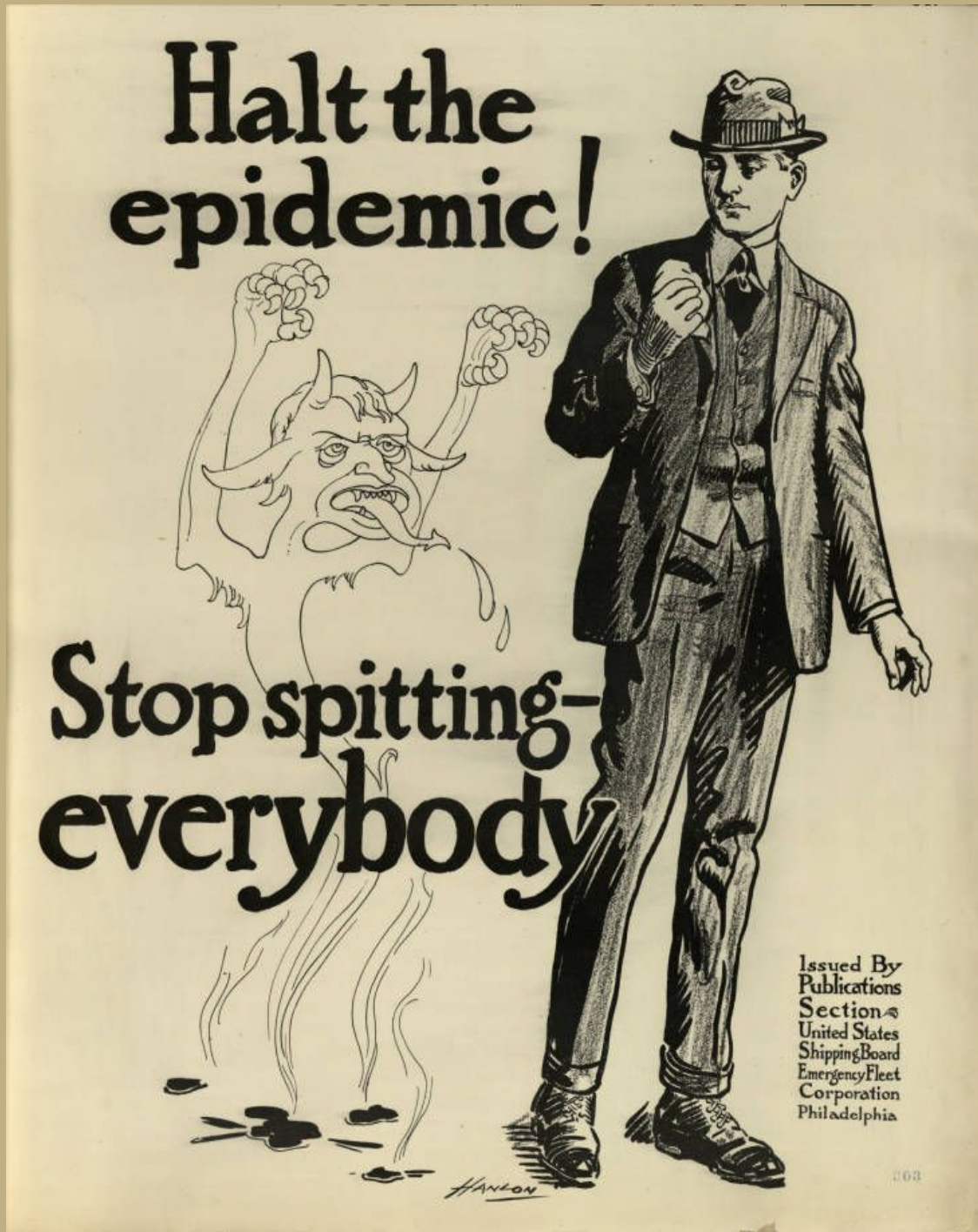


# TRANSOM ISSUE 14: THE NEW NORMAL

[in which we all live online and login to digital dance parties]



Hanlon. Illustration shows the Influenza epidemic of 1918, the "Spanish Flu," in the form of a devil rising from pools of saliva on the ground and reaching out to attack a well dressed man, with the text saying "stop spitting - everybody."

—To our readers:

It's March 2020, and it's a time of change. We're in the early stages of a global pandemic, and though it will eventually be over, there will be a distinct division between the time before and the time after all of this happened. Going into this issue, we knew we were going to be learning how to live with some big changes (our firstborn was due between issues 13 and 14), but we could not have predicted all that would happen in the world. Here's one full of space ships and ancient tech, paper cranes and clay pots. And noodz. Here's one from the year of the new plague, in which we all live online and dial in to digital dance parties. Keep a safe distance. Wash your damn hands.

May we all emerge renewed.

**[B+B]**

P.S.

As editors, we have to balance logical organization and clarity with aesthetic cohesion; this tightrope is a little shaky. In this issue, each poet's bio and interview precede their poems; poet names do not appear on each poem's page, but authorship should be understood through sequential order.

## **Michael Chang** (They/Them)

MICHAEL CHANG (they/them) hopes to win the New Jersey Blueberry Princess pageant one day. Michael strongly suspects that they were born in the wrong decade. A recovering vegan, their favorite ice cream flavor was almost renamed due to scandal. Their writing has been published or is forthcoming in *Q/A Poetry*, *Yes Poetry*, *Typo Mag*, *Wrath-Bearing Tree*, *Bending Genres*, *Heavy Feather Review*, *Cabildo Quarterly*, *Neon Garden*, *Yellow Medicine Review*, *The Conglomerate*, *London Grip*, *Kissing Dynamite*, *Thin Air*, *Pink Plastic House*, *Little Rose*, *Milk + Beans*, and elsewhere. They are the proud recipient of a Brooklyn Poets fellowship. They poet to feel alive.

### **Transom:**

What is poetry in a time when we've all been asked to practice "social distancing" and stay at least six feet from each other (or better yet, out of sight and contact)?

### **Chang:**

Poetry is everything! I relish the chance to turn inward, tune out the noise, and spend more time with my thoughts. This is the time to discover new obsessions and revisit old loves. My poem here is about nostalgia, desire, euphoria, eternity . . . all the Calvin Klein fragrance names, basically. I mean, Frank O'Hara perhaps put it best: "In times of crisis, we must all decide again and again whom we love."

### **Transom:**

As you revisit your poetry here, what resonates, in the context of current events?

