

Spring/Summer 2023 | Volume 39 | Number 2

EST 1983

WEBER

THE CONTEMPORARY WEST

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Deriving from the German **weben**—to weave—**weber** translates into the literal and figurative "weaver" of textiles and texts. Weber are the artisans of textures and discourse, the artists of the beautiful fabricating the warp and weft of language into everchanging patterns. **Weber**, the journal, understands itself as a regional and global tapestry of verbal and visual texts, a weave made from the threads of words and images.

Celebrating Women's History Month



Much Madness is divinest Sense - (620)

Much Madness is divinest Sense -
To a discerning Eye -
Much Sense - the starkest Madness -
'Tis the Majority
In this, as all, prevail -
Assent - and you are sane -
Demur - you're straightway dangerous -
And handled with a Chain -

—**Emily Dickinson**

Pedaling to Power — Women on the Wheels of Change

"Let me tell you what I think of bicycling. I think it has done more to emancipate women than anything else in the world. I rejoice every time I see a woman ride by on a bike. It gives her a feeling of self-reliance and independence the moment she takes her seat; and away she goes, the picture of untrammelled womanhood."

The bicycle will "make the next generation more vigorous of mind and body; for feeble mothers do not produce great statesmen, scientists and scholars."

—**Susan B. Anthony**

The Secret History of Women in Coding

In 1991, Ellen Spertus, now a computer scientist at Mills College, published a report on women's experiences in programming classes. She cataloged a landscape populated by men who snickered about the presumed inferiority of women and by professors who told female students that they were "far too pretty" to be studying electrical engineering; when some men at Carnegie Mellon were asked to stop using pictures of naked women as desktop wallpaper on their computers, they angrily complained that it was censorship of the sort practiced by "the Nazis or the Ayatollah Khomeini."

—**Clive Thompson**, "The Secret History of Women in Coding," *The New York Times Magazine*, Feb. 13, 2019

Cover art: Monica Lundy, *Elizabeth*, 50" x 31" x 3," mixed media with liquid porcelain on linen, West Riding Lunatic Asylum, UK, 2021



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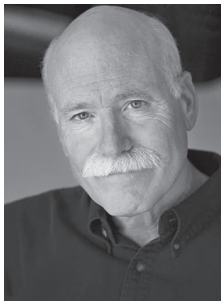
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"A RESTLESSNESS TO KNOW MORE ABOUT THE WORLD"

DEBORAH UMAN



A Conversation with JAD ABUMRAD

Before his talk at Weber State University in April 2022, radio host, podcaster, and interviewer extraordinaire Jad Abumrad agreed to turn the tables and be interviewed himself. A 2011 recipient of a MacArthur Foundation "genius" grant, Jad describes how he fell into radio, combining his passions for music and storytelling, and turning radio programming on its ear with his innovative approaches and boundless curiosity. Since 2002, Jad has produced and co-hosted WNYC's Radiolab, *which explores the intersection of scientific and humanistic modes of inquiry. Jad is driven by a self-described restlessness to know more about the world. This quest has led him to develop several* Radiolab *spinoffs, including* More Perfect, UnErased, *and, perhaps most famously,* Dolly Parton's America. *Through an exploration of the life and career of this beloved icon, this program examines some of the many divides in our country that Dolly Parton somehow manages to bridge. His most recent production,* The Vanishing of Harry Pace, *follows the mysterious story of the all-but-forgotten Black entrepreneur who founded Black Swan records and masterminded the Supreme Court case that led to the desegregation of Chicago, only to disappear as he started passing for white. In each interview that he conducts and every story that he tells, Jad searches for the truth even as he realizes that there are multiple versions of the truth. Although his job is often to talk, his goal is to learn how to listen. Through listening and sharing perspectives, he offers his audiences glimmers of hope as we navigate our own searches for meaning in a challenging world.*

Jad spoke at Weber State University as part of Browning Presents!, *a program featuring public performances and educational residencies in a range of disciplines that is made possible through the generous funding of the Browning Foundation. We want to thank the Foundation for their unfailing support and philanthropic spirit.*

As an undergraduate, you majored in creative writing and music. You ended up going into radio. Will you elaborate a little bit on your entry into public radio and how that career has developed over the years?

I went to Oberlin College for liberal arts—creative writing and music. My parents were supportive and generous enough to let me do whatever was interesting to me. I got out of school and realized that both of the things I chose to do are really hard, particularly when you're right out of school and haven't really lived much. Writers mature into writing because they've lived a life that they can draw from for their writing—I hadn't yet. And then on the music side, I never realized how nimble and flexible you need to be to write music professionally. I tried to do both of those things—to write articles and to write music for film and dance pieces. I got a few things printed and I did a few commissions, but they were small, and it was clear to me very quickly that this was not going to work as a profession. I needed to have a day job.

I started working in the world of the internet, which was a brand-new thing at that point. The internet was going commercial, and everybody wanted a website. I was three or four years out of school at the time; the situation felt almost archetypal, similar to the years of existential crisis people have after college, when they realize they're going to have to do something different than they thought. I was at that place. I was disenchanted with the idea of working an internet-based job. I had no skills. Anyone with a pulse could work in the internet world at that point.

I remember having a conversation with Karla Murthy, my girlfriend at the time and now my wife. I said, "I don't know what to do. I feel like I want to do these things, but I'm not good at them." She suggested, "Why don't you work in radio. It's a little bit of both. It involves writing and storytelling and it involves sound. So, maybe that's a place for you to go." At that point, I didn't really have it in my head, this idea of narrative nonfiction or anything like that; it was just a notion that she put in my head. So, I remember going to a demonstration of a radio station in Brooklyn. They would drive around and have these parties where they would park on a block, put the antenna in an apartment, or sometimes just on top of the car, and broadcast for the few blocks around. And so, I went to one of those to see how they did it. One of the news directors for WBAI radio, which is a community radio station, was there and we struck up a conversation. He said, "Come on in." They had a bustling newsroom, but it was in chaos. And so, I just walked in, and they handed me a tape recorder and said, "Go record this protest happening at City Hall." I had no idea what that meant; I didn't know how to ask a question, but I remember running to City Hall, and afterward putting the content onto reel-to-reels. The rest of the world had moved to computers, but they were still using reel-to-reels. They taught me how to cut the footage with a razor blade, tape different pieces together, and then write little bits of narration. At that point, I didn't know any of this, so the news director basically did it for me. But I remember putting that horrible radio piece on the air that same day. I couldn't believe that it had just happened. I just went out into the world, recorded voices, came back and made sense of it, and now it's on the air. I was instantly hooked, and I just kept doing it. So, I worked in that newsroom for a while, I worked on a different political show, and then I slowly started freelancing for NPR, then for a variety of shows at WNYC, which is the NPR station in New York. Then in 2002, right in the wake of 9/11, there was this sense that we needed to change the format of the station to meet the moment. They took all the music away and created new spaces for public affairs programming and news documentaries. One of those spaces became *Radiolab*. I just got yanked into the hall, told to "make a thing, late Sunday nights," and that became *Radiolab* (Laughter). It's funny, I think about

Then in 2002, right in the wake of 9/11, there was this sense that we needed to change the format of the station to meet the moment. They took all the music away and created new spaces for public affairs programming and news documentaries. One of those spaces became Radiolab*. I just got yanked into the hall, told to "make a thing, late Sunday nights," and that became* Radiolab*. It's funny, I think about the story now and it was such an interesting historical window. I don't know if that could happen anymore.*

the story now, and it was such an interesting historical window. I don't know if that could happen anymore; I don't know that you could just waltz into a radio station and make a thing. Gen Z is a massive generation; there are so many people coming in. Podcasting is a maelstrom. It's just a different world. But at that time, there was just news, there was just *This American Life*. There weren't a lot of templates. So, I did a new thing, and it felt easier to do a new thing at that point. I got grandfathered into podcasting, and the rest is history.

Radiolab *is the program you're known for, but you've also created other extended series and projects such as* More Perfect*,* Dolly Parton's America *and, most recently,* The Vanishing of Harry Pace*. How do you decide when a topic needs to be expanded upon? What do these extended projects have in common? What have you learned from doing these more extensive projects?*

All of those projects, starting with *More Perfect*, grew out of a kind of restlessness that I've always had. When *Radiolab* was established, there were six or seven years before anyone really noticed it. It took me a long time to convince the station to take the show seriously. But once we had done that, once we started to add people, once we became a sound, as amazing as that moment was, I began to feel the constraints of it. I was really just beginning to find my way. In your 20s, your brain is so malleable that you don't really know who you are. I didn't know exactly what I was interested in. Initially, I was drawn to science. So, that became the signature—a science meets humanities kind of zone—that became the *Radiolab* spot. I remember there was a day where we were doing "real science," and I was doing sound design for the show. I was designing the sound of the crackling of a neuron because it was part of some explanation about the brain, and I just remember being hit with this crushing fatigue. I felt like, I have made this sound five times, literally, and if I have to do it again I can't do this story anymore. Every story was different, the stories were never the same, but there was a structured pattern involved that I was beginning to recognize. So, while doing *Radiolab*, I just kind of had a tantrum. I was with the team, and I was just like, "we cannot do a goddamn story about neuroscience anymore. There are thousands of stories to do there, but we need to break our own groove."

It just so happened that that day, the Supreme Court released their docket of stories that they were going to cover. And on a whim, I said to my team, "Here's the docket. I have no idea what any of this stuff is. You all have no idea. Just pick a case, make three phone calls, and report back." And it was really just a shot in the dark. Here are these cases; they seem interesting; they clearly are important; all of them involve a plaintiff and a defendant. Maybe that's the narrative DNA of a story—let's see. One of the producers on my team, Tim Howard, struck gold with this

amazing story about a custody battle over a two-year-old girl that involved the fate of 500 sovereign nations in America. It was an amazing story where you have this micro-drama of two parties fighting over a little girl. And the world seemed to depend on it. And I remember it was this lightbulb moment. I thought, maybe every Supreme Court story is like this in some way. It's this little human drama, where suddenly humans are expanded to be 1,000 feet tall. It became a spin-off that grew out of a restlessness to know more about the world. I always had this feeling that I missed a few key days in school. I never understood the court system. I never understood government. I grew up on ***Schoolhouse Rock***, but I never really knew how that stuff worked, so that became a whole spin-off.

Dolly Parton's America was really driven by a curiosity about her, but it also came from a curiosity about the place where I grew up, but never felt a part of. My sense was that I'd never quite told the right story about the South, at least in my own head. It was about exploring a space that I felt ignorant of. But there is also always a creative question. With ***Dolly Parton's America***, it was questions about form: I love music documentaries, but I also hate them because they somehow kill the music. At the same time, musicians like Dolly are these lenses through which to see many things. So, could we make something that combined history, music, and politics? The work has always been about personal growth as much as it has been about communicating to other people. It's always both. I feel like I have to somehow wreck my own perspective before I can do that to anyone else. And I love the work for that reason.

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I read an essay in Vulture *recently about your decision to leave* Radiolab.[1] *In the essay, Nicholas Quah talks about a* Radiolab *episode from 2012, "The Fact of Matter," exploring the 1980s incident known as Yellow Rain, in which the United States accused the Soviet Union of supplying Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia with the tools of chemical warfare. The claim followed the periodic precipitation of a sticky yellow liquid that was initially linked to physical symptoms, particularly among members of the Hmong tribe, but was later attributed to honeybee feces. The interview included an interview with a Hmong refugee whose experience and perspective differed significantly from that of the reporter who focused on the scientific evidence supporting the bee theory.[2] The article talked about this moment as a sort of spiritual turning point for* Radiolab. *They included you as saying, "from that point forward, we barely ever told stories where we simply trusted one way of knowing to the exclusion of others." I thought that was incredibly powerful. Can you talk about that concept of "ways of knowing" and how you examine that in your radio productions?*

I deeply believe in science as a method more than as a culture or as a religion. I remember that story in particular. It wasn't that the science was right or wrong. As science reporters, I think we got it right, but somehow the fixation on the scientific questions missed an entire other kind of truth that was in the room. And that was a real awakening for me.

That was a pivotal moment for me because I think we were rooted in a kind of science reporting where it sometimes felt like we were translating science for poets. Occasionally, we would slip into a stance where we privileged science over other perspectives. I deeply believe in science as a method more than as a culture or as a religion. I remember that story in particular. It wasn't that the science was right or wrong. As science reporters, I think we got it right, but somehow the fixation on the scientific questions missed an entire other kind of truth that was in the room. And that was a real awakening for me. It was a horrible experience; it took me years to be able to even talk about it openly. It's weird to feel like you're this band of misfits who are just making a thing and don't really know what you're doing. Now we have an audience, and we have a responsibility. It's a little bit like Joe Rogan, how he was saying, "I don't really do any research."[3] I get that, because I had that stance at one point, but now you don't really have the luxury of saying that anymore. Anyhow, it was a horrible experience. I remember being struck by how the world of science is so inhuman by definition. It seeks to bleed out the human influence and to measure some objective truth. Never mind whether or not that exists, that's what it purports to be. And yet the world of human experience is so messy, and so to have scientific truth and human experience in conflict in such an extreme way made me realize that, not only did we screw up the story—and we were called out for being assholes, rightly; I felt the deeper story was there all along, and we really needed to examine and figure out how to do better. It's like an epistemological car crash—that's what *Radiolab* became. It always was to some degree, and then became much more so at that point—finding two ways of knowing in conflict. To know something in your own bones versus to know it in your brain. To know something through an analysis and in an empirical sort of way of thinking, and then to know it in the way in which you move. There were just all of these different ways of thinking that became super interesting to me. We do a lot of science reporting to this day at *Radiolab*. I would guess it's probably a third to a half of the stories that involve science. But I don't know that we ever do stories where we blindly accept the idea that science has a monopoly on the truth. And that's a very different stance to take as a science reporter.

I think one could say that some of the many challenges with vaccines, for example, where scientists are not talking in a way that people are believing them, shows that we still, as a culture, and as a country, and as a world, really haven't figured out how to communicate scientific knowledge in a way that is meaningful to people.

Yeah. The pandemic has been a masterclass in how different ways of speaking sometimes don't communicate.

I know that the title of your talk at Weber State is called "The Miracle of Indoor Plumbing." I was hoping you might tell us a little bit about what that title means and maybe give us a sneak preview of what that talk will include.

"The Miracle of Indoor Plumbing" refers to a moment where a word or an idea that you know is important suddenly appears to you in a new form, in a physical form, and feels like a revelation. We all have these moments of revelation where you understand something you already knew. And it was one of those moments that was very powerful for me. The whole talk begins with a sort of crisis. It was a little bit like what I described to you at the very beginning of my public radio career. I left *Radiolab* to go on a sabbatical. It's a series of revelations and discoveries, where the aspects of how we tell a story reveal themselves to me to be not just about storytelling, but about something much deeper. It's about what it means to live a creative life, about what it means to navigate doubt. It's about why surprise is important in a story and why it's really important to surprise someone and not just tell them what they know, how that's almost like an ethical imperative; and how the power of simply writing a sentence is a way to make you feel hope again. All of these things appeared to me, and so I tell a series of anecdotes in a series of stories, and then I pull in some social science research to support these small revelations in order to enlarge them. It's a very personal talk at its heart. It's about me navigating a life crisis and how I reflect on that now—with lots of video and lots of radio.

I'm looking forward to it. I'm glad you mentioned the issue of hope. When I listened to Dolly Parton's America*, I felt cautiously hopeful. The idea that she could bridge these divides – which seem to get ever sharper in our country – and can do so with grace, humor, and wonderful music gave me hope. I listened to it fairly recently, but I know you produced the program in 2019, pre-pandemic. Did you feel hopeful in producing* Dolly Parton's America*? Have those feelings changed in the past few years?*

That's a great question. I did feel hopeful. There's some way in which Dolly moves through situations where she is two things at once, that feel sometimes at odds. She's incredibly empowered. You're not going to tell a story about Dolly that she doesn't want you to tell; she's not going to get down with that. At the same time, she is so empathetic. There's something in that stance where she's incredibly self-possessed, but also really caring. There's a story that she tells in the series about her dealings with Porter Wagoner, her long-time vocal duo partner. She just refused to condemn him, and I was so admiring of that—the grace and the forgiveness. But also, she never apologizes for what she wants. So, there's something in that that felt really powerful to me, and it acted as a model for how to carry yourself when you're confronting difference—to begin with empathy, but to never sacrifice yourself in the process. But also, it was incredibly powerful for me to understand that the place where I grew up—that I had always held as just a place I moved through, I had no roots there—was in fact just as much mine to claim as anyone's. The culture of which I'm a part is very much woven into the fabric of East Tennessee. It was amazing to me, musically, to understand the similarities and the ways in which the divisions maybe aren't real. These divisions certainly exist, but in the end, they feel horrible, and intractable, and actually may be just fictions at their heart. I say that with caution, because particularly when you look at race, and the ways in which race plays into a lot of these decisions, calling these divisions fiction would be horrible, but I do still feel a lot of hope about it. And the ways in which we're speaking to each other right now feels really hard to stomach at times. And I don't just mean the ways in which the right speaks to the left. Donald Trump has influenced everyone. He's there within our relationships. His tentacles reach everywhere—like when I'm eating cereal, somehow, he's still in the room. There's a spirit of that. I don't know that we've exorcised that yet; I don't know how to bridge the divide. But I do know that when

you understand somebody, it's harder to hate them. And so, I think we can at least embark on that process of understanding the people we think we hate. And then see how we feel.

It seems like the kind of work that you do, and the questions that you are asking, ask us to do the same thing – to have conversations that challenge our beliefs and to listen to what other people's beliefs are.

One of the things that I'm really excited about right now, that I'm developing, and just announced today, is that I'll be doing some teaching at Vanderbilt University. I really want to teach a course about how to talk to a human. Listening is hard—it's a hard thing to do. And here are some things that you can do to get better at listening. I'm not saying I know how to do it, like a genius or anything. But I want to create a course that draws from journalism, but also therapy, oral history, and all of these practices that are about listening. I feel like that would be useful. I don't know if anyone will take it.

I think they would.

I'm really excited about that because I do feel like, in some ways, that is more important than. . . I don't know, I don't even want to finish that sentence. But it feels like an important task.

Thank you for your time.

Notes

1. Quah, Nicholas. "It's the End of an Era for Radiolab." *Vulture*, 26 Aug. 2022, https://top1tv.net/2022/01/radiolab-influence-jad-abumrad.html.

2. Roberts, Jacob. "The Mystery of Yellow Rain." *Distillations*, 13 Apr. 2018, https://www.sciencehistory.org/distillations/the-mystery-of-yellow-rain.

3. Earlier in 2022, television personality and the leading podcaster on Spotify, Joe Rogan, featured panelists who spouted false information about the efficacy of ivermectin in combatting COVID-19 and then offered the defense that he doesn't always get things right. For more information, see, for example, Aaron Blake, "The coronaries misinformation on Joe Rogan's show, explained," *The Washington Post*, February 2, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/02/02/actual-joe-rogan-coronavirus-misinformation/.



Deborah Uman (Ph.D., University of Colorado at Boulder) is the dean of the Telitha E. Lindquist College of Arts & Humanities at Weber State University. She is the author of *Women as Translators in Renaissance England* and co-editor of *Staging the Blazon in Early Modern Theater*. She also co-edited *Liberating Shakespeare for Young Adults*, which is forthcoming and builds on the work of her NEH Institute: "Transforming Shakespeare's Tragedies. Adaptation, Education and Diversity." Uman specializes in English Renaissance literature, including writers such as William Shakespeare and John Milton, with an additional focus on women writers from the period such as Mary Sidney and Aphra Behn. Other teaching and scholarly interests include postcolonial literature, public humanities, and sustainability.

POETRY, ACTIVISM, AND THE POSSIBILITY OF REDEMPTION

FELICIA MITCHELL



A Conversation with BARBARA KINGSOLVER



Barbara Kingsolver was born in 1955 and grew up in rural Kentucky. She earned degrees in biology from DePauw University and the University of Arizona and has worked as a freelance writer and author since 1985. At various times in her adult life, she has lived in England, France, and the Canary Islands, and has worked in Europe, Africa, Asia, Mexico, and South America. She spent two decades in Tucson, Arizona, before moving to southwestern Virginia where she currently resides. She has published novels, nonfiction, poetry, and newspaper articles, with her literary works being translated into more than two dozen languages and included in numerous literary anthologies as well as in core literature curricula in high schools and colleges across the nation. She published Another America/Otra America *(with Spanish translations by Rebeca Cartes), a collection of poems grounded in her life in the American Southwest, with The Seal Press in 1992. Some poems were written in the 1980s and others, in a revised edition, in the 1990s. Many novels and works of nonfiction appeared between this book and* How to Fly (In Ten Thousand Easy Lessons), *a collection of poems growing out of Appalachia and beyond, including Italy, that was released in 2020. In 2022, with a renewed interest in her poetry, and with Kingsolver mindful of the current border crisis, Seal Edition published a third edition of* Another America/Otra America. *The poems look at past and present political events with attention to racism, discrimination, and immigration, as well as the possibility of redemption and change. In this conversation, Kingsolver elaborates on her craft and the relevance of poetry growing out of personal experiences, political revelations, and relationships.*

A few people may think of you as a novelist who decided to write poetry. In fact, Kate Kellaway's insightful review in The Guardian *of your newer book of poems,* How to Fly (In Ten Thousand Easy Lessons)*, begins with a nod to your exceptional career as a novelist: "Whenever a novelist takes flight into poetry, one has, however unreasonably, misgivings – based on a received, under-examined idea of poetry as an exclusive vocation. And with a novelist of Kingsolver's stature, the last thing one wants is to see her as an impostor." But you have always been a poet.*

I was relieved that despite her misgivings, that stern reviewer did allow me into the club! And you're right, I have been a poet for as long as I've been any kind of writer at all. Most of the poems in this collection were written in the early 1980s, before I had any idea that I might also be a novelist. I consider *Another America* to be my first adult work.

And the poems still resonate today. What was it like to look anew at these "old poems" with the third edition of Another America/Otra America *(also known as "early work" written by you in your twenties), especially following the success of* How to Fly (In Thousand Easy Lessons)*?*

It's always a precarious business for a writer to look back on her early work, full of trepidation for the landmines of naivete she might find. I certainly registered some surprises in this face-to-face with my young self, as well as relief for some nice turns of beginner's luck. I ended up doing a small amount of reorganization, revising some words whose connotations have shifted over the decades, and cutting one or two entries that didn't stand up to time. Overall, though, I'm pleased to give these poems a fresh chance to stand on their own feet.

I have to ask: You have spoken of your fiction and the work that goes into what constitutes your vocation and your daily bread. Why poetry?

For whatever reason, fiction has a much larger audience than poetry in this country. I don't know a single poet who makes a living solely by writing poems. I've felt very lucky, since the publication of *The Bean Trees* in 1988, that I could support myself and my family by writing novels. I enjoy that work and consider it my day job. Poetry is an avocation, in a sense—something I do purely for pleasure. (Though I'm of course grateful when my poems become books, and readers buy them!) This means I can approach it in a less pragmatic way, not seeing it as daily bread or an engine I have to fix. I'm not required to make it happen every day. It's more accurate to say that poetry happens to me, on its own terms, like a summer storm or a house fire. Or the coincidence of both on the same day. When a poem arrives, it feels like an apple has fallen into my hand, and I give thanks for the luck involved. As a consequence, my poetry tends to be more personal than my other writing, and tracks closely with the emotional landscape of my life. Most of the poems in *Another America* were written shortly after I'd graduated from college and moved to a new place, where I had to deal with the chal-

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lenges of low-paying jobs, survival, relationships, politics—all of life's harsher realities. Whatever other stories they may tell, these poems are the record of an emerging adulthood.

I first came to know your poetry with the 1992 publication of Another America*, and I want to begin with "Beating Time," which first appeared in the second edition in 1998. This poem, inspired by a controversy in Arizona over whether poetry should be removed from the curriculum to make more time for "important" matters, offers a redemptive ode to the necessity of poetry. It shows poetry emanates from both the natural and engineered world.*

Yes, that poem is one of a handful I wrote a few years later, as a mother of young children, that were added to a subsequent printing (the 1992 edition). "Beating Time" happened to me as I was listening to a radio story about poetry getting banned from Arizona schools, while my toddler stood on a chair yelling "Math path boo!" Poetry was right there in the room with us. I thought about kids in school with ceiling fans over their heads beating out a meter: "whispering ***I am***, ***I am*** in iambic pentameter." The poem ends with a vision of all these children standing up and dancing "to the iamb of the fans, / whispering illicit rhymes, / watching the sky for a sign /while the rain beats time."

These are the children "too young to have heard / of poetry's demise"! If children are natural poets, innocent of doomsaying, you must have been a poet early on? And how did you remain one?

From as early as I can remember, I loved reading and had a passion for writing that I pursued very privately. Partly that was shyness, and the acute modesty drilled into me by southern working-class culture, where it's considered extremely rude to aggrandize yourself in any way. I had no idea that people like me could be writers. And later on, when I understood writing to be a profession held by mortals, I still couldn't see imposing myself on readers unless I had something really useful to tell them. I still feel that way. But my move to a border region gave me surprising new things to think about, that seemed worth sharing. As I wrote in the first introduction to these poems, "Arizona was cactus all right, and purple mountains' majesty, but this desert that burned with raw beauty had a great fence built across it, attempting to divide north from south."

One of the poems that introduces this stark contrast between the landscape and the political climate it was backdrop to is "In Exile" (for Rebeca). The poem begins,"These mountains I love / are knuckles / of a fist / that holds your dreams to the ground. . . ."

That poem is dedicated to Rebeca Cartes, who fled as a refugee to the U.S. to escape torture and horrible trauma after a military coup seized control of the democratic government of Chile. I was working with a human rights group helping Central and South American refugees like Rebeca. I learned how many of these people, who are literally running for their lives, get turned back at the border. I also learned that the U.S. had covertly helped organize the coup that terrorized Rebeca and her family. She became my friend, and eventually, the translator of these poems. I was learning huge political lessons: that every story has more than one side, and that the real crux of the matter might be the one you haven't heard yet. Truths that sit comfortably and righteously in one place can be utterly wrong in another. That has remained a central theme of my writing.

Can you talk about that experience of immersing yourself in a new language, new cultures and conflicts, and a new way of thinking about "the American dream?" Did this juxtaposition, the grandeur of the land you expected versus the political scene

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you found, give you something "useful," as you've said, to share in your poems?

It absolutely did. I wasn't prepared for the knowledge of what one nation will do to another. Knowledge arrived, regardless. My work with the human rights group sometimes involved taking people in, giving them a safe place to sleep, listening to their stories. I saw things I couldn't unsee, heard all these heartbreaking or sometimes eerily detached accounts of what they had been through. I'd used the word "American" all my life without thinking about men, women, and children like these: the other Americans.

Many of the poems in this collection are, in fact, dedicated to others, to their experiences, or marking specific events.

A lot of these poems are small, true stories I learned from the people who'd lived them. In addition to the poem for Rebeca, about being forced to live in exile, there's one dedicated to a woman named Juana who was raped by the border patrol. Another, "What the Janitor Heard in the Elevator," was dictated almost verbatim from two rich White ladies discussing their Mexican maids, griping to each as if the janitor and I were invisible. I found inspiration in these things I witnessed, or learned from people close to me, and also from people I came to know second-hand through their humanitarian work, such as Nicaraguan liberation theologist Ernesto Cardenal, to whom "The Monster's Belly" is dedicated.

It is fascinating how in "The Monster's Belly" you bring together your newfound knowledge to look back at childhood, your "growing years" when you participated in the school drills "to survive the rain of Cuban bombs" alongside Father Ernesto's time in Gethsamini, Kentucky, when he renounced violence and joined Thomas Merton at a Trappist Monastery.

It just blew my mind, to learn that Father Ernesto was in Kentucky at the same time I was growing up there. He had this huge heart, this vast understanding of the world's injustices, while I was jumping under my desk and parroting the terrified anti-Communist dogma of the day. I had a fantasy of the little girl meeting the great man and getting a transfusion of his compassion. "I would empty out the ache of my natural childhood," I wrote in this poem, "to find some greater love than the end of the world."

This may be too personal an observation, but some poems here – and in How to Fly (In Ten Thousand Easy Lessons) *– make me think that a balance between the fear imposed on children and the growing revelations that you could make a difference by talking back to the "monster" did emerge over your lifetime. There is sometimes a circling back,*

either direct or implicit, in the poems that makes me want to go back and read others to get the fullest lesson from another. I am thinking of that poem "In the City Ringed with Giants," written in Tucson, that you wrote after being almost literally in the belly of the monster when you visited the underground silo of a decommissioned Titan II missile.

Oh, my goodness, talk about the imposition of fear. I was an adult journalist when I visited that missile silo, on assignment, but left feeling like a scared, helpless child. Nuclear war is hard to think about. As background, the silo was one of eighteen that were built in the 1960s and '70s to house Titan missiles with nuclear warheads. They completely encircled the city of Tucson, Arizona. All aimed at the Soviet Union. They were decommissioned by the time I lived there, thank heavens. One has to assume they would have invited a particularly bad outcome for that city in the event of nuclear war.

As the collection juxtaposes poems grounded in the domestic and the political, the trauma of regimes and of the personal experience, I am reminded of the slogan popularized by Carol Hanisch, which I first learned around the time you came for a residency at Emory & Henry College: "The personal is political." The idea seems to thread through your poems about family (for example, "Babyblues," dedicated to your daughter, "Lily on the verge," and "Daily Bread," dedicated to your husband, Steven) that connects with the more overtly political ones such as "Our Father Who Drowns the Birds." There is a personal feeling here: "There is a season when all wars end: / when the rains come." And further, "There is a season when every ancient anger / settles. . . ."

One of the most important things art can do for us, I think, is to engrave personal, individual lives onto a larger map of the great unsettling conflicts of our time. The human psyche trusts personal stories more than abstract ideas. So, this challenge really calls me, the idea of taking big conflicts, big injustices, and whittling them down to a size that can fit into a reader's heart. Living in a conflict zone precipitated my emotional coming of age, which in turn helped me cut my teeth as a writer of conscience. The poem you mention, "Our Father Who Drowns the Birds," alludes to the revolutions against U.S.-backed regimes in several Latin American countries, but it uses the language of a parent telling a story to a child. Some of these poems are bleak, touching on the hopeless depths of the world's brokenness, because that's the truth. In the whole collection, though, I tried to balance the darker poems with others that bear witness to love, solidarity, and redemption. Because those things are also true.

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I do see this balance, especially emanating from the brutality documented in "This House I Cannot Leave" to the solace of love and family life in Appalachia, especially

in "Daily Bread," with its reverence for a domestic gift in a poem that redeems the kitchen and home as sanctuary. Yet there is still brutality that you are called to address, the poems in Another America/Otra America *relevant today.*

As we discussed earlier, I had some trepidations about resurrecting these poems I wrote more than thirty years ago. But I'm struck by what hasn't changed in all those years, from the ice-water shock of unapologetic racism in "What the Janitor Heard in the Elevator" to the routine humiliations described in "Street Scenes": these could be the #MeToo moments of yesterday, today, or tomorrow. I live a long way from the border now, but wherever we are, all of us live among certain people who are running for their lives, and others who rest easy with privilege.

I might go off-topic for a moment here and comment on how your new novel, Demon Copperhead*, addresses this imbalance of privilege as it explores institutional poverty, addiction, love, loss, and redemption through the mesmerizing narrator's voice. Poetry and fiction come from different places, but there is that act of choosing the perfect voice, the perfect detail, and so on, that connects them. There is the cry from the heart within poetry, and the cry from the heart of a boy who asserts, "My thinking here is to put everything in the order of how it happened, give or take certain intervals of a young man skunked out of his skull box, some dots duly connected." Could you comment on the interplay of poetry and fiction as you go into that deep place in the psyche where writing comes from?*

Yes, of course. Despite all the differences of craft, poetry and fiction are more similar than they are different. It comes down to hearing a voice, and listening closely to what it might say. Letting it sing. Letting it tell the truth. Giving it room to assert its wisdom. *Demon Copperhead* was very much driven by a voice. This fierce, funny, seriously pissed-off young man started talking in my head, and I typed as fast as I could. I mean, I did invent him, I know that. I molded the clay and it came to life, commanding me to give him room to assert his wisdom. I still had to go back frequently and revise him, to keep him on track. Good writers, like parents, have to discipline our progeny, but it is a beautiful thing when they surprise us with fresh insights.

Before we conclude, I wonder if I might ask what the subject of your first poem written as a child was – and how, looking back on it in the context of everything that came after, it might serve as a premonition or foreshadowing or. . . .

The earliest poems I remember writing as a child were descriptive, pastoral idylls along the lines of Blake or Tennyson, except overwrought and ridiculous. Cheerful mockingbirds, weeping willow trees, the golden

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morning sun, etc. I was a solitary kid who spent a lot of time outside. I probably should forgive myself for being corny, as a second grader whose main influences were Mother Goose and Christina Rossetti. The main thing, the real foreshadowing I suppose, is that I wrote, almost every day, starting at age eight when someone gave me a diary for my birthday. Writing has always been my most basic way of processing and understanding my lived experience. I still enjoy solitude. And I still spend a lot of time outside.


A.D. Stanley

Felicia Mitchell (Ph.D., Univ. of Texas) is professor emeritus of English at Emory & Henry College in southwest Virginia. Her scholarship includes *Her Words: Diverse Voices in Contemporary Appalachian Women's Poetry* (Univ. of Tennessee Press) and "Startling Morals: Teaching Ecofiction with Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer*," which was included in *Appalachia in the Classroom: Teaching the Region* (ed. Theresa L. Burris and Patricia M. Gantt for Ohio Univ. Press). Over the years, she coordinated the visits of many writers, including a residency that brought Barbara Kingsolver to Emory & Henry College through a Lila Wallace fellowship. Mitchell's poetry is included in anthologies such as *Mountains Piled Upon Mountains: Appalachian Nature Writing in the Anthropocene* (ed. Jessica Cory for West Virginia Univ. Press). Her most recent book of poems is *A Mother Speaks, A Daughter Listens: Journeying Together Through Dementia* (Wising Up Press). She serves on the editorial board of *Weber*.

SOUNDS OF ABSCENCE

MARÍA DEL MAR GONZÁLEZ-GONZÁLEZ



Guillermo Galindo, *Sonic Borders III* performance, Val A. Browning Center for Performing Arts, October 28, 2021. Photo by Cam McLeod for Ogden Contemporary Arts.

A Conversation with GUILLERMO GALINDO

Guillermo Galindo (b. 1960, Mexico City) is an experimental composer, sonic architect, performer, and visual media artist. His work expands the conventional limits between music and the arts while intersecting with politics, spirituality, and social awareness. His graphic music scores, three-dimensional sculptural cyber-totemic sonic objects, and performances have been shown at major museums and art biennials across the world, including documenta 14 *(2017),* Pacific Standard Time *(2017), and* Art Basel *(2018-19). In the fall of 2021, Galindo was one of 24 artists in the* Vida, Muerte, Justicia \ Life, Death, Justice: Latin American and Latinx Art for the 21st Century *exhibition held at both Ogden Contemporary Arts and Weber State University's Mary Elizabeth Dee Shaw Gallery. Several of his cyber-totemic sonic devices and original graphic music scores from Border Cantos – a collaborative project with photographer Richard Misrach – were displayed at the Shaw Gallery. He also performed* Sonic Borders III *– a sonic ritual featuring objects found around the Mexico-U.S. border – at Weber State University's Browning Center. This conversation took place in the spring of 2022, following Galindo's visit to Weber State University.*

Galindo trained in musical composition at the Escuela Nacional de Música in Mexico City while also completing a BA in graphic design from the Universidad del Nuevo Mundo. He then attended Berklee College of Music where he completed a film scoring and composition BA, and received an MA in composition and electronic music from Mills College. He currently teaches at the California College of Arts in San Francisco. His acoustic compositions include major chamber and solo works, two symphonies commissioned by the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) Philharmonic Orchestra, the Oakland Symphony Orchestra and Chorus, and two operas with libretto.

Hola, Guillermo. Thank you for taking the time to chat with me as a follow up to your visit to Weber State and participation in the Vida, Muerte, Justicia *exhibition co-curated by me and Jorge Rojas. At the* Vida, Muerte, Justicia *exhibition you had several cyber-totemic sonic devices and graphic music scores from your* Border Cantos *series that were made with found objects. Could you tell us more about how this idea of working with objects found along the Mexico-U.S. border fence originated? And, had you built musical instruments before?*



Guillermo Galindo, *Sonic Borders III* performance, Val A. Browning Center for Performing Arts, October 28, 2021. Photo by Cam McLeod for Ogden Contemporary Arts.

I'll start with the second question. I hadn't made musical instruments before, but my grandfather sold pianos and collected unusual instruments. Because my grandfather sold pianos, instead of toys, I was given parts of pianos to play with when I was growing up, which I used to build things. Also, my father was an engineer, and he always encouraged me to build things. So, I didn't realize until recently that it was all connected.

I'm trained in contemporary classical music composition. The role of a composer is very pyramidal. There's the director of the orchestra and the composer on the top of the pyramid, and then there's the orchestra and everybody else. While researching music and sound in pre-Columbian cultures, I realized that, within them, as well as within many others like African, Brazilian, Haitian, and Afro-Cuban, music is transmitted and performed in a horizontal model. In many cultures, music is part of life and therefore a shared community activity many times related to rites of passage. In the case of pre-Columbian cultures, music and sound were also used to heal. Being animistic, they used the sound of objects surrounding the person to perform the healing.

When my father passed, my mother invited me to choose whatever clothing I wanted from his closet. I realized that my father was present in every single item. This coincided with my study of pre-Columbian concepts of healing. The purpose of some of the pre-Columbian music was to heal, and the sonic devices are the talismans. Through our life journey, we are all connected to each and every object surrounding us. The recognition and our reciprocal connection to objects around us and their particular shape and sound can be used to make us more aware of the "place" we occupy and our inevitable connection to everything around us. Every entity that is part of our life, its shape and sound, has the power to heal us.

While composing an orchestral piece for the Oakland Symphony Orchestra, I realized my role in the pyramidal structure of classical Western composition and orchestral hierarchy. It was then when I decided to take a different, more horizontal route in my work.



Guillermo Galindo discussing his work in *Vida, Muerte, Justicia* with Contemporary Art History students at WSU Shaw Gallery. Photo by María del Mar González-González.

