

**TRANSOM ISSUE 11:**  
**EVENING IN AN OCCUPIED COUNTRY**  
[Wherein we let go of each other's hands]



Richard Kegler  
Stars are Stars

Letterpress monoprint with wood type and press wash, 12x19 in.

FALL 2017

**you had a baby & then**

the blue cormorant  
alights, dismayed  
at approaching shadows. i  
blew a murmur  
& watched it settle  
on the heightened mists.

what of  
these shadows &  
sweetened breezes? what of  
this debris?  
i saw a heron  
dip down to eat  
itself from the water.

**in the vernacular**  
**[sister idioms]**

here's the kvetch & kiss of us •• the quilt & quince •• the lull & last of us •• the pluck • the pout • the pinch ••

we're ant & anthem •• candle & corner •• mist & missive •• we are ••

help & heather we •• bliss & blister we •• flinch & feather we •• gall & gather ••

as cut from the same cloth • to sugarcoat those coattails ••

we're elated & elastic •• we're the jilt & jump •• in the roam & rope of us •• the mark & missile so •• how to spend our misspent missteps •• a miss, a mrs. ••

it's this current state of us • this currency •• to fit the code to fit •• like a glove •• like a jackknife ••

these notes • this norm •• oat & offal •• rye & roast •• salt & stitch •• tilth & tremor • & tether •• we watch the weather ••

it's raining •• cats & dogs into this •• fair-weather feeling you •• dog you • doggerel •• that's right that's right as • rain ••

it's the inch & ill of us •• to be unkempt & unkept •• which voice & void • which veer • vehemence • velocity •• will i xerox • will i apply my x-acto knife •

to unravel us thick as thieves •• us attached at the hip •• at the eye ••

we're the torque & twist of it •• the yelp & yoke •• zilch & zip of it • the zen • the zero • •

Abi Pollokoff (issue 11) is a Seattle-based writer with work most recently in *Yes, Poetry*; *The Birds We Piled Loosely*; *CALAMITY*; *Inch*; and *Broadsided Press*, among others. A former reader for the *Seattle Review* and editor in chief of the *Tulane Review*, she won the 2012 Anselme M. Larson prize for Tulane University. In 2016, she received her MFA from the University of Washington.

**Transom:**

Many of the poems in this issue seem to coalesce around themes of darkness and light. In what ratio of shade or illumination do your poems thrive? Does a dark poem need light, and vice versa?

**Pollokoff:**

Oh, I'm super excited about this theme (and I can't wait to read the rest of the issue)! To offer an answer, though, I'll start by finding some footing. Thinking about your second question first, I'll hesitantly suggest that light and dark aren't exclusively symbiotic—a poem could invoke one quality without the other. I believe that this probably depends on whether you're considering light and dark as literal representations of how space is perceived or whether you're also including emotional implications of image and tone, relationship, etc.

A poem might not need both qualities, but I'll suggest that I enjoy poems when both are present. Light becomes more joyous; dark, richer, when offset by their opposite—just as how paintings that feature chiaroscuro, strong light-dark contrasts, nearly glow off their canvases. However, light and dark are fickle and flighty. On any given day—at any given moment—a reader might see or understand or hear darkness or lightness based on tangible experiences of their day, the light (or shadow) in the room, a current mood. So the reader is intimately involved in the quality and ratio of light and dark in any given poem. Perhaps that's what I search for, then, in both writing and reading poems: dark and light that, on the surface, hint at balance, all the while pulling the reader in a direction that fulfills what they're subconsciously looking for.

**Transom:**

Each of your poems ends with the erasure of individuality—in the first, the heron bends “to eat itself,” while in the second piece, the dynamic between the sisters seems to form a self-reflective, self-reinforcing “zero.” Does infinity require the body to be consumed?

**Pollokoff:**

Wow! Infinity! That’s big. I’m not sure I can speak to how infinity affects the body in its entirety. Or, maybe this is more question of consumption—is it really consumption? Or expansion? Or envelopment? In infinity, wouldn’t the body have to change in some way to not be consumed by such a vastness?

Both of the bodies in these poems are surrounded by circumstance and action and do undergo some final transformation. But in their respective contexts, are the bodies consequence or instigator of each final moment? Perhaps in addressing the poems’ new states, I needed the body to consume itself in some way in order to continue to exist in its newfound present. So then I might return to the beginning of your question: am I erasing individuality? Or just changing what that individual is? I’ll have to keep thinking about that.

## **Milk (Version #1)**

The lambs are gone. Black milk  
drips from the bones of my hip.

I find you weeping in your silk  
Under the light of the moon.

You say the tears are for the nightbirds,  
But I can taste the milkweed.

I share in your pain. I too have soured  
For the son I will never know.

## **Milk (Version #2)**

Milk. Sours. Inside you. My Love.  
Sours. Turns into Milkweed. We cry  
curdled tears. thoughts of you.  
Soured. I block the trail from cheek  
to tongue with my dam of pursed lips.  
The pucker of loss. I share your pain.  
I too sour over the son I will never know.

Carson Sawyer (issue 11) is a poet living in Omaha, Nebraska. His work has appeared in Common Ground Review, Inklette, and most recently Ampersand Literary. He is also a graduate of the University of Iowa's Young Writer's Studio. He is currently working on his first novella, *The Lawman's Blues*.

**Transom:**

Many of the poems in this issue seem to coalesce around themes of darkness and light. In what ratio of shade or illumination do your poems thrive? Does a dark poem need light, and vice versa?

**Sawyer:**

I think it all boils down to the reader. You have to remember that, depending upon your audience, the people reading your work will already have their own experiences and beliefs, for the most part, set in stone. So when you're talking about something as ambiguous as poetry, a writer's emotional intent becomes, for me, an after-thought to the loose construction of language and imagery. Most times, poets aren't allowed a tight narrative like fiction that guides you to an emotional grounding. In poetry, the reader is thrown into an intense, uncertain emotional experience, so it's only natural that during the brief time you're reading a poem, where it stemmed from—light or dark—can just become white noise. And as a writer myself, that's completely OK. In fact, that's what I love about poetry. Its ambiguity. The message becomes the reader's interpretation.



