

BPJ

BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL VOL. 62 N°3 SPRING 2012
SPLIT THIS ROCK CHAPBOOK 2012

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COVER

Mary Greene, design

Robert Shetterly, “Langston Hughes,” acrylic on panel, 2005,
from the series “Americans Who Tell the Truth”

John McNee, Jr., Pen and ink illustration, 1951, from *BPJ*
Vol. 2, No. 1, Fall 1951, *Lorca: Gypsy Ballads*

Poet’s Forum

We invite you to join the online conversation on our Poet’s Forum at www.bpj.org. The participating poets for this issue are Minnie Bruce Pratt (March), Douglas Kearney (April), and Marilyn Nelson (May).

EDITORS' NOTE: OCCUPY AMERICA

John Rosenwald and Lee Sharkey

"I'm gonna split this rock," cried Langston Hughes.

Others heard his cry. And listened. And transformed his language into their own.

In 2007 a group of Washington, D.C., poets, led by Sarah Browning, Regie Cabico, and Melissa Tuckey, set out to organize a convergence of politically engaged poets from across the country and beyond. The following March, on the fifth anniversary of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, more than three hundred participants gathered to inspire each other through four days of conversations, workshops, and readings. They brought words of provocation and witness to our nation's capital to split the rock of deception and denial, violence, greed, disdain, and ignorance that weighed so heavily on our country.

Our predecessors at the *Beloit Poetry Journal* also heard Hughes's cry, publishing as its first chapbook in 1951 his translation of Federico García Lorca's *Romancero Gitano*. From its inception the magazine has worked to expand American poetic language and vision through its publication of international poetry and of work that challenges social, political, and aesthetic norms, from Hughes's Lorca translations to Michael Broek's "The Logic of Yoo" (Fall 2011), which indelibly parses one episode from the Bush II years.

Langston Hughes became for Robert Shetterly one of the "Americans Who Tell the Truth." After the 9/11 attacks, this artist found a way to "channel . . . anger and grief" at the policies of the U.S. government by creating a series of portraits honoring Americans who have spoken out and acted against injustice and the abuse of power. Across each portrait Shetterly incises a statement made by his subject. The choice for Hughes rings as vividly in the wake of the Arab Spring and Occupy America as it did when the poet composed it more than seventy years ago: "We, the people, must redeem. . . . all the stretch of these great green states—and make America again."

Jazz poet, essayist, playwright, novelist, journalist, master of his craft, Langston Hughes became rightly famous for giving voice to African American lives and dreams. During the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s he proclaimed in a manifesto that

“we younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful.” His manifesto continues, “And ugly, too. The tom-tom cries, and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain free within ourselves.” Hughes defies pigeonholing—and in this he offers us a model. He was chronically curious, ever on the move, alert to everything around him, and bound to the truth as he saw it. His would not be a one-dimensional portrait of race or poverty in America; he could code shift and turn on a dime from prophetic fury at injustice to easy laughter at the ways of the residents of his beloved Harlem. Racially mixed, sexually ambiguous, sympathetic to communism but unwilling to be restricted by dogma, he saw and wrote from a set of complex perspectives.

In 1937 Hughes traveled to Spain as a journalist to cover the Spanish Civil War. While there he began to translate Lorca's *Romancero Gitano*, the *Gypsy Ballads*. A beloved cultural figure whose verse, much like Hughes's, was seen to embody the spirit of his people, Lorca had been assassinated the previous year. Hughes worked with poet friends of Lorca's on the translations, revising them years later with the aid of Miguel Covarrubias and then the poet's brother, Francisco García Lorca.

These translations caught the eye of Robert Glauber, one of our founding editors, when he discovered them in the archives of *Compass*, the immediate predecessor of the *BPJ*. He wrote to Hughes, who was delighted to see them published in the fall of 1951. A thousand copies of the Hughes/Lorca chapbook were printed; within two months the issue was sold out. Thus this singular work by Hughes, the first complete English translation of Lorca's volume, fell into obscurity. Happily, a facsimile of the issue is now available to readers in the *BPJ*'s online archives at www.bpj.org. And soon the correspondence between Hughes and the *BPJ* will be available to researchers at the Beloit Poetry Journal Library in Farmington, Maine.