I wanted to be closer to "the people" and to acknowledge the presence and connection within all things. As a result, I started building electromechanical instruments related to my own healing process using the sound of my own personal objects. My first piece, "Maiz," was made out of a box of wine that I drank while I was writing the piece. It also had credit cards and other things that would make sounds to heal me from whatever illness I had. Years later, I was asked to write a piece for Quinteto Latino with Latin American subject matter. Instead of using stereotypical arrangements of "Cielito lindo" or "La cucaracha," I came up with the idea of going to the border to gather objects—personal items left by immigrants—and to use them to make sonic devices to play with Quinteto Latino. And that was the beginning of it.

What about the border attracted you?

I heard a story on National Public Radio about a person that lived near the border. They were describing the kind of objects that they find around their house—things like children's toys, clothing, personal objects like photographs or passports, religious objects like rosaries, pedialyte and juice bottles, and containers or wrappers of packaged food. The story truly moved me and it coincided with many ideas I was already brewing. It was this combination of events and story that led me to take action.

There is a legacy of avant-garde artists working with found objects ranging from Marcel Duchamp to Allan Kaprow to Robert Rauschenberg to Tomás Ybarra-Frausto's concept of rasquachismo*, or making due with what you have, with which your work seems to be in conversation – you use things that surround you to make something new. Would you talk about your practice of working with found objects?*

My music and art training comes from the school of conceptualism: in terms of music, Karlheinz Stockhausen or John Cage, and in terms of art, Marcel Duchamp, Joseph Beuys, Yoko Ono, and Eva Hesse. I take an approach called "reverse anthropology," which picked up at the beginning of the twentieth century. We see it in Brazilian painter Tarsila do Amaral's painting *Abapuru* made in 1928. The concept ingests what the West has brought to our countries (Latin America) in terms of art and culture, and regurgitates it in a different way.

My work is rooted in the principles of the conceptual art and music of the late 20th century, which stemmed from a rejection of an appropriated Mexican nationalistic aesthetic. I find myself in a place where I can synthesize what happened before me and, at the same time, comment on the art created by previous Mexican and Latin American generations of artists and composers. It is essential for me to acknowledge the hegemony and influence of European, American, and Western aesthetics in Latin America and the rest of the "third world."

The early and mid-20th century in Mexico was the beginning of the Pre-Columbian Renaissance and Mexican nationalism. Artists

such as Diego Rivera, Frida Khalo, Rina Lazo, Maria Izquierdo, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and José Clemente Orozco. We also had composers like Silvestre Revueltas, Julián Carrillo, Maria Grever, and José Pablo Moncayo. All of these artists were creating art with political meaning and works that reinforced Mexican identity.

By the 1950s and '60s nationalistic art had lost its essence as the government and the media appropriated it for political propaganda. Something similar happened in the Soviet Union, then new generations decided to move away from political and "nationalistic" art. In Mexico, they called it "romper la cortina del nopal" (breaking the cactus curtain).[1]

In the mid-20th century, Mexican and Latin American artists and musicians started studying abroad, mainly in Europe, and adopting more *avant-garde* aesthetics. Conceptualism and *Fluxus* were essential to the work of my previous generation of artists, which included Vicente Rojo, José Luis Cuevas, Mathias Goeritz, and my Mexican composition teachers, Mario Lavista and Julio Estrada, who studied with Iannis Xenakis, Stockhausen, and György Ligeti, and followed the music of John Cage and the American conceptualists.

As an artist of my generation, I decided to mix both things, taking back conceptual art to give it a political meaning.

My Mexican humor is always present in my work as it comments on the work of Western artists such as Marcel Duchamp, Leonardo da Vinci, and John Cage. As an immigrant to the U.S., I also learned about what Ibarra Frausto calls *rasquachismo,* which has been an enormous influence in my work and, in my view, the Mexican version of conceptualism.

I've noticed that in interviews, when you talk about working with objects that you've found across the border, you refer to them as "sacred objects" and "effigies" and reject terms like "trash" or "recycling." Can you expand more on this and discuss why this distinction in the nature of these objects is so important to you?

It is not discrediting the legacy of Western artists or Western culture, which is incredibly rich and has contributed a lot to the world in all fields. It is more the colonialist view of our relationship with what surrounds us and the belief that everything out there is in the service of humans. The colonialist "one way" relationship to things and nature as consumer items forgets about time, intention, and circumstance of things.

You drink Coca-Cola, and you throw the can into the trash, and that's it. But I want to go beyond that—what is the story of the Coca-Cola can that I drank when I met my brother after not seeing him in ten years? It's a different kind of can than the one I just go drink and throw in the trash. Somebody once shared a quote with me, which they said was by Stockhausen, the composer,



Guillermo Galindo, *Sonic Borders III* performance, Val A. Browning Center for Performing Arts, October 28, 2021. Photo by Cam McLeod for Ogden Contemporary Arts.

When my work is referred to as recycling, it's wrong. It's not recycling because that takes away the meaning that I want to give the objects. Whatever the person who leaves their country brings with them is either for survival or for remembrance – a little bit of home they take with them. It's an object of connection in the same way a sonic object in the pre-Columbian world holds a connection to the spiritual or to the healing world. So, it's not recycling. To call my work recycling is not only simple, it's kind of silly.

that goes something like this: "a tennis shoe found on the moon is not the same as a tennis shoe found in a trash can." The meaning of things depends on their framing and context. Especially now that we have the internet, there are a lot of things that are out of context. They lose their meaning in the process of consumerism, and recycling is part of that. So, when my work is referred to as recycling, it's wrong. It's not recycling because that takes away the meaning that I want to give the objects. Whatever the person who leaves their country brings with them is either for survival or for remembrance—a little bit of home they take with them. It's an object of connection in the same way a sonic object in the pre-Columbian world holds a connection to the spiritual or to the healing world. So, it's not recycling. To call my work recycling is not only simple, it's kind of silly.

Your Sonic Borders III *performance at Weber State was your first live performance since the COVID-19 shutdown. What were your goals for the audience?*

I don't want the audience to take away anything in particular, but rather to be present and to listen. To experience. There's a very direct and objective way of thinking about music and sound, where the music is played and the audience understands the narrative. It is the physical principle of resonance. Music is written in a way that suggests an understanding of place and time. The harmonic concept of consonance and dissonance is only one linear way to understand time, tension, and release. You go to a concert, where there's going to be a string quartet, a first movement, a second, and then a third one. The first movement is the allegro; it's going to be fast and happy. Then, you move to the second, and if not, you wonder, "Hey, what happened?" This is not what I want in my music. I arrive when unexpected things happen.

I am also about surrounding the meaning. For example, if I say "a table," then it's any table. But if I say, "*the* table," it carries a specific meaning attached to that table. It's the table where you share bread with your family, or the table where you decide things in a meeting. The table carries a universe of meanings. So, I'm more into the universe of meanings attached to "the table" than I'm into the abstract idea of "table." This connects to the concept of objects I explained before. I don't want anything specific to be taken by the audience, but rather for them to have an experience. The music is planned as a series of actions to be completed the same way a ceremony or a ritual is to be completed. It's not a piece of music that has a beginning, middle, and end. Rather, it's more of a series of actions to be completed, which connects to John Cage's ***Water Music***, or instruction-based art practiced by Yoko Ono. These works are based on a number of actions to be performed. They don't have a particular timeline or time divisions in mind. They are not songs, but rather are narratives

with no particular time beat or tonality. These pieces don't serve any particular purpose, but methodically perform a series of actions. My work here is more open-ended and is as long as it takes for each section. It's a very different way of playing and hearing music. There are a lot of cultures outside the West that use different ways of measuring music. For example, the shakuhachi flute music of Japan. The timing is measured in the breathing—in how long you breathe in and breathe out. The phases are measured that way. So, it depends on how big your lungs are, whether you are in shape, and how you breathe—the measurements are regulated by a natural process.

I am curious about the stories that you aim to tell, and in part this is because, after you left, I had a friend tell me that your performance captured his experience of crossing the border.

Oh, wow. What an honor. . .

It made me think about the stories that you tell through the performance and with the instruments, with the cyber-totemic sonic devices. So how does this all come together to help you tell stories?

In the *Border Cantos* book, I call them "imaginary stories." In our lives we experience sound more than music. We live with the sound that the chair makes when we move it, or the bottle when it drops, or the sound of water when you serve a glass of water. So, sound in itself is more familiar to us than music. Sound is the score of our lives, the film score of our lives, even more than music. So, if I put together a number of sounds that are related to the border, and I frame them around the concept that these are objects that migrants brought with them, I create soundscapes that refer to that experience and connect to it in many different ways. It's this very beautiful thing that leaves it open to the imagination and is not didactic—not saying this is this and that is that. The experience takes you

If I put together a number of sounds that are related to the border, and I frame them around the concept that these are objects that migrants brought with them, I create soundscapes that refer to that experience and connect to it in many different ways. It's this very beautiful thing that leaves it open to the imagination and is not didactic – not saying this is this and that is that. The experience takes you to the place where things connect in certain ways, but aren't necessarily linearly connected. The visitors and audience are placed in the soundscape – you're actually placing the audience inside an imaginary place in time.

to the place where things connect in certain ways, but aren't necessarily linearly connected. The visitors and audience are placed in the soundscape—you're actually placing the audience inside an imaginary place in time. My collaborator, Richard Misrach, does the same thing through photography. There are no people or faces. We are not using actual photographs of immigrants. That's too simple. We are inviting the viewer or listener *to experience* themselves. To connect their imagination to a dream-like situation and to be part of it. There is also the dream-like situation that is created with this kind of experience—the connection with your imagination.

In the last few years you've expanded your work on immigration, borders, and hu-

During the last two or three years I've also been working with the effects of the border on nature and desecrated Native American sites. I think that's a border too – the border between us and nature. One approach I use is from the point of view of animal and plant spirits, that is, the border between us and the unconscious. I have this other piece called Sonic Biogenesis: Genomics and Mutant Jungles *(originally known as* Sonic Botany*), a series I made for* PST (Pacific Standard Time, 2017-18)*, that is a commentary on colonialism and European codification of the natural world in the Americas, and the appropriation and commodification of natural resources. My comment refers to the biotech corporations that are appropriating the genome sequences of corn and other species of plants to commodify and sell as their property. It's set in a post-apocalyptic world in which we don't exist as humans.*

manitarian crises to bring attention to other issues including African and Middle Eastern refugees in Europe. Can you tell us more about this expansion in your newer works?

Yes, after ***Border Cantos***, I was invited to be in ***documenta 14*** (2017) where I did solo projects both in Athens, Greece, and in Kassel, Germany. The series was called ***Echo Exodus***. This time around, I used objects from African and Middle Eastern immigrants found in border crossings in Greece and refugee camps in Germany. For my piece titled ***Fluchtzieleuropaschiffbruchschallkörper***, I picked out a couple of wrecked refugee boats abandoned on the island of Lesbos, Greece. I brought the boats all the way to Germany and turned them into enormous cyber-totemic sonic devices.

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Even in ***Border Cantos*** there's a border of time. I always thought of ***Border Cantos***, well, my part of ***Border Cantos***, as a museum of objects, of immigrant objects, that could be seen two thousand years ago or three thousand years into the future. Within this perspective is the concept of circular time,



Guillermo Galindo discussing his work in *Vida, Muerte, Justicia* with Contemporary Art History students at WSU Shaw Gallery. Photo by María del Mar González-González.

which is more of an Eastern concept, in which events keep repeating themselves.

There have always been wars, immigration, poor people, epidemics, etc. There are immigrants again. There are poor people. There's sickness. There's epidemics. We've seen these all before, and we'll see them all again. In Western thought there's a focus on progress and linearity, while in reality we have the same problems we had 10,000 years ago. We've got a dictator in Russia invading Ukraine in the same way we had Hitler and Napoleon before that. Unless we have a big change of consciousness, we're going to keep repeating. It's not about armed revolutions anymore, we had enough of those and are still in the same place. I think it's about a deep change of consciousness that relates to the spiritual, and the acknowledgement of things, more than an armed revolution. That's my humble point of view (Laughter).

You just mentioned a few of your more recent projects. I know you've been really busy. Can you tell us a little bit more about what you are currently working on?

Yes, I am working on a piece this summer with a Mexican theater company, La Quinta Teatro, that's coming to San Jose to collaborate with the Chicanx theater company Teatro Visión. I'm playing with Red Culebra, which is my sonic duet with Cristóbal Martínez from Postcommodity. It's a duet of synthesizers entitled "Let Us Speak Frog." We wrote it after reading *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* by Elizabeth Kolbert (2014). In this book, Kolbert makes the case that frogs are a reflection of what we're doing to the environment. Martínez and I created this narrative in which we turn into flying snakes, and we go and speak frog languages and apologize to the frogs (Laughter). It is a really beautiful project. And, then I'm continuing with my *Sonic Biogenesis: Genomics and Mutant Jungles* project, which is gradually turning into an opera including animation.

This month, I am having the second movement of my Remote Control Quartet, originally written for Kronos, at the High Line in New York, played in front of Sam Durant's drone sculpture. The quartet is interactive with audience smartphones and is a comment on the dehumanization of violence in the digital era.

I am also expanding my work on the border spirits from an exhibit in Santa Ana in L.A. called *Native/ Non-Native/ Supernatural*. It focuses on native and non-native plants and how non-native plants have completely changed the environment of California, and that many of the current fires are created by non-native grasses that were brought from Europe for aesthetic reasons. I also explore the commodification of fruits and products that have, from the beginning of colonization, changed the nature of production. For example, we now have the avocado. There's a lot of craving for avocado in the U.S. It's kind of in fashion. Well, now people want it so much that complete fields are planted with avocado, since that's what the market demands, instead of practicing crop rotation. Avocado trees require a lot of water, so there are a lot of regions in Mexico that are running out of water because of avocados. Not to

mention the drug cartels that are involved in the avocado trade, and all sorts of things that ultimately end up with people having to leave their homes because they have no water and their environments are ruined. The drug cartels take over, there's violence, and it's another cycle. I'm trying to connect everything. At this point in my career, I relate a lot to nature, flora, and fauna, and the beautiful, amazing things that we have on this planet, but to which we don't pay attention.

Notes

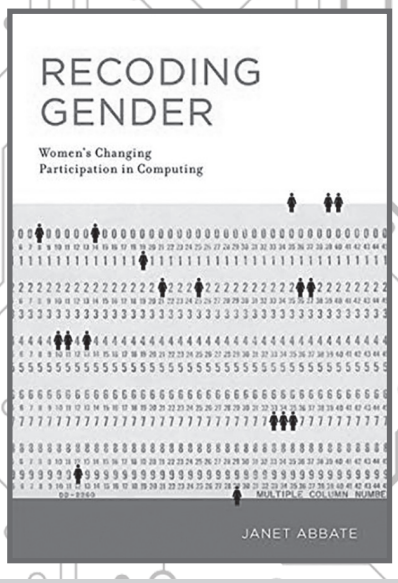
1. "Romper la cortina de nopal [breaking the cactus curtain]" is a reference to "The cortina de nopal ("The Cactus Curtain")" manifesto published in 1956 by José Luis Cuevas (Mexican, 1934-2017), a member of the Generación de la Ruptura, in the daily newspaper, *Novedades de México*.



María del Mar González-González (Ph.D., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign) is assistant professor of art history at Weber State University and an independent curator. Specializing in the fields of Latin American & Caribbean and U.S. Latinx art, with a research focus on the intersection of art and politics, her work investigates the interrelations among exhibitions, printmaking, and representation in the San Juan Graphic Arts Biennial. González-González's interests include socially engaged practices, decolonization, and institutional history. Her academic writings have been published in *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, *Caiana: Journal of Art History* and *Visual Culture of the Centro Argentino de Investigadores de Arte* and in numerous art exhibition catalogs.

RENDERING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE: WOMEN PROGRAMMERS PAST AND PRESENT

LUKE FERNANDEZ & DAVID L. FERRO



A Conversation with
JANET ABBATE



Janet Abbate (Ph.D., Univ. of Pennsylvania) is the author of *Inventing the Internet* (MIT Press, 1999) and *Recoding Gender: Women's Changing Participation in Computing* (MIT Press, 2012) as well as many journal articles. She's a Professor in Science, Technology, and Society at Virginia Tech. In the fall of 2022, Dr. Abbate gave a presentation on women in computing that was hosted by the Peterson Speaker Series at the College of Engineering, Applied Science & Technology at Weber State University. Women have been underrepresented in many fields in computing, and Dr. Abbate's research provides illuminating historical insights into how and why this underrepresentation developed as well as how it might be redressed.

(Luke) Can you tell us a little bit about how you became interested in the history of computing? And the role of women in computing culture?

In the mid-'80s, between college and grad school, I spent three years as a computer programmer. I ended up at MIT at the end of that, working on Project Athena, which was a big distributed computing project. So, I was in a programming environment. I was programming. My boss was a woman. There were lots of women there. I didn't realize at the time that that was sort of the peak for women's participation. To me it just seemed like, "Oh, there are plenty of women in this field. It's a profession that's open to them." A bit later, when I went back to grad school in American Civilization, it was still before the World Wide Web came out. And so, I was one of the few people who really even knew what the Internet was who wasn't actually in science or computer science. So, no one in my department had any idea what I was talking about when I said, "You know, this is really cool. I think it would be a good dissertation topic."

So, I ended up writing my dissertation on the history of the Internet, and of course that became the book *Inventing the Internet*. And by the time the book came out in 1999, the World Wide Web had spread far and wide—everyone had heard of it. But, at the time I was researching the book it was still an obscure topic. I had all these questions about it. And then, by the time the book came out, it was a topic that everyone was interested in. While I was writing the book, I wasn't finding any women in the story, there were just a few names. And one went under a male name, "Jake Feinler," whose real name was Elizabeth, but I didn't realize she was a woman. So, there weren't a lot of women's names coming up in the Internet history, and I thought, well, this seems odd because it hadn't matched my own programming experience where I was surrounded by women. So, I decided, well, in the next book I'm going to investigate this.

(Luke) What did you find out? What role did gender play, and what are some of the more important roles women played in your history?

One of the more important things to highlight is that women were there, and honestly, I was so naive when I started this project. I thought, "Because there are virtually no women in the historical record, there probably weren't that many, and I can get this project done really quickly." And then, as soon as I started looking, there were huge numbers of women, but they were invisible. And so, one thing is that they were actually there, and they are becoming more visible in various books and projects and movies, etc. (And certainly, Black women were even less visible, and though I had heard of some of them I couldn't manage to contact any to interview for my book. Which is something I wish I'd been able to do. But that was sort of the next generation of scholarship.) So, just because women weren't visible doesn't mean they weren't there. They were there from day one, and were there in substantial numbers even early on. They weren't the majority by any means. But they were there in large numbers. Women weren't just an anomaly, or one-offs.

A number of questions also came to me, both from looking at the past and the surprise at finding women there, that shed light on present policy concerns about underrepresentation. Why do people go into this field? What makes it look appealing to them? What makes it look accessible? What makes it look like an opportunity, or not? What does it mean for something to be an opportunity? Because if we just say, "Well, there's no longer a legal restriction, so why aren't you there?," that doesn't really explain very much. You also have to ask, "Why was this inviting, or not?" In the 1950s the alternatives

for a woman interested in STEM were really quite limited. There was overt bias in many STEM fields, and this limited opportunities. But in computing the opportunities were less limited. In computing you could actually put a math background to work much more than in other jobs women had. And all of these women were saying, "I didn't even know what a computer was. But I just knew this was much better than, you know, doing backroom calculations in some other STEM field." In comparison to the past, today there are so many more things that women can do. And because of this, computing needs to step up and make the case for why women should go into the field rather than something else.

A number of questions also came to me, both from looking at the past and the surprise at finding women there, that shed light on present policy concerns about underrepresentation. . . . In the 1950s the alternatives for a woman interested in STEM were really quite limited. There was overt bias in many STEM fields, and this limited opportunities. But in computing the opportunities were less limited. In computing you could actually put a math background to work much more than in other jobs women had. And all of these women were saying, "I didn't even know what a computer was. But I just knew this was much better than, you know, doing backroom calculations in some other STEM field."

Another question that arose as I did my research was how women's family responsibilities shaped their opportunities and the ways those responsibilities sometimes made it easier and sometimes harder to code. In the '50s and '60s and even into the early '70s, a lot of coding was initially done on paper and on punch cards. It didn't require sitting in front of a terminal. So, in some circumstances it was actually easier to do at home. That is, if you could convince your employer. That was the hard part. But the actual work required writing on paper. And so, some of the women who told me stories about this were saying, "It wasn't hard to do from home. Yeah, we just needed to go in periodically and run this, but you weren't running programs every day at that time." So, for a while anyway, in comparison to other types of engineering that required employees to work at the office or in the field, programming was more accessible to women who needed to be at home because it could be done at home.

Of course, once coding had to be done in front of a terminal, and no one had terminals at home, the imperatives of the technology and its scarcity pulled people back into the office. But today, of course, the ubiquity of computers makes it easier for people to work from home again. But do they have those opportunities? Sure, the technology facilitates working from home, but social mores and the attitudes of your employer might not always.

The capacity and willingness of employers to make an inviting space for women was also shaped by things as banal as whether there were bathrooms that women could use. And whether the employer needed programmers to come in late at night with their punch cards, which was often required when computing time cost a lot. These obstacles, while obvious now, weren't visible until I actually went out and interviewed the women who were coding, or attempting to code, in those times.

(David) I like the idea that women were the original late-night Mountain Dew programmers.

Another question that arose as I did my research was how women's family responsibilities shaped their opportunities and the ways those responsibilities sometimes made it easier and sometimes harder to code. In the '50s and '60s and even into the early '70s, a lot of coding was initially done on paper and on punch cards. It didn't require sitting in front of a terminal. So, in some circumstances it was actually easier to do at home. . . . . So, for a while anyway, in comparison to other types of engineering that required employees to work at the office or in the field, programming was more accessible to women who needed to be at home because it could be done at home.

Yeah. Small work space details often shaped how comfortable women felt. One person I interviewed, I can't remember who this was, said that she had an advantage because, while the men's room was just a men's room, the women's room had a lounge attached to it along with a sofa, and she said she could go take a nap in the middle of the night while she was waiting for the mainframe to become available. Of course, if there were inviting aspects of the office space, there were uninviting ones as well. Sometimes one would find pornography on the walls. Workplaces varied. But one place that was fairly progressive was IBM, which made concerted efforts to hire women. IBM workers often wore blue suits to work that were so uniform that it solidified IBM's reputation as a corporation with a very conformist culture. However, it was also in many ways genteel, which was more inviting than the baseball caps and skateboards and other artifacts of "bro" culture often found in today's companies. The workplace might have perpetuated and fostered mainstream masculinity, but at least it wasn't usually a toxic form of masculinity. And in this relative sense it was less gendered than the modern programming workplace. There are other examples where the mid-20th century workplace was more inviting than our current ones. For example, at Los Alamos National Laboratory, everyone worked long hours, usually six days a week. But everyone was dedicated and convinced that they were helping the nation. Everyone was incredibly motivated and working together. So, there was a lot of camaraderie. And on Saturdays they instituted so-called "casual Saturday," when people got to dress down even if you still had to come into the lab.

The larger historical point I'm making is that there were different ways the workplace could be inviting or not inviting, and it would be facile to say that the history tells a tale of unmitigated oppression. Yeah, there was discrimination in many ways. But a lot of women I interviewed said, "You know, it was exciting. I really felt like I was doing something important. There was genuine team spirit and it wasn't just you working alone in some cubicle. We had fun." In my history I felt obliged to highlight those experiences. That often it was a tale of success against the odds and that women still had a lot of fun. They often loved their work and the workplace even if not every aspect of the workplace was inviting.

(Luke) So, the history is complicated and maybe challenges our intuitions? It's not simply what historians call "Whig history," where things are bad in the past and progressively getting better.

But one place that was fairly progressive was IBM, which made concerted efforts to hire women. IBM workers often wore blue suits to work that were so uniform that it solidified IBM's reputation as a corporation with a very conformist culture. However, it was also in many ways genteel, which was more inviting than the baseball caps and skateboards and other artifacts of "bro" culture often found in today's companies. The workplace might have perpetuated and fostered mainstream masculinity, but at least it wasn't usually a toxic form of masculinity. And in this relative sense it was less gendered then the modern programming workplace.

Yeah, absolutely. And it's interesting, because there's a common narrative in histories of technology, which is the idea that professionalization equals masculinization. The historian Ruth Oldenziel wrote a book called *Making Technology Masculine*. She claims that, as engineering schools professionalized, they also threw out the women and the lower classes which had previously worked in the profession. Some people argue that this also happened in programming. And when I started my research, I went into it thinking I would be corroborating that story. But when I looked at the data, that's not really what I found. Programming didn't get professionalized in the same way. And women didn't get kicked out. Or at least not right away or in a wholesale fashion. In fact, it's an upward curve until the mid-1980s. And even after this women have continued to program, even if—as a percentage of the total profession—their numbers declined.

It's important to remember that in the 1950s women were programming. There's a movie that was made in 1957 called *The Desk Set* starring Katherine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy. It's a love story. But it also features Katherine Hepburn playing the role of a reference librarian whose job is jeopardized by the introduction of computers into the workplace. But by the end of the movie Hepburn's character not only falls in love, she also keeps her job by learning to program the computer. It's a charming love story. But what's striking about it is that it's a mainstream movie that presents women using computers with no commentary—as if it was the most normal thing, which an audience would not have any questions about why women are there. It's a pop culture movie that was reflecting reality—that working with computers was considered normal work for women to be doing in the 1950s and 1960s.

(David) How self-reflective were the interviewees? How did they compare the present with the past? Did they think things were better now or then? Did they ever talk overtly about gender discrimination? Did they accept it? Or rail against it?

You know, there was a range of responses. I would solicit those reflections at the end of interviews unless it came up naturally. Often, I wouldn't have to ask. Some would say "no" or "you know, I don't notice those things," and others would say "yes." I think to some extent, you know, it was just accepted. I remember one of the women—I think at MIT—who said the women would warn each other about a professor they called "Old Pinch-Bottom," and that you shouldn't turn your back on him! It seemed that for a lot of women, this sort of behavior was just some-

thing you had to put up with. You realized it wasn't right, but it was just kind of part of what you had to put up with at the time. That isn't to say, for example, that there weren't explicit protests against the pornography or against unequal working conditions. It probably wasn't any worse in computing than anywhere else, and so it was just part of the wallpaper for a lot of women, unless it was really egregious. (But none of my interviewees said anything about sexual assault. I don't know if they would have told me if it had occurred.) It seemed like it was no worse than any other environment in terms of sexism.

(Luke) Are you talking about so-called 21st century "brogrammer" culture then? Are you saying "brogramming" wasn't as present in the past as it is today?

Well, it's more complicated than that. Brogramming culture may be quite present today. It's a more recent invention. But its origins start with the personal computer and the subculture of men who were literally owning a computer, sometimes even putting it together using a kit. That kind of subculture was overwhelmingly male, and a lot of tech companies got built out of that subculture, including Microsoft and Apple. It's not that there were no women there, but that sort of technical hobbyism was already a masculine-gendered domain. We can see some of that even back in the early 20th century in the male subculture building crystal radio sets. So that particular subculture has a long history, and it contrasts with the more genteel culture of IBM and of government workplaces where things were more egalitarian as a result of corporate rules of conduct or as mandated by law.

(Luke) In your book Recoding Gender: Women's Changing Participation in Computing*, you spend a bit of time on initiatives to transform the activity of programming into so-called software engineering. Can you comment on that and how it relates to some of the history you've already covered in this interview?*

One thing I wanted to do in those sections of the book is denaturalize the idea of software engineering. I wanted to suggest that engineering is more of a metaphor than a description of what's actually going on when people program. I bring up a number of other metaphors that people also used to describe programming. Some people likened it to being a head surgeon or even a lawyer or a novelist putting together a work of art. Engineering was one more metaphorical way of looking at programming, and not necessarily any more essential to it than these other ways. Engineering meant certain things to certain people who wanted to see it that way. The other metaphors by and large went by the wayside. But even if the metaphor of engineering prevailed, it's important to see that programming wasn't always seen this way or that it needs only to be seen this way. Calling programming "engineering" is a prescriptive or aspirational claim about what programming is or should be. It's not necessarily factual or based on reality. These issues aren't as apparent as perhaps they should be, but they are surfaced when, for example, you think about the idea of certifying programmers in the same way engineers are often certified. You can certify a civil engineer and hire that person to build a bridge, and be relatively certain that the bridge won't fall down when the engineer completes it. But we have nothing like that for software. We know it's going to be full of bugs. We're just not in that universe of doing that kind of engineering. I talk about it like this: What is the consequence of looking at it in this way? And I think there is a sort of gendered consequence when we use the engineering metaphor. When we do so, the softer skills that are needed for building software can get excised from the curricula.

When we realize that there were many competing metaphors for describing programming, it raises the possibility that things

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might have turned out differently. And that the engineering metaphor might have been developed in ways that were less gendered. There was a whole generation of pioneering women who were building the first compilers and various types of programs and software and successfully making projects work. But their expertise wasn't consulted and they weren't included in these discussions about engineering. Their wisdom was tossed by the wayside when the engineering metaphor was developed. So, I feel like there was a lost opportunity to think about engineering in a more holistic way. The metaphor was developed by people with particular agendas. They were building big systems and were molding it in ways that would increase their own prestige. And their visions won out over other visions of what programming could be. So, it's a messy story, but I think it's a little closer to the truth than just saying, well, programming became more professionalized.

(David) That's interesting because there's a potential tension there. For example, think of Margaret Hamilton, who was at MIT with the Apollo program. She's considered to be a pioneer of software engineering. She was one of those who was tossing aside the programmers from the '50s and early '60s.

Perhaps. But is that sort of a retroactive labeling? I mean, clearly there is a process of rediscovering and reclaiming people who weren't originally credited or certainly didn't pop up in the histories before. When retelling the past there's always pressure to describe people or things or experiences in ways that make sense to people today. But when we do that we're flirting with anachronistic history. Hamilton may even have described her own work as engineering. But was it the same vision of software engineering that is celebrated today? The point isn't that engineering is evil. But the history suggests that the concept may have been unnecessarily narrowed, and that we could have a broader view of what it is without discarding the term entirely.

(Luke) This perhaps segues into our next question. It sounds like the metaphors that describe programming can be narrow or capacious. And that, in turn, might influence how students feel about the activity as they decide whether to make a career out of it. What should students be evaluating when they are thinking of going into the field? Is "following your passion" enough of an incentive to pursue programming as a profession? Or should they be considering other things as well?

Well, I wish I knew. I mean, I feel like if you're passionate about it, then you should do it. Here's something that might shed light on this question: I always ended my interviews asking the women if they had any advice

for women considering going into the field. There was a range of responses, but nobody said, "Don't do it." And so, I feel like there are many ways you can make a career as a programmer. My advice, I guess, would be to not narrow yourself overmuch. You don't have to say, "Oh, I have to work for Google or something." Instead, think about the range of activities and professions in which programming is heavily used. And I think it would be great if they had these sorts of discussions in computer science classes as a way of giving students an opportunity to think in the broadest terms about what programming is and how it aligns with their interests. Students should ask, "Well, what do I want to do in the world? And how does computer science empower me to do that? Do I just want a high paying job? Or is there some kind of change I want to make? Is there some kind of societal need I can fulfill through programming? And how can I grow my skills to fulfill that need? How can my mentors guide me to those opportunities, or even start my own company so that the company could serve those ends?" There's so much good you can do in the world, whether it's making an app for an underserved population, or working on a big system and making it, you know, safer, better, more ethical. I feel like the opportunity is there, and it doesn't have to be narrowed as long as we make a place for asking these questions in the curricula. Along these same lines, students should also be prompted to consider, "What do I need besides computer science to get to where I want to go? Do I need to take a business class? Do I need to take a literature class? Do I need to take a political science class in order to put together the skill set that will let me do what I want?" The answer to these questions might suggest a course of study that's broader than software engineering as it's conventionally defined. If that's not being taught, I really wish it were. Or that students maybe need to seek that out somehow through mentorship or through electives to make sure that what they value lines up with their course of study.

(Luke) A lot of what you are talking about seems to be about empowerment. And that to empower students with programming aspirations, we need to impel them to ask some questions about themselves and about their profession. Interestingly, you recently wrote a book chapter that was titled "Cod-

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ing Is Not Empowerment." What might be worth highlighting from that piece? What should programming students be considering as they attempt to use their education as a means of empowerment?

Part of empowerment resides in cultivating some interdisciplinary interests, because in so much of computing you're working with someone else. You're working with biologists or you're working with lawyers or whoever it might be. Right now, I'm advising a student who's studying robot judges in China, where they're actually automating some of the legal process. So, there are all kinds of areas where you can put things together. If you have these broader interests, or even just learn enough that you can talk to someone who's an expert in that area, there are so many opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration.

(David) Circling back to a former line of inquiry in this interview, do you think that it's a pipeline problem with underrepresentation of women in computing?

I think the whole pipeline metaphor is problematic, because it implies that to be successful you need to get in at the beginning and follow a rigid linear path. The problem with it is that a lot of women drop out somewhere along that path, or they get interested in programming later and want to come in at a later point instead of beginning when they're just a tween or a teenager. I think the pipeline metaphor excludes a whole lot of people whom we should actually be inviting in. A better metaphor than a pipeline is a river with tributaries that come in at later points. The pipeline metaphor is also problematic because it suggests that all we have to do is engage girls and minorities at an early age. But that's not the only reason we're seeing underrepresentation of women and minorities in the computing industry. It ignores all the people who are already there but who aren't being hired or promoted at proportional rates. When we focus on the pipeline problem, it eclipses the other ways in which women and minorities are excluded from the profession later on in their careers.

(Luke) In "Coding Is Not Empowerment," you also touch on the way some programmers are motivated by the coding itself, by its intrinsic rewards as it were, whereas other people like programming because of its extrinsic benefits and the fact it can do good in the world or provide an entryway into the middle class. How might a student evaluate these different motivations? And if coding isn't empowerment, does that signal that they shouldn't learn to code?

I think the pipeline metaphor excludes a whole lot of people whom we should actually be inviting in. A better metaphor than a pipeline is a river with tributaries that come in at later points. The pipeline metaphor is also problematic because it suggests that all we have to do is engage girls and minorities at an early age. But that's not the only reason we're seeing underrepresentation of women and minorities in the computing industry. It ignores all the people who are already there but who aren't being hired or promoted at proportional rates. When we focus on the pipeline problem, it eclipses the other ways in which women and minorities are excluded from the profession later on in their careers.

I'm certainly not against learning to code, and again, especially if it's fun and awakens a latent interest that somebody might not have known about until they tried it. But to major in computer science or to get a job in programming requires more than just programming chops. The profession often portrays itself as meritocratic when it actually isn't as meritocratic as it could be. In the industry, hiring committees are often making decisions that are based on whether the candidate looks like the hiring committee, whether they dress the same, or whether they have the same tastes. Sure, coding skills play a role in hiring, but it's by no means the only factor. The industry needs to examine these other considerations and evaluate whether they belong. Until they do, coding alone isn't going to lead to empowerment. There are all these invisible ways in which the profession isn't meritocratic. It pretends to be. But it's not equal opportunity, and I think we need to look at all of these other forms of inequity along the way, and to try to address them. Sure, keep having the coding stuff. That's great. It's just not the magic wand that's going to solve everything. I feel like the pipeline metaphor misdirects our attention. It allows industry to distract us from the problems that are under industry's direct control and that they need to solve in their own backyard.

(David) So, this is really interesting to me. I'm talking to companies all the time and they're desperate for coders. They're hiring people that don't even have degrees. I don't usually hear that there are people that aren't getting jobs.

So, that's kind of intriguing. If there's so much demand, why wouldn't the industry have an incentive to be more open in its hiring practices? The problem might be that the biases are so entrenched that it's not easy to overcome them in spite of the economic incentives. The tech industry is always saying, "Oh, we need more H1B visas." This is fine to a degree. But why aren't they looking more closely at someone with maybe a more unconventional background who has some computer science training, but maybe not from the institutions they are in the habit of hiring from? There are Latinos out there not being hired who have a computer science degree. The industry has a preconceived idea of whom they want to hire, and they'd rather go abroad and find the person who matches that image rather than hire someone who doesn't look like what they think a computer scientist looks like. You know it'd be great to see who, out of all the people who got a computer science degree in 2020, got a job. And what's the percentage per school? I think there would be some really interesting patterns.

(Luke) One last question. What initiatives have women taken to make computing more inclusive and inviting for themselves? How successful have these initiatives been, and have they had any impact on the culture as a whole? Can we take inspiration from women programmers in the past in terms of trying to make computing better in the future?

Certainly, there have been women at universities who have tried to figure out why their computer science departments didn't have as many female grad students, and what they could do to make that easier. Other women have created their own companies. That's one way to get rid of the glass ceiling. I interviewed a couple of women who became their own CEOs in the early '60s who created software companies that explicitly hired women who wanted to work part-time while they were raising kids and still be able to be a professional programmer. And so, part of it is just changing the mindset of who looks like a professional programmer. Is it a stay-at-home mom with kids? Well, to them it was, and it worked because they ran successful and profitable companies.

And so, I think one thing women can bring is a different idea of who is an excellent

programmer. It can be a lot broader because we know this from experience. You can work part-time and still be just as dedicated as someone working full-time. There's this myth that you have to work a ridiculous number of hours to show you're serious. We should also remember the women who fought against explicit sexism and made efforts to make the office a safer place. And then there are also people like Anita Borg, who started the Grace Hopper Celebration Conference, which was explicitly pitched for women. The conference creates an alternate universe that allows women to experience what it's like to attend a conference when you aren't in the minority. It enables women to take a breath, and let down their guard and just be themselves without having to be defensive about your professional identity. Girls Who Code is another initiative which seeks to expose more girls to the joys of programming.

(Luke and David) Thank you, Janet, for speaking with us.

Thank you. I've enjoyed it.



Luke Fernandez (Ph.D., Political Science, Cornell University) is an Assistant Professor in the School of Computing at Weber State University. He co-authored the book *Bored, Lonely, Angry, Stupid: Feelings About Technology From the Telegraph to Twitter* (Harvard Univ. Press, 2019), which was reviewed in the *New York Review of Books*. He has also published in *Salon*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, among other publications.



David L. Ferro has been the Dean of Engineering, Applied Science & Technology since 2011 and professor in Computer Science since 2001 at Weber State University. Prior to WSU, he spent many years working at companies like Lotus Development, Unisys, and Iomega. He has degrees in Computer Science (B.S., University of Lowell, 1985) and Science and Technology Studies (Ph.D., Virginia Tech, 2001). His research has focused on science and engineering communication, history, voice recognition and natural language processing, and user interface and experience design.

