

# TRANSOM ISSUE 13: TRANSITIONS

[in which our heroes venture beyond the familiar]



"La Femme au Perroquet"

Angelo Jank

SUMMER 2019

**“no obligations”**

do not feel bad  
for not wishing him  
a happy father’s day  
a happy birthday  
a happy anything

it is

not your job  
to be

the source of his happiness

\*\*\*

**“trust fund kid”**

sometimes i see  
bits of you  
in myself

sometimes i feel  
my anger rise  
and know that's  
the only inheritance  
i'll probably ever receive

lucky me

\*\*\*

**From gc cohen:** my academic and creative work has previously appeared in *War, Literature, and the Arts: An International Journal of the Humanities* (2017), *Sidelines* (2016), and *The White Squirrel* (2012).

these days, i live in the greater boston area and spend my time crushing overtime as a 911 dispatcher, reveling in the wonders of recent married life, working on my culinary skills, playing dinosaurs with my son, and dreaming of homesteading.

**Transom:**

The poems in this issue of TRANSOM speak to transition in its many forms. “no obligations,” and “trust fund kid” all feel like they describe relationships that have shifted, transitioned, maybe soured. Can you speak to the theme of transition in your work?

**cohen:**

"no obligations" and "trust fund kid" absolutely speak to shifting and souring relationships. They're incredibly personal to me, and writing those particular poems allowed me to transition into a new chapter of my life - one in which I'm honest with myself, what I've experienced, and my healing in terms of trauma and emotional abuse I've experienced in the past.

**Transom:**

As we navigate life as people, soon-to-be parents, professionals, and poets, the waters feel murky at times, and we're curious how others do it. What are your secrets for balancing your poetry with everything else?

**cohen:**

Trying not to be so hard on myself. Allowing myself to have those unproductive, stay in my PJs on the couch sort of days, or those days in which I just get outside and soak up all the goodness in a hike or in the sun. Those days are okay. (I still have to tell myself this on a regular basis. I often still feel guilty for having days like this.) The thing that took me the longest time to understand is that it's not a tragedy if I don't write everyday. I don't write everyday and I don't have to constantly be in motion. I let myself take breaks and when I'm ready again, the writing will just pour out and I write until there's nothing left.

**Transom:**

Summer moves quickly for many of us. What transitions are you facing, studying, undergoing right now—in your writing or otherwise?

**cohen:**

There have been so many transitions lately - some good, some awful. We unfortunately put our dog down around a month ago and sometimes I feel like I won't ever get used to not having her around. I'm still transitioning into a new era of writing and trying to figure out what to put out in the world next, and what to keep to myself. I just bought a house with my wife this weekend. We moved yesterday, and so we've been unpacking like machines. There are so many transitions to make - planning how to homestead, taking care of the land, helping our cats adjust to the new space, continually striving to be a good co-parent and supportive wife, managing my mental health, learning new commutes, learning where all the fucking light switches are.

## To Roswitha

*To you, learned and virtuous men...I come, bowing low like a reed, to submit this little work to your judgment. — Roswitha, a letter "To the Learned Patrons" (ca. 935-975 A.D.)*

I cried over your letter  
I was hungover and reading  
before a date  
when your words swung  
through the Gandersheim abbey—  
did I feel the cold  
of your sparse room  
imagine the bed  
desk and chair correctly—  
through when my head  
hit the pillow as a girl then rose  
hungover  
from centuries of literature  
without women  
to read you on the Chrystie St playground  
Your words bent as though  
gathering chaff  
at the edges of the alphabet  
Or having bowed  
did I feel too much  
I held a form  
of my own silence  
The phone in my pocket asked  
how far away I was

