The Hiram Poetry Review
THE HIRAM POETRY REVIEW

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poetryreview@hiram.edu
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EDITOR’S NOTE

Issue #81 finds us saying goodbye to two editorial aces, Alexia Kemerling and Matt Mitchell, who now join a distinguished list of HPR alums. Alexia ruled the slush box with an iron fist in a velvet glove. Matt showed me how to do a reverse tomahawk jam on Submittable. They will be missed. I will take this moment to remind our readers that we do not charge for Submittable, but we ask that you limit your submissions on that platform to one per year. However, you can submit hard copies to us year round. The HPR is also fortunate to have the varied skills and aesthetic sensibilities of Quinn, Lauren and Kerry on tap for issue #82.

As for guidelines for issue 82—here are some things that come to mind regarding art and poetry—we don’t know what Bill Murray whispers to Scarlett Johansson at the end of Lost in Translation. Philip Sidney believed that the purpose of poetry was to delight and instruct. Aristotle says that all people enjoy representation. Kendrick Lamar raps that he is blacker than the heart of an Aryan. Wallace Stevens suggests that the “great poem of the earth has yet to be written.”

Willard Greenwood
Editor, HPR
The Dental Appointment

*Did I hurt you?* the dentist asks, his nipples waffle his tight uniform top. The room is cold. I show him what I call my misbehaving tooth.

*T urn up the magic,* he says to the assistant, and she does. In seconds I’m horizontal, hot in the lamp’s glare, dizzy in a nitrous haze.

His rubber glove cups my chin, an invitation. *Turn towards me and open wide.* And I do. *This may pinch a little.*

*I’m going to rub it numb,* and he does, his breath on my cheek. He pulls on his mask, and in his eyes, I see decades of teeth,

the clanking metal hook, his desire to fix a stranger’s ache, and for a second, I want him to slip his married hands

into my married mouth and pull each *Oh* from its hiding, to ruin everything.
Things I Worry About While Driving Alone

Eighty flat miles, and I worry I won't remember how to go home. I’ll forget to read my map, to stop for gas and snacks. The zapping sun between flanks of pines will blind me. A dusty side trail will pull me in like a dark mouth, the steering wheel turning on its own volition, tires eating a weedy path straight to a broken down trailer, where sitting in sweaty boxer shorts seven burly men burp beer clichés, talking about how no means yes, how any woman who would venture down the dead end to their squalid door, not only would be lost, but loose.

I worry the car lock my husband did not repair betrays me. Pulled out, hoisted in air, I’m a jostled testosterone trophy.

The men fight over me. I am the last fried drumstick on the plate, their last remnant of hen.

The most bravado wins. He has a tender side, his chest abloom with fragile stars. We fall in love. I cook venison stew for all, send the other six packing, estrogen the place until it sparkles.

I worry I am never found.
I worry my husband won't miss me.
R. Steve Benson

OUR SING LEE

“Now entertain conjecture of a time...” -- Shakespeare, Henry V

“The man found last week in his shop on Main Street, wrapped in a bloody sheet, dead with a single bullet in his head, was our friendly industrious laundry man Sing Lee.”

The story continued in loud whispers: “The murderer, a Chinese man named Quan Sue, was apprehended in Montana, brought back for trial, then sentenced to Life in Iowa’s state prison. Some years later, Quan Sue was released and sent back to China.” No reason given.

I studied Sing Lee’s handsome picture in our yellowing newspaper, wondering what his life was like among Norwegian farmers’ sturdy henpecked wives who taught their strong smart athletic daughters how to wring wet laundry and pin it even stiff to winter lines.

Mag Idse, an early businessman in our tiny town, was quoted in the crisply aging article: “When Sing Lee invited me for meals, one of his favorite hors d’oeuvres was to catch the blood from a chopped chicken and drink it down. I skipped that appetizer!”

What was daily life like for this single Chinese businessman in our corn-fed Midwestern town where watched wives routinely delivered their cotton, satin, woolen, and even lace and linen skirts, shirts, dresses, coats and occasional gowns to Sing Lee?

Neighbors came to him with stains and stories for him to clean. Did they enter his warm steamy store, under inviting Asian bells above the door, to hear his musical rhythmical voice tell how he worked his way here across sudsy oceans on rusty filthy freighters?

In the newspaper photo his lips look sensual, pressed between a smile and a frown. His ears look almost pinned to his temples as if it was ancient Far Eastern wisdom they were trying not to hear, or the crashing crush of a bullet ending everything except conjecture.
Blackberries

Bee sting kisses, deep red to purple.

The sweetest of bruises cinch deep in late summer’s bramble, burgundy drunk. Spring’s knot of bumble and ovule, supple hues of green long forgotten.

All the colors of summer, too dark too soon. Let’s just pause and reflect, let October exhume the thorns.

Black and blue finger tips, a thumb, a heart, too soon compost.
Crystalline Vase

Art is magic delivered from the lie of being truth
–Theodor W. Adorno

The flowers I clutch are an enigma, but not to me.
It is my crystal-clear vocation.

I stand an open affirmation, with an entrusted
capacity for emotion, witnessed through a crystal
lens of equal proportion of antiquities.

If your palette is to bloom joy, say a birth or a
wedding, then I will gladly articulate that for you.
Of course, long stem red roses will do. They
bode longevity of life, die slower. However,
beware, they are soon forgotten after their allure,
dazzle and wilt.