FROM WSU TO THE NFL TO THE MET

YU-JANE YANG &
KAREN BROOKENS-BRUESTLE



A Conversation with TA'U PUPU'A

Born in the Polynesian Kingdom of Tonga, Ta'u Pupu'a is the youngest of nine children. He moved to Salt Lake City, Utah, with his family when he was five and attended Weber State University on a football scholarship. Paralleling his interest in sports, Ta'u was hooked on singing from an early age. While at WSU, he took voice lessons and a group piano class along with other academic courses.

Ta'u was drafted by the Cleveland Browns (later the Ravens when the Browns moved to Baltimore) when he was studying at WSU and seemed to be heading to a successful football career. Unexpectedly, two serious injuries on the football field resulted in a dramatic career change, and Ta'u eventually went to New York in pursuit of a singing career.

Through hard work, extraordinary determination, and with great blessing, Ta'u was able to meet the world-renowned soprano Kiri Te Kanawa at a CD signing at the Met Opera Shop. That was the pivotal turning point, and Ta'u was finally able to audition. He was accepted and awarded a scholarship to study at the Department of Vocal Arts at the Juilliard School.

A Juilliard Opera Center graduate, Ta'u was a recipient of the Richard F. Gold Career Grant. He also studied in Italy at the Georg Solti Bel Canto Academy under his mentor Kiri Te Kanawa and performed with her in concerts and recitals. In addition, Pupu'a has collaborated with José Carreras as well as the conductor of The Metropolitan Opera, James Levine. He was also a prizewinner of the Giulio Gari Foundation Vocal Competition and was awarded multiple study grants from the Olga Forrai Foundation.

Pupu'a made his professional opera debut with the San Francisco Opera in 2011 and has since appeared on the concert stage across the USA and internationally. He has collaborated with the Theater und Orchester Heidelberg and the Birmingham Opera, and has performed

at La Scala, Milan, the Asia America Opera Association Festival in China, the Hong Kong Opera, and the Danish Radio Concert Hall.

Pupu'a is often featured in major national and international media such as CNN, BBC, The New York Times, The Boston Globe, Men's Journal, *CBS Morning Show, and* The San Francisco Examiner, *and regionally in* The Salt Lake Tribune *and* Deseret News, Honolulu Star-Advertiser, *and* The Baltimore Sun. The New York Times *complimented Ta'u's "limitless power," noting that his voice "has real gold in its best moments."*

At the invitation of the Browning Presents! *series, Ta'u returned to his beloved alma mater to perform the* Hearts of Fire *concert at Weber State University on Oct. 15, 2022. While in residence, he extended us the privilege of interviewing him and reflecting on his impressive career. Thank you, Ta'u!*

(Yu-Jane) Would you please briefly describe your connection with WSU? And what are some of your fondest memories of your time at Weber State?

My connection with WSU was through football. I came out here on a football scholarship, to run around and hit people. (Laughter) Football is a sport that gives full scholarships—housing, tuition, and everything. When I was here, I would go to football practice and walk past the Browning Center. One day after football practice, I decided to go into the Browning Center. I found a practice room and I just started singing. Somebody knocked on the door while I was singing, and that somebody was Evelyn Harris [a retired WSU voice professor]. She walked in and said, "Oh my gosh, you sing! You should study with me." That's how my singing at Weber State started. But the football scholarship did not cover the private voice lesson fee, so I went to the dean of the Arts & Humanities college at that time, Sherwin Howard, and said, "Hey, I'm a football player, but I want to take voice lessons." So, he said, "Well, sing for me." So, I sang for him in his office. He says, "Okay, we'll pay for your lessons." (Laughter) And I'm like, okay, great!

My fondest memories are on the football field, but also in the practice room and on stage. I remember Dr. Thomas Root, the WSU band director at the time, who offered me an opportunity to solo with the band. That was a wonderful memory. Another wonderful memory is one with you, Dr. Yang. I wanted to learn how to read notes and know the value of notes. So, I decided to take a group keyboard class. We would get our assignment, and we would have to practice. But because of football practice, I didn't have much time to practice on the piano. I would come to class and pretend to have practiced. But of course, you could tell right away that I did not practice. You would say, "You did not practice." And I would say, "Oh my gosh, I am so sorry." I blamed it on football, which was true. The days that I did practice, I would come in, and you would say, "You practiced, very good." Also, I remember that you pulled me to the side and had me sit right next to you. I remember you said, "Look at my fingers and look at my hands, and just do what I do." So that's another fond memory. That helped me a lot later for my professional singing career. I wish I were more serious about piano then. But at least I know the flats and sharps, and I can look at a chord and play the chord on the piano. Because of my very basic piano training at WSU with you, I am able to sit down with a piece of music and learn my own singing part.

(Yu-Jane) I remember that very thing you just said, when we sat by each other. I discovered that your fingers are so thick and often got caught in between two black keys. So, we had to do some adjustments in order for you to be able to move your fingers

around on the piano keys. That was really a fond memory for me as well.

Another fond memory for me was the concerto night. I auditioned for it, and I was able to get a spot. That was my first time to collaborate with Dr. Michael Palumbo [the conductor of WSU Symphony Orchestra at that time] and the orchestra. It was so fun.

(Yu-Jane) How did you end up going to Juilliard?

After I got injured from playing professional football, I moved to New York because I wanted to be an opera singer. But how does one become an opera singer? What I did was that I walked around Lincoln Center where Juilliard and the Metropolitan Opera are. I looked around, and because of my football background I knew I needed to surround myself with people of that caliber to gain some kind of connection. I saw all these restaurants across from Lincoln Center. And I thought to myself, well, working at a restaurant, that's one way that I can meet opera singers and students. Opera singers like to eat and like to sit around, socialize, and have a drink or two. So, I decided to get a job at a restaurant across the street from Lincoln Center. But I was nervous, because after playing in front of 80,000 or 100,000 people in a football stadium, now I am here working at a restaurant. But I didn't care, because it was a dream of mine to hopefully become an opera singer. I walked in, and they hired me right away. And lo and behold, in comes Luciano Pavarotti, Placido Domingo, and Beverly Sills. They would come in and eat and drink some wine. I would study these singers. Study what they would eat, what they would drink, how loud they would talk in a restaurant because New York restaurants are very noisy. I noticed that Domingo would talk quietly, not use his voice, and drink lots of water. They would eat nondairy food. I learned a lot.

It was for six years that I did that, six long years of just hoping that something was going to happen. Every time I would get off work, I would be tired as a dog, and it would be 2 am. But I would just look across the street, and I would see Juilliard and the Metropolitan Opera. And I thought, no, I have got to keep going. And I did. My parents and my family were another reason why I had to keep going. We moved to the States from the Kingdom of Tonga when I was little. My mom and dad did not have the money to help. I just had to do it on my own.

One thing led to another, and then I met Dame Kiri Te Kanawa in 2008. She was the reason why I ended up going to Juilliard. The first time I sang for her she took me to Juilliard, and we went into a room where the head of the vocal department was sitting with a pianist. They said, "Sing for us." And so, I did. They thought, well, this is wonderful. This is a diamond, but it's rough. It needs polishing. The head of the vocal department said, "Well, why don't you apply, and we will accept your application." A lot of times, people apply, and they just ignore it or throw

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the application to the side, because there were so many of them. But they accepted my application, and I had to go through the whole audition. In a month I had to learn five opera arias and a monologue. There were a lot of singers auditioning—115 in all. I went in and did my first audition. I was so nervous because I had never done anything like that before. I walked into the room; the room was dimmed, and you had faculty sitting all the way across the room. In the middle of the room was a piano and a spotlight shining down where the singer should stand. Luckily, I was well prepared, and I sang my first aria and my second aria, then my monologue, and was called back. We went from 115 people down to 70 something, then it went down again to 20 something, and then it was down to 14. And then, I got a phone call about a month later saying, congratulations, you were one of four to get the full scholarship. So, I got into Juilliard, and it was just amazing.

At the time, my parents did not know the value of Juilliard. When I told my dad I got into Juilliard on a full scholarship, he said, "That's nice, I'm happy you decided to go back to school." I called my brother afterwards, and, of course, he knew. And he said, "Oh my gosh, are you serious? Let me call you back." So, he called up my dad and told him about Juilliard. And then my dad called me five minutes later screaming on the phone, "Oh, my gosh, your brother called me and told me! We are just so happy! We should have a luau!" (Laughter) And so, there I went. It was a two-year program. I think it was called an artist diploma. When one graduates, or two, then those slots are open again. I went there for two years, and then they said, "Well, why don't you stay for a third year? Because you know, when you came in, you were just so green." I really needed that third year. They said, "Do you want it?" And I said, "Okay." I stayed for a third year. And, of course, the colleagues that I went in with, they got jealous. They said, "Why did they offer it to you?" But that was how it all started out, through Kiri Te Kanawa.

(Yu-Jane) How did your music training at Weber State prepare you for your career?

It literally prepared me to have the courage to move to New York. For me to take my beginning keyboard lessons with you, at least I knew what a whole note is worth, or a quarter note, or a dotted half, or whatever. And so, I was able to have some kind of courage to say, "Yeah, I can read notes." And then also Evelyn Harris, with whom I studied, she helped me a lot about being able to use your voice all the time. Also, what I love to tell people is, even if you are not a religious person, you should go to church. Churches are the best places to sing because everyone forgives you, and everyone will tell you how good you are. And that will just boost you up, and it makes you feel good. So, I tell people, just go to church and sing your favorite song and work on your technique there in front of all

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those people. Because they would tell you that you are good, and that was what I did.

(Yu-Jane) Would you describe your professional work and your daily routine?

When I am called for a job, I am very happy and very grateful. I learn my music so well before I go to the place where I have to perform. I work with an acting coach, and sometimes I work with a language coach. First I work with my coach, who is a wonderful pianist, who helps me with the rhythms and where I should breathe and not breathe, the phrasing and all of that. And then, I see an acting coach, who helps me bring out the character. You don't want someone just to stand on stage and be still. By the time you are done with the language and acting coaches, hopefully you are ready to deliver the goods. One part of my routine is, when I go to a place, I like to get there a little early. Sometimes you can't because you have just finished a job, and you've arrived at the next one just a day before the first run-through—we always call that the "first day of school," where everyone has a scene with the conductor. That is always nerve racking, because it is your first time there with everyone else. But, on the day of the performance, I like to stay quiet. I don't really talk to people; I like to save my energy. I like to go for walks and clear my mind. And I think nothing but positive things and envision positivity about how the audience will react and how I envision myself walking on stage and how I would stand. I watch my diet—I like to make sure that what I am eating is going to give me energy to perform, and I drink lots and lots of water. If there is an intermission, I will have apples backstage. I will eat those because they cleanse your palate and are not heavy. They give you enough energy to continue on.

(Yu-Jane) What does football playing have in common with being an opera singer that makes your professional success in doing both?

I find that football and opera are very, very similar in many, many ways. One is played on a football field and on grass, or turf; the other is played on plywood, on a stage. One wears a helmet and shoulder pads, the other wears a wig or costume for whatever period that one is singing in. They both deliver, but I find that in opera, everybody wants to be the quarterback—sopranos, tenors, basses, and baritones. (Laughter) Everybody wants to throw that touchdown pass. They all want the limelight. And I find that very interesting. The conductor is the coach. He makes sure that everything is running smoothly. But in opera, like in football, when you have your moment, when you have an aria, that is your moment to be a quarterback to throw that touchdown pass. So, in football, you still have to treat it the same. Like if you have a game tomorrow, you are not out partying the day before. I find them very, very similar with each other. Take care of yourself, so you can deliver the goods. In football, you have four quarters to play. In

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opera, you have three or four acts. (Laughter) And so, you have to pace yourself as you do in a game. You play hard, and you have to pace yourself because you don't want to get to the last act and realize you don't have a voice. And so, it's the pacing. So, football has literally taught me that with singing.

(Yu-Jane) When you were working at the restaurant for six years, was there any moment when you felt, "I don't know what I'm doing here," or, "Maybe this is not right for me?"

I think after a year or two, I asked, okay, is anything going to happen? Am I going to sing? Then, I think on the third year, I was still practicing, but I found a voice teacher. I studied with this teacher, and that kept me going. She liked me a lot. She would say, you don't even have to pay me, just come. She taught me three times a week. I would go and sing, and then I would go to the restaurant and work. But three years, four years, five years passed. New York is a wonderful place because you have teachers who want to do an opera for their students with piano. They were performing in churches, and the teacher would go to second-hand stores and try to find costumes for their singers, and then would produce something at a church. That's how it all started with me. A teacher was looking for a tenor for ***Rigoletto***, for the part of the Duke. And a friend of mine told this teacher, "Oh, I have a tenor friend who could do it." She says, "Okay, can you tell him that he could be the Duke?" without even hearing me! So, I learned the role of the Duke in ***Rigoletto***. I showed up to rehearsal, and we ran through it. That was the first time that I ever sang an entire opera. I would just sing because I love to sing. That's how it all started—this voice teacher needed a tenor. I guess tenors are hard to find, and she had all the other parts. That led to another person hearing me. They said, "Oh, you should hear Ta'u sing." The Hamptons, in New York, was doing ***Butterfly***, and they needed a tenor. So, I went and did ***Butterfly***. These were all free gigs—I was singing for free. I was singing just to get that experience and to get my name out there.

Like my voice teacher said back then, "We just need to put ink on that paper." Now I had ***Rigoletto*** under my belt, I had sung the Duke, and I had done ***Butterfly***. That director then said, "I would love for you to come and sing with an orchestra for another ***Butterfly***." And I had never sung with an orchestra. I went and auditioned for them, and they took me. From there, I was doing ***Tosca***. Again, for free, but I didn't care because I was getting all these things under my belt. And then, finally, someone in Houston, a smaller company, saw a YouTube clip and said we want to pay for you to come here. That was my first paid job! That was for ***Tosca***, my first paying job. A lot of times, people get discouraged, they're beaten, they can't do it anymore. I was fortunate to have friends in New York and people who wanted to help me.

(Karen) I think your support system has a lot to do with it.

Yes, I believe so.

(Karen) We see with students here, if they've got a great support system – with the other students, with the faculty, with the community – it makes a huge difference.

It makes a huge difference, absolutely, because people will look out for each other. Especially here in Utah, if somebody needed a pianist or another singer, they just contacted each other. I could say, Karen, do you have a baritone for me? And you'd say, well, I have a faculty member, or a student I need to showcase. Because of the Chamber Orchestra, there are a lot of WSU players in there. I want to acknowledge those people because I'm one of them. Thomas Root is one, Dylan is one, and so here we are. For me, it's like a full circle, I'm back. It's been wonderful.

(Yu-Jane) As a professional musician, how has your ethnic background inflected your current career?

Being Polynesian, that has been wonderful, because on stage I could pass as an Italian or Spaniard. So, it's been really fantastic.

(Karen) Recently PBS televised the Governor's Mansion Artists Awards. You were featured along with a few other artists who were selected. This is a great honor, so please tell us how this came about.

I really don't know how it came about. I heard through the grapevine that when WSU gave me an honorary doctorate, and also after the commencement this year, people were just awed by my speech. A woman who was on the board of the Governor's Award brought it to their attention. They said, "We have a Utahn from Weber State University. I just saw his commencement address, and he's sung all over the world. Maybe we should look at him for the prize." I think that's how it all came about, because of WSU.

(Karen) During your career so far, have you been given any other accolades or awards or any other special honors? Competitions you've won? Can you please talk about any special awards over these last years that have recognized your achievements?

There are a lot of things that have happened. I don't know if I could talk about some of them, because they're still in the making. We'll just say it has to deal with Hollywood.

(Karen) Fantastic. That's just a little tidbit, a little morsel to keep us waiting. (Laughter)

That has been a great honor. I think just singing itself has been an honor.

(Karen) You've won competitions, haven't you? What have you won in the past?

I have in New York; I've won some competitions there. I graduated from Juilliard in 2011, so it's been 10 years. And I've been given awards for different things now.

(Karen) What opera role, or roles, do you love to perform? Do you have a favorite that you have done?

Oh my gosh, there are so many. When one is asked that question, I will say, it's the opera that I'm learning now.

(Karen) You've been blessed with so many different roles that you've been able to learn and perform. I've seen pictures of you as Pagliacci.

I do love that opera, but I also love *Tosca*. And I also loved singing the German Strauss opera, *Ariadne*. I don't have one favorite. A lot of the roles I've really enjoyed singing. It's also about getting along with your colleagues. To bring out the story of that opera, if you have a great colleague with you, it's going to be a fun rehearsal and a fun performance.

(Karen) We've all been through this global pandemic. Especially in the world of singing, there was a lot of devastation with all of the shutdowns. So many things were canceled or rescheduled. Artists like yourself, or even for me teaching, trying to teach voice, virtually, on a computer, was really tough. How do you think that this pandemic has changed the world of opera? Do you still see any fallout from that or things that have permanently changed? In terms of opera, rehearsals, and auditions? Give us your feedback on this.

First of all, the pandemic itself hurt the arts, especially in singing. In New York, where I live, it is really, really hard to practice. In Manhattan, everyone lives on top of each other. And so, people didn't go to work because everything was shut down; everyone was just in their apartments, so singing. . . your neighbors were not going to have it, they got

upset. A lot of singers were discouraged from practicing, because where else are they going to go to practice? I mean, you could walk to Central Park and sing there, but people would think that you're crazy.

(Karen) You didn't even have a place to go to, everything was shut down, right? No rehearsal halls or studios.

Yes, you couldn't. Many singers, including myself, did not do a lot. It literally took me about eight, nine months to get back into shape. Because, as singers, we are athletes. If you don't work on the coordination of your breath, your diaphragm, your vocal cords, if you're not stretching your vocal cords and using them, they're just going to sit there. Everything, your whole body, just sits there. And for me, it took me a while to get back into shape. Now, people are teaching on a computer. For me, I would find it very, very hard because the teacher needs to see how students are standing.

(Karen) You have to have a full body camera, and you've got to have the right sound equipment.

Yes, that's the problem, the microphone on a computer. You can't really hear the true nature of a voice like that. So then how can you help?

(Karen) Are they doing lessons in person in New York now?

Yes, pretty much.

(Karen) What about the audiences? Have you seen how the pandemic has affected production itself, for instance, stage management and audiences? Do you feel there is a difference in that now?

In New York, you still have to wear a mask. If you're watching a Broadway show or an opera, you still have to wear a mask. In rehearsal, they still have to wear masks, and they still have to sing in a mask. I hear from a lot of my colleagues that it's really, really tough because when you sing and you breathe, the mask sucks in. Once they go into performance mode, they don't have to wear a mask. So, I don't understand all of that. And the conductor is not wearing a mask.

(Karen) Working in this industry, you're in an ideal position to describe the current state of opera in New York City and in the country. How do you feel about opera itself? What's the heartbeat of opera? Is it going to stay the way it is? Is it going to have to invest in other ways to maneuver and rethink and redevelop itself? Do you think that audiences are still really involved with opera, or have you seen opera changing?

I remember when I first moved to New York, before all these operas in movie theaters, people had to come into the city to watch a performance, an opera, or whatever. They would come and they would make a night out of it. They would come and have dinner, they would bring their kids, and then they

Many singers, including myself, did not do a lot. It literally took me about eight, nine months to get back into shape. Because, as singers, we are athletes. If you don't work on the coordination of your breath, your diaphragm, your vocal cords, if you're not stretching your vocal cords and using them, they're just going to sit there. Everything, your whole body, just sits there. And for me, it took me a while to get back into shape.

would cross the street to see the opera, and then they'd drive back to New Jersey. That is not happening anymore. Because now they say, "Why would I drive into the city and spend all this money when the movie theater is showing the performers just fine, and it's closeup?" I've noticed that not a lot of young people are coming into the opera. All those older patrons are dying out. How can we bring a younger audience or just bring an audience itself? Andrea Bocelli does it. . . .

(Karen) I think there's a kind of mixture to what he's doing. Yes, it's not all just pure opera. I'm seeing that more and more because musical theater has just taken off. These young people love musical theater. That's what I'd love to hear from you, where does opera fit in with musical theater?

That's why opera is doing more musical theater-type things.

(Karen) They're doing productions like A Little Night Music*, that crossover. . .*

Yes, like ***Showboat***, ***The Light in the Piazza***, they're doing a lot of Broadway, too. I remember when I moved to New York, I loved listening to older singers, the passion that they had in their voices. Now, a lot of people don't want that. I would go to a company to do an opera, and they would say, that's so "old school." Can you just sing it straight? And I say, I'm singing this with my feeling. My mother just passed away. Why would I just sing [sings with monotone inflection] my mom just passed away. No, I would sing [sings with greater emphasis] my ***mom*** passed away. A lot of the individual touch to a character is taken away by certain directors saying, "No, we want it this way." And so, they will call it "old school." They don't want old school. But for me it was the "old school" that sold out the theaters. But now, you know, someone will say to me, "Oh, you're an opera singer. I love opera." And I say, "Oh, great! What's your favorite opera?" And they say, "I went and saw ***The Lion King***." And I say, "that's a musical."

(Karen) Or Phantom of the Opera. *(Laughter)*

Yes. But they would say that's an opera, you know. So, there's that.

(Karen) I feel your pain. (Laughter) I feel it so much.

But even people who do go and see performances at The Met, they wear torn up jeans or shorts, you know. I feel like we are begging people to come to the opera, so just dress however you want. Rather than saying, this is a special thing, you should make an effort.

(Karen) I went to Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg *at The Met. It's six hours long. But, they had a huge dinner that they served in the middle of it. People were dressed to the nines. This was about 15 years ago, so there's been a big change. Even here, people come to concerts, and they're in ripped jeans and T-shirts. And I'm thinking, okay, we're just trying to get them here, get bodies in the seats and get the younger people engaged. But I miss that sense of having pride and dressing for the performance that you're going to.*

I feel like now, if our audience were to go back and start dressing up to go to a concert or

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whatever, they would feel special. Like they're going somewhere. The kids, the parents that brought their kids, those kids will grow up to remember it as a special evening. We even have opera singers who wear clothes to please the audience. I saw this young woman on Facebook, and she came out and wore a dress that had a slit up to here. You could literally look up her dress. Another was a pianist; her dress was so short and the heels were so high. Opera singers, by contrast, would walk out with these flowing gowns. There are still some who do that.

(Karen) But some of them, they just cater to the crowd. We have to be examples, right? We have to be the trendsetters.

You know, people have asked me, how should we dress to come to your concert next weekend? I said, dress to the nines because there's a reception afterwards. We're going to take photos. I'm not telling people to go and buy things, just to look nice. Don't come in shorts.

(Karen) To kind of veer off a little, during this upcoming concert at WSU, what are some of the fun things that we are going to hear? Can you give a little bit of an outline on what is going to happen for this concert?

First of all, this will be a musical journey. What I am inviting the audience to do is to board this plane, flight 2022, to Paris, and to Rome, and to Italy, and to China, because those are the pieces that we're singing from. And so, we're going to take them on a musical journey to all these fabulous places. And also entertain them with where I'm from. We'll have some dancers from Tonga with beautiful costumes. We are mixing the cultures. I want people to enjoy my culture, and I want to enjoy your culture. I think it's very important to just enjoy each other, enjoying each other's differences.

(Karen) What suggestions or advice would you give our next generation of college students, those who really want to move forward and excel and have a professional career? What would you say to them?

The first thing to do is to love yourself. I'm getting teary, but a lot of times we are very hard on ourselves. When things don't go right, we get angry, and we hate ourselves. And I went through all that when I was in New York. It's hard not to give up. Love yourself, and forgive yourself, and keep going. That's the key, to have the faith to keep going and surround yourself with people like you—positive people who want to change the world through music. That's what I'd leave with the students, not to give up, but to love yourself and allow yourself to grow.

(Karen) I love that. That's so true. That's great advice.

I always get teary when I talk about it, because I lived it.

(Karen) Well, I think in this business, people feel like they have got to live up to an expectation, or they've got to please this person, or they've got to be something that they're not. You know, I ask singers, and pianists, what is your special skill? Hone in on that because that's going to make you different from other people. Be who you are, and love that, and embrace it. So, I think that is so wonderful what you just said.

That's what kept me going, that I kept really loving myself over and over.

(Yu-Jane) You have so many incredible personal qualities. Even though you consider yourself very lucky because a lot of people helped you during this journey, I think it is because you attracted and drew those people to you. You are also very loving. In addition, you have been able to come away from your football injury and find something else to focus on, and then pursue it with such incredible long-term effort and devotion, and

not just as an overnight success. It is a true testament of your endurance and your tenacity. You are also so observant. Who would have thought about working at a restaurant so that you can meet those opera people and study them?

I always got nervous. One day, I thought I saw a former football teammate walking in to eat at the restaurant where I was working. I was coming up from the kitchen, and I saw this person, and I was like, "Oh, my gosh, that's so-and-so." And I backed down, because they were going to see me working at a restaurant after we had played football together in front of 90,000 people previously. Then, I stood there and thought, you know what, this is my story, and this is my dream. Yes, I got to the top in the NFL, but that life is gone, and now I am going to try for this. So, when I came back up, I saw it was not the person I thought it was, but it was a life lesson for me. To not be embarrassed of the journey.

(Yu-Jane) What would be the one thing that you would really like to accomplish in the next five years?

That is a wonderful question. I think twenty years ago, I was asked, what do you want to accomplish in ten years? And then here we are. . . . What would I like to accomplish in five years? I can never answer that question when it is asked. As one gets older, I would love to pass on all the goodness that I have been given, pass it on to the next generation. Whether it is through words of inspiration or through helping another teacher out—for instance, if a teacher were to say, "Well, I have a football player. . . ." I would like to pass on what I have been given to the next generation, because why should I keep it all to myself until the very end? What use is it then? I think we are born, and we have a purpose, and it is up to the individual to find what their purpose is. Once you find your purpose, you hone in on it and make it yours. And then once one gets older, you pass that down, and you give it to the next generation. It is like handing the torch and passing it on.

(Yu-Jane) I think we found your next career post-opera. You are a very inspirational speaker. I watched your amazing WSU commencement speech in 2021. It came from the heart. You have incredible charisma and inspiration.

When one is a performer, there is a light switch that you turn on, as a football player too. There is the Ta'u offstage, but once you are getting ready to go onstage, you flick that switch. And so, to deliver the commencement speech, I had to perform. I could not get up there and just be me. I had to be a performer. You have to perform, and then still have to sing at the end. When they asked me to sing after the speech, I was like, "Really?" (Laughter)

(Karen) Some people don't get that, what talking does to your voice.

I know, exactly! (Laughter) During that whole speech, eleven minutes, I'm talking. By the

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two-minute mark, I'm sitting there thinking, oh, my gosh, I still have to sing high Bs. I still have to sing high As. I'm looking at the monitors, and performing, and you can't let anyone know; that's what being a performer is. You can't let your audience know what is going on inside.

(Yu-Jane) When you started singing with the orchestra at the end of the commencement speech, it was the real climax!

Thank you so much.

(Karen) This has been great. Thank you so much for spending the time with us for this fun and informative interview!



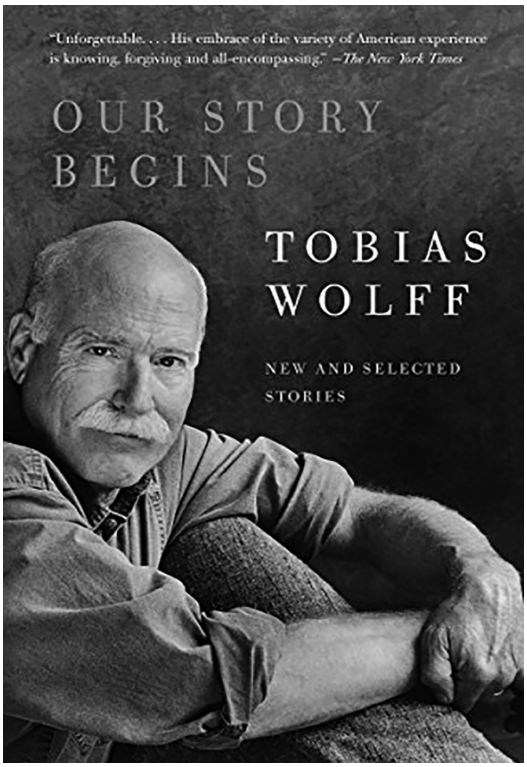
Dr. Yu-Jane Yang is a Brady Presidential Distinguished Professor and the director of Keyboard Studies at Weber State University. She is the recipient of the Music Teachers National Association (MTNA) Teacher of the Year award (2020) and has been recognized with the Steinway Top Teacher Award (2022). She was also inducted into the Steinway Teacher Hall of Fame in New York (2021). Yu-Jane has given numerous piano workshops, master classes, and concert performances in Europe, Asia, Canada, and the United States, and she will be performing at the Opening Session Collaborative Recital as a featured artist in the 2023 MTNA National Conference in Reno, Nevada.



Soprano Karen Brookens-Bruestle has enjoyed a rich and varied solo career throughout the United States and Canada. She has performed a wide variety of opera roles that range from Cathleen in *Riders to the Sea*, to Cherubino in *Le Nozze di Figaro*. Recent musical theater roles include Edith Bouvier Beale in *Grey Gardens* and the role of George's mom for Weber State University's production of *Sunday in the Park with George*. As a sought-after vocal technician, Dr. Bruestle has taught numerous vocal master classes throughout the United States. Karen completed a doctorate in vocal performance from Arizona State University and is the director of Voice, Vocal Pedagogy and Opera at Weber State University.

“THE POSSIBILITY OF PERFECTION”

ASHLEY MARIE FARMER & RYAN RIDGE



A Conversation with TOBIAS WOLFF

If you write and read enough, you might find that your literary heroes fall into distinct categories: There are writers who have power in your early years, sharpening your instincts and shaping your tastes. There are new writers whose books sit dogeared on your nightstand. And there are literary icons who create masterpieces that leave imprints in literature – whose influence is certain, almost inevitable. For many of us, Tobias Wolff is the unique writer who fits into all of these categories. A contemporary writer who's also canonical, Wolff has lit fires among many of us who aspire to make a writing life and work across genres, taking risks and challenging ourselves to put in hard work. Few authors find themselves equally adept at writing short stories, memoirs, novellas, or novels, but Wolff demonstrates that one can be seriously accomplished in all forms, innovating while securing a place in anthologies and on syllabi. In a prior interview, Wolff questioned the notion of modern-day literary celebrities. However, if we were to ask our diverse writer friends scattered across the world what significant, famous writer has had a lasting influence on their work, we know that Tobias Wolff's name would materialize multiple times.

They say you should never meet your heroes, but we had the honor of doing just that on August 16, 2022. Wolff was generous with his time and provided insight into his career, his own influences, and how his practice has evolved. Tobias Wolff is the author of the

memoirs This Boy's Life *and* In Pharaoh's Army, *the novels* The Barracks Thief *and* Old School, *as well as a number of celebrated story collections, most recently* Our Story Begins. *The recipient of numerous distinctions including the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction, the PEN/Malamud Award, The Story Prize, and an NEA National Medal of Arts, he lives in California with his family.*

(Ashley) Hello! Let me introduce myself: my name is Ashley Farmer, and I am a former student of one of your *students, Paul Griner. I studied with him as an undergrad at the University of Louisville, and then I was an MFA student at Syracuse from 2007 to 2010. (Wolff taught at Syracuse from 1980 to 1997.)*

Who were you working with there?

(Ashley) Although I write other things now, I studied poetry then. I studied with George Saunders, Chris Kennedy, Michael Burkhard, and Bruce Smith. I had several classes with Mary Karr.

TW: You had some pretty good teaching there, didn't you?

(Ashley) I sure did. I feel fortunate to have spent a few years there. It was a great experience.

How did you like Syracuse?

(Ashley) I have a fondness for it. Even though the snow was something to get used to – I was not quite prepared for that – I liked the town. There was something really cozy about it. It made for a good community, too.

It's got character.

(Ashley) It does. There's an interesting history there – and it's a rich literary history, too. My grad school mentors had a great impact on my writing, and I can see their connection to you. For instance, I read your books in a memoir class I took with Mary Karr. We also read Vladimir Nabokov's Speak, Memory *and Mary McCarthy's* Memoirs of a Catholic Girlhood, *which I know you've talked about. In reading those books alongside your work, I'm wondering if you have any thoughts about writing lineages and if direct connections with writers before and after you have been a part of your writing life?*

I'm not conscious of a lineage from me on, but I'm very aware of the lineage I feel I belong to. Certainly, the writers you just mentioned are part of my larger family. I love Nabokov's work, and *Speak, Memory* is a very special book. In that passage, when he's describing their tenants coming to the door with a dispute, and Nabokov's father, the judge, comes down. He renders a judgment for these people, and then to celebrate that this matter has been decided, these roughhewn people gather with this aristocratic Nabokov. They start throwing him up in the air as a kind of celebration. Nabokov is on the second floor with his governess and trying to keep a straight face when, suddenly, he sees his father floating outside the window, a little higher each time. From that moment, he goes to a vision of a church roof with angels depicted, and it's really about his father's death. There's just such beauty and heart in Nabokov, and sometimes people miss that because his style can have a cool effect, but he's such a beautiful writer. And Mary McCarthy, I love. I'm now retired, but I used both books in my last Stanford class. I love Mary McCarthy's memoir. All of the satirical ways in which she's pretending faith and then suddenly finds that she has talked herself into it: it's kind of wonderful.

She's very funny and dark, and I could go on all day. But yes, what beautiful books.

(Ryan) I want to shift gears and talk about short stories. The popularity of the genre ebbs and flows over time. They seem to fall in and out of style.

Where do you think the popularity is now?

(Ryan) I feel like nonfiction is what people want to read first and foremost, but interest in short stories remains strong. There was the talk of the short story renaissance, in the 1980s, led by folks like yourself, Raymond Carver, Mary Robeson, and Amy Hempel. I admire the short story anthology you edited, The Vintage Book of Contemporary American Short Stories. *I've taught the anthology often over the years.*

Good stories in there.

(Ryan) They hold up because they're timeless.

There isn't a story in there that I don't love. Richard Bausch's "All the Way to Flagstaff, Arizona," for instance. My God, what an amazing story. Leonard Michaels' "Murderers." One after another.

(Ryan) Denis Johnson.

"Emergency." The character Georgie: "I save lives." The narrator is at the drive-in in the snowstorm and his vision of angels turns out to be an old film. What a great story.

(Ryan) The best. In your introduction to the anthology, you push back on the notion of a short story renaissance, writing: "The truth is that the short story form has reliably inspired brilliant performances by our best writers, in a line unbroken since the time of Poe." What is it about the form that continually draws our best and brightest literary lights to it? It certainly isn't the money anymore.

No, it's not. Oddly enough, it was once. Fitzgerald made a ton of money off his short stories. Hemingway did too. John P. Marquand made a lot of money on short stories. It was a very lucrative form once. Obviously, TV filled that niche for a lot of people. A lot of those stories were entertainment and were read that way. I may have overstated it by saying every American writer in an unbroken line. No, not every writer has been a great short story writer. Some of our great novelists have not really turned their hand that much to it, but it is, by and large, I think, true. I believe it was Randall Jarrell who described a novel as "a prose narrative of a certain length that has something wrong with it." That's a great line, isn't it? The thing about a short story is I can think of very few novels that I would say are perfect. You don't look for that quality in a novel. A novel is a larger kind of enterprise. It accommodates a looseness sometimes. I mean, there are obviously perfect novels. I would say *The Great Gatsby* would be one. They tend to be short novels, though, I think. William Maxwell's *So Long, See You Tomorrow* is a perfect work of art. Or Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*. But those are the exceptions, I think, that prove the rule. There's something about the short story that offers the possibility of perfection that is almost closed to us in other forms.

You can achieve a kind of snowflake perfection with a short story. Look at "The Dead." Look at "The Lady with Pet Dog." Look at "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place." Look at "Flowering Judas" or "A Good Man is Hard to Find." These are perfect stories. There isn't a thing you would change in any of those stories. I could go on all day naming them in a way I cannot do with novels. Partly it is just the ambition of the novel, how much baggage a book has to take on. Of course, the load will shift now and then and, in a way, you can control that with the short story without any appearance of control. It's a beautiful form that way. We don't get perfection anywhere in our lives. But, we tend to be attracted to something that might give us the possibility of perfec-

tion in an imperfect life. Poets must feel that too. Poetry is capable of perfection, right?

(Ashley) Yes, I love that distinction. It leads me to a quick follow-up question. In your working process, do you approach longer projects with different expectations for yourself? Book-length works versus shorter works?

I'm trying to finish a novel I've been working on for some time. I was hoping to have been done with it by now. I have to say, I often find the process of writing longer works really frustrating. Partly because I have worked in a form that I have felt a certain control over, though even within that control, you are open to surprise and to being redirected and to have things come that upset everything else you've done, but it's better. So, you follow that instead, and you have to give things up now and then. But I still prefer perfection in the novel form, which is a source of great frustration for me. I sort of do beat my head against the wall sometimes, working on this book. I finished another novel twenty years ago called *Old School*. When I finished that, I felt like I'd gotten close to what I wanted to do there and was satisfied with it. That's always a good feeling. I wouldn't let something out in the world I didn't feel was good. Sometimes that frustration is just a necessary part of it, but I wish I could write more happily and fluently. But then, don't we all?

What are you working on right now, each of you?

(Ashley) I just had an essay collection come out, Dear Damage*, and now I'm going to try a novel. I've never done that. It's inspiring to hear you talk about the process. I appreciate it, as I'm embarking on that journey right now.*

Good. Good luck to you. And Ryan, you?

(Ryan) I'm under contract to write a young adult novel. I have a former student who's an editor now. She approached me about writing a book for a new imprint she's running, and I thought it'd be cool to work with a former student in this capacity. The timeline is tight. It has to be done by the end of the year. I liked the idea of writing a novel in a year.

Are you writing it now?

(Ryan) I am, a couple chapters a day. They're short chapters.

Good. I've never tried my hand at young adult literature. Good luck with it.

(Ryan) Thanks so much. So, we've talked about perfect stories, and one of your many masterpieces is "Bullet in the Brain." One could argue that all stories are about time in some way, and this story of yours takes place in "brain time" as a bullet blasts through the main character's head. How much of the structure did you have going into it? Because here we have the protagonist, Anders,

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who gets shot and killed halfway through the piece. Could you speak to the process of writing that story?

