TRANSOM ISSUE #6: ENOUGH BIRDS

[wherein 15 poets take up fiddling in a time of peril]

Ellen Siebers
Letters II, 2013, 10"x10"
Oil on marble ground on panel (shaped), 2013
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For our translation feature, we bring you a selection of new poems that are in dialogue with Francesco Petrarch’s Rime 190 (“Una candida cerva”) and its most famous English “translation,” Sir Thomas Wyatt’s “Whoso List to Hunt.” Working in fourteenth-century Italy, Petrarch perfected (as much as one can “perfect”) the sonnet form, which was to become one of the backbones of Anglophone poetry. Published in 1557, Wyatt’s famous appropriation of Rime 190 is a brilliant poem in its own right, even if it’s not what foreign language teachers would call a faithful translation.

Wyatt’s poem is at the headwaters of the long history of Anglophone sonnets. In it, he domesticates the foreign poem, rendering Petrarch’s idealized love poem into a world-weary, anti-courtly, fallen love poem. For this feature, we invited submissions that explore the space that such adaptations open up. Our contributors engage with the contradictory impulses behind all translation projects: honoring the original while creating something new.

Each of the exciting new poems in this feature – formally conscious, yet often veering toward adaptation, bastardization, and appropriation – makes us rethink the possibilities of “translation.” We admire how these poems – including a sonnetish emotional call-back to Wyatt, a free verse update of some of Petrarch’s key images, a prose concretization of what was allegorical in the Petrarch, and a fairly straightforward version of a Rilke sonnet – address the concerns of the original texts while making room for innovation and further inquiry. They continue the evolution of translation, the hunt for a better net to hold the wind.

Una Candida Cerva, Kechi, Kansas, 2003

The gutted doe they'd strung up out behind Gino's Bar-B-Q, rarely open anymore since his diabetes then his cancer but the smoker going full tilt today, the day of the citywide garage sales. The kill is fresh enough that blood still pools in the bare dirt below it, and when my girlfriend's dog escapes its lead I look for her in that direction. Thick rope ties two hooves to two oak branches, splaying the disemboweled thing two feet above the earth where she sways, her eyes fly-covered and glazed. A tear of cardboard tacked to the dead beast's hind, scrawled in black Sharpie says: Do Not Touch. The lunch line outside forming, the air so dense with the smoker's pungent billows of bright white heat I trip over a crate of empties, I call out again and listen for the jangle of the dog's collar tags; cars speed by on their way to where they go, the only other sound is Gino cursing. I return to my sale, two doors down, where my old horse-trader neighbor is trying to move a stack of glass window blocks I had bought for a good reason. The dog eventually trots in and then retches a pool of shimmery grease into a box of books marked at $1 per.

Archaic Torso of Apollo

We will never grasp his unthinkable head,
where eyes like apples once ripened.
Yet his torso radiates an inward brightness,
like a candelabrum, wicks now trimmed,

from which a gaze gleams with all its might.
How else could the thrust of his chest
so daze and excite you, or the slow curve
of the thigh that like a smile joins hip to crotch

still burn with generation. How else could
this stone not be pressed and disfigured beneath
the surge of shoulders so thoroughly disclosing;

or ignite, like a wild animal’s glistening pelt; or
burst like a star, beyond its own limit: vision
is surrounding. You must perfect your life.

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“Archaïscher Torso Apollos”

Wir kannten nicht sein unerhörtes Haupt,
darin die Augenäpfel reiften. Aber
sein Torso glüht noch wie ein Kandelaber,
in dem sein Schauen, nur zurückgeschraubt,

sich hält und glänzt. Sonst könnte nicht der Bug
der Brust dich blenden, und im leisen Drehen
der Lenden könnte nicht ein Lächeln gehen
zu jener Mitte, die die Zeugung trug.

Sonst stünde dieser Stein entstellt und kurz
unter der Schultern durchsichtigem Sturz
und flimmerte nicht so wie Raubtierfelle

und bräche nicht aus allen seinen Rändern
aus wie ein Stern: denn da ist keine Stelle,
die dich nicht sieht. Du mußt dein Leben ändern.

-Rainer Maria Rilke

John Estes (issue 6) grew up in Indiana but lives in Ohio where he directs the Creative Writing Program at Malone University in Canton. He is author of Kingdom Come (C&R Press, 2011) and two chapbooks: Breakfast with Blake at the Laocoön (Finishing Line Press, 2007) and Swerve, which won a 2008 National Chapbook Fellowship from the Poetry Society of America. His work has appeared in Tin House, Southern Review, Notre Dame Review, Crazyhorse, AGNI and other places.

Transom:
Where do you believe your poem may fit within the long history of translation that surrounds “Whoso List to Hunt”?

Estes:
Well, I won’t pretend to be overly familiar with that long history of translation, but if the history’s signature event is Wyatt’s poem, then certainly we can say that “adaptation for one’s own purposes” is securely embedded in it. Because Wyatt’s rendering of Petrarch’s poem bends it into a courtly love poem and wanders substantively from the source material, “Whoso List to Hunt” is established as a great poem rather than merely as a great translation. So in that I am approaching Petrarch’s poem as pliable, taking it as a point of departure and a prototype rather than as an artifact that must be shown abundant reverence, I’d say my poem fits into the tradition better than at first it might appear.

Transom:
Imagine an teacher of Italian or German reading your poems and then going back to the originals. What aspects of your translation would most annoy that teacher? In other words, where and why were you most deviant as a translator?

Estes:
I’m not sure a teacher of Italian would bother examining my version of Rime 190, but a reader of German would find the Rilke poem a pretty faithful translation. My aim was to gather some of the more muscular sounds and imagery of the original without losing either precision or music; I had not seen a version of the poem that did both to my satisfaction. My favorite, my standard translation of the poem (maybe the standard translation?) is Stephen Mitchell’s, but just to highlight one difference between his poem and mine, take the candelabrum (Kandelaber) from the first stanza. He uses “lamp,” which gains him something valuable in terms of clarity, but there is a marked imaginative difference, I think, between “a lamp turned low,” as Mitchell puts it, and a group of candles whose wicks have been cut back, as a means of describing the quality of light that emanates from within the torso (which is really a quality of vision). We both use the word “gleams,” but eight flickering candles gleam in a way different than a single flame from a lamp. So in this instance, my deviancy was trying to not be deviant at all.

Transom:
Your transformation of the Petrarch poem takes place in prose. Prose versions of foreign-language poems are usually considered a gloss, i.e., a way of approaching the literal meaning of the original text. But your prose version abandons most of Petrarch’s literal meaning in favor of communicating something else. What is that “something else?”

Estes:
This is a good question, but I'm not sure I'm the best person to answer it! But if I were to attempt to be more helpful than coy, I'd say it's in some respects an anti-version: it aggressively eschews the allegorical nature of its original and insists on the reality, and perhaps the meaningless and mundane reality of things. If it's a love poem, it's a love poem to a place; what is being sought is neither of dazzling beauty, great value, nor sought across great distance; however, like the speaker of the original poem (and even more so of Wyatt's) the speaker finds himself exhausted by the search and ultimately barred from possessing what he seeks, and suggests frustrated, if not failed, knowledge and competence: the dog has run off, he is lost in a bank of smoke, his neighbor is selling off his belongings, his books are ruined with vomit. The fact that it's his girlfriend's dog does give it an interesting romantic tension, though. Yet all around him life, his life even, goes on with a kind of glorious, untouchable exuberance.

