Provisions

Poems Held Close in a Time of Crisis

Edited by
Claire Schwartz  Nathan Goldman
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Provisions was a column that ran biweekly in Jewish Currents from April 3 – July 20, 2020. Conceived as a way of sharing and reflecting on poems held close as we confronted the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, the pieces took on new forms after the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police triggered a global uprising against anti-Black racism.

AN UMBRELLA PLANT sits on my windowsill. I sing a song as I give her water. She looks away from me, toward the light. What else enters my morning: a pinch of salt, a text from my cousin, stray notes from my neighbor’s record player—tiny, precious things, small counterpoints to the world’s colossal violence and enormous grief.

In the spirit of the small, here, every other Friday, three people will offer a brief response to a poem they’re holding close—some work that’s nourishing them in a time of need. We don’t know how long this will last. Already, one participant had to pull out; she had begun to feel ill. Even as I write this, my own breath is too short to stretch over a line of my favorite poem. Still, I need poems now to pull me toward my breath, my body, to give form to formless things (love, pain, death), to teach me how to exist with what I don’t understand.

I’m especially grateful, these days, for how poetry can help us to live alongside absence, not to rush to fill it in. Little word unspooled from meaning, little line break, little plant inside an apartment. My hope is that we can come together in this space. I want to nourish something small, here, where I am. To join with your small here. To see what grows.

—CLAIRE SCHWARTZ
“languages I didn’t know I wanted to know”
LATELY, I've been holding Solmaz Sharif's “Civilization Spurns the Leopard” close for its dedication to the gloriously quotidian—chattering sparrows, bare trees, potholes, pools of water. Its rhythms feel almost sinfully languorous, like so many of my evenings now. I rest, read, peel vegetables, oil my hair, spring clean, stretch, process. In this state of slowness, I am more acutely aware of my body. I register each new ache. “To step out of my door and hope to see something like a life,” Sharif writes. London feels lonelier, if that’s even possible. Those who can afford to have fled to country homes; the rest of us plod along to the best of our ability. My mother tells me another person in her social circle has fallen ill. The WhatsApp Auntie Network remains a sinuous web of misinformation and grief. Loved ones conduct birthdays via video call. Our Rasta neighbor punctuates the air with garage throwbacks. Some of the neighbors—now working from home—have begun to complain.

I feel perched on the edge of a historical rupture we are only beginning to understand. This is the easiest part to admit. What’s harder to convey is the nauseating smugness of being proven right in the worst of ways. For those of us carrying histories of catastrophe as diasporic muscle memory, even our anxieties have anxieties. Word to Charlie Brown. Our survival instincts kick in with a predictable urgency. We have always known we would one day have to outrun or acclimate to the apocalyptic. “To lose even the loss.” After all, it has happened before.

There’s no joy in such confirmation. Still, there is the solace in knowing we can channel our creativity toward something other than cruelty, toward caring for each other. As a result of lockdown, an increasingly concerned central government has ordered councils across England to provide accommodation for the unhoused. Hotels are offering beds to rough sleepers. We don’t have to accept hunger, income inequality, disempowering atomization, punishing sanctions, or disregard for the elderly and vulnerable. We can’t go back. We are still trying on this new world for size. I’m learning the shape of things anew, in “languages I didn’t know I wanted to know.”

Though a terrifying expanse of indeterminate months lies ahead, I find comfort in the people and poems I will share this weight with. From Oakland to Shiraz, we are the “single likeness” Sharif describes. The uniformity of our days tethers us to one another. Never have I had so much in common with so many people. Nightly, I fall asleep mid-conversation. On the other end of the line, someone I love breathes.
QUARANTINE has me nervous and irritable. It’s been hard to be kind to my family. Though we’re lucky to be sheltered together, gratitude and generosity are not coming as quickly or as easily as I’d like. I haven’t experienced an overwhelming urge to read or write; indeed, I feel a little repulsed by the idea. In the past, I’ve often found poetry to be a liberating space—a space where I can, to quote Paul Celan, “push the question further,” destabilizing what I think I know. But now, amid so much uncertainty, I am drawn toward simple, sturdy thinking. I reach for a poem that a dear friend and fellow drunk shared with me in the most anxious days of my early recovery: Mary Karr’s “VI. Wisdom: The Voice of God.”

The poem opens with a bluntness that shocks me into listening: “Ninety percent of what’s wrong with you / could be cured with a hot bath.” The gorgeously straightforward directive of “The Voice of God” offers some relief from my diffuse worryings. Taped to my wall, printed and folded in my wallet, saved to my phone for instant accessibility, recited as prayer in a dark moment, this poem has been a compass I can retrieve and use to locate myself when I’ve lost my bearings.

In sobriety, God’s voice has become an active, ordinary presence in my life—as practical as it is metaphysical. It’s understandable that “you want magic” from God; after all, my prayers are macro, on the scale of my global fears. But the poem reminds me that I have a body requiring maintenance, physical and spiritual. If I cannot listen to the churning in my stomach, if I forget to regularly practice prayer, if I do not keep myself in order, I cannot possibly hope to hear any voice, soft or tremendous, that might be seeking my response. “It is small and fond and local,” writes Karr. “Don’t look for / your initials in the geese honking / overhead or to see through the glass even darkly. It says the most obvious shit, i.e. Put down that gun, you need a sandwich.”
DURING THESE STRANGE AND SCARY TIMES, I've been holding June Jordan's “Roman Poem Number Thirteen” especially close. When I read about nurses and doctors forced to ration ventilators, I think of these wrenching lines: “who can choose between the worst possibility / and the last / between the winners of the wars against breathing / and the last / war everyone will lose.” Another politician argues that we should restart the economy, death rate be damned, and I think, here is “the dry gas / domination of the future.” When I see Trump congratulate himself in yet another press conference while US sanctions continue to strangle Iran, I remember “the consequences of the killers / and the past / of all the killing.”

The line breaks in this poem are jarring, and the internal rhyme throws the reader into a vortex of sounds. But for all the strange and horrifying beauty of the first 14 lines, the last lines are quiet, almost swallowed: “Your voice / breaks very close to me my love.” It's a heartrending volta—where a bleak picture of life at an empire's end gives way to an intimate scene between lovers, the nebulous “our” now clearly held by the “you” and “me.” The final lines describe a brutal, precise sadness that renders the brutality of the preceding lines more real and more felt. The poem reaches for connection with the beloved—reaches, I imagine now, through isolation, through grief, through the fear of being unable to pay your rent, through the fear of every cough and ache, and through other, greater fears.

I believe in the collective. Alone, we are protecting each other. But I am not quite alone. Three months pregnant, I lie in bed, vomit into a trash can, and scour the news for an ounce of hope. What world am I bringing this child into? Will he be born into isolation, into silence, in a hospital hushed by so many deaths? As the virus snakes up the coastline, in my darkest moments, I wonder if he will be born at all. I hope he will. My heart is arguing hard for him.

I read my child this poem aloud, over and over. I sing it to him softly. My voice—and Jordan’s—are the first ones he will hear. Usually, I can’t get through the last line without crying. I read it anyway. I read it for the pregnant women still showing up to work in hospitals and grocery stores without protective gear while I shelter at home and grind my teeth to dust. I read it for all of us, together, struggling to do our part through the great terror of what we don’t know. I’m reading it for you, too, wherever you are. Your voice breaks very close to me my love.
“The world begins at a kitchen table”
BACK IN FEBRUARY, thinking that my partner and I might, against my every sedimented instinct, board a plane for Texas to be among other writers at the annual AWP conference, I turned sharply, as if at the last minute, into the parking lot of a CVS far from home. I wanted travel-sized Lysol and zinc lozenges, and I wanted no one I knew to see my paranoid scuttling. The shelves, mind you, were still full. Around me, it seemed everyone was laughing, moving in that easy way that humans do.

In the end, we didn't go to Texas. Just yesterday, my partner happened to dig it up, my trove of products that I'd hidden among her scarves like a squirrel burying acorns for the winter. I spend these days mostly in animal ways, pacing our three rooms, unbearably alert, and then napping in the midafternoon sun. In this way, despite the lengthening daylight, the leaves returning to the trees outside our window, it's winter, again, now.

To remain something like human, to give structure to our days, my partner and I have made a list of rules: No working all of the time. No working none of the time. No scrolling in bed. Another rule: Each day we'll read poems out loud to each other until we find one, just one, that enters both of us and remaps our inner terrain. Usually, this means ten, twenty minutes of poems, and then off to work in our separate corners. On rare mornings, we read and read. Once inhabited by a poem, it's difficult to let it go.

The last time this happened, we were rereading Donika Kelly's collection *Bestiary*. I'd read Kelly's book when it came out in 2016 and loved it then, but now there was something newly propulsive about it. I couldn't let us put it down. *There always are/have been disasters that tear a hole in human sociality*, this book of love poems issuing from a site of profound estrangement insists. *Disasters of spoiled intimacy. Disasters of history unfolding, folding, unfolding still.*

The speaker—Black, queerly gendered, survivor of violence both intimate and historical—tarries with what disaster has made of her: monstrous, perhaps, more animal than girl. But this isn't exactly a tragedy. Instead, to sometimes be only adjacent to human life forces (or enables) Kelly, her speaker, to develop new, precise vocabularies for intimacy—vocabularies borrowed from the birds, the minotaur, the sphinx, and the dogs “who make bearable all that you must / bear.” Given how figurations of Black people as animal or animal-like have been mobilized to justify the ongoing history of Black oppression, Kelly's imitation of the nonhuman isn’t without risk. But given that everyday human structures of care and intimacy—the family, healthcare systems, etc.—are themselves sites of violence, I find it steadying to look around at the more-than-human world for reminders that there are other ways to live, even if only temporarily. “What you crave: distance”—from the violence of the human. “What the / [nonhuman] gives you: warmth.”

In *Bestiary*, winter—loneliness, isolating and reparative reclusion, coldness, hardness in all its registers, absence of (human) touch—ends. But disaster never ends. I can’t help but think of Kelly's poems as my partner digs through the closet, unearthing my tiny cache. My tail twitching, twitching. Yes, we find new ways of living with what has been made of us. What we have made.
How to be alone

DONIKA KELLY

Not that you ever are. The small, rough dogs lie at your feet or warm your belly. Who make bearable all that you must bear. What needs doing, regularly. You fear your life without them; the hawk perched on your roof, eyeing the smaller. The larger, safe for now.

Practice the lonely drag that makes you no different from the men you resemble. Let this be a kind of safety. The shamble in your walk. Become invulnerable in holding, on every body, your eye, roving, restless.

This heartache like any cliché, sincere and boring. The small dogs your only constant. You call the smallest to your breast. The larger, belly exposed, snoring. They rest.

Admit that, were you a different kind of person, you would smash in your father's skull with your booted foot. This being a fantasy you can hear and smell and all but feel. A father one hates. No mother to speak of.

Admit also your mother's death. Mention, often, her resurrection; the load of the word. Remember how she grieved, freshly, when she asked if her mother was truly dead. How you answered yes. How she forgot. How you killed her mother, again and again.

Because she leaves. And you are always your best. And you are a fool. Because you believe in reciprocity. Because you are afraid of your own hand. How could you have asked her to stay?

The couch being, at this juncture and many others, the best antidote to loneliness. Narrow and brown. You know the small dogs will wake you when the neighbor leaves for work, crow and shrill. You know you will yell at the littlest and larger to return to the fetal S of your body.