I will say, from my own experiences writing the two versions of “Milk,” both follow the same story up until somewhere in the middle. Both follow the tragedy of losing a son, but they don’t share the same outcome as to whether or not the couple will stay together through their loss. I was intrigued by how a couple could deal with what happened and lead a relatively normal relationship and how another couple could deal with the same experience and be totally crushed by it. Therein lies the light and dark. They occur in the possibility of their relationship being mended. I leave it to the reader’s interpretation. But to say that a poem exists solely in darkness or light seems too easy of an answer to a complex question. I think a piece of writing is best played in both spaces. For example, what’s so tragic about the couple losing a son is that they seemed so eager to have one—to raise it and nurture it, to watch it grow—because it came from a source of light and love, not from unwanted or a misplaced sense of necessity. That is the darkness. The light, like I said, lies in the possibility of powering through that trauma. But it’s always up to the reader. In the end, it’s always up to their mentality.

**Transom:**

Your “Milk” poems utilize metaphors of souring to describe an intimate grief: the loss of a child. We’re interested in the ways that sourness is private (an acrid taste in the mouth) and shared (the emergence of acrimony in a relationship). To what extent are these poems intended to be audible addresses to the “you,” as opposed to interior monologues?

**Sawyer:**

This one's an easier question to answer! Both are intended to be interior monologues. However, both are different. In the first version, it feels like the event of their son's death happened a while ago, while the second version is much more in the present. They're also different in the actions of the father. In the first version, the monologue takes place from an observational standpoint. The father seems distant, observing the mother's grief, but too crippled by his own loss to do anything about it except to know it. The other is much more involved. In the second, he still feels overwhelmed with loss, but his action of kissing the tear trailing down his wife's cheek makes the experience much more shared and hopeful. Also, in the last line of each poem I use the word "sour," but in the first version I use it in the past tense because he's cemented in his grief. While in the second I use it in the present when it's still fresh and able to be mended. So I think the first is more of an interior monologue (almost a memory), where the second is more close to the moment and to them as a couple, making it an interior monologue that interacts strongly/more physically with the "you" making it almost an address.

## Shellac

Go deeper  
into a woman's  
bed, sheet  
on a pillow, blood  
on a bed sheet.  
Packaged down  
feathers poking  
their stingers through  
the seams.  
I'm caged

in furious warmth, a swarm  
under stitching and patches,  
never matching.

As I struggle they sting.

Conyer Clayton (issue 11) is an Ottawa-based poet who aims to live with compassion, gratitude and awe. You can find her current work both online and in print with Prairie Fire, Bywords, Causeway Lit, and PACE, among many others. For updated news on her poetic endeavors and collaborations, go to [facebook.com/ConyerClayton](https://facebook.com/ConyerClayton).

**Transom:**

Many of the poems in this issue seem to coalesce around themes of darkness and light. In what ratio of shade or illumination do your poems thrive? Does a dark poem need light, and vice versa?

**Clayton:**

My poems are usually born in the dark. The act of writing, for me, is an act of transfiguration from darkness to light. Of taking the shades of the myself I don't realize exist and forcing them out onto a white page for dissection. But that implies a sort of sterility inherent in the light, which is not what I mean. The dark is not always dirty, and the light is not always clean. Often, after a poem wriggles itself into the daylight for examination, the very act of dissection creates a whole new realization of darkness.

As for the second question ... yes and no. Of course they need one another. They cannot exist alone. A lot of my poetry is about cycles, and the cycle from dark to light is continuous and natural. Settling into a place of light or dark for a time means at one point there was a sinking, that in the future there will be a rising, and on and on. So that is my yes. But there is also the no. Sometimes we have to black out the curtains and forget the light exists. We have to settle into the shadows. A poem of shadows can be complete in and off itself. But then ... that settling is the first necessary step before the inevitable rise back to lightness, so maybe my answer is actually a firm yes.

**Transom:**

In your poem, the “woman’s bed” transitions from tranquil nest to stinging hive, a locus of potential harm. But where should we locate the principal threat—in the speaker’s furious domesticity, or in her struggle against it? What is the titular image of “shellac” meant to protect the speaker(s) from?

**Clayton:**

This is a hard question to answer. The threat in this poem comes from past experiences of trauma located in a bed. The threat is not physically present in this poem, but psychically remains. The speaker is struggling (unsuccessfully) not to allow the “stinging” past to enter into her current realm. One where no real threat is actually present, but danger is perceived even in the most seemingly comfortable and traditionally calming places. Where the real threat is memory, and the refusal to recognize the impact and weight of past traumas. The recognition that the refusal is what keeps it coming back in unexpected moments.

The “shellac” the speaker covers herself with is meant to protect against events she cannot yet face, but it cracks and crumbles. The shellac is a faulty shield, one that invites further trauma and re-enacting rather than facing what is underneath. The shellac is an attempt to protect the speaker from herself, from her own neglect to process what is swarming.

## Roundabout

As the last wagon of the caravan approached the roundabout, the driver thrashed the horses he had acquired at an oasis hundreds of miles from the former capital; his original team had bolted at the sound of a meteor roaring across the sky at dawn; its glittering remains lit the way to the city. His notes on the drought went on for pages, detailing his losses in a meticulous hand. Some believed his testimony might explain what had propelled their exodus, without hope of alleviating their pain. Loneliness lay on his tongue like dust from a courtyard in the medina, where sheepskins were drying in a wire cage and a laborer recited verses from the Qur'an, rubbing his legs blistered from long days of wading in the vats of the tannery. Who could decipher the graffiti—New York, New York—on the palace wall? Friend or foe? said a policeman, reaching for his gun. A dog asleep on a sack of cement twitched and whimpered. The horses did not budge. The policeman took aim.