Transom:
Your version of Rilke's "Archaic Torso of Apollo" renders the German verb "ändern" (change) as "perfect." What place does perfection have in a poem about incompleteness?

Estes:
I would point to the etymology of the word "perfect," which literally means "to make complete," and its use as verb there rather than as a noun where it might more easily convey something like "without flaw." To my thinking, if the poem is about incompleteness, the injunction at the end is best understood to mean you must change your life, inwardly, in the direction of completeness. He certainly doesn't mean change for the mere sake of change (which is why Stafford's rendering you must revise your life is so compelling). The wonder that Rilke expresses at the archaic torso of Apollo I would suggest is how something so partial can radiate with such wholeness, how something so still could possess so much movement. He is above all else a poet of transformations.

What Makes You Think You'll Get It In

You told me to call into your radio
to get us tickets to the St. Patty's show.
Snow cereal around us. Sky a spilled bowl.
Standing in the milk I chugged my last Keystone.

After the show I bought frozen macaroni
and more beers. When you passed out on my couch
my roommate said you were "My Man" I said "I doubt
it." and left the noodles on your dormant belly.

I went to the roof in my red snowsuit.
The snowcloud had nothing left in it but its skin
still held the muted city orange in.

I think you woke up and left into that
March night with your blue puff coat on your back
hidden and slippery as the muffled city.

Annik Adey-Babinski (issue 6) is a Canadian studying for her MFA in poetry at Florida International University, in Miami. You can find some of her poems in the upcoming issues of Hobart, MOJO, and Salamander. Her Internet address is annika-b.blogspot.com.

Transom:
Where do you believe your poem may fit within the long history of translation that surrounds “Whoso List to Hunt”?

Adey-Babinski:
I see my poem is a very loose, contemporary translation of “Whoso List to Hunt.” I was attempting to address issues around the hunt for the unattainable, and the obsessive cyclone of unrequited love which I saw in the original. However, unlike the love of Wyatt’s time (can I call it courtly love if it was the Tudor era?), I am dealing with “Friend with Benefits,” a present-day construction that I don’t think existed in Petrarch or Wyatt’s time. I aimed to capture the frustration of a failed ‘hunt’ for love as a Canadian woman in her 20’s might experience it in the early 2000s.

Transom:
Imagine a teacher of Italian reading your poem and then going back to the original. What aspects of your translation would most annoy that teacher? In other words, where and why were you most deviant as a translator?

Adey-Babinski:
This is a very deviant translation. It is a bad, bad boy. I did not follow the original word for word, and so a speaker of Italian would probably not even recognize this as a true translation of Petrarch’s original. Instead, I’m dealing with what I see as analogous concepts about love and the Beloved.

Perhaps an Italian teacher would object to my crass title, which even I cringe at, but which I've decided to keep at the editors' encouragement!

A teacher might also object to the fact that I've unmasked Petrarch's Doe metaphor, and made the Doe a human character in my poem, which, from reading your next question, was somewhat ambiguously translated. I discuss below where I was trying to place the Doe/Beloved in my version. Petrarch's Doe belongs to the Caesar, and that is why it is unattainable and that much more attractive. My Doe/Beloved belongs only to himself, no higher power is keeping the Beloved from the speaker and he is attractive because of how distant he is with the speaker. This difference might also peeve a precise instructor.

And my worst insult? I made the speaker in my translation a woman and the Beloved a man, which is the opposite of what Petrarch and Wyatt did. I don't think an Italian teacher would put up with my version of events!

Transom:
We read your sonnet as a potentially provocative rejoinder to Petrarch's "Whoso List to Hunt," in the sense that the speaker appears to operate from the position of the "beloved." We are tempted to read this voice as more empowered than that of Petrarch's silent "deer" but lines like "I think you woke up and left" make us question that supposition. What were the obsessions in Wyatt and Petrarch that you were reacting to?

Adey-Babinski:
Although I wasn't thinking specifically about agency when I was writing, now that I look back at "What Makes You Think You'll Get It In," it is full of issues of power. Unfortunately, I can't attribute as much power to the speaker as you propose. I would say that the speaker is operating from the position of the Unbeloved, which, as those of us who have been obsessed with unrequited love know, is a very frustrating and powerless place from which to operate.

I meant for the Hunter/ Unbeloved in this to be the speaker. The 'you' occupies the position of the Beloved, but the Beloved is also a kind of hunter. The Beloved seeks physical union (sex) from the speaker. Therein lies the ultimate insult. In the end, the Beloved is not even interested enough to make the minimal effort required to obtain sex from the speaker, even though the speaker is making herself available to him. This is also the reason that I don't see the speaker operating in the position of the Beloved. The speaker is desired only physically, and just barely, whereas the desire I read in Wyatt and Petrarch was about more than the physical—it was about emotional and spiritual union as well—which the speaker desires of the Beloved "you."

Dealing with this double-Hunter situation, in which both parties are hunting for different things, and are both left unsatisfied, I was hoping to have my poem resonate with the ideas that I read in Wyatt and Petrarch: the bitter-sweetness of wanting what you can't have, and yet continuing to pursue what is, quite obviously to most spectators and perhaps even the speaker, a self-destructive impulse. I think that humans get addicted to the sweetness of that dull ache of impossible desire, and I wrote this, in some ways, to acknowledge that we've been torturing ourselves in this way for centuries, and that we will most likely continue to do so for centuries to come.

The Duel

I have started by finding the necklace
and taking the pendant
from its chain, to work out what it is made of
and how to defuse it,
if I can grind it into powder in a peppermill
if it can be melted down or drowned.
I need to go to the forest, like a pair of snipe,
deep enough to be lost in symbols to know
what it is made of
and what made him choose it,
being himself so chosen, and courted
like a shot in the breast.

Megan Watkins (issue 6) grew up in Powys and has lived in London for 15 years. She works as a carer mainly. Her poetry is in magazines and online: Magma, Brittle Star, Rhino, Antiphon, Snakeskin, Tears in the Fence, Smiths Knoll, The New Writer, Ink Sweat and Tears, The Shuffle Anthology 2011, two anthologies for Word Aid, 14, Sentinel, Gloom Cupboard, The Journal, Message in a Bottle. She has two unpublished collections.

Transom:
Where do you believe your poem may fit within the long history of translation that surrounds "Whoso List to Hunt"?

Watkins:
The speaking necklace has been carried from Petrarch by Wyatt and my poem studies the necklace but shifts direction, tone, form. I find the "Rima" swoony and hallucinatory, and "Whoso List..." charged with captive exhaustion. My poem I suppose internalises the energy of fascination.

Transom:
Imagine a teacher of Italian reading your poem and then going back to the original. What aspects of your translation would most annoy that teacher? In other words, where and why were you most deviant as a translator?

Watkins:
The gripping thing in both is the speech of the doe- the complexity of it. In Wyatt "wild though I seem tame" manages to reproach the deer, and Petrarch's "it has pleased my Caesar" is the voice of a hostage forced into complicity.

My poem embeds these conflicts but without the power figure that stalks the original/s (Caesar/Henry VIII) or rather that agency has been transferred to the deer, which is a deviation.

Transom:
About halfway through your poem, the speaker states “I need to go to the forest, like a pair of snipe.” This line seems to imply that the speaker wishes to become two entities. Since this sense of a split speaking self is not really present in either Petrarch or Wyatt, why have you chosen to introduce this element to your translation?