### **Chang:**

I wrote this poem in Osaka, so I'm certainly thinking about travel being curtailed. In the midst of this public health crisis, the poem makes me miss wandering around Amerikamura (American Village); pigging out at Critters Burger; and admiring Issey Miyake innovation and tailoring/Kaneko Optical sunglasses/Okayama denim//beer from Minoh Brewery/beautiful vintage

furniture and objects and all of the associated craft. (There are so many little shops selling second-hand collegiate sweatshirts there. I was so happy to find a Penn State sweatshirt at the top of a very tidy pile. Nobody does Americana better than the Japanese.) We talk a lot about CRAFT in poetry. This poem is a love letter to craft and to someone who slipped away.

**Transom:**

And how does this shift your poetry going forward?

**Chang:**

My poetry has always been about hope and optimism. In particular, this poem is about indulgence to the Nth degree. I would like to write more about wanderlust and pleasure. The lines "somebody told me that fish don't know when to stop eating / so they keep going until their bellies burst" make so much sense now. Cathy Park Hong was joking about gaining the COVID "19," and I love that sense of abandoning restraint. I think most people are very prudish about desire and gratification. This is the chance to be selfish.

**Transom:**

This poem brings up the idea of overindulgence to the point of bursting. This doesn't mean total annihilation though, just a change of states. What are we after bursting? What's left?

**Chang:**

"The rest is drag!"

***the category is . . .***

if you wrote a letter to someone living in the future  
would it just be a list of swears  
if you look away from my poetry  
are you looking away from me  
if you want my charity  
will you pretend i'm married to mika hashizume  
my hero is the only one who can quell my hunger  
the poem i wrote about you  
the one your wife didn't like  
ended up in the new yorker  
brah  
somebody told me that fish don't know when to stop eating  
so they keep going until their bellies burst  
i guess i am like that too  
brah  
真金不怕洪炉火  
(true gold fears no fire)  
hand on hot stove  
is this love i'm feeling

## **Ashley Taylor** (She/Her)

Ashley Taylor [she/her] is a non-binary poet and MFA candidate at Spalding University's School of Professional and Creative Writing. She curates, promotes, and designs inclusive programming of creative writing and performing arts workshops. She earned an MA in English from the University of Louisville, where she served as graduate editor of *Miracle Monocle*, writing instructor of college composition and intro to creative writing, and facilitator of UofL's LGBTQ Creative Writing Group. She is the founder of the Louisville reading series River City Revue, the author of *The Metamorphosis of Narcissus* (Damaged Goods Press, 2019), and a teacher at the Jewish Community Center in Louisville KY.

[www.ashleytaylorpoet.com](http://www.ashleytaylorpoet.com)

### **Transom:**

What is poetry in a time when we've all been asked to practice "social distancing" and stay at least six feet from each other (or better yet, out of sight and contact)?

### **Taylor:**

Poetry can be a lot of things in a time like this: a way to pass the time or a way to have a voice and connect with others. I think for me this is a time for expansion where I can prioritize the study of poetry in my daily routine a little easier (working from home, etc.).

### **Transom:**

As you revisit your poetry here, what resonates, in the context of current events?

### **Taylor:**

We're at a time when, globally, we're learning new ways to connect and communicate across barriers and despite limits. I like to think that my poems navigate responses to anxiety and vulnerability, which might resonate with a collective experiencing uncertainty together.

**Transom:**

And how does this shift your poetry going forward?

**Taylor:**

I think knowing that more people are experiencing this together might shift my poetry more toward a perspective of a collective. Also, poetry allows us to study language's role in shaping perception and identity; so, if our platforms of communication are digital, I might start to read more poetry like Franny Choi's *Death By Sex Machine* or other poets/poems that discuss perception, identity, and connection in relation to digital technology.

**Transom:**

Both of these poems feel concerned with the temporary, and the potential for loss (or the absence of what is already lost). Does poetry allow us to capture the inherent transience of things in the world, and make them permanent, or are we doing something else?

**Taylor:**

In *We Begin in Gladness: How Poets Progress*, Craig Morgan Teicher talks about how vocabulary [words/poetry] is both the bridge and the uncrossable river. To me, this is the magic of what you're asking—poetry's ability to connect across divides, to express the inexpressible, to snap a photograph; and, simultaneously, because of this ability to employ an image and manifest the abstract (transience of things), we are limited by our words and in that very act of representation. Ugh, that's the fun.

## HELLRAISER MANNEQUIN: A LOVE SONNET FOR G GRIFFITH

We grip ourselves together in neon lights, growling  
for a garden in the last days of autumn. We think,

*Where did the Goth Girl go?*

Our manic pixie spirit guide  
taps her fingernails on the digital clock.

I listen to a voice in my ear  
*tell me all the things I'm doing wrong.*

Bodies whisper along the edges of the dance floor,  
watching and smiling. I can smell the danger lurking.

My dentist always says I have too much saliva in my mouth.

A bear reared back, clawing at anything that comes too close.  
Fear of loss, hair raised, spiky and electric. A new sweater,

cozy with pork rinds and spicy cheetos. Pink ink ontology,  
we are mise-en-abyme nesting dolls posing for the photobooth.



## A LOVE SONNET FOR THE PAPER CRANE MAKER

How easy it is to forget  
and beg for origami dangling from the bough,

to see what we are so afraid of losing,  
layers of plastic wrap and wax paper.

I will grant you one wish to grow out of cracks in the concrete,  
take a boomerang to the air, toss the leaves back and forward again.

Jagged shapes like lion's teeth, drunk as tea. I want to remember  
how parachutes expand and lift,

how we lingered on how to shape the wings  
in the soft bends of our limbs. I whisper, *i am sorry*

as my thumb presses against the fold, winged paper trembling.  
I keep bending back until the paper ripples.

It's a ravenous feeling to keep  
in my fingers, a desire to hurt

( so many dandelion heads ).

Show me the cabaret of flightless birds  
and I will show you what it's like to feel small.

## **Natasha Deonarain** (She/Her)

Natasha Deonarain lives part-time between Arizona and Colorado. Her poems are published or forthcoming in *Crack the Spine*, *Door is Ajar*, *Juked*, *NELLE*, *Rigorous*, *Packingtown Review*, *Thin Air Magazine*, *Dime Show Review*, *Prometheus Dreaming* and *Canyon Voices Literary Magazine*.

### **Transom:**

What is poetry in a time when we've all been asked to practice "social distancing" and stay at least six feet from each other (or better yet, out of sight and contact)?

### **Deonarain:**

I'm concerned about these trending terms. While it's important to understand how infections are transmitted and take proper precautions for protection, I'm afraid that as we move forward, fear will become even more pervasive than it is today. In a world filled with too much distraction, inability to be silent and isolation via technology, we're likely to become even more distanced from one another and lose our basic qualities of communication and empathic connection. Loneliness becomes a top killer, both from suicide and from an increased risk of many other physical, emotional and mental diseases.

