TRANSOM ISSUE 12: THE HARD TURN

[Wherein everything comes to a halt]

angel fish
Acrylic paint on Arturo paper, 18x24 inches
Marbled by Steve Pittelkow

FALL 2018

Poems by:
Elizabeth Threadgill
Kyle Valentine
Alexandra Akuginow Haines-Stiles
Leanna Petronella
Laurinda Lind
Chiyuma Elliott
Jessica Cuello
Sarah Gridley
Margaret Reges
Terrence Abrahams
Molly Brodak
Devanshi Khetarpal
Colby Gillette
Kathleen Hellen
& Khal Torabully, trans. Nancy Naomi Carlson

waved geglet
Acrylic paint on black Hähnemühle Ingres paper
18x24 inches
Marbled by Steve Pittelkow

A conversation with translator Nancy Naomi Carlson

Transom:
What drew you to translating Torabully?

Carlson:
While looking online for work by francophone African poets, I came across an exciting bilingual anthology called The Parley Tree: Poets from French-Speaking Africa & the Arab World, edited and translated by Patrick Williamson. It was there that I first encountered some excerpts from Torabully's work, whose thought-provoking themes immediately drew me in. I couldn't resist such lines as "Is that why poetry is my real mother tongue?" and "I am Creole through my rigging, Indian by my mast, European by the yard, Mauritian through quest and French through exile." I was vaguely familiar with the concept of indentured labor, and was intrigued by Torabully's treatment of this compelling theme, along with its association with skin color, racism, and oppression—ideas that were important to me, especially since I had just finished translating a collection of poetry by Suzanne Dracius, a prize-winning poet from Martinique, who also writes about skin color. It was from her work that I first learned about the "black-white continuum," and how those at the lighter end, like herself, are often marginalized in France for being "too dark," and marginalized in Fort-de-France for being "too light." In addition, Torabully's use of language—his lyricism, use of Mauritian Creole, wordplay, and neologisms—sealed the deal for me.

Transom:
These poems are part of a larger project in which Torabully grapples with the suffering of indentured laborers (who arrived in ships that had once carried slaves) on his native island of Mauritius. Given how unfamiliar most Americans will be of the particular experiences he is articulating, how did you go about handling the ethical implications of bringing this work into English?

Carlson:
I think the fact that most Americans are unfamiliar with the experiences Torabully articulates increases the importance of translating this work into English. Torabully has taken the derogatory term “coolie,” and has re-visioned, re-imagined, and re-defined it to encompass the richness of transcultural exchanges. His concept of “coolitude” has much in common with Aimé Césaire’s concept of negritude. In translating his work, I was extremely careful to avoid committing racial microaggressions and perpetuating stereotypes. Indeed, Césaire praised Torabully’s work for “containing all of my humanity.” It’s this sense of humanity that gives Torabully’s work universal appeal. Does this focus on the suffering of indentured laborers take anything away from the suffering of slaves? From victims of the Holocaust? I think these tragic chapters in the history of mankind need to be brought to the fore.

Transom:
You have noted that his poetry is "peppered with neologisms, which makes it especially challenging to translate." Could you point to a particular moment in these poems where you faced a complex challenge, and tell us how you came to your solution?

Carlson:
I’m very happy you’ve raised this question, as it’s one of my favorite topics to discuss! Sometimes translating neologisms comes easily for me, but in the majority of cases it takes days or weeks to find the best solution. As Susan Bernofsky has said, “if you work hard enough, you can always figure it out.”

“[Step lively seamen]” provides a good example of how I dealt with Torabully’s neologisms. In order to approximate “lèse-hommes” (an invented French term that echoes the expression “lèse-majesté,” the crime of insulting a reigning monarch), I was able to come up with my own invented English word, “lèse-men.” Coming up with an equivalent for “allège o lège lazaret,” the refrain repeated three times in the poem, was more complicated. While not technically a neologism, it was certainly wordplay at its best. I first analyzed the literal meaning, though I knew that I probably had to take some liberties with the meaning in order to bring the wordplay to life. Literally this line means something like “unload o unballasted lazaret” with “lazaret” referring to a storage locker located in the bow of a ship, which, on old ships, sometimes held the bodies of important passengers who had died at sea). Then I analyzed the French expression to discover the source of its energy. The alliteration of the letter “l” (allège o lège lazaret) stood out. More importantly, the repetition of the same sound in the context of two words with different meanings (allège o lège lazaret) seemed to drive this word play, along with the addition of the exclamation “o” to link the repetition of “lège,” which also echoed the “a” in allège. In addition, I noticed there were seven syllables in the French, plus a stress on the last syllable (lazaret).

After almost two weeks of struggling with this expression, I finally landed on “avoid a void o vacant hold,” with its alliteration of “v” (avoid a void o vacant hold), its word play with “void” (avoid a void), the echoing “a” and “o” pattern (avoid a void o vacant hold). Rhythmically I was able to get the English expression down to eight syllables, ending with the stressed “hold.” Whew!

Transom:
You have translated many French-language authors into English. What are some of the particular pleasures of this work, for you?

Carlson:
As a former French teacher, I love being able to draw on my foreign language skills, as well as my background in music when translating French poetry. French is inherently musical—even when used for everyday speech. I think my being a poet helps in the translation process, and I enjoy how the work of the authors I've translated influences my own writing. For example, after translating René Char's prose poems, I began to experiment with writing prose poems.

I love learning about other cultures through my translation work. From translating Suzanne Dracius's work, I was exposed to a new culture (Martinique) with its volcanic disaster in 1902 which wiped out the town of Saint-Pierre, but where people now live, despite the threat of this now-quiet volcano that looms over the city. Before translating Torabully, I probably could not have easily found Mauritius on the map. Similarly, I had no idea that Abdourahman Waberi's homeland of Djibouti was a country nestled between Somalia, Ethiopia, and Eritrea. I've just started translating the work of a Congolese poet, and can't wait to learn more about Congo-Brazzaville.