**After Hemingway  
For Kiki Petrosino**

The girl was gazing at the line of hills  
Across the sea, stirring a lump of sugar  
In her mint tea. "We can have the whole world,"  
Said her Moroccan guide. She purred, "It's lovely,  
But if you say another word I'll scream."  
He raised his hand to signal for the check,  
Thinking: Everything tastes of licorice.  
The muezzin's call for evening prayer began.  
"I'll find my own way to the terminal,"  
She murmured. "Enjoy your time in Paradise."

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The warden of the prison vowed to change  
The narrative about the string of botched  
Attempts to execute the quarterback  
Convicted (twice) of murdering his girlfriend.  
The media were having none of it.  
The series of directives he had issued  
To paper over his mistakes fooled no one.  
And the barbeque they were invited to  
Inspired more digging into his affairs.  
What they would find was anybody's guess.

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The pirate lair was looking toward the future:  
The bleak facades of a suburban skirmish,  
Where a wounded stretcher-bearer hunkered down  
In a deserted fort on Cherry Lane,  
And dreamed of Casablanca, capital  
Of contradictions. From a dream or memory  
Came the snake-charmer's warning at the gate  
To the metropolis in which he had  
Forsaken everything for a madwoman:  
Enter the Old Medina at your peril.



## The Final Act

With a snake looped around her neck, the acrobat leaped from the high platform into a cloud of incense swirling in the aerial hoop from which she would swing in the circular flight pattern of a bird in a cave painting discovered just before the war. The incense rose from a table at the edge of the ring, behind which the ringmaster summoned clowns and jugglers at regular intervals so that he could feed the lion in its cage. A priest in the crowd tracked the aerialist's movements through the dark, as if to monitor the changes roiling his own soul, which he likened to a wheel of flames spinning under the big tent. The circus would leave town in the morning, never to return, and the priest was not alone in his contemplation of last things. The snake began to constrict the performer, who grew confused, her rotations slowing, and now she could no longer remember where she was in her routine. The priest mumbled a prayer for the ringmaster, who shook the censer like a whip. The lion roared once then lay back down. The crowd yearned to fly away.

Christopher Merrill (issue 3, issue 11) has published six collections of poetry, including *Watch Fire*, for which he received the Lavan Younger Poets Award from the Academy of American Poets; many edited volumes and translations; and six books of nonfiction, among them *Only the Nails Remain: Scenes from the Balkan Wars*; *Things of the Hidden God: Journey to the Holy Mountain*; *The Tree of the Doves: Ceremony, Expedition, War*; and *Self-Portrait with Dogwood*. His writings have been translated into nearly forty languages; his journalism appears widely; his honors include a Chevalier from the French government in the Order of Arts and Letters. As director of the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa, Merrill has conducted cultural diplomacy missions to more than fifty countries. He serves on the U.S. National Commission for UNESCO, and in April 2012 President Obama appointed him to the National Council on the Humanities. Author photo (c) Ram Devineni.

**Transom:**

Many of the poems in this issue seem to coalesce around themes of darkness and light. In what ratio of shade or illumination do your poems thrive? Does a dark poem need light, and vice versa?

**Merrill:**

Poor eyesight from childhood has sharpened my sense of the ways in which darkness defines the light, and so it follows that my poems are shaped by an acute understanding of the endlessly shifting ratio between the two. If I have learned anything from my walk in the sun it is that my peripheral vision is sometimes more reliable than what I see in front of me; poems emerge from what I glimpse at the edge of things, like shadows that gradually take solid form, each containing a measure of light.

**Transom:**

Each of these poems resembles the beginning of a tale, spinning out tantalizing backstories for caravan drivers and prison wardens and acrobats—but then the speaker’s attention moves to another landscape, another story thread, just as detailed. We begin to feel as if we’re zooming in on sections of a larger tapestry. Are these poems united by a single speaker whose mind ranges with equal intensity over miniature and macro-landscapes? If so, who is (s)he?

**Merrill:**

At a party after a reading, a well-known writer told a long and tedious story about his visit to the house of a sixteenth-century Arctic explorer, the upshot of which was that the current owners had neither heard of this historical figure nor particularly cared that he had tried to sail to the North Pole. “He did this in 1576,” the writer cried. “Imagine. 1576.” Unable to contain myself, I said, “Was that pre-MTV?” The writer was not amused, though later he said that he liked my sense of humor, even if he couldn’t figure out where it came from. “That’s easy,” I said. “I listen to all the voices in my head.” I like to think the serial poems I write, each section of which derives from one of the voices in my aural imagination, are of a piece with who I am. Then again I may be deluded, in which case I hope someone will have the good sense to crack a joke at my expense.

## Seeing Xian Jian Off at Hibiscus Pavilion

Rain at the embankment fell so hard  
Wu City seemed a wall of water.  
That's what I remember of our parting—  
That, and my sense Mount Chu was watching.

If father asks, my mother asked him to.  
Tell him my heart never crossed the river.  
Tell him my heart is ice in a cut-jade cup,  
That Luoyang is pure in me, and will be forever.

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### 芙蓉楼送辛渐

寒雨连江夜入吴，平明送客楚山孤。  
洛阳亲友如相问，一片冰心在玉壶。

Wang Changling (issue 11) (698-756) is one of the most revered poets of the Tang Dynasty, a golden age in Chinese literature. Along with Gao Shi and Wang Zhihuan, Wang Changling participated in the famous Wine Shop competition.

Daniel Bosch (issue 11) teaches writing at Emory University. Four of his recent versions of poems by German poet Friedrich Hölderlin are legible at [intranslation.brooklynrail.org](http://intranslation.brooklynrail.org), and his chapbook *Octaves* is downloadable at [birdofbees.com](http://birdofbees.com).