Watkins:
In a sense both Petrarch and Wyatt are talking themselves out of the pursuit of a married deer – talking to the mirror. The speaker in my poem seeks something in the forest that can only be delivered by the self – to kill off the part that loves/defuse the part that fears.

Of Season

Wayfarer: what I call the bug
that dogs my students—weak fever,
smudge on the throat’s rosy altar.
We are a drawn bow and we are
the arrow and the target too.
I admit all the misery in this place
won’t be turned by it. Wanderer.

*

The floor trembles. Or, the earth?
Through matted, dew-fed grass—
painstakingly sweet and stinging—
flowers press furled heads as
roots draw strength from a corpse.
A rough-legged hawk wheels south-
east; a fathom above her, pintails
speed north, thinking as a flock.

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Most of us get better but, some, never.

F. Daniel Rzicznek (issue 6) is the author of two poetry collections, Divination Machine (Free Verse Editions/Parlor Press, 2009) and Neck of the World (Utah State University Press, 2007), as well as two chapbooks, Vine River Hermitage (Cooper Dillon Books, 2011), and Cloud Tablets (Kent State University Press, 2006). His individual poems have appeared in Boston Review, The New Republic, Orion, Mississippi Review, Hotel Amerika, and Shenandoah. Also coeditor (with Gary L. McDowell) of The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Prose Poetry: Contemporary Poets in Discussion and Practice (Rose Metal Press, 2010), Rzicznek teaches writing at Bowling Green State University.

Transom:
The lines “flowers press furled heads as / roots draw strength from a corpse” remind us of Whitman’s “This Compost,” or Bataille’s notions of life being derived from putrefaction. Is that kind of paradoxical thinking important to your poetics?

Rzicznek:
That type of thinking is very important to my writing (if I possess a “poetics,” I’m afraid it is invisible to me) but I have to argue with the word “paradoxical.” The idea that life and death ceaselessly nurture one another seems reasonable enough to me. The fact that our consciousness would rather avoid direct acknowledgement of this flowing cycle might be the real paradox. It’s perhaps our oldest survival instinct—push out the thoughts of death and decay and get on with living. It’s why, when we strike and kill the young whitetail fawn with our car, we’re likely to shudder or even weep instead of rejoicing for all the crows, buzzards, beetles, flies, etc that will eat well that day. “Nature” is a merciless recycler. Everything wasted is put to some use. Everything created steps out of the waste. An honest “nature poem” should admit this reality.

Transom:
“Of Season” uses the first person singular and plural, a distinction emphasized in the contrast between the lone hawk and the flock of pintails toward the end of the poem. Is this poem in a certain way a meditation on individuation?

Rzicznek:
This poem comes from a series written in the aftermath of a mass shooting several years ago. (I won’t name the exact tragedy in honor of its victims, their families, and the community where it occurred.) The series tries to dig into why the individual goes wrong, why community is rejected, and how morals then dissolve. The poems also look to the natural world for comfort but instead find mirrors. So I’d say they’re more meditations on aberration than on individuation. The last thing I hope to do is in any way celebrate the individuals who perpetrate these unspeakable acts. There’s a fine line here, but it’s part of the poet’s job to speak (or speak about) the unspeakable. “Of Season” is a “meditation on individuation,” but specifically on the negative potential for destructiveness in both the individual and the group-mind. It’s a warning.

Transom:
The italicized lines invite a number of possible readings. Are these bits of dialogue spoken by an “other,” or do they come from an even deeper, more inward source of articulation for your lyric speaker?

Rzicznek:
The italicized voice speaks from within the speaker’s blood, introducing arguments and corrections. I suppose it is the voice of the collective dead of human history.

Hell

When I was famous I held my heart in my hand like a plum.
Hell is a beautiful plum.
The saddest picture I ever saw was of Hell.
Hell dresses like the Swan of Montevideo.
Sparkling Hell, two swans on the horizon.
Come visit me here. My house is made of whalebone.
My white tent. My foreigner, my plum, my single colorless gong.
It is said that the seabirds come often to the garden.
Hell is sweet comb.
Often you hurt me when you do not reply.
I have asked you to visit.
Half song, please visit.
I will wait in the landlocked sea which is not Hell as you would expect.

The Blue Square

We beheld our enemies at the far line.
Where were you born, they signal.
Where did you bury the blue square that is the square
of our country and our great symbol.
What have you done, they bellow, great grayness
because there is nothing left to talk through but smoke,
but we cannot read it because everything burns.
Instead we made lines and summoned the generals
and march through the mist towards our enemies.
We are unraveled but this is not unpleasant.
We are thinking of the beloved blue, we walk in blue.

Rachel Abramowitz (issue 6, issue 11)'s poems and reviews have appeared in Crazyhorse, Oxonian Review, POOL, jubilat, Sprung Formal, Colorado Review, YEW, and Painted Bride Quarterly. She is a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop and the University of Oxford, and teaches at Barnard College in New York.

Transom:
In your poem, "Hell," the speaker "wait[s] in the landlocked sea which is not Hell as you would expect." What opportunities does the tremulous condition of "waiting" offer your poem? And what differentiates this eternal-sounding (some might say, hellish) circumstance from Hell itself?

Abramowitz:
Waiting, as Beckett and Bishop knew particularly well, is both torture and imperative to creativity. Along with waiting comes anxiety, frustration, fear, idealism – and perhaps especially boredom. While no writer wants to either be bored or bore his or her audience, psychoanalyst Adam Phillips writes that "the paradox of the waiting that goes on in boredom is that the individual does not know what he was waiting for until he finds it, and that often he does not know that he is waiting." Does not that sound like a definition of reading a poem? So writing and reading poems may be a kind of hell!

Transom:
Diagramming your poem, "The Blue Square" would be a fun challenge. We'd need several chalkboards to do it properly, since your poem makes abundant use of conjunctions and prepositions. Diagramming would leave us with a constellation of dotted and slanted lines. Are these parts of speech the major rivets that bind your images in this poem?

Abramowitz:
Confession: I have never learned to diagram a sentence. But I like the idea of prepositions as "hinges" – the parts of speech that make things move. Diagramming a sentence looks, I see, like a great robotic beast with hinges for joints, so that makes good sense in my brain. I will now go learn how to make these robots.

Transom:
We at Transom are always fascinated when a poem comes to us in the first-person plural voice of "we" rather than the singular "I." In "The Blue Square," it seems vital that the readers perceive the "we" as both wounded and potentially dangerous as they "march" towards the mysterious "enemies." Is there a subtle social commentary embedded in your choice of pronoun?

Abramowitz:
The "we" was just a way of getting away from "I," to be honest. I see how that avoidance has made this into a rather political poem, which was unintended, but is a nice side effect of a stylistic experiment.

Dime-Store Travelogue

Someone lifted a strand of my hair & smelled it
& I began my travels
through oranges & rain. & the dark wood
of my own scarred table. I thought there
should be a castle around my voice
but there were only two roosters sprouting
their wish to be roses & the holy blood of the slain
into the sound of water cunningly unbuckling
a spider played her alphabet against
my tympanum making a charm
for my fingernails to stay rooted
in their beds like the royalty of women
who sold themselves kept deep in their minds
while skin simpled & stuttered yes
I am a good audience & by this evade detection
& disgrace. Maybe you didn't notice
me crouching, a marvelous villa inside a slave
The city not yet in flames. For an hour
erase naught with if. Because it is
the stronger thing we must prevent ourselves from
imagining until the hour of our deaths
so as not to know how strongly we exist

Jennifer MacKenzie (issue 6) just relocated from Istanbul to New York City. Recent poems appear in Typo, Word for/Word, and Drunken Boat; a full-length book, My Not-My Soldier, is forthcoming from Fence Books next year.