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Carlson:
In two words—more translations.

[As in a dream begun again]
for André Gérin

As in a dream begun again,
the ship is preceded by strange tears,
its cargo of bodies delivery-bound
through a bleeding horizon’s soft slit.

Deep down in the hold, what eyes
can discharge their despair
without springing a leak on all sides?

*

Comme pour un rêve recommencé
le navire est précédé d'étranges larmes.
Il délivrera sa cargaison
de corps par une douce saignée d'horizon.

A fond de cale, quels yeux
savent décharger leur désespoir
sans faire eau de toutes parts?

[Step lively seamen]

Step lively seamen
cast some ballast on top of my skin
avoid a void o vacant hold
where each cargoed body has grounds
to hang its eyes from the bowsprit.
Poor buggers—
compost of luggers—
with no tiny three-cornered sail to resist the wind!
Avoid a void o vacant hold
we are journeying lèse-men.
At our feet the sun rules out shipwreck.
At the slightest shade from the topgallant sail,
avoid a void o vacant hold.
For my only diversion,
my flesh is the cordage of continents.

Translator's note: "Lèse-men" is an invented English word to approximate the French neologism "lèse-hommes." Both terms echo the expression "lèse-majesté" (the insulting of a monarch or other ruler).

*

Soyez lestes matelots
jetez du lest par-dessus ma peau
allège o lège lazaret
chaque corps entassé a raison
d'accrocher ses yeux au beaupré.
Pauvres bougres
terreaux des lougres
résister au vent sans petit triangle de toile!
Allège o lège lazaret
nous sommes lèse-hommes en voyage.
A nos pieds soleil écarte naufrage.
Au moindre ombrage du perroquet,
allège o lège lazaret.
Pour tout agrément,
ma chair est gréement des continents.

[Everything comes to a halt]

Everything comes to a halt in the heart of the waves:
soldiers rinse their quivers
in my shifting concavities.
Long before land is proclaimed
their shields deflect
the silk of rays onto the heads of kings.

Everything comes to a halt on wrecks of ships
when coal bearers bathe
in the great blaze of dawn.

And shadows whisper as clouds parade past:
everything comes to a halt so we can be told
of the night of a flesh drum.
And let me see the seashell stairway,
let mermaids drag me in their wake!

*

Tout s'arrête au coeur de la mer:
les soldats nettoient leur carquois
dans mes conques mouvantes.
Avant toute vue de terre
leurs boucliers renvoient
la soie des raies sur la tête des rois.

Tout s'arrête au bord d'une épave
quand les porteurs de charbon se lavent
dans la grande brûlure de l'aube.

Et les ombres murmurent au passage des nuages:
tout s'arrête pour nous raconter
la nuit d'un tambour de chair.
Et que je voie l'escalier de coquillages,
que m'entraînent les sirènes dans leurs sillages!

Khal Torabully (issue 12), from Mauritius, writing in French and Mauritian Creole, is a prize-winning poet, essayist, film director, and semiologist who has authored some 25 books, and coined the term “coolitude,” much in the same way that Aimé Césaire developed the concept of negritude. In 2014, UNESCO officially approved the International Indentured Labour Route Project, and Torabully is a key part of this project, offering a new paradigm for the encounter of “memories and imaginaries,” which UNESCO has recognized as “vectors of peace.”

Nancy Naomi Carlson (issue 12) has received grants from the NEA and the Maryland State Arts Council, and has authored 3 books of poetry and 6 books of translations, including Hammer With No Master, translations of René Char, which was a finalist for the 2017 CLMP Firecracker Poetry Award. Her translation of Djiboutian poet Abdourahman Waberi’s book was a finalist for the Best Translated Book Award. Carlson’s work has appeared in such journals as APR, The Georgia Review and Poetry.
www.nancynaomicarlson.com

Unusual Pellet Contents
after owlpages.info

a pigeon egg
embryo intact
a cardinal
a cloth
wrapped
around the mouse
as if a shroud
if you dissect carefully
you can find a clue
plastic rope
in the grasp of prey
classifieds
lost dogs
snowy fields

Elizabeth Threadgill (issue 12) holds an MFA in Poetry and a PhD in Developmental Education-Literacy, both from Texas State University. She grew up in Marfa, Texas, and now lives in upstate New York, where she is an Assistant Professor of English at Utica College. She is the author of Tangled in the Light (Finishing Line Press, 2018).

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Threadgill:
Poetry continues to surprise readers—reimagined uses for the poem, forms influenced by technology, and the ability in the digital age to react immediately to the issues that need our attention. It's exhilarating to have access to such diverse poetry through online forums like Transom. I am reassured daily by the flood of beautiful imagery and music I encounter in these spaces.

Transom:
We are mesmerized by the movement of this list poem. Is it in some ways an ars poetica?

Threadgill:
All found poetry has the capacity to comment on what counts as poetry and the way poetry functions. This poem begins as a list of surprising items found in the contents of owlpages.info. To choose and list these images in poetic form is to say these images are poetic, to comment on what is poetic and what is not. The poem then plays on association. When the cloth wrapped around the mouse becomes a shroud, the cardinal can no longer exist solely as a bird. The poem moves into the sacred. The poem also comments on permission. The poem invokes the second person, giving the reader permission to dissect its contents. And the classifieds give the poem permission to surprise us, to find lost dogs in the contents of an owl pellet. To find snowy fields encapsulated in these remains.