**Transom:**

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**Bosch:**

I haven't yet read the poems in this issue, but it makes perfect sense to me that they should body forth themes of conflict, of opposition, of partiality, shading, and gradation.

A strong artwork will not merely express a position but will include its opposite. One cannot merely agree with a really good poem; if it is of lasting interest it will incorporate sufficient tensions such that all the positions expressed in it are also undermined and questioned.

Poems are constantly telling us in their very structures that they are not simple broadsides on issues.

Wang Changling's poem, for example, offers us a fiction in which the speaker uses a vivid image to express the state of his heart. In my opinion, the poem is most powerful when one realizes that the speaker's words are not true, that no one really has such a heart as he describes, able to remain a pure piece of ice once it is dropped in a cup of hot tea. That he says he possesses such a heart is interesting; that we know he doesn't have such a heart—that none of us do—is what makes this a poem.

**Transom:**

What drew you to this particular poem, and what elements of the original did you find most challenging to bring into English?

**Bosch:**

My one-year old daughter Auden is half-Chinese. When Auden met her Chinese family, many conversations focused on what Auden's Chinese name should be. Part of the challenge was to find a suitably literary yet uncommon name to match that of an amazing British poet; another part of the challenge was to find a name as beautiful as Lee Shuang Bai, Auden's mother's name, which alludes to a famous Chinese poem, and can be rendered in English as "Plum Frost White."

It was Auden's grandmother who recalled Wang Changling's words about parting with Xian Jian and the image of a heart like a miraculous piece of ice that would not melt even when it is immersed a jade cup of hot tea, an image expressed by the phrase Bing Xin. Bing Xin literally means "ice heart," but in the context of the poem it does not suggest what Americans mean by "cold-hearted." I was immediately struck by the rightness of this name, thus Auden is known to her Taiwanese relatives as Lee Bing Xin (Bing Bing is her nickname), and thus I received an implicit assignment to try to bring some version of the poem into English.

Bing Xin is also the pen name of a prominent female Chinese novelist and poet of the 20th century who was graduated from Wellesley College in Massachusetts. This further literary connection ties Auden to a female artist who was very active and influential in China, in spite of all the patriarchal expectations of the 20th century, and I hope that being called Lee Bing Xin will point Auden toward being as empowered in the 21st century.

**Transom:**

We're fascinated by the image of "ice in a cut-jade cup." In a poem about an emotional parting, what do the sharp, hard images of ice and jade symbolize?

**Bosch:**

Wang Changling's speaker tells us that he maintains the values of his upbringing even in a foreign and adverse environment, and the image of "ice in a cut-jade cup" tells us how: his loyalty to Luoyang may have the nearly the same chemical formula as river water, rain water, or tea, but his virtues (he says) keep it hyper-frigerated, crystalline.

For me, the fictional hardness and durability of this fictional ice has a personal referent. Auden's mother's family came to the United States in the 80s but returned to Taiwan—all except "Plum Frost White," who has lived on permanently in America, far from where she was born. She would never overstate the case the way Wang Changling's speaker does; she has never felt she had to. But no doubt some durable part of her has remained purely Taiwanese.

**Transom:**

In this poem, division and order seem paramount: rain creates a wall, and the city of Luoyang is "pure in me." What danger do you think there could be for this speaker in having a heart that "crossed the river"?

**Bosch:**

My version of Wang Changling's poem includes strands not in the original. One is an invented narrative implied by the speaker's expressing to his friend the likelihood that his father would refuse to speak to Xian Jian about his son, that it would be the speaker's mother who would ask after him. To me this suggests how unspeakably painful separation from one's family can be, even when—or especially if—one maintains a fiction that one has never left at all.



## Everything Is Real and Everything Isn't

Today was a slow day.

Pigeons ate wheat from my palm,  
coffee and oranges in a sunny chair,  
thoughts of you, how you were a good  
child, and how, now that you're grown,  
you have stepped into a forest webbed  
with shadow and still can't shake the dreams.

Dreams that there are no more children  
in your body, no more moths around your oil lamp.  
The ones you bore, like a maze of identical streets,  
the ones you didn't, digging holes in the earth  
with a hawk's feather while sunlight pools  
in their throats, lost children singing to themselves  
as the dark grows solid around them.

In my dreams, I arrive where no one awaits me,  
on a train stopped beneath a church clock without  
hands. Used shoes hang from the eaves of houses,  
bedraggled and stained, as if pulled from a sack  
being dragged to the river. I pass a building full  
of muffled voices, or perhaps it is a single mouth  
filled with muffled laughter. Two modest voices,  
I decide at last, aglow like afternoon sunlight,  
like a choir. Come, lovers of dark corners, one says,  
lose something every day, as it's always evening  
in an occupied country. No, replies the other.  
In the dark in such a country, we cast no shadows.  
All one needs is a broom darker than the midnight streets.

The road from town was lined with white birch trees,  
mud, blossoming apples. I gathered blossoms for  
your hair near the roots of weeds white with dust,  
where gods jostled one another over lost door keys.  
There was more—blind archers, a woman with breasts  
as hard as tin, flute music floating from your fingers,  
a ring of supple women, birds at dusk in the clear sky  
tucking their wings and descending into darkness—but,  
sniffing the twilight, hunting for you, I put my dreams  
aside like something wicked and hurtle through the dark  
toward you, my woolen lover, you who have crossed  
the distances to roost in me, to people my empty bed.

Paul Griner (issue 11) is the author of the story collections *Hurry Please I Want to Know* and *Follow Me* (a Barnes and Noble Discover Great New Writers selection), and the novels *Collectors*, *The German Woman*, and *Second Life*. His work has been published in *Playboy*, *Ploughshares*, *One Story*, *Zoetrope*, *Narrative*, *Tin House*, and *Bomb*, and has been translated into a half dozen languages. He teaches Creative Writing at the University of Louisville. *Hurry Please I Want To Know* won the 2016 Kentucky Literary Award.