This chapbook therefore brings together Split This Rock, the *BPJ*, and Robert Shetterly, all of whom heard Hughes's call and responded by taking action. In 2007, when we as *BPJ* editors learned of the intentions for Split This Rock, we volunteered to edit a chapbook (Spring 2008: Vol. 59, No. 3) of the work of poets to be featured at the festival. This year, we gladly accepted the invitation to produce a second chapbook, of unpublished work by poets featured at the 2012 festival, which takes place March 22–25 in Washington (www.splitthisrock.org). For the cover, Robert Shetterly contributed his probing portrait of Hughes, into which our designer Mary Greene has integrated one of John McNee, Jr.'s illustrations from the *BPJ*'s original *Gypsy Ballads*.

Not surprisingly, the poems in the 2012 Split This Rock chapbook have a somewhat different set of concerns than the poems in the first, which was focused largely, as was the country, on issues of war and peace. Now that the Iraq occupation has ended, at least formally, the poets represented here direct our attention to issues that in the last year have spawned the Arab Spring and our homegrown occupations: political oppression, poverty, economic inequality; cultures of violence; persistent racism, sexism, and sexual predation; the loss of neighborhoods and traditions that sustained communities.

The contributors emerge from a broad range of literary traditions, but surely all can claim as one of those the world-engaged American poetry Langston Hughes epitomizes. As if in response to Hughes's call to let an America that has yet to exist "be America again," they tell our histories, represent us in our multiplicity, and talk back to stereotyping. They identify the "enforcers" who "lie in wait for us with black daggers" (Aridjis) not unlike the one on our cover. They praise and they rage. They reflect, and quicken on the global pulse. Khaled Mattawa's "After 42 Years," written in the wake of the overthrow and death of Muammar Gaddafi, might well be speaking for all the work in the collection when it looks toward a future where systems of oppression have been dismantled and "an earthy sun is shining on us, with us, within us again," then poses the open-ended question, "What will our aftermath be then?"

MINNIE BRUCE PRATT

Someone Is Up

The snow's like boulders on this block, before dawn,
one heavy-coated person walking in the road, a man
coughing, two children waiting for the school bus,
two houses with insulation strips and no siding,
two with blue tarps and no roof, two *For Rent* signs
on this street of workers living behind what's left,
opulent façade of another century, the stained glass
shining now lavender, yellow, blue, someone is up
in the subdivided houses, the black metal envelopes,
mailboxes counting two four eight apartments,
four of the houses boarded up, three empty, and
on the last, plywood seals off the bottom windows.
But on the second floor, lights come on, someone is
up in the half-condemned house. The snow counts up.
The talk-show pundits say, *Things are better!* But here
we see the bust after every boom that means our jobs
and lives exploding, the dust settling like snow
on our shoulders, like cement around our feet.

MINNIE BRUCE PRATT

The Difference between Inside and Outside

At dawn the sky is chrome yellow. We turn over, we say to each other, *The storm is coming*. Thunder, purple, white, light, red. At the window I listen for rain to make its room of sound, how once under the trailer roof clatter I was reading about the future, once I was under a tin porch roof, spatter, writing the spider lilies, now rain spouts like a turned-on faucet, I'm back in bed, the lightning strikes next door, you hold me, you say *I've got you*, petting my arm, you quiver back into sleep, my company inside the storm that's fading east, the last thunder inside me, conversational rumble up from gut and lungs. My mouth wants to reply.

Outside I look for charred streaks, the strikes scorched down a tree trunk. Rain showers shake down from leaves in the wind onto the drenched folded cardboard someone slept on before rain fell onto the little room under the tree. The slick wet surface of paper. Douglass said, to long for progress without struggle is to ask for rain without thunder. Lightning blow, your eyelids and fingers trembled. The dream where you made rally placards, people were massing, that's what you had the strength to do in your dream. Today the cardboard is unfolded under the tree in the sun, maybe the person using it was alone, or maybe two lay in each other's arms during the uneasy night, wrapped in streaks of light.