The Moon You Blink the Sun

at times I find myself getting drunk to kick my tombstone
beneath the sky a trail of scaled fish silent as it should be

here I learn when the fox comes the fox must later go
like when I tried to grow up but my teeth never left

the soft hush of my pillow’s voiceless belly I mean
I tried to be a guitar dragged behind god’s

snake-bit horses but I ended up bandana-faced
at every train in your heart’s badlands burning down

saloons to figure how a feather can be a gun
because back to back blade to blade severed

wings to severed dreams light is what divides us
and in the dark we are one I never said I’ll bury

my dynamite behind the stars who died to make me
I only said I already built your mobile of fangs remember

that hound jaw turning into the night’s mask
can you believe how you told me this is mine

Kyle Valentine (issue 12) is the recipient of a Fulbright, and he is currently working on his first chapbook, Glossolalia. His work has recently been published in Whiskey Island, Visitant, Rock & Sling, Construction, and elsewhere. A native New Orleanian, he currently resides in San Antonio, TX where he plays lead guitar in the rock & roll band The Holy Knives.

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Valentine:
In my personal poetry future, I look forward to continuing the endless pursuit of discovering new authors who teach me new ways to feel and see and wonder. I also anticipate the coming works from authors I am already invested in, patiently awaiting the next time I'll watch myself fall under the hypnosis of their linguistic dreams. At large, I can’t wait to see how poetry continues to expand itself and its influence, as I feel it is more and more re-present in our collective thoughts, growing as a stirring force in the world's subconscious, maybe even conscious, mind.

Transom:
The breathlessness of the voice in this poem marries beautifully with the emotional range, from playful to deadly earnest. Could you tell us about your relationship to punctuation, or the lack thereof, in this poem—or in poems in general?

Valentine:
I think punctuation most typically plays the role of travel guide for the reader, telling them the best way to navigate these verbal streets—when to pause, when to breathe, when to separate one idea from another. At times, this is vital, but for this poem I wanted to entrust the reader with the ability and freedom to make sense of this poem without those training wheels.

With less explicit separation between ideas there is more room for magic, the dance floor has cleared for reader and writer to tango as they please. If you look at the evolution of the written word, punctuation arrived pretty late in the game. Before that, everything had to be sounded out, still said aloud, the breath had to be pushed through every word. There's something sacred in that. Not only does it connect us to the world with every cycle, it proves every word is more alike than we think.

So I built this particular poem without punctuation because it thrives on juxtaposition and leaping thoughts. I gave the reader a horse, and I gave the reader a ghost town. All I ask is they turn off the moon when they're done.

Heartbleed

The Heartbleed Bug is a serious vulnerability in the popular OpenSSL cryptographic software library.
—heartbleed.com

If all’s well, the heart beats to show
systems are go, all in sync. The soul
of each machine pulses a rhyme:
keepalive, keepalive. In good health,
seconds pass between love notes;
one brain dotes on the other.
This is how connections survive.

And if you send a signal with no reply,
instead of wondering why, simply
follow protocol: cut your losses,
drop the link, reroute affection along
multiple transports. Don’t overthink it:
that system’s failed or been derailed by
false alarm. Sever yourself, lover.

Alexandra Akuginow Haines-Stiles (issue 12) is a graduate of Harvard and Oxford, where she studied twentieth century literature and language. Her poems have appeared in Meridian, Copper Nickel, The Missouri Review Online and elsewhere. She lives in New York.

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Haines-Stiles:
In my day job, I'm a sort of futurist for brands and agencies, so I'm always looking forward **...** I'm excited for fresh multimedia poems, poems in the form of video games, feature film-length adaptions of books of poems, more emoji translations, more experimentation and innovation, hand in hand with an appreciation for traditional influence and inspiration. I'm excited for good writers to continue breaking beyond literary journals and bookstores, reaching and building receptive new audiences through mediums like New York Fashion Week and Instagram and advertising campaigns and activist movements. And I am relying on poets to keep reminding us of our humanity in this increasingly digital experience of life.

Transom:
This 14-line poem gestures toward the sonnet tradition, right down to a reflexive turn in the last couple of lines, but it is also rooted obviously in 21st-century concerns about online security. How do you see the ancient concerns of the sonnet mapping onto our current digital landscape?

Haines-Stiles:
I must admit that the 14-line formal gesture was unintentional, or maybe subliminal ... But like many traditional sonnets, this is a love poem—a lopsided one, about curiosity and vulnerability, pulsing and longing, deceit and disbelief. Networked computers may be a relatively fresh technology, but the way they reflect our human relationships and primal emotions—how they relate to one another, crave one another, divulge themselves to one another, help one another, spy on one another, attack one another, disarm one another—strikes me as timeless and poetic. To me, contemporary digital triumphs and concerns certainly seem worthy of, possibly demanding of, our most enduring verse forms.

The Gummy Bear

Jewel bear, fetal bear, whirls-in-fur-stomach bear,
deep charm, bait charm, heart-casts-its-head-on-string charm,
bone thread, a long way, headless heart on catch day,

and the rainbow played with her last teardrop
before placing it gently into the ursine uterus.

The mother bear wrenched herself through snow,
white sky cutting bird legs from their bodies. They fell on her like twigs. She ran.
Hair on the trees stood up and fell off. Green needles on the forest floor.
The birds could only fly now, she could only run,

and this was her own light, strung in her own belly,
and even if she evaporated, her bones breaking into clouds,
she would stop at nothing to bury her baby into snow.

The licked embryo sank into the ground.
Left there for that long winter, even in its sleep it grew hair and eyes.

One day it floats out beautiful,
a balloon on its umbilical,
wondering why, and to where, and for whom.

Leanna Petronella (issue 12)’s poetry appears in Beloit Poetry Journal, Third Coast, Birmingham Poetry Review, CutBank, Quarterly West, ElevenEleven, and other publications. Her fiction appears in Drunken Boat, and her nonfiction appears in Brevity. She holds a PhD in English and Creative Writing from the University of Missouri and an MFA from the Michener Center for Writers at the University of Texas. She lives in Austin, Texas. Her debut collection, The Imaginary Age, won the 2018 Pleiades Press Editors Prize, and will be forthcoming in October 2019. Learn more at http://leannapetronella.com/wp/.