Poetry to me is a spiritual connection. I'm a firm believer in including a person's spiritual health into a definition of what defines total health. For a person to be truly healthy in my mind, it's of vital importance to establish a practice that leads to high quality spiritual health, whatever that may mean and however that manifests for an individual.

Becoming lost in the soul by using our senses allows for this closer connection and is to me, simply a pathway. The more you become lost, the greater you'll be found. I've found my soul by igniting my love for words, feelings and images through poetry.

**Transom:**

As you revisit your poetry here, what resonates, in the context of current events?

**Deonarain:**

The last line of “meditations...” is a line not only for physicians, but for all of us. And it not only relates to the current COVID-19 pandemic when we need to become constant gardeners, it’s a time to remember that you’re always expected to tend to your gardens, whether they be your attitude in relationships, a sense of unconditional love, your reactions to adverse events or people, your habits towards yourself, your health, the way you treat the world in which you live, and basically everything you think, do and say.

Is that a demanding order? I think not.

I believe it’s called life.

**Transom:**

And how does this shift your poetry going forward?

**Deonarain:**

As I continue to write, I find myself getting more and more honest with many subjects that previously I was loath to confront. I’m not sure these particular poems and this particular crisis we face is going to shift my poetry. Rather, I feel that both are on a continuum of helping me become even more brutally honest with myself.

Now, that’s a tall order.

**Transom:**

Both of these poems live among hospitals and doctor’s offices. Lots of sources now say that doctors should have a liberal arts background, for empathy and a humanistic perspective... but what’s good is it for a poet to have a medical background? Or to put it differently, why should poetry be so special?

**Deonarain:**

I guess I'm from the olden days when we were trained to be good humans first and not humans who are able to use technology well. I don't feel that a liberal arts background is needed. In fact, I don't believe that more institutionalized education is needed. In fact, if you want to be a genius, it's not formal education that you need. It's imagination.

The medical students I've interviewed for admission to medical school and who were outstanding were those who'd lived first. Through their experiences, they began to understand who they were rather than what they wanted to do. Most had taken at least two years to travel, live, develop relationships and comprehend life without formal classroom or online classes.

In my opinion, a person who knows him or herself, will be a fantastic healthcare provider. Poetry is secondary to all that. It's simply a tool to continue to help that person understand him or herself. It's a tool to unleash your imagination.

All poets therefore, whether published or not, are simply genius.

## meditations on morning rounds

1. magenta  
pain violaceous  
flowers wilted—  
drip-fed  
into silent  
yellows, hollowed  
red.

putrid smell  
of pus  
perfumed.

drained.

I am a  
nesting doll—  
a garden  
gnome with a  
black hose wrapped  
around  
my throat. I float  
among  
steel-caged beds,  
prune blistered eyes  
from sagging  
stalks.

I don't ask  
the wrong question.  
I am the sun.

2. memories rolled,  
smoked  
by my attending  
who tends to  
too wild  
ideas, shapes  
me into leafy  
garden sculptures  
with a clanking  
chainsaw—

triton, hippogriff,  
jackalope, yete—

my path  
bordered  
by motionless  
versions of  
myself, nothing  
inside but stems  
and bark.

now—  
I tend to  
fresh transplants,  
implanted row  
upon row.

I prod,  
poke, dig  
entangled  
undergrowth sprouted

from mobile metallic  
trunks, strip sheets  
like commensal weeds,  
expose all  
that should never  
be seen.

I swallow their  
answers,  
sage, rosemary—  
winter evergreen.

3. organized  
flower gardens  
made for  
queens and kings,  
blood-blue lineages  
more equal  
than everything  
outside  
royal walls.

4. heart-shaped balloons  
on white-lace  
garden tables,  
empty chairs, air—  
almost gone.

over stuffed bears,  
dilated  
hearts held in  
fuzzy paws  
as if when broken,

they can  
easily  
be replaced.

failing hearts  
flooded with  
toxic irrigation,  
backed up in  
spongy pink  
balloons,  
filled to overflow,  
pink-foam head  
bubbling  
through pale  
blue lips.

livers  
like soft seeds  
swallowed into  
distended bellies,  
germinating under  
damp cloths—  
brown-stained,  
elephantine legs,  
pitted avocados  
when I press.

5. my thumbprint.  
their skin.
6. all my flowers  
have no guarantee—  
price tags, expiry



dates, labels  
tucked at the bottom  
of foot boards—  
labels clinging to  
thin plastic strings  
on singed soles  
of feet.

7. I fill  
vases with  
fading  
flowers, voices  
fading  
behind curtains,  
waiting for  
candy-striper  
footfalls to walk  
through doors with  
artificially—  
sweetened hope.

8. I am a  
constant gardener.

I dare not disturb this—  
my universe.

## Question 1: Why do you want to be a doctor?

Second floor shines—  
rows of bright faces, spot-lights from two-storey  
windows and moon blue eyes in oversized  
borrowed black business suits and ties and as I mount  
the stairs hugging a hot tea, all turn to stare—  
will she be the one?

Minutes later our door is shut and we  
sit across from each other with a maple desk and decades  
in between as my finger underlines  
the first question you've prepared so well.

Your eyes light, tip to the drop ceiling tile and for a moment,  
we both listen to the muffled sounds behind other's  
walls, as you inhale life with your own sense  
of fullness and say;  
you want to help people of course—  
and I nod. Once,

when the world needed our help,  
I would have agreed but  
now we've become insignificant spinning worlds  
hiding behind our own moonbeams,  
each off kilter from  
one another, wearing out our welcomed orbits,  
sinking into ourselves like dying  
stars. We spew  
platitudes of vapor and dust from our lips as we implode  
from gravitational collapse until  
astonished, find ourselves

in the exact same place where we started.

Now—

it's my turn to shrink and

I'm you walking on a red carpet  
universe but unlike you, didn't have  
anything to fix—

no loving grandmother whose arms I'll never  
forget, no father

who'd carved my heart with gamma knife  
radiation from cancer treatments, no mother  
with starlight and stars

bursting in her brain from stellate  
glioblastoma multiforme.

Your voice catches  
as you tell me about all the tiny pieces  
of soul you've left behind while you orbited  
their suns and we, both fading and rare as proton  
decay, as dense as man-made  
heavy metals and as unknown  
as visible light amongst this dark energy,  
find ourselves up against all that's been broken yet  
doesn't need our help—  
or quick fix.

In this vastness,

we both long to belong where sound  
cannot be overheard—

but you've already been deafened by  
rocket fuel blasts and now that you're about to  
leave gravity,

it's time to move on to Question 2.