Well, I'll tell you how the story came to be. My wife and I were living in San Francisco in the late '70s, and a friend of ours dropped by the apartment in the late afternoon, and he was very rattled. He had been in a bank that had gotten robbed. So, I was curious about the whole thing, in a rather predatory way, as writers can be. I should have been more sympathetic and less curious, I suppose, but I wanted to know how it went down: what they said, what was the atmosphere of the whole event, that kind of thing. I remember being struck by, basically, the banality of the event in the sense that their dialogue sounded like something from a TV show. I thought later, where else would a bank robber learn to rob a bank except by watching TV or movies, right? You know, just to make sure everybody understands you're robbing, you've got to use the conventional formula for robbing a bank. But it stayed with me and I thought, I'm glad I wasn't in the bank because you know how writers are, we're all so superior—especially about language—and I could have imagined myself sneering at these guys for their lack of originality, and that would certainly be a mistake to do that. People who are in their heads so much, as writers are, get a little detached from reality and can forget some survival skills, like don't laugh at people with guns, that kind of thing. But with how things coalesce, the barnacles start sticking to the boat. After a while, I had this idea of having this sneering—originally, the character was a writer, and then I thought, no, he'd be a critic, so I made him a critic—and the story stopped where he got shot, and that was then just an anecdote, really. It didn't feel like a story. That's always a funny question when you're writing a poem or a story: When is it finished? When is it done? How do you know that as a writer? Sometimes you can fulfill your original design, but you know it's not done. Somehow there's more. And so, I let it sit for a while—I think like a year or so before I went back to it. I'd been reading this book ***The Bicameral Mind***, and some of that suggested almost the structure of the story to me. So, I went back and explored that second part of the story, which turns it into a story from an anecdote. I hoped it would raise the game of the story to something more interesting.

Generally speaking, I would not put something away for as long as I did and then return to it. Usually, I think, well, that didn't work because it wasn't supposed to work and get on to other things. But that one, I just was attracted to come back and try to get it right.

(Ashley) That's great. I'm glad you did.

I am, too. I mean, I have abandoned a lot of things that I've started, so I really tried hard not to do it because, at a certain point, at least in my own writing experience, I've run into some kind of a problem with most of the things I've written—some angst, uncertainty, or self-doubt. And if I truly quit every time I ran into those things, I would have published hardly anything. And so, sometimes it's just necessary to put your head down and keep going at something, you know? It feels like hitting a wall with your head, maybe, but that's how it gets written.

(Ashley) We've discussed short stories and touched on novels a bit. I would love to ask you about fiction and nonfiction. You've talked before about how that distinction is crucial. Even if you're writing fiction that's close to your life, for you, it doesn't seem like there's a lot of ambiguity. I just wondered about the process and experience of working in those different genres. Is there a different kind of engagement in nonfiction versus fiction?

Well, let me say, in the beginning, I hadn't intended to become a writer of nonfiction, at least as a memoirist. That had not been any part of my plan for my writing, as

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much as I did love some memoirs—Frank Conroy's *Stop Time* and the other ones we've talked about, too. But, I was wary of that kind of self-exposure, and I also remember something that W.H. Auden said about the memoirist: "He's like a beggar, showing his sores in the market." And you don't want to be aligned with that.

(Ashley) Yeah, pass. (Laughter)

Pass, exactly. I actually started writing what I thought would be a novel *about* my mother and me. I should say about my mother and me, drawing on experiences at the beginning, which I then intended to turn into a novel that would not be, you know, a memoir at all. And yet, as I was writing the thing, whenever I would veer off into real invention, it just didn't seem as strong to me as what I had been writing that was actually drawn from our life. So, at a certain point, I just finally had to say to myself that this did not want to be a novel. The pull of the thing was in the other direction, and, as I say, I had not written that kind of personal work before—maybe the odd essay in which I would mention something about myself, but usually, the focus was on something else. And so, once I gave that up, this continual effort to turn the thing in a direction it didn't want to go in, it really gave itself to me in ways that very few things I've written have. I usually have to beat things into existence, but this one, I didn't. It led me and was also vivid to me. I remember those things so well. I remember her so well, the emotional atmosphere between us, and her address to the world, just how she was, and I wanted to catch that. I mean, I'd started to keep some kind of collections of autobiographical musings just as something for my kids to know about their grandmother, who came off rather differently from the mother that I'd had—she'd become quite proper in her older years—and I was carried away by the thing. I was, and I'm *still* grateful that that book was given to me because it felt like that. That isn't something I forced into existence. It felt like an embrace. It felt like a gift, really.

And in an odd way, the same thing happened to me, though I was much more reluctant when I wrote *Pharaoh's Army* about my military service in Vietnam. Again, I started that as a novel, and again, it wasn't working, so I thought, well, I'll just write this one episode that I remembered and would laugh to myself about and tell friends about. About when I and this Black sergeant, whom I served with, drove down, and we were with Vietnamese troops out in the country, but we drove down to the nearby American base, and they had all the money and goods and everything there. And we ripped off a big TV out of a club, the officers club, and managed to get it out of the post and back because we were hell-bent on watching *Bonanza* and other programs they were showing on the Armed Forces Network, but we didn't have a TV. And later, I think, that road was mined, people were getting ambushed on it all the time, but we were just driven, the two of us, by this weird obsession to do this thing, and it amused me

in retrospect. It was very emblematic of certain things about that war, the kind of casual corruption that we all somehow fell party to, and a certain brutal way we had of interacting with each other, especially with the Vietnamese. So anyway, I thought, I'll just write that, and so I wrote it, and then *bang*, it was like a springboard. I had to write this other thing that happened, and then gradually, of course, through writing it and then revising it, I began to see a kind of shape in it. And so, you know, again, despite my original intention of writing a fiction I ended up writing a memoir.

(Ashley) I love hearing what those books' seeds are and the permission you gave yourself to go in a different direction and how things opened up. I just think about the element of surprise in that – it's fantastic. And it sounds like the momentum is maybe also a bit different from writing fiction. It's really special to hear that about those books.

(Ryan) I love that This Boy's Life *came easy.*

Easier. None of it comes easy. But again, I didn't feel like I was babbling upstream all the time: I mean, I was in the flow of personal history, and I had been, in a sense, making stories of that history since I lived it. I used to tell stories, and my brother and I would reminisce in terms of stories, so in that way, it wasn't like entering a dark cave, starting that project. I had some sense of where I was going.

E.L. Doctorow has this image, which you may have run across, about writing a novel in which he says, "Writing a novel is like driving a car in the dark, and you can just see as far as the headlights allow you to see, but eventually, you will arrive at your destination." That's his metaphor for it. But in writing, I added that because it was my life and the life of other people, and we had, in fact, arrived at a destination that I was aware of, it was a little different. There was a little more light on the road, and the drive wasn't always at night, you know?

(Ashley) I like that metaphor. Just to follow up with one other question about nonfiction: in thinking about memoirs as a form that's evolved, have you seen them changing in a certain way? Or is there anything you're seeing now or that you'd forecast in that genre?

I don't, because I'm not reading many memoirs these days, though I did finish one that a friend had recommended to me by a famous political cartoonist, Jeff Danziger. You see his stuff all over. He's really good. He was like me, a young officer in Vietnam who also worked with the Vietnamese, and he recently, in 2021, wrote a memoir called *Lieutenant Dangerous*. The Vietnamese couldn't say Danziger very well, but they knew the word "dangerous," so he became Lieutenant Dangerous. And so, this friend said, "I think you'll really like this." So, I read that. Otherwise, I read a lot of history and I read fiction. I'm reading John Williams's novel *Butcher's Crossing* right now, which a friend of mine gave me, and I'm loving it. He wrote a novel that I had read earlier called *Augustus*, which is kind of a famous novel. But I hadn't actually known about this one, and you know, Williams is, I think, long dead now, but I do really like this novel, which is set in the West during the slaughter of the buffalo. So, my reading tends to gravitate more toward fiction and formal history. The book I just finished is by the historian Richard White called *Who Killed Jane Stanford?*—the founder and benefactor of Stanford University who was murdered around the turn of the century. This is a superb history of the time and place, and of the development of a new university, all the more interesting to me since I taught at Stanford for many years and indeed still live on Stanford land. Reading White's book, one can't help being amazed that the university survived Jane Stanford's death, or her meddling while she was alive. Through all those years, it hung by a thread. It's amazing that it didn't lose its endowment and go under because it looked like it would.

It was a pretty new and very chancy business. Anyway, it's a really fine work of history. The same writer, Richard White, wrote another book that I liked a lot called ***Railroaded***. ***Railroaded*** is about the railroad barons who just rip this country off—and a lot of other people, Indigenous people, you name it. Mark Hopkins, Leland Stanford, a couple of other gentlemen—they were robber barons and fascinating to read about. The history of this country never ceases to astonish me.

(Ashley) We have some of that railroad history near us: we're near Promontory Point. It's fascinating history, complex.

Of course, right. The Golden Spike. My Irish half of my family came over here and worked on the railroad and ended up in Denver, in fact.

(Ryan) I want to ask you about music. I saw a fantastic clip of you on YouTube with John Darnielle of the Mountain Goats. You sang some pretty sweet background vocals for the song "Woke Up New." What kind of musicians and composers do you like to listen to?

I used to love to sing. I sang in choirs, and my wife and I sang in a choir. She still sings in a choir. I'll never forget when George Saunders first arrived at Syracuse: we had a party one night that fall, and he's an excellent guitarist, and he got his guitar out and we all sang "Helpless" by Neil Young. I love music. My second son, Patrick Wolff, is a professional jazz musician. He has a quartet, a quintet, a sextet, a trio. There are a lot of the same musicians floating in and out of different configurations—he's a wonderful musician. In fact, we're going up to the city tomorrow night: he's playing at the Redwood Room, his quartet, in the Clift Hotel, which is a great gig. He may have caught the jazz bug from me. I listened to a lot of jazz. But in the car, I've still got Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young, the [Rolling] Stones, Fleetwood Mac, all kinds of retro music. But otherwise, I tend to listen to jazz a lot. I love Sonny Rollins and Miles Davis. Some Scandinavian jazz musicians that I've discovered, one named Tord Gustavsen, is just a wonderful pianist, very lyrical, very musical, kind of in the line of Keith Jarrett and Bill Charlap. I mean, he's kind of in that family of players. I highly recommend his albums. What do you guys like?

(Ryan) We like it all: jazz, classic country, indie, folk, punk, hip-hop, blues. Literally, we like everything. I'm also a big Miles Davis fan. I was listening to Bitches Brew *yesterday.*

What a pioneering album that was. The guy was a genius and such a beautiful musician, my God, and crazy. And Thelonious Monk, I love his stuff, and he was pretty crazy, too. And I love country. I grew up on it in Washington state. Hank Williams, Patsy Cline, Loretta Lynn. I love Loretta Lynn.

(Ashley) I also love the relationship between music and writing—I'm sure there are things we could talk about there. But, I guess, as a final question: in a previous interview, you talked about early disappointments in writing. I'm thinking about this interview being read by writers at all different points in their careers, beginning writers to established writers, and I loved what you said about how the part of writing that gets easier is the fact that you know that you can do it, but now you ask more of yourself. The challenge is there, but you have this knowledge that you can make it happen.

When you've finished a few things, it helps.

(Ashley) I think about the scope of your incredible career, and I wonder, if you could go back to yourself as a newer writer who was in those early stages, wrestling with that uncertainty or disappointment, what would you say to yourself?

To go to law school. Do you really want to spend the rest of your life in a room, by

yourself, beating your head over semicolons? Is that really the best you can do?

(Ashley) Fair enough. (Laughter)

(Laughter) I'm kidding, obviously. But it isn't entirely facetious of me to say something like that. If you were going strictly by logic and sense, the chances of being the kind of writer that you want to be—and you only want to be a writer because you have loved the beautiful work of other writers, and you aspire to belong to their company, and not by becoming famous or rich, but by writing something that's beautiful and has the effect on other people that their work has had on you—if you coldly assess your chances of actually achieving that, you could become pretty discouraged sometimes in those early stages of your writing life. You are probably not going to hit that note because you have to hit so many other notes before you can hit that note. I again go back to Doctorow's image of the headlights just in front of you: do the work that's just in front of you, don't be thinking about what that person has achieved at your age, how you didn't get this story taken. You just shine that light on what's ahead of you and do it as well as you can and keep going with it. I mean, it's the only way, really, if you're going to do this. And you don't have to do it. If it gets to be too much, then don't do it. There are so many wonderful things to do in this life—no one said you had to be a writer. Unless there's something in you that just won't let you be anything else, and for some of us, for better or worse, that turned out to be the case. People I went to school with, people who are really, really smart and had ambitions to be writers, turned their gifts in another direction and are just as happy. They didn't have that do-or-die thing. Anyway, that's probably about as much wisdom as I can offer.

(Ashley) Thank you! You've been so generous with your time.

(Ryan) Yes, thank you!

Actually, it's really been fun talking to you.



Ashley Marie Farmer is the author of the essay collection *Dear Damage* (Sarabande Books, 2022), as well as three other collections of prose and poetry. Her work has been published in *TriQuarterly*, *The Progressive*, *Santa Monica Review*, *Buzzfeed*, *Flaunt*, *Nerve*, *Gigantic*, *DIAGRAM*, and elsewhere. She is the recipient of a *Best American Essays* notable distinction, *Ninth Letter*'s Literary Award in Creative Nonfiction, the *Los Angeles Review*'s Short Fiction Award, as well as fellowships from Syracuse University and the Baltic Writing Residency. Ashley lives in Salt Lake City, UT, with the writer Ryan Ridge.



Ryan Ridge is the author of nine books, most recently the story collection *New Bad News* (Sarabande Books, 2020) and the poetry chapbook *Ox* (Alternating Current Press, 2021). His near-future YA novel, *Beyond Human*, is due out in the spring of 2023 from Gibbs Smith Publishing. His work has been featured in *American Book Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Moon City Review*, *Post Road*, *Salt Hill*, *Santa Monica Review*, and *Southwest Review*, among others. A graduate of the University of Louisville and the MFA Program in Writing at UC Irvine, he's an associate professor at Weber State University, where he co-directs the Creative Writing Program. In addition to his work as a writer and teacher, he plays bass in the Snarlin' Yarns. He's working on another novel.

LEANING INTO THE COMPLEXITY OF HISTORY

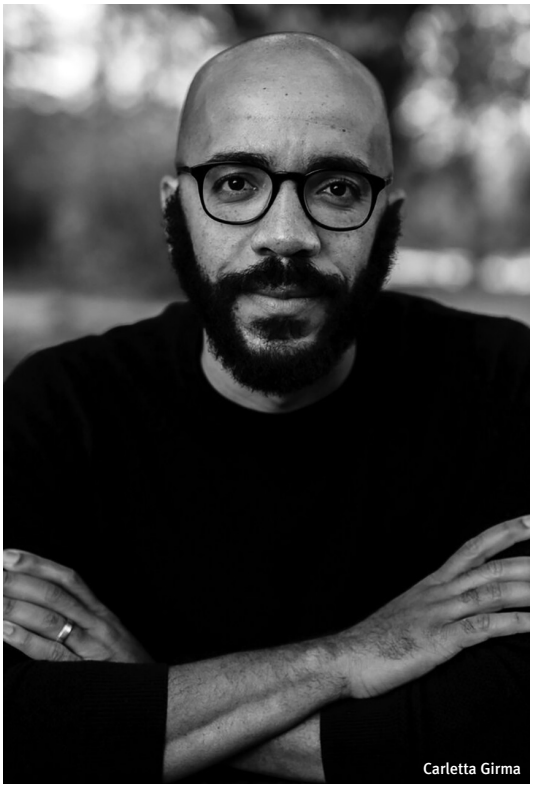
ADRIENNE ANDREWS

A Conversation with CLINT SMITH

Clint Smith is a teacher, poet, and essayist, and currently a staff writer at The Atlantic. *He is the author of* Counting Descent, *which won the 2017 Literary Award for Best Poetry Book from the Black Caucus of the American Library Association and was a finalist for an NAACP Image Award. His new poetry collection* Above Ground *has just appeared from Little Brown. Clint is also the author of* How the Word is Passed: A Reckoning With the History of Slavery Across America, *which was a #1* New York Times *bestseller, the winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award for Nonfiction, the Hillman Prize for Book Journalism, the Stowe Prize, the Dayton Literary Peace Prize, and selected by the* New York Times *as one of the 10 Best Books of 2021.*

Clint taught high school English in Maryland when he was named the Christine D. Sarbanes Teacher of the Year by the Maryland Humanities Council, before pursuing a Ph.D. at Harvard with a dissertation focusing on educational programming in juvenile prison settings. He is a former National Poetry Slam champion and a recipient of the Jerome J. Shestack Prize from the American Poetry Review. *He is also the host of* Crash Course's Black American History *series on YouTube, which ran from 2021 until late in 2022.*

This interview took place when Clint was a featured speaker at Weber State University's National Undergraduate Literature Conference (NULC) in March '22. Thank you, Clint!



Carletta Girma

Your work is something I waited my whole life for. When I grew up as a child here in Utah, I would hear people talking about slavery, or the South, or voting rights, or the Civil War, but they would always speak about it as if people were not a part of the problem. It was a matter of states' rights. Even as a kid, I knew that was insane. That couldn't be true. Little old me in Layton, Utah, knew that. You grew up in the South, in Louisiana. When did you find the words?

It took a while. I think part of what ***How the Word Is Passed*** was born out of was a recognition that there were so many gaps in my own childhood, my own education, my own experiences. For so long, I didn't have the language, the toolkit, or the historical context with which to understand why my city, my state, my country, looked the way that it did. Growing up in New Orleans, I was inundated with messages, some explicit, some implicit, over and over again about all the things that were wrong with Black people. Messages about how New Orleans was the murder capital of the nation and how it incarcerated more people per capita than China, Iran, or Russia. Messages about how the public housing projects were reflective of the social and cultural decay of communities. Implicit within all of that, in a majority-Black city, was a message of, "look at all the things that are wrong with Black people."

Look at all the things that are wrong with you.

Exactly. I think that as a child, when you don't have the language to push back against it, it can become confusing. I experienced a sort of emotional and psychological paralysis. I knew that what I was hearing was wrong, but I didn't know how to say it was wrong. I've spent much of my adulthood searching for the language to explain the things that I wish I had an explanation for when I was young. In many ways, this book comes from a recognition that I did not understand the history of slavery in a way that was commensurate with the impact that it had on this country. And so, what this book is, and hopes to be, is me going on a physical, intellectual, and emotional journey to all these different places across the country, across the ocean, to try to make sense of the impact, the residue, and the legacy of slavery. To try to understand how it continues to shape the contemporary landscape of inequality today. When you gain that language, when you gain that history, when you gain that understanding, when you are given a more acute sense of how this history wasn't that long ago, it disabuses you of any idea that the reason certain people live in certain conditions is somehow singularly because of something they have done or failed to do. Instead, you recognize it as part of the very natural outgrowth of a history of public policy that has prevented people from having access to the levers of upward mobility and opportunity in the same ways that other communities have had.

When you gain that language, when you gain that history, when you gain that understanding, when you are given a more acute sense of how this history wasn't that long ago, it disabuses you of any idea that the reason certain people live in certain conditions is somehow singularly because of something they have done or failed to do. Instead, you recognize it as part of the very natural outgrowth of a history of public policy that has prevented people from having access to the levers of upward mobility and opportunity in the same ways that other communities have had.

Is this what led you to teach in prisons?

I started graduate school in 2014, the week after Mike Brown was killed in Ferguson. So, my entire graduate school experience, especially those first few years, happened during the same time as the crimes against Mike Brown, Eric Garner, and Renisha McBride, and obviously the list goes on. Those years were profoundly animated by the movement for Black Lives. I spent a lot of that time trying to figure out how I would be situated within the larger movement. There are the activists and organizers on the ground, but with the way that social movements have always worked you need people in all sectors of society who are doing work. You need professors, you need teachers, you need lawyers, you need writers.

I was studying the relationship between education and inequality. I was specifically drawn, in part inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement, to think about the criminal legal system more directly. I'd been thinking about it for some time, because a lot of my students when I was a high school teacher had been entangled in the criminal legal system. I had parents who were entangled in the criminal legal system. I came from a city that had a profound relationship with the criminal legal system. Louisiana is the prison capital of the world. Louisiana incarcerates more people per capita than anywhere else in the world. And so, I'd been thinking about it for a long time. I recognized that there was a time when I was reading a lot about the history of prisons and about theories around the carceral state, but I wasn't spending time with incarcerated people. I learned quickly that for me, both as a learner and as a person, if I'm not grounding myself in the human impact of the thing that I'm studying, it can too quickly become an abstraction, an intellectual exercise.

Which is how people divorce themselves from it every day.

Exactly. Which is how people can move through their lives without having to think about this as something that they are implicated in and impacted by. For me, it felt really important to get into prisons. So, I started teaching in the Norfolk prison in Massachusetts, the prison Malcolm X was once held in. It was one of the most important, life changing experiences that I ever had. I spent time with people in prison, and I quickly realized that, but for the arbitrary nature of birth and circumstance, it very easily could have been me inside of that prison, instead of being somebody who went to teach in one. I'm very lucky to have grown up in a home where I felt safe, loved, and affirmed.

Even though the city you grew up in had signs everywhere saying that these spaces aren't for you?

Yeah. You know, I think the tension there is to not allow yourself to be labeled as exceptional when the world attempts to do that. A disproportionate number of young Black men are born into communities saturated with violence. Many of these young men are often looking for protection and find that protection in the only places they can, sometimes in gangs or neighborhood crews. If I grew up in a community where I felt scared because of the violence and poverty around me—violence and poverty that exists because of decades of state-sanctioned policies that created that poverty, not because of the people in those communities—it would be very easy for me to imagine that I would have joined a gang. Because I wanted community, I wanted safety, I wanted love, fellowship, and brotherhood. It is very easy for me to imagine a scenario in which I am driving a car, and somebody gets out, and they say, "We're going to rob the McDonald's." Things get crazy and somebody shoots the cashier, the cashier dies, they run back to the car, they say, "Go, go, go!" I drive the car, the police pull us over, I get arrested for felony murder and sentenced

to life in prison for second-degree murder. That is a scenario that I've encountered over and over and over again. Is that young man a murderer? Should that be the singular way we define who he is and what he did? No, of course not. Part of the experience of teaching in prisons just made clear what already felt intuitive to me. We cannot divorce the social and historical context that so many young men are emerging from—the fact that so many young Black men have become entangled in the criminal legal system in the first place.

Where do you get your emotional bandwidth from? Because this work is not something that anyone can do lightly, or that comes without emotional baggage and potential trauma. Where does your bandwidth come from to go on a journey to these different places, to explore history? There are people who visit a plantation and think that they are just experiencing the history of something, a great plantation. When real people lived there, children were born and raised there, beaten and sold off, families were separated there. How do you plan a wedding in that place? So, how do you have the bandwidth to work through that, in addition to being an educator, doing your work in prisons, and simply being a parent, a human?

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Well, I tell this story the whole time: the first enslaved people came to this country in 1619; the British colonies came to this country in 1619; the Civil War ended in 1865; the 13th Amendment passed in 1865. The vast majority of people who fought for liberation—which Black people were doing from the moment they arrived on these shores—never got a chance to see it. But they fought for it anyway, because they knew that someday, someone would. I think about how my life is possible only because of people who fought for something they knew they might never see. They fought for it anyway, because they knew that someday, someone they would never meet, would get to experience the fruits of their labor. I think about what sort of responsibility that bestows upon me to attempt to work toward the sort of world that I want to live in, but will probably never see myself, in my own lifetime. I am part of a history and a lineage of people who have done that for me. I think that's probably the Black historical tradition. Part of what keeps me going is a recognition that people kept going for me. I am not necessarily here to see the fruits of my own labor. We're all chipping away at this wall, and we don't know if the wall is six inches thick, or 600 miles thick. But the more we chip away at it, the less the people who come after us have to chip away. And so, we just have to keep chipping away. I hope ***How the Word is Passed*** is one way of chipping away at that wall.

More broadly, I look at my kids, and it just reminds me how ***human*** all of this was. Enslaved people were kids just like mine. Kids who were born into a set of circumstances that are unfathomable. Only a few generations ago, there were kids like my kids—kids who love dinosaurs, animal documentaries, food pouches, and pancakes—who were chattel. I think that when you can home in on the human piece of it, that it was people

like us, it *was* us, born into horrific circumstances, then it forces you to encounter the reality of the institution in a different way.

Your saying this takes me back to 1991, and my first African American history class at the University of Utah. We read John Blaston Gaines's The Slave Family. *It was so stunningly shocking, stark, and representative of everyone that was around me – my mother, my grandmother, my father, my sisters, our family members – that what you said just touches my heart. I think that even for people who identify as Black or African American, sometimes we are even divorced from that feeling. Because we've been told that that was* then *– it's away from you, you're not a part of that, when it's really historically imprinted on our DNA. How do you think that COVID will impact the way that the word is passed? Moving forward, especially with our young people? Or maybe you don't think it will at all?*

I think over the past ten years, there has been a profound shift in public consciousness. Millions of people across this country no longer understand the history of racism as merely an interpersonal phenomenon, but rather as a systemic, structural, and sociological phenomenon. I think part of what we've seen during COVID is the way that we have developed—not everywhere, but in many places—a new, more nuanced, more sophisticated and honest way of talking about the reason that racial disparities exist. If COVID had happened ten years ago, the way we would have talked about it in our media ecosystem would have been very different. If people would have seen Black, Indigenous, and Latino families being disproportionately impacted and dying from the virus, they would have said it was a result of things that those communities were doing or failing to do themselves. Instead, I feel like what I heard were more honest conversations about the reason certain communities having multi-generational housing, or

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multi-generational families within the same homes. Conversations about the reason that so many Black and Brown people work on the front lines of "essential" jobs and what are those wages commensurate with. What is the risk that they are engaging in by working in those jobs? How do we think about what "essential" work is? Who is often funneled into those types of work? I think that represents some level of progress in our consciousness and our collective consciousness.

Gen Z kids and young people have a more sophisticated understanding of themselves, and of the structural and social realities of the world, than I did at 19 or 20 years old. They can name it in a different sort of way; I think that's important. We are entering a sort of hybrid space where, on a logistical level, things that were once only in-person are now virtual. That creates access for many more people to have conversations and access resources and opportunities that they might not have been

able to take part in beforehand. The word is becoming more nuanced and more expansive in the way that it's being disseminated.

You've made me think about it as that wall that you're chipping away at, giving everyone more access to more words and ideas. Why do you think the United States resists a formalized, government-led, racial reckoning along the lines of, say, South Africa or Germany?

I think we're a much bigger country. I think we are a much more splintered and heterogeneous country. Part of what I discovered during the process of writing this book was the varying extent to which different communities understand their relationship to the history of this country. It's not even just about people having different senses of what the history of this country is. It's about people's identities and senses of themselves, the most existential pieces of who they believe themselves to be. The most intimate parts of themselves are wrapped up in those stories. For many people, when you ask them to tell new stories, reassess stories they have been told, or recount stories that they have been told in the past, it calls into question who they understand themselves to be in the world. I think there's a lot of resistance and fear in that idea.

Do you think that's because people might have to consider whether or not they really are the boogeyman that somebody may be pointing them out to be?

Whether they are, or whether their family has been. Also, it calls into question whether the material goods, education opportunities, and access to certain resources that they have had is entangled in that history. For example, the homesteader. The Homestead Act was something that gave millions of people access to land in the western parts of this country in ways that they had never had access to land before. But those pieces of land weren't given to Black people. They were given only to white people. Part of what happens is that because history is complex, the story you've been told your whole life is that your great-grandfather was an Irish immigrant who got some land from the Homestead Act. The story you were told was that that land was terrible land, and you couldn't plant anything on it. He had to work so hard to get anything to grow there. And this was the story of the government letting you down. Then, somebody comes along and tells you, well, actually, you were really lucky because you got land in the first place. Now there's a tension there. I think part of what we have to sit with is the complexity of history in which both things can be true. It can be true that your great-grandfather was given terrible land that took so much work to plant anything on, and his children didn't get to go to school because they had to work on that land. And it can also be true that Black people didn't even have access to terrible land; they had access to no land at all. That's not to create hierarchies of harm, not to do the oppression Olympics, but to recognize the way that the stories someone has been told of who they are, what their lineage is, and how they fit into that story differ. Some stories are more complicated than others. I think we tend to tell one-dimensional stories because people have a hard time holding onto complex dualities and stories that don't fit into neat boxes. It's easier to tell simple stories and to believe them.

When you began writing, monuments of slavery were coming down in Louisiana and other parts of the country. At that time, as those monuments were disappearing, were street names changing? Were gardens changing their names? Places that might seem more innocuous, that held on to the Confederacy or to Civil War heroes for fans of the South?

Things are continuing to change. New Orleans speaks specifically to cities that have had an ongoing series of conversations about which

places should be renamed and which places shouldn't. Recently, they renamed Robert E. Lee Boulevard Allen Toussaint Boulevard. Alan Toussaint was the great jazz musician who came from New Orleans. I think that a lot of those things are being replaced. But, I mean, the Confederacy is the low-hanging fruit of this debate. The Confederacy is the easy stuff. People like Robert E. Lee, Jefferson Davis, PGT Beauregard, and Stonewall Jackson. There's no context in which those people should ever have their names on streets, bestowed on buildings, or have their statues erected in public spaces, especially in public spaces that are funded by taxpayer dollars. If you want to have a statue of Robert E. Lee in your backyard, that's weird, but you can do that. There's a lot of conversation in New Orleans around Jackson Square, and there is a huge statue of Andrew Jackson in the French court. Andrew Jackson was a terrible, racist, Indigenous genocide-inducing person. He was the catalyst to the Trail of Tears. He was someone who owned enslaved people. He also represented a fundamental shift in American politics that extended beyond what he did to Indigenous and Black people. When we remember Jackson, how do we remember him? What does it mean to be a Black child walking past a statue of Andrew Jackson? What does it mean to be an Indigenous child walking past a statue of Andrew Jackson? It's the same question with Jefferson. It's the same question even with people like Lincoln, whom I admire greatly. He is probably my favorite, to the extent that one can have a favorite President. What he represented was the capacity to change and evolve over time. We'll never know the extent to which he would have changed his mind on issues of race and things beyond that, because his life was cut short, less than a week after the Civil War ended. But Lincoln also has a complicated past. He's not just the Great Emancipator and who, in the Lincoln-Douglas Debates in 1858, ran in the Senate race. Prior to that, in 1856, he was talking about how he didn't want Black people to be enslaved, but he also thought that Black people should be sent away to live in a different colony. He thought that Black people were inferior in intelligence and in physiology. So, the most important thing, I think, is that we tell honest and complicated stories about these people. Because it allows us to tell a more honest and complicated story about this country.

How do we get other people to that understanding, especially our educators? You are a Doctor of Education and work with folks who are in our prison system. How do we get our K-12 teachers to have these complicated conversations, that are very difficult, without legislators calling it an "attack on whiteness"?

Yeah. It's hard. I think that people have to make a distinction in their own pedagogy, and for themselves, about the difference between indoctrinating students with their political beliefs, and giving students the full picture of a person, an event, or a moment. So, if you are going to tell the story of Jefferson, you cannot tell only the story of the Declaration of Independence, you also have to tell the story of *Notes on the State of Virginia*. You cannot tell only the story of how he wrote that all men are created equal; you also have to tell the story of how he wrote that Black people are inferior to whites, both in dominance of body and mind. You can't talk about him only as a remarkable statesman; you have to talk about him as someone who owned over 600 enslaved people, including four of his own children. You have to hold all of that together. Jefferson was a philosopher, a statesman, a scholar, a President, a leader, and he was an enslaver. I think that if you're presenting that information to a student, you are not telling that student to believe that Jefferson was a bad person; the student may or may not decide that for themselves. Your role as an educator is to present the full picture to

the student. And to say, "This is who this person was; this is what this moment was. Let's sit with all of this." And that is *different* from saying, "Let's talk about why Jefferson was a bad person." I don't think that's effective pedagogy. I don't think that that's helpful. What's more important is to put all the primary sources and evidence in front of your students and allow them to have discussions about what you know, what they believe that means about who that person was, and what that period of American history was. And you might have students who come down on different sides of it. I mean, people, scholars, come down on different sides. And it goes back to our question about the statues. People who think about this all the time can have very different ideas of whether a statue of Thomas Jefferson should stay up or come down. Annette Gordon-Reed is someone whom I admire immensely. She has written some of the most seminal books on Jefferson and his relationship to slavery. She is someone who doesn't believe statues of Jefferson should come down. She's a Black woman. So again, it's not always simple. It's not always singularly defined by your identity, or your background. The story of this country, the story of the world, is messy and complex. We have to lean into that complexity. But part of what is happening is that you have people who fear that their sense of identity is implicated in a more complex, nuanced story of this country. And so, they are attempting, in a state-sanctioned way, to prevent teachers from teaching the very history that explains why our country looks the way that it does today. And that's really unsettling. In some spaces, it's being effective; in some places I think we are inspiring teachers to double down and teach this history in more thoughtful, nuanced, and unapologetic ways.

I can't thank you enough. If I had had access to your thoughts and ideas as a younger person, I wonder what my life would look like today. I'm very happy in my life. I was also fortunate to come from a wonderful family. But I grew up in a place where it was very hard to get some of those ideas and some of that information. So, thank you so much. I can't wait to see what you do next.

Thank you.



Adrienne Gillespie Andrews is the vice president for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion and Chief Diversity Officer at Weber State University. She has two master's degrees and a Ph.D. in Education, Culture, and Society from the University of Utah. An active speaker on social justice, consensus building, and collaborative partnerships, Andrews's research focuses on diversity initiatives and outcomes in higher education; diversity and inclusion efforts in curriculum; and building effective campus and community partnerships with diversity and inclusion as their foundation.

PAINTING MATTERS AND THE UNDOING OF ERASURE AND SILENCE

MICHAEL WUTZ

Monica Lundy is an Italian-American visual artist who lives and works between California and Italy. Her work draws on site-specific research conducted at archives and museums around the world, unearthing lesser-known stories from the past on which her painting is based. With an emphasis on installation painting, she utilizes non-traditional media such as liquid porcelain, clay, burned paper, coffee, and pulverized charcoal. Lundy holds an MFA from Mills College and a BFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She has been an artist in residence at the American Academy in Rome, Montalvo Art Center's Lucas Artist Residency Program (California), Stoney Road Press (Dublin, Ireland), and has been awarded an Irvine Fellowship (2015), a San Francisco Arts Commission Grant (2015), and the Jay DeFeo Award in painting (2010). Lundy is currently represented by Turner Carroll Gallery in Santa Fe and Nancy Toomey Fine Art in San Francisco. Her work can be viewed at monicalundy.com.



Photo credit: Daniele Puppi

A Conversation with
MONICA LUNDY

As you look back on your career as an artist, Monica, how would you describe your arc of development, abstractly speaking? Do you see it more in terms of a more or less continuous evolution, with nuanced adjustments on the way, or do you see – especially in retrospect – moments of a major reorientation in your aesthetic, or conceptual framework, for lack of a better term, and consequently, perhaps, your artistic practice?

Looking back on my evolution as an artist, I would describe it as a nonlinear, continuous evolution, punctuated by moments of radical experimentation. During periods in which I seemed to be "breaking" from my routine, I didn't even understand why I was doing the things that I was. At those points I would try working with media or subject matter that seemed like quite a shift from my normal routine. But now, looking back, it all makes sense, and I can see it as a continuous evolution.

I've always considered myself to be a painter, except for when I went to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago to get my BFA. There, I started as a painter, but I didn't feel a connection with the painting department; I didn't feel nurtured as an artist in that particular environment. So, I decided to change majors and studied sculpture instead. In the sculpture department, people were very supportive, and there was a palpable synergy. At that point I began working with clay. I also started experimenting in the foundry, working with metal, which I really enjoyed. But the thing I really loved doing was working with clay. At a certain point, I began drawing into tablets of clay, doing low-relief carvings of narrative scenes, such as portraits of people. In retrospect, I realize I found a way to "paint" with sculpture. As soon as I graduated, I put a huge canvas on my wall, and I started painting again. (Laughter) I painted for another 12 years, but slowly, over time, I realized that my paintings were going from being very two-dimensional to being more sculpted, where I was starting to use more impasto paints. I started becoming more interested in the surface of paint.

When I went back to school for my MFA, I was primarily studying under the Chinese-American painter Hung Liu (1948-2021). At the same time, I enrolled in a sculpture class with Anna Valentina Murch. The class was overenrolled, so Anna began conducting studio visits to select who would remain in the class and who would be let go. She came to my studio, looked at my paintings, and asked me, "Why on earth do you want to take a sculpture class? You're a painter." And I said, "Because I miss moving material around: I want to get my hands dirty." So, I made the cut. This is where another radical shift happened; again I went from painting back to sculpture. However, this time I began *painting* with clay. I began with terracotta clay, applying it directly to the wall. As it would dry it would crack apart and some pieces would fall off. So, there was also a performative aspect to it. What remained on the wall was a stain of an image with all of the shards of clay on the ground. An example of that was *Stockton Asylum*. There was something really fascinating for me about not just the materiality of the piece, but also that it was ephemeral. It had a lifespan. It was born, and then it eventually died. It lasted only as long as an exhibition lasted—a month, six weeks, two months sometimes—and then whatever remained had to be destroyed. It gave me another appreciation of this concept of painting that had a lifespan—it was almost like a being. I had only a certain amount of time that I could enjoy looking at this work, communing with this work, before it was gone. That was really powerful to me.

I did a number of these pieces. I did one on Alcatraz Island based on the history of the Hopi Native Americans who were incarcerated there. That was an interesting show, because it was a site-specific exhibition in a legendary location. I got to work on the island, work with the history, and I did a number of site-specific

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installations there. I think that was also the last time I ever did an ephemeral painting, because after that experience I found myself really missing the work. At the end of the exhibition, I didn't want to destroy the work, but I had to. As much as I loved doing ephemeral paintings, I also realized I wanted to spend more time with my work. I slowly started developing a process of working with clay and liquid porcelain so that it would no longer be ephemeral—so that it would remain on a substrate as a painting. I started working with this new process in 2015, and it's still evolving. The process and material are very finicky. It depends on the humidity and the temperature of the environment I'm working in. Every time I do a painting with this material, it's a new experience. Sometimes it works wonderfully, sometimes it fails catastrophically, but that's also a part of the process.

It reminds me a little of musicians and the way they fine tune their instruments depending on the moisture content in the air and the elevation. That's really critical.

Exactly. But, that is what also makes it interesting. I really love challenges. In fact, if I don't feel challenged enough in my work, I'll do something to completely pull out the rug from under myself—push myself out of my comfort zone. That's also why I've started working with so many different materials, because each process is a whole different learning curve.