Transom:
Elizabeth Bishop famously asks, “Is it lack of imagination that makes us come / to imagined places, not just stay at home?” Is your “Dime-store Travelogue” conceding the point, and embracing the imagination as the preferred means of transit?

MacKenzie:
As someone who lived abroad for five years before (just now) returning to the US, I think part of my impetus for leaving in the first place was as Bishop suspects not so much a pure lack of imagination, but an indulgence of its biases. That is, I have chronically imagined that what is elsewhere is categorically different than what is nearby; the imaginary differential between here and there (or these and those people) becomes magnetized in favor of the latter, and off I go. In the long term, though, as I think Bishop also experienced, travel became a backdoor to the source of my own projections, but from a slightly different angle. So, this poem is set at that point of the devaluation of the travelogue as a form of discovery, because what the traveler has discovered is that for her it actually serves as a Romantic and somewhat imitative facade allowing her to hide/dodge her own inner uncertainties. Which is to say: for me at least “the imagination” needed some outside schooling in order to become a decent transit system.

Transom:
What is “the stronger thing,” and what is the danger of imagining it?

MacKenzie:
The stronger thing is the fact of being alive—as caught against the “naught,” non-existence, terminal mortality, that life’s the flip side of. Against all temporizing hypotheticals spun by “if,” this non-negotiable zero is normally ignorable; but past a certain proximity to death—yours or another’s—your imagination can’t help but bend to meet this bifurcated fact: non-/existence. It’s not dangerous, just usually (unless you have a strong Memento Mori practice, or are Marina Abramovic) unwelcome.

Bees

I used to watch the bumblebees brush
flowers' teeth, scraping off the pollen plaque
with their legs covered in metallic moustache
hairs. At night I dreamt drones
came to my bed, cleaning clods
of dirt from behind my ears, eating
dead skin off my face, bleaching brown
hairs blonde, pollinating my empty eyelids
with sleep. They've since sprouted spindly
tendrils of daylight. I'm awake, and aware
of the honeycomb of pavement, poor
hive minds wandering the road, rummaging for metal nectar.

Stephen Marvel-Coen (issue 6) is a recent graduate of Oberlin College (2011), currently living, writing, and working in Massachusetts. This is his first publication.

Transom:
This poem dramatizes the central surrealist impulse of bringing the dream world into the waking world. Is that crossing over a source of energy, or an important part of your poetics?

Marvel-Coen:
Yes, although I've never really thought of my poetics as surrealist, despite the surrealist vibe my poetry often evokes. My focus has always been on taking an ordinary image or concept, and turning it on its head or examining it until it becomes something bizarre, grotesque, or fantastic. To clarify that a bit, it's never a matter of looking at something and saying, "let's make this weird", it's more about writing and picking at the object until it's stranger qualities reveal themselves. This definitely leads my poems to take on a dreamlike quality, but rarely do I set poems within dreams, or intentionally take imagery from dreams to create that atmosphere. I think our brains naturally reveal the odder qualities of the ordinary in dreams, so I think I create a surrealist quality in my poetry without necessarily thinking, "I want to use imagery from a dream state."

Transom:
It's difficult to read the word "drones" in your poem without thinking about recent headlines regarding the use of unmanned aerial vehicles in the War on Terror. "I'm awake, and aware" says your speaker, "of the honeycomb of pavement." Despite the fact that your drones are "dreamt," can your poem be read as a commentary on the surveillance state?

Marvel-Coen:
I think this might just be a case of "sometimes a cigar is just a cigar". When I wrote this poem I was honestly just thinking of drone as a way to refer to bees. I originally composed this poem about five years ago, so, while drones were being used in Pakistan and Afghanistan, it wasn't the buzzword it is today. It's really interesting how quickly the association of a word can change, and unintentionally add an emotional charge to a poem. Which, I suppose, is an important thing to take into account when editing. The poem does take a big shift in tone near the end, although it wasn't meant as a realization of the surveillance state, and more of a realization of the current obsession with being a cog in the machine, rather than searching for what is fulfilling in life.

from Some Mysterious Influence

Man is a queer animal. We were all
hungry as wolves for a heap of bad company.
My little critter was full of fire and mettle.
The Colonel, whose name has been given to
a knife, looked upon me as the subject
of a future supper. I felt as though
a dozen swords'd been sheathed in my heavy
heart. I relieved my wearied animal
upon his rough salutation, and was
determined to put my own hand to it,
though I had not beard enough to please him.
If a fellow is born to be hung, he will
vanish, like he had been a cloud, and leave
no mark of the course he has taken.

from Some Mysterious Influence

The Colonel vanished, like he'd been a ghost,
and left no mark of the course he had taken.
The whole sky was hid by falling snow,
and I half-resolved to lie there till spring,
like frozen snakes. But I was of the real grit
and pursued the road. My tracks filled so briskly
after me that I forgot where I came from.
A light across the river compelled me
to wade, cold as the water was. I struck
land and came upon a cane brake afire,
which spoke to me in Spanish. I was so much
rejoiced that I scarcely felt the cold, though
my clothes were frozen on me, and I could
not understand a word of what God spoke.

from Some Mysterious Influence

There is nothing in universal nature
so well calculated to draw people
together as the sound of a fiddle.
The lame fiddler was fond of the bottle,
and was now off snoring in the hayloft.
I made off with his little instrument,
its wood worn beat, as if two stags had been
engaged upon it. I tickled its ribs
with my hunting knife to convince it to squeak,
but found that it was nothing but a shell
on the outside, and all doted in the middle,
as too many of our great men are these days.
What could have induced me to think I might
take up fiddling at a time of such peril?

from Some Mysterious Influence

I have seen hundreds of acres of mountain
timber on fire in my time, but this
was the first I ever saw a prairie burning.
The skulls of creatures lay scattered about,
mostly Indians and their horses.
The fire seemed ancient, and sly as a fox.
For the bones had not yet separated,
or yet begun to melt in the mellow earth.
I came upon a place, what is called
the Natural Bridge, and found it guarded
by a pack of very poisonous snakes.
They schooled me good in the dread of dying,
I nearly joined that numerous society.
But I am losing sight of my story.

from Some Mysterious Influence

Before the war was over I was pronounced
an entire zoological institute.
For in me there's a sprinkling of all sorts:
I'm of the steamboat and alligator breed.
I'm shaggy as a bear, wolfish about
the head. I can neither be led nor driven.
My hyena grin could convince the bark
to curl off a gum log. I talk with birds.
I was afraid to say my soul was my own.
My mustang legs drove me through the prairies,
where the wild horses pasture, but could
not escape the herd bent on trampling me.
I cried out, "Help me foolish jackdaw! Help
me old black crow," which was my only hope.

A graduate of the Purdue University MFA program, Joshua Diamond (issue 6) has had work published in The Literary Review, The Lumberyard, Mid-American Review, Pleiades, and Western Humanities Review. He currently lives in Akron, Ohio and teaches English at Kent State University. His first book Some Mysterious Influence is forthcoming (early 2014) from Typecast Publishing.

Transom:
You composed these poems with the help of a chatbot you'd programmed with language from the autobiography of Davy Crockett, your ancestor. What led you to this process? What surprised you most about the poems that arose from this process?