## **Lee Peterson** (She/Her)

My work has appeared in such journals as *Arts & Letters*, *North American Review*, *Nimrod*, *The Fourth River*, *The Seattle Review*, *Salamander*, *Bellingham Review*, *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism*, and the anthology *Making Poems: 40 Poems with Commentary by the Poets*. I have read and presented my work widely—at The Carter Center in Atlanta, Reed and Sarah Lawrence Colleges, Carlow University, Kent State University, The University of Pittsburgh, and as a visiting writer/teacher through the Alabama Prison Arts and Education Project, among other places. A recent visiting faculty to Penn State University's BA/MA program, since 2004 I have taught in the English and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies programs at Penn State University's Altoona campus where I also direct the campus writing center. I live in State College with my husband, the novelist Steven Sherrill, and our eleven-year-old daughter, Esmée.

### **Transom:**

What is poetry in a time when we've all been asked to practice "social distancing" and stay at least six feet from each other (or better yet, out of sight and contact)?

### **Peterson:**

This is a time when we need to find and recall the gifts of our bodies and our hearts. And poetry can give us both. Poet Li-Young Lee begins a wonderful Lannan Foundation poetry reading from the year 2000 with these words: "The practice of poetry, I suppose, is a practice of a certain kind of presence that locates us not just in the head but in the body.... It may be that the practice of poetic presence is the practice of whole being." Ultimately, poetry is of the body and connects to the body (and helps us reconnect to our spirits as well as our minds, through the physical senses, through imagery, poetry's primary delivery system). If we stay in body, which it to say, we stay in the moment, we stave off fear and panic, which are functions of the spinning mind. In the moment, we feel and feel whatever it is we must and so remain whole.

**Transom:**

As you revisit your poetry here, what resonates, in the context of current events?

**Peterson:**

Questions of safety and risk appear in many of the poems in this series. The experience of the pandemic is, I think, forcing us all to reconsider our sense of things being stable or safe, but not entirely in a bad way (at least not for those who don't come to or cause harm as the result of the virus). Former war correspondent and public intellectual Christopher Hedges wrote a powerful book about the sense of urgency that comes from collective crisis, *War is a Force that Gives us Meaning*. The contradiction in times like this, as with 9/11, is that our sense of safety is stripped. But what's revealed beneath that veneer and through our collective acts of caring for each other is something very potent, a sense of meaning and purpose that can be lost in the busyness and striving of daily life.

There is a false sense of and emphasis on the charms of wealth and ease in our consumer culture. Media bombards us in all our waking hours with messages that claim comfort, economic gain and the possessions associated with these hold the keys to happiness. But as both wealth and comfort (which are, by the way, also at the root of climate change and resistance to the steps needed to mitigate it) are taken away by this collective health crisis, our safe harbors are revealed somewhere else and in more reliable and authentic territory, in our deeper selves and our connections to one another.

**Transom:**

And how does this shift your poetry going forward?

**Peterson:**

These poems are both about uncertainty and instability and how we grapple with it. They're also about love and loss and about innocence and the loss of innocence. These are things I'm interested in, always, on a personal, spiritual, and parenting level and on a geopolitical level. In my work I try to explore how these realms of the personal, political, local, and global interact. So the themes feel

relevant, like they'll maybe have a new resonance in this current context and once we're on the other side of the crisis. But I can't honestly say how my writing will shift going forward. I'm not writing right now. Instead, my days have been all about organizing classes for my students; helping my daughter navigate the new normal; tending to my family's health and well-being. Like so many of us with families and jobs that are now remote, just doing what needs to be done day to day.

**Transom:**

Both of these poems are, in ways, about children. Childhood is an experience wrapped in transition for everybody involved. It's also an experience that, despite the details, we have all had. Both poems also seem concerned about what to say, to the child, about the child, to the world, especially as the child enters the world. Childhood feels full of entrances and exits. How do we begin to interpret it, for ourselves as people who have been children, and for children?

**Peterson:**

Both of these poems refer to the frameworks we use to understand—the references to the cosmos and the naming of stars as well of the emergence of language, in "Small Bodies"; the narrative structure and imagery of fairy tales in "Motif." The answer offered in the poems, though they ask questions too, is that we interpret these very complex moments of childhood for ourselves, for children, for each other through metaphor and older systems of knowledge and storytelling. Doing it head-on can feel too tall an order.

## SMALL BODIES

i.

Your world can be explained  
in constellations —princess, archer,  
little dog, big dog, dragon,  
hero, clock.

And this light that travels  
through you—how far  
has it come? And by  
what fields?  
Bent around moons,  
refracted.

Your dreams too are echoes  
yet shine something  
all their own. So we are  
un-alone—little bull, little star.

ii.

You speak now—more words all the time.  
You said—*eagle*—today.  
*Remarkable*—the other.

iii.

Blue on the floor. Glass stars  
I've roped down for you, girl.  
Galaxies caught in tension wire.



Heavens staked fast  
to the earth —just this once  
—four points.

And all the green,  
    all the green tossed up  
to where sky would be.

iv.

On the day of your birth,  
on its lip I said:  
    *It's safe here, come out—*  
from inside the inside of my voice.

## MOTIF

There is the miraculous birth and a girl  
who goes underground or is mired in ash  
where she lives before being returned,  
gossamer clad. The path is safety, the woods  
wild with beasts, shadows, hags. Creatures speak.  
Their bodies songs, skins messengers—amphibious,  
plumed. There is the transom a child or prince  
must cross or turn from. The giant hedge  
wraps the castle in sleep and thorns, swallows  
those who try to pass. I remember within that thicket,  
the slow decay of corpses caught in vines, in barbed wire  
—prisoners whose bones never found home. Their  
loved ones grieving, somewhere outside the castle walls,  
in rooms and fields, in villages—palms to faces, palms to sky.  
What do I tell her of all this? What do I tell myself  
now that she's here, in this world, with us?  
She whose limbs sprout daily—new length—shoots  
so green, so long, so soon, so bent upon, so pulsing.

## **Stephen Frech** (He/Him/His)

Stephen Frech has published three volumes of poetry, most recently *The Dark Villages of Childhood*. His fourth volume titled *A Palace of Strangers is No City* (Cervena Barva Press) is a sustained narrative of prose poetry/flash fiction. He published a book of poetry translated from the Dutch: *Menno Wigman's Zwart als kaviaar/Black as Caviar*. He operates Blue Satellite Press at Millikin University where he is Professor of English.

### **Transom:**

What is poetry in a time when we've all been asked to practice "social distancing" and stay at least six feet from each other (or better yet, out of sight and contact)?

### **Frech:**

People who feel invested in poetry, as writer or reader, will attest to poetry having a reach far beyond six feet, six years, or six generations. The first time I read Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" ("I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations hence."), I was struck by the intimacy and personal address reaching beyond the years and the distance. It seems to me an articulation of what all good poetry can do: speak beyond, speak in transit, bridge gaps.