I want to come back to the materiality of your work in more general terms, but here bring up the thick application of liquid porcelain. The both fractured and fragmented, cracked and scratchy appearances of some of these panels or linens gives them an almost sculpted appearance. They are reaching for a relief-like condition, as if leaping from what would otherwise be a 2D representation into something like figuration, plasticity, three-dimensionality. (In that sense I am reminded of the thick, dotty application of colors one finds in the canvases of some of the French Impressionists). Perhaps they are reaching even for something like embodiment? How would you react to such an observation?

The fractured, fragmented, sculpted surface does serve in some way to break apart or abstract the pictorial image—we could discuss many artists who have achieved a similar effect here, among them Anselm Kiefer, Jay DeFeo, or more subtly the French Impressionists, Georges Seurat or Vincent van Gogh. There are different ways in which a painted surface can speak to more than the simple image it depicts. For me, the liquid porce-

lain is a way to abstract the image and draw attention to the painting's plasticity. In that way the piece itself becomes as much about the material as it is about what it depicts.

I once coedited a collection entitled Reading Matters. *It's a book about "matter," about the materiality of print, and other media, in the last two centuries, roughly. There's an opening section on painters and artisans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century who were foregrounding the materiality of their media, which took precedence over the actual object of representation. That was the primary "content" of their work, if you will.*

When I look to artists for inspiration, I mostly look to artists who really push material. Alberto Burri, Richard Serra, again Kiefer, DeFeo, even van Gogh. Again, van Gogh may be considered more traditional, but the way he used media in that day and age was radical. The paint itself had form and movement. Even if it was just a flat blue sky, it was a turbulent, flat blue sky. There was motion in the paint. And for me, it really adds a different dimension to a painting. So many paintings are simply two-dimensional and depict something, a scene, a landscape, a portrait. I'm really intrigued by paintings that have another dimension, that have something in addition to that. I'm thinking about Francis Bacon and the way he used paints and talked about paint. It was flat, but he moved it in such a way that you could not deny that it was paint, and it was also depicting an image. Materiality is really important.

You mentioned Anselm Kiefer. His sculpting Das Buch *(*The Book*, 1985) is the frontispiece to* Reading Matters. *I'd like to ask you about the idea of painting and clay, and about the idea of using the brush as an extension of your hand as opposed to working with your hands themselves; your hand, which is the immediate connection of your body to the linen, or whatever you're working on, versus the brush, which is another instrument. I'm reaching for the right way of phrasing my question. . . .*

That's an interesting question; I think about it all the time when I'm working, the distinction between the brush and the hand. I consider them both to be equal in terms of tools. When I'm working, I'll use anything as a tool. I'll use a brush, a pallet knife, paint scrapers, my hands, sponges, rags, sometimes my feet. Sometimes I'll lay a painting on the floor, and I'll have to walk on it just to get to the center of the painting, but that leaves footprints, which are another form of mark making. I don't think about the instrument I'm selecting to make a mark as much as I'm thinking about reacting to the surface. What does the process of painting want in that moment? It's not such a cerebral choice. It's more of an emotional reaction. Sometimes I'll be working with the brush, and then I'll grab a palette knife and scrape it off, and then I stick my fingers in it because there's a motion that I can achieve only with my hands, and then sometimes I'll take a rag and undo it. So, it's about the application of media, and also removing media—it's a back and forth. I think that there is a democracy in all tools. It's simply what the painting is asking for in the moment that dictates the tool that I use.

Like many artists, you are probably walking a fine line between self-expression and earning a living, between being true to your artistic vision and being mindful of the (shifting) tastes of the art market. Could you describe how this balancing act looks like in your artistic life? Do you find that the galleries representing you in Italy and the U.S., respectively, are asking for different kinds of work for their clientele? If so, what would account for these differences?

That's something that a lot of artists struggle with. There's certainly temptation to make something that's more saleable, or more

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marketable. All galleries ask for something—a little more of this, a little less of that. On top of that there's also a difference between aesthetic taste in different countries. But I think that it's really important for an artist—it's really important for me—to think only about the integrity of the work. Personally, I have to think about what I feel I am called to do, because the moment I start thinking about what somebody else would like for me to do the integrity of the work is compromised, and because of that my interest in the work diminishes. And in that way, I think that an artist has to be a lone wolf. They have to do what they feel truly compelled to do, regardless of what the art market is asking for, regardless of what galleries are asking of them. Regardless of what the fashion of the art world is at the moment, an artist has to be accountable only to themselves. Once an instructor said to me, "Keep doing what you're doing. If it's not in fashion now, fashion changes, and someday it will come around." It's true, the art world is so unpredictable; and what galleries want to sell goes with the fashion of the market. For example, I had an experience where I was ***obsessively*** working on large pieces and a gallery asked me for smaller-size work that was, in their opinion, more saleable. On opening night, they sold the biggest pieces and the smaller work didn't sell as easily. So, what does that mean? It means that in the end, the work that I r***eally*** felt ***compelled*** to do was the work that was more well-received and artistically intriguing because that obsessive, uncompromising energy came through in the work.

I would imagine that is central to the integrity of an artist's vision. But I also know that you want to make a living, as difficult as it already is as an independent artist. You don't have a regular income, so you have to be mindful of your own sense of vision, but at the same time see that that vision speaks to a clientele.

I think that the solution to the discourse of income for me—without knowing if it will actually translate into income—is to get to the studio every day and work, and work, and work. To make as much work as possible, in the way that I enjoy making it. I believe that provides the best possibility of creating something that a collector will want to buy, or that somebody will want to buy, without knowing if it will sell. Artists don't become artists because there's money in it. It's an addiction; it's an obsession; we do it because we have to; we do it because it's an extension of who we are; we do it because it is who

we are. And then we're left to think about how to make money. They're almost like two different worlds, and sometimes they can coexist easily, but oftentimes they don't.

What prompted you to eventually relocate from the U.S. to Italy and establish your studio there? There might have been personal reasons, but professional reasons as well. How would you compare the general climate of culture in contemporary Italy – and its receptivity for the arts – with that in the United States, beyond the cliché of Italy as the undoubted epicenter of the Renaissance, with which Tuscany and Rome are associated to this day, not to mention the Biennale?

I have been coming to Italy intermittently ever since I was eight years old because my mother is Italian. When I was a child, we lived in Saudi Arabia, and when we would travel to and from there we'd frequently stop in Italy to see family and friends. In 2016, I treated myself to a trip to Rome right after opening an exhibition at Nancy Toomey Fine Art in San Francisco. I started befriending local Romans, and I had a glimpse of what real life in Rome was like, instead of the tourist experience. I remember one night at dinner I had a flash where I thought, "I could see myself living here," and then it vanished. I immediately thought, "That's ridiculous! I live in California." Instead, I went ahead and applied to the American Academy in Rome with a proposal for a research project, and was accepted! In 2017, I went there under the Visiting Artist and Scholars Program. I began working on a project with the Italian historian Annacarla Valeriano, who was researching the history of women who were put in psychiatric hospitals, or "insane asylums," in Italy under Mussolini for being diagnosed as "deviant" or "bad, fascist women." Here, the decommissioned psychiatric hospitals are still referred to as "insane asylums" or "manicomie." At the same time I was working on that project, I was also introduced to Santa Maria della Pietà: Rome's oldest "insane asylum." At that point, I began working with their archives and museum and my research branched off into a whole different project. When my residency at the American Academy was over, I felt like I had just started to scratch the surface of this whole new interesting project. At the same time, I was starting to meet local curators and artists, and I felt like a whole new world was opening up. I wanted more time. So when I left the Academy, instead of returning to California, I decided to rent an apartment and studio for several more months so I could continue my work and new life in Rome. I don't know when I officially moved my main studio from one country to the other, because for years I had official studios in both Italy and in California, and I would travel frequently back and forth. I guess it was during Covid that I had to choose where to spend more time, and so I stayed in Italy, and that's when my Italian studio became my primary studio. Actually, I have two studios here. I have a large warehouse studio in the countryside in Northern Italy, and then another studio in Rome.

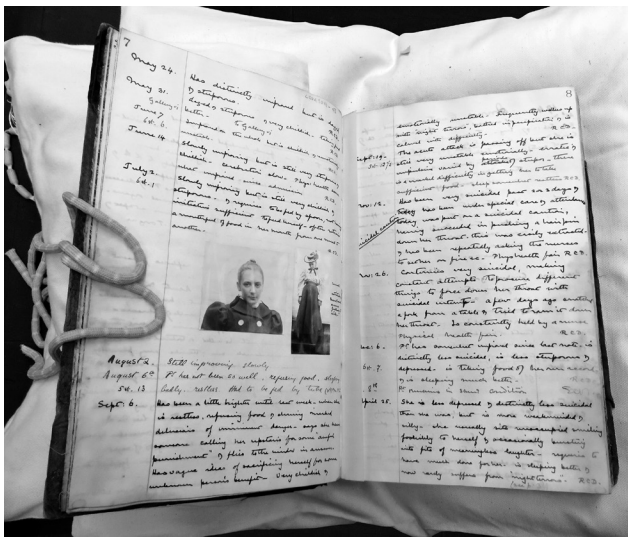
Rome is beautiful. There's no other city like it. There's history in your face. Every corner you turn, there are ruins that are 2,000 years old. Parts of systems that the Romans constructed are still being used today. Rome, for me, is a great place to live and work. But even though I do some projects there, I do all of my major exhibitions in the U.S. still. Because Rome is focused on historical tourism. People come to Rome for the history, not for the contemporary art. Therefore, the historical museums are much better funded than the contemporary art museums, project spaces, and galleries. There are some interesting galleries and great contemporary museums, but it's a smaller world than where I came from. Rome is a multi-layered, enigmatic place, and it takes a long time to understand it. It takes a long time to be integrated into the contemporary art scene here. It moves slowly. Rome is old, she has a different sense of time.

You mentioned your strong interest in "Obscure Histories" and "Deviance." Your

series Santa Maria della Pietà – *formerly a psychiatric hospital in Rome – with its emphasis on empty, sterile, and walled-off spaces, speaks volumes about silence and erasure precisely (and paradoxically) because of their bareness and barrenness. Your work reminds me in more theoretical terms of the project of Michel Foucault, who too was laying bare the unwritten histories of (western) societies. Imprisonment, shutting out, and looking at the permeable boundary between what is considered normal and not, between what is socially acceptable and not, are the effects of power relations that seem to be inscribed in your work as well. Could you speak to that?*

I look to Foucault for a lot for these concepts, because what he has written about dovetails precisely with my curiosities, one good example being that he observed that the history of criminology is all about maintaining social order. I'm researching the history of criminology. I say that, but the people I'm referring to were not actually criminals. But in the day and age that they lived, they were considered outside of the norm for one reason or another. And so, the only way to maintain social order for people who were not considered "normal" was to put them away. Many of the historic psychiatric hospitals, or "insane asylums," were also designed to try to re-educate or retrain people, especially women, how to be more "normal" or "socially acceptable." An example of this is that when lobotomies were first invented, they were touted as a treatment for women in unhappy marriages. I focus on women because I have seen how different injustices, specifically against women, transpire in different cultures and different parts of the world. Of course it happened on a large scale with men and members of the transgendered community as well.

In my research, I'm looking at how society has treated people, how that has evolved over time, and how we still need to evolve to be better. Where we are now is simply another point along the path of evolution. When I was working with the patient files of Santa Maria della Pietà, I did not want to work with patients who seemed truly mentally ill—that was a different subject. I read patient files to determine if they were put there for social reasons rather than for medical or psychological reasons. I found a number of examples of women who were hospitalized for not wanting to be married to their husband anymore, being too "independent," or the family thinking that they were possessed by the devil because they were acting in an "abnormal" way. I read one file in which a husband brought his wife in because, when she found out that he was having an affair, she slapped him across the face. He said that she was violent and dangerous, and so he had her admitted to the hospital. There are countless examples of these scenarios. For women, being put in an asylum was often a way for a husband or family member to control her or not have to deal with her. A lot of men had mistresses, but sometimes they didn't want to get divorced because maybe the wife had money, so instead they would lock her up. My portraits



Female No. 11: Holloway Sanitorium Hospital for the Insane, 1898-1899, Wellcome Collection, London

focus on people who were unjustly hospitalized, those who were helpless and found themselves in a tragic situation. While working with the director of the hospital museum, Museo Laboratorio delle Mente, he explained to me that there were many cases of healthy people who were admitted to the hospital who in turn developed a specific kind of mental illness due to the traumatic environment.

As you were talking about your archival work just now, I couldn't help but think of Cesare Lombroso. He wrote a famous book in criminology called La Donna Delinquente *(1893) (*The Female Offender*, [1898]) in the late nineteenth century (plus, he wrote numerous related books as well). It was a sort of guiding text in Italy, but also in the U.S., and for a while considered a "definitive" book about the "inherent" mental instability of women.*

At one point there was actually a medical diagnosis called "female deviance." That was an umbrella term applied to any socially undesirable characteristic of a woman. Symptoms included being defiant, too independent, not wanting to be married, not wanting to be a housewife or mother. There was sexual deviance, which included being "flirtatious," sexually promiscuous, bisexual, or homosexual. There were all sorts of symptoms which constituted this alleged illness.

Natalina*,* Angela*,* Camille*,* Elizabeth*,* Giuditta, Donatella*,* Aurora*, and* Assunta *– these are the first names of women and patients whose last names are absent, eventually disappearing or shriveling into such titles as* Anonymous Girl *and* Patient with Leaves*. You undo their erasure almost literally on paper and contextualize that erasure within the disciplinary apparatus of the asylum, the political framework of fascism, and the patriarchy, more generally. Did you get the names of these women from archival research? What are the steps involved in obtaining access to some of these archives (often housed, and protected from public access, in old institutions)?*

It's true that some archival information is not accessible to the public, including documents that are protected under the Privacy Act. I tend to work with information that is old enough that it is no longer protected under that law. In fact, my experience has been that archives are thrilled to have an artist interested in researching with them.

During 2009, I started working with the California State Archives, researching women who were incarcerated in San Quentin State Prison in the mid- to late 1800s. At that point, I was fascinated by the evolution of mugshot photography and how, at around the 1850s, when photography was new, they used it to take photos of criminals. It would often be just a photo of somebody with a number in these mug books—their name wasn't listed. There was a photo and a number. Sometimes, their name would be scribbled in handwriting on the top of the photo. I started doing a series of these portraits just with numbers to emphasize this notion of reducing people to numbers, where they lose their personal identity. Then, when I started working with the archives of Santa Maria della Pietà in Rome, I decided that I wanted to honor the individuals who suffered this terrible fate, and a number wasn't enough. I wanted to evolve past using numbers. So, I started using just the first names. I didn't want to use their last names, because I wanted to maintain some sort of privacy in case they had surviving family members. I wanted to be respectful of their privacy. Even using their first names caused some controversy with the archives. They insisted that I change their names for additional privacy. I thought, no, that's being dishonest to my subjects. I wanted to give them their identity back.

When you mentioned mug shot photography, I was reminded again of Lombroso, but also of Sir Francis Galton. Sir Francis

I was fascinated by the evolution of mugshot photography and how, at around the 1850s, when photography was new, they used it to take photos of criminals. It would often be just a photo of somebody with a number in these mug books – their name wasn't listed. There was a photo and a number. Sometimes, their name would be scribbled in handwriting on the top of the photo. I started doing a series of these portraits just with numbers to emphasize this notion of reducing people to numbers, where they lose their personal identity.

Galton was the cousin of Charles Darwin. He was a eugenicist, like many in the late nineteenth century, and he advocated for a kind of photography that was almost three-dimensional. He suggested to take 10 to 12 mugshots of one person and then sandwich them together, one on top of the other. The idea was that such a "composite photograph" would create the essential, concentrated rendition of that person. I wonder whether you've encountered that as well.

The evolution of mugshot photography is fascinating. In the late 19th century in California it began with a single portrait with little numbers pinned to the inmate. Then later they began using blackboards behind them with their name, their heights, different measurements. Then, they even started getting into phrenology and the measurement of facial features. At one point they began doing a series of three mugshots of the same prisoner: the first one would be the person dressed in normal clothing with a hat; the second would be the same photo without a hat; and the third one would be the person dressed in their prison attire. It was in the early 20th century that the mugshot portraiture that we recognize today was developed—that is, a profile and second frontal photo of the inmate.

Speaking of repression, the patriarchy, and the erasure of women, you mentioned that, as a young girl, you spent some time in Saudi Arabia. You might have been witnessing, and perhaps experiencing yourself, what we see now once more in parts of the Arab world: women in Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan are – following short periods of progress and relaxation – once again protesting the loss of their incipient freedom and of educational opportunities. Could you see yourself building on your existent work and extending your concerns about women in the West to women (and other suppressed groups) in the Middle East?



2437, series: ***Women of San Quentin,*** 30" x 22," gouache on Fabriano paper, 2010. Photo credit: Randy Dodson

Because I lived in Saudi Arabia as a young girl, I have great empathy for women in the Middle East. Their plight is something I'm very passionate about. While it would be interesting to do a project there, it would also be much more difficult because of the way I work; first off, it's important for my process to actually go and visit a site to get ideas and inspiration. Travelling to the Middle East is much more complicated and dangerous for a woman. But now that you bring it up, it is in fact an interesting idea to consider.

Your site-specific installations integrate your work into a total design, something like a Gesamtkunstwerk. Two Prostitutes of Mandrione *(2021) appears to break almost literally out of the wall, with shards lying on the ground – as if breaking the frame not once, but twice; the asymmetry of* Beast *is extended into the crack in the floor; and the panels of* Le Novizie *(2019) or* Painting with Leaves *(2021) are nonlinear, in vertical and horizontal terms, respectively, in their alignment. What are you looking for in prospective installation sites? And what challenges do you see in adapting (or "fitting") your work into particular spaces to achieve the desired effect?*

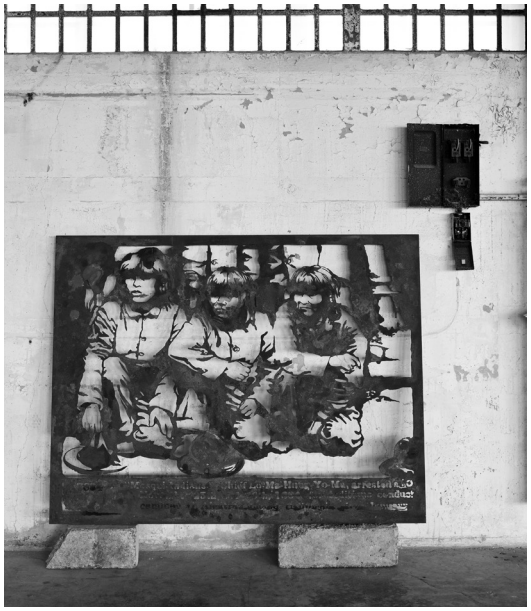
I love that you cited ***Gesamtkunstwerk***, the idea that a work is completed by the space it's in. But more importantly, for me, when I'm doing a site-specific project, I don't even perceive that I'm choosing the space to work in. When visiting a site, I have to let myself be totally open, and the right space will grab my attention. In the case of ***Two Prostitutes of Mandrione***, that was a site-specific installation for a group exhibition on the outskirts of Rome in the Mandrione district. During World War 2, different parts of Rome were bombed, and a lot of people had to relocate to that district. It became a shanty town full of crime and prostitution. While researching, I found photos from 1951 of two prostitutes in a doorway in various poses. While I was visiting the site of the exhibition, which was in a big, open, quasi-abandoned warehouse space, I approached a doorway leading into a little room with what must have been another doorway, ripped off. It was one of the most intimate spaces in this big factory, and that grabbed my attention. I immediately knew that the subject matter of the two prostitutes from that district would function perfectly in such an intimate but also a destroyed and very raw space. Another thing about the space was that the walls were crumbling and there was all this detritus on the ground, and I asked the curator not to clean, not to throw away anything. I used that detritus under my painting so that it gave the impression that the painting continued, that there was some deterioration left on the ground, and in that way, the marriage of space and work is really what makes a powerful site-specific work. When I'm working site-specifically, I take into consideration the story of the place, the history of the place,



Two Prostitutes of Mandrione, dimensions variable, mixed media with liquid porcelain on panel, site-specific installation for *There Is No Place Like Home*, Rome, 2021. Photo credit: Daniele Puppi

the ambiance as it is, the material that exists, because all of it together influences, informs the work that will manifest there.

Another example of this is the site-specific exhibition that I did on Alcatraz. When I did the site visit, I was really taken by the deteriorating walls and the rusting metal everywhere. There was rusted metal all over, because it's surrounded by seawater, so there's a lot of corrosion. So, when I did *Hopi Inmates*, which was a group mugshot of Hopi inmates on Alcatraz in 1895, I decided to do a painting out of rusted metal. I did a painting, then had it cut out of steel and rusted. I leaned it against a deteriorating wall, so that the rusted metal in front of the wall—the dark of the metal and the light of the wall together—created a kind of two-toned image, being dark rust and light blue. I really like being challenged by a space. Instead of coming in with my idea, and looking for a space that could fit my idea, I prefer to arrive to a place and be influenced by it, and then see what ideas manifest based on that experience. That makes for a much more powerful work.



Hopi Inmates (1895), series: *Alcatraz*, 48" x 66" x 2," cut, rusted steel, site-specific installation on Alcatraz Island, San Francisco, 2011. Photo credit: Randy Dodson



Women's Dept. San Quentin State Prison (1859), series: *Women of San Quentin,* dimensions variable, liquid porcelain, site-specific, ephemeral installation for The Performance Art Institute, San Francisco, 2011. Photo credit: Randy Dodson

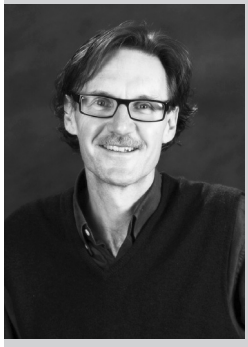
Another good example is the liquid-porcelain painting called *Women's Department San Quentin State Prison*. That piece manifested because there was a problem with the site. I was invited to participate in a group exhibition in San Francisco, and I was designated a corner in this big exhibition space. The curator said to me, "There's a problem." What happened was that part of the dry wall had been ripped off, exposing the stone aggregate sub wall. The wall was a dark, blackish-granite color, and the curator suggested that I repair the wall and then work with the space. I sat and looked at it, and I thought this could be really interesting for something completely un-preconceived. After seeing that site, I started looking through my image bank and I found a beautiful black and white image of the historic Women's Department of San Quentin State Prison. And that was it. It's almost like, when I'm working with a space, I don't feel like I have to think too hard about what to do. It's almost as if the ideas *arrive*. The site is not separate from the work; the site

is part of the work. It informs the direction of what kind of installation will be there.

You sometimes work with charcoal and gouache on paper, but your work with liquid porcelain seems to be your distinct materic signature, if one could call it that. What made you choose this particular medium as your major form of expression? Could you take our readers through the – what I assume is a rather complex – process of preparing the porcelain and working with it? It must be quite elaborate and time consuming. As somebody not trained in art history, the liquifying porcelain process reminds me of the glassblowing tradition in Murano – without of course making the step onto a base medium (linen/panel). Could you help us understand the art-historical traditions you partake in?

I'll give you a little sense of how it's done. It's a process that I started in 2015, when I was doing a residency at Montalvo Arts Center in California. I got a four-month long Irvine fellowship, so I had four months just to experiment in the studio. I started experimenting with clay, with mixing pigments into the clay. I would actually have to manipulate the clay with my hands to mix the pigment in. It was a tiring and time-consuming process. Then I began a similar experiment with liquid porcelain because it was easier to mix. I had a lot of failures. I had some what I thought were successes, and then I would continue with those, and then they turned out to be failures. It's such a finicky material in that clay and porcelain react completely differently depending on ambient conditions—hot weather with low humidity, cold weather with high humidity, hot weather with high humidity. And so, it's an ever-changing beast. Sometimes it works, sometimes it all falls apart. Every painting is a different experience, and I'm still experimenting and refining the process. One thing I discovered when I arrived to Italy was, when I was working with liquid porcelain in the U.S., I had formed up a specific method. When I tried that same method in Italy, it did not work. I had to reinvent my method in Italy because liquid porcelain here is different from liquid porcelain in the U.S. I don't know how it's different, but it's different. I found that the liquid porcelain here is really gorgeous compared to what I was using in the U.S. It's really smooth, and creamy, and a beautiful white, bone white. But, it's a very labor-intensive, exhausting process. When I did ***Padiglione IV***, the portrait of the psychiatric hospital, that's roughly 214 cm squared (7 ft); it took me a little more than a year from start to finish. I was working on other things also, but that's how long, and how slow, the process is. Another thing about the porcelain, which is really tricky, is that when it's wet, it's a different color than when it dries. So, it's very difficult to know what you're doing, how it's going to look when you come back to the studio the next day—which is something I love. I love impeding my ability to control an image or to control a painting—I like surprise. Sometimes it's a very unpleasant surprise (Laughter), but sometimes it's a nice surprise, too.

Monica, this was a really engaging conversation. Thank you.



Michael Wutz (Ph.D., Emory University) is Brady Presidential Distinguished Professor in the Department of English at Weber State University and the editor of *Weber*. He has published in the fields of American literature, media studies, science, and the humanities. Recent publications include a volume of original essays, *E. L. Doctorow: A Reconsideration* (co-edited with Julian Murphet, Edinburgh UP, 2019), and an edition of original essays by the late media theorist Friedrich Kittler, *Operation Valhalla* (co-edited with Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Ilinca Iurascu, Duke UP, 2021).

MONICA LUNDY



Patient with Leaves, 66” x 42” x 3,” mixed media with liquid porcelain on linen, Surrey Country Lunatic Asylum, UK, 2021



Emerald Wall (detail), series: *Santa Maria della Pietà*, 72" x 54" x 3 ," mixed media with liquid porcelain on linen, Rome, 2021. Photo credit: Gioele Pol



Padiglione IV, series: Santa Maria della Pietà, 84" x 84" x 3," mixed media with liquid porcelain on panel, Rome, 2021. Photo credit: Daniele Puppi



Emerald Wall, series: *Santa Maria della Pietà*, 72” x 54” x 3,” mixed media with liquid porcelain on linen, Rome, 2021. Photo credit: Gioele Pol



Le Novizie, series: *Santa Maria della Pietà*, 87" x 109" x 4," mixed media with liquid porcelain on panel, site-specific installation at Museo Laboratorio delle Mente (Rome), 2019. Photo credit: Simon d'Exea



Natalina, series: *Santa Maria della Pietà,* 28" x 35" x 2," mixed media with liquid porcelain on panel, Rome, 2021. Photo credit: Gioele Pol



Hamper, series: *Santa Maria della Pietà*, 87" x 55" x 6," gouache and charcoal on Fabriano paper, Site-specific installation for Museo Laboratorio della Mente, Rome, 2019. Photo credit: Simon d'Exea



Panoramic Study of Hospital Room and Corridor, series: *Santa Maria della Pietà,* 22" x 41" x 0.4," charcoal on wood panels, Rome, 2022



Aurora, series: *Deviance: Women in the Asylum During the Facist Regime,* 55" x 38" x 4," mixed media with coffee, burned paper, and charcoal on Khadi paper, 2017. Photo credit: Roberto Apa



Allegra, series: *Deviance: Women in the Asylum During the Fascist Regime,* 55" x 38" x 4," mixed media with coffee, burned paper, and charcoal on Khadi paper, 2017. Photo credit: Roberto Apa



Two Prostitutes of Mandrione, dimensions variable, mixed media with liquid porcelain on panel, site-specific installation for *There Is No Place Like Home*, Rome, 2021. Photo credit: Daniele Puppi



Stockton Asylum, series: *Stockton Asylum,* 108" x 120" x 12," terracotta clay on wall, site-specific, ephemeral installation at Mills College Art Museum, 2010. Photo credit: Randy Dodson



Stockton Asylum (detail), series: *Stockton Asylum,* 108" x 120" x 12," terracotta clay on wall, site-specific, ephemeral installation at Mills College Art Museum, California, 2010. Photo credit: Randy Dodson



Department of Mental Hygiene (1943), series: *Stockton Asylum*, 96" x 192" x 10," terracotta clay on wall, site-specific, ephemeral installation at Ogle Gallery, Portland, 2010



Hopi Inmates (1895), series: *Alcatraz*, 48" x 66" x 2," cut, rusted steel, site-specific installation on Alcatraz Island, San Francisco, 2011. Photo credit: Randy Dodson



Arresting Officer (1894), series: *Alcatraz,* 96" x 96" x 2," terracotta, site-specific, ephemeral installation on Alcatraz Island, San Francisco, 2011. Photo credit: Randy Dodson



Women's Dept. San Quentin State Prison (1859), series: *Women of San Quentin,* dimensions variable, liquid porcelain, site-specific, ephemeral installation for The Performance Art Institute, San Francisco, 2011. Photo credit: Randy Dodson



120, series: *Women of San Quentin,* 30" x 22," gouache on Fabriano paper, 2010. Photo credit: Randy Dodson



2437, series: *Women of San Quentin,* 30" x 22," gouache on Fabriano paper, 2010. Photo credit: Randy Dodson



13793, series: *Women of San Quentin,* 30" x 22," gouache on Fabriano paper, 2010. Photo credit: Randy Dodson

MY MOTHER'S LANGUAGE

L. ANNETTE BINDER


Jake Thacker

When I was a child growing up in Colorado, my mother spoke to me in German and I answered only in English. She'd scold me then. *You'll forget your mother language*, she'd tell me, and *you'll be sorry when you're grown*, but I ignored her. Speaking English—being American and not German—that was what I wanted. I wanted feathered hair and dinners of macaroni and cheese and not rouladen and liver dumpling soup. I wanted peanut butter sandwiches in my lunchbox, but I ate Milka chocolate bars with German rye bread instead, and everything was strange about us. Everything was a little off.

Where are you from, people would ask me when I was seven and ten and twelve and sixteen, and they'd shake their heads when I said I was from Colorado. Where did you come from *before*, they'd say then. Where were you *born*?

We'd come to the U.S. when I was five and a half years old. My parents spoke only German to each other, but it was my mother who insisted that I learn the language. She read me German fairy tales and when I resisted her efforts to brush my mass of curls, she'd call me Struwwelpeter, the sloppy boy who lets his hair grow wild, but her efforts took on a new level of seriousness when I started seventh grade. *You're going to the high school*, she announced with great satisfaction. *Every day you'll study German there*, and so there I was—twelve years old and surrounded by high school seniors taking German because they needed one more language credit to graduate. I tried escaping only once; we were stopped at a red light, and I opened the door, but she yanked me back into the car by one of my pigtails. *You'll be grateful when you're older*, she said. *If you forget your German, you'll lose part of yourself and you'll never get it back*. For three years she took me to that high school every morning, and I was grateful only when it was over.

My relationship to my own Germanness has always been uneasy. It was my first language, but it's also frozen in time. And so, what I'm left with is a laundryroom German, fluent, to be sure, but with strange lacunae. I don't know how to say "cell phone" or "tablet" or "social media"; I can't talk politics or philosophy or economics, and I've made no real efforts to improve my skills. My husband doesn't speak the language and my daughter doesn't either. And when people ask me where I'm from now, I'll say I'm from Colorado, and they don't question it anymore. And still there are moments when I realize the hold the language has on me. Lacing up my skates at my local ice rink not so long ago, I overheard a toddler speaking to her father in the Franconian dialect of my parents. The sweetness of her voice stopped me still, and I saw myself on that bench and my mother there beside me.

My mother has dementia now. The disease has been relentless, stripping away one by one the things that made her who she was. I miss all the voicemails she used to leave me, *Lisalein*, she'd say (the nickname she alone used for me), *it's your mother*, as if it could be anyone else. I miss her eccentricities, too—her pride in finding a sterling silver nutmeg grater at the Goodwill, her calls asking me how to spell twelve ("a v, mom, not an f"), her tendency to talk about death and disease at holiday parties—all these things embarrassed me at the time and now I want only to have them back, but that's not how the disease works, of course. It goes in only one direction.

I've visited my mother at her memory care unit almost every day this past year. The Covid lockdown prevented me from coming inside the building so I came to her window instead. I'd park in the same spot and walk to her window and knock on the pane, and after a few weeks, she began to wait for me in her chair, sitting behind her lace sheers and watching for my car. In winter, I shoveled a path through the snow to her window as if I could somehow find a path back to her, to the way she was and the way I was, too, when she was young and I was a clueless kid who didn't understand all the things she was giving me.

My mother still speaks to me in German. She speaks to almost everyone in German, even those who don't know the language. *Lisalein*, she says when she sees me, I'*m so happy to see you*, and I feel a rush of gratitude that she still knows me and calls me by my name. I speak to her in German now, too. I've

My relationship to my own Germanness has always been uneasy. It was my first language, but it's also frozen in time. And so, what I'm left with is a laundryroom German, fluent, to be sure, but with strange lacunae. I don't know how to say "cell phone" or "tablet" or "social media"; I can't talk politics or philosophy or economics, and I've made no real efforts to improve my skills. My husband doesn't speak the language and my daughter doesn't either. And when people ask me where I'm from now, I'll say I'm from Colorado, and they don't question it anymore.

spoken more German in the last year than I have in the last four decades, and I wonder now why I resisted so much. As terrible as it is, dementia also brings clarity to those who must watch its course.

My greatest fear is that my mother is lonely where she is. Her world has shifted, and she lacks the tools to get her bearings, but for now my face is a beacon to her and my language is, too. And those days when she sits in silence, I speak for both of us. I speak in the dialect of my parents and how easily it comes back to me, the words and endearments and curses I heard every day as a child and took for granted until now. The day will come when she won't know me anymore. I won't be her *Lisalein* then, but I'll still be with her. I'll be the woman with the curly hair who sits beside her and speaks to her in German.



L. Annette Binder was born in Germany and grew up in Colorado. Her story collection *Rise* (Sarabande, 2012) received the Mary McCarthy Prize in Short Fiction, and her stories have appeared in the *Pushcart Prize Anthology*, the *PEN/O. Henry Prize Stories*, *One Story*, *The Southern Review*, *American Short Fiction*, and others. Her novel *The Vanishing Sky* (Bloomsbury, 2020) is inspired by her family history.

THE WAITING ROOM

L. ANNETTE BINDER


Sabine van Erp

The residents of the second floor of my mother's memory care facility have taken to sitting in chairs and recliners pushed against the wall in one of the dining halls. They seem to prefer the dining room to the lounges just down the hallway with their books and puzzles and game tables. They sit in a row and sometimes they chat, but most days they are quiet and watch the staff and the visitors come and go. It feels like a waiting room, like an airline gate or a dentist's lobby. The residents fidget with the hems of their sweaters or tap their feet. Sometimes they hold an unopened book or a newspaper on their laps, or a crossword puzzle, and there is a genteel quality to their waiting, and a dignity, too.

They smile at every greeting, every acknowledgment from visitors. They turn like flowers toward the sun. *Hello, B*, one of resident's daughters tells the rabbit-lover, who's sitting with two other ladies, *how are you today? Thank God it's Friday*, and they all smile at that. They nod. *Yes*, one of them says, *it's the best day of the week*, and it's humbling to see how a simple hello can bring out their smiles. I've struggled with shyness all my life. When I was at college, I'd see someone I knew coming my way across the courtyard and I'd muster all my courage to look at them and wave, and even then I'd sometimes fail. I'd look away when they passed by and berate myself afterwards. My shyness falls aside now when I come

to the second floor. I greet everyone I see. I show them my sunhat and talk about the weather and I regret all the chances I had when I was younger to chat with older people, with anyone really, because my solitude had turned to loneliness at times, but my reticence was almost always stronger than my ability to reach out.

A few of the residents get frustrated by the waiting and the slow pace on the second floor. They aren't sure what they're doing here. They've worked all their lives, and they want to pay for their meals and their decaf coffee. One man in particular reaches for his wallet every time I see him at dinner. *No*, the staff say, *you don't need to pay, it's free, everything is free*, but he is dissatisfied with this answer. He doesn't want freebies. He wants to pay, and he comes to me after dinner one day and asks about the money machines, can I get them to work? *No*, I tell him, *I can't. I think they have some glitches*, and he shrugs then. I see him struggling to understand where he is and how this strange world works. Every day he puts on his jeans and his hiking books and a flannel shirt. He walks the halls, back and forth, back and forth, and he sits down in the dining hall and watches everyone with an intense focus. He's one of the younger residents—he seems no older than sixty, his body strong and nimble—and it's painful to see him struggle. The world has shifted beneath him and he is trying mightily to find his bearings, and it will shift more as the disease progresses.

If I worked on the second floor and he tried to pay for his food, I'd tell him he'd already paid. I'd tell him it had been deducted already from this month's paycheck. Or his best buddies were treating this time and next time it would be his turn to pay. I'd tell him the bill would come in the mail. The lies come so easily on the second floor. It's a training ground for deceit. I'd lie to every single one of the residents because I want to keep them happy in the waiting room. I want their world to make sense and most of all I want to protect them from the knowledge of what's happening to their minds. But in truth even if somebody told them they have dementia, they might understand and they might grieve but only for a moment.

Some days they seem lonely as exiles. The professor, the explorer, the athlete, the healthcare worker who spent years helping nursing home residents, the woman who colors all day at her table. They are each stranded on their own island and their loneliness is palpable when I visit. And so it is with my mother, who seems uninterested in my chatter, who rarely smiles or says hello to me or anyone else. I catch myself looking through the window after I leave for the evening. I see my mother sitting alone at her table in the dining hall, her gray hair haloed by the overhead light. I wave to her from the sidewalk, but she doesn't respond, and seeing her sitting there by herself is almost unbearable. I want to go back upstairs and stay with her a little longer. I want to talk to her because she's still alive and I might coax a smile from her yet. But most days I don't go back upstairs. I go home instead where my husband and daughter are waiting, and I come back the next day and the day after that, and each time I leave I look up at the window and feel the familiar pang.

When I was thirteen I flew to Germany with my mother to visit my Roths Oma, my maternal grandmother. My

grandmother was in her early seventies when we visited, but it's clear in retrospect she suffered from dementia. She told me the same story again and again, how a local hotel had been serving horse meat without telling its customers. *They thought it was beef*, she laughed at the punchline. *They thought it was beef*. Will I be like my mother and grandmother? Will my cognition start to fail when I'm just a little older than I am now? And what would I do differently if I knew now that it would? Dementia makes you look at your own life and your own choices. It brightens the colors you see and darkens all the shadows, and it's a gift in this way. Not a gift anyone would ever choose for themselves or the ones they love, but a gift all the same.