Diamond:
While at Purdue I met a couple poets (shout outs to Chad and Eric) who would use computer programs, like Gnoetry, to create poems composed of language from existing texts. I knew I wanted to mine Crockett's autobiography in a similar way, but I didn't have a clear idea how or what I was going to do with that language. I started programming the chatbot (a computer program designed to simulate human conversation) thinking, naively, that I might resurrect my famous ancestor from the dead, or at least create an AI that could convincingly dispense some frontier wisdom and humor. What I got instead was less exciting but infinitely more useful to me—a poetry line generator. The first two dozen poems or so were composed collaboratively with the chatbot (which I named "crockbot"). I would pick a line from the source text, type it into the bot, and the bot would reply with another line from the autobiography. If the product of one of these conversations was something less than a good poem, I would scrap it and start over. As I grew more comfortable with the language and the form these poems took on, the chatbot became less and less important, and in revising the manuscript I left the bot out entirely.

What was most surprising about this process was how seamlessly some of those early poems came together. The second poem I wrote with crockbot is still in the final manuscript, virtually unchanged from the day it was hatched. I call these “spooky poems.” On days I wrote a spooky poem, I’d feel like a boss-level necromancer. Other days I felt like IT support.

Transom:
Structurally, these poems hearken back to the sonnet, that classical form of asymmetrical thinking-while-feeling. What is the relationship between thinking and feeling in this project? Does it make sense to ask such a question, given the semi-mechanical nature of their composition?

Diamond:
Ultimately, my “semi-mechanical” process is an interesting but minor footnote in how these poems got made. The first poem I wrote with crockbot sort of serendipitously fit into this fourteen-line container with a loose pentameter. The poems that are the most sonnet-like borrow the Shakespearean turn in the final couplet and use that moment to inject aphorism or epiphany or anti-epiphany in a way that (I hope) deepens or undermines the reader’s understanding of what happens to Crockett in a given poem. And this deepening and undermining, validating and critiquing is a reflection of the competing ways I was feeling and thinking about my folk hero ancestor and his particular brand of frontier masculinity. On the one hand, I have this tendency to celebrate what a badass he was and that he lived a simpler life, closer to the sources of his food and always and intimately connected to nature and wilderness. On the other hand, I wanted to use Crockett’s language to critique and revise his own racism, misogyny, and violence. My hope is that the form makes room for Crockett, myself, and the reader to exist, think, and feel at the intersection of these things. I also think the poems will convince more people to live on farms.

Transom:
"What could have induced me to think I might / take up fiddling at a time of such peril?" asks this speaker, presumably channeling Crockett's self-exploration from his autobiography. Is this a question that resonates, for you, as a young poet in 21st century America?

Diamond:
Another of the poems from this series ends "I'd sooner leave / the poet with you, reader, and such like / foolish stuff, and do something important." I guess this is my answer to the "can poetry matter" question. Still, a big concern for me in writing these poems was that they be accessible to an audience beyond the poetry community. I wanted to write a book my grandfather would read if he could see well enough to read a book. Right now there's a surplus of young poets, and most of us are academics, writing poems for the rather insulated community of fellow academic-poets. I'm not necessarily against this kind of poetry—I am, after all, an indebted member of that community—but its preponderance. After hearing some of the Crockett poems read aloud, a friend of mine told me she was going to buy the book as a birthday present for her father, who, like most red-blooded Americans probably hadn't read a poem since high school. For my money, praise doesn't come higher than that. So, poets, if these poems don't strike your fancy, just remember, I wrote them for your dads.

No More Birds

No more birds. Enough birds.
No more branches, no more moon, no more
clouds, light glinting on
no more water. Refuse to sing because
the song is stuffed and birds
they lilt and carol wordlessly of what, of whose
turn it is to bird and bird and bird
the same translations as assigned.
Whose turn is it to open-throated sing?
And what world's turn is it
to be sung of, a thing made noticed
that isn't, its beauty insisted. Who called again
to say what's ugly? Who pointed
from the other side of town, and which
frayed hem of a chainlink fence
did they mean. Did they mean
to suggest or outright say
is distinctly unbeautiful. This face?
The hand that cups it
or refuses to? The bodies
we inherited and tried to slip out of by pressing
pressing them together
together into finest dust? In which these little
dun intelligences do chip and flit. Do we, ought we
to care? For one another, yes –
but beauty. Come here and crouch with me
at the unremarkable front stoop
of this medium-sized aspen tree
on an unnamed side of town.

Listen to their chattering or shrill
world-songs about our plastics and forgetfulness and bombs,
bombs of much unnumbered rubble, bombs of the reasonable
fear of bombs, bombs dividing the living
from the living, towns from towns, constant speaking
or lip-synching with feathers
over the sound of the erosion of
whose turn it is to listen. Listen,
time to quiet down, beauty. Time to world.

Ari Banias (issue 6) is the author of a chapbook, What's Personal is Being Here With All of You (Portable Press @ Yo-Yo Labs, 2012). His poems have recently appeared in Guernica, Gulf Coast, The Volta, Subtropics, DIAGRAM, and elsewhere. The recipient of fellowships from the New York Foundation for the Arts, the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, and the Wisconsin Institute for Creative Writing, he currently lives in Provincetown, where he is a second-year writing fellow at the Fine Arts Work Center.

Transom:
In the epic tradition, a poem begins with the poet petitioning the Muse to inspire his song. But in "No More Birds," your speaker appears to do the opposite when he commands, "Refuse to sing because/ the song is stuffed." Whom or what does the speaker address in this line, and why is silence (i.e., the birds' "wordless carol") the only appropriate sound to (not) make at this moment?

Banias:
The poem wants to hush beauty for a moment in order to ask what else might be important; to question beauty's terms. But the poem inhabits contradiction: refuse to sing (oops, I'm still singing) no more birds (but here are birds multiple times), and so on. And it begins in frustration – with the self, with the world at large, with the attempt to express – starting with the appearance of the birds/trees/moon, these overused symbols of the poetic. I mean, how can one possibly sing? But one feels compelled to sing – that's why lyric (still) exists, despite the claims that it doesn't or can't.

Elaine Scarry argues that when we regard beauty, we instinctively incline toward ethical behavior, toward justice. I'd love to believe this – it's a reassuring, and actually, beautiful idea – but her argument leaves too much unaccounted for (think of how Western notions of beauty have been used to justify colonization and subjugation, or the idea that symmetry is an indicator of beauty and what that implies about ability, or that a culturally produced value system relying on the category "ugliness" in order to leverage itself can't ever be just). This speaker doesn't quite know how to stomach beauty, or how to reconcile it with institutional violence and other injustices, and so tries to reject it – though ultimately, is unable to entirely turn away. So the poem came partly from that struggle.

Transom:
How much lyric DNA might your birds share with Yeats' hard-of-hearing falcon in "The Second Coming?"

Banias:
They seem like cousins. A few times removed, who may not have ever met.

Transom:
In the central portion of your poem, items like "chainlink fences," "the bodies we inherited," and "this face" seem to drop out of existence through a kind of amnesia: "Who called again/ to say what's ugly?" We're usually invited to read poems as the artifact of a poet's attention. Does this poem articulate an aesthetic of forgetting?