**Transom:**

Many of the poems in this issue seem to coalesce around themes of darkness and light. In what ratio of shade or illumination do your poems thrive? Does a dark poem need light, and vice versa?

**Griner:**

I don't think consciously about a ratio of light and dark in my poems, though your question immediately made me go back over them to see if I could find a pattern. I don't see one, though I do see an ongoing battle between the two, wending through the work. And I do think poems need both light and dark.

The first poem I fell in love with was Hardy's "Darkling Thrush." Darkness predominates throughout that poem, but it's the light that wins out, in the final few lines.

**Transom:**

We hear an echo of John Berryman's first Dream Song in the conclusion to your poem. Are your references to a "woolen lover" and to Bessie Smith's "Empty Bed Blues" meant to rewrite or challenge Berryman's original?

**Griner:**

"Everything is Real and Everything Isn't" is a (highly) modified cento, and for me it's not quite a challenge to Berryman, whose work I return to often, but a way of finding echoes of Berryman (and other poets) and myself in other works, many of which aren't poems. As if, in all the data we are daily flooded with, there are messages, if only I can discern them.

## KIRU XXXXXIII

Nice how night shrinks  
life. Kids cries distant

in the quiet. Flushed  
young man comes

from a hedge gap, after him  
comes a young woman

with wild nodding  
detaching from her light

skirt a clinging twig. Man  
resituates his cap. They smoke

staring at a branch  
of poplar above. Keyboards

and monitors strung  
from limbs. Fall asleep

with her feet  
in his hands.

## KIRU XXXXXV

Not a thing happened this morning  
but nothing did not happen. All are here,

awake, in the next room, politely  
not a-swarm, and slightly missed.

Fold towels so they are ready  
to be unfolded, I catch myself

not breathing, often. Then belly  
breathe, scratch a laughter

from my lung. On the grass  
undrowned, but often

almost drowning, content, just about  
to drown.

Adam Day (issue 11) is the author of *A Model of City in Civil War* (Sarabande Books), and is the recipient of a PSA Chapbook Fellowship for *Badger*, *Apocrypha*, and of a PEN Emerging Writers Award. His poems have appeared in *Boston Review*, *The Kenyon Review*, *American Poetry Review*, *The Iowa Review*, *Poetry London*, and elsewhere. He directs *The Baltic Writing Residency* in Sweden, Scotland, and *Blackacre Nature Preserve*.

**Transom:**

Many of the poems in this issue seem to coalesce around themes of darkness and light. In what ratio of shade or illumination do your poems thrive? Does a dark poem need light, and vice versa?

**Day:**

Blanchot speaks of “une telle intimité déchirée”: “The work is this torn intimacy inasmuch as it is ‘unfurling’ of that which nevertheless hides and remains closed—a light shining on the dark, a light bright from the clarity darkness [makes possible]...” Hopefully the poems thrive in a balanced, if not equal, ratio, like dark humor, like a Giant Swallowtail’s turquoise on black pattern. Even the best or smoothest of lives is difficult, declines, and has lots of messes. When writing avoids those complexities or prettifies them, it feels disingenuous or naïve, and un-engaging. Beckett, Cathy Wagner, Genet, Darcie Dennigan, Joyce, Fred Moten, Krasznahorkai, Diana Hamilton, Albee, Phil Levine, Flann O’Brien, Jakov Lind, Danielle Pafunda, Paul Beatty, Sabrina Orah Mark – these are all writers who embrace the visceral, messy, complicated realities of being a living being, and their work means much to me for that reason.

**Transom:**

The Roman numerals you use for these poems’ titles are unconventional. What message should the reader take from the proliferation of Xs that mark these poems?

**Day:**

I wanted the reader to be un-distracted by the meaning of titles, and/or meanings they might inflict upon the poems. So, the Xs, I suppose, say, 'Ignore us.'

**Transom:**

We've noticed an interesting telescoping effect in these poems. Children's cries move away from us, as a man and woman move forward; towels fold and unfold; and the grass is both undrowned and fully drowning. Does every poem's landscape contain its opposite?

**Day:**

That's something I hadn't myself noticed before. Once I've written and revised and revised, &c. a poem, I tend to not see it again until it floats up due to a reading or publication. I think probably that telescoping, that 'thing and its opposite' is related to what I mentioned above about attempting to address nuance and complexity. We all know that nothing is all one way or the other, but we often move in the world as though things were in fact all one way. I can't really abide a work of art that aims for revelation, catharsis or lesson teaching, but I do think these poems involve the writer trying to think through what the world looks like when he can try, and fail, and succeed, and fail—by way of analysis and observation, rather than by way of declaration, instruction, or epiphany—to see the manifold nature of life.

## The Houseguest

Wildebeests got so close to biting my dog that her black fur has turned wholly white,  
the texture of a mattress floating in an estuary.

I am the houseguest of any dream.

With salt in the windowsills, the garden breeze rushes in its zucchini and squash.  
I go back to the drawing board: rethinking rabbits.

The mother must have escorted out the kits  
burrowed underneath our thyme, leaving a bulge of dirt.

No one has asked me to leave, but a broom appears by the door.

Now our dog, injured with a cut paw, crouches as far as she can  
beneath the seat—pain a state of infancy, an estuary to the open sea.



Author of chapbooks *Dead-Eye Spring* (Cy Gist Press) and the forthcoming *This Paper Lantern* (Dancing Girl Press), Cheryl Clark Vermeulen (issue 11) has poems and translations in the journals *Drunken Boat*, *Caketrain*, *Jubilat*, *Third Coast*, *TWO LINES Online*, *DIAGRAM*, *EOAGH*, *Split Rock Review*, among others, as well as the anthology *Connecting Lines: New Poetry from Mexico*. She was a finalist recipient of a Massachusetts Cultural Council's Artist Fellowship. She received an M.F.A. from the Iowa Writers' Workshop after working for a decade in non-profit organizations. She is an Assistant Professor in Liberal Arts at Massachusetts College of Art and Design and the Poetry Editor for the journal *Pangyrus*.