Conversely, rarely forgotten, the hypnotic orchid
is a good choice. Say in matters of de mort. Here
there exists no enigma of apportionment.

Hands down, it’s the orchid’s dark peloria that is
entrusted to subdue life and deaths exquisite grief,
at least for a day or two.
Translucent Graves

It’s nearly three in the morning, witching hour. Late September shrouds my backyard burial ground.

It’s here, in my Adirondack chair, on my redwood deck, that I observe the Lilliputian graveyard.

As the moon clicks X-rays through the windy, black branches, I see the husks of bees, birds and beetles. They are iridescent in their translucent goodbye bones. They rest strewn above and below ground. I can even see my beloved dog Maddy, long buried. She thinks she’s still asleep.

I see skeletonized lizards, self entombed moles staring transfixed in dirt, a clickety-clackety bluebird or two, mummified creatures whose phylum’s rhyme with mistakes and failures.

As hard as I strain sight and thought, it’s difficult to imagine humankind intelligent. After all, we bury the only magic we know, our dead, far away from where we live. Yet not one of us has a plan of escape.

In the misty swell of early morning, I notice the hyaline wings of a dragonfly near the vegetable garden, torn from a sky.

I think of all my creatures as their own religion.

Their souls grow chaotic above ground, turn complete anarchy when the wind bellows. As the moon capsizes, I grow circumspect. All my life I have been burying parts of me: bits and pieces, claw and pain, pride and bone, in careful metrics of molecules.

There is such little time left, such little room.
Daniel Daly

Egg Salad

She remembers for him
Not the midlife storms
But Hampton’s visit of snow
Crying in the arms of trees,
“Hold me tight, Hold me tight.
I want to be beautiful,”
And Montauk’s morning sun
Spilling pink champagne into
The dark waters of the Atlantic.

As she goes on, he pushes dinner,
A stir-fry of mainly vegetables
She jabs her fork into, then slumps,
Dead tired, dreading once more
Another outrage over “pig food,”
Anger and fear colliding in his eyes.
He turns from her to the window
Where outside a bundle of gray trees
Adds its dark to the coming dark.

She remembers for him once again
The transparent afternoon of his lying
In the grassy meadow of Central Park.
Indian-summer sky, sweethear breeze.
He is wolfing down sandwiches
Eased by a cold bottle of amber beer.
She tells him he loves egg salad
Bumped up by onions and fresh celery.
He whispers, “I love your egg salad.”
one clumsy house beyond the desert

you are not evil for what you must do to walk across the desert. you are not evil for your survival or what it takes to keep a yellow bird from leaving. i pretended

agency was a gift provisionally granted. that late gifts still had hope
of arrival. that one day we would live in a house with a wrap-around porch and watch grapes growing slowly in summer. the problem with leaving is always an open door which the house is built around.

the problem with yellow birds is the leaving i built my life around. it seems then each departure becomes a distinct kind of beast roaming the floors between myself and i—the bear and birds humming surrender to the last lonely balloon at a party. and perhaps / in your clumsy way / this is love.
Asparagus framed with parsley, frothy leaves circling thick spears. We imagine crisp green illustrations replacing these charcoal drawings. Eggplant, pears, their curves fuller than any fruit in any garden. We imagine our fingers searching for bush beans, pole beans, recall sugar snap peas, their plump pods plumper every day, bold bell peppers beside them, green flaming into red. Peaches and plums, seamed along one side, cupped in our palms, their ripe juice dripping past our wrists, our fingers and forearms sticky with nectar. We imagine our tongues sucking pulp. Oh cherry tomatoes, oh better boys and early girls, every one of you so globular, tugging your stems earthward, as if all you desire is to sink into warm soil, be held up by warm soil, your flesh ready to burst through its skin.
Ben Goluboff

A Confession

Deep inside me, close to the center,
it is always the summer of 1971
in the south of France.
It’s daybreak as the Rolling Stones
emerge from Keith’s chateau
where they are recording
Exile on Main Street
They walk to the dock and board
his mahogany speedboat,
the Mandrax 2.
The band has worked all night
on the first takes, let’s say,
of “Torn and Frayed,”
and now they will speed across
the bay -- Mick and Keith,
Jimmy Miller, maybe, Bobby Keys
the Texan sax player --
to breakfast in Italy.

I am a little grey man
pursuing small grey business,
but deep inside me
the sun rises out of the Mediterranean,
the morning mists dissolve,
and
Exile
is coming together.
Stuart Gunter

The Old Cowboys

One man, hat pulled low over his eyes, Wrangler jeans, white button-down shirt, sitting on an upright tire in the dirt under the overpass strums his Gibson guitar, sun on his neck.