Crumple the fetal S of your body until you resemble a ball of paper. The fold of your limbs, the ache in your joints. You are too young to be so sore. You make no room for the rough dogs now. Your boys. It is winter. You are miserly with heat.
You plan to get the larger one fixed. You joke, *there are no balls in my house*, but this is not a joke. Your father, whose head you would make a mess of, is oddly attached to the larger’s balls. You consider how the neutering will affect him. The father. Weeping over the end of his name.

The smaller has crawled between you and your green hoodie. Your house is cold. You have been cruel to the woman you love because she has been honest with you. You embarrass yourself. What you crave: distance. What the smaller gives you: warmth.

Home is where your dogs are. Home is where your gods are. Your feet are quite cold. Still the smallest trembles on your belly. You continue to become her. The misfiring keyboard. Operator. I might be dying. Dead. Soon, like my mother, who finally remembered my name.

Only the boys. The couch is best tonight, though the wind pries sound from all the loose parts of this house and so pries the gruff and gutter of my sweetest hearts. I would like to sleep. That I might bear what needs it.

Admit also cutting. The attempted suicides. Both. And the little ways you brick up your heart. Admit the sweet black of charcoal making a river of your body. The blackest you’ve ever been.

The louvered windows. The peach walls. The buckling ceiling that needs repair. The gusset of your panties soaked with your father’s semen. Why you no longer wear panties. Why he deserves every arc of your boot. Why the door is always locked.

She, a zombie. Undead. Specter of herself. Mother. Mama. She does not remember to think of me anymore. We recognize each other only in echoes.

Your sadness is full of sadness. You feel as a man feels: reluctantly. Your feet are still cold. Oh, little and larger ones who keep you warm. Oh, little and larger ones who guard the little lock of your peace.
MY BACK ACHES from standing all day, turning the kitchen over to prepare for Passover. I place the year-round dishes into a box, stack the one-week-a-year plates onto the shelves, consider a continuous internal stream of versions of the same question: “Is ______ kosher for Passover?” I don’t have any goddam dill. The victory garden is sprouting chard, kale, spinach, and herbs, but it’s all weeks away from being ready to use. Stock simmers on the stove while I seek my mother’s advice by phone: “The broth I was planning to use turns out to be chametzdik. What do I substitute?”

I’m in Baltimore; my mother is far away in Philadelphia. We should be in the same kitchen, bumping into one another, morphing into a back-to-back, multi-armed, multi-legged, red-headed being, like the first Creation in Genesis. We should be creating a tornado of parsley, vegetarian chopped liver, and far-too-salty saltwater. But the virus is spreading, and so we are apart. Because the healers are already so overworked, because there are so many dead, because so many are so far from enough food for a feast, because there is a plague at the door.

Joy Harjo’s “Perhaps the World Ends Here” has brought me comfort in all times and places. This Pesach, her words are revealed anew. As so much feels terrifyingly uprooted, the table is a familiar shelter, “a house in the rain, an umbrella in the sun.”

The plague knocks at the door, zooms across town. Are we destined to tell a story of hope and liberation as the world ends? Document our despair one last year?

Suddenly, the answer is no. I read Harjo’s words, again and again. Until now, I received this poem as a lament, a remembrance of what was. Now I see, there is sustenance here: “The world begins at a kitchen table. No matter what, we must eat to live.” She is and is not writing about the end of the world—for the world has surely ended time after time; our Native poet laureate certainly knows of the destruction of worlds. “We have begun and ended at this table. It is a place to hide in the shadow of terror. A place to celebrate the terrible victory.” Perhaps this poem suggests that what remains at the holy altar of the table is what the world should stop for, that endings can yield new beginnings. That the worlds these beginnings yield depend on us. Time lengthens in the breath of the poem, eternity and the world’s end are woven into each other.

This year, the table is at the end of the world. This table, with teething babies and coffee stains, makes promises of that which can endure, and what is worth enduring for. The world is not coming to an end; the world stops at the table. The table is the whole world.
CLAIRE SCHWARTZ

IN LUBLIN, POLAND, in 1939, SS officers backed a group of Jews against barbed wire and ordered them to sing to their execution. A man began a familiar tune: “Lomir zich iberbetn,” he sang. *Let us reconcile.* Nobody joined him. He improvised: “Mir veln zey iberlben.” *We will outlive them.* This new song caught. The SS commander ordered the Jews to stop singing. The Jews sang on. Even as SS officers charged them, the song swelled. *We will outlive them, we will outlive them, we will outlive them.*

I used to chafe at this story, which I learned in Hebrew school. It felt violent, mining the dead for hope—those of us not killed sanctified by the terror inflicted on others, a grotesque consolation. I think of this now when I hear people say *hero*, meaning: You don’t need sick leave, a living wage. *Hero:* You can take it. We can take losing you. Even the vocabularies of care most immediately available to us prime us, I fear, to understand certain deaths as acceptable, as a necessary sacrifice. When, following empire’s scripts, we say we are “fighting” the virus, that we’re “at war with an invisible enemy,” we are preparing ourselves to tolerate the deaths of “frontline” workers, of people who are incarcerated, disabled, Black, brown, or otherwise denied resources, further authorizing the unequally distributed vulnerabilities under the alibi of common good.

Craving a language of true togetherness, one that neither looks away from the horror nor accepts what’s readily offered, I’ve found myself returning to “On Living” by the Turkish poet Nâzım Hikmet:

> Living is no laughing matter:  
> you must take it seriously,  
> so much so and to such a degree  
> that, for example, your hands tied behind your back,  
> your back to the wall

...  

you can die for people—  
even for people whose faces you’ve never seen,  
even though you know living  
is the most real, the most beautiful thing.

The physical constraint expressed here is not metaphorical: Hikmet wrote “On Living” in the tenth year of a 28-year prison sentence he served on charges of sedition for writing a poem that referenced a 15th-century rebellion against Ottoman rule. To take living seriously, this poem reminds, is not to hoard life-chances, but to nourish the life-chances of us all.

In 2018, after the shooting at the Tree of Life – Or L’Simcha synagogue, I found myself struck by a doubled grief: grief for the murdered and their communities, and grief that, in their grief, so many Jewish institutions seized on white supremacist constructions of safety, calling for increases in police presence and reaffirming a commitment to Israel—routes to even more death. In a last-ditch effort to mourn in community in a way that did not produce more mourning, I attended a vigil hosted by Jews for Economic and Racial Justice. We gathered in Union Square Park. It was raining. Someone I didn’t know offered me half of their umbrella. There were no police. We sang together: “Mir veln zey iberlben.” In that particularly distilled kind of living that love makes of loss, I experienced a glimpse of true togetherness; the words I’d resented for what had felt like a hollow affirmation of life now made way for full grief that swells like song—from us, then larger than us all.
On Living

NÂZIM HIKMET

Translated by Randy Blasing
and Mutlu Konuk

I

Living is no laughing matter:
   you must live with great seriousness
   like a squirrel, for example—
   I mean without looking for something beyond and above living,
       I mean living must be your whole occupation.

Living is no laughing matter:
   you must take it seriously, so much so and to such a degree
   that, for example, your hands tied behind your back,
       your back to the wall,
   or else in a laboratory
       in your white coat and safety glasses,
       you can die for people—
   even for people whose faces you’ve never seen,
   even though you know living
       is the most real, the most beautiful thing.

   I mean, you must take living so seriously
   that even at seventy, for example, you’ll plant olive trees—
   and not for your children, either,
   but because although you fear death you don’t believe it,
   because living, I mean, weighs heavier.

II

Let’s say we’re seriously ill, need surgery—
   which is to say we might not get up
       from the white table.
   Even though it’s impossible not to feel sad
       about going a little too soon,
   we’ll still laugh at the jokes being told,
   we’ll look out the window to see if it’s raining,
   or still wait anxiously
       for the latest newscast . . .

   Let’s say we’re at the front—
       for something worth fighting for, say.
   There, in the first offensive, on that very day,
       we might fall on our face, dead.
   We’ll know this with a curious anger,
       but we’ll still worry ourselves to death
       about the outcome of the war, which could last years.

   Let’s say we’re in prison
   and close to fifty,
   and we have eighteen more years, say,
       before the iron doors will open.
   We’ll still live with the outside,
       with its people and animals, struggle and wind—
       I mean with the outside beyond the walls.

   I mean, however and wherever we are,
   we must live as if we will never die.

III

This earth will grow cold,
   a star among stars
       and one of the smallest,
   a gilded mote on blue velvet—
       I mean this, our great earth.

   This earth will grow cold one day,
   not like a block of ice
       or a dead cloud even
   but like an empty walnut it will roll along
       in pitch-black space . . .

   You must grieve for this right now
   —you have to feel this sorrow now—
   for the world must be loved this much
       if you’re going to say “I lived” . . .
“Pain was everywhere. Sprang out of everything”
THE POET ELSE LASKER-SCHÜLER (1869–1945) felt the urge to sing, and she didn’t know why. So she wrote a poem, “Abends.” The poem replaces the song that maybe never materialized. (These spring days of 2020, when concentration eludes me, I use brief lyrics by vanished poets as attention-anchors.)

The song-wish hit her in the evening, at the borderline hour that Robert Schumann and hundreds of other Romantic and Expressionist artists knew marked mood’s return. A baleful moment for everyone, when evening arrives, with its retinue of effacements—its chromaticism. Is evening, after 1913, always atonal?

“Pain was everywhere. Sprang out of everything . . .” All the objects around her—trees, drapery, concepts—sent forth a command: to suffer, to be hyperconscious, to experience acuteness itself, as if acuity could arrive separately from the affects it enrobed. The things may not have intended to emit agony. To give things their awful dignity I should capitalize Things; we should honor those obstacles—boats and boulevards and dictionaries—encumbering us. Things don’t have empathy. Coarsely they remain fastened to their identities, and refuse our come-hither.

Finally the dolor lay on top of Else Lasker-Schüler; she was truculence’s last stop on its route. I enjoy when a lover puts his weight on me. Like damp sand, I need to be pressed by beach-wandering feet. But when pain levels me into the dirt, am I delighted by the inanimate’s adamancy?

This ostensibly simple poem resists fathoming. Does song intensify her bitterness? Does she feel guilty for exhalation? Was singing an impulse that she should have squelched? Does poetry extirpate misery? Can we give names to these things—“Dingen”—encircling us, or must they remain unspecified eminences?

“Dingen” rhymes with “singen.” We sing and we thing. This terse poem, virtuously reticent in the midst of its outgoingness, mentions neither the source of the poet’s sadness nor the nature of her song. We know merely that she felt a sudden (and perhaps unrealized) expressive liberation, and that a desolate aftermath followed her quick spontaneous release.

I keep circling this poem as if it holds the answer to a riddle, but the poem is, in fact, the riddle itself. The puzzle it proposes returns every time I read these lines, their transparency a lure, a screen growing opaque when I disturb its resistant surface with my inquiry. The poem pretends to solve the enigma, but her mood’s unspeakability lays its rhythmic weight on our will to draw conclusions.

For years I’ve carried near me this little book, Lasker-Schüler’s Selected Poems, translated from the German by Audri Durchslag-Litt and Jeanette Litman-Demeestère, and published by Green Integer in 2002. Here’s a brutal biographical fact cited on the pocket-sized volume’s back cover: “When the Nazi government took power, Lasker-Schüler, after being accosted by a group of Nazis and beaten with an iron rod, immediately boarded a train to leave Germany.” It may be preposterously maudlin and ahistorical for me to imagine that the evening weight descending upon her in this poem prefigures the iron rod. A fit of melancholy isn’t the same as state-sanctioned violence. But let me suggest that a person is an impressionable surface, and that poems can train our capacity for noticing how impressions get made—almost invisibly—through words, and through the monstrosities and transports that words, when they are direct and when they are covert, can evoke.