Banias:
I think it’s asserting the existence of the places and subjects you mention, and saying that they matter. The eye can pass quickly over what’s ordinary (a worn fence, sparrows bathing in dirt, an unspectacular tree). This isn’t where the culture tends to look with interest and care. And the so-called ugly, what’s decaying or queer or awkward or cast off or too frightening, becomes either momentary spectacle or deliberately ignored. So the poem is thinking about representation, but also attention – in that sense, it’s pointing to what might be overlooked (our own bodies, estrangement, garbage, wars, how and whether we touch...). Who or what directs our attention, and what names do they call – or bestow on – us? Who tends to sing the song, and what is described by it? What does it leave out? Is it always in the same damn key? How does it encourage us to see ourselves, each other, the world? What other songs might we need to sing or hear?

Agapanthus

See they are not pretty.

Rods of fathers who beat their sons.
Blue-black toes on a working man’s foot.

Like the blank windows
of public housing,
they are private,
but testament.

Like widows’ canes
they support everything brittle.

They hoop and nod. They blunder,
bird-dust, scoot.

All that, still can’t get loose.

Only a dark wind frees them,
bruises

them to wet sugar, pulp
for our feet. We are always walking,

but also can’t get anywhere.

Birth

Until, as if bereft, a bell rings in the abdomen,
mourns. Call it a whiteout, call it a scalding,
justice licked by invisible flame.

The tongue, that bacon, forms a living word.
The fingers twist. There is a sorry way
the wrists have of no longer

bearing weight. The wool in the brain catches,
smokes. The burr of the heart crinkles to ash.
Still, the glory there, from the darkness,

a purple-fringed thistle, emergent, aloud.

Hannah Craig (issue 6) lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Her work has recently appeared in journals such as Post Road, Prairie Schooner, and New Haven Review.

Transom:
Upon first reading the title, “Agapanthus,” we thought you had made a hybrid word containing “agape” (the love of humans for one another) and “acanthus” (the ornamental flowers found on Classical architecture). But it turns out “Agapanthus” is a species of flower, also known as “Lily of the Nile.” Your speaker describes them as “private, / but testament,” which seems perfectly to encapsulate the intimate yet allusive quality of botanical names. Can you talk about how these qualities function in your poems?

Craig:
Theodor Adorno, at the end of his chapter on Natural Beauty, wrote “If the language of nature is mute; art seeks to make this muteness eloquent.” For me, in this poem, there is actually a fair amount of subtext about how attempting to make a natural figure stand in for human will and compulsion, to act as allusive vehicle or allegory, is a fraught enterprise. The result of so much figuration—the flower as disciplinary tool, toe, window, cane, as something that blunders or scoots or circles...is very little actual movement. Even if we’ve maybe tried to impart something—meaning, purpose, agenda, identity, status—with the name “Agapanthus” (from the Greek for love, “agape,” and flower, “anthos”)—what is actually said or known about the flower from these things is relatively little. I’ve said more in this poem about myself than about the flower, right? And, after all of that work, the flower still can’t “get loose,” can’t move away from itself to become something else, can’t even speak.

If I sometimes think about how little is accomplished by naming or figuring or taxonomizing metaphorically, I also sometimes think that quite a bit is accomplished precisely through those acts. What to make of a poem like Juliana Spahr's fabulous "Gentle Now, Don't Add to Heartache," where she goes for pages and pages just listing species by name, "...whirligig beetle larvae, hickory, sparrow, caddisfly larva, fluted shell, horse chestnut, wartyback, white heelsplitter, larch?" Is there something hylozoic going on there? A suggestion that pattern, association, and proximity create some kind of living structure? It may be a little bit at odds with Emerson when he wrote about "the young scholars, who invade our hills...love not the flower they pluck, and know it not/And all their botany is Latin names." But even if all our botany is names, the naming is something incendiary & creative itself.

Especially as someone who elects to live in a city, who goes months without seeing a cornfield, goes years without sighting a fox creeping from a ditch, in whose world the great cultivars are those with beds of Home Depot petunias and begonias, in whose office a single over-grown spider plant "greens" up the place...I'm sometimes suspicious of the way that I want to use natural imagery to stand in, to lend gravity, intimacy, allusion. So I try to accept that the natural world I inhabit is not indigenous to itself. That my experience of nature is all about transplantation and adoption, pollution, absence, history, capital. But that I still need to come from a place, from a world that I know and experience. Walking over the crushed petals of a purple flower native to Africa, grown as an annual in Pittsburgh, probably unidentifiable to 95% of the people who walk past it every day, there's still something that is shared between the natural world and the human world when the flower is seen or encountered, something in each that speaks to the other.

Transom:
Your poem, “Birth,” seems to associate the process of birth with heat of all kinds. The speaker is concerned with “scalding,” “invisible flame,” and “ash.” Even the word “bacon,” associated with the tongue in your piece, gives us an idea of transformation through fire and smoke. Why are such potentially destructive forces brought into dialogue with the (seemingly generative) concept of birth?

Craig:
After that last answer, I need some brevity. I think the dual nature of fire—both a destructive and creative essence, has been with us for a long time. Fire is a primary agent of change and transformation. Heraclitus called this world an “ever-living fire, kindled in due measure, and in due measure extinguished.” So, much as it’s a destructive force here, I think fire’s also associated with transformation, with the life-essence, the soul, with being.

For anyone who’s ever physically given birth to another being, I think there are some destructive elements to the process. There's the physical devastation of birth--the splitting/bursting, the obliteration of one's self as a thinking, feeling being as the body is overwhelmed by the work of bringing forth life. There’s physical danger—death in childbirth is still a very real possibility in many parts of the world. There’s physical danger in being born, too...injury, failure of the birthing body or the birthed body to make it through the stress. Metaphorically, I think the birth of other things—the birth of an idea, a thought, a poem, a relationship, a painting...all of these can have a similar arc. In the moment the thing is “created,” it hovers between two states, on the brink of obliteration, perilously close to existence.

from Century Swept Brutal

He said See the red raspberries straining She said No

the green cellular ones strained within, Now lift your arms

and hands remain down, Now in the dressmaker's window

the reflection of a street crosses a gown

*

He said See the red raspberries strained against

this wire that you could say educates them away from

the path but from which they rise

so haphazardly, it must be by design

*

He said If in any age

you say we may share this bed but only

touch in these three places, which of course

in its restraint conjures

increased lust before we have finished imagining

restraint, and a tone

induces the shape of a bell, so the nets

drying in trees

occasionally have olives in them in the morning

Zach Savich (issue 6, issue 9)'s fifth book of poetry is The Orchard Green and Every Color (Omnidawn, 2016). He teaches in the BFA Program for Creative Writing at the University of the Arts, in Philadelphia, and co-edits Rescue Press's Open Prose Series.

Transom:
Could you tell us a little about the project that these poems come from?

Savich:
These poems are from Century Swept Brutal, a book that is forthcoming from Black Ocean.

Transom:
The second section ends, “they rise so haphazardly, it must be by design” – does that seemingly contradictory statement articulate a kind of ars poetica for this project?

Savich:
I don’t think so.

Transom:
The first and last sections end with a moment of surprising beauty, an announcement of a stumbled-upon epiphany. As readers, part of our pleasure in these poems comes from sharing in that sense of discovery, of having bumped into beauty while turning a corner, even though we know that the surprise is curated, deployed (by you). Is poetry a form of articulated attention?

Savich:
I have to believe so.

See more from Zach Savich on this collection, love, loss, location, and hating on haters over at: **Thermos**!