The other old cowboys line the fence, boots crooked on the metal bars, hanging their arms over the top rail, listening. Some drink Coke out of bottles, and they discuss the day’s heat, their favorite songs, what to eat for lunch.
Alec Hershman

Bridge Scene Ending in a Pickup Line

Crapshot and scatter seem abiding principles of beach. People wear hats. The sky’s attic hangs open with delicate tufts of asbestos. Things about which we—river, river—softly whispered eventualize to figs in the tree of our ears, and in the tree of our ears, the butterflies warn of predators with their poisonous, nasal bodies. Touching you erased what I knew about my genitals. Effervescent mannequins forsook their Sunday windows, their plastically shut, putty lips tilted by a rumor of fruit. People wear thin banks of personal, nude, emphatic spice, razor-burn on river surfeits, wading in. Sparkle for me, and only, chameleon; I’ll know.
Joanne Holdridge

LINES FOR THE MISSING

There's a child missing from the swimming pool
where the remaining cousins swim, practicing cannonballs, disco jumps
my dark curly haired niece born after my nephew and son isn't there
when she first learned to walk, she used to yell at the top of her lungs
down the steep basement stairs where she wasn't allowed to go
“Boys! Boys! What are you doing boys?” over and over again

She was crazy for strawberries and would pick them carefully out of any
fruit bowl
stuff them in her mouth all at once, the red juice dribbling down her
chin
staining the front of her shirt, cheeks puffed out with berries
even when I close my eyes and try not to remember, I see Zoe
not chasing after her brother and cousin, filling her mouth with straw-
berries
or jaw clenched in concentration kicking a soccer ball as hard as she
could

but her pale face pressed against the frosted window
skinny arm hooked up to yet another IV, the most vigorous thing
about her by then were her curls, they at least when tugged
would spring back to life and refuse to lie down
she's watching the neighborhood kids building a snow fort in the front
yard
murmuring to herself, I wish I were out there too
WITHOUT YOU, I’D BE SOMEONE ELSE

Once in bed you told me
that you liked to hear me talk
said I was funny, full of good stories
even about bad things
about all I knew before you was bad things
your voice rough gravel in my ear
but your touch warm, soft, surprised

Until that night in my twin bed in the dorm
shoved up against that cinder block wall
no one had told me to do anything
but shut up, don’t tell, keep quiet
no one wants to hear about that

I haven’t seen you this century
but each morning as I drive into work
down the highway past the Mystic River
the sand and gravel pit and the sign
that bears your name
I hear you still
Henry Hughes

HAUL-SEINING STRIPERS

East Hampton, New York

It’s stripers, not strippers, I laugh
deleting a p in a story your grandson writes.
Stalling homework, he peeks at a fresh text,
and I remember CB radios, fifty years ago, listening
for those daybreak hails, silver fingered waves
luring schools of striped bass
where we parked the winch truck,
and your crew launched the dory,
paying line and net, half mooned
against whitening gulls, crying and dipping
above the spiny dorsals, a hundred bronze bass
twisting in the bunt.

Then the fish were gone.
Then the haul-seiners were gone.
They’re catching stipers off Montauk, the boy reports.
And I wonder if the belly-up can right themselves.
Your battle with cancer, my knees gravel and fire.
Enough fish would cure anything.
I’d crank from the truck, you’d run the boat.
We’ll teach the kid and call the old crew.
Some are dead, you say. Some are still kicking.
We’ll call Billy Joel and Christie Brinkley.
They’re divorced, you shake your head.
True, I smile, but they still sing together
MAN HIGH ON LSD SAVES DOG FROM IMAGINARY HOUSE FIRE

―headline from NY Daily News

Worried for the animal locked inside—spilled water dish, chewed toy, nose on the greasy mat, boredom smoldering away the quiet hours of an October Thursday afternoon, when Michael Orchard dropped a little acid with cap of cough medicine, and felt the pale heat no one would heed in Halfmoon, New York, where Henry Hudson sneezed on the Mohicans, and sweaty Irishmen dug the Erie Canal. After hammering down one of its 34 locks, those Micks got good-n-drunken in an old cider shack, now the spot Mike stoked with Fire! Fire! driving his BMW sedan through the neighbor’s glass doors, and lifting the excited white terrier into his arms. Best thing to happen to that creature in a long time. A State Trooper reported that Michael “was very cooperative,” and that “He really believed he was rescuing a dog from a fire.”
Richard Jones

Lilac

Yesterday I drove to the garden store and purchased a lilac, which is now sitting in front of me in its rectangular black pot. I take time, pondering where to plant it. I already have a hedge of full-grown lilacs—the sweet scent of the mauve blossoms floats through my open windows in May. The word for that warm scented breeze after a long dull winter is intoxicating. And how could I be blue when I read the plastic planting guide, telling me I am the owner of a Syringa vulgaris, which is a fancy way of saying I have a common lilac. Thus vulgaris—the Latin word means “common”—and Syringa because the stems are hollow like syringes, which reminds me again of intoxication and addiction, the way I’m addicted to lilacs—always have been. The lilac is one of the bushes I remember from childhood, and the holy perfume of a cluster of blossoms carries me home to a country of wax-green ligustrum hedges and lavishly flowering honeysuckle bushes. And I’ve long known the meaning of lilac in the poetic language of flowers—love, innocence, tranquility, passion, and purity. How can I be sad, sitting here with my lilac, when to my delight I see my planting guide is presented in both English and French? “Planting Guide” and “Guide de Plantation.” How could I be anything but happy, walking the yard with garden gloves and shovel, asking my little lilac where it would like to live?
Venice, The Lido

