those ordinary shoppers taken by surprise
on an ordinary day, becoming part
of the dazzling show.

See how the long camera shot
catches them moving as one living thing—
an amoeba swirling toward and around
the singers strophe antistrophe
flight of sparrows turning in wind
whorl of seed in sunflower
YouTube the hive
and I too swirled into the buzz
and living center of our singing world.

Air Drumming to “See These Bones” after Winter is Finally Over

It feels like months since we’ve left
the house, been cold in night air;
me pulling my sweater tight across an old
T-shirt, you tightening your belt an extra notch.
It’s been a lean year. Just the driving, the in
and out of traffic, with music too loud for us;
we are too old for this.

But it feels good, breathing
in the words, screaming hard like the kick
drum. Forgetting that we’re in a neighborhood,
I beat my leg with an open palm—
It’s been so long since you’ve smiled like this,
like your face has thawed for spring.
“Keep going,” you say, grabbing my other hand
“That’s your snare.” Now you guide me,
patting my left leg gently, saying, “this,
this is the beat. Keep going.” I control my breath,
trying to tattoo lyrics on the inside of my chest
to control my messy movements, and then you
grab my knee, pulling. “Now,” you say,
“There’s your high hat.” I can’t keep all this going
but you keep smiling while I joke about drummers
and amphetamines, and we scream the last line
as loud as we can, me moving all of my body
out of rhythm, *just like we are permanent.*

Gram Parsons Survives the Explosion

Never mind that he was already dead
When the casket went up in flames, Gram rose
Like a phoenix or fireworks. Here,
He was given new life, cacophony rising
Over the Joshua Tree desert, turning
All that fire into nothing but noise. You can't
Kill something that doesn't want to die,
You can't burn something that won't melt.

His crooked smile, singed into his face
Like an apostrophe, replacing all the things
He's lost, stays frozen on his face,
Like just for a second in the sky, nothing
Can destroy anything, and all the buildings
Are still standing, and all the legends
Are still living, and all the records
Are still spinning, and oh Lord, grant me
Vision, oh Lord, grant me speed.

Hotel in Evansville, Indiana (After the Fire)

I watch my new husband roll over,
feel his soft pillow touch
my own cheek, the depression
heavy on starched sheets.
When I touch his slender chest

it is like playing a guitar
made from my own ribs. I know
the song like I wrote it—deep, heavy
breathing, full of loss. The
sadness washes over me—over him—

I try to memorize that piece of him
that I only understand at night
disappears into the plaster,
and is left clinging to the room.

Struck

Someone struck a match and the world
was born. Among several trillion

other worlds, with their six-winged dogs
and their talking taxicabs.

But in every world, in every universe,
the one constant is flame.

They don't mention that in the schoolbooks.
Sometimes a galaxy will

put a whole arm into its mouth
as the orchestra struggles to keep up.

Here, castled in the mundane,
hardly anyone drops a menu at the news.

Except the astrophysicists,
who are as excited as candles kissed

by a fire-eater. Someday
they'll figure it out. It'll be all over

the news. As some guy on a barstool
lights up.

Leiber and Stoller's Magnum Opus

Randy Newman,
strange young man,
will compose
the orchestral score,
conduct the ensemble.

Jerry will read
Thomas Mann's
Enttauschung,
refine and extend
its narrative arc.

Mike will study
the tradition
of *Sprechgesang*
from Wagner
to Weill,
will ponder
the sound
it might make
in the cultural
acoustics of
the New World.

Miss Lee,
an odalisque
on a couch
of flame,
will suffuse
Radioland
with an
elegant ennui.

It will be
the year of
the moonshot,
Chappaquiddick,
Manson,
and My Lai.
Americans
everywhere
will ask
one another:
Is that all
there is?

Jimmy Witherspoon Buys Leiber and Stoller's First Commercial Release

Nobody was talking about crossing over in 1950.
Spoon made platters for the migrants' children
and there it ended.
Race records: a different world.

But Jimmy was magic in this little world:
When he shouted it was like they put
the gospel choir on the road gang.
The women got happy when he shouted,
and the men got women.

So when he bought the song from the boys
it was as if the ghost of W.C. Handy
came down from Blues Heaven
in the form of a flaming Aleph
to ransom them,
individually and as a duo,
from the whole
dreary sad
American thing.

But there were always haters
who would give Spoon frost about the boys:
Dig Jimmy's writers:
Goldberg and Goldberg,
Hymie and Hymie.
And years later when he did cross over,
when he was shouting for the hippies at Monterey,
Spoon sometimes wished the boys
had chosen other names.