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Petronella:
I’ve spent the last five years in a PhD program, where I read poetry, wrote about poetry, taught poetry, and selected poetry for publication. As a result, I spent a lot of time in poetry's big picture, categorizing and distinguishing: what came before, what’s happening now, what will come next. Now, suddenly, I’ve graduated and am working as a writer and editor. Poetry has become private again, my small, concentrated thing that I take in lovely sips and glimpses. So I’ll answer this question on the micro level, rather than the macro level, since that’s where I am now: I’m looking forward to writing poetry again. I’m looking forward to the mystery, the play; the long, slow moments of fiddling.

Transom:
This poem hooked us with thumping, incantatory opening, which also put us in mind of the Gummi Bears show. But what captured us as readers is how, even after reading it multiple times, the shift into a more dire register kept happening earlier than we'd thought. Could you tell us how you came to write something that bends wonder toward desperation and back around to where it began?

Petronella:
I wrote this poem in the library of an all-women's college in Columbia, Missouri. Its spark was an image from the movie Hedwig and the Angry Inch that has stayed with me for years. In the scene, the protagonist is raving about how much he loves gummy bears. The camera zooms in on a handful. The gummy bears overflow with light, and it is that moment—the way the bears are totally illuminated, how they become little sugary stained-glass windows—that was the impetus for the poem.

But that was just the impetus. Later, the poem became about grief, motherhood, and the grotesque, which many of my poems explore. Although the subject matter is familiar, this poem is still a different (chewy) beast for me, in terms of the chanty opening and the stair-stepping visual layout. I felt haunted by the bears; I could see them in my mind, but I didn't understand them. Not quite understanding—letting the poem gallop away from me, like the mother bear does—is what I want to take with me from this poem into other poems.

Crevices

The vines they ripped off the house
with a long-handled rake, I was like
that as a kid finding holes for feet

and hands gone rooty against cliffs
too tall to fall from unless you were
a lake wet with fish you had freed

from the glaciers. I was not that. I grew
across sandstone, limestone at best
but receded back from the shore

year by year into my own skin into
my own body, which meantime
had learned how to break.

Laurinda Lind (issue 12) is probably a female and definitely lives in northern New York. Some poetry acceptances/ publications have been in Blueline, Comstock Review, Constellations, Main Street Rag, Paterson Literary Review, and Radius; also anthologies Visiting Bob: Poems Inspired by the Life and Work of Bob Dylan (New Rivers Press) and AFTERMATH (Radix Media). In 2018 she won first-place awards for the Keats-Shelley adult-poetry prize and the New York State Fair poetry competition.

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Lind:
Something inside people, or a people, always ends up crying out for art, and poetry strikes chords that wake people and get them wondering whether their hearts are stringed instruments. Maybe some of us can agree to start a guerilla poetry action in these anti-intellectual times—pungent, pithy poems package-taped to poles and other public surfaces (including non-alliterative ones). Eventually weather or the keepers of public surfaces will remove them, but meanwhile maybe someone saw one and started pondering, caught a glimpse of an interior reality no one had pointed out.

Transom:
In this short poem rife with empathy, you say early on, "I was like / that," and a few lines later, "I was not that." How does the difference between simile and metaphor impact how we empathize?

Lind:
This would be a great literature-composition-class question, and they only let me teach introductory composition, but I'll try. A kid who is like vines is an opportunist looking only to grow and advance, even when it's dangerous. That's a kid's job. But despite the intuitive connection a growing kid may feel with the landscape that shapes him or her, the body imposes limits. Empathy is not the same thing as identity. In other words, empathetic identity is provisional, since we're stuck in bodies.

Arcadia

> “When my father found me, he gently raised my head from the keyboard. He dried my eyes with the edge of his shirt. Then he started to tell me about computer games. A computer game is a device for giving people things to want from computers.”
> —Michael Clune, Gamelife

The world is alacrity.
I said to my heart be still.
I said turn left, there’s a ghost
I said faster! This is not compline,
forget the cherries, my heart,
alas, was always eating.

*

My heart, alas, was always dodging cars.
There were rivers to cross.
There were turtles; there were medians.
There were turtles; there were medians.
The world was the same song repeating.

*

The world is a sieve.
We give the oarsman a coin,
and our lives may accrue:
turn, fire, thrust, what else?
The asteroids, when shot,
break into many
dangerous
fragments,
and danger increases their value.

*

What else? This reading
from top to bottom,
sometimes it creates
problems of translation.

*

The world is defined,
just not soon enough.
Once upon a time on the porch
comes before veritas,
so we can’t figure them out:
trumpet vine or overhang.

*

My heart, alas—
a fondness
for small movements,
for metrics.
I am waiting out the weather.

*

This is my firepower, given up for you.

*

The simple graphics,
the silence.

Chiyuma Elliott (issue 12) is an Assistant Professor of African American Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. A former Stegner and Cave Canem Fellow, Chiyuma’s poems have appeared in the African American Review, Callaloo, the Notre Dame Review, the PN Review, and other journals. She is the author of California Winter League (2015) and Vigil (2017).

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Elliott:
I'm looking forward to more poems and discussions about empathy and its limits. Also, I'm watching the sky for responses to Jeff Dolven's new book on style and interpretation.

Transom:
Comedian John Hodgman calls nostalgia a toxic impulse, and the title of your poem alludes to a lost utopia of the past. Yet in this poem full of callbacks to games like Frogger and Asteroids, you seem to offer a sympathetic ear to those concerns: "Once upon a time on the porch / comes before veritas." What is your relationship to nostalgia in this poem, or in your poetics in general?