I take my place on the sandy beach, dropping onto a wooden chaise lounge under a yellow and blue umbrella. In the shade I take off my straw hat, my long white robe. I look cross-eyed at my upturned nose to appreciate the cool, arctic-white zinc oxide, then apply handfuls of lotion to my shoulders and plump belly. I look like an Italian banker on holiday, a man who knows not only how to eat and eat well, but also how delicious it is to lie on a warm chaise and rest. It’s been so long since I’ve seen the sun, my skin is wan and ghostly. The locals blink and gape, never having seen skin so pale, or a man like a white whale in red swim trunks and sunglasses. The beautifully fit and tanned locals must wonder where I came from—Geneva, or Bern, or Mont Blanc. Ah, I sigh, the white mountain. The Adriatic bright, the Italian sky an unrolled a bolt of soft, blue silk, I let my eyes close slowly and dream of ascending Mont Blanc in winter, climbing ropes wrapped in loops around young, muscled shoulders, blue carabiners clipped to a sling, my body hidden beneath insulated pants, hard shell jacket, and wool Balaclava. The valley disappears in an ocean of mist as I climb by inches—gripping edges of rocks with my fingertips, balancing on small ledges and outcrops of crystal. The high peaks echo when I hammer pitons into impossibly tiny cracks of rock, and only the sun and a few lofty clouds cheer me on as I dangle from the mountain at the end of a rope, twirling with my ice axe.
Peycho Kanev

Everything That’s Gone

A cat laps water from a puddle of mud behind the tool shed. On the blossoming cherry tree two birds sing their celestial courting songs. In the distance the marsh flickers like a shattered mirror. Rusted cars on both sides of the dusty road bake under the sun. A cow lies in the dry grass with swollen udder. From the yard of an abandoned house, a dog barks at the emptiness inside me.
Just Like That

In the cold noiseless night
with the bitter wind outside
and the pine scent coming
from the winter forest
and the sleet falling over
the crescent moon in the shallows
of the pond when even the birds
are cuddling on the bare black
branches under the dark clouds
and even the stars are whispering
gently to each other
and nothing stirs
nothing moves
no eyes watching
in the pure snow
and the shadows of the trees creep
eastward
in this virgin silence of
the dead of the night
and you opened the door
and left for good
from this love
from this light
and life
as if you...

as if—
Kara Marell

May 2019

I ate YouTube cooking shows for dinner last night paired with a coffee mug of California’s finest boxed shiraz. I woke up this morning to purple lips and fed the cat, because he will never suffer in this life like I have. I poured a cup of coffee from the pot I’ve been nursing for 4 days over ice. As if that somehow justifies what I’m doing I check my phone. Maybe you got drunk and thought it good to text or email. Nothing. But world war three is seemingly closer every moment. I light my Guadalupe Virgin Mary candle while chanting Hare Krishna because it’s all the same. Last week I found out that I’ve been watering fake plants for the better part of a year. I did go through with repotting them, so they still sit in soil and I will continue to water them in hopes that I can help them grow somehow. You seem brighter these days. I didn’t know you before, but you have more. I want you. I want you to feel good Love is complicated I’m a complex thing But recently I’ve been leaning in to simplicity Let me water your plastic Let me help you grow
Jose Oseguera

Tiller of the Ground

My brother didn’t ask for my mother’s womb
To open its mouth to receive her husband’s seed.
He didn’t ask to be part of a family sapling
Too diseased to be called a marriage.

He didn’t ask to live in an apartment building
Where the property manager’s kids acted
As their mother’s henchmen—
Garnering fear from the kids

Who slept cramped
On hand-me-down mattresses
As she garnished their parents’ Welfare checks—
Because she was jealous

Of how torrid and impetuous and dashing
Her “assistant” manager husband
Wore his grin whenever Mom needed something fixed—
Then 26 and mostly single.

He wasn’t at fault
For his mother’s beauty and selfishness—
An abandoned, immigrant woman starved
For the kindness and warmth and lies

Of any man stupid enough
To harvest the fruit of his vigor
For her pale, brunette, wild honey— tender as lush as foreplay—
Miraging as clear as forbidden sex.

He didn’t ask to be born two years after
My empty trunk, shaking as it petrified,
When my hands twinged as twigs— my shoes as roots—
Because they were filled with rage as a tree with sap.

He didn’t ask to read the letters Dad
Sent from prison, written in false promises
On paper made of the pulped bark,
Inner flesh of stumps pruned dead.
He didn't ask to be too young
To understand rejection and disappointment
From someone who had become so good
At hiding them in her impatience and chagrin—

Our comfort, craving for the heat of her violence;
A woman whom I questioned in silence,
While she distracted herself with absence,
Whether she was really a mother

Or someone pretending to be one
Because she was stuck in a prison
Which bound her to us in a way
That correctional bars set her husband free.

He didn't ask for his wailing kindergarten body—
Still soft and fuzzy of baby hair—
To be tilled soil for their whaling fists,
Stripping from my sinews

The spirit that wasn't fully formed—
The layers between skin and muscle,
Bone and soul, blood and breath—
Crying to me from their laughter.

He didn't ask for his eyes
To be so large that he couldn't hide anything,
Melting as the older of the two Cains
Held his arms back, sternum up—

A loser before I had the courage to face his sacrifice—
While the smaller kid punched my boy, my son by omission:
It was a matter of honor,
Something you defended when all else was lost.