Incredible Water

My neighbor reflects that if he can't run and play soccer and have sex with a woman, then there's no point in living anymore. But these are simpler times — there's an app for those things now. Then there's a beeping deep within the loins of this interior space — time for the ritual measurement of something. Or maybe it's the signal for more time to come. The end comes for my father hooked up to machines, and he departs with a sheepish little grin, satisfied with his glimpse of the other side though the names of the people in front of him have slipped into oblivion. It's strange how mercy arrives. They say you can drive a beaver crazy by playing a recording of running water over and over. It'll work to stem the flow until it can no longer bear the sound of that incredible water, until it's no longer a beaver believer. It ceases its dream of being a dam builder and just becomes a neighbor to everything around it, part of a dramatic haze settling over the horizon. It creeps in like dementia whose soundtrack is background noise similar to that running water, giving way to the sound of cheering in a stadium, collapsing into the last gasp before orgasm.

Sunset Blues

The high priest is in retreat
while the lithium kicks in
and kills the switch on the mood swings

Blue as a vein

He moves into Pannonica's house of cats, a single room
upstairs and swears he'll never return to Nellie's
two machines grinding up carrot juice all night.
— I'm not coming back until that juicer goes.

Blue as a flame

He gets up every Jersey morning to dress in a jacket and
tie and then lie in bed watching "The Price is Right"
as Nellie rides in from New York to cook his dinner
each day.

It's coming to negotiate terms — like hell

Pianists file in to play; they try finding the man who sleeps,
eats, walks, laughs, and dances as the spirit moves him.
If he likes it, the door stays open. If he doesn't . . .

It closes the door on the will to explore

In his little room all day he hears echoes of The Apollo
and the Chicago Opera House chanting his mantra:

two is one

two is one

two is one

It uses up the place where you dream

During the radio program dedicated to his music,
the on-air expert proclaimed it extraordinary
despite the errant notes he played.

— tell him the piano ain't got no wrong notes

Everybody's thinking: why don't you want to play anymore?

— Tell 'em I'm retired and my friends are all dead

Why don't you want to play anymore?

Blue as a vein

Blue as a flame

It's coming to negotiate terms — like hell

It closes the door

on the will to explore

and uses up the place where you dream

Everybody's thinking:

Why don't you want to play anymore?

Why don't you want to play anymore?

The Vital Blurt

The germophobes blame the lax borders between hands and plates. They suspect the cheese and the open doors of the kitchen and the student who helps at the library shelving books. That kid. Poor kid. Can I shout *Hallelujah* once more? Can I shout it at the bandshell and expect the men with the dirty pants to listen? Can I shout it at the women at the business mixer and expect all of them to adjust the way they hold a purse? Can I shout it at the forest that welcomes new trees? Can I lift the repeated *Amen* as the hailstones descend on the funeral home? Everyone knows we should see a little more sun. The weather service is calling for it by the end of the week. But now the thunderstorms and funnel clouds are dropping in to continue their dispute. They touch down on the roofs. They damage the factories, the car batteries, the database of cures, the river's green fringe. Take care to contemplate the puzzle of debris or join the choir and sing.

Doksana

your name
so heavy
in my bowl
i've forgotten what spoons are for

doksana
your name
tethered to a sonnet of blues
your name
hoisted in broad gales
taunting victory
then falling
exhausted down the perpetual well

doksana
gypsy hands sweep a
swath of darkness
tripping christ into a manhole

oh, doksana
my dopa
my plainsong of ringing whole notes
where would we put it?

i become singular
a surplice ghost
veiled as your
instant man in a time
spun by the soothsayer's orb

we celebrate
our pentecost
in black garb

"Doksana" was in Dan Sicoli's chapbook entitled "the allegories" in 2004 by Pudding House Publications.

Bone Music

To combat mass proliferation of substandard music, I propose we overexpose x-rays—rengens to our Eastern friends but that's for the Communist birds—and whittle away record tracks like snowbanks by hand so bands understand exactly what we mean when we say their songs hit us like a bullet in the gut, wound around our spleen, grazed a shoulder blade, and cracked a rib.

We'll show them, point out exit wounds on the record.

When Grandpa combed his hair back and wore dark sunglasses to match the black tie against his skinny Soviet chest, he knew bone music's value. Lungs mean Elvis because *bozhe* does that American boy have a pair no Russian can compare twenty packs of cigarettes and even then no guarantee what you got wasn't some Kavkasian knockoff the government dispersed to check citizen loyalty as they messed around.

The problem with music today is risk. Give me a bucket of x-rays, a chisel and a song. I'll teach you about Siberia as I pound cuneiform curlicues into your brother's pelvis. Your sister's femur will seem less broken in my basement of underground tracks. We'll transform her. All she ever wanted was love like a Fleetwood Mac song. Instead, she'll have Lou Reed bite the fracture and when she heals, he'll be her marrow.