Elliott:
I think Hodgman is wrong. Nostalgia is a resource for poems because of its complexity. It's this deep set of impulses that can help us think about our relationship to the world—and the ways we have skin in the game. Nostalgia's not inherently toxic, but it's dangerous because it's personal and revelatory ... and sometimes the objects it fixes on tell us that we've wasted our lives. That's useful! The other week, I overheard someone say this to a friend: "decolonize your desires!" I can imagine nostalgia conveying the same thing, even when the poem doesn't know us well enough to say it directly.

House Fire

Who was the burnt man
who extended his burnt arm.
Who were the metal beasts,

swarm of heavy helmets
on our lawn, the covered eyes,
the machinery in the dark.

Our mother carried us one
under each arm, ran down
three flights. Our apartment

was high up—in summer
she poured buckets out
the window to rain on us

and fill the wading pool.
We watched from
the ground. The sky

was lit upside down.
When we returned,
charred walls pulled back

from the frame. We slept
immobile and afraid
on a stranger’s floor.

Was it night, groping
and hard, a shell of heat
to separate us out. Who

barreled the water,
unblessed, a hard spray. Even
the beasts were afraid.

Jessica Cuello (issue 12) is the author of Pricking (Tiger Bark Press, 2016) and Hunt (The Word Works, 2017). She has been awarded The 2017 CNY Book Award (for Pricking), The 2016 Washington Prize (for Hunt), The New Letters Poetry Prize, and a Saltonstall Fellowship. Her newest poems can be found or are forthcoming in Crab Orchard Review, Passages North, Missouri Review Poem of the Week, Foundry, The American Poetry Journal, and Red Paint Hill.

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Cuello:
I don't think I look forward to things in poetry. I read pretty equally from both the past and present, and when I find something I love, it exists in that moment. I do notice that people who are a part of poetry communities look forward to the books of their friends and teachers and I admit feeling some envy (like Grendel outside the banquet hall) for that kind of shared joy. I have favorite poets, but I have learned that subsequent books are not always better. Mostly I look forward to quiet reading time and fewer responsibilities.

Transom:
When staring back through the night at her burning apartment building, the speaker in your poem says, "The sky // was lit upside down." The childlike imagination that sees firefighters as monsters of the night, even as they're performing their heroic deeds, is one of the pleasure of the poem. Is there beauty in disorientation, in not seeing the world clearly for what it is—or what it might obviously seem to be, to someone less connected to the moment?

Cuello:
Not only is there beauty in this kind of disorientation, I believe it can be a state of clarity. We spend a lot of time trying to familiarize/habitualize the world so that our presence in it is less terrifying. Disorientation lets us see beneath the familiar. Maybe this is why trauma is useful for poetry—not for the suffering—but because it separates a person out of the habitual and introduces the strangeness of physicality. When I was a child I used to lie on my back until the ceiling appeared as a floor. At the same time, I am always trying to get away from the discomfort of the strange. The monstrous firemen have been trailing me for a long time—in different forms of fire in earlier poems (Marie Curie's radiation, pyres from fairy tales, burnt Cathars, Joan of Arc). It's hard to sustain the heightened state of disorientation. But one way to access it is by reading poems.

Analog
for Roy Wright

I was low, so I brought up your pencil drawing
of the sweet chestnut fruit—the infinitely spiky
female cupule—

and wondered what monkish discipline
produces a drawing so arduous and soft.
As rays bear with the sun, as many spokes

hold with the wheel,
you seem to have suffered the chestnut
as the shy host might the desired guest.

Openly

Who isn’t a little tired of being social
when it takes so much surveillance from every side.
You don’t stop being hard on other people,
but the love you do dispense is spiral,
and wildly celibate.
The creature in the sand,
that sticking to the glisten of a backward
wave, the sensible retraction into shell, the raw
opalescence of its seam. There’s nothing there
but hidden daylight. Or later, a longer sketch of shell
against air, a drawing like the philosophical turn
of banister, its wooden copy
of the wild pomegranate’s calyx,
the ancient, inward shine of descent.
The shell was like a virtue
showing up in the sand, as strangely,
distantly violate. Like the v in violate,
the v in violence, it glosses somewhere
unforgivably on your mind, the pot coming
to a boil, the generalizing sting of vinegar,
a spotted shell soulless on the open
window’s sill, striped towels flapping
childishly on the line. Some
had called it cleaning,
not killing. Some said tissue
instead of creature, memento,
as opposed to shell.

Sarah Gridley (issue 12) is an associate professor of English at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio. She has written three books of poetry: Weather Eye Open (University of California Press, 2005), Green is the Orator (University of California Press, 2010), and Loom (Omnidawn Publishing, 2013). She is currently working on a new manuscript, Insofar, whose poems have appeared or are forthcoming in the following journals: New England Review, Hampden-Sidney Review, Bennington Review, Third Coast, West Branch Wired, and concīs.

Elegy With Lightning in Its Hair

Memory the firework false lightning pulsing red on the horizon,

scent of tobacco smoke on the jacket collar years ago.

The train under the bridge breathing thin gold wires as the sun lowers,

a kind of tensile heart pressure. Was it you in the dream,

holding me to your chest, your heat in my hair when waking,

feeling the heart through your shirt.

Small grief of the white pocket catalpa blossom, your hand is warm.

Summer tree, lean down, put me in your white cup.

Catalpa blossom, feather ball, ash-light, carry me.

Ode With a Dust Storm at Its Gate

Storm moving through the city, mass of dust

eating the pink stone of the gate. Crushed marigold petals

and a taste of cold metal, like blood.

The pigment deepening, entering the mouth in dreams.

Opening the arms, the largeness of clouds against the ribs

is falling from a great height. Falling from a great height,

I press my mouth against yours. Words are dust swirling around the feet,

ash so fine you could breathe it in. Waking at night,

I taste it in the sweat on your throat.

Ode Whose Horizon Obeys No Laws

Dust on the backs of olive leaves, beach grass and the close scent of salt,

cinnamon and the blanched, bacterial rot of seawater, a horse browsing tough weeds.