The leaves on the trees—
Falling before it was their turn—
Paved our way back home
In summer's heat, when the days were longer

And the dad's came home
Tired, dirty, hungry, empty-handed
Without a dad to give us,
As if they'd lost him somewhere along the way.
Jonathan Andrew Pérez, Esq

VIGNETTE 1992

Eclipsed: Western Logic, Arithmetic that universe they used to read Miranda rights:

You have the right to remain silent, anything you say or do will be used against you.

Even if you are silent, backed up to 1992 Rodney King blacked & blued therefore, hence, ergo the L.A. night, proud fires spelled rights in fumes & rose anew

first-order predicate logic: schools, EBT, behavioral therapy, Planet, nothing was used against you.

proof-theory stolen body like a clank or holler right structurally in The Marcus Garvey House:

Uncle Diego opened the gate for los gatos again. We watched, 1992, tv news.

Strict mathematics, pure deduction, what represented burning bushes & spoke of imagination,

my brother spray painted UFOs, and a feminine script on the Orange Line Station.

This wasn’t our world to rebuild, our “if I say this, then it must be this” commuted our sentences

No guarantee our formulation was held against us, no sense of hypothetical systems.
the validity of the truth-complex, “your son can do better” was a vignette to rebuild in our own fashion, 1992.
SHERRY, DO YOU REMEMBER ‘73?

I remember green—the wedding chuppah
we stood beneath, my father’s face
when the drunk guy he helped from the floor,
sagged, said, *Buzz off, dude*, the Quaaludes
that night in the motel near Baltimore, though
Wiki says they were probably white or blue.

But we wanted the house in Owings Mills,
the one your father offered—room for guitars
and mandolins—mine—for clay and stone—
yours—for Yorkie dogs and the Sheep one too—
yours, for sure. And we could get the wheels we
needed for your waitress job
in Reisterstown, though you wouldn’t drive,
or couldn’t, I can’t recall. But I drove,
and it would haul my stuff
to gigs—a pickup, I said, and we got it.

We stand beneath the chuppah, the rabbi
before us. And though you were a Jew,
neither you nor I knew Nicodemus
from Nethuselah, but you take the ring
my brother holds, place it on my finger.
Then I break the glass—wine glass,
water glass, brandy snifter—what? wrapped
in cloth—green? and placed beneath my foot,
and I stepped and pressed and it cracked,
shattered like a day might shatter
with a stumble, with a curse. And after that?
looked it up—we would have
said, or the guests, or me, *Mazel tov*—

joy must be tempered. Oh Sherry. Our joy
was tempered, and tempered quickly, even at
the motel, even with the ludes—though it was fun,
those first few moments of letting go. I can
see you tongue a tobacco flake from your
lower lip, your eyes rolling up beneath
your lids. And my brother, asleep on the couch,
each of us drifting into blank, like cumulus
sucked down to earth, opaque and
green and bluish-silver in the tv light.
Mercury Marvin Sunderland

I Didn’t Know You Were Transgender

when i take my weekly testosterone shot i
pinch an inch of that belly fat.
i play
my shot
from
hamilton
and i shoot .5 mL into my insides.
i'm an adult and i'm
still afraid of needles but
it only takes a second and
i'm mostly used to it by now.
a cisgender person tells me
i didn't know you were transgender
they tell me
i thought you were a cis man
if they even have the decency to use the right words for it
cisgender people are infuriated by words being used to describe them
they want us to say “normal” instead
i know you want me to
praise you for your words
i know you think i will
think of this upon a prayer mat for the ground that all cis people walk on
but i don’t
outside i say thank you
because i'm not allowed to show even the slightest bit of upsetness
13
or else you will be violent
or else i am just another pinnacle of the angry trans stereotype
or else you will scream in my face and manhandle me
but inside i will curse the ground you look down on me from
i’ll dye my hair whatever vibrant color i damn please
i’ll paint
a blue, pink, white, pink, and blue
wherever i damn please
when you say
you look like a cis man
what you really mean is
you have a beard and a deep voice
what you really mean is
you don’t look like how i think a transgender man looks
i’ll cover myself in vibrancy
and i’ll wear all the makeup i want
i wear skirts on my college campus
i’ll break an umpteen-billion gender roles
before you can ever throw my non-passing transgender siblings in the
dust
my world does not revolve around cisgender approval
i didn't become myself for you to jerk off your superiority complex
you are not the sun
and i do not exist to please you
i didn’t throw myself into a higher rate
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of suicide, abuse, sexual violence and eating disorders
just so you could use me as your token minority
i’ll wear dress shirts and smother myself in old spice
i’ll paint my nails and pierce my eyebrow
i’ll tattoo my skin and wear elf ears
i’ll put on a unicorn horn and a butterfly cape
if you knew
even a scrap
of trans culture
you’d know i
already do look
like a trans man
because we are a diverse multitude all over the earth
and i cover myself in things important to trans culture
and we look in any possible way a man can appear
i will take the world by a storm
i’ll throw my hands to outer space
i’ll blast neil cicierega and wear a million chokers
i’ll eat pickles and demand the communist revolution
i’ll write a million private instagram posts
i’ll deck myself in fairy lights and i’ll go to pagan festivals
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i’ll have my wiccan rituals and i’ll yell
hail satan
to the mormons
with a list that puts me into hell in nineteen different ways
i’ll shroud myself in axe
and i’ll plaster my walls to
frida khalo, marsha p johnson, sylvia revera, laverne cox, chelsey manning
and all those other trans figures
i’ll teach myself all the languages
where gender isn’t real
i don’t stick medicine in me
because i want to be cisgender
i stick medicine in me
because it makes me feel better
i don't strive to look different
because i want to be cisgender
i strive to look different
because it makes me feel better
i am one out of a population of millions
and none of us are the same
you say we destroy the english language
but singular they has existed for centuries
meanwhile you say
transgendered
even though transgender is an adjective
Go Back in Time with Me

Go back in time with me
to days before we knew
there was no guarantee.