The previous sentence—or a more complicated version of it, including the phrase “the weight of articulation,” an attempt to explain why writing and reading are, at this moment, so difficult for me—was going to be my conclusion. But before I said goodbye to this little essay, I needed to find an online translation of “Abends,” to offer as a link for you, reader. The translation I found was by the great Irish poet Eavan Boland. By sad synchronicity, the day after I discovered her translation, a gracefully demotic and impetuous rendering, she passed away. I’d like to imagine that Lasker-Schüler would have understood, and admired, this line from Boland’s poem “The Pomegranate”: “Will we ever live so intensely again”? 
In the Evening

ELSE LASKER-SCHÜLER

Translated by Audri Durchslag-Litt
and Jeanette Litman-Demeestère

Suddenly I had to sing—
And I did not know why.
—But evenings I cried bitterly.

Out of all things a pain did spring,
Spread itself around
—And lay on top of me.
IT WOULD COME AS NO SURPRISE to anyone who knows me—at least of all myself—to hear that I am spending my days thinking about love again. And, as always, I am thinking about how to detangle real love from the overarching, sanitized, and generalized idea of love that seems to float down from above and blanket anxious or painful moments like our current one. The new Fiona Apple album begins with the song “I Want You to Love Me,” and I have been so wonderfully haunted by that tune during this time of reconsidering love and all of its movements. I don’t believe the song to be an arms-open plea to some vast and unknowable “you,” as the title might suggest. It feels, instead, like a person who had loved someone else for ages, pleading for their love to return to a happier era. Perhaps I’m projecting my own interests in love onto the song, but I feel like the urgency in the lyrics brings me closer to something familiar that has grown distant.

In the spirit of naming loves, I do love beyza ozer’s work. They write whimsically and delicately, stretching out a moment until it feels like a universe, eager to cradle a reader. I thought of “I Think This Is the Last Love Poem” while weighing my many excitements about the Fiona Apple song. This poem feels to me to be—among other things—an ode to the way we can reinvent seeing the familiar people in our lives. The way they can take new forms within our larger affections. I appreciate how love appears in this work, as well. As uncertain, delightfully exhausting, and earnest as it is in the Apple song. But also worthy of celebration—especially in the opening: “When Arabella laughs it feels like / allah’s prayer in my heart.”

I am confident that a part of me is drawn to those lines, specifically, because I have heard a call to prayer and been moved by it, or because I have had my life illuminated in the pursuit of belief in that which I could not see. My days interrupted by prayer, five times, even though I wasn’t certain whom or what I believed in.

But, even beyond all of this, I return to “I Think This Is the Last Love Poem” because of its final ask: The poem doesn’t overly romanticize the emotion of love itself, but instead proposes a companionship that might aid in making the world less miserable. Even briefly. I love how eagerly the poem challenges those sanitized conventions of unblemished love that I hold at a distance. I keep knocking at the door of this poem because of the way it puts to language what it is to want someone—not to distract you from the burning world, but to make enduring it a little bit easier.

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**I Think This Is the Last Love Poem**

BEYZA OZER

When Arabella laughs it feels like
allah’s prayer in my heart

I look at her in light that
took many years to get here

& maybe that fixes all the bad
all the things that keep us awake at night

or maybe it reminds me of the future
which always keeps me awake at night

I hope I am making sense but look,
maybe this isn’t actually the last love poem

Maybe this is just the first & all the rest
were letters I was too scared to call letters

& now is the right time to tell her
about when I dreamed we were superheroes

except we called each other superhomos
& she had a purple cape that matched her suit

We made the world safer for queers
& punched transphobes in the throat

& Arabella, what I’m trying to say is
would you like to try to stop hating the world with me?
“HALOGEN LONELINESS DISAVOWAL.” I love this line by Gregg Bordowitz, from “April 23, 2018, Wednesday, 7:15–7:48 a.m.”—part of “Wake to Dread,” a series of poems and letters documenting the debris field of headlines and preoccupations that make up everyday life. *Halogen loneliness disavowal* speaks to my general mood, a pattern of moods, what Gregg describes in the letters as “morbid realism.” It’s the kind of feeling I get when I shake the Magic 8-Ball, and the floating 20-sided die replies, “Outlook not so good.” Gregg’s line resonates with an ongoing and uncanny experience of prolonged fatigue—dread, yes, but also alienation. The energy of the halogen light bulb is finite; it burns out too fast. Still, its glow makes me want to turn toward the past (a disavowal of the present) and listen to Joy Division’s “Isolation”—not because I want to dance, but because I am pissed off. I want to rally, I want to regress. At some point I decide to shave my head.

The ambient dread endemic to late-stage capitalism infuses the poem with a world-weary energy. The drive for maximum profit at the expense of human life infects everything, like “the virus.” It permeates our social relations and structures our silences: *This is how long your lunch break is. This is how many vacation hours you have accumulated. This is how much sick leave you’re allowed despite (or, rather, because of) the fact that you are now considered an “essential worker.”* And forget about sleep. What you can expect in its place is the siren sounded by the poem’s opening line: “awake alive nightmare slumber exhaust.”

As each of the poem’s ten-syllable lines oscillates between inventory and experience, inventory as experience—“Wake mister alarm phone set disgrace defeat”—I hear echoes of my own restlessness. I’m lonely, and I’m burnt out. These fragments are what’s left, the speaker seems to suggest. I, too, have forsaken verbs and forgotten how to speak in complete sentences. Since the shutdown 37 days ago, I feel so bombarded by experiences of language that I am having trouble processing and prioritizing information. ATM withdrawal receipts take on the same urgency as late-night text messages from friends in New York. What does it mean to prioritize my understanding of information over my understanding of my own feelings, when the truth is my feelings are information? (I’m reminded of Yvonne Rainer’s memoir *Feelings are Facts . . .*) I use the poem to help me tend to my inner coral reefs, and at daybreak, truth, desire.

In the wake of all that—and following a Zoom conversation with my therapist where I admit I am a demanding person who is both disinterested in and incapable of spelling out my actual desires—I’m returning to Gregg’s poem, attending to its time-stamped list of items. The specificity of some of its objects—“salt seed shavings,” “rain blossoms”—disarms me. Were I to begin every morning, as I imagine Gregg does, and create a poem fashioned of the arbitrary and indispensable artifacts that first come to mind, I might better recognize my desires, if not learn how to own them outright.
Awake alive nightmare slumber exhaust
Breath apparatus regularity
Pulmonologist cardiologist nurse
Disease alive care consistency drips
Rain blossoms green awake glass descriptions
Adjective noun verb mixtures salt seed shavings
Night baths heat soak bodies lover tangle
Sleep disturbance viscosity gas mask
Chlorine water disinfectant mop spread
ICU constancy attendant care
Halogen loneliness disavowal
Wake wait coral reefs plant assurances
Tides tithes lunar slander daybreak forecast
Spells cast fracture bones disintegration
Morning preparation endoscopy
Colonoscopy numbers reversal
Wake mister alarm phone set disgrace defeat
Numbness pins needles fairy-tale carpet
“here in a foreign place,
my thoughts of you sharpen”
RECENTLY, I’VE SOUGHT COMFORT in things that have been with me for a long time. I wear old clothing. I cook recipes from my childhood. And I keep circling back to the same long-loved poems.

Of all the poems I love, “9/9, Thinking of My Brothers East of the Mountains,” by the legendary Tang Dynasty poet Wang Wei, has been with me the longest, since before I was even born. It first found both of my parents in a grade-school classroom in Shandong, China—the “east of the mountain” referenced in the title—where, for a time, they were young classmates (I’m obsessed with this fact of their love story), and where they memorized the poem. Back then, it hadn’t yet been translated into English with such great care and attention by David Hinton, whose version is the most crystalline and beautiful one I’ve come across:

9/9, Thinking of My Brothers East of the Mountains

Each year on this auspicious day, alone and foreign here in a foreign place, my thoughts of you sharpen:

far away, I can almost see you reaching the summit,
dogwood berries woven into sashes, short one person.

After we moved to the United States, perhaps feeling lonelier and more foreign than ever, heartsick for the Shandong of their and my birth, my parents would, on occasion, recite the poem to me in the original Chinese. Much later in life, I would come across it—indeed, for the first time—on the day of my 30th anniversary in this country. The poem has perhaps always been auspicious for me.

Away from home during Chongyang Festival (the ninth day of the ninth lunar month in the title), the poem’s speaker reflects on another missed opportunity for gathering with loved ones by elegizing time itself. “Each year,” they are alone and foreign. The recurrence of this sorrow is an unwanted anniversary.

But in its potency, the traveler’s loneliness is also the source of the irressponsible vision in the poem’s second half. The space taken up by the speaker’s absence—both in the grammar of the line and the imagined scene on the summit—always makes me cry. This poem is my favorite example of remembrance as astral projection, as teleportation, overcoming distance. The speaker’s naming of their own absence transports them there into the image for us, the readers. It’s a bittersweet kind of reunion that poetry grants, one that is beholden to, as the poem says, an “almost.” Even the fantasy must reckon with the “almost,” the asymptote of longing.

For most of my life I’ve felt shades of “alone and foreign / here in a foreign place,” and current conditions have complicated the emotional implications of both “alone” and “foreign.” Perhaps I have never felt less foreign to myself. Though, to others, at this moment: never more. I have been the homesick traveler of Wang Wei’s poem as much as I have been the one holding space, unfailingly, for her return to the world.
THE POEM I HAVE BEEN REVISITING over and over during these unprecedented days is one by the Sumerian priestess Enheduanna, the earliest author whose name is known; it dates from the 23rd century BCE. That I am even able to directly engage work written nearly four and a half millennia before my birth is an occasion for profound wonder and humility. This poem, a hymn to the goddess Inanna, who presides over both love and war, is a praise song to unknowing. To sitting in mystery without trying to resolve it: “Lady of all the great rites, / Who can understand all that is yours?” (I’m pulling from Jane Hirshfield’s brilliant translation.) Today murderous certainty accosts us from every angle, and the performance of certainty in an acutely chaotic world creates acute suffering. A border is a performance of certainty about the sanctity of nations. Prisons, sanctions, wars—all performances of certainty in neolithic ideals of retributive justice. The cost of such certainties is immense: children in cages, for-profit carceral institutions, famine, endless war—billions of lives diminished or demolished. The cost of such certainty is our collective soul.

Enheduanna writes from exile, having been “cast out to the place of lepers,” that her “beautiful mouth knows only confusion.” She says, “Even my sex is dust.” In her words, I find that all of my doubt and baffle has a precedent. These days I feel so immobilizingly alone, terrified of everyone and everyone’s legion immutable certitudes. I can’t articulate how lucky it feels to read Enheduanna and find myself finally among. When I read her words, I can feel my lungs filling more fully. To be connected to this poet across 45 centuries, accompanied by her wonder, together in knowing nothing . . . it is a mercy, it is an actual miracle.

from The Hymn to Inanna

ENHEDUANNA

Translated by Jane Hirshfield

Lady of all powers,
In whom light appears,
Radiant one
Beloved of Heaven and Earth,
Tiara-crowned
Priestess of the Highest God,
My Lady, you are the guardian
Of all greatness.
Your hand holds the seven powers:
You lift the powers of being,
You have hung them over your fingers,
You have gathered the many powers,
You have clasped them now
Like necklaces onto your breast.