**Transom:**

Many of the poems in this issue seem to coalesce around themes of darkness and light. In what ratio of shade or illumination do your poems thrive? Does a dark poem need light, and vice versa? Also: In this piece, your speaker declares herself "the houseguest of any dream," but in the poem, no host appears. Is the dreamer in control of her dream?

**Vermeulen:**

Entering a dark room, I remember its contours from being there in the light; I may pat around for the light switch if the room is entirely new to me. Walking around outside in the dark, I may appreciate the moon's reach or reach for a flashlight. During my root canal, I will see a bright light directed into that well of my mouth I cannot see. At the bright beach, I seek out the shade for relief. In a dark room, with just a scrap of light, I calm down. Lights out, now to sleep. Daily we navigate through these literal darks and lights, and in both of these spaces illumination can arise, that figurative sense, that opening up into wilder spaces: epiphanies, spells, visions, dreams, trances, imaginings. They have their own weave of darks and lights, so intimate. Let's say my darks and lights kiss. They do so exceedingly in dreams in which the I gets troubled; the dream being the host and I the guest, with all those variant levels of welcome. The more that we can walk around thinking of ourselves as guests, I think, the less damage we may do. Who is the host of this space? This place? Whom do I thank? Am I the stranger? (I haven't even gotten to the notion of hair being blanched by fear, all this fear).

## Nights Again

Tired mountains and gold lake-light  
finish up our return. The children yawn.  
The travellers falter in the ash town  
watching the breezeless staring.

Moments pass like beetles,  
each of us a faceless book.  
That something precise might burn  
and wake into a bowl of eyes

watching is courting stars.  
Low field moons, like old coins  
loop the months, eating film,  
eating dreams among bald trees.

## Fat Days

Everything new was dead.  
Poured into the sink.  
Weather inverted.  
Mouse music. Then there  
came the terrible

noon we heard could kill.  
Its hours reached up to  
us inside this kind  
of knowledge like a  
carpet. Everyone

loved its fractious hair,  
its tawny pressure  
under foot. But time  
was the master now.  
We shaved to meet it.

Ate birds to park its  
leisure in the tips  
of gladioli.  
Cycled to its grand  
apiaries and vistas.

The cream days crept by.  
Dresses filled like lungs.  
This was our terror:  
perched inside shadeless  
ministries, we grew.

Chris Emery (issue 11) has published three collections of poetry, as well as a writer's guide, an anthology of art and poems, and pocket editions of Emily Brontë, Keats and Rossetti. His work has been widely published in magazines and anthologised. He lives in Cromer, North Norfolk, with his wife and children.

**Transom:**

Many of the poems in this issue seem to coalesce around themes of darkness and light. In what ratio of shade or illumination do your poems thrive? Does a dark poem need light, and vice versa?

**Emery:**

The poems I suppose I trust most arrive in a kind of half-light and seem to occupy it. I like to think they have a separate life from my own which is, frankly, largely managerial. Both of my poems here offer a kind of glimpse into other possible universes—a good poem (and I'm not inferring mine are) creates its own universe, though there are clearly touch points with my own experience and the anxieties and fears for the world I live in, the world of my children, the world of "Brexit" here in the UK.

"Fat Days" is certainly driven by the bleak premise of its first line, and it's perhaps clearly political in its portrayal of a world of failing utopias. We increasingly seem to occupy spaces that have more than one narrative, more than one set of occupants, with wildly different visions of how the world can work. We all recognise that Western democracies seem increasingly fractured and our tendencies are shifting increasingly towards secession and resistance; we can't seem to share visions across political divides or accept the pressures of globalisation—the placelessness of capital. All we have is anger and a kind of simulation of political engagement. Well, that's my fear.

“Nights Again,” the second poem, seems to me even darker as a narrative of dispossessed gloom. Yet again we have our golden vistas, those nostalgia-driven stories of glory elsewhere. If there’s something to counter the darkness, it’s the idea that all our worlds are constructions, and if we need to fix them, we need to devise those stories that can unite us, right now we can only witness.

Perhaps poems that arrive in the dark by their nature are points of light, tiny engines of doubt that, by their nature show some form of redress and rebalancing?

**Transom:**

The speaker of these poems feels vaguely detached from any given scene, but deeply invested in developing a communal, yet mysterious “we.” What opportunities does the first personal plural afford you here?

**Emery:**

I think my concern about the modern erosion of shared identities is everywhere in these two poems. I like to think that poems are fictions that point away from me, so I regularly play with the first person plural as a way of drawing the reader into the space and then, I fear, provoking them with something absurd. Using “we” lets me play with all those natural expectations of coherence and tribal narratives. I’m anxious equally about the loss of communities and their construction. I find nation states rather repugnant in the twenty-first century, but I recognise that people like to be somewhere rather than nowhere, that belonging is a powerful experience and that people can long to belong to something others may find repellent. We’re back to that dual sense of the world, the real one that has no borders, and the other constructed world where people not only enjoy borders, but want more of them, with walls.

## Song

Old patient song! I know what suit you wear,  
whose mother you were, where

you've hidden the pearls.  
O to be your burning rib, your heartthread,

a black braid—Remember! You are one  
of us! Though the city is far and the season

green. Or, if you like, light haze  
around the skull, the ancient spellings

of vestigial bone. You have tried to be bad,  
living beneath the world. I never think

of you. Tell me the truth.

I never think of you.

## Traité d'Ostéologie

Drawing of a female skeleton, 1759

She is a village, tiny in the distance.  
Her hand turns inward, come  
to the village, I will bake bread, I will  
not breathe too much, my feet are small.  
My ribcage is as narrow  
as you like. I grow bluebells  
along the village walls, I am allowed to,  
they are mine for the while.  
Sometimes I am a cat in the shape of a woman,  
I slip around doorways, unfurl  
the insides of mice and birds, a knitting I know.  
Watch me, her other hand curls,  
watch and be amazed.