To when we could not see
the pain we would go through.
Go back in time with me.

All heard the referee.
His call was death for you.
There was no guarantee.

Worms of madness, hungry
bore holes; your eyes were blue.
Go back in time with me.

Before your foot did leave
the ledge that held the clue
there was no guarantee.

In dreams you land safely
a bird who simply flew.
Go back in time with me.
There was no guarantee.
Matt Zambito

Love Poem Because You Can’t Sing “Happy Birthday to You” in Poetry

Scientists crushed diamonds with a giant laser today, and the diamonds didn’t have it coming, so I was afraid of getting you something too glittery for fear you’d get caught in the physics of crossfire. Billions of beams of light reflecting off Neptune—whose core could be carbon compressed into a brilliance jewelers would give all the greed on Earth for a chance to choose who got to don it—go unannounced in the everydayness that exist s in any life unaware how magnificently dazzling your breathing makes it. Without making too big a deal out of the rock now thought common in our cosmos, I still must say there’s some destruction the universe has coming for even threatening to take you away from me at all. There is no god who knows who it’s messing with when it’s messing with you and me, so blow out your candles and wish for a gift we could live on forever. We could live on forever—it’s simple as tic-tac-toe—if we turn the kisses of X into prisms, the hugs of O into photons,
and then
shoot ourselves,
the opposite of suicide, into the electric
oblivion of everything else..
At the edge of every devastation
There is a last garden: the stripe
Of thistle velcroed to the drought’s verge;
The asphodels in Mosul, flamboyance
Climbing their stems like fuses;
And outside Eden, a modest bed
Of radishes, waiting on God
To banish man. Or see here:
The lilies heaped at this limit,
As if a casket were a window box
Pulled free from its mooring
REVIEWS

Charles Parsons

Don't Read Poetry
Stephanie Burt
Basic Books, 2019

A last attempt: the language is a dialect called metaphor.
These images go unglossed: hair, glacier, flashlight.
When I think of a landscape I am thinking of a time.
When I talk of taking a trip I mean forever.
I could say: those mountains have a meaning
but further than that I could not say.
To do something very common in my own way.

This is a part of the poem “A Valediction Forbidding Mourning” by Adrienne Rich. In Don't Read Poetry, a new book of criticism by Stephanie Burt, Burt cites these lines, saying “Everything about this poem suggests rejection.” Burt's emphasis is on the difficulty and disapproval Rich felt personally, as someone who was a lesbian but who had been trying to live a heteronormative life, as well as Rich's struggle with the so-called “traditional, inherited, supposedly stable or fixed ways” of writing. Valediction, as Burt points out, means a goodbye. These lines are great way of understanding what Burt is trying to accomplish in her own new book: to see poetry in her own way, without sorrow for a supposedly bygone golden age of poetical purity.

In Don't Read Poetry, Burt argues that many people have got it wrong when they think that they know what poetry is. That poetry is just one thing. Poems, she explains, are various ways of expressing poetry, with a lowercase p, common in that they are all poetry and uncommon from who and where and why they were created.

Burt is also attempting in this book to confirm what she sees as a transition in poetry, one she believes has shifted from a focus on language and meaning to that of race and audience. And she wants to bring us to the truth of a “mystery that most people never get.” A very tall task. But she's up to it.

In case you don't already know, Burt (formerly Stephen) is a poet, critic,
and professor at Harvard, and has established herself as a think-leader on poetics for the twenty-first century. She’s published four volumes of her own poetry and, before this one, several books of criticism. Fashionable and interested in reaching a broader audience, she gave a TED Talk in 2014 called “Why People Need Poetry.” In 2015, she spoke eruditely and considerately before the Library of Congress about her book The Poem is You: 60 Contemporary Poems and How to Read Them. With an essay accompanying each poem, The Poem is You illuminates and explores recent assertions, shifts, recantations, and rebuttals among poets. It is unquestionably one of the most thoughtful volumes you can find if you’re interested in what’s going on in American poetry today. Serious poets and critics alike should really learn as much about Burt and her work as they can.

And with an A.B. from Harvard and a Ph.D. from Yale, it’s difficult to imagine a more learned advocate for poetry. Yet, to hear Burt or read her work is to encounter a passion and quirky interest in the subject that goes beyond academic posturing and recitation. To be straightforward about it, Burt’s pretty cool. For a quick sample of her pert badassery, seek out “Alexander Pope as Homeboy,” a podcast from the Poetry Foundation. Recorded in 2007, it’s a conversation that refers to an article Burt wrote making comparisons between Pope’s wariness and paranoia when he was at the top of the poetry game and today’s hip-hop lyrics. So, yeah, Burt’s just as comfortable talking about one of the most revered English poets as she is discussing Kanye West.