### **Transom:**

As you revisit your poetry here, what resonates, in the context of current events?

### **Frech:**

I remember "Brined Spirits in Delicate Jars" as surreal, dreamlike in its descriptions and details and associative moves. I'm struck in the context of distancing now by how strange and wonderful we all are, each of us, in our own idiosyncratic ways. The poem was intended to address our fragility, how delicate we are, not just in our bodied selves, but any aspect of self that endures—a small miracle.

**Transom:**

And how does this shift your poetry going forward?

**Frech:**

The current distancing and isolation highlights an isolation that I think was always there, but was easy to ignore while we cheered the raucous parade. Having that isolation newly imposed or exposed, I'm touched by the deliberate efforts to span the gap with song and with poetry. Song and poetry, as communicative, metaphorical arts have reassured us for as long as we have been doing them.

**Transom:**

Brining immediately brings to mind preservation, putting something away to be used later. The poem also feels like it is full of descent, of everything moving down toward a new place of rest; panthers and clouds and dealers and jars. Of course, preservation doesn't always work; things can change in there. Can anything, even brined spirits, even poetry, even meaning, hope to remain unchanged, or is everything just always settling into something... stranger?

**Frech:**

I love your phrase "settling into something . . . stranger." Yes, stranger and wonderful. We are ourselves spirits in delicate jars. Everyone in the poem is searching, anxious about finding, not finding, about being found (the panther seems menacing to me). Meanwhile, this treasure, which overtime has become a different treasure, has been lying below all this time. It emerges not unaltered, brined from its time in the sea. What a joy to find again at last something we didn't know we lost, something we didn't know was there, something we may not have been looking for. How precarious its enduring and finding.

## **Brined Spirits in Delicate Jars**

Panthers pour from the trees at the rummage sale  
and move like silent, black clouds  
among the tables of lusterware and depression glass.  
The dealers examine the underside of teacups.

While the storm clouds gather,  
I search for a bottle with my name on it,  
convinced one still exists in a kitchen somewhere  
holding flowers, leaking slowly, unbroken.

The papers report amphora found in the sea,  
a shipwreck of bottles clustered like grapes,  
like cargo still packed hip to hip in the hold.  
They have lain there for centuries,

intact, still in transit,  
brined spirits in delicate jars.

## **Gale Acuff** (I prefer, for me, he, his, and him)

I have had poetry published in *Ascent*, *Chiron Review*, *McNeese Review*, *Adirondack Review*, *Weber*, *Florida Review*, *South Carolina Review*, *Carolina Quarterly*, *Arkansas Review*, *Poem*, *South Dakota Review*, and many other journals. I have authored three books of poetry: *Buffalo Nickel* (BrickHouse Press, 2004), *The Weight of the World* (BrickHouse, 2006), and *The Story of My Lives* (BrickHouse, 2008). I have taught university English in the US, China, and the Palestinian West Bank.

### **Transom:**

What is poetry in a time when we've all been asked to practice "social distancing" and stay at least six feet from each other (or better yet, out of sight and contact)?

### **Acuff:**

It's possible that people will reconsider the value of companionship. When again we can freely intermingle, as we've been accustomed to, there might be more appreciation of the closeness or the bonds we may have taken for granted. If I must reassess my self-hood by being obliged to distance myself physically, perhaps I can learn something of a spiritual nature about my affinity with others - closeness through distance, even absence, perhaps.

To some extent, poets are distanced, or distance themselves, anyway; for them, distancing might be a matter of degree and they might be more accustomed to it than others. The issue is whether there can still be a person speaking to others (to borrow from Wordsworth). If poets still have readers, that might be the preferred closeness anyway. Romantic ideology would, of course, have that closeness be a very personal, personable, one as well.

After the virus has been vanquished, the community which poets and other sorts of visionaries have long sought, some of them anyway, might be more nearly realized. It may still be true that a poet is a man (by which Wordsworth implies a

fullsome humanity) speaking to other such men. As for those who don't read poetry, perhaps they'll learn to find an intellectual solace in it such that they'll enjoy a closeness not contingent on physical proximity. Perhaps the living will become more aware of life.

**Transom:**

*As you revisit your poetry here, what resonates, in the context of current events?*

**Acuff:**

I wonder to what extent the thematic issues in the poem will remain relevant, or at least worth continued scrutiny, in the face of widespread panic and death. One struggles to understand; we want meaning. Who's responsible for the virus? Is the current crisis somehow connected to the speaker's concerns?

**Transom:**

And how does this shift your poetry going forward?

**Acuff:**

I'm not sure. My concern is what COVID-19 avails me. It's not as though people aren't distanced in some ways anyway. The speaker in the poem is distanced from his teacher, God, Jesus, his parents, and his himself. These are conflicts with which he must struggle, and COVID didn't create them, though it's taking them into different arenas, and as for how I'll shape my work as time passes, I'm not sure, but whether it's COVID or SARS or HIV or polio, forces against which superstition would've struggled eons ago (and still does - this is one of the speaker's insights, I think, as a churchgoer), the issue can be framed (or shoehorned) as good versus evil, and that wouldn't be an unusual way for one to try to come to grips in a binary, if questionable, way of framing the matter. There will be poems about those who love each other defying common medical sense and falling into each other's arms. I, too, might try to write such a poem, but of course they've been written before; things change, yet they don't.

**Transom:**

This poem juxtaposes questions about the Christian Heaven with the Space Age; whatever the cause, it seems we're always looking up for answers. Specifically, the poem interrogates authority, and how we use it for justification. What is authority, really, and why appeal to it? If Jesus worked for nothing, why should God help me earn more?

**Acuff:**

To some extent, a challenge is authoritative in itself. Perhaps the challenge itself is the real authority. At its most dynamic, it's probably intended to remove and often replace extant authority. P. B. Shelley argued that poets are "unacknowledged legislators"; Marx probably agreed. The speaker is trying to negotiate, trying to understand how one can be godly in a world of unto-Caesar-rendering. This is a key issue in Western tradition. What is the value of a dollar? Then, too, "Jesus worked for nothing" might suggest that his work, depending on how one explains that work, was in vain. The speaker is a part of a tradition which he tries to understand, or at least work with: If I'm going to be an altruist, how can I support myself? But there's also this: If I cross authority, am I ready for the consequences? Anyway, the speaker is a child; children encounter authority in many forms. How can one trust that the human manifestation of divine authority is legit? Why have adults adopted this . . . posture, and how can I deal with it to get what I want even as I tell myself (and other tell me, too) to settle for what I need? Who or what determines necessity? How do I get the courage to test whether authority has limits? Do I need such courage? Must I work for free, as the speaker guesses Jesus did? Miss Hooker's the authority in that Sunday School classroom, but even she's in agreement with the young speaker, so how authoritative is authority, anyway?