Like a dragon,
You poisoned the land—
When you roared at the earth
In your thunder,
Nothing green could live.
A flood fell from the mountain:
You, Inanna,
Foremost in Heaven and Earth.
Lady riding a beast,
You rained fire on the heads of men.
Taking your power from the Highest,
Following the commands of the Highest,
Lady of all the great rites,
Who can understand all that is yours?
In the forefront
Of the battle,
All is struck down by you—
O winged Lady,
Like a bird
You scavenge the land.
Like a charging storm
You charge,
Like a roaring storm
You roar,
You thunder in thunder,
Snort in rampaging winds.
Your feet are continually restless.
Carrying your harp of sighs,
You breathe out the music of mourning.

It was in your service
That I first entered
The holy temple,
I, Enheduanna,
The highest priestess.
I carried the ritual basket,
I chanted your praise.
Now I have been cast out
To the place of lepers.
Day comes,
And the brightness
Is hidden around me.
Shadows cover the light,
Drape it in sandstorms.
My beautiful mouth knows only confusion.
Even my sex is dust.

What once was chanted of Nanna,
Let it now be yours—
That you are as lofty as Heaven,
Let it be known!
That you are as wide as the Earth,
Let it be known!
That you devastate the rebellious,
Let it be known!
That you roar at the land,
Let it be known!
That you rain your blows on their heads,
Let it be known!
That you feast on corpses like a dog,
Let it be known!
That your glance is lifting toward them,
Let it be known!
That your glance is like striking lightning,
Let it be known!
That you are victorious,
Let it be known!
That this is not said of Nanna,
It is said of you—
This is your greatness.
You alone are the High One.

O my Lady,
Beloved of Heaven,
I have told your fury truly.
Now that her priestess
Has returned to her place,
Inanna’s heart is restored.
The day is auspicious,
The priestess is clothed
In beautiful robes,
In womanly beauty,
As if in the light of the rising moon.
The gods have appeared
In their rightful places,
The doorsill of Heaven cries “Hail!”
Praise to the destroyer endowed with power,
To my Lady enfolded in beauty.
Praise to Inanna.
AND I HAVE BEEN WONDERING about tenderness and touch and forms of caress and care during a time of physical isolation and social distancing. The physical distancing does, truly, feel social. The proliferation of screens is becoming too much, for me at least, to bear. Thinking about tenderness is felt in my flesh, makes me aware of and attentive to my breathing. Turns out, the thing Eric Garner was cultivating, at least according to Ross Gay’s imagination, is also the thing he most needed and was pleading to have: breath. To breathe. “[P]erhaps,” Gay says, “. . . with his very large hands, perhaps, in all likelihood, / he put gently into the earth / some plants.” The gentleness of the poem—its perhapses, its tentative nature, its hesitance—is itself a kind of breath and breathing, a series of pauses and pleas to tend to tenderness, to tend to tending, to be gentle likewise. I feel the need for tenderness, its cultivation and care, sharply in this moment of distance.

And this is why I have returned to this poem over and over again, the tenderness of planting flowers, the gentleness of reflection, the stillness that vibrates out for us to sense its possibility.

It blooms. The flower.

How do we hold on to tenderness in times of emotional turmoil and distress? A kind of softness and openness in moments of intensity? Plant things. It points to the otherwise than this, the plan, the to-come, the and.

Over the last year or so, I have been beginning my writings with the word and because it announces relation—connecting something that came before with that which will have come after the word, after the concept. And as a kind of soil in which things could be cultivated and cared for and tended to with tenderness and delight and pleasure, from which emerges life. I am looking for the tender, touching, caressive relation, the form of living and breathing that our collective and individual existence can take to sustain itself during a pandemic, during a biological fact that is being refracted through our racial hierarchies and other socially constructed categories of difference. I am looking for the and, the alternative to this normativity, for the otherwise possibility for life to emerge. This, too, is Eric Garner’s plea for us and again, to breathe.

To tend to and be tender with annuals and perennials and biennials and shrubs and bushes and seedlings and weeds and trees and trees and trees is not only about building the capacity to breathe; it is also about sensual range that the flesh feels and imagines, and being tender thus becomes the occasion for a community to come to gather, to gather around sight and touch and taste and smell and the sound of the rustling of the beautifully planted, gently placed lives.

Eric Garner lived and was murdered during the ongoing crisis of our terrible moment, this long moment of racialized violence and its history, which began in 1492 (if not before). To plant flowers during crisis. To plant flowers in a world that considers Black flesh dispensable, discardable, is to still have a plan and a hope and an idea for a world to come in which such flowers flourish and bloom and unfold to be smelled and touched and savored and seen and heard, in which such flowers are tended to, in which we tend to and touch and caress one another with care.

Sweet.

I have been meditating on this poem because I have begun a container garden. In this time of crisis. I want to grow things, to see things flower and unfurl daily, to see buds break from soil and begin to breathe. I want to be open to emerging from this with delight and softness.

Softness. It is the word I have been thinking about and through, a kind of tending in the direction of the social. Softness. A kind of ephemerality. Softness. A Blackqueerness that is joy. And perhaps then, too, this softness, being tended to and being tender with it, with me, with us, will be a fact that makes it easier for us all to breathe.
Is that Eric Garner worked for some time for the Parks and Rec. Horticultural Department, which means, perhaps, that with his very large hands, perhaps, in all likelihood, he put gently into the earth some plants which, most likely, some of them, in all likelihood, continue to grow, continue to do what such plants do, like house and feed small and necessary creatures, like being pleasant to touch and smell, like converting sunlight into food, like making it easier for us to breathe.
“tarnished, problematic, and certainly uneven—a we”
I FEEL MOST BLACK AT THE CENTER OF A GARDEN. For a short
time, that garden was in my old backyard in Brooklyn, where organic
kale and beets grew marvelously, bean pods shriveled on their vines,
and the clay-heavy earth surrounding my beds glittered green with
bottle shards. More often, it has been at the Morgan Family Farm in
Florida’s panhandle where, for an entire summer, I painted watercolors
to Alice Coltrane on the porch in front of my grandma’s fig tree.

Intimate contact with the earth and the ways it sustains life aids
in my healing from colonial wounds. Colonial power is anchored in
exploitations of land. This includes a methodic severance of our
experience of land from the practice of care it offers. “A literature is
taking shape,” wrote René Ménil in his 1948 piece “Let Poetry Go,”
as he walked his colonial friend through a visualization of his native
Martinican landscape, where the evening sun “[lit] a campfire at the
base of tree trunks sleek and no-doubt Sonorous.” Before the journey
could conclude, Ménil’s colonial friend “[leaves] silently, embarrassed,
on tiptoe, by an opportune path.” Faced with the description of a not-
yet-colonially-subjugated land, Ménil’s colonial friend experiences the
imposition of silence and embarrassment.

Relatedly, I feel shame and incoherence in the presence of certain
robust ecosystems—universities, hospitals, Dillard’s, the streets of any
suburban subdivision after dark. In the United States, these spaces
maintain their centrality through exploitation and violence, and
existing within them often requires reproductions of violence in which
land and what it bears become the means by which we subjugate one
another. I consider the purple-tipped asparagus in my shopping basket.
Picked where? And at what cost to whom? When I receive the earth in
this way, I’m pressured to understand concern for my own survival as
in tension with my ability to resist the exploitation of others.

Another practice of survival begins in the language light builds
across Ménil’s forest floor—through attention to what might disrupt
my fluency in the languages and tools of white supremacy. A literature
builds in the particular un-greening of mission figs, made surreal
through the fruit’s internalization of time and light, measured in
color and water, in the years of days my grandmother turned compost
and applied water to the roots. Measured in her belief that I would
hold them one day. A literature takes shape in my hands, cold in the
intergenerational dreaming of soil, where time metabolizes through
both horizontal and vertical horizons.

Like many, I question what values I’ve internalized through colonial
systems. This other language—this old, old literature that continues
to take shape through amorous contact between bodies—offers me a
collaborative practice of survival in which the value produced binds me
to others with affection rather than violence and disregard.

That summer I spent painting in front of the fig tree, my grandma
had been dead 12 years, and I could feel her as finely as the soft gray
hair she swept into the utilitarian bun of a woman who woke each
morning to mind land. I imagine there was—is—an exponential power
in the caretaking relationships in which her desires for a future resided
in the intersections of the human and nonhuman, our shared desire to
live and support life.
Let Poetry Go

RENÉ MÉNIL

Translated by Keith L. Walker

[. . .] But, colonial friend, I assure you and do believe me, I like you, charming character, for once again, I really want to lift the corner of the veil for you, just for one tiny second. But be careful that your sugary sweetened stomach does not heave in front of a scene prepared for a spectator other than yourself. You will come to understand just how many oceans separate us . . . A forest, next to Mount Pélée. The sun at this close of the day (you would not be able to endure the devouring light of midday) lights its campfire at the base of tree trunks sleek and no doubt sonorous. Sometimes the light comes forth in waves of fiery glimmers, sometimes, quietly, takes over the forest with an aborted light, yellow and infinitely subtle. At this moment one can hear, come from afar, from behind the trees that are moving, that are not moving, this melody, alternately muted and blaring, of Duke Ellington, the marvelous Mood Indigo. A sudden anxiety grips your heart and you turn your head sharply to the left, expecting the worst. In a clearing, up until then unnoticed, you glimpse a scene of prodigious beauty. Bathed in a living–dying reddish-yellow light and bathed also it seems in great ellingtonian chords, there a Caribbean grander than life amorously devours the enthralling object of its love . . .

Your heart, my dear colonial hare, cannot get used to this sublime spectacle, you feel that your presence is incongruous and you leave, silently, embarrassed, on tiptoe, by an opportune path.

And in the forest there lingers this exalting image of absolute love that before our eyes, the pure child eater of toys and sometimes lovers boldly realize . . .

• Get over not liking poetry.
One never loves that which does not deserve to be loved.
• . . . Beautiful as the encounter in the Antillean forest at the center of a clearing illuminated by the subtle bleeding light, of a cannibal and of woman of ash pale complexion.
• A literature is taking shape.
What we do not worry about is whether it pleases you or not. Who does not see that, for this literature, it would not be a propitious sign if it were pleasing to you, to your shadow ever-adorned in clouds of disinvolved? Martinican poetry will be cannibalistic. Or it will not be.

Tropiques, no. 5, April 1942
LAST WEEK I ATTENDED A SHIV A for my friend’s father, who, at 90, passed away from respiratory failure, just a few weeks after a bad fall. Unlike so many who are currently dying alone in hospitals or nursing homes, attended by medical personnel sheathed in identity-erasing PPE, my friend’s father was able to die at home with his wife and my friend by his side. The family sat shiva with the help of Zoom; more than 100 people attended from homes scattered across the globe. We could not bring food, hug, or hold hands with the bereaved. But we were able to find connection in shared loss, in the rabbi’s prayers and songs, and in the recounting of stories in celebration of a long and extraordinary life.

Like the prayers sung during the shiva, Ari Banias’s “Some Kind of We”—the opening poem in his debut collection, Anybody—has recently brought me comfort. The poem begins with the false allure of consolation: “These churchbells bong out / one to another in easy conversation / that wants to say / things are okay, / things are okay—/ but things, / they are not okay.” Our world is definitely not okay, and in the poem, the speaker admits he cannot trust the church bells with their grandiose and generic promise of well-being. Instead, he finds a more mundane reassurance in the knowledge that in almost every apartment and every house, there resides somewhere a stash or two of plastic bags. In this imperfect commonality, Banias locates a kind of solace. Though synthetic and toxic, the ordinary plastic bag says something, not about separateness and isolation, but about our connection to each other—that we exist as “tarnished, / problematic, and certainly uneven—a we.”