But, why this title, Don’t Read Poetry, if Burt’s so clearly all about poetry in all its forms and registers?

Let’s face it. A negative title makes the book more marketable. It’s intended to get everyone who claims they hate poetry to say they never thought of it that way, and everyone who loves poetry to commend Burt for the generous, clever takes, sometimes supplication, and upstanding political consciousness. Ben Lerner did something similar in his recent Hatred of Poetry (2016) a slender book of criticism that I also reviewed for the HPR. Not ignoring this, Burt gives a brief summary, interpretation, and disagreement of what she sees as Lerner’s argument. But the strategy they’re using is the same: get a potential reader’s attention with a title that will have lovers of poetry curious and potentially outraged and entice the literate less interested in poetry to wonder, what’s all this well-intended self-hatred actually about?

The subtitle of Burt’s book is more reassuring, A Book About How to Read Poems. This makes Don’t Read Poetry a feint, quickly balanced. Additionally, the book jacket describes the contents as dispelling
preconceptions, challenging assumptions. It assuages Burt as a “masterful guide to a sometimes confounding genre.” If it smells a bit of Dante and Virgil, you’re picking up the right scent. Burt even evokes her own guide, William Empson. He was a poet and critic who helped establish New Criticism. He’s an erstwhile important figure who became rejected by the fickle establishment and is mostly forgotten today. Burt writes that Empson’s 1930 book Seven Types of Ambiguity is a model for Don’t Read Poetry—though, she quickly adds, her book is not so academic.

If her book isn’t intended to be academic, what kind of book is it? Good question. It is encouraging its readers to undertake close reading. And if they don’t have time for close reading, reading of every kind is better than none. Any and all poems that come across one’s desk are poems, after all.

And this is where Burt’s mission gets a little weird. To avoid being prescriptive, she works by way of analogy, becoming so careful that it’s almost comical. She compares poems to songs, to an instrument, to Pokémon, to magic, to cooking, to therapy, to the Olympics, to the New York subway system, and the list goes on. Finally, she concedes and divides the subject into categories (I won’t spoil them for you). And, throughout, she’s magnanimous with her knowledge and analysis. Intentionally, there’s not a lot of negativity in this book. No hatred.

Truly, Burt’s here to tell us that trying to classify poems is like trying to do the same with people. It’s complicated. Stereotypes exist to be resisted and meaning changes over time. If meaning ever meant what we thought it meant in the first place.

Don’t Read Poetry is at its best when it engages how this marginal subject can help readers understand those at the margins of our society. Furthermore, Burt provides unique insight into the groundbreaking work of transgender poets. She helps readers understand how transformative poetry always has been in giving writers a chance to speak, even if at first they must speak in code. And Don’t Read Poetry is a reminder that out of rejection forms a hard-earned empathy.

So, the choice is ours. Reject poetry or keep trying to prove that we understand it all. That it fits nicely into one anthology, one semester, one shelf, one voice.

In a recent poem published in the Paris Review, Burt writes,

As for the ones who want purity,
they think they’re being delicate,
but really they’re passing up delicacies
on unfamiliar trees,
and climbing up withered and tall ones to pick famine food.
No wonder they’re in a bad mood.

Don’t Read Poetry challenges close-minded canon building and uproots
the authoritarian. It’s genuinely a refresher and, perhaps, a refreshen-
ing of the odorous close quarters of the academe. It can also, hopefully,
encourage us to reject trendy nihilism, uncalled for despair, and blind
hatred. Hopefully, it can boost our mood and encourage us to hope,
read, dream, write. To accept what’s different. To be different.
CONTRIBUTORS’ NOTES


R. Steve Benson. Steve was lucky enough to study poetry with the late poet James Hearst at the University of Northern Iowa. Steve’s poems have been published in many literary journals including the The North American Review, South Carolina Review, Minnesota Review, Weber and Spoon River Poetry Review. Twenty of his short poems have been published by the Christian Science Monitor. Steve is a retired art teacher, married with 3 children. He lives in Mt. Vernon, Iowa.

Daniel Daly’s poems have appeared in Poetry, North Dakota Quarterly, NY Times, America, Notre Dame Review, Wm.& Mary Review and elsewhere. His last collection, Off the Road, was awarded the Tennessee Chapbook Prize.

Lynn Domina is the author of two collections of poetry, Corporal Works and Framed in Silence, and the editor of a collection of essays, Poets on Psalms. Her recent work appears or is forthcoming in The Kenyon Review, The New England Review, Alaska Quarterly Review, and many other periodicals and anthologies. She currently serves as Head of the English Department at Northern Michigan University and as Creative Writing Editor of The Other Journal. She lives with her family in Marquette, MI, along the shores of beautiful Lake Superior.

Dan A. Cardoza’s fiction, nonfiction, and poetry have met international acceptance. Most recently his work has been featured in Brave Voices, Cabinet of heed, Cleaver, Entropy, Gravel, New Flash Fiction Review and Spelk.