## Stole My Book

My father said so long as my heart was pure  
I would have my clear soprano

that it was a reflection of my soul  
proceeding from my innermost self

I grew very silent

I liked those who seemed to know me  
and I could approach on my own terms

opening their books alone in my room  
It was as though they were further along

and higher up a path telling me what I may see  
what the scene may say

and sometimes I felt they'd returned  
and sat beside me as though I were a lake

and looked into me and spoke of movements  
in shadowy recesses I hadn't named

the greatest desires  
leading to anger

I wanted to read everything  
about everything and myself

especially to avoid betraying  
myself again

here here

here

and so after a time  
in protest of my thrall

my father stole a book I'd fallen into  
as I read and ran away

across the parking lot  
and over a hill high as his forehead

across which grass waved

It was a warm day but inside the book

was a cool house

It had no furniture

and occasionally a visitor

the young boy

who I'd become

We were going to my brother's football game

I can hardly say any more about the scene

what I was wearing I wasn't  
in a body anymore



I chased him over the hill and onto the chalk-lined field  
and he was delighted I knew as I chased him

instead of myself this time  
though how desperately linked

these two chases

my own self flying in his hands

Lauren Roberts was raised in Massachusetts and lives in New York. She holds an MFA from NYU, and her poetry appears in places like BARROW STREET, THE VOLTA, THE MINNESOTA REVIEW, and FOUNDRY.

**Transom:**

The poems in this issue of TRANSOM speak to transition in its many forms. Your poem “Stole My Book” describes reading, running, chasing, flying, and we get the sense that the speaker is undergoing a transformation into “the young boy / who I’d become” throughout the poem. Can you speak to the theme of transition in your work?

**Roberts:**

Thanks for giving me a chance to think about this. Both these poems, and a lot of what I write, deal in some way with my upbringing in the Evangelical church. Learning to recognize the different ways religion silenced or wasn't for me as a woman has been a big transition in my life.

I think many people share the heartbreak of this type of realization right now.

**Transom:**

In “To Roswitha,” we witness someone crying over words written years before their own existence. We love the weaving together of an old letter, a date, a phone, words, distance. What transitions and evolutions between 935 AD and now most interest you?

**Roberts:**

I can hardly speak about pre-modern history. In the last century, women's right to vote in America. In the last decade, the ways in which we communicate, definitely.

I love writers who can represent a history or layer memory and communicate in interesting ways. A lot of autofiction writers and that genre interest me.

**Transom:**

As we navigate life as people, soon-to-be parents, professionals, and poets, the waters feel murky at times, and we're curious how others do it. What are your secrets for balancing your poetry with everything else?

**Roberts:**

It was hard to establish a practice when I started working full-time. I had to prioritize poetry in a different way, giving myself a lot of time in the evenings to read and write. Being able to discuss poetry and exchange work with my friends has been hugely motivating.

**Transom:**

Summer moves quickly for many of us. What transitions are you facing, studying, undergoing right now—in your writing or otherwise?

**Roberts:**

I'm getting married in the fall!

## The Meaning of His Name

After he rapes me I seek out God.  
I seek out truth in the cemetery of Gesthenami.  
I devour books that I never finish but hope to God I do.  
I want to be saved from the boys weathered hands,  
the way he stares at me cold not moving while I am on my knees.  
I try to make myself holy.

The boy is no archangel.  
He doesn't know the higher power I do,  
with his 4 wheel drive trucks  
or the men's choir he sings hymns in every Christmas.

Instead I turn to the old ways of sage and holy water  
that I want to drown myself in  
until I cannot feel him bitter in my mouth anymore.  
I guzzle wine every night like they served  
at the wedding of Cana.  
I ask who is like God over and over again and I can never see him  
but me bare-chested, shaking, on my knees.

## Holy In His Name

My head is cupped  
in the curves of the boys shoulders  
while I talk about how when I was 17  
I was diagnosed with Bipolar Disorder.  
That I never thought I would graduate from high school  
yet alone a graduate program and to be in the place I am now.  
To be thriving and not just surviving like I was  
in the days when I fell asleep in art class  
with a colored pencil in my hand  
and the teacher always let me sleep  
because I was so fuzzy from antipsychotics.  
All the while he traces figure 8's  
with his callused fingertips with one hand,  
up and down my waist,  
and with the other he drawls from  
a blunt rolled so tightly  
that only someone who had been smoking  
since their teens could create.  
He murmurs into my ear that if I want  
I can move closer to him  
and I do want to but the last time I had sex  
the man choked me without asking.  
He used my limp body,  
manipulating, and maneuvering the limbs  
into a way where my voice no longer knew  
how to call for my roommate in the next room,  
to say stop,  
to say you are no longer welcome  
in the territory of my body.  
With this boy though,  
in this space I am bursting with vitality.