I've seen the pictures: Grandpa, shirtless. Grandma, blond. In the woods he flipped and caught her like a falling star he kept in his waistcoat while bone music rattled, crooned its scratchy tune against trees—piecemeal, a giant's second best pair of dentures—if caught, they'd plow snowbanks for the rest of their lives so they danced for the trees and birds, danced from their bones to Elvis's spinning lungs.

Marginalia

Dad's dad used to write poems in the margins
of his morning newspaper. He would joke
that was the only truth in the Soviet times.

He never published or gave a damn if anyone read
his sparse couplets like sunflower seed shells
trailing down a neighborhood granny's dimpled chin.

More important were his mornings among dappled trees
which understood him better than we, I think, reverent,
ponderous--silent, shaken before their future defacer.

He wandered face down to catch overlooked mushrooms,
made it home in time for cold compote and Dad's mom's
fierce old woman hugs, her feral cat jealous on the couch.

This year, he died in America, withered and snapped days
after his wife's birthday. He was comatose at the end, newspapers
stacked higher than his head on the cot's right side.

Bourbon Street, 3 AM

Somewhere between the sax and piano
I lost my summer hat
forgot where I hung it if I hung it
my new friend on the next stool exits
I'm left with the horn player
ordering his nightly shot
somewhere between notes
he lost his place improvised
play it again I say

outside it's a packed house streets
skunked with tossed trash
hot Saturday studs
saddled for action
I single out a plumed chapeau
loud proud a French peacock
turning heads strutting blue feathers
hell we're all winging it

Last call
play it again doesn't play
this time who says
I can't rock that peacock hat
sidle up to anyone I choose
rather than flock to pretenders
stumbling through birdland
somewhere out there it's open-mic night

Here in the lonely corner the keyboardist
riffs off his syncopated tangent
a mind away from the swaying ensemble
eyes fixed on a solo mix
his gray fedora tipped just a bit off center
enough to throw this whole set
off key

Of Bone and Limestone

I walk this low heaven of graves
of slaves and descendants of slaves
on ground they once worked
at the old Loudon Plantation
in far western Alabama.

The oldest stones wear single names:
Elizabeth, Seth, Jonas, Mary—
Bible names, no African names—
some so worn by rain and wind
that the careful etchings love made

have been sloughed away like
the rock surface under waterfall.
The newer stones have surnames.
But all are rough-carved with
the caresses of a hand's despair.

On the higher hill to the grassy north,
slave masters and descendants
of slave masters lie in their own
segregated disintegration under limestone.
Decay unites those never joined in life.

I step around these markers, fearful
of treading on the calm repose
and violating again those whose lives
were etched with too much violation.
The wind rustles leaves at my feet

and the wind cracks a winter branch
from a tall oak with aged joints,
a sound like a whip snapping.
Cold shivers me, the weak sunlight
unable to warm above or below ground.

Beneath these fades of names become
the limestone blanketed with leaves
and their decay, something remains
long past the end of all motion,
embedded in the urges of the earth.

Past All Aging

I stand between the wind
and emptiness
under the voiceless sky,
beside the sea guttural
in its long crash of dark waters.

I am older now
than I had ever thought to be
and hunger no longer
dances at my dinner table
as I fast alone.

Here I am as abandoned
as a deserted ruin
partly subsumed
in the wind's constant
sculpting of dunes.

I could buy dreams
from any promise
at the raucous market
of false prophets.
But I turn my face away.

Let me sit,
break bread
and scatter it to a gratitude
of pigeons and sparrows
who call it blessing.

For I am the beggar
and these feathered hopes
are generous
in their eating what I give
before their gracious flight.

Sounds Like Home

In the heat of the soon to be night,
in a world of windows,
sun settles with a saxophone.

IN THIS ISSUE

Sophi Amado

Katie Darby Mullins

Megan Ayers

Heather Newman

Terr Barr

Charles O'Hay

Jane Beal

W.E. Pasquini

Joe Bisicchia

Robert L. Penick

Patrick Cahill

Daniel Pravda

Yuan Changming

Zack Rogow

Edward A. Dougherty

David Anthony Sam

James Gallant

Dan Sicoli

Benjamin Goluboff

Kimberly Simms

M.A.H. Hinton

John Stupp

Yi-Wen Huang

Gilmore Tammy

Clinton Inmann

Judith Toler

Tim Kahl

Bruce Wise

Jake Kaida

Bill Wolak

Jeffrey H. MacLachlan

Maria Zalessky