## Allowance

I raise my hand in Sunday School class when Miss Hooker asks us who wants to go to Heaven. Sign me up, I think. But I raise it too fast and now she's calling on me to explain to everybody why.

I don't know why, I say--I just don't want to be left out. Everybody laughs.

Miss Hooker removes her glasses and smiles.

*Think about Jesus dying on the cross, she says. He must have felt very alone even though He was the Son of God and had the power to step down from it. But He had a job to do--to sacrifice Himself for the world.* She finishes. Dead

silence. I raise my hand again. *Yes, Gale,* she says. Well, I say, He had a job but He did it for free. He could've been paid --at home I have to earn all my money. I sweep the porch and set the table and feed the dog, and the cat, too, when he's home and hasn't wandered off like he likes to, and take out the garbage and wash the car and clean out the garage. Fridays, Father gives me my twenty-five cents after supper and says, *Here, don't spend it all in one place.*

*Oh, Miss Hooker finally says. Yes. Well, in Heaven, she says, your money's no good, --you won't need any when you go there. If*

I go there, I say. My classmates laugh. *Oh*,  
Miss Hooker says. *I think you'll go there--I*  
*have faith in you* . Oh, thank you, ma'am, I say.

Then it's time for the Lord's Prayer and class  
ends. After the other children leave, I  
stay in my seat 'til Miss Hooker sees me.

*Yes, Gale*, she say, *do you have a question?*  
Yes, ma'am, I say. Should I be getting more?  
*More what*, she asks. More allowance, I say  
--it's 1966. I'm ten years old.

I work hard for my two bits but it's not  
enough and I hate to be greedy but  
this is the Space Age. She sits down again.

*Well*, she says, *Jesus worked for nothing but*  
*I understand your point. On your birthday*  
*maybe you can ask for an extra dime.*

Oh, thank you, I say. I turn to go. *Wait*,  
Miss Hooker says. *Don't tell your parents that*  
*I said so*. No, ma'am, I say. I'll tell them  
God told me. It comes down to the same thing.

## **Paige Menton** (She/Her)

I grew up in Birmingham, Alabama and earned a bachelor's in comparative literature from Brown University. My poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *New South*, *Forklift*, *Ohio*, *Kestrel*, *Matter*, *LVNG*, *ecopoetics*, and other journals. I teach writing and naturalist studies to homeschoolers near Philadelphia.

### **Transom:**

What is poetry in a time when we've all been asked to practice "social distancing" and stay at least six feet from each other (or better yet, out of sight and contact)?

### **Menton:**

I think that poetry remains durable and may even become a more common tool of choice for all of the forcibly separated with more time and silence than they are used to. I find that the constant "if/then" scenarios that play through my mind are challenging any poetic focus I can muster. If we can't buy books at local bookstores, attend our community movie theater, watch my daughter's dance company, then what can we do to keep them afloat? If I can't teach children about the natural world in person, how else can I reach them? I am heartened by the creative thinking that is emerging in the face of these challenges and feel more of my creative energy is being poured into those solutions than into poems at the moment.

### **Transom:**

As you revisit your poetry here, what resonates, in the context of current events?

### **Menton:**

That is a very interesting question because the creative process for these lullabies feels analogous to the processes we are all experimenting with now. I do not speak the languages of the songs that inspired these two poems. From the sounds of a few opening words, I "translated" the sounds into a dragon in one poem and a boy with keys in the other. From there, I tried to create narratives of comfort.

The narratives share some of the rhythms and repetitions of the original lullabies. I wrote them in the first months of my first child, very much unsure of my steps in the motherhood project, afraid of missteps. Today we are “translating” all of our normal patterns of behavior, narrowing in some dimensions and broadening in others as we work to maintain connections, provide comfort. Revisiting these poems reminds me of the isolation that I felt when I wrote them. The uncertainty that I felt then mirrors the uncertainty now. My son is a strong, sensitive, voting adult now, and that reality buffers my worst fears for our current state.

**Transom:**

And how does this shift your poetry going forward?

**Menton:**

I am not sure. I finished a revision of a manuscript about edges a few days before all of the schools and non-essential businesses in my county were closed. When a trip to the grocery store feels like approaching a cliff, I am not sure how this manuscript will hold up on the next rereading.

**Transom:**

Slippage and transformation are interesting by products of translation; what is lost in translation can and often does make way for something new. In your project of translating lullabies, what do you feel is lost and gained? Does the form hold, or give way to something new?

**Menton:**

From the sounds of each language, I gained two stories but lost much of the musicality. They are new stories that could not have existed without the kernels of the original lullabies. They were fashioned to soothe as the original songs do.

## **My friend Dragon**

My friend Dragon  
sees his silhouette  
makes it wider beside the candle  
turns his tail toward the moon  
makes a smile open his arms  
does not know where to put his hands

Do not cry now  
Do not wish away the darkness  
On the night's back  
rest your head

Dragon will sing for you  
Dragon will dance  
Dragon will hold your fears in his hands

## Mayi A Gaye (Haiti)

Juan goes slow while he  
carries keys up the mountain  
                        up the mountain  
to the changing country  
changing while he  
dreams of monkeys  
and lemon pie

land changing  
sun falling

his pockets full  
his pockets full

full of the moon?

No, full of days  
when he can eat lemon pie

his pockets full

## **Danielle Mitchell** (She/Her)

Danielle Mitchell is the author of *Makes the Daughter-in-Law Cry* (Tebot Bach, 2017), winner of the Clockwise Chapbook Prize. She has also been awarded the 2015 Editor's Prize from Mary and the 2014 Editor's Choice Award from The Mas Tequila Review. Her work has appeared in *Vinyl*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Eleven Eleven*, *Harpur Palate*, *Animal*, *Bellevue Literary Review*, *Nailed Magazine* and others. Danielle is a member of the Community of Writers at Squaw Valley and director of The Poetry Lab. Learn more about her at [poetryofdanielle.com](http://poetryofdanielle.com) or on Instagram @imaginarydani.

### **Transom:**

What is poetry in a time when we've all been asked to practice "social distancing" and stay at least six feet from each other (or better yet, out of sight and contact)?

### **Mitchell:**

Poetry is vital. My immediate feeling was that social distancing would take a huge toll on my local community. Open mics, slams, book launches, workshops—I run a workshop called The Poetry Lab that meets twice a month—holding space together is an important part of what we do. I worried for us, but I also knew that creativity is a path to resilience. I watched with pride as people in my community adapted to the rules of social distancing faster and with more flare than any group I have observed so far. It took less than 3 days for people to cancel live events and replace them with virtual ones. For The Poetry Lab, I started a project called #creativecloseness. My hope is that in a time of social distance we can be creatively closer than ever.