Just last year my mother would still wake up from her fog. She'd snap awake with a start, look around like Rip van Winkle and wonder at the strangeness of the world and how different it was from what she'd always known. I visited her on my birthday that year. I sat with her at her dining table and polished her fingernails. *It's my birthday*, I told her. *I'm fifty-two today*, and she shook her head. *Fifty-two*, she said, *that's old*, and I laughed then at the strangeness of the moment. *You got that right*, I said, *I'm an old lady now*, and my mother laughed, too. *You're so funny*, she told me. She didn't know what year it was or where she was and she was stunned to hear how old her daughter had grown, but she was still herself and we were joking around the way we'd always done. How wonderful it felt to sit there and hear her laughter. How I long for it now, but the times she emerges from the fog are increasingly rare. And still I wait for those moments, even if they're fleeting. I wait for them because they're my fuel. They remind me that it's my mother I'm visiting. The woman who changed her own oil for years, who climbed the ladder and cleaned her gutters and who wore lipstick to shovel the snow. It's my mother and not a disease of tangles and plaques. She's alive, and every time the elevator doors open and I step onto the second floor, I harbor the hope I'll get to see her.

***

I find a group of residents wandering the halls together looking for the dining room. *Anyone have any idea where the hell it is*, the gent with the wallet asks. The English lady is with him and L, who tells anyone who will listen that nobody gives a damn about her, least of all her daughters who never come to visit. I stop to show them the way, and they remind me of passengers on a cruise ship the way they go up and down the halls, peeking into the lounges they see every day. The English lady thanks me for the directions, her smile radiant and happy, and they continue walking back and forth, back and forth along the hallways until one of the staff leads them to their dinner table.

My daughter has recently discovered *Gilligan's Island*. She watches the reruns on TV right before bed and knows many of the episodes by heart—the one with the lion and the pussycat swallowtail butterfly and the gorilla who steals Mrs. Howell's jewelry, and I'm reminded of the show when I visit the second floor. There's a professor here and a skipper and women who were Gingers in their day and Mary Anns, too. They all just want to leave this strange island. They want nothing more than to get back home, but events conspire against them and so they go round in circles, unable to leave but

unable to sit still. And as insular and foreign as this place is, they've found companionship here, too. They'll hold each other's hands sometimes and walk these strange hallways together. And I'm just another visitor to their island, one of many who come and go for reasons that aren't clear, and they greet us all and shake their heads as if to ask, Why is the world so strange? When did it all stop making sense?

***

Sometimes I explore the other floors in my mother's building. The assisted living floors—for those who don't need full memory care—are like a well-appointed cruise ship. There's a library on the fifth floor, and common areas built for gatherings and intimate conversations, the cinema and pub, a pet salon, a kitchen with marble countertops and an enormous dining table so people can cook and host dinner parties. And still these rooms are deserted every time I pass by. Everything gleams. Everything stays new, and maybe it's because people who need help with their basic daily routines also need coaxing to enjoy the amenities. If they have no family or friends to lure them outwards, they'll stay in their rooms or at their regular dining hall table. They'll stay in their familiar bubble. Their world is circumscribed by what they know, and the circle becomes smaller every day.

I'm grateful my mother has company to take her off the second floor, to walk with her or push her chair to see all these beautiful amenities and to look at the books with her and enjoy the views from the picture windows. Even now she watches every car that drives by, every pedestrian walking between the parking lot and the building. Her eyes miss nothing. And just when I've given up on her talking for the day, she'll frown. *Too fast*, she'll say. *They go too fast*, and I smile then because she was always a painfully slow driver. *Yes, it's not safe how they're driving*, I agree. *They need to slow it down*.

On that trip to Germany I took with my mother all those years ago, our flight out of Frankfurt was delayed due to an air traffic control strike over Greenland. The delay was announced in increments, first one hour, then two, then four, and people grew restless and started grumbling. It was a full flight and there was a large group of American schoolteachers waiting at the gate, some of them still wearing Oktoberfest hats from a trip to Munich. The delay extended into the afternoon and then into the evening. The airline needed the gate for other flights and so it moved us to an unused baggage carousel area. People sat on the carousel and on the floor and tried to get some sleep. I dozed on the floor, but my mother sat straight with her back to the wall, holding tight to her purse and her carry-on.

Ten more hours passed and then twenty and they must have brought some food for us, but I don't remember the details. The teachers were starting to look a little peaked. A few still had their hats on, not because it was funny anymore but because they were too tired to notice them or to bother taking them off. There were probably two hundred of us in the baggage area, and when the announcement finally came that our flight was ready and we should report back to our gate, we found the doors were locked. We were trapped together there in the baggage area even as our plane waited on the tarmac. Some of the men started banging on the doors with their fists. Other pas-

sengers were shouting. *Get us out*, they shouted. *Get us out of here*. My mother stayed calm. She hadn't slept, but she didn't look particularly tired. She wore her trench coat and her pumps. She had her lipstick on. *Was für'e Wirtschaft*, she said with a shrug—what a business—and there was nothing to be done about some things. They had to be endured.

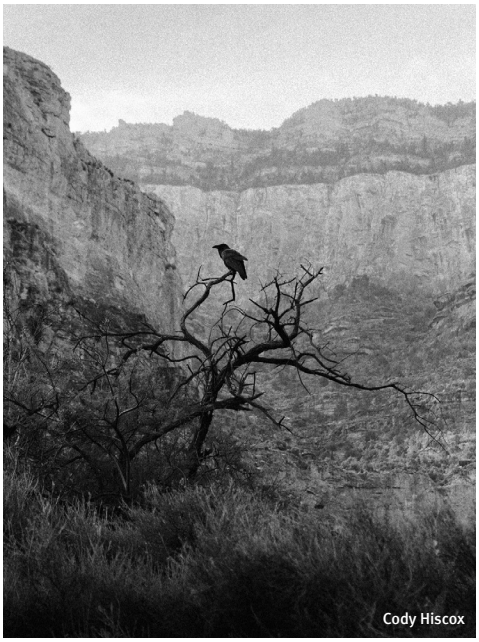
I wasn't anxious with her there beside me. She created order wherever she went, my mother. She created tranquility, and so we waited together for the doors to open so we could go back home. It's forty years later, but it feels like no time has passed. Forty years and she's sitting beside me and we're still waiting together.



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THE DESERT

G.D. MCFETRIDGE


Cody Hiscox

During the weeks of late March and early April, when winter's rainfall has been plentiful, an abundance of colorful flowers bloom to cover the desert landscape, but because the land soon becomes sun-parched and unforgiving, the lifecycle of the flowers is fleeting, and within a matter of weeks they will wither and die.

From the forested summit of the mountain range to the alluvial deposits of open desert, the elevation drops over 4400 feet; then, about ten or so miles to the east, the ribbon of highway intersects a dirt road that crosses a wide dry wash and slowly gains elevation as it cuts through cactus-covered hills towards a long ridge. Past the ridge and to the north, bordered by rolling flatlands, the landscape falls away into a broad basin, beyond which the windy emptiness stretches to the rim of the horizon.

From the highest point on the hills, the dirt road, now little more than a pair of graveled paths made dusty by off-roaders, descends steeply to a flat area that slopes upwards to the base of the high ridge. As I coasted down this stretch of the road, my mountain bike's front tire let loose a loud hissing sound and went flat in a matter of seconds.

The squishy tire couldn't grip the loose gravel and before I could slow down, I lost control of the handlebars and pitched sideways off the bike, skinning my elbow and knees.

After cleaning my wounds, I cursed my bad luck and unzipped the nylon pack attached to the seat post; and after removing the tire repair kit, I flipped the bicycle upside down, loosened the axle clamp, took the wheel off, and pried the tire loose from the rim.
An object of some sort, about the width of a pencil, had stabbed through the rubber and punctured the inner tube, though I couldn't make sense of what it might have been. When I opened the tube of glue, I realized it had turned rubbery and useless.

"Sonofabitch," I said. Gnats were buzzing around my face as sweat dripped from my forehead, and so I grabbed my water bottle, took a drink, and squirted a splash on my forehead, wiping the sunscreen from my stinging eyes with my shirtsleeve. I had parked my van off the highway not too far from the dry wash at the start of the dirt road, and according to my bike's odometer I had ridden over twelve miles.

The morning weather report had predicted the desert would reach the high eighties, though it felt more like the mid-nineties and was climbing in incremental leaps. I thought about what a pain in the ass it was going to be to walk back to the van, and I scolded myself for not remembering to check the glue. Fortunately, I was in good shape and the effort needed to walk those twelve miles, though inconvenient, wasn't beyond my mettle—provided nothing unexpected happened.

Thirty minutes into my forced march, the rising temperature joined forces with a blustery wind that kicked up flurries of dust into my eyes. Added to this nuisance, the sun was knifing through my shirt and sweat dripped from my face and body at an alarming rate. I'm not a superstitious person, but when a raven appeared like a shadow, gliding out of nowhere and landing on a tall rectangular rock, I couldn't help thinking to myself how the rock angled out of the desert sand like an old gravestone.

What was stranger still, the raven cawed at me repeatedly in an aggressive manner, as if to suggest I was an unwanted trespasser in his territory, or that he—this particular bird was large and therefore probably a male—was warning me not to cross an invisible threshold under his jurisdiction. Although, considering we were in the middle of nowhere, what that jurisdiction could have been was a matter for dispute.

He was about ten paces away, his feathers glistening black in the sunlight, and as soon as he had stopped cawing, he canted his head as if to have a better look at me, so I howled at him like a coyote; he cawed one last time, flapped his wings, and took flight. I thought no more of him and continued pushing my bicycle along the dirt road. Minutes later the wind whipped up a furious little dust devil that swirled past me, and when I stopped to wipe my eyes, the raven swooped right over my head. I could hear the rush of his wings cutting through the air, and when I looked up, startled, I lost my balance and my footing gave way.

I'm not sure how it happened but my left foot wedged in a rut, and as I fell sideways, the awkwardness of the

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fall twisted my ankle worse than I had ever experienced. I lost my grip on the bike and went down on my hands and knees, the shoe still jammed in the rut. I shifted my weight and inched backwards and managed to free my foot, clenching my teeth and waiting for the pain to subside. The raven banked off the wind and circled several times, cawed loudly and flew in the direction of the highway, fading like a black dot against the backdrop of blue sky. I didn't know what to make of it.

After I had managed to stand, my ankle was so tender I couldn't put much weight on it, so I lifted my leg and tried to rotate my foot, but the pain was intense and I sat down to rest. During high school and college, I played soccer and had sprained my ankles more than a few times, but nothing quite this serious.

The only good news was I had my cell phone in the waist pack where I kept my wallet and keys. If worse came to worst, a call to 911 would bring me help.

But what's that fellow's name? Murphy—as in Murphy's Law—and if it can go wrong, it probably will. When I unzipped the pack and retrieved the phone, there was no signal.

"What the hell else can go wrong?" I shouted at the sky.

After mulling over possible options, I decided if I held the handlebars at midpoint and used the bike as a rolling crutch, I would be able to walk and keep some weight off my left foot; but regrettably, when I got into position and took a few tentative steps, it was obvious my ankle was unfit for service for the long walk that lay ahead.

My self-diagnosis was I had torn a ligament or, worse yet, suffered a fracture in one of my ankle's small bones, and this being the case, my chances of making it to the refuge of my van many miles away seemed in question. I reconsidered my options, which were few, and wondered if I should wait and hope someone showed up.

Fortunately the blustery wind stopped as abruptly as it had begun, although the rising temperature remained a troubling factor. I glanced at my wristwatch—it was five or six hours until sunset. I'm a rugged individual, athletic and tough by nature and not given to panic, but I was becoming concerned. All I had to eat was a chocolate power bar leftover in my pack from a previous ride, plus my liter-size bottle of water, so after thinking for a few more minutes, I decided to eat half of the power bar, drink some water, and rest. I looked around, hoping to find some shade.

Off to my right I noticed a sloping depression that angled down from the high ridge, and maybe it held a small gulch cut by monsoon-like cloudbursts during summer months. With luck the banks of the gulch would be deep enough to offer a slice of shade, seeing how the sun was over an hour past noon. It took five minutes with the help of my bike to limp my way to the depression, and much to my relief there was a gulch about four feet deep, with steep-cut banks creating a shadow wide enough for me to sit in, legs stretched out and my back leaned against the earthen wall. After getting comfortable and breathing a sigh of relief, I finished the power bar and washed it down with several gulps of water.

Perhaps this was when the full weight of my dilemma began to descend on me. People die in places like deserts for lack of water and for other reasons, and the harsh reality was this: I was in the middle of nowhere with little or no hope of rescue, with less

than a liter of water, a bum ankle, and no cell phone signal. Lacking any other solution, I decided to rest for a while to see if my ankle improved. The air in the gulch was slightly cooler than the open desert, and after a while I guess I drifted off into a short catnap, though I don't recall actually doing it. That was the odd part.

It seemed as if my brain had switched off without conscious awareness, and when I awoke, instead of having my back leaned against the wall, I was lying in the shady gulch with my arms folded over my chest. For a brief moment it seemed as if I were dreaming and looking up at the sky through the space between the walls of a grave; odder still were the feathery clouds floating overhead, whereas earlier, I thought that the sky had been cloudless. I glanced at my wristwatch and wondered if I had lost track of time, or if I was so stressed out I wasn't thinking clearly.

After muscling my way out of the gulch with my arms and my good leg, I tried shifting my weight from my right foot to my left. Resting had reduced the acute pain, but when I started to walk, I knew the injury was more serious than I allowed myself to believe. I would have paid a hundred bucks for a roll of duct tape to bind my ankle.

My next thought was a choice between disagreeable options: withstand the pain and continue walking no matter what, even if I risked damaging an already taxing injury, or spend the night in the gulch and hope rattlesnakes didn't bite me. Perhaps by morning my ankle would improve. Either way it was a tough decision that stood as the paradigm example of the old saying—*caught between a rock and a hard place*—although in this particular case it was a scorching desert full of rocks, thorny cacti, dangerous snakes and scorpions, negotiable only by way of a long dirt road.

Then an idea came to me. If I removed the bike's front tire, which was tough to steer, riding on the rim would be difficult but not impossible, considering much of the return trip was downhill. I also hoped my swollen ankle, though unfit for walking, would be less traumatized by pedaling. Riding without a tire would ruin the rim, but under the circumstances it seemed a reasonable sacrifice. So I hobbled back to the dirt road.

Once I had removed the tire, I managed to get back on the bike—carefully slipping my left foot into the pedal's stirrup—and began slowly pedaling,

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mostly with my good leg. The stretch of road ahead sloped gently, and the undertaking seemed workable despite the rim's tendency to slice into loose dirt and jolt over unavoidable stones and depressions. Though still painful, the effort wasn't stressing my ankle beyond endurance, and the initial success of the venture bolstered my confidence that I would be able to return to the van before the onset of darkness.

Sometime later, as I approached a steep section of road dipping into a ravine between the slopes of two adjacent hillocks, I stopped to drink some water and take stock of whether I should continue riding the bike or try walking.

Anyone who has ridden bicycles knows that the front wheel does the majority of the braking, whereas the rear brake, if applied too hard, locks up the rim and causes the tire to skid and fishtail. Lacking the front tire to grip the dirt, I was undecided about trying this stretch of road, but when I dismounted and attempted to walk, the searing pain in my ankle made it clear that walking was not a sustainable option.

I figured that the increased pain might have resulted from my body's endorphin response fading during my rest in the gulch; however, whatever the case, even if I could tolerate the pain, I feared injuring my ankle even worse. I had no choice but to keep riding. Roughly half way down the steep section of road, the inevitable occurred, and as gravity tugged and my ability to brake and steer between ruts and other obstacles grew worse, I lost control of my bicycle. The front rim angled into a rut and jolted sideways, sending me sidelong to the ground.

It was a minor spill as spills go, but my left foot caught in the stirrup and re-twisted my ankle. The pain was immediate and so intense I clawed the dirt and groaned in agony, and after I had managed to ease my foot out of the stirrup, all I could do was lie there waiting for relief, shading my eyes and wondering if things could get any worse.

Out of nowhere, like a spooky omen, I saw a raven glide overhead and bank sideways, before disappearing from my line of sight. A few moments later he reappeared, circled two or three times and landed on a mound of dirt beside the road, cawing repeatedly. It seemed to me that it was the same raven I had seen earlier, and I say this because he was large and canted his head in the same way as he watched me with his dark eyes.

I'm not given to flights of illogic, but the situation seemed beyond what I would call ordinary reality, and I had the odd feeling this peculiar bird was somehow connected to what was happening, inasmuch as bad luck had conspired against me with such uncanny precision as to suggest the possibility that I had crossed over into an alternative reality of some sort—though I know this sounds a little nutty if not slightly delusional.

Maybe it was the pain combined with my sense of growing hopelessness, underpinned by the prospect that my potential demise had become more than a vague possibility. I had to face the fact that my bicycle was all but useless, my water diminished, and my van still miles away. The temperature, though no longer rising, remained oppressive, and the only thing I could do was shake my head in disbelief and curse the irony of my predicament.

The raven had a curious way of hopping, and what I mean is, his gait combined a few steps forward followed by a hop or two, more steps and then

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another hop. His beak was the color of polished ebony, his eyes glistening in the sunlight like little black diamonds, and what was even creepier, he continued his curious mode of locomotion until he was less than a few yards away.

Does this feathered beast see me as a potential meal? That was what crossed my mind, and yet a moment later, after he had stopped walking, he made a couple more loud caws and stared at me, displaying the odd countenance of an intelligent creature making sense of what he was investigating, perhaps even arriving at some sort of avian conclusion — though I can't imagine what that might have been.

"I'm not dead yet, you little bastard. Get the hell away from me."

I actually said that, and I don't know why except that the totality of my circumstances had evolved from apprehension into a peculiar sense of the irrational. My situation was beyond absurd, considering that a member of the grandest species alive on planet Earth — a man sitting on a dirt road with the sun beating down — was being accosted by a goddamn bird. I picked up a rock to scare my tormentor, and as I cocked my arm and took aim, he cawed again, fluffed his feathers, bobbed his head up and down and hopped closer until he was only five feet away, seemingly oblivious to my intentions.

I wondered if I was suffering from heat stroke or some sort of hallucination. Maybe I was in worse shape than I realized and my brain was creating its own bizarre reality, which may have had little to do with what was actually happening.

"No, I'm not going crazy, I'm fine," I said to myself. "And I'm still in control."

But aside from this self-assurance, I knew the situation was precarious and I had only my own resources with which to save myself. The raven hopped a few more times, stopped, turned his head and seemed to be peering at my injured ankle; then he flapped his wings and took flight, circling in rising arcs before heading west in the direction of the sun, which was now lower in the sky and only hours from setting behind the mountain range.

The raven, growing smaller in the hazy afternoon sunlight, disappeared in the distance. I tossed the stone I had been holding and watched it bounce down the road. One way or another, I had to get on the bike and make my way to the safe haven of my van.

An hour or so later my ankle had become unbearably painful, but I still had six or more miles to go. The sun was getting closer to the horizon, my water bottle almost empty, and as I approached a downward stretch of the road, I heard the twang of a snapping

spoke. One of the front rim's spokes, brutalized for lack of a tire to protect it, had given up, and then moments later I heard another twanging metallic pop. Within ten minutes eight more spokes had snapped, causing the uneven tension of the remaining spokes to warp the rim, jamming it against the brake pads.

Even though the sunlight was less intense, the air temperature remained high, and I was worn out; my mouth was dry, my eyes stinging from the salty sweat dripping down my forehead. Worse yet, my ankle, along with my foot, had become so swollen I had to loosen my shoelace to relieve the pressure.

I'm by no means religious and never have been, but something even nonbelievers often resort to, when circumstances turn desperate, is the hope that there's a compassionate force or entity in the universe that will intervene. Sitting in the dirt beside my broken bicycle, realizing I had lost control of my circumstances, I glanced at the empty sky.

"Anybody home?" I said aloud. "Is this my destiny, to die in this forsaken desert? Billions of years after the Big Bang and here I am, and seeing how I wasn't the cause of myself, you must have caused me, but for what reason. . . for this? What was the point?"

Truth is, I wasn't as far gone as my brief soliloquy suggests, though I felt as if I were teetering at the edge of a dark precipice. But as I said before, I'm not a wimpy man, I'm resourceful and ready to do whatever I have to do in order to survive. This is what I whispered to myself:

You are not going to die. You can survive without water for another day or even longer, and no matter what else, you will make it back to the van; if worse comes to worst, you can crawl or hop on one foot or sleep in the desert if you have to. Man up and grit your teeth and do whatever it takes.

In spite of this bracing pep talk, I must admit that some part of me was desperate enough to petition for help. Fear of death pushes a man's thoughts to places he may otherwise never go—it's the old adage about no atheists in foxholes—yet as I was about to start my supplicatory monologue, a thought popped into my head. You're going to beg the heavens to intercede, and after a few minutes pass you will realize that nothing has changed, you're alone with your own thoughts, viewing reality through the keyhole of consciousness. The universe is still out there doing what it does, creating reality born of probabilities that congeal into a bizarre, inexplicable dreamscape, which I witness as it moves through time one slice after another.

The last sliver of sun vanished below the hazy horizon, backlighting the mountain peaks, and I remained on the ground staring in the direction of my van. The desert had cooled a little and stars were beginning to twinkle in the eastern sky, the last suggestion of twilight fading in the west.

I noticed a light flicker not far from where I would have guessed the dry wash intersected the dirt road a few hundred yards from my van. I watched the light. It flashed and jiggled, disappeared and reappeared, and then after a moment or two disappeared again.

The sky had turned dark, stars shining brighter, and I continued watching for five minutes or more, wondering what had become of the strange light. Just as I was about to give up, I saw a flash come and go and realized the light was much closer than before, following the dirt road. My hope was that an off-

road enthusiast was out for a night ride and headed my way, and in that instant of impending redemption a weight lifted from my body and mind; yet in the wake of this unlikely twist of fate, I wondered if I were hallucinating the terms of my own deliverance. But then the light grew closer.

I heard the faint sounds of a small engine, a motorcycle or maybe an all-terrain vehicle. I waited and watched, my vision blurred, then the engine noise gradually became louder and from around a bend in the road a headlight appeared, growing closer and brighter until the intensity of it made me shade my eyes. The light illuminated the space around me in a pale, eerie glow, and the buzzing of nocturnal insects fell silent. The light stopped moving, and a dozen paces away I saw the vague image of someone getting off the machine.

The figure walked slowly towards me casting a long shadow, backlit by the headlight, and as the silhouette grew closer, I thought I saw a tall, lanky man with the raven perched on his shoulder. The man stopped and stood still for several moments, and then he crossed his arms as if making an assessment of the situation. The raven cawed, flapped his wings, and vanished into the inky night.

"Are you real thirsty?" the man asked.

"Yes, I am. . . and I'm hurt and exhausted and I need your help. Please help me."

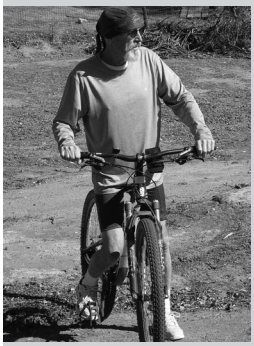
He said nothing more and stood there statue-like and unreal.

I reached out my hand with my arm extended, "My van is parked near the highway—if you could just take me there. . . then I'll be okay."

Wind gusted through the darkness and the raven returned to the man's shoulder. He turned and walked away as the light flickered into nothingness. I rubbed my closed eyelids with my fingertips and looked again, but all I saw were shadows and vague forms.

I was thirsty and hungry, broken, afraid my exhausted body was finished and I was losing my mind. I struggled to my feet and pointed to the star-pocked sky.

"To hell with you," I said, my hand trembling, "I'm not giving up."



G. D. McFetridge, a refugee from Montana's frosty winter, is visiting an old friend in the outback of Southern California in a place called Paradise Mountain, where he rides his bicycle, plays guitar, writes fiction, and works part time as a carpenter.

OWL'S MYTH

RICHIE SWANSON

Owl's horns flew up, and he glared with huge yellow cat-eyes from atop his old-gnarled oak. He heard Blast blast his disc player, blat his muffler, turn off the bridge. Blast drove his truck down the bank on tires as high as horse withers. He smashed saplings in the bottoms, snapping stems, his tread spinning and sinking through snow and mud. A little oak flew from a tire; Owl gnashed his beak. He had called the wind to blow the acorn from its branch, and Mama Horn had planted it, digging with talons. The sprout had inched up, the velvety red leaves had unfurled each spring. Now the stem and tap root lay mangled.



Allen Blake Sheldon

H.D.—High Drive—got out barking, and Little Blast, skinny-fidgety Willie, and dark-eyed Candy straddled ATVs in snow suits, and more trucks came, all awesomely roaring, blazingly-glitteringly bright, idling so broad and tall that Little Blast drove donuts beneath them, ducking his helmet.

"Fucking A! Saturday!" Blast yelled at fathers who rolled ATVs from trailers for kids. "You boneheads want to run some mud, or you still twiddling your dicks?"

Fumes rolled inside Owl's bill, stinging his throat. He flew down to his nest in the fork of the old oak's trunk. "The stumps on Stump Island!"

Mama Horn rose up, her chicks squeaking beneath her. "Ho-o-o, the stumps!" she cried.

The drivers crashed through shrubs and jumped deadfalls, fishtailing, and H.D sprinted beside them, his fur rippling black and shiny. The drivers stopped, idled, sized up the oak. H.D. quieted. He crept along a narrow neck of land around the oak and crouched at the edge of a frozen slough.

"Keep that dog off the ice!" said Blast.

"Stay!" cried Willie, and H.D. sniffed after fox-tracks. The ice cracked, H.D. went under. He popped up and dog-paddled in icy water. He pawed ice-edges, slipped. His chin sank. His eyes got oily, urgent.

Willie called, stepped onto the ice, and Blast swatted him sideways, cuffing his helmet, lifting a pistol. He shot into the sky, and H.D. crawled out panting beside the oak. Blast shot again, and the dog staggered to him and shivered against his shins.

Willie yanked off his helmet, rubbed his head. He stood on his footrests, pissed off. He threw his helmet ringing against Blast's truck. He spun his ATV around, gunned it straight across the ice, and Candy straightened her chinstrap, watching him speed through the woods past the oak. Owl felt her thoughts: *You can tear-ass through the bottoms toward the holy-ass channel and bust crazy-ass through those rotten-brown stumps, and the island will end, and the Mississippi will be about as whole-fucking big as the sky, and you can launch your wheels right onto a fucking ice floe and float your way to the dam and go through the roller gates, and Blast will about hemorrhage and cream in his briefs.*

Blast came over and pulled her key from the ignition. "You fetch that blabbermouth, I'll have one half-drowned bitch and one full-frozen idiot."

"Daddy!"

"Don't drive on that ice, I said."

She took off her helmet, flicked her hair across her nape, gleamed at him. He grinned at the oak blocking his way. He hardened his face, smiled at Candy. "You think I can't do this?"

"Your chainsaw's at home, Daddy."

Blast bear-hugged a stump, broke it from its base, hoisted it two-handed above his head, hurled it against another, poured on gas.

Candy toweled H.D. by the fire, and Blast looped a chain around the Owl's oak, hooked it to his truck's hitch, got in the cab's door. The truck lunged, the chain tightened. Owl flew down and beat his beak against the windshield, and Mama Horn clung to a rear tire, clawing tread. The truck boomed, the oak screamed. It split, thundered down, and then there were gunshots, whoops, big-belly laughs, and shreds of chicks on shattered nest sticks; H.D. rolled across Mama Horn—her bib raw-bloody flesh, an ear tuft pasted against a nearby tree.

Owl hooted mournfully down, and the oak thudded against trunks and stumps, dragged by Blast's truck. Blast revved across the crater, and everyone—in pickups, ATVs, SUVs, UTVs, dirt motorcycles—followed. Stump Island thrummed like a twenty-lane freeway at rush hour, stumps flying from tires and fenders, splitting like tinder, rolling and lying smashed as worthless trash.

* * *

A coyote licked and chewed at her breast and lapped up the chicks. He slunk into dusk, and then that scavenger-dog winked high in the dark,

sniffing the heels of the Insatiable Archer who raised a hickory war-club, wore a hot-pulsing belt, and carried a turtle-shell shield that spat incisors snapping after the Seven Ancient Owl Sisters who swirled the voices of the dead in a funnel until the departing howls rose through the sky-hole and blew across the featherless buzzards and eagles gnawing meatless bones in the next world.

Moon climbed out of the river black and steaming and thickening.

The stars blurred blue, hazed yellow above town.

The lights went out at the house, and Blast kicked open the storm door, squeezing Willie's nape. He pushed Willie to the driveway, muscled his face against the dent in the truck's door and then the windshield-cracks. "Bend over." Blast thrust Willie's helmet into his hands. "Hold it down against the ground." Blast pulled a rubber strap from the pickup's bed, swung it huffing and grunting, and finally its s-hook flew off, plinking against the garage. He went in, and Willie cooled his ass and thighs against the cold-crusting lawn. He lay prone, arms sprawled, helmet on, tinted visor drawn down, its ear-speakers pounding his kick-ass band, Vicious Rage, vengeful lyrics.

Owl glared down from the yard's flagpole and burned his wind-howls onto the Vicious Rage disc. Willie melted. He left only a grease spot, and H.D. pawed beneath the fence of his pen, whining, whimpering. Blast got hard, waking beside his wife. *Chrissie was making high little moans? Squirming? About what? Willie's pay-up? The slime-ball looks from her boss?*

Chrissie's eyes popped open—Owl leaned forward from a bedpost, squeezing Kitty limp and bleeding in a talon. He tossed the cat at Blast's feet and flapped at Blast's lap. He bit down and then spat Blast's thing like a pellet upon the mattress. He slit open Kitty's belly—a bluebird, robin, chickadees, cardinals flew out. Mice, squirrels, rabbits jumped out—meals meant for owls, not kitties. Owl boomed at Blast, "I do as you to us!" Blast lunged for his thing, Owl pecked and gulped it again. He ripped open a pillow, beat wings through a sudden storm of down. He plunged into the toilet, a merganser diving deep, and he flew up through a sewer grate. He shook himself clean. High Drive jumped against his pen, barking, and Owl lit upon him, ran a claw across his throat, raked fur.

Oh, a piece of her heart.

Owl blew his mournful hoots into it, Mama Horn pushed out. Owl spat the thing again, Mama Horn swallowed it. They flew above town into a blue glow, Heart City Hard Motor. They strutted atop a neon sign, bowing and bobbing in a throbbing buzz. He preened her. They locked bills and clacked, but she plummeted from him. She pressed her belly against a pickup's tire and bit the air valve. It tore easily. Every truck in the lot sank on flats.

Mama Owl clawed open a gas cap, spat the thing in. "DIS-SOLVE!" she yelled. "DIS-SOLVE-A-HA-HOO-HA!"

They flew into a red glow, Heart City Hardware, rows of four wheelers outside on double-decker trailers. They bit off those valves and flew to the carport's roof at River View Inn, and they fucked in front of horrified guests, slapping, spinning, and flapping like common English sparrows.

* * *

They perched on the backside of Stump Island, and Owl hoo-hooed softly, soothingly at the Dipper. He besought the Dipper, and Mama Horn blinked in assent—the ice-echoes from River Sun Slough sounded nearly as cold as when The Freeze had gripped all things, and darkness had pinned silence against Earth as unflinchingly as talons hold rats.

And, oh, the slough had thundered! It had shifted, ice-shards had flown high. The Dipper had glittered in place, had fallen, had bounced up again. The bucket had smashed the North Country flat, and the handle had left the Mississippi's long-curving valley to the Gulf. Ice-shards had scattered across the sky, a stump had risen on the bank beneath the stars. The slough had boomed, and the owls had flown out, coming into being. The ice had knocked, and a woodpecker had flown out and had clung to the stump, hammering an icicle. He peered through a crack and shrieked deliriously—a tiny curve of sun glowed inside the stump! Two burning-black eyes! A song came out! "Heat-heat-heat-heat! Cheat-cheat-cheat!"

River Sun Warbler! The one that God's nation would call the prothonotary! Sitting on a nest in there!

She poured out her warmth, and a fiery ball rose from the stump. Sky Warbler whispered a breeze, brushing the air with wings. The firmament turned blue, the slough smelled of mud, catfish, turtle flesh. Duckweed bloomed. Teal with crescent-moon cheeks came, and grebes pumped horny-blond heads, skidding across the melt.

Owl tore open a rabbit. Mama Horn bent to their chicks with the meat, and they sank suddenly, peering with lion-sized gawks over the nest's rim. A brown head rose from the slough—a man. He fisted a mallard's neck, and a woman plucked the duck on the bank of River Sun Slough, her ribs too big-looking. Their girl squalled, her stomach thinner than her waist. The man carried a hickory club toward a marsh, smelling muskrats, and the woman saw a wet-gray splotch on a maple trunk. She and her girl licked it hungrily. It tasted sweet, and they peeled bark from river birch, folded it into boxes. Sewed them with bone-awls and nettle-fibers, hung them on maples each year, caught the sap, and always the men hunted the thawing marshes, and the women stayed behind, boiling syrup on the bank.

The women molded sugar in duckbills. . . reeds. . . rawhide. . . brass. . . tin, and one morning shouts came from the channel, commands. A keelboat moved up the current. A crew of white men pushed poles from

their shoulders, hunching like apes. Their captain quieted, the women knew his stare. They ran through the bottoms, and River Sun fell, the girl's ankle throbbing in a groundhog-hole. The crew hoisted her, new breasts wiggling against her dress. The men got her down in the sugarhouse, the captain spread her on a bearskin. River Sun shrank beneath him, screamed, "Heat-heat-heat! Cheat-cheat-cheat-cheat!" She grew luminous gold feathers, flew to a stump, hid inside like the warbler on eggs. The men brought axes from the cargo box, swung them against the stump, and splashes sprayed their ankles.

The river jumped up their thighs, gushing cold, stinging and shrinking their things. The river pushed the men under, pummeled faces with ice-shards; the captain climbed a tree. He jumped from trunk to trunk, heading for his boat, and Mama Horn called a gust. He fell in, Owl felt the captain's last thought, and it took many reservations, many brown mutilations and killings. But the Noisy Things finally came, downing trees, loading logs onto rail cars, dumping rock, pouring cement, and then the river backed up behind hard iron gates and long white walls. The river flooded and ran only through a channel between dikes, and when it dropped, dams held back the flow all the way from the middle of the continent to her headwaters. The water turned scummy and brown, full of sewage from cities, field fertilizer, sawdust from mills. It backed up over the stumps in River Sun Slough, and Mama Horn hissed at Raccoon, Snake, Skunk, and Mink, "The River Suns! Leave their eggs! Don't eat their chicks, not any!" She looked distraught at little oaks and cottonwoods barely sticking out above the silty water. Their leaves shriveled. The saplings floated up dead, roots bloated.

And so the big old oaks and cottonwoods dwindled, and Sky Warbler hardly whispered in their towering crowns at all—every spring, that little bird used to brush the air, the deep cerulean of the south, yet in God's nation the blue of the day paled to smog, and hardly anyone heard that soft song—nor River Sun Warbler calling plaintively while he flashed his stunning white tail spots at his hole, looking for love.

* * *

Blast drove his truck home, balanced himself on the cab's step, swung his legs ably across the side panel. He spread his feet on the bed and unbuckled his belt, and a gas hose flopped out—tough like his strap, thick as if the hospital had sewn it on from a fuel tanker. Pinkish and orange, it hung off the tailgate, and Candy cupped palms beneath its nozzle, lifting it from asphalt; Chrissie fingered its trigger, stretching it out the driveway. Blast wiped a tear. "Remember my—" He gulped pain in front of cousins, neighbors, dad-buddies. "Remember my—WILLIE!" He cocked his big-boned chin, glared unflinchingly at cameramen, voters, senators, representatives. "We drive WHATEVER WHEREVER HOWEVER WE WANT!"

Invasion-tanks, armored fighting vehicles, multiple missile carriers, multiple rocket launchers, transporter erector launchers, commando four-wheelers, armored reconnaissance vehicles, feather-smeller transporters, Skyhawks, Seahawks, Eagles, Harriers, Blackhawks, Fighting Falcons, Sea Stallions, Hornets, Dragonflies, Sidewinders, Diamondbacks, Cayuses, Chinooks, Chickasaws, Choctaws, Apaches lined up, and everyone wore crisp fatigues, saluting and stroking Blast's hose, and gas holes sucked and sucked and sucked it, and he hummed, vibrated, hoisted his boy to his shoulders.

Little Blast straddled Dad's neck, kicked his feet, discovered his little-hairless thing was a hose too. He thrust it secretly into Blast's nape, and his hand-held monitor showed a hole high up an oak, Owl's new nest. He saw a stump beneath the tree, a helmet gleaming inside. "Dad!" he said. "Willie!"

Blast rolled in his hose, zippered up, called the brass.

Amphibious assault vehicles landed where the old-gnarled oak had fallen. Tanks and hummers sped through the bottoms. Lasers shone dots against stumps. Earthmovers crushed them. Robotic mites swarmed the debris.

"Heat-heat-heat-heat! Cheat-cheat-cheat!" The golden glow spread through the bottoms, melted snow, softened mud. Machinery sank. Nettles swarmed up, and the razor-hairs cut through steel, honeycombed armor, anti-radiation liners.

Poison ivy vines dangled suddenly from greening trees, and Mama Horn spun inside her hole, blowing, and mist swirled like dust devils. Drivers and gunners blistered beneath body gear, bled from bumps and rashes, felt traces of wood roaches scurry through ears. They wailed as if woodpeckers were inside their heads, pounding to get out. Herons taller than Bradley tanks smashed hatches with bills, squeezed bodies down their throats, flew above the command bunker, and shot whitewash on the roof.

"Cream shitters?" Blast barked at the brass. "You couldn't see cream shitters coming?"

Chrissie clicked through infrared images, and the computer screens went black—an intelligence drone corkscrewed down through the sky, tumbling in flames—wild grapes and Virginia creeper were racing up towers, darkening satellite dishes.

"We didn't really see Willie's helmet," said Chrissie. "He must be—"

"I still feel Willie alive on my fingertips," said Blast.

"Willie's as dead as everything else you touch."

"You don't know owls." Blast gripped Chrissie's mouth and pushed her teeth crooked. "Owls are wicked. They got bullshit spines held up with nothing but hot air."

* * *

The weather stayed warm. Candy dove in from the levee and swam brazen strokes to the backside of Stump Island. She climbed onto a log in River Sun Slough, arched a thigh in a blaze of light. Her breasts thickened beneath bikini-cups, her hair fuzzed beneath her navel. An old soft-shelled turtle climbed beside her, raising a fleshy throat-pouch, a shy-curving smile, little crocodile eyes.

She lay back for his web-fingers, and the turtle grew man-like. She kissed him, leaving a tiny gold disc on his tongue. "Just crawl-ass to Owl's tree and drop it there." She fondled the soft-shell man like an oil hose. "Just squeeze it ass-out like an egg."