Living in the Tall Kingdom

The house of shadow grows longer on the field
until there is only shadow, and the moon
brings thin milk, its second trickery of sunlight,
over the horizon. Indoor feeling. I won't go
to the city, where I would be lost
in constant streetlight that soothes residents
like water lapping endlessly against a rowboat's hull.
When the bedroom light is doused I climb down
from the window and wander into my own realm
where no one can place a finger on me.
The quarry is filling with snowmelt, the smooth
and slack-jawed pit darkening with water.
To which kingdom does the quarry belong?
To the kingdom of the tall, of genitals vast
like herds of cattle on the hills, or the kingdom
of safety, where wooden ladles are beaten
against doorframes to ward off ghosts:
the whereabouts of each realm as difficult to discern
as a snake's belly on its long underside.
As the city dampens the night sky with its light
I take off my shoes and splash into the stony water
beside the frogs and their pitched chorus.   Alone,
love-deep in the mud with stone-bred weeds
behind my ears I wait for the quarry muse
to step out of her skirt, and with her mouth
close my dripping mouth.

The Farmstead

In such places they tell stories about the first settled family:
the man who went to the dripping creek and made love to it
with his hands until it became a river, his wife
who kept furrows in bloom those early winters by walking
the rows with her lantern and breathing on the stems
to keep them warm. Post and lintel arose as if
from nothing, headstones climbed out of the earth and collected
in small, family plots where the dead laid claim to the loam.
Ancestral mile markers: he fell off the ladder
and it took a week for him to go; in her bed
she coughed out all her blood; his lover's husband shot him
when their sin was discovered. Dirty roads
traced from other early homes creep over the hills.
Schoolhouses are built for the inevitable children. Blacksmiths daily cast
the smallest objects of need in life: nails over and over
seeking the perfection that would end their necessity.
Children arrange themselves for school,
girls sing throughout choir and shadows follow their causes
repeatedly like a kind of sadness.
Who knows what goes on inside of houses, behind their doors.
Secrets kept, broken, a frightened child who avoids the upstairs hallway
for days, until finally he peeks into the haunted suit of armor
and finds only cobwebs. If we hide
under our beds for long enough our chores
will forget about us. The water we pull from the well will go on forever.

Duncan Campbell (issue 6) is a graduate of the MFA program in writing at the University of New Hampshire. His poems have appeared in more than a dozen journals, including burntdistrict, Dirtflask, Halfway Down the Stairs, Ghost Ocean, and Stoneboat. He was the recipient of the Collins Literary Prize in 2010 and the Dick Shea Memorial Award in 2012. He lives in Huguenot, New York and, in addition to work in outdoor education, he co-edits Paper Nautilus.

Transom:
To us, “Living in the Tall Kingdom” and “The Farmstead” feel like sibling poems because of the way their speakers animate a landscape with near-mythic lyric energy. They seem written from a dream- or childlike state in which the boundaries between reality and fantasy are particularly porous (“If we hide / under our beds for long enough our chores / will forget about us.”). Are these pieces from a larger project? Can you tell us what concerns inspired the poems?

Campbell:
Both poems are part of a series that seeks to establish a real, if mythic, setting. An overarching narrative involving coming of age and its sibling, disillusionment, ties many of the poems together. The poems were inspired, in part, by the notion that childhood can be defined by the lack of control that one has over their own life, paired with a child's inability to rationalize or even comprehend the actions of mature adults and the motives behind these actions. The speaker longs for an escape from this reality, and the move to dreams and fantasy is a reaction to what he is living through. Unfamiliarity is frightening, but can be met with wonder in addition to fear. I had other concerns in conceptualizing the whole series of poems as well, some examples being: where is the intersection between experience and knowledge? Is trauma reversible? Is there a link between intimacy and transgression? What is the distinction between trauma and growth?

The frustration in writing poems like this is trying to imply rather than explain something away, to point in the direction of the collection of things in the corner so that the reader can discover them for themselves. I know what the storyline is, and I know what questions caused me to create (and, in some cases, recollect from my own experiences) the story to begin with, but for the poetry to be a success the reader must discover it for themselves. It's been one of the greatest challenges in editing these poems, trying to balance the overarching elements of the series with restraint necessary to keep all of these concerns unsolved. I like the idea of telling stories through poetry, but think it presents a lot of challenges and pitfalls in this regard.

There's a deeper thread to the narrative of the whole series that I won't spoil, but my hope is that the exploration of these ideas will be evident in the book.

Transom:
The final lines of “Living in the Tall Kingdom” sound, if possible, like an even darker twist on a similar moment in Plath’s “The Colossus,” which ends, “No longer do I listen for the scrape of a keel/ On the blank stones of the landing.” But while Plath’s speaker turns away from the waterfront, realizing that her former waiting posture is a useless remnant of patriarchal culture, your speaker gets “love-deep in the mud” to “wait for the quarry muse/ to step out of her skirt.” Is your poem doubling down on the notion that lyric inquiry can only be quenched by peril?

Campbell:
That you brought up the Plath poem is interesting. First I would say that in writing the final lines of “Living in the Tall Kingdom” I wanted to spin a reader’s expectation, to introduce surprise through diction. The speaker is trying to escape, but, while he waits for her to arrive, the quarry muse doesn’t appear in the poem, maybe implying the lack of a cure for what he is dealing with. He wants to be overwhelmed by a feminine power that he perceives (perhaps an even better word would be “conceives” although this term is a bit loaded) in the quarry. Plath’s speaker rejects her status quo in the end, while my speaker continues to seek supernatural refuge. One distinction might be that Plath’s active turn from the shores could imply triumph over that system, albeit a painful one, while my speaker continues to wait for the muse as my poem ends and thus has no positive revelation. I think my speaker is dealing with emotions that parallel Plath’s, though there are obvious situational differences. So, to finally answer the question: Yes, “Living in the Tall Kingdom” makes a claim for peril as a means of inquiry. We grow most when we face seemingly insurmountable, possibly dangerous, or potentially traumatic challenges, and then solve them.

Persephone

The city smells like summer, like roasted meat, like earth.

If the skin houses the soul, where is the door?

Footsteps, the dark street, and a man behind you who says, I have a gun.

The wedge of geese flew into a wide mass grave.

A blood rose prides itself: the brand of his fingers; the thief takes hold of your arm.

Persephone, her hands imitate a nest of dead goslings.

Our bodies shift in their nests of velvet, blue suits, Sunday dresses, shards of ivory.

Behind the high cement walls of Rosehill Cemetery crows turn their heads and listen.

A cemetery wants to be the wedding of the orchard and the moon.

If the skin houses the soul, lovers walk up the street, lovers and the lonely boys who wish to be in love.

In autumn, in moonlight, a great arc: the hullabaloo of a thousand wings.

The geese could feed on watercress, they could glean bent acres of yellow wheat.

If you are pretending you are somewhere else, sooner or later you should get up and go there.

Arrows, maidens, rise up, depart.

Robert McDonald (issue 6) lives in Chicago and likes his train commute out to the north suburbs because how can you not like two train rides every day? He works as a children's bookseller, blogs at Lives of the Spiders, and has work recently published or forthcoming in New World Writing; A Clean, Well-lighted Place; and Skydeer Helpking; among others. This past week he made a kick-ass chicken gumbo without a recipe, but now it’s almost all gone, like so much else in life.

Transom:
This poem is part of a manuscript of 13-sentence poems, which suggests that the sentence is the unit of composition. But many of these sentences aren’t sentences at all, in a strict grammatical sense, and what drives the lines seems to us to often be the diction and imagery. Do you see a tension between the sentence and the image here, or in general?