Here in Tucson, the morning trains call out to me like Banias’s church bells. I once loved the long, drawn-out sound of the horns as the trains passed through town, producing their reliable music. But today, I hear their thunderous repetition as a harbinger of danger. I do not trust their insistent commerce, their call to movement and capital, no matter the cost or the death—all of which echoes the brassy propaganda of the president’s daily briefings and Twitter feed. Now, even the memory of the horns feels threatening. Banias’s “not okay” was our now, long before this paused and shuttered present.

In the midst of our quarantines, I, like Banias, ask myself: What reminders do we have of dailiness and ongoing life, of our connection to those we cannot touch? I, too, have a stash of problematic plastic bags, not unlike my neighbors’ or my friends’ a few blocks or a few states away. On my walk this morning I witnessed the saguaros’ insistent May blooms and a pair of quail scuttling past with a new brood of chicks. Two days ago, I spoke to a student living alone across the country about a poem. Last week, while gazing into that grid of tiny Zoom boxes, I listened to friends and family speak of life and loss, and felt the common we of our mourning, our tears, and the long reach of our love.
Some Kind of We

ARI BANIAS

These churchbells bong out
one to another in easy conversation
that wants to say
things are okay,
things are okay—
but things,
they are not okay, and I can’t
trust a churchbell, though I would like to
the way I can trust
that in this country, in houses,
apartments, there somewhere is a cabinet or drawer
where it’s stashed, the large plastic bag
with slightly smaller mashed-together
plastic bags inside; it is overflowing, and we keep adding,
bringing home more than we need, we should have
to weave a three-piece suit of plastic bags
a rug, a quilt, a bed of bags even, anything
more useful than this collection this excess
why am I writing about plastic bags, because
it is this year in this country and I am this person
with this set of meanings on my body and the majority of what I have,
I mean, what I literally
have the most of in my apartment, more than plants,
more than forks and spoons and knives combined, or chairs
or jars or pens or socks, is plastic bags, and I
am trying to write, generally and specifically,
through what I see and what I know,
about my life (about our lives?),
if in all this there can still be—tarnished,
problematic, and certainly uneven—a we.
EARLY IN MAY, I ASKED ANDREA REXILIUS to send me an audio recording of her poem “Afterworld” so that I could listen to it on my ritual walks. Though she lives nearby, we've obeyed distances since the pandemic arrived. Having her voice in my headphones while wandering the neighborhood is a way to bring her close to me. I wanted to amble through this oracular poem, to enter its soundscape and measure the edges of its precinct with my movement.

It takes about six minutes to listen to the recording, which resembles a descriptive index of selves, vegetal and animal:

. . . a creamy amber yellow self with a lime throat constricted; a semblance of ash in the month-of-the-ash-self; the growth of grass, the first witches of the year, the first bees; a creamy yellow self swallowing pond stones to tenderly sprout a stock of the new self; a golden flower self; a fire revelation self of being the birth-tree, the silver fir, the unborn sea; the unborn . . .

Here are the many selves we inhabit, the ones we lose, or get lost in, or loosen from our wrists like a balloon. Even though there's something elegiac about a record of names—like a bede-roll of the dead to be recited for solemn remembrance—this poem isn't simply a static registry of selves to mourn or celebrate. There’s a vibratory motion here. It travels far back (through our present Anthropocene) to reach some primordial place of molten earth and first growth. Still, it's not only made of backward glances. “Afterworld” also glimmers with the flares of a future place, alive with its own first greenness that emerges after a calamity.

It comforts me how “Afterworld” becomes a spell in the ear. With its syntactical repetitions, its recombinations of colors and images, the poem attains the rhythms of incantation. Who knows if anything is enacted or protected, but I sense that part of the self will be vouchsafed every time I listen to the poem through the tumult of this present moment. After all, the poem is governed by the “after.” The *after* world of this poem isn’t some familiar and heavenly hereafter into which we would be saved. Rather, the after world is a weird vision that an oracle might offer, foreshadowing new life:

. . . a light orange self in the semblance of abysmal fields at night; a scarlet red self with a yellow throat which supplies a carrot orange self an olive green throat; an avowed self; a self as new sentience

No punctuation mark closes this poem that opens up into possibilities beyond our time.
A very light lemon self; a self of replication; a self of galactic hills of the subterranean womb; a creamy amber yellow self with a lime throat constricted; a semblance of ash in the month-of-the-ash-self; the growth of grass, the first witches of the year, the first bees; a creamy yellow self swallowing pond stones to tenderly sprout a stock of the new self; a golden flower self; a fire revelation self of being the birth-tree, the silver fir, the unborn sea; the unborn; a creamy white self with light green throat asking clouds to mother, then weather; a velvety black wine red self licking mulch; an ivy-twined, fir cone scarred self, the myth of which in return; in reference to the first day of the year, the first reference dedicated to the cult of the flower corpse returned in a boat, floated down the Rhone to Alyscamps at Arles; an over-examined self, a pale amethyst violent self with a pale yellow throat of wasps; a self of bees and eighteenth century antiquary; a written self, the “lofty one” transcribed as a self wound, a woven self with a green throat with stones in the swollen thorax, stones in the split spine; stones in the lingering of the gut; a pink or poppy red self and a yellow green throat channeling pre-Columbian bees; a lavender pink self in the early morning ash-groves, in the early morning pandemonium, fading until the lavender remains on all edges; green throat becoming greener internal wilderness. A subdued self, pricked into cactus seeds. A luminous pink decaying self; a pale self burning away; is the third tree; is the third tree composted; is the third tree in the moss. A creamy lemon self emergent as a yellow green throat of trees. Very pale lemon self with yellow forested throat; elegiac self; dark red self with sorrowful green throat, plucks berries from the mouths of birds; it is late for the nameless self; onn; ura; a self lighted on the hills in return; a coronation; a coronation violet self with green throat; formed into ferns; no reference to her own forest; an attractive melon pink self threaded, overturned log self of sounding forth; a bee-loud glade selfishness. A deeply seamed red and medium yellow bicolor or polychrome selfless self, the orange self; a rose pink self with white midribs; self of acumen; self of carrying forth; a clear golden yellow scared self, free blooming self; a bright light yellow self; resonating sanctity; a coral amber peach self with a yellow green throat listless and listening to a pink self with a green throat slit; a free blooming self; a self of the ingrained field of sleet-ing; a newly sprouted self, deep yellow self with cream midrib and terrestrial longing for uprooted golden flowers; a purplish red self at the close of the mouth; a tiny melon pink self with a green throat which has become fir-tipped; a self under the tongue; a self the blend of dusty rose forked tongues; an orange yellow self with a golden throat; an orange yellow self with an orange throat full of deep water; a dark black red self buzzing with a green throat harvesting mulch hunted by elk; gathering stones to heave into herself; a
clear blue lavender blue self with a lime throat; a light orange self in the semblance of abysmal fields at night; a scarlet red self with a yellow throat which supplies a carrot orange self an olive green throat; an avowed self; a self as new sentience
“In the exhalations of Americans there is a crumbling empire”
AS MANY COMMUNITIES ARE RISING UP to challenge the social and political conditions of Black people in the United States and around the world, I have been thinking about a sequence of poems by Lucille Clifton that appeared in her first book, Good Times. I say “sequence,” though it isn’t marked that way; the nine poems just appear one after the other. In the voices of two boys—tyrone and willie b (Clifton rarely uses capitalization in the text of her poems)—Clifton recounts riots and looting that took place in Buffalo, New York, during the summer of 1967. That was the so-called “long, hot summer,” when, in response to the economic and political disenfranchisement of Black communities, hundreds of riots erupted in urban centers across the country. By writing in persona, Clifton vigorously forgoes any claim to objectivity. Moreover, she emphasizes the embodied experience of political action by choosing for her personae not adults—who might have understood the sociopolitical factors that gave rise to the riots, or their place in the larger movement for civil rights—but rather two boys.

Each boy speaks four times. It is not clear whether they ever interact with each other, nor how or if they are related. Each speaks to a different way of experiencing the uprisings: While tyrone is among friends and comrades, and his experience seems to be mainly one of companionship and community—“we happy together oh / we turning each other on / in this damn war”—willie b is on an internal journey. Not only is he mostly physically alone (for example, absent the helping hands of a friend or comrade, he brings his wagon along to try to loot a TV out of a smashed store window), but his dialogue is internal, his concerns personal. The two characters’ musings intersect briefly when the governor of New York dispatches baseball hero Jackie Robinson, who integrated the major leagues, to try to cool tempers. Tyrone dismisses Robinson’s accomplishments as irrelevant (“if we buffalo soldiers was sports fans / we sure would cheer”) while willie b, being younger, doesn’t even know of Robinson. Willie b’s hero is Muhammad Ali, who, in 1967, was a subversive anti-war, anti-government figure, an admirer of Malcolm X, a member of the Nation of Islam, and a proponent of Black Power—a very different kind of role model to invoke during a race riot.

Each boy’s sequence ends with his own declaration of personhood. Tyrone is caught out in the riots by the police. We do not know his fate, but as the poem ends, he is being tear-gassed and his eyes are burning. Here, in the closing lines of “tyrone (4),” is a rare instance in which Clifton deploys capitalization: “they see the tear gas / burn my buffalo soldiers eyes / they got to say / Look yonder / Tyrone / Is.” At the end of this sequence, in a moment of severe degradation, capitalization—of “Look,” which supplants the passive “see” and demands the reader’s engagement; of Tyrone’s name; and, finally, of the verb signifying existence—powerfully asserts Tyrone’s subjectivity and personhood.

Willie b’s final poem ends with a similar move, as well as an admission that he participated in the destruction by arson of a local business, “the dew drop inn.” After telling us that his mother once picked up a white man there, he says, “look I am the one what burned down the dew drop inn / everybody say i’m a big boy for my age / me / willie b / son.” Clifton uses the line break here practically as punctuation. Where his mother earlier insisted that he had no business out in the riots because his father (“the mother fucker,” willie b calls him, at once description and rebuke) was white, the “me” and the “son” on their own lines foreground willie b’s claim to independence as a Black child.