I want him to place his hands around my neck  
because I know he understands  
the meaning of the word stop  
and the look I get in my eyes  
when I cannot vocalize it myself.  
There is so much gentle here,  
so much tenderness in this moment,  
right now, as he spools a tendril of my hair  
lightly around his fingertips  
and he looks at me  
as if I am some kind of holy magic.  
He sees me and all the trauma rinse off me  
like I've been dunked  
in the baptismal waters on Easter Sunday.  
Like I have become holy in his name.

Chaney Williams is a poet and doula who grew up in Kentucky. She holds an MFA from Murray State University.

**From Chaney Williams:** I write mostly about my different identities and experiences. One of my creative writing teachers in high school, Crystal Wilkinson at Governor School for the Arts, talked a lot about writing what you know and what haunts you. This is something I've lived my life by. Writing for me is therapeutic and healing. Through my writing I process my queerness, my sexuality, my trauma from sexual assault and emotional abuse, my Bipolar Disorder, and my identity as a fat Woman of Color. Looking back on some of my earlier writings I can see the processing that I did on the page even before I fully realized my emotions. I can see situations that I hadn't been able to fully accept yet such as having PTSD from sexual assault and intimate partner violence. My writing is my sanctuary and safe place where I can process those situations and feelings without judgment. Because of that my writing is extremely confessional in nature. I used to be afraid of sharing my work because it is so honest and true to myself. I had fear around how people would react to it but I've learned my best writing comes from my most vulnerable and raw voice.

## Setting: Hall of Mirrors

No love here: most would say  
it's inevitable. Any marriage born in  
blackmail will end in murder. They both  
have guns and take each other's  
reflections. Afterward, each  
shard is frozen with their faces  
and blood, permanent record of this event.  
The director sifts through the pieces because,  
killer though he is, he is  
the only innocent in this melodrama.  
Carriage, yacht, aquarium:  
noir takes them by the hair.  
Nothing but love and everything  
makes art out of death. They manage  
despite multiple images and  
spiderweb cracks.



## The Nature of All Things Temporal

She said Time is its own  
conscious entity wearing sunglasses and  
a velvet scarf sinuous through this garden  
collapsing under its own weight and she  
plucks a blue petal, crushes it to leave  
a black octagonal scar on her palm and a sweet  
scent vaporizing through the air and she watches  
the moon rise, a hole in the eye we feed into while  
the birds come spiraling out and it's Time  
with her back to the wall, the table  
an old door on blocks, she sprinkles  
cinnamon on a mocha into this dialogue:  
we have a clear view of the door and whoever  
is planning an attack. The whole world  
found in the pastry case – this digestion  
and there are things to be found at the end  
of the path she once paved –  
it led out of the water. It wound  
through her hair into this dialogue'  
She's very interested in the rumor she spelled out  
in the sand, at the memory kiosk, for the  
reasons that might be outlined  
this last year. So much care taken.

## Enigma

I climb up to the garden, down  
to the treehouse, and I do not have  
any implements for sifting through  
the light underwater. The birds are all  
underground in this place, no more  
wings for human envy, neither  
any stone to carve upon, or any  
white horses wearing red bells, and  
I can no longer sense your long  
and forgotten fingers. I never  
crawl through caves or up stairs.  
Your identity is a subject  
for astrology and criminal theory:  
nothing grows here,  
everyone is thirsty,  
no one walks across the fire scar,  
and I am the answer to everything  
you ever wanted –  
the future eats from a shallow bowl.