Straw cup of the broken ice plant blossom, when wind moves through you, you tremble.

Petals like a mane or false halo.

When wind moves through me, I listen.

Wanting at all times to be that which touches you.

My head on your chest and maybe a little singing.

The slight, bitter, flimsy petals of the yellow poppy opening against the bead of the throat.

The song that folds unfolding, saying, I was with you, I was with you, I was with you.

Elegy Whose Leaves Are Wreathed in Smoke

The hand I once held I still hold, years later, after death.

The keen break of the scent of sassafras,

sassafras in long light. Years ago I felt it: wood floor

through a thin cotton nightgown and outside all trees rising outward,

damp air and rotting pine boards, hint of mildew, some pith tar, some fir sap,

and inside each leaf bud a smaller leaf folded inside,

a kind of layered, shifting dream color.

Some varicolored light. Do you hear it.

Did your ash move over the water. Did it drive down.

Building a Fire

To haul broken fence posts across the wet field, water pressing up to the slim edges of wet blades,

and the shadowed smell of hay rotting at the end of the thaw, the flat packed tangle of grass beneath the boots.

Somewhere in the back part of the head a train blasting through the wet grass, sending birds in flashed patterns across the sky.

Planks of good pine, good house-building pine dragged across the hair-thread grasses, the planks nailed in the rough shape of a house,

newsprint and pine boughs, bound with rough garden twine, packed at the center among the wing-drifts of sparrows in the pitted skin of boughs

hefted to the top of the pile, brittle, exoskeletal, the empty husks of dead wasps, and small bits of splinter and bark roughed into the wool gloves, and the damp press

of sky into the hair and wet thorns of the locust trees.

Across the field, the dull gray shatter of half-thawed branches and the faint scatter of dogs,

a single dog running across the flat packed grass, backwarding again and again.

Path

From the ice the stiff straws of dead reeds, dried cattails, and the frozen stubs of fluff bristling in the wind, the wind eating into the face and hands, the wind in small noises in the frozen leaves and grass blades, and the thin whine of ice splitting underfoot, and water pooling out from under the crust of ice.

The body of the doe steaming in the half-dark, dissolving the edges of ice crystals, and a dust of snow in the long fur about the ear.

The blood from a small tear in the throat, and the belly hot against the back and the shirt soaked through, and the tip of the hoof catching the chest pocket.

Snow melt and the tongue gathering bits of ice, and the ice melting on the tongue, the tongue the bruised, oily purple of mud, and a huff of cloud trickling from the nostrils, the blood darkening, pooling out from the pock in the chest, clotting in the hair.

The doe and the slow settling dark, the breath in the lungs, the halt and drag of the head in the slush, and the blood at the chest darkening.

And the shock of pink branches brittling out in the blue light, shock of pink light in the white branches, and the branches breaking with the weight of snow, the ragged, splintered ends of branches, snaps of cartilage, ragged combs of ruined pith, marrow-light.

As if lifting itself from tar, as if hauling limbs from tar, the deer in the half-light with the gash of blood, and the tightening of the hind legs, and the body folding as the doe kicks.

And fat drops of blood clotted in the hairs, the doe in ragged breaths, and the black pulse beating out from the webbed chambers of the heart, and the snow weight bearing down on the branches.

And the wound opening, the wound growing deeper, the branches splintering, the doe pulsing out, ghosted in the sky, and the darkness of blood on the white of the chest.

And fat drops of blood clotted in the hairs, the doe in ragged breaths, and the black pulse beating out from the webbed chambers of the heart, and the snow weight bearing down on the branches.

And the wound opening, the wound growing deeper, the branches splintering, the doe pulsing out, ghosted in the sky, and the darkness of blood on the white of the chest.

A graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, Margaret Reges (issue 12)' honors include a 2015 "Discovery"/Boston Review prize from the 92nd Street Y, the 2012 Page Davidson Clayton Prize for Emerging Poets from Michigan Quarterly Review, and fellowships from the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, MA, the MacDowell Colony, and the Vermont Studio Center. She lives on an island near San Francisco.

Transom:
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Reges:
In terms of my own work, I'm looking forward to continuing to find ways into the poem. Looking forward to continue experimenting with first person point-of-view, of trying to make the first person POV luminous.

Transom:
We were blown away by the raw linguistic energy of these poems, and how a grounding in narrative or situation could be razor-thin and yet enough to carry us through the immediacy of each poem. And we noticed a recurring grammatical element in these poems that we tend not to see as much elsewhere, which made us wonder: In what sense is yours a poetics of the present participle?

Reges:
Thank you. That's a huge compliment! Yes, I lean on the -ing verbs quite a bit. A poetics of the present participle, otherwise known as PPP, also known as PoPrePar. I think to my mind it's the tense that dreams are in, so that's why I use it. Because I'm trying to invoke that feeling of suspension. Successfully or not.

I do prefer to think of myself as having a post-postmodern pony poetics, though (PoPomoPonyPo). In every sense.

Transom:
The lines in "Building a Fire" and "Path" in particular are quite long -- so long that we're not sure if we should call them lines or short paragraphs. Could you tell us about the attraction of a very long line?

Reges:
I'm not sure this is actually how it plays out for the reader (especially in "Path"), but the lines in these poems are supposed to be massive breath units. Personally, I see them as lines.

For me, it's the unspooling horizon line, the long line. And it was a game for me, for a long time. Trying to make a long line feel like it was hovering. The long line prevents me from cutting myself off. There's less of me telling the poem what to do.

field study

I’ll never be the same again now you are through
untangling finch from fencepost.

Little bird moved from wire to your palm
whole body a heartbeat.