In these eight sparse poems, Clifton creates an epic. There is no epic conclusion to this summer of resistance, though. The sequence ends with a final short poem, called “buffalo war,” which denies any sense of victory or accomplishment in the so-called war:

```
war over
everybody gone home
nobody dead
everybody dying
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tyrone (1)

on this day
the buffalo soldiers
have taken up position
corner of jefferson and sycamore
we will sack the city
will sink the city
seek the city

willie b (1)

mama say
i got no business out here
in the army
cause i ain't but twelve
and my daddy was
a white man
the mother fucker

tyrone (2)

the spirit of the buffalo soldiers
is beautiful
how we fight on down to main street
laughing and shouting
we happy together oh
we turning each other on
in this damn war

willie b (2)

why i would bring a wagon into battle
is
a wagon is a help to a soldier
with his bricks
and when he want to rest
also
today is mama's birthday
and i'm gone get her that tv
out of old steinhart's store

tyrone (3)

the governor has sent out
jackie robinson
and he has sprinted from center
and crouched low
and caught the ball
(what a shortstop)
and if we buffalo soldiers was sports fans
we sure would cheer
mama say
he was a black hero
a champion like
muhammad ali
but i never heard of it
being not born till 1955

willie b (3)

i'm the one
what burned down the dew drop inn.
yes
the jew do exploit us in his bar
but also
my mama
one time in the dew drop inn
tried for a white man
and if he is on a newspaper
or something
look I am the one what burned down the dew drop inn
everybody say i'm a big boy for my age
me
willie b
son

willie b (4)

we made it through the swamps
and we'll make it through the dogs
leaving our white man’s names
and white man’s traditions
and making some history
and they see the tear gas
burn my buffalo soldiers eyes
they got to say
Look yonder
Tyrone
Is

buffalo war

war over
everybody gone home
nobody dead
everybody dying
EVERY MONDAY AT 9:30 PM, I have a poetry chavruta with my adopted zaydee, Leslie. When we began our chavruta two years ago, Leslie—whom I first met when I enrolled in his literature seminar in college—was planning a class on the elegy and proposed that we devote our studies to the form. I agreed, and we’ve more or less stayed true to course. In early March, after spending three months with Jericho Brown’s *The Tradition*, we turned to the work of Mark Doty. Though Doty looms large in the canon of AIDS literature, I’d read him only sporadically, and I hoped his work could provide tools, in our new coronavirus reality, for understanding viral epidemics and their accompanying mass loss of life. We decided to study *Atlantis*, the 1995 collection Doty wrote following his lover’s death due to AIDS-related complications.

Our first session on Doty took place in my first week of working from home in Durham, North Carolina, and of Leslie teaching via Zoom in New Haven, Connecticut. Although we’d always conducted our chavruta on video calls, it felt strange, after a day of work meetings, to again use the medium for social reasons. Even beyond this, I felt an uncomfortable presence hovering over our conversation, which only intensified in the following weeks as the coronavirus death toll rose. Leslie’s wife Susan has lived with Alzheimer’s for years, and she remains alive because of Leslie’s devotion and the support of a team of at-home caretakers. But now what saves Susan’s life doubles as a threat: Not only is each caretaker a potential risk of infection for Susan and for Leslie—who himself is a diabetic in his mid-seventies—but both Susan and Leslie, in turn, present a risk to the caretakers’ health. As the weeks passed, I’d hold my breath as the video call loaded, anxiously waiting for Leslie to report that everyone was “all clear.”

A month into *Atlantis*, Leslie and I read what is now my favorite poem in the collection, “Wreck.” The wreck in question is a beached fishing trawler, long abandoned on the Provincetown shore. The poem, which opens with the trawler’s description, moves swiftly into a meditation on decay and permanence:

```
something must hold,
    some chambered wreck

must fill and empty daily,
    seawater pouring like the future
— I need this evidence —
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When we read the poem, Leslie and I were both taken by the line “—I need this evidence—,” whose em dashes provide, through their exclamatory insistence, a sense of desperation as the poem comes to a close. And like any good chavruta, Leslie and I offered divergent readings.

I read the line as emanating from the speaker’s ongoing wreck: the death of a lover, the destruction of a community, and a gnawing doubt about the possibility of a future. I heard the desperation in the line as a plea—or a prayer—for evidence that a stable future would one day supplant the speaker’s loss-saturated present. Leslie, ever the optimist, read the line as arriving from that very future, where the speaker now reflects on the metaphorical wreck after the storm has passed. In Leslie’s reading, the future is guaranteed, and the evidence that the trawler provides is that life can and will go on—altered, but a life nonetheless.

Three months into quarantine, I continue to worry about Leslie, and I still wait anxiously, each week, to hear him report his “all clear.” And in the past two months, as the death toll has reached a number I find nearly impossible to comprehend, I haven’t changed my mind about my reading. But if Leslie’s optimism has taught me anything, it’s that I can find comfort in my interpretation, while also praying for the day when I can read, with him and with all those I love, his version of Doty’s line.
Wreck

MARK DOTY

This drowned trawler’s
rested comfortably
on the tide flats for years,

filled and emptied
like some legendary storehouse.
High tide, up close,

you can see from the wharf
red portholes looming up—
windows observing us

from another, less mortal element?
It’s the shadowy heart,
today, of a triangle

of white boats, sun-lashed
and nodding; its broken profile
lends depth to their lightness,

substance to their grace.
This boat’s pickled in salt,
but preserved, I think,

by sheer persistence;
some things have such a will
to be themselves

they don’t take to decay,
even wave-beaten and scoured
by seekers of salvage

and souvenir. I love this evidence.
Ghost, it is more stubborn
than live things. Ruin,

it lasts, though the bay’s
huge indifference laves what might,
should, at any moment, cave in,

dissolve—what must, in any tempest,
scatter the shore in unrecognizable
fragments. It doesn’t, hasn’t,

I want to say won’t:
something must hold,
some chambered wreck

must fill and empty daily,
seawater pouring like the future
—I need this evidence—

into the hulk which admits
and releases and keeps
its grip on the shore.
LATE IN THE AFTERNOON on Wednesday, June 10th, in Miami, I watched as someone sprayed red paint across a stone face, a statue of Christopher Columbus—the man who, in 1492, was offered patronage by Spanish royalty, commissioned to discover a new path to India to expand access to trade routes. His fanatic dreams of a return to the Roman empire fueled mass enslavement and the near-extinction of Indigenous peoples in the Caribbean, while his journey accelerated a global shift toward Christian European hegemony, an epoch of colonial profit and domination we continue to suffer under. More than 500 years later, I observed in awe and quiet admiration as a hammer and sickle and “George Floyd” were left emblazoned on the statue of the deranged Italian colonizer who raped a “New World” into order. George Floyd was lynched less than a month ago—a cop kneeling on his neck for nearly ten minutes while others looked on.

Shortly after, police rushed the crowd, drove over the limbs of people—some as young as 18—and took protesters into custody, where the police interrogated them repeatedly and locked them in cold holding cells for 12 to 14 hours. These protestors, the police claimed in a press release, were “violent.” Later, City Council members, mainstream media outlets, and the mayor all called the protestors “violent,” too.

Violence, in the rhetoric of a police force defending the interests and sensibilities of the ruling class, often obscures so thoroughly, one might not note the blood in the soil, the blood in the water, the atmospheric brutality that enables America. Decolonial violence, in contrast with the continuum of colonial state violence in the shadow of 1492, dramatically, undeniably, upends the world order that Columbus’s vision forecasted—leading to what Frantz Fanon called “the creation of new men.”

When someone tears down a monument to Columbus—or when colonized and enslaved people cut the necks of the white masters who believed their power to be sacred and ordained—they demonstrate that white supremacy is not an impenetrable force. The chaotic periods of decolonial violence, then, are useful, a “cleansing” weapon of the terrorized. A righteous incoherency.

This is to say, to abhor and condemn violence without regard to who wields it, and to what end—to refuse to distinguish between destruction of property and a knee on a neck—is to deny the existence of totalizing violence in the world as is, and to be dishonest about what will be required in order to make the world anew.

Few poets capture the visceral and stunning contradictions of violence better than Etel Adnan. I return often to her epic poem The Arab Apocalypse in particular. Originally published in French and translated into English in 1989 by Adnan, The Arab Apocalypse is part surrealist manifesto, part text of witness to the horrors of war in Lebanon. Adnan does not search for innocence, nationalism, or coherence. Rather, in the rubble of Arabs killing other Arabs, in the rubble of Israeli forces bombing and arming Arabs killing other Arabs to undermine Palestinian resistance, in the rubble of massacres and self-defense, she forges a new language:

XXXVI from The Arab Apocalypse

In the dark irritation of the eyes there is a snake hiding
In the exhalations of Americans there is a crumbling empire
In the foul waters of the rivers there are Palestinians
OUT OUT of its borders pain has a leash on its neck
In the wheat stalks there are insects vaccinated against bread
In the Arabian boats there are sharks shaken with laughter
In the camel’s belly there are blind highways
OUT OUT of TIME there is spring’s shattered hope
In the deluge on our plains there are no rains but stones

The violence of modernity, the violence of capitalist production and primitive accumulation, the violence of alliances with imperial actors at the expense of kinship: All harrow and inform the contemporary incidents of Adnan’s Apocalypse—these parameters, these harms, this context cannot be wished away.

Adnan’s naming of a crumbling American empire, hundreds of years of pain held back on a leash, feels particularly visceral here and now. There are so many pains to name; subdued for the mythology of a nation. But the leash grows thinner. “OUT OUT,” Adnan commands in grief. OUT OUT. Instructions to escape, or a premonition of violent endings before the new can begin. Whether or not the new will begin—
and whose rubric of new it will be—will depend on the people. I hope for the children who pick up the stones and throw them at tanks, until the rains come.

In a time of uprising, the rebel poets must cultivate a righteous and meditative incoherency. Not in the legible institutions that insist we neatly describe our subjective diversity allotment. Not in the academy of flammable contracts. But with the people, in all their obscene contradictions, fumbling toward an otherwise, in and out of the streets.
“repair a world or build a new one inside my body”
I WAS 11 YEARS OLD the summer my big sister came home with Tracy Chapman’s first CD. To this day, when I hear the opening notes of “Fast Car,” I feel like I’m overhearing someone else’s music, remembering a memory—not even mine—rather than an event. A decade earlier, when our family left Iran to live in the United States, I was only a toddler, barely aware of anything outside our home, and she was already a six-year-old kid, homesick for one world and navigating first grade in another. Periodically, over the years, she’d fall very hard for something—an album, say, or a way of dressing or talking—and I’d take note of her tastes as markers on a path to being cool. “Fast Car” was like that. She’d grow moody and quiet at Chapman’s wounded, rueful refrain, “I had a feeling that I belonged,” while I, not really knowing what her silence meant, merely had a feeling that I’d had that feeling.

That same song appears briefly in Solmaz Sharif’s extraordinary poem “Master Film,” set in 1988, the year “Fast Car” was released. I share a few of the poem’s touchstones: the song, of course, and also the basic contours of an immigration story. But beyond those glancing connections (both of which give way to just as many differences), I’m drawn to the way the poem, like Chapman’s song, summons intimate feelings over vast distances, both spatial and temporal, measuring the pain those distances have inflicted. Perhaps I turn to the poem now because the pain it conjures can also feel like contact, and it’s contact I crave: with a sister I haven’t hugged in four months, with parents whose home we haven’t entered—and when will we?—in much longer.

The distances in Sharif’s poem are diasporic. At the poem’s outset, the speaker recalls herself at age four, living in Alabama. Her family has come from Iran to live in the United States, and her parents are out of sight, trying to make a living:

. . . my mother mostly gone
and elsewhere and wondering
about my dad, my baba, driving a cab
in Poughkeepsie, lifting lumber in Rochester, thirtysomething
and pages of albums killed,
entire rows of classrooms
disappeared

The speaker sits on her “great grandmother’s lap.” From there, she thinks of her mother, who is nannying and attending school; her mother thinks of her father, working a thousand miles away; behind her father loom the ghosts of a generation of classmates, halfway around the world, killed in the Iran–Iraq war. The child sits at the center of concentric circles, each rippling out farther from her position, each growing fainter, until the last, which reaches Iran, dissolves into absence. Snug in her great-grandmother’s lap, she is “singing” her mother “home,” attempting, via the magical thinking of childhood, to cinch those circles tight.

The child at the center of the poem cannot really know what the father out along its edges is feeling. But his soundtrack, “Fast Car”—a young person’s song that is also a weary song, a song about both leaving a life behind and making a new one, a song about the cruel optimism of American life—gives us some indication. Memory here is shifting and itinerant; each of the poem’s geographic points locates a vantage from which the family’s experience will look and feel different.

Sharif’s title, “Master Film,” suggests that behind that diffuse array of selves and perspectives there exists an authoritative account—indeed, that the poem itself might be that account. But when that father, “downing Bud Light by the Hudson / and listening to ‘Fast Car,’” is recorded by a friend—his image delivered back to his family—the poem reveals itself, in its second half, to be not a verifiable record but something more vital, a living archive of feelings otherwise lost: “my baba on VHS / interviewed by a friend in New York, his hair / black as mine is now.” A “thirtysomething” father and his grown daughter are brought together, with the help of a taped interview, in a dreamlike present tense that exists only in the poem.