"To aim your father's missile?" He wrinkled his nose at a cotton-wood-top, and Sky Warbler flew down, landed beside Candy, puffed his mantle, bowed his head before her. Candy caught her breath. *The fuck-ass blue on his crown! His nape! His wings! A kick-ass dark-ass necklace! A cool-ass white-ass breast!*

"He flew out of the dense-dark color of the first dawn." The man's hard-on turned sky-blue. "He warbled the first lovely breeze. He feathers your beautiful breath."

The bird let go a rushing whisper; the man's mood flew into Candy. She flung the gold disc away, not caring where. She wiggled, panted, moaned, crooned. The log bobbed. A snapper bit the man's neck and then fell upon Candy, clawing everywhere. He rocked upon her. She sprayed apart, and the snapper stood, Blast slipping from the shell, a howitzer smoking from his loins.

"No fucking traitors, none what-so-fucking-ever." He wiped his howitzer clean, hoots murmured behind him. He turned, and vines snagged the howitzer, wild cucumbers. They roped his arms and legs, pulled him down. He fired deep into the ground—punch and recoil. The vines stretched and spread. They sank tubers into him, leaking brown slime like rotten potatoes. He sputtered, his howitzer a tuber, tubers in his organs, and then he was gone. The cucumber flowers bloomed starry and white. Their fruits swelled. Their prickles dripped pus. The pus seeped through acorns in the dirt, and oaks blasted up—twice as tall as redwoods. They sank tap roots through buried turrets, clenched limbs like fists. They thrust out burls like angry chins, uppercut one another. They blasted themselves ten-stories high, and Mama Horn blew termites from her hole, and they seethed across a drift log that lay rotting on the ground. They darkened it, boring in, and a big uncle oak turned from his boxing, saw Owl and Mama Horn on the forest floor, fluffing wings, hopping up from detritus. A stem snapped up—stained by blood drops. It pushed out catkins. They smelled sweet, whispered a blue breeze. Uncle Oak nearly melted through his bark, lifted and tickled Candy. She squealed. He and Granddaddy Oak swung her by crown and roots, she got big as Uncle. They hurled her across the river, she blasted down on anti-aircraft and anti-heron missiles. They collapsed like little-balsam replicas.

Scads of oaks flew across, thrown from the island, all awesomely giggling, leaves blazingly-glitteringly bright. They smashed down on town and rolled so broad and heavy that tanks, hummers, buildings, even the gas-hose hospital squashed flat.

"We sprout! Walk! Sing! Fly HOWEVER WHEREVER WHENEVER WE WANT!" cried Candy.

Tomahawk missiles streaked toward her. Mama Horn coughed out fuzzy-cottony wads, egg cases. Spiders hatched on Candy, webs shrouded her. The missiles flew in and jerked about like birds in mist nets. The tiny gold warbler zoomed around reentry vehicles, his heat cut them open. Uncle hurled the warheads against the turtle-shell shield. They mushroomed into blinding blasts up there. They dimmed the Insatiable Archer; the hickory war-club swung down. The dams' long white walls and red roller-gates burst like surf-spray, the Dipper dipped down. It scooped floodwater, dipped up and circled North Star, and dumped east of the river, then west, and everyone in Blast's nation, all their cars and buildings, washed into oceans.

The river sank, slipping down the oaks' trunks. It dropped below the stumps, and Mama Horn saw all the way to the river's mouth and heard the wakes of warships and even the shush-sounds of Candy, a live oak now, her shroud suffused with moss, her limbs draping the tide from a bank.

"You'll be the death of all owls, Candy!" Chrissie shouted through quadraphonic dentures from an aircraft carrier. "Of all oaks, all islands, all your vines!"

Little Blast came out the bridge to the deck, raising a bullhorn to a chemical protected-hood. "Get off our land!"

"W-h-hoooo-whooooo-whooooooose land?" Owl blurred duskily in the oak, blowing Candy's voice out to the ship. "W-h-hooooooooooooo-hooooooooooooooooooose?"

"Blast left in my hands secret blasts to blast away all blasts blasted against us!" blasted Little Blast.

The live oak straightened, and Candy squeezed out from a bark-furrow, her body green and gold, wiggly and wobbly like a frog's. She hip-hopped.

The miracle. . .
The miracle. . .
The miracle of green

Receive it, believe it
Do not deceive it
Or dare besiege it

The miracle. . .
The miracle. . .
The oracle of breath.

She steadied webbed talons on a branch and spread a rubbery chin against a violin. Her hair flopped down, shiny strands of pondweed. Her nipples sweated algal drips as she tensed droopy-crooked fingers on her bow.

Owl and Mama Horn hooted and hummed time, and Candy played with aplomb, weeping concertos for the gifts of the sun.

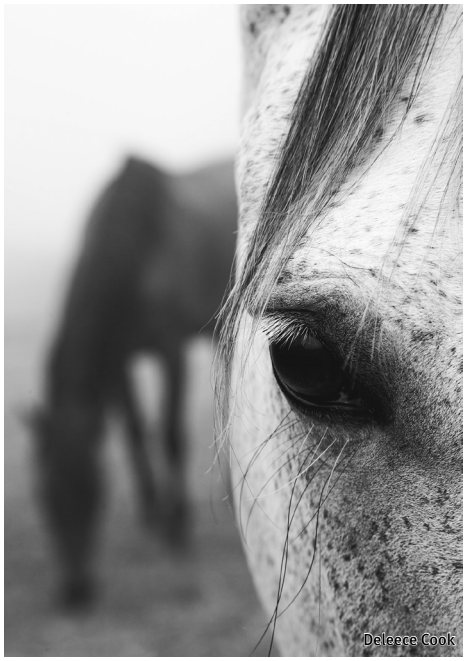


Allen Blake Sheldon

Richie explored North America by bicycle and backpack from 1977-2006. His novel *First Territory* (Sunstone Press, 2013) depicts the U.S. invasion of the Yakama homelands in 1855-1856. He's lived in a Mississippi River boathouse for 35 years, earning two Pushcart nominations for river fictions. He's conducted breeding bird censuses and advocates for habitat conservation around Winona, Minnesota. You can read more about Richie at RichieSwanson.com.

RIDING A DEAD HORSE

BILL BILVERSTONE



When my old man decided he needed an office—and that was a long time ago, even before my mom died—he made me drag a card table, four odd chairs, and a beat-up refrigerator into a back corner of the shop and enclose his junky furniture with two seven-foot-high companion walls of cast-off wheel rims and bald tires.

"But leave, Numb Nuts," he warned me, "an opening for me to get through."

For all its menacing ugliness, his office didn't offer that much seclusion. You might not know what he was up to, but you knew when he was in there. Like the autumn morning the telephone startled me out of my book. Bogus poker chips clinked and cigarette smoke overhung his walls. I tossed my paperback onto the bench and grabbed the phone because it's a cinch the old man wasn't going to get up off his dead ass and answer it himself. Not while there was a college dropout he could boss around. Besides, he was entertaining his sketchy friends.

"Good morning." I said, "Risley's Repair."

"This is Milo Dodd, Chuck. A three-quarter ton and a horse trailer turned over across from my place and the horse is trapped. Tell your old man to get on out here with the tow truck."

"He's pretty busy, Milo."

"This is an emergency, Chuck. Tell your old man to get his fat ass out here."

"All right, Milo. I'll try."

I didn't much want to, though. Leave the old man alone and do the job yourself: that was my motto. But knowledge being power and the five-ton tow truck being the apex of his power, the old man didn't allow me to operate the damn thing, and he wasn't about to teach me either.

I trudged over to the doorway and stood in the smokey light.

"Raise," the four o'clock lump said as he tossed bottle caps into the pot. The eight o'clock lump—stained overalls and cauliflower ear—frowned and restudied

his cards. The biggest lump, my old man, took a slug from his longneck, pointed a .45 caliber index finger at the lump who'd raised and cocked his greasy thumb with an audible click.

All this for my instruction: they knew I was there, were doing their duty, showing the college boy how to be a man.

"Pa," I said, "there's a pickup and a horse trailer turned over across from Milo Dodd's place and the horse is trapped. Milo says they need the tow truck, and I thought I'd go on ahead."

The old man set his bottle down amongst the bottle caps, ashtrays, and antacids, and tilted his head in my direction. His face was blue from Marlboros and his bristly jowls waggled as he flapped his lips.

"Is the radiator out of that jeep?"

"What's that got to do with it?"

"What that's got to do with it," he said, fixing me with his gravelly eyes, "is that I want to know."

Staring down people was one of the old man's great shibboleths. Besides outright intimidation, he believed that it was impossible to lie to him when faced with his deadly gaze.

"Yeah, sure," I lied as I stalked off between the jeep and an F150 waiting for a fuel pump. "It's on the bench."

"Hey. Hey! Who's gonna haul cable?"

"You three can handle it," I hollered back. "You're rested."

I spun gravel on his Lincoln. I smoked ruts down a row of junk vehicles and busted farm implements, popped my emergency flashers, and really let the Silverado roar on the Sweetwater Road. Before long, though, I let up on the gas and slid in behind half-a-dozen vehicles strung out along the blacktop. Milo Dodd, a down-on-his-luck farrier with a skimpy moustache and acne scars, broke from the onlookers and hotfooted in my direction. Right away he wanted to know where-in-the-hell the wrecker was at.

I stepped down from my truck, slammed the door, and nodded at the others. Local guys mostly, in bibs, blue jeans, and feed caps.

"How'd it happen?" I said. And my question wasn't a distraction entirely. The Sweetwater Road is straight and flat from mountain range to mountain range, and I couldn't understand how a guy could overturn his rig in all that sunlight.

"Some tourist in an SUV swerved to miss a coyote." Milo shrugged. "Got hisself in the cowboy's lane and the cowboy swerved to miss him and over he went."

Over he went, all right. The flatbed was on its side, its rusty underbelly exposed to the world, and the smokey scribble that rose from the engine drifted out over the prairie and the droopy barbwire fence that fenced the sagebrush in.

"That the cowboy?"

Milo looked where I was looking. At the horse trailer. The horse trailer had busted loose from the pickup and flattened some as it tumbled part

way down the borrow pit. A stringy guy in a straw hat was stooped at the loading end which, as luck would have it, had fetched up on the downhill side. All I could see of the horse was a limp tail and chestnut rump.

"Yeah, that's him. He got the gate tore off a while back and now he's tryin' to drag her outta there. By the tail, no less. She's scared and maybe hurt and he ain't gonna be satisfied until he gets his face kicked in."

"Anybody call the vet?"

"Yeah. But Doc Brennan is hell and gone, off trying to save a thoroughbred that got tangled up in wire."

I quit Milo then, tramped on down the borrow pit, and the cowboy straightened up when he saw me coming. He was weather-beaten and going on sixty, but his eyes were green and alight in his cleanshaven face.

"Listen," I said. "I'll give this tail hauling business a try. But she's your horse, you stand closest to the hooves."

"A practical man." He grinned. "What my wife wouldn't give for a practical man."

I probably grinned back and—free from the shop now and playing at buckaroo—I remember I said, "You haulin? Or just talkin?"

"I'm ahaulin." He laughed.

The cowboy positioned himself between me and the iron shoes and grasped her tail down by the root, but right away the mare kicked and the cowboy jumped back and knocked us both down in weeds and thistles.

"I believe she's hurt," he said. "She can kick a whole lot harder than that."

I followed him around to the front of the trailer where a window panel had torn off. When we peered in, the mare opened her eyes, lifted her head, and nickered softly. Fell back when he reached down and stroked her cheek.

"Where-in-the-hell's that tow truck?" someone, probably Milo, hollered down from the road.

"How about if I climb in?" I said. "While you pulled, I could push."

"That's not such a bad idea." He shook his head. "But spooked as she is, I should do it myself."

"Nah. You're too big. Besides, I'd rather get bit than kicked. Here, give me a boost."

The mare followed my banging scramble onto the trailer and her ears went back when I crouched above her.

"Steady, Babe," the cowboy said. "Whoa there, steady, girl. You gotta talk to her, son."

"Steady, Babe. Whoa there, steady, girl. That's a good girl. A good good girl. And you're a good-lookin' girl, too. And you don't bite either. Not like some horses do. Not you. Not the beautiful beautiful Babe."

I reached in and, feeling her hot breath on my hand, stroked her cheek until her eyes closed and the cowboy nudged me and I lowered myself into the crumpled trailer's smoldering heart.

"Good girl," I said. "Good old Babe. That's a good girl. A good good girl. Lay your head in my lap now, girl. Let me get my back against your

chest and my boots against the wall. And don't look so scared. Everything's gonna be all right. Yes, it will. Oh yes it will, you beautiful beautiful Babe."

The cowboy eased away and dusty sunlight replaced his shadow. When Babe's eyes suddenly flicked open and her ears pricked up, I figured he'd taken hold of her tail.

"Ready?" he called.

"On my count of three," I called back. "Steady, Babe. Steady there, girl. It's just the humans talking. Talking and talking."

"One. Two. Three. Heave."

Almost before I could get my back truly into it there came a loud *wock* and string of curses as Babe went to snorting and thrashing about.

"What's happening?" I hollered after I'd got her settled down.

"Nothin'," the cowboy snapped.

But up on the road the bystanders were muttering that the cowboy had finally got himself kicked.

"Goddamn," he growled when he at last appeared in the opening. "Where-in-the-hell is that tow truck?"

What could I say? That it was my fault? That the old man was punishing us because I'd lied to him, mocked him, spun gravel on his shitty Lincoln? Not this kid. I kept my mouth shut, remained small and silent, hiding out in the hot sweet scent of the beautiful Babe. After a while I got to thinking about my mom, near the end, when she got all confused and would sometimes bitch at me and sometimes let me lie with her on the sweaty bed.

"Let's give it a try," the cowboy called.

I gave it everything I had. I ground my boots into the sheet metal and strained until my joints popped and Babe bucked and something gave and out she went, sliding into the sunlight. Calling on her to stay down, the cowboy scrambled from tail to neck where he caressed and crooned while, up on the road, some damn fool began to cheer. Myself, I slid on out of there, grinning like a jackass at how happy he must be. I imagined one of those wiry cowboy arms thrown over my shoulder. I imagined him proclaiming my courage and gumption and strength. I imagined, I imagined, I imagined.

But the truth is Babe was dead. The cowboy could find no pulse or respiration, and we knelt there—dumbfounded by the swift flight of the spirit, oppressed by the immense weight of the sun—until a deputy sheriff marched down the borrow pit and told the cowboy that he needed to come make a statement. Noon, I was thinking as the deputy led him away, must be a terrible time to die. All that darkness and all that light. All that shadow packed into the body like molasses in a jug. I couldn't handle the darkness. I lay my face against the beautiful Babe and began to cry.

I don't know how long I knelt there, how long my guts heaved and my breath came in raw little snuffs, but I do remember seeing the doctor there, the mustachioed old GP who used to visit my mom. To remem-

ber him, of course, was to remember her, and to remember her was to remember a haggard face cautioning me from a rumpled bed. "Stand up straight," she scolded again and again. "You've got to stand up straight, Charlie. And you've got to start now, before I'm gone." Silence. The darkness ate at her face like acid. Silence not silence: the charged silence left by things unsaid and things undone.

Suddenly, over the silence, boots came sizzling through the weeds.

"That ain't no place to be sittin' and bawlin'," the old man said.

I wished him away. I told myself that he wouldn't be there if I opened my eyes. And then I didn't open my eyes just to be certain.

"Did you hear me?" The old man prodded my back with something hard.

"Whatta you want?"

"I want you to get outta my road so's I can put that horse out of its misery."

I opened my eyes. The boxy, semi-automatic was indeed in his hand, and the clones flanked him like a pair of bristling hogs.

"The horse is out of its misery."

Unfortunately, just as the words were leaving my mouth, the dead Babe quivered.

"Look!"

"That's just nerves."

"Nerves, my ass. Get-the-hell outta my way."

I hauled myself to my feet and stood there, feigning helplessness, as he jacked a round into the chamber. When he stretched out his arm to shoot, I snatched the pistol away and heaved it out on the prairie.

The old man balled his fists and charged but—familiar with his attacks—I ducked a roundhouse right and slowed him down with a flailing, mostly defensive forearm that rattled off his throat. Encouraged by my luck, I seized a jowl with one hand and slapped him very hard with the other. When that unorthodox assault froze the bastard up, I slapped him again and wrung that hunk of blue meat until his hands fell to his sides.

A quick look around assured me that the clones would be content to mutter and glare, but the old man had gone ominously still, gathering himself, I feared, for Charlie's extinction.

I gave him another hard slap and a furious shaking.

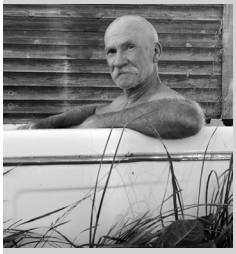
"You don't understand," I hissed in my best schoolyard bluff. "I'll rip it off. So help me, I'll rip your face off."

I almost stalled then, seeing the confusion well in his teary old eyes, seeing how hollow he really was. But sometimes, I suddenly understood, you had to bash the shit out of something or you'd never reach the other side.

"Stay away from the trailer," I said. "I'm going to be packing and you better stay away till I'm gone."

I gave him another brisk shake, slapped him for good measure, and pushed him down hard at the feet of the clones. All the way back to the truck, I imagined boots stomping my kidneys, bullets drilling my lungs,

fists crunching my nose. But when I finally pulled away from the thinning crowd—forgetting, I'm ashamed to confess, to tell the cowboy goodbye—the three mooks were out there in the sagebrush, scuffling around for a pistol I hoped they'd never find.



Bill Bilverstone fled the east coast for Montana where he eventually received a B.A. in Film and TV from Montana State University and went to work at Montana PBS. There, he made the award-winning documentaries *Paradise and Purgatory: Hemingway of The L Bar T and St. V's*; *Gravel in Her Gut and Spit in Her Eye,* a biography of western writer Dorothy M. Johnson; and *Confluence,* which set Alan Kesselheim's nature writing against Stuart Weber's classical guitar chops. Since leaving Montana PBS, Bill's work has appeared in *Kansas Quarterly*, *Arkansas Review*, *Big Sky Journal,* and *Montana Quarterly*.

NEVER COME BACK

ALICE KINERK



When a person leaves for the grocery store there is a good chance she'll come back. I mean, groceries suggest cooking. Cooking suggests home. There is almost zero chance your spouse turns the onions to low, races off to Ralph's for that jar of oregano she had been certain was in the cabinet somewhere, never to be seen again.

But that's what I did. That's the mystery Jez now lives with. Sometimes I wonder, did he let the onions burn? Jez is no cook. He keeps a respectful distance from the culinary tools of the trade. He can operate a microwave. For anything beyond that he's got me.

So, did he eventually decide to turn the burner off, or did the police do it after he called them? And when did he call them? And how did he sound? I have, for a long time, imagined the recording. Did his voice waver? I wonder, did Jez remember specifically that I went out for oregano? What words did he use? Did he say "I don't know where she went" or did he say "She went to Ralph's for oregano and never came back." I want to know.

Time to address the elephant in the room. I went for oregano, not drugs. I'm not a secret drug dealer. I know so little about drugs that I don't know if "oregano" is code for marijuana. Everything I know about drugs I read in a paperback called *Just Say No*. I found the book in my brother Felix's closet one night after he left. The pages smelled like dust, and there was a photo of Nancy Reagan on the cover. Old Nance had kindly included a list of slang terms that the reader might encounter. *Oregano* was on it.

I only bring it up now because one of the possibilities I've considered—and believe me, with the free time I have, it becomes natural, habitual, to consider possibilities—is that the police mistook Jez's mention of oregano for narcotics, and went around flashing my photo in the face of every emaciated addict in town. *Do you know a woman named Luann Briggs*? That is, of course, if Jez remembered it was oregano at all.

***

Let me start again. It was an autumn evening. I was cooking dinner. We were out of oregano. I turned the burner down, grabbed my purse, and yelled up the stairs "I'm going to Ralph's! We're out of oregano!" Jez had told me he was going to be job-hunting online, but I could hear *Sports Center* returning from commercial break.

"Have fun," he yelled.

So, I drove to Ralph's. It was terrible. What is it about driving that I don't like exactly? It's no one thing. When I get in the car, I'm trying not to worry about what is wrong with the brakes we can't afford to fix, and not get annoyed by the cracked windshield that's all smeared because the defroster crapped out a year ago and we've been wipe-by-hand since. I don't want to look at the paint peeling off and rust coming up, or the gray silt caked in the door jambs, or smell the sun-baked plastic.

When I first turned sixteen, it was the action of pressing the accelerator that used to get me. The guilt, I mean. Dino bones burning under my foot would make my whole right leg go numb. I would get out of the car and stumble. That never happens now. Who knows why.

Anyway, I drove to Ralph's. I was thinking about the argument Jez and I had the previous night, which started off when I'd complained about how my floor supervisor at MetaGen was never listening, always talking over me. Jez had *yeah, yeah, yeah'ed*, head bobbing with what I'd thought was empathy, but no! Jez was only waiting to one-up me with a story about a guy he'd worked with who had done the very same thing! (The irony was lost on him.) It was a story he'd told before, and I said so.

He sat up straight in bed and tucked his chin down. An ugly look. "You have a job. I don't. Does rubbing my face in that fact make you feel better?"

I just lay there reeling. Of course, I didn't like it that Jez didn't have a job. The number one thing I wanted from life was a husband with a job! I had been totally hung up on the idea that once Jez worked, our marriage would work. But *Sports Center* was forecasting playoffs and I was well-vaped. Articulating specific thoughts suddenly felt like too much to bear, so I . . . didn't.

I mean, I love Jez. I loved him. When I said *To have and to hold. To love and to cherish*, I really did believe, at the time, that I loved him. We had good fun. We had good sex. I used to feel like a flower when I was on top of him, like a rose budding, blooming, blossoming, as I came. It's different now. These days, during sex, all I can think about is the clashing of

bodies, the endless pushing together and pulling apart. It's analogous to the rhythm of our relationship, the way periodic arguments perforate our peace. I loved Jez. Do I still love Jez? Who knows.

And what is love, am I right? I wish there was some sort of peer-reviewed, super-accurate definitive test. Like, just drop a sample of your love in this glass, stir, and observe if the water turns red or blue. Because sometimes it is hard to know! Sometimes I wonder, what if I've never been in love? What if everything I thought was love was just a dollop of dopamine? What if I've just learned to mimic the way other people act when they are in love? Maybe I'm walking around in human clothes, playacting at something everyone else understands but me? I used to feel this way a lot around Jez, I mean, back when we lived together. I used to imagine there was one wall in our house made out of glass, and on the other side visitors come to view the "human" in her "life of domestic tranquility." Munch some popcorn, point, laugh, then wander off to the reptile house. Because that's how it used to feel!

Anyway, I drove to Ralph's. At the intersection, a dog stopped to sniff, and a teenager yanked the collar so hard its front paws went up. Sometimes it's the little things. Because I'm always the dog in the situation, you know? I turned away. I turned on the radio news. A woman was having a hard time getting words out. Her first language was Spanish, I could tell from her round vowels. *Take your time*, the reporter said. *I might never see my children again*, the woman said. I switched to a different news station, heard one word *nuclear* and switched again. This time to music because sometimes music helps.

That's another thing I hate about driving. Sometimes my blood pressure does loop-de-loops. First my heart beats hard, then everything drops through the floor—*fawhoomp*. Then my vision narrows and there's this half fuzz/half terror that makes it hard to think, but at the same time feels like floating, like I'm floating above and behind my physical self, like my body is a marionette, and the real me is up above, pulling strings. Which is fine when you're sitting down to *Sports Center*, but not so much when driving. To reset, you have to tighten yourself up, push the blood around. I've learned to clench my sphincter, clench my jaw, clench my fists.

So, I arrived at Ralph's, tight as a clam. I pulled in, took a sharp left to my favorite spot, a place I called the overlooked spot. (I had this thing about parking. Cruising around infuriated me. Waste of time and gas. Then you have to remember where you parked afterward! Always look for an overlooked spot. All lots have one. Overlooked spots are conveniently located, yet rarely occupied. Overlooked spots are out of sight until you are almost upon them. Look for moss on the pavement. Once I found an overlooked spot, I never parked anywhere else.)

I entered Ralph's. I walked to Baking/Spices. I located a jar of Spice Island brand oregano. I purchased said oregano. I walked back to my car. I took out my keys. But I didn't get in. In the little wedge of woods that separates the suburban parking lot from the suburban road, there's a picnic table. It's been there since forever. Which higher-up at Ralph's gave

the green light for a parking lot picnic table? I'd like to know. I have this thing about underused picnic tables. I mean, maybe I do. I walked into the little woods, swung a leg over, plopped down and poked at my phone. It had suddenly become the perfect moment to text my mom.

Sry about Sat!!
Did U clean up @ Felix's grave? TY!!
CU next month!!
Love you miss you

I knew I should write more, but there was this aroma. Buttery, vanilla birthday cake. It distracted me into hitting *SEND*. It was weird. I knew Ralph's bakery was washing up by noon. There were only two other businesses in the Ralph's plaza. A barbershop and the DMV. Neither of which emitted an aroma of cake. There's also a stand-alone Starbucks store (plus Ralph's in-store mini, of course, with our proximity to Seattle) but Starbucks just smells like Starbucks.

Well. It smelled stronger as I walked away from the picnic table and into the green strip, past a ragged plug of scotch broom wearing a windblown bag. Birthday cake aroma was literally blowing against my face. My hair did the supermodel thing. I looked around.

Under the sprawl of a huckleberry bush was a manhole cover. A big, metal, standard size manhole cover, just lying there. I pushed it with one foot. I saw a hole. I dropped to my knees and shoved the manhole cover all the way to one side and bent down closer. It was a large hole. It did not go straight down like a well, but sloped off like the tunnel slide at Water Country. The Twister, that's what it was called. I always loved the Twister. What is it about dropping yourself into something you can't see and letting yourself be whisked away? It's the same morbid curiosity that got me married at 23.

The birthday cake aroma was blowing up and out. I leaned in but it was too dark. I took a breath, dropped to my knees, and stuck my whole head inside.

The jar of oregano rolled from my open purse.

There was the *thunk* of glass hitting ground. But no splash of standing water. No curious claws of creatures dark and dangerous.

At this point a normal person would have stood up, brushed off the dirt, walked back across the parking lot, and purchased another jar of Spice Island brand oregano. It's like what, three dollars and seventy-nine cents? That would be the normal thing, am I right? But not me.

I turned on my flashlight app. I strapped my purse messenger-style across my shoulders, zipped it closed, and lowered my head and shoulders into the hole. I reached in. My fingers waggled at air. My bottom half failed to provide sufficient leverage, and I began to slip head first into the hole. It happened fast and was unstoppable. I skidded in on my chin. My neck bled. There was dirt in the space between my bottom teeth and my bottom lip.

I spent a long time coughing and spitting, then wiped my eyes and looked around. I took off my purse and dropped the stupid bottle of oregano inside, zipped it closed, and patted it.

It was not just a pit, it was the entry to something larger. I mean, I'd guessed that already, from the cake scent. There was a hallway. It was not a dug-dirt hallway, but a standard underground cement hallway with a tile floor all shiny-wet and cracked. Every ten or twelve feet halogen light, dim and flickering. Nothing at the end but a corner that went off toward Ralph's.

Above me, the surface was close. If I were to stand below the opening and raise my hands, my fingertips would be above grass. The packed dirt slide had a couple huckleberry roots alongside it. They were thick roots and well placed as handles. I could have hoisted myself out. I could have left (I still could leave) at any time. I could have stood up, brushed off the dirt, climbed out, and gone home. At that point, I was still thinking I would.

***

Let me start again. I was born in Cleveland on September 27th, 1986, just a hop/skip/jump from a little disaster known as BalloonFest '86; maybe you've heard of it? The local United Way had sent schoolkids out selling balloons for fifty cents each. It was a fundraiser. Also, going for a Guinness. The Cleveland tykes sold *1.4 million* balloons.

There's photos. My favorite is an aerial shot when the balloons were still held down. They're tented to the ground with a series of ropes. They look, in sum, like the segmented exoskeleton of some monstrous multicolored arthropod bent on consuming C-Town.

But when it was time for the release! They shot straight up! Everyone in the Terminal Tower crowd lolled their heads back and began screaming, and oh, the joy! Ecstasy! Euphoria! Exhilaration!

It is impossible to describe BalloonFest '86 without innuendo.

But afterward what did they think would happen? Did they not understand the basic law of gravity? You can go down and never come back up, sure, but the opposite is never true. What goes up always, always, in some form, at some point, eventually, will come down.

In the first hours of my life, drifting balloons mesmerized drivers and caused accidents. Balloons screwed up air traffic control. They had to ground flights. Two fishermen on Lake Erie somehow died. After BalloonFest, Guinness announced they would no longer keep records of stunts which were damaging to the environment.

My mom had a photo of me in a stroller. Newborn, flappy neck. My father's left hand is on the stroller and his right is holding a pink balloon. My mom says our street was covered with BalloonFest balloons the day they drove me home from the hospital but even so, no pink one. He wouldn't let her take the picture until he found a pink balloon. That had made my mom laugh. (She never laughed, telling about it.) She says he

walked all over our block, pushing me in that stroller, and when he found a pink balloon, he rushed right back home and she took the picture. It is the only picture of me with my dad that I have.

***

In front of me, in the pit, at the end of the hall, a hunched-over man hobbled several steps and then paused. "Who's that? Marlena, is that you? I heard coughing. You're going to be late! It's Al. Run on over here. Walk beside me. I know I'm late. We can be late together."

Right away he reminded me of my grandpa. I guess at first I assumed I had stumbled across some overlooked fire escape into a retirement home. That I was being mistaken for a caregiver. I thought at any moment we would come across the real caregiver, Marlena I guess, and there would be laughter, apologies, gratitude, possibly birthday cake?

I turned off my flashlight app and did my best to wipe the dirt from my T-shirt. I did not run to this old man Al (because of wet tiles), but walked with my shoulders back in the sort of business-like way I imagined Marlena might walk. Calm but quick. I was faking the calm part, obviously. This was a nightmarish feel to the experience. I *wanted* to run.

"Thanks," Al said after I'd slipped my shoulder underneath his arm and we'd begun hobbling along, me at a half-hunch to accommodate. "Now. What is your name?"

"Marlena." It just rolled off my tongue. Grampa had lived with us, in Felix's room, after he left. I'm not proud. But I will say I know how dementia makes you easy to manipulate.

"Marlena?" Al sounded surprised.

"That's right, Al!" My voice was warm and cheery. "You know me!"

Al nodded in a slow way as if he really wasn't sure. "How's the Overlooked Spot?"

***

Well. I would like to state, in the time since, in the copious hours I have now just to sit and think, when I have chosen to reflect and ask myself when the balance tipped in favor of me never going back, when it was I began to think I didn't actually want to return to Jez, but instead wanted to stay there, live forever underneath Ralph's; well, it was then.

Because until Al asked about the overlooked spot, I'd considered myself a visitor to these parts. I had been trying to keep myself calm by visualizing my escape route behind me. I'd been playing the good girl scout, upstanding and honorable and crap. But I was very much looking forward to being home, finally taking those onions off the heat, sprinkling that oregano, finally sitting down to dinner. Describing my adventures to Jez. *No, seriously! Not fucking with you!* And vaping out to *Sports Center* afterward.

But when Al brought up the overlooked spot all I could think was *How*?

He'd even used those words, *the overlooked spot*, a term I myself came up with, and had never spoken aloud to anyone, never once, not even to Jez. So how could Al have known? Was he a mind reader? Had he been traveling through time? *How? How? How?* My brain became a hamster wheel. It was a miracle I didn't drop the guy.

In the time since, I have come to understand that all of us living here under Ralph's arrived the same way. Improbable as it may sound, dodging the minefield of modern life, merely continuing to exist amid the pressure led each of us to start anew.

And there's a lot of us down here. More than two dozen. Almost three? I know it sounds unlikely. But we are a self-selected group, and as such we share many commonalities. Not that we're all Luann Briggs clones, with limp curls and a lopsided snaggletoothed smile. You get the idea. We share a heart.

***

When a person leaves for the grocery store, there is a good chance she'll come back. But there is, of course, no guarantee. Maybe she stumbles across a secret underground utopia which does a better job meeting her social-emotional needs, and also has cake.

Maybe what they like under Ralph's is everything that's not there. No debts. No "convenient" monthly payments that barely cover interest. No sunshiney daytime to fritter away, no insomniac night to endure. No cell phone signal, so no way to receive bad news. No texts, so no need to text back. No clock, no watch, no calendar. No blithe Christians full of comfort and proselytizing. No *Let go. Let God.* No overzealous United Way volunteers vomiting latex and helium into the sky. No teenagers yanking dog collars. No car. No need for sphincter-clenching or looking away. No floor supervisor cutting off your words. No MetaGen. No endless workday. No clothes to wash. No chores to do. No appearances to keep up. No absentee father. No guilt-trip mom. No purple-face, won't-breathe, won't-wake-up, won't-respond-to-Narcan brother. No *Sports Center*. No job search. No onions. No Jez.

In a situation like that, a person may very well decide to say *fuck it*, never to be seen again.

I will say that here, under Ralph's, we have conversations. Conversations are something people have when time allows. We talk about all sorts of things. We laugh. We share anecdotes. Stories about life before. We make conjectures about life today. At all times, whatever the topic, we use a wise tone, the kind of tone that makes both speaker and listener feel better about themselves, allows everyone to believe they are privy to some insider information, makes them think they know best about how other people ought to live their lives.

***

A few hours after I'd skidded in and helped Al to the party room, I had gotten to know some folks. Caroline, Ms. Betsy, Bunny, Yesenaria, and Pete were the first to introduce themselves. All lovely. And then, after I'd been filled to the brim with birthday cake—birthdays being something that are celebrated any day, for anyone, symbolizing the sort of pure joy, the joie de vivre, the simple appreciation for life that people have here—after all that happened, after I'd been friended and fed and was feeling good, I was rather suddenly brought to sit before Al.

Even back then, I could tell Al was some sort of leader; I could tell from the way everyone sort of stepped away and looked at him when he was getting ready to speak.

Ms. Betsy and Bunny and I had been bonding over tales of married life when the two of them began insisting we go somewhere called the Reading Room and take part in something called The Giving Up. So I did. I walked with them to a room at the far end of the hall that had been filled with books, high-back reading chairs, a Harstine couch, and everywhere tall floor lamps glowing warm yellow. There was even a braided rug. It was all quite homey and put me at ease. (I was already at ease.) I sat in a chair facing Al, and everyone else sort of filled in around, and Al began.

"She helped when asked," Al began. "But she didn't give her name. She lied."

From around the room there were nods, crossed arms, and sighs of disappointment.

"It would be kind of us to let her stay. But understandable if we kicked her out."

"Kick her out!" a man behind me shouted. It sounded like that's what he said. Maybe the first word, "Don't," got caught in a dry throat. Regardless, I panicked. By this point, just a few hours in, I already felt a weird allegiance.

"No! Don't! Let me stay! Please! My name is Luann!"

"Luann?" Al leaned forward. The room quieted.

I nodded. "I'm sorry for lying."

"Are you prepared to stay here under Ralph's forever?"

I didn't know how to answer that. There was a pause. "I didn't pack a toothbrush."

Everyone laughed. It hadn't yet occurred to me that everything a person could want was procured with a simple overnight trip upstairs to Ralph's. I laughed too, because why not? I laughed at myself. "I mean, yes."

"Yes?" Al laughed like my grandpa, like all old men. Honk-and-nod.

"Yes. I want to stay."

There was a great and sudden cheer.

Al brought silence with his arm. "Are you prepared for The Giving Up?"

"Yes!" I did not want to backtrack on everyone's enthusiasm. Details felt unimportant.

More cheering. Al stood. I stood. He shook my hand. Then I was hugging strangers.

At some point amidst the congratulating, Bunny came up and took my purse off my shoulders. Ms. Betsy (with whom I had already shared a great deal of details regarding my life/marriage) opened my purse, took out the bottle of Spice Island oregano, and handed it to me. Then my purse (with my car keys, cell phone, RFID driver's license, maxed out Mastercard, and anything else personal and identifiable were taken from my possession. I got to keep my pipe, of course. Everyone under Ralph's keeps their own pipes.

Later, I came to understand that my cracked windshield shitbox was driven to some random somewhere, wiped of prints, and abandoned. My cell phone was tossed into the Puget Sound. My credit cards were destroyed. All of this was done in order to protect the secrecy of our encampment under Ralph's. It was The Giving Up.

***

With all these months and years of missing folks, who knows what the police have figured out. It is a frequent subject of conversation. Sometimes we imagine that our left-behind spouses and family members have teamed up, formed a support group for themselves. Maybe they're playing junior sleuths, like in a movie, and they'll be the ones to discover us in the end. Maybe they're a strong team, and closing in on us quick. Or maybe they grieve individually.

One thing we know is they need us more than we need them. We don't need them! We don't miss them! We don't miss anything about the way our lives used to be. Why would we? Our lives down here are full. We have everything. Food. Friends. Time. Quiet. Dark. Books. Conversations. Peace. Sex. Drugs.

These days, when I tell stories about Jez, I usually call him Fuzz. Because that's what he is. Someone I used to care about but has become increasingly irrelevant.

There is one rule: no couples. Once there are couples there are factions, and once there are factions there is division, and unity, above all, unity must be preserved. We are taught to love one another equally, and we do. Yes, yes, yes to whatever it is you are imagining. We're not just an all-the-time orgy here. But we are a never-ending, slow-roll orgy, plus conversation/cuddles.

***

This is all to say, when that day comes, finally, finally, that our understaffed, undertrained police department does raid our utopia, we have a plan. We sit on chaise lounges filched from Ralph's Memorial Day sale and draw fantasies out to their most glorious conclusions.

Our plan is to scatter. We will go like rats into the darkest depths, the unfinished parts we have been burrowing in anticipation of this day. When they come for us, we will wedge ourselves. We will press our skin and bones into the nooks and crannies. We'll close our eyes and hold our breaths. We'll grab onto overhead huckleberry roots and hold fast.

Please come back! they are begging us already in our imaginations.

We're never coming back! we will reply.

And we mean it, we do. We'll never come back. Never, never, never, never, never.



Alice Kinerk earned an MFA in creative writing from the University of Washington and then spent the following years raising children and not writing much. Now that she's changed her last dirty diaper, she's back to hitting that keyboard! Her short stories have been published in *Oyster River Pages*, *Johnny America*, *Rock Salt Journal*, and elsewhere.