How can I not envy it helpless
wound up by touch release you.

short essay on grief

He suggested we collect glass, not stones. Sea glass, he called it, though we were inland, meaning it would be lake or river or runoff or ditch glass. I liked stones for the everywhereness of them. But he was right in saying glass was rarer, harder to find, harder still to pick up and put in a pocket. Because I loved him, I agreed. Because I agreed, it began. Because it began, there was a change, and in this change I lived for a little while. We never found enough glass for a collection, but our efforts amounted in enough scars for one. I liked scars for the singularness of them. I liked how they looked when they stretched, contracted, stretched again. I liked how his lips could feel them but through them I felt nothing. He suggested we try stones again. Because I loved him, I agreed. Because I agreed, it began again. Because it began again, there was another change, and in this change I lived for a little while longer.

Terrence Abrahams (issue 12) lives and writes quietly in Toronto. His work has been a part of The Poetry Annals, Peach Mag, many gendered mothers, and the Puritan, among others. He tweets at @trabrahams.

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Abrahams:
What comes from poetry is more poetry (my favourite lifecycle), so what poems will inevitably be brought into being after someone works through this issue are worth looking for in the future.

Transom:
These poems are both desperately vulnerable, but they present their vulnerability in distinct ways. While "field study" performs a grammatical and visual breakdown at the end of a carefully described scene, the prose block of "short essay on grief" submerges us with the speaker in a relentless, stifling pattern of logic. Did your early drafts of these poems look like this? In other words, did you explore different formal choices before landing on these—which strike us as perfect support for Creeley's assertion that form is an extension of content—or did the form arrive first and shape the content?

Abrahams:
The content came first, actually. The physical poems shaped themselves around it. "field study," if you can believe it, had no first drafts—what you see here is the first draft. The form emerged in near-perfect tandem with the content. But you're right—they are both desperately vulnerable. A little raw. They are expressing the exact same emotion in two different ways, and that emotion is the indescribable one that somehow encompasses both loving and grieving at once. It’s the feeling of following someone but being unable to reach them, a sort of longing that cannot be balmed, and it can emerge in a fragmented state of mind (as in "field study") or completely comprehensible to the point that its logic becomes suffocating (as in "short essay"). Poetry, for me, is very close to emoting, and so my work will always be a little rough around the edges.

Materialism

1.
A song from the center of town
bobs above us like a cloud.

The pail handle gives
and milk clouds the lawn.

2.
No one knows what the silk
means to say. It just says

yellow and yellow.

To be alive
means to be separated
by a boundary.

The hope-shape of a paper bag.

“You” aren’t in there, not way down
dark in that body at all,

are you,

are you anywhere.

3.

We stand on the rim of the void.

My hen’s eggs disappear
and she doesn’t wonder.

I wash
her horrible feet.

We hold our little lamps of knowing
on the rim, and look in.

Molly Brodak (issue 12) is the author of A Little Middle of the Night (U of Iowa Press, 2010) and Bandit: A Daughter's Memoir (Grove Atlantic, 2016) along with three chapbooks of poetry. She has received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and Emory University.

Transom:
The title of your poem, "Materialism," suggests less an obsession with material possessions and more the philosophical position that all aspects of existence, including consciousness, are rooted in the material world. But the speaker of your poem seems a little unconvinced by this notion—particularly in section 2: "'You' aren't in there, not way down / dark in that body at all, // are you, // are you anywhere." Can poetry serve as those "little lamps of knowing" we hold "on the rim, looking in"?

Brodak:
The short answer, let's just get this out of the way first, is yes, absolutely. Poetry is the little lamp of knowing we hold on the rim of the abyss. All art is. It's the interface between spirit and material, as such.

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Brodak:
What we have to look forward to, in a general sense, is finding out more about how these two realms are the same. The borders are an illusion. Distinct categories are an illusion, a coping mechanism of the human mind. Nothing is really so certain. Material is spiritual. What we have to look forward to in poetry is a closer walk with the truth. There is no reason in the world poets need to be pressed through a system, through the MFA process, or conform themselves like keys to the special locks the gatekeepers throw up. Agnes Martin said "We need more and different flags" because she knew this is how we get closer to knowing anything—more testaments, more loyalty to simply believing each other, allowing vulnerability and softness. A radical softness.

Let Us Consider

we are no longer here.

Our silence has a name
it answers to.

In this light, I can almost
see you, walking through

the noise among the softest stones.

Devanshi Khetarpal (issue 12) lives in New York. She is currently a sophomore at NYU, majoring in Comparative Literature with a minor in Creative Writing. Khetarpal is the editor-in-chief of Inklette, a poetry reader for The Blueshift Journal, application manager for The Speakeasy Project and a poetry reader for Muzzle Magazine. Her poems have been published or are forthcoming in Indian Literature, Vayavya, Aainanagar, Souvenir, and Drunk in a Midnight Choir among others. Her work has been recognized by Hollins University and Columbia College Chicago. Devanshi's poetry collection, Small Talk, is forthcoming from Writers Workshop India this year. She is from Bhopal, India. Visit her website: devanshikhetarpal.co.

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Khetarpal:
There are different things I am looking forward to on various fronts. As a reader, I am always on the lookout for fresh voices. And I hope we get to read more literature in translation, especially more poetry in translation. But I am also curious to know if we'll see poetry go beyond the page or the text in the future, as in I wonder if we will get to see poems intersect with music, film and television, or visual art in groundbreaking ways. I don't want to carry too many expectations and hopes going into the future or even whilst exploring the past. I like to be taken by surprise and I believe that's what I am waiting for more than anything.

Transom:
This short poem is full of confident assertions in the face of mysterious contradictions. Can silence actually answer to its name and remain silence? Can we ever not be "here," wherever that is? From these statements we land on the only moment of doubt—in the last sentence of the poem. What, for you, is the relationship between poetry and certainty?

Khetarpal:
I wrote this poem in Siglufjordur, a small fishing village in Iceland, about a summer or two ago. And I was truly enamored of the geography of the place but felt equally fearful and uneasy. I thought of the poem when I was at the harbor staring at the ocean, with hills and homes in the background. There is so much we don’t know, so much that remains private or unanswered and unsought.