### **Transom:**

As you revisit your poetry here, what resonates, in the context of current events?

### **Mitchell:**

In some ways, it's terrifying to look at these poems in context of our growing dependency on digital forms of communication. The internet feels like the only thing that is holding us all together right now, and yet, it is also a place of carnage. Hollie Toups knows how easily it can turn on you.

**Transom:**

And how does this shift your poetry going forward?

**Mitchell:**

I've been writing about non-consensual pornography for five years and contemplating the reality of both needing and fearing the internet. As I mentioned above, creativity is a path to resilience. How many women and non-binary folks do I know who are so used to harassment that they take it in stride? It's just part of our lives. My path forward is a lot like the path behind me, I'll keep writing about NCP and I'll keep hoping that the more people learn about the dangers of sexism, violence against women, gendered harassment, and the internet's roll in all that the safer we will be.

**Transom:**

The line "in reality nobody cared or noticed" feels evocative of the current cultural landscape. The internet is forever, and all of our noodz are somewhere out there in the cloud, whatever that is. Your poems suggest we are more appearance than substance. Can we ever reverse this ratio? What happens to us when we die now? What happens to our noodz?

**Mitchell:**

The internet has its ghosts. I've lost two close friends in the past few years and after they've passed the question of what to do with their social media accounts has remained. What happens to us when we die is an enormous question, but in the context of our digital footprint it's an interesting one. I guess the main difference between deciding whether or not to delete a Facebook account and nudes is the matter of choice. For most victims of non-consensual pornography there is no choice. Hollie Toups didn't want her nude photos leaked onto the



internet, but once they were out there it was forever. On some level, we all have to accept that using the internet strips us of our privacy in all ways—it's not just meta data being collected and sold to companies that send us ads for the sneakers we've been eyeing at Nordstrom Rack, it's everything.

For women that threat is higher because our bodies are sensationalized. The ironic thing about the line you called out "in reality nobody cared or noticed" is that if it were true, then the threat would be nullified. If nobody cared then a woman whose nude photo is leaked on the internet wouldn't lose her job. She wouldn't be called names. She wouldn't receive death threats.

At the end of the day, I'm glad we are finally having these conversations. Everyone I know has taken and sent nudes at some point, but only an unlucky few have ever had their photos hacked, stolen, leaked...there was a time when this seemed unbelievable, but now people understand that trolls do exist and private accounts do get hacked. Ten years ago, that seemed farfetched, today you're asking me questions in the context of "all our noodz" and to me that is hopeful!

## Hollie Toups still 'hears' about her noodz

*borrowed from an entry in Encyclopedia Dramatica*

"her phone hacked"

    "naturally, the first suspect"

"men across the globe"

    "she cries on camera"

"the responses are from people who are tired"

"the sick bastard that uploaded her pictures"

"the FBI has taken notice"

"dozens of camwhores featured on Texxxan.com"

"the ladies were under age"

    "(no wonder schools are going downhill)"

"a class action lawsuit was filed"

"the media, being afraid"

    "asked what she's learned"

"she could have copyrighted the noodz"

"noodz in the future"

    "given that she's now 33, maybe not"

"the website owner attempted to extort money from them"

    "all the innocent schoolgirls claimed"

"this is about women's rights"

"in reality nobody cared or noticed"

"unfortunately for him"

"Hollie refuses to admit any fault"

    "she's busy stuffing her purse with money"

    "it had nothing to do with money"

"100% to blame"

"the internet stood still"

"what this means is we can hope for additional"

## Good Meat

She meets the interviewer  
on a Wednesday.  
Poolside, L'Ermitage.  
He notes: blue cotton top  
very short skirt, she says  
"I should have worn pants."  
She'll be photographed  
naked in the water,  
white sulphur-crested  
cockatoo on her wrist.  
Vanity Fair runs:  
Both Huntress & Prey  
Jennifer Lawrence  
on the dark side of fame.  
"You don't expect  
to be terrified," she says  
about the paparazzi.  
Two weeks later—  
intimate photos leaked  
the interviewer calls  
for comment—"It's not a scandal,  
it's a sex crime," she says,  
"I feel like a piece of meat  
being passed around for profit."  
But there's little she can do.  
She can't become un-famous.  
She can't quit her job.  
In glossy pages, another photo:  
Jennifer emerges  
from the pool in skin-

tight black dress, feet a blur  
of splash & sequins.

Caption: wet your appetite.

After all, this is Hollywood.

The interviewer asks  
what keeps her going.

Suddenly she breaks  
into song: "I've got joy  
insiiiiide my tears."

"It's a smoky voice"  
the interviewer says,  
"just like BBQ ribs."

**Edward Mayes** (I refer to myself as "I" while others refer to me as "he.")

Poems in *Southwest Review*, *The New Yorker*, *APR*, *Kenyon Review*, *New England Review*, etc. Took a decade-long break from writing poems, but now have re-started about 9 years ago. Also, several of my books of poetry have won prizes: Juniper Prize (University of Massachusetts Press) and AWP Prize in Poetry (University of Pittsburgh Press). Recent poems are in *Harvard Review*, *Boston Review*, *Colorado Review*, *Gettysburg Review*, *Crazyhorse*, *Subtropics*, *Agni*, *Seattle Review*, and others. I divide my time between Italy and North Carolina.

**Transom:**

What is poetry in a time when we've all been asked to practice "social distancing" and stay at least six feet from each other (or better yet, out of sight and contact)?

**Mayes:**

The writing of poetry is first for many a solitary thing and the more "social distancing" the better. Not easy to write poetry in a crowd (although not impossible). An engagement with the self is needed (and of course and engagement with the world). Reading poetry can be both individual and social--double your pleasure!

**Transom:**

As you revisit your poetry here, what resonates, in the context of current events?

**Mayes:**

The current we swim in is the same current others have swum in, perhaps the heat of the water changing or the speed of the water. *IN SIRACUSA WE TOOK OUR TURN AT ARCHIMEDES'S SCREW* is about water and the sequence of living but also about "sempre di meno"--there are always fewer of us--our friends, our family--as we leave the planet. *THAT WAS THE DAY WE DROVE OUT OF ATHENS, FRANCES* is about the idea of travel, which is a thornier idea now than earlier in this year 2020.

**Transom:**

And how does this shift your poetry going forward?

**Mayes:**

I think of Keats in quarantine (coming from the Italian "quaranta giorni"--forty days of isolation--in the Bay of Naples in 1820 and how in 3 ½ years he wrote 150 poems. Those from January 1819 to September 1819 "sealed his fame" And then he of course promptly died at age 26. Work to be done, no matter what!