J. David is from Cleveland, Ohio and edits Flypaper Lit. They love Julien Baker

Benjmain Goluboff teaches English at Lake Forest College. In addition to some scholarly publications, he has placed imaginative work -- poetry, fiction, and essays -- in many small-press journals, recently Unbroken, Bird’s Thumb, and War Literature and the Arts. He is the author of Ho Chi Minh: A Speculative Life in Verse, and Other Poems (Urban
Stuart Gunter is working toward a Master’s Degree in Mental Health Counseling and lives in Schuyler, Virginia. He likes to paddle the Rockfish River and play drums in obscure rock bands. His poems have been published in *The Madison Review, Streetlight, Gravel, Broad Street, and Into the Void*, among others.

Alec Hershman is the queer author of Permanent and Wonderful Storage, winner of the Robin Becker Prize (Seven Kitchens Press, 2019) and the Egg Goes Under (Seven Kitchens Press, 2017). He earned his MFA at Washington University in St. Louis and has received awards from the KHN Center for the Arts, The Jentel Foundation, Playa, The Virginia Creative Center for the Arts, and The Institute for Sustainable Living, Art, and Natural Design. He lives in Michigan where he teaches writing and literature to college students. You can learn more at alechershman-poetry.com.

Joanne Holdridge lives in Arlington, MA, but spends as much of the winter as she can skiing the White Mountains of New Hampshire. Until quite recently, she taught poetry and literature classes to ESL students at Bunker Hill Community College. She has published poems in a variety of different journals and has work forthcoming in *Coal City Review, Iconoclast, and Illuminations*.

Henry Hughes is a professor of literature and writing at Western Oregon University. His latest book is a memoir, *Back Seat with Fish*.

Richard Jones is the author of seven books from Copper Canyon Press, including the recent *Stranger on Earth*. Editor of *Poetry East* and its many anthologies—such as *London, The Last Believer in Words, and Bliss*—he also edits the free worldwide poetry app, “The Poet’s Almanac.” A new book, *Paris*, is forthcoming next year.

Peycho Kanev is the author of 4 poetry collections and three chapbooks, published in the USA and Europe. His poems have appeared in many literary magazines, such as: *Rattle, Poetry Quarterly, Evergreen Review, Front Porch Review, Hawaii Review, Barrow Street, Sheepshead Review, Off the Coast, The Adirondack Review, Sierra Nevada Review, The Cleveland Review* and many others. His new chapbook titled Under Half-Empty Heaven was published in 2018 by Grey Book Press. He currently is living in Bulgaria.
Kara Marell is a Minneapolis, MN-based poet, author and spoken word artist. Along with writing, Kara is a yoga teacher, multi-media artist, and internet clothing stylist. When she's not writing poems, Kara enjoys teaching yoga, laying on the floor, going to the lakes on her orange bicycle, petting her cat Tofu, and spending time with the loves of her life, in or outside of her basement apartment. Kara holds a bachelor's degree in human services and political science from Metropolitan State University St. Paul. Kara has an affinity for wood paneling and thinks aliens have a lot of the answers. She wishes you nothing but love and joy. And also fries. Contact Kara on her website www.karamarellyoga.com.

Jose Oseguera has published over 100 pieces— poetry, short fiction and novellas— in a variety of literary journals. His poetry collection, “The Milk of Your Blood,” will be released in February 2020. He's currently working on his second novel, as well as his second poetry collection. Links to his most recent publications can be found on his website (www.joseoseguera.com).

Charles Parsons writes in the township of Black Horse, Ohio. He recently had poems in Lake Effect and Palaver and a story in Chicago Quarterly Review.

Jonathan Andrew Pérez, Esq. His debut, “Proximity and the Cartographer of Crumpled Maps, A Justice Pastoral” will be published by Finishing Line Press, November 2019. Among Journals his work appears in Muse/A Journal, Quiddity, The Chicago Quarterly Review, Rigorous, BARNHOUSE, the Cape Code Review, and TRACK//4, dedicated to poets of color. A participant at multiple Cave Canem workshops, his poetry has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. He has a day job as a trail attorney and lives on larger reform ideas of justice, on a daily basis.

William Snyder has published poems in The Southern Review, Poet Lore, Folio, and Southern Humanities Review among others. He was the co-winner of the 2001 Grolier Poetry Prize, winner of the 2002 Kinloch Rivers Chapbook competition; The CONSEQUENCE Prize in Poetry, 2013; the 2015 Claire Keyes Poetry Prize. He teaches writing and literature at Concordia College, Moorhead, MN.

Mercury Marvin Sunderland is a Hellenist transgender autistic gay man who uses he/him pronouns. He's from Seattle, and his dream is to become the most banned author in human history. He can be found as @Romangodmercury on Instagram and Facebook.

Katherine Szpekman writes poetry and memoir from her home in Collinsville, Connecticut. Her work has appeared in Red Eft Review and
Sky Island Journal, Muddy River Poetry Review, and is forthcoming in Chestnut Review. She was awarded Honorable Mention in the Connecticut River Review Poetry Contest 2019.

Matt Zambito is the author of The Fantastic Congress of Oddities (Cherry Grove Collections), and two chapbooks, Guy Talk and Checks & Balances (Finishing Line Press). Other poems appear in Slice, Painted Bride Quarterly, Soundings East, Pembroke Magazine, and elsewhere.

Jane Zwart’s poems have previously appeared in Poetry, TriQuarterly, Threepenny Review, and Rattle, as well as in other journals and little magazines.