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:**

Many of the poems in this issue seem to coalesce around themes of darkness and light. In what ratio of shade or illumination do your poems thrive? Does a dark poem need light, and vice versa?

**Abramowitz:**

I would love to think that the poems in this issue had, whether consciously or subconsciously, artistic knowledge of the eclipse that occurred on August 21st. When else, especially if we live in cities, do we pay particular attention to what's happening with and between our galactic spheres? Nearly everyone—from day traders to hair stylists to students to traffic cops to ... um ... the President—took time on that Monday to witness (safely or unsafely) a cosmic pas de deux. Without darkness it would have been a day like any other, and the light was, of course, crucial to the experience of temporary darkness during an otherwise ordinary day. All of this is to say that poems, like eclipses (partial, total, lunar, solar, other), must play out this fundamental physical and, ultimately, psychical, composition of space and time, shade and illumination. Otherwise we wouldn't see the poem at all.

**Transom:**

Your first poem feels like an exuberant Paul Celan to us, taut and twisting, but confident in the face of death. The second feels more playful, almost seductive, but still morbid. Do you conceive of these two approaches to the concept of death as distinct, or is there a unified attitude at play here?

**Abramowitz:**

I have been writing a lot about death lately. While it is true that a couple of deaths have occurred around me in the past year—one expected, the other not—my work is less about specific deaths than about the particular kind of ending death is. Death is often used as a metaphor for other kinds of endings, such as relationships or phases in one’s life (or even batteries and cars), but I think actual death, of living things that thought and felt and had an innate drive toward life, is set apart in its finality. For humans, the end of a “self-assembled” self—“assembled” in the sense, as Neil deGrasse Tyson has described, of one’s body as an collection of the energy it has consumed and exuded, as well as the idea of an identity accumulated over a lifetime—invites an inquiry into the mystery of its abrupt end of the assembly and the birth of disassembly. It is so difficult to describe death that metaphor has to enter in order to do some of the existential heavy lifting, which is, of course, where poetry comes in. Poets raging from Sappho to Keats, from Whitman to Max Ritvo, have recognized that human death is deserving of poetic treatment—in fact, it is difficult to name a poet who has not engaged with the theme of death. In terms of form, I find that my poems have become more plainspoken rather than lyrical, even though I cannot quite let go of some traditional forms that make plainspeaking difficult (a villanelle, for instance). Formally, I am working toward mirroring the proportion between what is known about death—the actual biological processes that accompany it—and what is still and will forever remain unknown.

## **The Miner Longs for Sleep**

A man is his own bird  
testing the air  
in the caged sleep of miners:  
the long descent into night,  
the bare bulbs lighting tunnels,  
the lungs hazed with dust.

Rising depends on so many chances:  
the lift's chain, the roof's repose,  
chances we take  
in the immense silence between blasts  
and the tremor that travels  
through the bedrock and seam.

Stephen Frech (issue 10, issue 11) has published a mixed genre chapbook *A Palace of Strangers Is No City* (2011) and three volumes of poetry, most recently the chapbook *The Dark Villages of Childhood* (2009). He is also the translator of Menno Wigman's *Zwart als kaviaar/Black as Caviar* (2012).

**Transom:**

Many of the poems in this issue seem to coalesce around themes of darkness and light. In what ratio of shade or illumination do your poems thrive? Does a dark poem need light, and vice versa?

**Frech:**

In an awkward silence before an academic job interview, one of the host faculty members leaned over and quietly asked me, “I notice all your books have darkness or night in their titles—what do you make of that?” I fell in love with Romantic poetry in high school, I told her. As it turned out, she was the Romanticism specialist in the department, so we talked briefly about our affections for Coleridge and Byron. The interview started, and that quiet exchange wound up being the best part of it.

This may be the Romanticism talking, but darkness and light are mutually dependent—they need each other even as they seem to be cancelling each other out. We seem instinctively drawn to dramatic chiaroscuro borders. We recently passed through the solar eclipse, and the town where I live in central Illinois was preoccupied, almost giddy about the event. The police had to regulate traffic going into the local tv station that morning as they distributed free viewing glasses.

Wherever one is on that sliding scale between dark and light, the energy comes from the tension between them, the dynamics of encroaching darkness and emerging light. My poems tend toward that threshold, the borderlands, even when light isn't the governing imagery.

**Transom:**

In this subterranean poem, your speaker contemplates the many “chances” that must align in order for the miners to survive another day. Knowledge of death seems to keep our miner from falling asleep. Can vigilance be a state of repose?

**Frech:**

To be one’s “own bird/testing the air” is a frightening prospect. The whole point of a canary in the mine was to place a buffer, a gauge between oneself and a noxious environment, to let something or someone else determine the air’s safety. But there are some dark places where we can’t send surrogates—we have to be the one to enter some unknowns. So he might be able to send a canary into the tunnel, but the miner must enter his own “caged sleep” alone.

He loses sleep, I imagine, because his work makes him conscious of something true for all of us but lost in the details of our daily lives: we are all suspended by a thread. We are here and endure by chances beyond our control. Vigilance with those details, I’m afraid, doesn’t improve our chances.

I love the double irony of “repose,” the angle at which a slope can maintain itself without slipping and without supports. The miner has trouble sleeping as he worries about the resting slope of the tunnel ceilings. And in this fright, he never leaves the tunnels because they are, literally and figuratively, a place of constant worry.

**We held hands as we walked through the old growth and came to the field's edge.**

A thousand eyes rose from grasses. Tree stumps rippled from their centers. We wanted to sing a song, but our tongues were gone, so we hummed throat-sound in our empty mouths. A black moon gazed from above with a hollow longing. Our own gone eyes roamed above and collected in the vacancy. We stood and leaked salt from our sockets as fatal openings trickled from our centers. Lucy told us the lesions would never heal and that our only hope was to enter them with our outward limbs first. We let go of each other's hands and put our hands inside our gashes, searching for their source. We entered the whole of our bodies into the wounds until they enveloped us.