The film is at once a record of distance and a form that makes intimacy possible. The poet and her father meet in each other’s absence; their meeting becomes a kind of melancholic presence. If that father’s hair is now (in the moment of the poem’s enunciation) gray, there on the tape it was still “black as mine is now”; the grown child and her young father meet as peers. There, too, on the tape, he sees the young daughter from whom he has been kept apart. The same friend who would bring the VHS tape to the young girl has brought her photograph to him. In the poem’s final lines, she looks at him, decades ago, looking at a picture of her—and the experience for both of them, then and now, is rending:
and on the video our friend shows baba a picture of me and asks how do you feel when you see Solmaz?
and baba saying turn the camera off then turn off the camera and then

can you please look away I don’t want you to see my baba cry

I have tried teaching this poem a few times, and I’ve discovered that I can’t read these lines aloud without my own eyes filling with tears. In answer to the question, “how do you feel when you see Solmaz?,” the father can give only his refusal to answer. His refusal becomes, in the poem’s last, unitalicized line, his daughter’s refusal, offered to us. That refusal is the measure of what must be denied in order for the poem to live.

my mother around that blue porcelain,
my mother nannying around the boxed grits and just-add-water pantry of the third richest family in Alabama,
my mother at school on Presbyterian dime and me
on my great grandmother’s lap singing
her home, my mother mostly gone
and elsewhere and wondering
about my dad, my baba, driving a cab
in Poughkeepsie, lifting lumber in Rochester, thirtysomething
and pages of albums killed,
entire rows of classrooms
disappeared, my baba downing Bud Light by the Hudson
and listening to “Fast Car,” my baba on VHS
interviewed by a friend in New York, his hair
black as mine is now, I’m four and in Alabama, I see him
between odd jobs in different states,
and on the video our friend shows baba a picture
of me and asks how do you feel when you see Solmaz?
and baba saying turn the camera off then turn off the camera and then
can you please look away I don’t want you to see my baba cry
MY CALENDAR has been blank for four months. In March, after the shelter-in-place order was given for Ohio, my journal entries, to-do lists, and daily schedules stopped. Though the days in quarantine have not been empty, I’ve been unable to bear keeping records of the time. What would they be but catalogues of panic and rage and ceaseless domesticity? Every entry would start the same way: People are dying; the remainder would be a tally of homeschool lessons, college papers, and recipes. The only reminder I’ve left myself, a task still undone, is a sticky note on which I scrawled write a will before calling my brother to ask if he would care for my son if my partner and I died.

During this time, I’ve returned over and over to “Keeping Quiet,” Alastair Reid’s translation of Pablo Neruda’s poem “A callarse.” The poem opens with a simple collaborative instruction—“Now we will count to twelve and all keep still”—and proceeds to describe the revelations that might be found in communal quietude. In the first weeks of quarantine, as traffic slowed outside and my family stayed inside, it seemed the whole country had entered the collective stillness Neruda describes as being “without rush, without engines” in a “sudden strangeness.”

In these past few months, we have left our house so little that animals ventured closer. Wrens tucked dried grasses into the wheel wells of our car, seven deer appeared one morning on the lawn, and a pair of robins built a nest in the leafless rose of Sharon outside our back door. In April, my son and I watched from the kitchen window as one of the robins sat in the nest through two nights of freezing rain. “Do birds ever get lonely?” my son asked. I said I didn’t know. Two weeks later, the robins suddenly disappeared, leaving behind three bright blue eggs. We read that birds will abandon a nest that is unsafe for their babies, even if they’ve already laid eggs. In our confinement, we’ve become more watchful of pain we’ve caused and pain we’ve felt, like the fishermen in Neruda’s poem who “would not harm whales” and the “man gathering salt / who would look at his hurt hands.” We wondered if the robins left because of us.

The stillness summoned in Neruda’s poem is not rest or ease, but a space for deep attention to disquiet, a silence so transformative that even wars might stop. Neruda writes:

If we were not so single-minded
about keeping our lives moving,
and for once could do nothing,
perhaps a huge silence
might interrupt this sadness
of never understanding ourselves
and of threatening ourselves with death.

I first turned to the poem in search of solace as schools and offices closed, but with each rereading I’ve understood better that the poem’s quiet does not directly parallel the abrupt suspension brought on by the pandemic. Instead, the poem offers an urgent portrait of what could happen if people would listen to the unrest that quiet makes audible. As in Neruda’s poem, the disruption of quarantine offers people the opportunity to “understand ourselves” and pay attention to the brutal inequities in this country that the pandemic and protests against anti-Blackness have so plainly laid bare. When I read the poem again now, I see a vision of the true reckoning that is possible in this country as the history of undeniable cruelty and pain is exposed in hospitals, street corners, viral videos, statistics, and best-selling books—an inventory of the ways people are “threatening ourselves with death.”

Now, my neighbors are gathering again in backyards, in bars, and in pools. They say they want to return to normal, they want to get back to regular life—but normal was never safe for everyone, and the regular lives of some have long made the lives of others unsafe and insecure. Even the robins know not to return to the nest they abandoned. Surely, by now, they have built a new home in stronger branches. At the end of Neruda’s poem, the reader is not returned to the past or snapped out of silence. Instead, the speaker “counts up to twelve” again and leaves the reader alone in the stillness. I too want to be quiet, to pay attention to the rumble of each other’s sadness until we are all truly changed by it.
Now we will count to twelve
and we will all keep still.

For once on the face of the earth,
let's not speak in any language;
let's stop for one second,
and not move our arms so much.

It would be an exotic moment
without rush, without engines;
we would all be together
in a sudden strangeness.

Fishermen in the cold sea
would not harm whales
and the man gathering salt
would look at his hurt hands.

Those who prepare green wars,
wars with gas, wars with fire,
victory with no survivors,
would put on clean clothes
and walk about with their brothers
in the shade, doing nothing.

What I want should not be confused
with total inactivity.
Life is what it is about;
I want no truck with death.

If we were not so single-minded
about keeping our lives moving,
and for once could do nothing,
perhaps a huge silence
might interrupt this sadness
of never understanding ourselves
and of threatening ourselves with death.
Perhaps the earth can teach us
as when everything seems dead
and later proves to be alive.

Now I'll count up to twelve
and you keep quiet and I will go.
LAUREL CHEN

CAMERON AWKWARD-RICH’S “Cento Between the Ending and the End” has graced my bedside for over a year now. I fell in love with this poem when I first encountered it months ago as a feature on Academy of American Poets’ Poem-a-Day. I copied it by hand onto a torn-out sheet of notebook paper and taped it to the wall beside my bed; it’s the first thing I read when I wake. A cento is a collage poem comprised entirely of lines by other poets, and in a “queerly brimming” gesture toward his kin, Awkward-Rich explains—in a note that accompanies the poem—that he sourced his lines from works by literary heroes and loved ones, “[a]ll of whom have made for me a world and for whom I wish the world.”

Lately, I’ve been sitting with the words of abolitionists Derecka Purnell and Ruth Wilson Gilmore, who invite us to imagine not simply the absence of the carceral state, but the presence of life-affirming systems. In the tender patchwork of Awkward-Rich’s cento, I find a similar invitation to imagine a place where the speaker and their loved ones are alive and well—a world of Black, queer, trans, marginally gendered thriving. When the speaker describes the “choice” to “repair a world or build / a new one inside my body,” I catch glimpses of an abolitionist future: the possibility of a new world cultivated through care. In the gathering of beloved lines, Awkward-Rich makes anew from what has been, creating another world where this one ends by picking up the pieces already there. We already have everything we need.

This poem’s title encourages me to recognize the difference between “the Ending” and “the End”—that the ending of this world is not a totalizing end to all life; rather, the ending of the world as we know it is an active engagement, a necessary condition for the creation of a new world in its wake. Like other acts of abolitionist imagination, Awkward-Rich’s cento is a study in what can be reconstituted from what already is. In this moment, when I struggle to visualize what a world without policing looks like, I turn toward the communal space of this poem. I read the lines and think of Ruth Wilson Gilmore speaking of freedom as a place, abolition as geography:

it is still alive gathered
at the lakeside
like constellations

On a recent webinar, Angela Davis stated that trans people offer a blueprint for abolition, as we’ve already shown the world how to abolish the gender binary—a system that cis people previously couldn’t imagine their lives without. When I hear someone I love call me by my name, I feel something close to freedom—something like “the body whole bright- / winged brimming.” In a world predicated on anti-Blackness, racial capitalism, Indigenous genocide, and gendered violence, the lives of trans people—especially Black trans people—point us toward futures where we are all alive and free, a world without prisons, borders, or police.

Abolitionist Mariame Kaba speaks of hope as a discipline; each morning that I wake and read this cento, I feel more closely attuned to an abolitionist present and future. To riff on a line from Toni Morrison: These days I try to do what I can from where I am. June was Pride, and the queerest thing I did all month was write letters to queer kin incarcerated in Texas. I have no way of knowing if my pen pal has read my letter—I won’t know until I receive mail back. In California, I joined thousands virtually across the state calling on the governor to grant mass clemency to people incarcerated in his prisons and detention centers. I water my houseplants, call my loved ones, and drop off ingredients and meals for friends from a six-foot distance. “Sometimes you don’t die / when you’re supposed to,” and today I am alive and feel that another world is possible. Today I choose care, again and again, as a way of building another future. Beloveds, bloom how we must—“wild / until we are free.”
Sometimes you don’t die
when you’re supposed to
& now I have a choice
repair a world or build
a new one inside my body
a white door opens
into a place queerly brimming
gold light so velvet-gold
it is like the world
hasn’t happened
when I call out
all my friends are there
everyone we love
is still alive gathered
at the lakeside
like constellations
my honeyed kin
honeyed light
beneath the sky

a garden blue stalks
white buds the moon’s
marble glow the fire
distant & flickering
the body whole bright-winged brimming
with the hours
of the day beautiful
nameless planet. Oh
friends, my friends—
bloom how you must, wild
until we are free.
“If I could just leave the old things to their trembling”
A FRIEND ASKS, “How are you?”

I say, “I don’t know.” I say that I am trying to make sense of, that I am trying to figure out, what new words/worlds are being put in place. Even as I must focus on particular events—police murders, monuments to white supremacy finally coming down, ongoing mass protest, death from the virus, the threat of mass evictions—I am also trying to pull back that focus so I might try to understand, more broadly, what is being contested fiercely and what is being imagined differently.

I find myself struggling to concentrate, struggling to find words to speak and to write. So much is in the air, so much is at stake. I tell my friend that this shifting focus has left me feeling fuzzy around the edges, indefinite and suspended. I feel light and insubstantial, heavy, grief-filled and hopeful—though that hope is provisional and waning, while the grief seems, somehow, definite and ongoing.

My friend tells me that the first cluster of adjectives (fuzzy, indefinite, suspended) makes them think of clouds and of my frequent photos of clouds. I started taking those photos to remind myself to breathe, and to look up and out. The clouds make them think of what, but also how, clouds hold and release.

Hold and Release; word-world.

This is a strange and difficult time, one that feels, to me, like multiple times being lived at once. I’ve lived part of these past several months alongside a part of the past, which means that places, objects, people have been insistently returning to me, sometimes in dreams—waking and sleeping—and only rarely in nightmares.

Some of what returns are things I thought I would never forget. But now, as they replay in my dreams, I recognize that I’d forgotten what I, at some earlier time, had thought would always be right there, on the surface of things, on the skin, touchable and tender. Dream and return.

In the midst of all of this feeling, I’ve been sitting with Canisia Lubrin’s shattering poem *The Dyzgraph²st*. Lubrin works with and at what survives TransAtlantic slavery, that disaster of modernity, its ongoing effects. She writes the poem, she specifies in the book’s dedication, “for the impossible citizens of the ill world.” Living in this ill world, this impossible citizen is holding her book close.