**Transom:**

Both of your poems included here are concerned with history, including old (but still so useful) technology, inherited seasonal rituals, and mythology (both ancient and modern). However, this sense of history does not feel stuck in its own moment. If we are always growing and changing, is history a static reference point to measure ourselves against, or is it always somehow changing with us?

**Mayes:**

History only seems to exist to the few of us who are alive at this moment to see ourselves pass through it, become part of it, if only briefly. For the last 30 years, I've spent a good part of the each year in Italy, where at the dinner table someone might bring up new evidence of Hannibal's triumph in the Battle of Lake Trasimeno (which we can see from our land)--that's 217 BCE--as if it happened yesterday. Time's written on a chalkboard and gets erased, and we're pounding the cloth erasers together, filling the air with the clouds of chalk.

## IN SIRACUSA WE TOOK OUR TURN AT ARCHIMEDES'S SCREW

In Siracusa we took our turn at Archimedes's screw  
And watched the water spin up and the water kept

Coming, water for the twenty-four palms we had  
Wanted to plant, water for the hydrangeas

That this year would never flower, but  
We would make a garden nonetheless,

The pear tree we call Arm's Reach, and  
The *tiglio* branches lifted by the bees, or

The *pomodoro* tied with *vinco* to the bamboo  
Poles, we who have given them water,

Flooded their ditches, and they who have taken  
The water, wicking it, and we will rip them

Up with their roots and they will hang all winter  
Next to the prosciutto, nails in the chestnut

Beams, and we will all be fully measured,  
When it comes to that, when the Aral

Sea and others "gang dry," and we have known that  
The length of one hand is one-tenth of

Our full height, what we *are* contracting into  
A runty *aren't*, *sempre di meno* of us, and

Always more of us, unrolling the maps of  
The known world *at this time*, at the time

Of leaving, plums to pick first, peaches to  
Pick next, and twenty inches of reach, our personal

Cubit, one hand to strum one guitar, water's  
Own sound, coming up for air, every way we turn.



## THAT WAS THE DAY WE DROVE OUT OF ATHENS, FRANCES

That was the day we drove out of Athens, Frances  
Riding shotgun, the road taking us to Nafplio, and

The whole of Western Civilization as we had known  
It on the cutting room floor, and those movies

Yet to be made, Walt Whitman whistling,  
Emily Dickinson in dialysis, John Keats

Writing the history of kite flying, or Geoffrey  
Chaucer never having the pleasure of drinking

Tea from a saucer, and in the glove box  
The pair of scissors we use to cut foxglove

Or herbs to royally strew or to clip  
An errant thread which we heard could be

Used to tie around the scarab beetle's leg, or  
Around the cricket's waist, or the movie of

The swooping *upupa*, the hoopoe, all crest,  
All attaboy and attagirl, and the *chiocciola* disguised

As a snail, marking its location, the votive  
Candles all alit, and if we knew our atomic

Weights, the names of ships listing, or the progress  
We made after the last lane shift and after

The downshift in our Atos, and think of Athos  
Throwing a mountain at Zeus, the theists

And the atheists together on the last ferry to leave  
But the first to arrive, as we practice what we will

Say when we pull up to the House of Atreus,  
Although in all the confusion, in all the lost traffic.

## **Seth McKelvey** (He/Him/His)

Seth McKelvey teaches at Auburn University. His poems appear most recently in *E-ratio*, *Bateau*, *BlazeVOX*, and *Stickman Review*. He co-edits the online journal of poetry and short fiction *S/WORD* ([www.sslashword.com](http://www.sslashword.com)).

### **Transom:**

What is poetry in a time when we've all been asked to practice "social distancing" and stay at least six feet from each other (or better yet, out of sight and contact)?

### **McKelvey:**

I reckon poetry is still just poetry.

### **Transom:**

As you revisit your poetry here, what resonates, in the context of current events?

### **McKelvey:**

"Risk" rings for me now. In this poem I wanted to think about how the fear of bad can extinguish the possibility of good. I find that fear in the opening lines of Psalm 39, which gives this poem its title. I don't think that's any more or less true now, but it might be more or less visible in the context of current events. I think there can be a danger in saying things--language is often in the service of the bad. So the temptation for me is to simply stop saying, to give up on language, and be silent. And so I wonder how to neither repress nor succumb to that temptation.

### **Transom:**

And how does this shift your poetry going forward?

### **McKelvey:**

I don't think it does, at least not in any intelligent way. It might offer some new vocabulary. This isn't to say that my poetry won't change--I don't fantasize that poetry is outside of history. But I'm not interested in documentation or in that

kind of determination. I'm more interested in could and should than about was and is. Poetry is ephemeral enough already.

**Transom:**

Alm 39 feels very focused on the reality of human identity in a rapidly expanding digital age, asking if the human body will be skeumorphic. In a time when we have more and more control of technology, and it simultaneously has more control of us, are we only keeping up appearances as human? And what is the value of that? (Bonus: Will we ever be obsolete, and in need of massive revision?)

**McKelvey:**

I really like "revision" here. Nathaniel Mackey calling us "a rough draft of humanity" has always stuck with me. So, "revision" not as a response to obsolescence, but as the ordinary mode of a work in progress. I'm not thinking of a posthuman cyborg, in part because I don't think there's anything "post-" about the ways we intertwine our bodies with technology. So I probably need to explain that this poem's language of the digital is more its means than its ends. A lot of this was spurred on by thinking about the word "render," which is such a provocative word for me. We render unto Caesar, who renders judgment back to us; we render fat when we cook; we make renditions of songs; and the graphics card in my desktop renders images while I play video games. So that's actually how "reddit" makes its way into the poem. Yes, I probably spend too much time on the website by that name, but, in the ghostliness of Latin, "reddit" is also "renders" or "profits." This poem's "hereafter" is less sci-fi and more mystical. So I am thinking about the reality of human identity and how both bodies and representations of bodies overdetermine that reality, but I'm trying to probe beyond that reality. If we're to become like angels, I want to know, are angels raced?

## Alm 39

will our hereafter  
bodies be  
skeuomorphic?

path-dependent, sure—vestigial  
flesh, the whole matter  
of bodies

but what about colors?  
hair eye skin  
will our covers still

be cornered  
in physics' tiny domain? analog faces  
for superquantum souls?

faces in the herebefore  
and herenow we muzzle, fearing  
fearing the gamble of speech

risk-averse, hesitant to take  
even evens per verse  
to say good or bad

but a psychic cry in a verse—  
a paperverse's digital physic,  
blood reddit, pay perverse