Dana Curtis' is the author of *Wave Particle Duality* (Blazevox Books), *Camera Stellata* (CW Books) and *The Body's Response to Famine* (Pavement Saw Press). She is the Editor-in-Chief of Elixir Press.

**Transom:**

The poems in this issue of TRANSOM speak to transition in its many forms. Even just the titles of your poems ("Setting: Hall of Mirrors," "The Nature of All Things Temporal," "Enigma") make us think of things that are changing, that may not be as they seem. Can you speak to the theme of transition in your work?

**Curtis:**

For me, the next step in "transition" is transformation. In my poem, "The Nature of All Things Temporal," I imagine the entirely abstract concept of Time as a woman in a velvet scarf enjoying a mocha in a café. I tried to make Time both vulnerable (or paranoid) as well as all-powerful: Time defeats all, yet she sits in the corner and keeps an eye out for attack. Time is indefinable and constant. Time is, literally, transition. At the same time, there can be nothing literal about Time.

"Setting: Hall of Mirrors" is taken directly from Orson Welles's movie, *The Lady from Shanghai*. The whole of mirrors sequence is one of the most iconic scenes in film. I imagine the various images of a man and woman trying to kill each other as being frozen on the various shards of glass, Rita Hayworth with the mirror a spiderweb in her face. Again, time is both moving and frozen.

Both of these poems are included in my book manuscript (currently unpublished), Directed by Lilly Obscure. Because the book is all about movies, it is also about transition, transformation, and Time. All movies are both constantly moving yet frozen in the moment. "Time is what keeps everything from happening all at once." That quote is often attributed to Albert Einstein, Woody Allen, and several other people. I don't know if anyone knows who really said it first. I think it's as good a definition of Time as any. Check out Time Travel by James Glick.

As for my poem, "Enigma," we move down to things that are up and up to things that are down. Physical space becomes meaningless, and that takes us further into the abstract, further into the indefinable. The Future is hungry but doesn't need much, or maybe, it needs everything but can't get it. Making abstractions concrete is completely meaningless but the only way I've ever been able to deal with them. Metaphors everything. And nothing.

## Lies About Love: A Primer

I.

For this lie, I get dressed up.  
My deception: what my lips  
look like. Lipstick becomes a tremor,  
a first-date seismic signature.

To what end?

I mop up for half an hour with a rag  
to make a perfect lip shape, a perfect  
earthquake. No grandma or mother  
or girlfriend  
ever taught me a better way  
to leave a mark, to pull the ground out from under  
a beloved's feet.

II.

I fidget to make nice, to make lips that can stand in for me,  
riding the maternal wave of the Earth. This feels like the ghost  
of forgetting to make nice.

The Earth deadpans:

*Why invent contrivance  
as a haunting?*

*Dead people connect with others  
in meaningful ways.*

When the sharp lip outline comes, to encounter the constructed shape is  
to find a table, huddle under, meet an end.

III.

I am almost ready-steady. Also absolutely phony.

My gummy smile says "I love you"  
to this reflection.

She seems like a hot date.

Tremulous, supernatural, ready to deceive.



After a sweet sweet toe in the pool of air-moving, one dirties up the best one can.

That pool never appears again.



Amy Poague is an Iowa City-based poet working at a junior high school, and she holds an M.A. in Creative Writing from Eastern Michigan University. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Opiate* (online and print versions), Iowa City's Poetry in Public project, *Fine Madness*, *The Mantle*, *SWWIM Every Day*, *Really System*, and *Helen: A Literary Magazine*. She is on Twitter at @PoagueAmy.

**Transom:**

The poems in this issue of *TRANSOM* speak to transition in its many forms. Attraction, appearances, infatuation—each of your poems reminds us of what is temporary. Can you speak to the theme of transition in your work?

**Poague:**

The speaker of “Lies” feels that she\* must change her appearance to become the version of herself that others will love. Cosmetics can both mask us and bring us out, make it more difficult to connect and enable connection. This speaker is betting on the latter but gets the former. The transformation not only confuses but betrays her in allowing her to become estranged from herself.