McDonald:
My first ideas with my 13 sentence project were about taking sentences from different sources: my journals, art criticism magazines, and opera periodicals. The sentences I “stole” from sources other than my own head were altered – nouns changed, clauses added, until they were no longer in any way quotes of the original material. Cousins, perhaps. After I had hundreds of these sentences, I started grouping them and trying to get them to converse with one another. I started with seven sentence batches, but that didn’t seem to be enough room. Nonetheless I knew I wanted some kind of limits put on the construction of the poems, and 13 lines seemed to be a nice anti-sonnet number. Despite my wish to be more abstract, I am at heart a narrative writer, and stories formed despite my best wishes. As soon as Persephone entered she took over. I wonder if the work would be read differently if it was called “A Wedding Between the Orchard and the Moon.” I don’t see a tension between the image and the sentence – to me a sentence is nearly always only as interesting as the image it carries. I think I hoped that the sentences, and the images they contained, would rub up against each other with more discomfort and odd gaps than they actually do.

I’ll Open No Other

I’ll open no other—
a tree-line soul is mine—

I’m not a ground
that you can cover, harbor

green, leav-y green. The hard return
of my Winchester hurts me.

I feel its dark body
on my arms, talk-talking

to me. Hum of index, my finger
slipping to its stock—

I want to say something about
light here, I want to say

something like a name. I want
to imagine you here,

wet and open, wind and wave.
Shaking your terrible hands.

You move right through me.
And the black plums

of my feet are sweetly bled.
Dire horse, dire man.

I fled you, and then you fled.

Annah Browning (issue 6) lives in Chicago, Illinois, where she is currently pursuing her Ph.D. in English in the Program for Writers at University of Illinois-Chicago. Her poems have appeared in Nashville Review, The Superstition Review, Vinyl Poetry, Anti-, Handsome Journal, and elsewhere. Her poem "On Hearing a Childhood Playmate Is on Death Row, Early Spring" was selected by Michael Dickman as the winner of Blue Mesa Review's 2013 poetry contest. Her chapbook, The Marriage, is available from Horse Less Press.

Transom:
The second line of your poem reminds us of Emily Brontë's phrase, "no coward soul is mine." While the speaker in Brontë's poem comforts herself by reflecting on the eternal constancy of the Divine, the world of your poem is far less secure. Your speaker painfully clutches her "Winchester" revolver while declaring that "a tree-line soul is mine." What does it mean to have such a soul? To whom is this poem addressed?

Browning:
The speaker in my mind is actually clutching a rifle, which is what is more commonly meant by a Winchester—at least in my experience growing up in a gun-heavy part of the country. It's interesting that you see a revolver; Google tells me Winchester did make a revolver for a time, which I did not know!

Since apparently I'm on a gun terminology kick, I'll answer your question through that set of terms, specifically "return" in the third couplet. In one sense I'm referring to "return" as in the recoil from a weapon when fired, the "kick" of a shotgun. When this happens, the stock of the gun can hit you so hard in the shoulder it can bruise you, especially if you're a slight person and aren't prepared for it. The speaker of the poems has dealt with a repercussion, both literally and metaphorically, that's greater than expected. The poem is about the return of a weapon to the speaker's hands, a return to guardedness after an opening up to another person that left the speaker stifled and damaged. It's also about the return of the memory of that beloved.

The tree-line is the line of vulnerability, in both hunting and military strategy. (Or so I imagine, being neither a hunter or solider myself. As a kid, I was just a quiet carrier of weapons in the woods, brought along more for some idle target-practice and a sense of defense than any real desire to do harm to anything.) If you leave the tree-line and come out into the open, you're more visible to be shot. From just behind the tree-line, you can hope to stand in shadow and take your aim from hiding—a move that shows either intelligence or cowardice, depending on your perspective. Our speaker's a little bit of both a tough guy and a coward to my mind—like so many of us in love. (Also, I love Emily Brontë; I'm so happy that you see her here!)

Transom:
“I fled you, and then you fled,” concludes your speaker in the final couplet. What possibilities does the two-line form open up for this piece, which speaks so plaintively of isolation and distance from authority?

Browning:
I use the staggered couplet often because it enables pleasurable syntactic ruptures and double-readings. I also like the way the compression of the short lines makes the sound echoes chime louder, and helps me more easily position rhymes at unpredicted intervals within the lines. The music gets going, but it’s a little off—stately, maybe, but perpetually broken. The poem has the appearance of a shaky wholeness and unity in a world that’s, as you said, metaphysically so distant from and unsure of those very concepts.

Everything Is Sweetened by Defiance

there are things to defy living for | you are the shirt unbuttoned | on its own | the comfort of gravity | compels the swelling of spinal columns | and peculiarities | a rollercoaster cart | stuck at the top of the drop | if courage had better groomed me | I'd play stock market | risk all my greenbacks | sign on the dotted line | paint self-portraits with a paintball gun | I'd play the spoons at the gelato shop | one knee bent into a proposal | when I want to be someone | I chew two sticks of cinnamon Dentyne | and become my father

Stephen Danos (issue 6) is author of the poetry chapbooks Playhouse State (H_NGM_N Books, 2012) and Gravitational (The New Megaphone, forthcoming). His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in 1913, American Letters & Commentary, Anti-, Columbia Poetry Review, Court Green, cream city review, Forklift Ohio, H_NGM_N, iO: A Journal of New American Poetry, The Southeast Review, and elsewhere. He is Editor-in-Chief of Pinwheel and serves as Editor-at-Large for YesYes Books.

Transom:
Can your title, “Everything is Sweetened by Defiance,” be read as a kind of commentary on the art of poetry-making itself? Does the resistance offered by the blank page “sweeten” the writing process?

Danos:
Definitely. I was also thinking of literary defiance in terms of writing outside the normative mode of contemporary poetry or, as a poet, writing poems that are in no way similar to one's previous series or project. Is the blank page conquerable in that way? I’m not so sure. When I confront a blank page, I never have a game plan aside from drink too much coffee then type or scribble or compose via smartphone.

Transom:
Something about the way your poem ends, with the speaker “chewing two sticks / of cinnamon Dentyne” has us thinking about explosions. We’re set up to expect “dynamite” to be attached to the “two sticks” that the speaker’s chewing. Instead, the transformation takes place via Dentyne, a far stickier substance, which turns the speaker into his / her “father.” Does truth come to us in bright, sparking epiphanies (dynamite), or through a slower unfolding (Dentyne)? Maybe we’re really asking: can you ever outrun your past?

Danos:
That should be Dentyne’s next ad campaign. Like in other poems from this series, the enjambments often conjure two potential directions at the same time. The way truth processes us is subject to change. I wrote the poem contemplating how the ultimate defiance is to embrace that which you rebelled against in the past. You defy the younger iteration of yourself, and it's so gloriously conflicted and full of melodramatic betrayal! On a personal level, this poem gestures at the acceptance of that old cliché that many have reservations about “becoming their parent,” where I believe certain aspects of their personalities are inevitably transferred. When one notices those similarities (in personality or lifestyle preference or whatever), then it’s difficult to draw comparisons. To answer the question, truth comes in both forms. I may have sudden realizations or truths (similar to how my brain jumpstarts the writing process) or an accumulation of smaller realizations will build into one, unavoidable truth. Both variations can “stick” if you let them. Or you can circumvent truth by being outside its blast radius.