But this poem, I think, is really about the sea. I observe the sea as a territory of uncertainty. I often use the sea, sometimes even water, as a metaphor for friction, doubt, dichotomy. I never felt as though I could trust it or place my faith in it. It is silent until you put a shell to your ear and I don’t know exactly how one stands up to or exists in the face of something like that. I find it difficult and excruciating to be certain in that space. I would prefer not to be so attached to certainty or knowledge but it’s easier for me to be present where I know how to be present, how to trust, how to be still and in motion. And poetry helps me navigate through doubt. It helps me color the landscape. It makes the unfamiliar navigable.

However, it’s becoming harder to trust words, to trust language now more than ever. It is dangerous to not pose questions and believe everything we are fed, and it is equally dangerous to raise doubts. Language holds power and has consequences, both positive and negative. I think writing poetry gives breath to language in many ways. But for the time being, I have found some ground to stand on by going back to how I was introduced to poetry—not through its dependence on language, but through its freedom from language. That guides my thought and belief in poetry.

Left Undone

Not yet home to each other. My I was still animal—both hands broken, burrowed in the snow; my head that highway bier. Midnight left us guests, alone, the last awake and singing down fire. Summer, aborning in the honeysuckle, was humming along. We heard the grass growing in the cemetery—making, unmaking our bed—followed that call. Childhood was growing back its hair, communion coming to breathe us back in. The restless dead beside us soon gave way to those looking for birdsong, listening for dawn. The dark thinned out, left us gathered in this rolling, luminous pause.

Colby Gillette (issue 12) is the author of the chapbooks, Without Repair (Called Back Books) and Red of the Dawnbreakers: Translations of René Char (Spect!). His work has appeared in Poor Claudia, New American Writing, Interim, and elsewhere. He holds an MFA from Saint Mary's College of California and received his Ph.D. from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, where he currently teaches.

Transom:
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Gillette:
I'm looking forward to a poetry that, firmly embedded in the present, full of the detail of presence, means beyond the immediate moment we're constrained in so that it calls forth from the future a future we're barely glimpsing now as imagination.

Transom:
We were struck by the odd precision of this poem, how it carefully unfurls a moment in the speaker's life, the "rolling, luminous pause" of childhood. So much of the imagery proceeds from the senses, particularly taste, sound, and sight. Even so, the "we" at the heart of the poem is unnamed, mysterious. This piece is interested in unfolding a precise world of sensory description, but it leaves a lot unspoken, too. Did you approach this poem with this tension in mind?

Gillette:
Most of my care and aim in poetry is phenomenological in that it's bound with a lived experience of the world which always exceeds my meager attention. Though luminous detail comes to stand out and take shape, there's so much that's layered and latent in the face of my everyday life. In this way, mystery mingles among the concrete sensory details that bring focus to life. What I'm not aware of is present in and exerts a hold on what I experience; when I'm lucky, both make it over into the poem.

The Agnes Moon
After Keats

January—the ice tooth cracking, the early thaw
of what might track the home invasion, the rapist—as morbid practice,

I walk the habit of the night, trailing scratches in the drywall, grasping
for the railing as escape, the solid reference of a door as opening for flight—

startled by the shape the streetlight makes, the light illuminating, projecting
on the wall through decorated glass the flower of perception. How moonlight
passing through the casement's tinted herald might have stained the virgin's
breast,

as if embarrassed by the poet's brief obsession. The wish fulfillment,
masquerading
as elopement in the rare imagination. The way the past is always shining
through
the prism of the present, refracting the narrative of rape, of Agnes.

The rose-light beautiful—the convent shining through the brothel where they
dragged her—if art is all that matters.

Kathleen Hellen (issue 12)'s poems have appeared in Barrow Street, The Massachusetts Review, North American Review, Poetry East, Poetry International, and elsewhere. She is the author of the award-winning collection Umberto’s Night and two chapbooks, The Girl Who Loved Mothra and Pentimento. Nominated for the Pushcart and Best of the Net, and featured on Poetry Daily, her poems have been awarded the Thomas Merton poetry prize and prizes from the H.O.W. Journal and Washington Square Review.

Transom:
Your poem, "Agnes Moon," seems to offer a possible rebuke of Keats' "The Eve of St. Agnes." In your poem, moonlight passes through Agnes' breast, almost "embarrassed by the poet’s brief obsession." And the ending of your poem seems like a jab at the famous ending of another of Keats' poems: "Beauty is truth, truth beauty--that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know." As a 21st century poet, how do you navigate the pleasures and challenges of Keats' (and other Romantics') formulations when it comes to the relationship between beauty and art-making?

Hellen:
What has always disturbed me about “The Eve of St. Agnes” is the dissonance in Keats’ celebration of romantic love as a kind of heavenly magic and the narrative of revenge killing that is the terrible story of Agnes of Rome. Keats’ Madeline elopes with her dream-lover on the eve of the feast of the virgin brutally dragged to a brothel and sentenced to death. The sensuous details of the poem belie the horrific martyrdom of the girl who refused all suitors. Since the Middle Ages, Agnes has been depicted in art with a lamb, her name the Latin word for "lamb," echoing the Agnus Dei, Lamb of God who is the sacrifice for our sins. As a 21st-century poet, I have to reconcile in Keats’ poem the sacrifice for pleasure, for art-making, for beauty, the truth of what powerful men can do—their sins—when slighted by the virtue of a woman.

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Hellen:
Though beauty might lead us astray, the “cold pastoral” housed at the British Museum—among the spoils of the Parthenon—had invited Keats to abandon his medievalism for the sublime. The Grecian urn depicted views of “happy, happy love” as well as “what maidens loth,” “what struggle to escape.” The sacrificial heifer with her “silken flanks.” This is truth—the beautiful in sadness. I look forward to a poetry of fearless truth-telling.