In “Future Ghosts,” the speaker is transformed by a love that is only meaningful to her\*, not her partner in crime (and garbage). The wind-love that moves her feels both capricious and life-giving. This transition--falling in love--is out of her control, and in the final analysis, she would prefer not to be enlivened by capricious love. It's implied that she avoids romantic relationships for the rest of her life.

Both pieces speak to the attempt to be met in love, and both try to tell the truth about where that attempt goes awry.

\*The speakers of “Lies” and “Future Ghosts” need not be interpreted solely as females or femmes. However, since the poems are inspired by my life experiences as a woman, I have used feminine pronouns in this analysis.

**Transom:**

As we navigate life as people, soon-to-be parents, professionals, and poets, the waters feel murky at times, and we're curious how others do it. What are your secrets for balancing your poetry with everything else?

**Poague:**

This is always a tricky balancing act. For the last two years, I have worked at a job where I feel purposeful and connected to others. Additionally, I currently don't have to take my work home with me, which I am very grateful for. This set of conditions has enlivened and inspired me. I have time and energy to work on my writing, to learn more about submitting and publishing poetry (mostly online), and to connect to other editors and writers.

**Transom:**

Summer moves quickly for many of us. What transitions are you facing, studying, undergoing right now—in your writing or otherwise?

**Poague:**

My current strategies for achieving balance will have to change, as I am soon going to be taking classes in the evenings to work toward my teaching license. One of my goals in the next two years is to become a junior high or high school English teacher. I am always inspired by teaching and learning and writing, so working in all three modes sounds perfect! However, I know the first years of teaching will be very intense and there will be less time for poetry. I have been asking my poet-teacher friends on Twitter about how they make it work, and I have seen evidence that it can be achieved. I am excited to come to the classroom, to ask questions every day with students, and to let those questions enliven our community and inspire us to write.

## Poetry Ends Like a Rope

*after Spicer*

Cancel the caravan,  
the corduroys, the glasses of milk and your beer  
cancel the kingdom and sandwiches too  
call all the people to call off the backup  
turn off the time machine  
crush your little heart  
cancel out noise, commission, idea  
cut off the fingers of morning  
cry cause there's no water  
carve no tattoos, pile no stones  
count backwards from the dream  
know your feet  
remove the belay  
get that ancient friction  
when you cut that line

## Hold Music

until I come back  
    take this replica of beauty  
hold it close, remembering also  
    what it could become

& how all religions pray for  
salvation by outsider art  
(what's stuck inside?)

    to heck with it  
we want to have fun

renewal, that's all

what feels like eternity  
    probably isn't  
you just never know

## Milk

however  
brief or long this session  
we can't know what we've produced  
except generally: enough to sate.  
thus grateful we go  
farther out from ourselves  
into musing's place; baby  
I got eyes for.  
you've foraged through something  
and I to you, just  
as well, maybe less than, the qualities  
shift in place of any number. I can only feel  
for this-ness in you.

\*

the breathing whistles  
I'm ready as tea  
we know together, what a long poem  
(and thought forgotten)  
already

\*

this will be. I'll know it in my bones.  
they'll tell me one day  
the codes of your  
little barrel heart. not  
speaking, akin to wishing,  
manifesting some capability  
out a dark clock. I keep scrawling it  
into what milliseconds between us.

\*

you know me much better.  
I bat lashes and  
in return, sign  
the night away sleep the days.  
hands almost orphan, negligent.  
drink water. eat anything. get  
by like the bible.

\*

lovely ensued  
caution animal, marker for me. ever  
arriving.  
again we hold  
on. one by one. two by two.  
we will learn what unceasing  
turns up in the bushes. am I in  
here, or left open, out there

\*

I imagine floods  
in milk and honey, your scent,  
a pale flower out of blood.  
others come and go between us.  
of course sex would make an unknowable thing.

\*

reading aloud, my voice is far  
from its home. my juice is  
all the sugar from my marrow,

slow-cooker dinners,  
baked names,  
clouded.  
gone to seed, you came to me,  
so quickly, spied a home  
in places I hadn't named.