In the book’s title, the I of *The Dyzgraph²st* is replaced by the superscripted x. In the poem, when that I appears, it signifies a self that is diffuse and choral, singular and collective. This I refuses the ways Black people are written by those who make and profit from the ill world.

This I collects and gathers; it is lifted with all that “lift” carries with it—distance and movement and theft and light and possibility.

I keep returning to “Dream #5” in “Act III: Ain’t I Épistémè? . . . elsewhere called the transaction of dream and return,” which opens:

If I could just leave the old things to their trembling

If I could leave you to your monuments, too. No innocence

I’ve known the sharp world and it is imagined and gerund

big enough for all of us . . .

I return to those “Ifs”—those conditional conjunctions—to what they might hold and release, and to the hard knowing beside them: “No innocence” for those who make and for those who meet the “sharp world.” In Lubrin’s hands, this knowing is twofold: The sharp world is material and imagined, and there are multiple ways to see it and to be in it. The perspective of the poem’s subject is multiple; it is the I that knows itself to be “more than one way to see / the word-world.”

“Dream #5” opens me to the force of our collective imagining (“gerund”), as the material and metaphorical monuments to white supremacy are falling. Still, there’s a difference between a word and a world: A word might hold you close when the world does not, gerund; it might measure the distance between what is and what might be. Open to this old/new word/world that was always there and that was “big enough for all of us.”

In the midst of all of the sacrifices (and the sacrificed)—and all that is being made and unmade by masses of young, queer, trans, disabled Black people organizing and gathering in order to insist a habitable wor(l)d into being—I come back to “Dream #5.” And by the time I land in its final line, “How rude of me to force you on the thing that springs blood,” some suspension breaks, some clarity returns. I have been gathered.

My breath has been taken away and then given back.

*With thanks to Keguro Macharia.*
Dream #5
CANISIA LUBRIN

If I could just leave the old things to their trembling
If I could leave you to your monuments, too. No innocence
I’ve known the sharp world and it is imagined and gerund
big enough for all of us, imagined a tattoo up close
on Trappist-1, and I am more than one way to see
the word-world, sizing up the moment by worth of a return
How rude of me to force you on the thing that springs blood
LIKE LITERALLY EVERY OTHER GOOD THING, Wisława Szymborska’s “Vietnam” was brought into my life by someone I love. My sweetheart of nine years is a poet, too, so it’s not uncommon for one of us to break the silence of our shared work studio by suddenly reciting some poem out loud. Such was the nature of my introduction to Szymborska’s nine-line stunner. One day, in the studio, I was preparing to teach a workshop. Earlier in the week, I had mentioned that I was seeking bangers to bring into the space for discussion. Shira, a longtime Szymborska stan, laughed one good, loud, clipped laugh and asked, Have you ever heard this? The next thing I knew she was letting those first flammable bars hit the air.

The gift of single poems carries a particular urgency—charged as they are with the resplendent testimonial of the giver. Even before Instagram made the sharing of screenshots of poems common, teachers, mentors, and friends would slide “loosies” from hand to hand. Yo, you need this shit ASAP. And I did. Every time. When I think of sustenance, the smallest possible building block of nourishment, or what carves a space of reprieve in our most grueling hours, I think of the single poem, its undeniable portability and nourishment. The treasure of the to-go bag. The scrap in the back pocket. The photo in the bra below the titty. The little spell you keep just in case things go left. There is always something fashioned by someone else that will prepare you. Even now, at the intersection of quarantine and uprisings—this horrifying and electric moment, marked by the impossibility of predicting what the next moment might bring. Being isolated and afraid to touch, knowing the police responsible for state-sanctioned murder roam free and virtually consequence-less would be enough. But for me the weight compounds as it comes after a year of gaping, irrevocable, personal loss.

If the past year has taught me anything it’s this: I truly don’t know the limits of my capacity to experience ache. Ya Allah, the sheer vast, endless dimensions of grief! Much more vivid, bald, terrible, and singular than I imagined. But rather than become submerged in isolated despair, I find accompaniment and instruction in precise and rhetorical poems, like Szymborska’s, composed in plain, lean diction and jarring interrogatives. In the staggering translation by Stanisław Barłeczak and Clare Cavanagh:

“Woman, what’s your name?” “I don’t know.”
“How old are you? Where are you from?” “I don’t know.”
“Why did you dig that burrow?” “I don’t know.”

It is a poem that resists conclusions and easy sanctuary. The interrogative gesture, repeated, integrates cliff after cliff. Life is that: a sequence of fallings into uncertainty after uncertainty.

“How long have you been hiding here?” “I don’t know.”
“Don’t you know we will do you no harm?” “I don’t know.”

The poem is steeped in the cresting trauma of a moment. As a reader, I want to know what is right and what is wrong, who is bad and who is good, so I can situate myself in the comfort of knowing while I ride out the rest of the text. I want to use my brain to guide me through the poem, but a poem like “Vietnam,” with its disturbing, disruptive flexibility and jaggedness, refuses to let me think myself out of feeling. The reader must relent to discomfort and doubt. The reader finally joins the woman in that traumatic and tenuous suspension, where the brain cannot survive but the heart must. A blunted and non-cerebral place where the questions are pulled taut by non-answers.

But here’s what makes me shake my head: Through the woman’s insistence of using “I don’t know” as a shield, she makes way for what is the most empirically important.

“Does your village still exist?” “I don’t know.”
“Are these your children?” “Yes.”

Claiming the children, without which survival doesn’t matter, is the poem’s final straw, its grand act of clarity. What happens to the self as it negotiates against what terrorizes? What emerges as lone truth and refuge? I am in awe of the gut—ancestor, smartest cell, guardian angel, intuition. Whatever you wanna call it, it finds you. I, too, want my children to live. I’m at the grocery store, dodging strangers. I’m taking out the garbage and holding my breath when someone sneezes. I’m watching a man’s last words with the rest of the world on a loop. I’m panicking in my building’s vestibule. I crave nothing but my head on my sweetheart’s lap and a safety ensconcing us both. But I have only the thin bray of my sanity and the reverberations of a poem’s lesson. It’s not a lesson of knowledge, but a lesson of love. Give me an unassailable day. And then, dawn: I am certain of only this. As merciful a prayer as anything else: I don’t know. I don’t know. I don’t know. Yes—
“Woman, what’s your name?” “I don’t know.”
“How old are you? Where are you from?” “I don’t know.”
“Why did you dig that burrow?” “I don’t know.”
“How long have you been hiding?” “I don’t know.”
“Why did you bite my finger?” “I don’t know.”
“Don’t you know that we won’t hurt you?” “I don’t know.”
“Whose side are you on?” “I don’t know.”
“This is war, you’ve got to choose.” “I don’t know.”
“Does your village still exist?” “I don’t know.”
“Are those your children?” “Yes.”
FOR THE LAST EIGHT YEARS, I have been writing a book about mourning and colonial history. It's become something of an obsession. The dimensions of the imperial ledger book are infinite and so trying to read along its length sometimes has the feel of cloistering myself and reading in a strange monastery. Reading along the asymptote of an evil infinity, reading what otherwise might be forgotten. The amnesia of empire is not a lapse—it is an ideological project inherent in most types of nation-building. What cannot be forgotten are those more material aftereffects of colonialism, the power dynamics that sustain themselves in the present. Postcolonialism is an impossible term: As long as we live in the present of racial capitalism, the dirge of colonialism will always play counterpoint against the musical score of the present. And so my reading often possesses an unintentionally contemporary resonance, as if I am receiving prophecies transmitted from the past. I read the history necromantic—and the once-living people of history begin to creep out, their ghosts flickering into sight when I skim the latest news alert on my phone.

Much of this research has little to do with poetry, which is the ostensible purpose of this column. American poets often see their medium as the child of technique and charismatic autobiography, both of which leave out that living world beyond the claustrophobia of style or memoir. While literary critics tend to rely on formal definitions of poetic writings, let us instead ask what we want a given literary tool to do. A few years ago, I visited the National Archive in Kew Gardens, England, and pulled up recently declassified files from the small dirty wars that the British fought against insurgencies around the world. What might a poem do in these contexts? I read one document from the colonial office in Kenya. The file discussed a practice adopted by the Kenyan freedom fighters, the secret ceremonies where they would declare oaths to overthrow British rule. The bureaucrat described these as psychopathic gatherings for insane Satanists. So much more convenient for the British to see the Kenyans as primitives, fearful of modernity, scrambling for refuge in violence and ritual atavism—than simply as people who quite sensibly opposed the endless concentration camps that their colonizers had erected across their country.

What are the oaths like when read from that point of view? A Kenyan Marxist historian named Maina wa Kinyatti edited an anthology of them, many of which he describes as “mobilization songs.” Often these poems rallied the collective memory of the havoc the British had wreaked, the martyrs who had died, and the joy of prospective freedom. One poem simply warned the listener never to get their fingerprints taken. A wise suggestion, since half the Kenyan population found themselves jailed. Even many who avoided prison were fed into the machine of British knowledge, which molten off an endless series of files, maps, surveys, reports. While the colonial government sowed divisions by ethnicity and indirect rule, the oathing ceremonies sought to create a different idea of the people. They were a way for the Kenyan revolutionaries to assemble another civil society in secret, one bound by the more intimate connections of friends and family. If the British bureaucracy slowly assimilated the territory of Kenya into the mimesis of its paperwork, these radicals possessed a different approach to the nation. They wanted to invent it.

I had been writing about the British occupation of Kenya during the early days of the George Floyd uprising. Protesters had arsoned police precincts and toppled statues. Some argued we should erect statues to progressive heroes. Others that statuary was simply how colonialism remembered its past. When this insurgency seemed like it would transform our obscene country, I had been writing about a man named Dedan Kimathi. He had been a charismatic schoolteacher and came to lead the military wing of the freedom movement in Kenya. And hiding in the forests away from British surveillance, Kimathi also found himself thinking about the nature of national memory. He wrote regularly in a journal, copied his correspondence, and instructed his comrades to write monthly reports. When the British soldiers rooted out his encampments in the woods, they would turn up typewriters and printing machines—what had these guerillas been up to, they must have wondered. This surplus of documentation was not mere graphomania. Kimathi believed he would liberate Kenya and that its future citizens would look backwards and discover their national identity in the papers he was only just creating. The very form of the archive had been the imperial form par excellence, the indexical Medusa that petrifies those it sees into objects. Kimathi sought to create what might seem oxymoronic, an insurgent archive. An archive in a forest, rather than a state bureaucracy. An archive of strange temporalities, created for a nation that existed only in a speculative future.

This future did not come. The British eventually discovered the meeting minutes, journals, and memoranda that Kimathi had hidden so lovingly in the woods. They found him as well and executed him.
His trial transcript, previously unavailable to the public, was only recently discovered by renegade historians. What has not been declassified is Kimathi's archive itself, which he assembled for a nation whose particular contours never arrived. Only a few pages have been recovered by Kinyatti, the historian of the oaths. They are sometimes dry, devoted as they are to the logistics of organizing a peasant army. There are flashes of levity and grace, like when a stubborn rhino refuses to budge from their path or when Kimathi discusses his dreams. And in an entry dated April 3rd, 1945, we find an account of the freedom fighters singing a bucolic song as they walk through the forest. Was this a poem? If it was, if it was not, either way, they raised their voices together and sang this unexpectedly joyous chorus:

We were happy as we went
We were happy as we returned
Our mission was a victory both ways
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Acknowledgments

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