## **The dog taught Lucy how to bite.**

The dog taught her how to look for hidden weak spots. The dog told her, “The larger the dominator, the more abundant the breaches.” “The larger the tyrant, the deeper fear’s well.” And although Lucy’s jaws were small, her teeth meant for grinding leaves, she honed her senses and found the spots with precision. Her teeth opened perpetual wounds in her adversaries. She brought one down after another and dragged them to the cave as they continued to rupture. The cave reeked with bodies piled and seething and transmuting into one large body. A large body leaking from its deepest chambers. The air became flies, the floor, maggots. The dog told her to stop; the cave was uninhabitable. The cave that they had lived in for thousands of years.

Kim Parko (issue 11) creates melancholy monsters, cyclical chimeras, and grotesqueness in both text and image. She is the author of *Cure All* (Caketrair Press, 2010) and *The Grotesque Child* (Tarpaulin Sky Press, 2016), which was the co-winner of the Tarpaulin Sky Press 2015 book prize. She lives with her husband and daughter in Santa Fe, New Mexico and is an associate professor at the Institute of American Indian Arts.

**Transom:**

Many of the poems in this issue seem to coalesce around themes of darkness and light. In what ratio of shade or illumination do your poems thrive? Does a dark poem need light, and vice versa?

**Parko:**

I've been reading lately about our biological need for darkness. Does our regeneration occur in this darkness? In this increasingly illuminated world, what do we lose by not taking refuge in the dark spaces? What do we do when darkness is no longer available to us (physically, metaphorically, mythologically)? For me, there is some generative (dis)/comfort in finding these sacred nooks and caves in a poem.

**Transom:**

These poems seem to take place in a post-apocalyptic landscape where the safe and familiar have become "uninhabitable." But from this seemingly hopeless situation comes the miracle of the benevolent dog who communicates the secrets of this new world. How Lucy uses these lessons showcases the danger of unforeseen consequences. Are these poems parables, in a way?



**Parko:**

When my daughter was a baby and we were napping in bed one afternoon, I heard a strange noise in the house. My imagination took me to a vision of an intruder that meant us harm, and in that moment I felt a welling up of ferocity. I felt my jaws lengthen and my teeth sharpen. I felt some primal force awaken in me. I felt that I would bite. So this poem has something to do with that very powerful sensation ... Lucy has fled from a society that is adversarial to her kind and she has come to the wilderness. The dog in the poem acts as an intermediary between ancient and contemporary knowing. What are the consequences of using the dog's knowledge with the limitations of Lucy's contemporary understanding? And also, what is the line between fierce protection and violence?

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## Everything a Sunbeam

sounds so optimistic doesn't it— sunbeam— all clarity and nasals—

someone gave my son a fistful of dead leaves it must have been the ocean  
the ocean is good like that always ready with a gift always  
offering up the dead things you thought you didn't need or want anymore  
they say

put it in a box for six months and if you don't miss it  
they say clarity comes from cleared countertops and closets you can see the  
bottom of

But I remember sixteen listening to the same song about white horses over  
and over in a veryvery tidy room and now when my baby boy crushes  
leaves  
in his fist and draws them happy-faced to a gummy mouth I hesitate and he  
says

mama ! mmama ! mama ! mma !

our neighbor rakes the leaves from last October gentle so as not to pull the  
hyacinths that will bloom  
no matter what decays around them—

we could make that into a pretty thought couldn't we we could we could  
something to sustain us these six or seven cold months  
but instead we teach the baby a sharp retort  
the family way to shake the head— Nnnnnno !

Megan Leonard (issue 11)'s poetry has most recently appeared in *The Maine Review*, *White Stag*, *HOUSEGUEST*, *Reservoir*, *Nightjar*, and *Tupelo Quarterly*. Her digital pamphlet, *where the body ends*, is available through Platypus Press.

## Dark Riser

Orchid greets me at five a.m.  
Pink-purple on top throwing  
itself like confetti at a surprise

party for me—lights on—or  
like a surprise at least, standing  
there in the tub with plump leaves,

wax paddles pushing to joy  
in the late fall morning,

or if less excited, as it is still dark  
this December falling to winter,

like the arms of old Christians

## Oremus

in the catacombs that are far

from here but still in gloom  
like this bathroom without a window,

except the skylight that lets in the moon  
when it is full or just about, but no air

for me or orchid, high and bright  
in the worn plastic basin even after

I extinguish the only light

For thirteen years, John Zedolik (issue 11) taught English and Latin in a private all-girls school. Currently, he is an adjunct instructor at a number of universities in and around Pittsburgh. However, he has had many jobs in his life including archaeological field assistant, obituary writer, and television-screen-factory worker. He has had poems published in such journals as *Aries*, *Ascent Aspirations (CAN)*, *The Chaffin Journal*, *Common Ground Review*, *The Journal (UK)*, *Pulsar Poetry Webzine (UK)*, *Third Wednesday*, *U.S. 1 Worksheets*, and the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*.

**Transom:**

Many of the poems in this issue seem to coalesce around themes of darkness and light. In what ratio of shade or illumination do your poems thrive? Does a dark poem need light, and vice versa?

**Zedolik:**

My poems thrive in 50% shade, as the relative darkness highlights my thoughts and feelings in relation to the object or situation illuminated.

**Transom:**

In the Roman Catholic Mass, the “*oremus*” is an invitation to stand for prayer. Though the catacombs of the old Christians are “*far / from here,*” they are still present for the speaker in a shared “*gloom.*” When, by the end of the poem, the darkness is of the speaker’s making, what role is left for faith?

**Zedolik:**

The role of faith is to provide a language for hope—thus “*oremus*”—which is is subjunctive— Let us pray, so allowing the possibility of these moments of transcendence even in somber or bleak situations.