\*

this terrain simplifies me, implicates you,  
in the plea  
I go to work  
on what to make  
between us. the breast  
easiest, strangest of

\*

territories loved  
only ever briefly  
sighted, then passed, then  
remembered in the night  
of quiet sirens, already  
you from the little  
stream of my consciousness

\*

opened and gone and  
returned to me from wherever  
you darkly went  
as you become the place  
that is no longer in me,  
breaching out across  
the domiciles

**From Julie Choffel:** My poems have been published in *The Tiny*, *Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review*, *The Seattle Review*, *Tinderbox Poetry Journal*, and elsewhere. My book *The Hello Delay* (2012) was chosen by Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge for the Poets Out Loud Prize. I also teach creative writing at the University of Connecticut.

**Transom:**

The poems in this issue of *TRANSOM* speak to transition in its many forms. Endings, hold music, nights and milliseconds spent breastfeeding—each of your poems reminds us of what is temporary. Can you speak to the theme of transition in your work?

**Choffel:**

I think it's safe to say that the ephemeral is a major theme in my work, in part because it's a subject the writing process constantly reinforms. When I'm writing, trying to make something out of something else, something I already clearly see in the world, it quickly dissolves before me, can't be held, shape-shifts. So even when the poem starts to lean into meaning and form, it also resists and reroutes me. In many ways this has come to be a kind of mindfulness practice for me. My tendency outside of my writing is to resist change; I crave consistency. And writing reminds me every time that the transitional space is really where it's at: creativity, feeling, the push and pull of ideas.

**Transom:**

Beth here. As someone who is pregnant and will hopefully be breastfeeding soon, I especially adore your poem "Milk." Whether this poem speaks to your own experience or channels another's, what have you learned about growth, change, and transition by studying parenthood, in which "of course sex [makes] an unknowable thing"?



**Choffel:**

I love that you say “studying parenthood,” because that’s what the writing allows me, to study my experience of it. Parenthood itself, moment to moment, often feels raw and indiscernible to me, especially in its newness. It took me what felt like a long time to be able to write about it. I needed distance from those early days to see them more fully. More than anything I think I was surprised at my reaction to it all—I didn’t expect it to be so hard for me to adapt. The topography keeps changing.

We have managed in our culture to control for so many variables, and the culture of parenting is especially weird in this; we say things like “I’m going to make a baby, a career, a life for myself.” Having kids taught me what a funny way that is to think, when humans have spent so long surviving the total chaos of the world by the skin of our teeth. I mean, sure, we are clever planners. But then we see pretty quickly that making people is not about us; it’s about nature, making the world more complex, more strange, with no regard for our plans. Once I saw this, I became incredibly possessive of my experiences of mothering. If it was going to erase or change so much of me – down to how my mind worked, how I felt in the world – at least I could say that this particular set of temporal impressions was my own, in this moment, and now in this one, and so on.

**Transom:**

As we navigate life as people, soon-to-be parents, professionals, and poets, the waters feel murky at times, and we’re curious how others do it. What are your secrets for balancing your poetry with everything else?

**Choffel:**

Oh I definitely don't have much of a balance. I have three kids, I teach, I write, and I do other things. Often one of those (kids or teaching) takes up all of my time while the others suffer. There's always someone not getting all of their needs met. Maybe the secret is giving up any notion of balance. I exert myself over my schedule as much as I can, and my husband and I give each other time to work. I increasingly write by piecing together fragments and remixing my interrupted thoughts. As I write this, I am also nodding and half-listening to my daughter, who wanted to come over and read to me.

**Transom:**

Summer moves quickly for many of us. What transitions are you facing, studying, undergoing right now—in your writing or otherwise?

**Choffel:**

I recently finished a manuscript of serial poems, so I am moving on to new work, and thinking about the opportunity to play with form more dramatically. It's intimidating – not really knowing what these things are that I'm working on yet – but it's exciting, too.