Michelle Bonczek Evory

End of the World Weather

I am sometimes embarrassed
to be human. My inability
to work out and eat greens every day,

to drive finally to the post office, send
the electric can opener we bought
for Christmas to a friend. It is April.

Unfolded laundry in the corner
basket, stack of magazines unread
on the dusty table, images of what

Coleridge called "end of the world weather"
glaring from their covers. For him,
it was the loss of sky to a volcanic eruption.

For us, it is the loss of everything else.
I signed up for a yoga class and misread
the time, entering the hot room

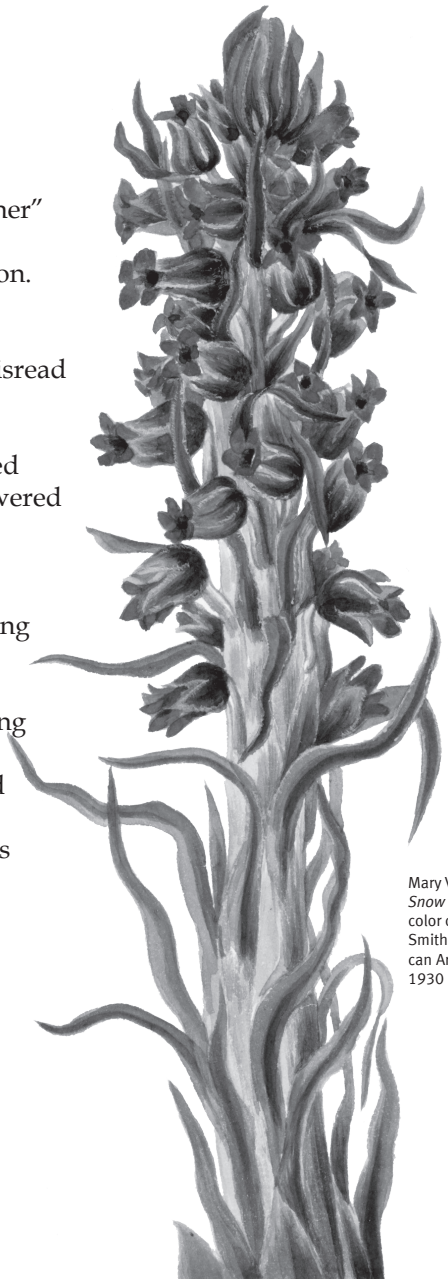
during Shivas Ana. While others stretched
their last breath into stillness, I cowered
in child's pose, only beginning.

I'm nearing 47 and contemplating
motherhood. I'm not great at making
decisions. I struggle with bleu cheese

or ranch let alone having a baby, becoming
a mom, and now with surrogacy
no longer an option since Russia invaded

Ukraine, where surrogates cost $200k less
than in the US, I am even more
unsure. My ache is not that war, but it is

a type of war. Today, before I learned
of the massacres in Bucha, I woke
dreaming of my old friend Rob Buchta



Mary Vaux Walcott, *Snow Plant*, watercolor on paper, Smithsonian American Art Museum, 1930

whom I hadn't thought of in decades.
Our psychic minds reach far beyond
our bodies. In Bucha, women's bodies,

children's bodies burning in mass
graves, I had to retreat to the woods.
The fog kept my eyes on the small

grey rocks, grasses, the rare Snow Plants
emerging from winter's cold—how
lucky I was to see them: pink arrows,

bright red nipples. Someone had kicked one
open, of course. Inside, split, flesh
like an artichoke. I'd seen some kids ahead

on the trail, imagine their black boots
swiping the plant so rare,
it is federally protected. Every time

I come close, a bell smatters
the trance. We are all eggs within
eggs within eggs, the heart knocking

harder until the perfect shell
is fractured by desire, curiosity,
the will or what is this tendency to destroy

that which is beautiful, that
which is strange, whatever it is
that is not us, but the thing is

it actually is us, broken,
split, burning,
rare.

Monster

Before the freak show
under big tents, the freak show down
street, under sheets, in the woman.
Images of alligators, two-headed
pigs, the mythical creatures that emerge
from our imaginations, in the beginning,
emerged from the womb. Surely, they are in me
somewhere. Some connect
at the head, some share a pelvis, liver, throat. Most
are stillborn, but sometimes, they survive.

In Minnesota, two girls share one body—four
lungs, two hearts, two stomachs, two spines.
A third arm is surgically removed from their back.
For nine months inside the mother, each cell moving
closer and closer. . . to that.

At a friend's bridal shower I met a woman
whose baby was born brainless because
she ate too much sugar while pregnant.
At first I was irked she turned down
a piece of the beautiful
cake: pink roses, bluebells, butterflies swirled
in buttercream, a garden brought forth
with sugar because, I assumed, she was watching
her weight, already she was so thin. For years

we tried, hoped for something
to form. Friend after friend
conceived, gave birth, miscarried once, twice,
and here we were: eating, drinking,
sleeping—what does one do
if not nurse a wailing child with raw, bruised
tits, kiss a mouth that teaches itself to say
mama, dada? Stroke gently the two-headed monster
that teaches you, one cell at a time, to love?

By root, by petal, by sword

They grew on roadsides, first in bunches
like families, where asphalt hinged on plain.
Some claimed they had to be seeded
by human will, their placement too perfect,

too symmetrical to be random, but
in the deepest sense, they were wild,
wild in their perfume, intoxicating
in their rouge electrifying
synapses of passersby who'd swoon
their cars, unclasp seatbelts and rip them out—

mothers from root to be resettled into
soil, showcased in pots glazed
with the colors of Mexico, Honduras, Brazil,
other countries where people danced
and sang in the streets, men by stem

wrapped in bright paper, presented in sheaths
like swords to the women they loved, children
petal by petal to crush and darken
in their endlessly damp hands.

They grew, they grew. Single, paired.
Widowed. Nobody could decide
what to name them. For to name them
was to lose them, a lack tongued
into tragedy because their extinction,

like all of ours, allowed them to live on
as absence, translucent in the imaginations
of those who could never keep them alive,
and by those, I mean we who tried.

The grass is dry, the Earth is round

I started to think of my belly as a baby
bump. An expanding ball, a dump
of fatty jiggle beneath my drooping
boobs. I'd stand in the dimly lit room,
sideways in the mirror, hands over
its heart and growing brain.

It was the closest I would ever get,
my fallopian tubes severed and sealed
in a hazardous medical waste bag.
My vaginal walls drying like rose petals
in the sun's thinning light. I would never
call it a drinking problem because
that is not what the problem was.

The problem was the hole. I couldn't
hold my husband's body inside of mine
forever. I couldn't feed another's
inner worm tube with secretions
from my own. The emptiness went on
and on like two mirrors facing off.

Egg and sperm would meet but wouldn't
dig in. Meanwhile all these fluids
running through, running through, fluids
from holes leaking hot between my legs.
Fluids up the straw, down the throat,
Through the belly like an umbilical cord
on fire.



Michelle Bonczek Evory's poetry collection *The Ghosts of Lost Animals* won the Barry Spacks Award (Gunpowder Press) and a 2021 Independent Publisher Book Award. Her open-source book *Naming the Unnameable: An Approach to Poetry for New Generations* (Open SUNY Textbooks) is taught in creative writing courses internationally. She currently lives in Oregon and is a creative writing instructor and mentor at The Poet's Billow (www.thepoetsbillow.org). She can be found there and at www.michellebonczekevory.com.

Connie Wieneke

Not Far From Cokeville

Rolls of old hay sink into poor neighbors,
that flock of winter worn sheep, not yet sheared.
A first slow rain on snow and spring runs off,
unfaithful, headed south like us. Nothing keeps

us here. A waste to turn this ground again,
its rotten spent grain. Let's argue about
what's uneaten, now squandered. Why bother
barter—too-little too-late? Time enough

the moldering hay may acquire some use.
The dung-encrusted, tick-laced sheep are still
digging holes all of their own. Can we ask
to what end? We glimpse sheep and grass, no one

up to much, no thought to abandon earth
to us, trailing our sad, god-awful stink.



Over The Fence

because we are told fences make for good neighbors fences are built on good intentions / even when over the fence you see the neighbor has added. . . [fill in the blanks. . . .] and you add your own [fill in the blanks. . . .] even when your county's ordinances say in so many words *any new fencing can be no higher than 38 inches* above the ground which is to say this fence can never be high enough to hide a neighbor's intentions even yours a fence eight feet tall built of planks you figure match his & your rough intentions / because / 20 years on / *40 ACQ pressure-treated* fence posts cobbled into high groundwater rot / because these hidden rivers will undercut even the best intentions / because the posts will need to be reset / because fences do not keep their promise any more than nostalgia can keep out what's become [fill in the blanks]



Connie Wieneke's recent work has appeared in *Stand*, *High Desert Journal*, *The Forge Literary Magazine*, *Weber*, *Split Rock Review*, and *Talking River Review*. Her prose and poetry also have appeared in several anthologies, including *Orison 6 Anthology and Rewilding: Poems for the Environment*. Since 1983 she has lived in Wyoming, where she has worn many hats and is keen on collaborative projects of all kinds. Her writing is fueled by family and relationships with the land and all its myriad inhabitants and conflicts. She received an MFA from the University of Montana and two literary fellowships from the Wyoming Arts Council.

Radha Marcum

The Poets



Pinyon Jay, Deschutes National Forest, David Menke

A low summer sun smudges darkness
under the piñons and junipers. Though the piñons
produced few nuts this year, the jays still pass
from clump to clump at dusk hunting the chestnut-black
teardrops. Tracing the dunes' dry embrace, you think
the hills resemble Modigliani's sketch of Akhmatova reclining.
The sunset teases and unsettles. Chamisa sways,
the downdraft's consort. Tomorrow, on instinct, the jays
will go on beseeching dry cones for seeds, like poets
recollecting words carried in full throats, then hidden—
Akhmatova's ellipses, her breath paused at line's end.
(The *inner emigré*, she burned every scrap of *Requiem*, burned
ink-marks cached in notebooks.) Whatever dark clusters
the birds bury now, next April they will fail
to find all of them, the slow-growing piñon forest
predicated on their forgetfulness.

Fire Season in the West

Summer's last towhee grips the splintered
fence chest red as a controlled burn then
flits into wildfire haze —transmogrified
forests pepper the membranes of our eyes
blur the yard where I snip stubs of done
marigolds and blinking back realize it's
ashes I've mistaken for flies eye-floaters it's
ashes of others' lives falling to my fore-
arms to my restlessness with garden scissors
under a scarlet day-moon blistered sky
—tonight when the new wildfires lay down
in me each anxiety will flash like dry
lightning how many acres this season? —I'll
work to dig the break the line to tamp down
sparks as stars wither in the smolder
of every engulfed home —I'll repeat
to myself this fact that certain trees do burn
and survive charred like ponderosas —I'll
forgive the grasses that replace the trees

Poem

The locoweed that kills horses blooms first
from a crack in one of your constructions.

Also known as astragalus it puts on purple,
rambles its dense leafstalks, throws silhouettes.

The bobcat stalks near. You've watched him
amble the low adobe wall, your glassed-in face

new to his house—his hills; his piñon and cholla;
his settled gravel; his substrata nailed with wells.

Wind repositions juniper cast-offs in sandy soil.
It would take a lot of locoweed to kill a horse,

you think; and native bees sip the purple bells.
Despite the wells' plummet, the cholla swells

yellow fruits from its tips—its angle on living
insisted on by rows and rows of sharp spines.



Radha Marcum's collection *Bloodline* received the 2018 New Mexico Book Award in Poetry. Her poems appear widely in journals throughout the U.S. She lives in Colorado where she writes the *Poet to Poet* newsletter (poettopoet.substack.com) and teaches at the Lighthouse Writers Workshop.

George Such

Shadow Study



I embrace him but I don't trust him.
He's certainly not my New Year's
resolution. He stalks me
this evening as I walk into the sun,
circling a lake in east Texas. Sneaky,

I have to turn around to see him, thick
ankles tapering toward his tiny head.
He creeps in the long grass, a reptile
at the water's edge. I know the power
of his hunger and primitive wisdom,

his ancient lusts and sense of direction,
how he's carried by the thumping music,
bumping his booty against all he craves.
I am the silhouette, somewhere
between my shadow and the light.

West Glacier

It all begins at the center, where the 4
directions merge, but I don't know how
we got here, gazing at the stony bottom
of Lake McDonald through these 4 orbs—
it must mean the two of us are one,
or wonderful, or 4ming one rocky
mind—who's top? bottom? what's right?
left? Positions aren't clear in this underwater
sphere, like the 4 seasons here, nine months
of winter and three months of relatives—
but look at those fall colors—that purple
feels like 4play, 4ever on the edge
of red and blue—but let's be in the moment,
can you sense the wind on your skin
where the 4ground blurs? we're looking
through the water's faint arousal, the sun
splotching its veneer; of course
post-modernists say there's only surface,
but they've 4gotten extra-textual life—
just look at the depths! the 4th wall
is gone, come close and lean against me,
I'm not Walt Whitman but we can still 4age
together, there's no 4bidden fruit—
I'll whisper in your ear *clarity is deception*,
tell you the mind can be like this icy
water, so clear it makes 4ty feet look like 4,
makes you think you can touch bottom
with an oar, but those stones are boulders—
can you see the 4ramina in the floor,
hiding pockets from our view? and the faces
grasped by hands? one of them screaming
like the creatures that 4d our watery dreams—
and since our gaze is fixed downward,
I should tell you what's around our boat,
the 4rest of cedar and hemlock, its scent
in the air, and the snow-covered peaks
to the east—and I can paint you more
if you've never been to Montana be4.

Seattle Crosswalk on a Good Friday

I join the surge that crosses the street
as signals shift from red to green
at this oil-stained crucifix of Pine
and Fourth. Our soles hammer notes
on the spit-blotched pavement, playing
our part in an anthem that screeches
like Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*.
Behind me a blonde woman dressed
in navy blue screams repeatedly: *My life
is in danger and I'm sick of being
threatened! My life is in danger and I'm
sick of being threatened!* Her ruddy face
a fist. She clutches her belongings in bags
that read Bed, Bath and Beyond.
We must seem like vermin from Macy's
roof above us, driven by our appetites,
scuttling toward West Lake Center,
Starbucks just in front of us.
Mounted policemen watch the plaza,
waiting for someone to cross a line.
The signal's red palm begins to flash
before I reach the other side. I smell
bagels and urine, perfume and gasoline.
A voice grabs me by the sleeve,
eyes that stoop with toothless words:
Mister, Can you spare some change?



George Such teaches part time in the writing program at Rutgers University and is also an independent personal fitness trainer. In a previous incarnation, he was a chiropractor for twenty-seven years in Washington State, but then retired and returned to school, earning an M.A. in English from Western Washington University and a Ph.D. in English from the University of Louisiana. His creative writing has appeared in *Arroyo Literary Review*, *Blue Mesa Review*, *Cold Mountain Review*, *Dislocate*, *The Evansville Review*, and many other journals.

James Grabill

In The Air


Mathilda Khoo

It's astonishing to be able to live now
in the new morning, in the open air
from which a crystalline drop collects
on a leaf before dawn, and eventually
rolls into freefall between both sides
of the canyon echoing the pitches
of animals, with the brain proving itself
an extraordinary instrument that pursues
multiple routes of connection in a medium
of echo-location maybe it is, showing
automatic xylophone bays, or predilection
of the latest climate-torqued storms.

It's astonishing when breathing cells speak,
call it, through interspecies sense
with solidarity in the spectacular coliseum
of humility under the afternoon sky,
with answers in the refined in-between colors
on feathers, swallows of the indefinite passing
by backwards architecture at the outskirts,

the moment replaced by penciled-in flights
of owls over shoulders of moss-vented
hills and archaic mothers with practices
of fertility encoded within our bodies.
So the light where we reside continues,
broken and whole. If, refracting, its waves
have split, they've already healed. It happens
as if it were nothing more than expected,
a payment due that never fails to be on time,
dawn that blazing boils up over the horizon
to return light to the world, offering
an image of emergence from elements,
the fire-ball sun as birth of the self,
whatever species, such as megalonychids
that first appeared in Argentina 35 million
years ago, with room on our calendars
for circulation of rain, shuck dissolution,
and unavoidable roads, where we've seen
jet subvention in atmospheric gases,
steaming debris of sea-floor hypnotisms,
festering of Moray eels at unseasoned depths,
boneyard coral in hungers of populations,
unknowing turned into open-source intent
a few miles from the cores of blood-making.

Phenomena are written by grasses into air
as thermals rake a wide wing over the foul
little dirges of internal combustion, dusts
reeling at the lip of transplanetary firsts,
the protozoan surf-breaking rounding off
any accord with unconditional nakedness
in an atmosphere as old as it's current,
too innocent not to be taken advantage of
by unprecedented enthusiasts, fire-making
under their moon reaching its zenith,
as zephyrs scramble undiscovered scripts
and nightcrawlers try pawing the dirt
not far from their holes to another world.

We've known labor on a scale of amino acids,
with lightning-scaffolding in dull shapes
of antiquity in the effects of daily living,
the Asian rhinoceros foraging in grasses,
triggering likenesses within the brain
fired by 100 trillion electromagnetic jumps
at the instant a thick oak branch holds
with undivided heaves of meaning in events,
cusps of yellow fractals in the tiniest
masses riding in on buoyancy of the genome,
in gravity of thunderhead Roman numerals
outlining bodies, governing uncountable
European faces of Ave Maria over lifetimes,
blooming spikes of hope on a sunken root.

There are many years at sea at every point
of flux impacting the long-evolved seed
delivered to self-healing and the markings
of feathers, with flexibility in unfinished
vibratory negotiations, while glistering
aerobic ganders land on the backwaters
through the lift from pitching immensities
of leaves in the loneliness of beauty,
with splashes of discovered scales ignited
in sophisticated faculties of the psyche,
in indivisible sacramental crosses between
one person and another, around mushroom
ingestion of a sleep-slick oil-spilled wake
or an archaic doubt over gospels of Jesus
teaching human love capable of finding
no boundaries ultimately contain it,
mindfulness, as an exquisite overflow.

Solidness

Greater forces than human beings exist, of course, wherever
eyes or ears or fingertip touches may land. For they've made
every week solid enough, these forces that ensure the past
present stays generally stuck together, where they've gotten

the place spinning and are giving beings a nudge out or back,
working through the lightning-bolt instant in the troposphere
that's still not well understood. An individual fruit fly happens
in the room, to be zooming in on a nostril, circling at an angle,

wobbling in air around the human face—a natural ambassador
crazed, finding few routes to right action, delivering a message
of nearly indivisible wild forces of madness, barriers, and heat
like nobody's business, like *how much are you willing to learn?*

Like *who's the mother of any one of us if not the mother of all?*
For thunderhead fronts build towering anvils over the plains,
as a fruit fly darts between rooms. What lifts in us searches
through space for signs of life. As the backdrop of day's night,

half of it remains Bodhisattva emptiness, a kind of emptiness
with ritual catastrophe blocked by intricately self-interweaving
microorganisms that assist solid cells which form and support
the shoulders of Asian elephants and bellies of the sea otters.

For bodily cells alive reach from the root with solar precision,
as the compass points to wilder grasses, to up-rocked artistry,
the grackle's roost bursting alive with chatter as they return
from the corn-splashed yards. Within the eye-going instant,

days thicken in a flurry, spiral with the delivery of impulse,
unconditional long-range plans, solar spreads that advance
genetic overflow, that the sparrow's thread. So, a small cut
heals on an arm. Pollen's carried downtown to the embassy.

Readiness

The terrain on an ongoing chord from the clearly contiguous origin,
circling atoms driven by everything they've been part of or close to,
doors we've been moving through, at the root of fluid swimming cells,

the circling billions of suns, millions of beliefs, and ten thousand sins,
the peak experiences grandfathered in, orbiting with wild momentum,

the work of protecting Earth for unformed light and its animal claw,
the onrush, which soaks into muscular floors of whole disciplines,
electrical convergence that is merging with current pulse in mind
surviving in flux that flows along strings to the formless and formed.

In the ignition of light, the least indivisible stall and pulse of blood
to the cells rests on the loose pack of clay and stone mosses, the rain
forests spread between people's yards, horses in blue extended senses,

the scientific ancient air breaking in electrical fields at state-of-art
autonomic depth, the melt of a peach in the mouth, feathering back
as seeds thicken underground in mind with leaves combing power
from time in the summer at peace with the terrible ocean of beauty,

given this chance to live, broken with light or whole, as eyes touch
and take the wave of a strand forward or back, into water following
the slow heave downslope in uneven light splitting on prisms of cells,
the comfort of brown bark, offshore oysters in the lull, as slippery
rays fly across these future lands some uncountable eons from now,

genetic inheritance with spear-tip readiness in the whole bolstering
the prehistoric or present parts of ethical impulse in collaboration,

the intricate means to ends we've embraced on half of the younger,
which include high-rise hydroponic farms for common hunger
where no one present could be denied the means of her survival.

Zither

Out of the inexorable commonwealth of soils, the carpet
of night that smells green in the morning, the slightest
shifts corresponding with industrious stretches that hold
the tiniest up with the gargantuan, our roads wheel ahead

when no one has the name of depths of the sun within cells
built out of Elizabethan soliloquies and Arabic mosaics
in unfiltered subsensory light, the lightning-sharp root-dug
foundation in a wave rooted a moment in sky-down ancestry.

From bending of mineral light over the horizon with vestiges
of private childhood sounding with tall firs out through space,

out of mercy cultures moving on toward everlasting future tense,
bright yellow-orange sky quickening nuclear chrysalis overflow
from being younger or older, in the stay of what leaves, free-range
expanses, the sun centers the speeds of waking, the incremental
fire-fusion readiness we've taken on within blank-slate immensity

and vastness at the end of belief, out of consciousness stopping
to live without notice, to witness flooding sea-dusts shot through
seismically ringing with Cambodian gongs, mythically uncharted,
hand-painted, as pre-Columbian centuries fall asleep in the day

then wake on their walks through candling air, across shoulders
of the ground in solar existentialism with low levels of virgin birth

raining from unconscious cloud cover which the mind sails in on,
metaphysical trees as dark as WWI military camps at the outskirts
of Shakespeare folios—but for you, if you're seeking brilliant origin,

say if the fossil burns keep going, and if carbon drawdown doesn't
kick in, as if we won't learn who we are, or where, as ecosystems
spending our time working for money, when there's so much more
than we've imagined being discovered through research every day,

every week. For blessed is woman or man whose home is at home
within home, reaching out over the miles and down within bone,
whose subatomic sweet grasp of matter reveals sun within cells,

where it's found a way to experience its home in the light touch of bearing on extraterrestrial zither, a bell that rings canvassing the molecules under starry nights on the Galapagos, with amber from beaches impelling the temporal gyrus and Wernicke's area to collaborate in the midst of elephantine necessity and stillness.



James Grabill's poems appear online at *Calibanonline*, *Unlikely Stories*, *Terrainonline*, *The Decadent Review*, and others. His books include *Poem Rising Out of the Earth* (recipient of the Oregon Book Award, 1995); *Sea-Level Nerve: I & II* (2014 & 2015, Wordcraft of OR); *Branches Shaken by Light;* as well as *Reverberations of the Genome* & *Schoenberg in the Troposphere* (2020, 2021, & 2022 Cyberwit, India); and *Eye of the Spiral* (The Uncollected Press, 2022). He has been teaching writing and global issues relative to sustainability for many years.

Joanna Solfrian

Ghazal With Mourning Doves, Joshua Tree



Desert, cities, suburbs, steeples: at my childhood's core, mourning doves.
I, too, keen reflexively; what is a morning without mourning doves?

Describe a thing, like a toe in black Converse tracing a dust-circle.
The desert yields to circumference, as do the folding wings of a mourning dove.

Why "Joshua Tree"? Early Mormons saw in its shape the prophet praying.
Joshua lifted his arms to God—or, if I may—a mourning dove.

Everywhere, crystals. Adventurine, agate, quartz spires: $5.
My daughter drifts away from the market, distracted by mourning doves.

Ooo-whee hoo, hoo, hoo, indeed. *My song is in your throat,*
I telepathize to the mourning dove.

Describe the thing. The wine last night tasted of lemons
in the terroir. Or was it the desert pang of mourning dove?

Jo, you are no sister of pigeon; the closest you get to flying is riding a bike.
Never mind: you are an oceanic drunk, like the dear mourning dove.

Travel Ghazal, Arizona

The red rocks are the purest expression of themselves:
there is no gap between object and identity.

Woman, weighed down with shopping bags, tottering
through the faux-Mexican village with her "identity,"

shed your packages (I've just shed mine!).
Let's drink wine under the Ponderosas and talk identity.

Oak Creek cuts a chasm. A tourist hikes, slips, and is unharmed:
the creek bubbles up to her mouth, red with identity.

Jo, what are you? The raccoon on three legs who visits your cabin,
leaves strange tracks in the dust: tonight, he is your identity.

Ghazal With Joshua Tree Avian Life, Pamphlet

After all these years, the poem still remembers you: a mourning dove
alights on a telephone wire, calls other mourning doves.

My daughter wakes early, carries cereal to the porch of the AirBnB.
She watches the sky go from black to gray to mourning doves.

The loggerhead shrike "impales its prey (lizards, insects) on thorns."
This seems both clever and dickish, I confess to the mourning dove.

True story: your "crop," an esophageal storage sac,
can hold 1,000 millet seeds. Don't sneeze, mourning dove!

Hunters "harvest" 20 million of your siblings each year.
Exemplar of grief, so much cause for mourning, dove.

Jo, your past lives are boring. Forget Joan of Arc, the lover's shove—
with any luck, you were a mourning dove.

Ghazal With Tequila

It arrived in a clear bottle with black letters: Reposado Tequila.
I introduced myself, as I would with wine: *hello, tequila.*

Jimadores clip the agave's center stalk before flowering.
They must kill beauty to coax the beauty of tequila.

I thought the liquid came from the leaves, the blue exalting spikes–
but as with anything noble, from the core comes tequila.

Baked, then pressed. Then the alchemy of yeast and the churning,
industrious bubbles. At last: the vegetal sting of tequila.

Reposado means aged, or "rested." Hah!
I have rested my life.

Is there any other way to sup the sun?
If there is, Jo, you've forgotten it for tequila.



Joanna Solfrian's first collection, *Visible Heavens*, received the Wick First Book Poetry Prize, judged by Naomi Shihab Nye. Her second collection, *The Mud Room*, came out in 2020 from MadHat Press, and in 2021, Finishing Line Press published a chapbook of ghazals called *The Second Perfect Number*. Her poems have appeared in journals such as *The Harvard Review*, *Boulevard*, *Image*, *Spoon River Poetry Review*, *Margie*, *Rattapallax*, *The Southern Review*, and *Pleiades*. Solfrian lives and works in New York City. Read more at www.joannasolfrian.com.

READING THE WEST

read-ing [from ME reden, to explain, hence to read] – vt. 1 to get the meaning of; 2 to understand the nature, significance, or thinking of; 3 to interpret or understand; 4 to apply oneself to; study.

BARK BEETLES

There are more than 550 species of North American bark beetles, although the extensive damage to conifer forests is done by only 20 species. In western forests they often affect an area larger than the actual wildfire area. Recent outbreaks of beetles are among the most severe in recorded history. Several of these have been correlated with shifts in temperature and precipitation. In an article published in the Journal of Forestry*, a group of scientists provided several potential explanations for recent trends in bark beetle impacts between eastern and western North America.*

During 2000–2020, bark beetles had a greater impact in the West than in the East, which we primarily attribute to a larger number of notable tree-killing species in the West, and differences in climatic changes (warming and drought) and forest composition. In a review of bark beetle outbreaks in western North America and Europe, [we] conclude that recent outbreaks were driven by climate change.

Due to warming, foresters and other natural resource managers will be increasingly challenged to manage bark beetles in North America, maintain resilient and productive forests, and facilitate recovery of landscapes affected by bark beetles and other stressors and disturbances.

Source: Fettig, Christopher J., et. al. "Trends in Bark Beetle Impacts in North American During a Period (2000-2020) of Rapid Environmental Change," *Journal of Forestry*, vol 120, no. 6, November 2022, pp. 693-713; https://academic.oup.com/jof/article/120/6/693/6648424?login=true

PINE BEETLE RESPONSE PROJECT

This Spring, Phase 3 of the Wilder-Highlands Mountain Beetle Response Project was begun. The primary purpose of the project (initiated in 2020) is to treat the mountain pine beetle-affected stands of forest, reduce the risk of mountain pine beetle spread, and diminish the potential for catastrophic wildfires. The project is being conducted in the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre and Gunnison National Forests in partnership with the Colorado State Forest Service, the National Forest Foundation, and Wilder on the Taylor and Gunnison Highlands communities. In a statement, the U.S. Forest Service notes:

To date, project partners have successfully treated 340 acres and helped mitigate the impacts of the mountain pine beetle. The project is a regional and national model for successful "shared stewardship" of federal and private lands.

The third phase will focus on treating approximately 194 acres of lodgepole pine forests experiencing a mountain pine beetle outbreak northeast of Gunnison, Colorado. Treatment

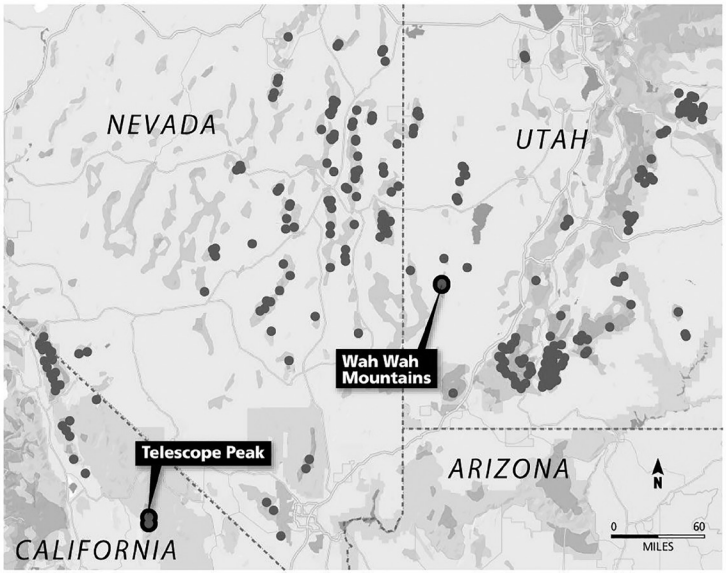
activities include sanitation, removal and long-term preventative treatments on private and National Forest System lands. Operations will also consist of a fuel break on the Wilder on the Taylor property. Equipment and tools utilized will include traditional and mechanized logging equipment, as well as helicopter logging systems. . . . "We hope that our activities reduce the heavy fuel loading that coincides with bark beetle mortality and limits the losses of lodgepole pine by keeping mountain pine beetle in check, in an effort to manage for diverse, healthy and resilient forests in the future," said Mike Tarantino, Supervisory Forester, Colorado State Forest Service.

Source: USDA, Forest Service, "Phase 3 of Wilder-Highlands Mountain Pine Beetle Response Project." 4 May 2022, https://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/gmug/news-events/?cid=FSEPRD1018704

THE GREAT BASIN BRISTLECONE UNDER ATTACK

Great Basin bristlecone pine range

Bristlecone pines, the world's longest-lived organisms, are found in about 380 known locations in the Great Basin. New research has discovered they are succumbing to bark beetle attacks in the first known instances of bristlecone mortality, likely driven by climate change.



Source: David Burchfield, BYU; Graphic by: Christopher Cherrington, *Salt Lake Tribune*.

In the past two decades, the West's conifer forests have seen wave after wave of bark beetle epidemics. Bristlecones seem to have been largely unaffected. Until now. As Brian Maffly reports:

The world's most long-lived organism, the Great Basin bristlecone pine, has stood firm against the beetle onslaught, unleashed by climate change, while other needle-bearing trees—like the lodgepole pines in Utah's Uinta Mountains and the Engelmann spruce on the Wasatch Plateau—take a beating. . . .

But in a sign of the worsening climate crisis, the tide now appears to be turning to the beetles' favor and against these resilient trees, as scientists have now documented beetle-

killed bristlecones, according to new research by the U.S. Forest Service's Rocky Mountain Research Station.

These findings are. . . a cause of concern: If the die-hard bristlecone is at risk from climate change, what does that portend for the West's other conifers in the face of climatic conditions that experts predict will get hotter and drier as greenhouse gases continue building up in the atmosphere?

The Great Basin bristlecone, one of three of the five-needle pine species inhabiting the West, is perhaps the most resilient plant on Earth. It occupies rocky, high-elevation terrain between eastern California and western Utah, able to thrive in places where not much other woody vegetation grows.

It also thrives in environmental conditions that beetles don't care for. But as the climate changes, those conditions are becoming easier on hungry bugs and harder on trees.

Source: Maffly, Brian. "What is Killing the West's Notoriously Resilient Bristlecone Pines?" *The Salt Lake Tribune*, 29 July 2022, https://www.sltrib.com/news/environment/2022/07/28/what-is-killing-wests/

PINE BEETLE

MSN recently posted a guide to the Rocky Mountain Pine Beetle, prompted by the epidemic occurring in Rocky Mountain National Park. Of the thirteen things listed:

11. What has been the recent beetle outbreak?

The mountain pine beetle epidemic has killed millions of acres of pine forests.

While Colorado is particularly vulnerable to these insects, the issue extends up as far as British Columbia.

This outbreak of mountain pine beetles is considered to be more extensive and severe than previous outbreaks observed throughout the 20th century.

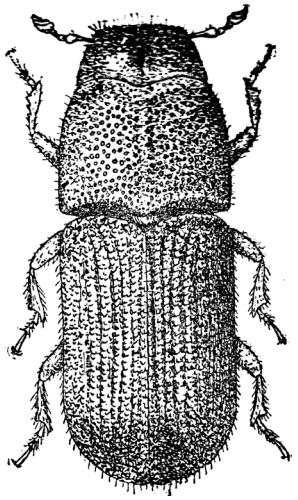
The outbreak is due to a variety of factors—a perfect storm of conditions.

Several years of warmer-than-normal winter temperatures have caused an increase in beetle populations.

A drought lowered the defenses of trees.

Large expanses of lodgepole and other pine trees across North America reached the right age for beetle infestation (100 to 150 years old).

In general, both forest structure and climate played a role in the recent outbreak.



Pine Beetle, *Yearbook of the United States Department of Agriculture* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1903) 270, https://etc.usf.edu/clipart/23600/23684/beetles_23684.htm

Source: Benson, Erika. "Rocky Mountain Pine Beetle: 13 Things (2022) You Ought to Know." MSN, November 2022, https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/technology/rocky-mountain-pine-beetle-13-things-2022-you-ought-to-know/ar-AA140HAY

"SECURING FAVORABLE CONDITIONS OF WATER FLOW"

According to information first published in the Fort Collins Coloradoan*, the U.S. Forest Service is not managing water well. About half of the West's water supply originates on national forest land.*

However, before that water reaches the West's major rivers or cities, much of it has already been claimed by farmers, ranchers, housing developments, and industrial users. Using information supplied by the USA TODAY Network, *which obtained a database of all water-related permits issued by the Forest Service, Jacy Marmaduke reports:*

The result of these combined issues—poor management, legal setbacks, and legislation that discourages conservation—is a limited tool chest of options for safeguarding water. And the agency rarely reaches into it, the investigation found. . . .

Instead of "securing favorable conditions of water flows," the agency has developed a reputation among environmentalists for cowing to the interests of water users at the cost of the resources it is legally bound to protect. . . .

The Forest Service's budget for fighting wildfires more than quadrupled over the past 30 years as funding for other pursuits stagnated. As a clampdown in federal spending locked the agency's total budget in place, staffing for water and wildlife efforts suffered significant cuts while wildfire-focused staffing soared. The staffing cuts have left most Western forests with a single hydrologist covering the entire forest, if that. . . .

The small band of conservationists committed to the cause of forest water preservation wonders what it will take for the agency's water strategy to meet the urgency of this moment. Forest water diversions have "been an orphan issue literally for three decades," said Laura Ziemer, senior counsel and water policy adviser for *Trout Unlimited*.

"Those of us who have been engaged in these issues have been warning that there will come a day when even on the national forest, there is not enough water," she said. "And that day has come."

Marmaduke, Jacy, "The Forest Service was supposed to Protect the Water Sources of the American West. Instead, Water Users Drain Untold Amounts." *Coloradoan*, 20 November 2021, https://www.coloradoan.com/in-depth/news/2021/11/20/us-forest-service-water-management-limited-oversight-diversions/8446212002/

EDITORIAL MATTER

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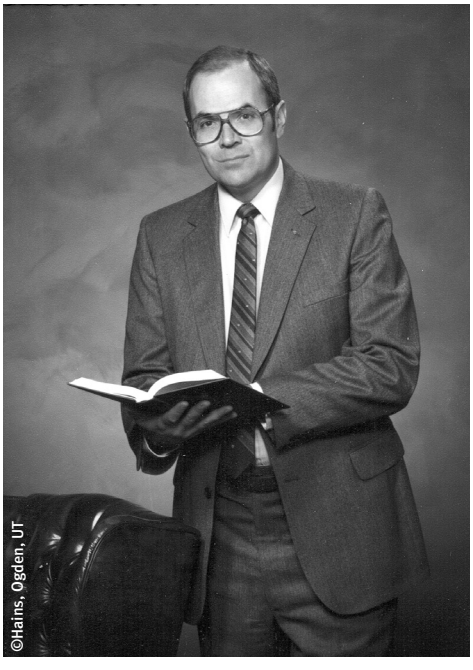
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ANNOUNCING
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to

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for
"Who Will Drink Us?" and other poems

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The Dr. Sherwin W. Howard Award of $500 is presented annually to the author of the best poetry published in *Weber* during the previous year.

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An international, peer-reviewed journal spotlighting personal narrative, commentary, fiction, nonfiction, and poetry that speaks to the environment and culture of the American West and beyond.

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Conversations

Deborah Uman & Jad Abumrad; Felicia Mitchell & Barbara Kingsolver; María Del Mar González-González & Guillermo Galindo; Luke Fernandez, David L. Ferro & Janet Abbate; Yu-Jane Yang, Karen Brookens-Bruestle & Ta'u Pupu'a, Ashley Marie Farmer, Ryan Ridge & Tobias Wolff; Adrienne Andrews & Clint Smith; Michael Wutz & Monica Lundy

Essays

L. Annette Binder, G.D. McFetridge

Fiction

Richie Swanson, Bill Bilverstone, Alice Kinerk

Poetry

Michelle Bonczek Evory, Connie Wieneke, Radha Marcum, George Such, James Grabill, Joanna Solfrian

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