MINNIE BRUCE PRATT

Turning the Switch Off

Habit—the key in the ignition, and no, maybe never, thought about why what happens next. Turn down Gertrude, into Almond, sun into shadow under the overpass, then the sun gnawing at my ear at the red light. The comfort of habit, not psychological. The pileated cackle every June in the old magnolia, rejoicing the chambered seed cone has opened, the plump lick. What habit gives us, and when it fails. Tushabe says there were two seasons, wet and dry, the farmers knew time out of time when to plant until now, the drought, the weather has changed its habit. Or something else has changed the mind of the climate. We were watching *Norma Rae* yesterday, holding hands, the mill hands reached out and turned each switch off. How hard to break the habit of work, obedience not to the machines, but to those who own them. The hand reaching out to take its own, bringing the fragment, the red seed, delicious to the mouth.

MARILYN NELSON

Called Up

**Blue Checked Cotton Dress with Smocked Bodice and White Peter Pan Collar
(Cleveland, Ohio, 1951)**

Folding the letter and laying it down,
Daddy says Well, Baby, I've been called back up.
Mama pauses, then puts my bowl of beans
in front of me. Jennifer eats and hums,
across from me on two telephone books.
Mama says Pray God you won't see combat.
Jennifer, stop singing at the table,
I hiss. Her humming's driving me crazy.
She looks up from her bowl with dreaming eyes:
Huh? Mama says My Darling, we're going too.
Stop singing! I'll take a leave from law school,
he says. And you'll take a leave from your job.
We've been called up. Our leaves become feathers.
With wings we wave goodbye to our cousins.

MARILYN NELSON

Your Own

**Kelly Green Cotton-Polyester Dress with Green and Brown Plaid Bodice
(Smoky Hill AFB, Kansas, 1953)**

Our new house, Officers' Quarters 42,
connects to other quarters, and mowed yards
connecting to wheat fields and wilderness
waiting to be explored by kids and dogs.
Sometimes we don't come in until we're called
by someone's mom. They say Mom, not Mama.
Hazel, Charlotte, Jeannie, Tommy and Charles:
as soon as we hear the School's Over bell
we flock together like migrating birds,
catching grasshoppers, gathering bouquets,
or just plain running into breathlessness.
I don't know why Mama looked sad tonight
while I was washing up, or why she said
Be careful: Don't like them more than your own.

MARILYN NELSON

Making History

**Blue and White Orlon Snowflake Sweater, Blue Snowpants, Red Galoshes
(Smoky Hill AFB, Kansas, 1955)**

Somebody took a picture of a class
standing in line to get polio shots,
and published it in the *Weekly Reader*.
We stood like that today. And it did hurt.
Mrs. Liebel said we were Making History,
but all I did was sqwunch up my eyes and wince.
Making History takes more than standing in line
believing little white lies about pain.
Mama says First Negroes are History:
First Negro Telephone Operator,
First Negro Opera Singer At The Met,
First Negro Pilots, First Supreme Court Judge.
That lady in Montgomery just became a First
by sqwunching up her eyes and sitting there.

KIM ROBERTS

The International Fruit of Welcome

A pineapple is the perfect gift
to bring to a blind date.
A pineapple is like a blind date:
spiky and armored at first,
with the hope of sweetness inside.
A pineapple is the perfect housewarming gift.
You don't have to wrap it,
it doesn't spill inside your car.
It comes in its own house.
A pineapple is the perfect birthday gift.
You might prefer a coconut,
that planet molten at the core,
but the pineapple has a better hairdo,
better wardrobe; it never
goes out of style.
Think of all those historic houses
with pineapple bolsters, pineapple finials,
pineapples carved above lintels.
Such a sophisticated fruit:
every sailor wants one.

KIM ROBERTS

Instructions for Use

Look at dishwasher.

I admire instructions that start
with the basics. The diagram

is like a cubist painting, showing
all sides at once, each part
given a letter, so the machine

has an alphabet infestation.
I follow the letters into the maze.
This is not a dishwasher.

It's a garden of tall boxwoods,
open-air rooms leading one to the next
and I am wandering,

unable to read the instructions
I hold in my right hand, following
a line of towering bushes.

I am always flying out of my body
at inopportune times. And where
do I go? Something else

takes over, twin brain,
deep brain, primitive.
The twin brain can't read,

or follow directions. But it has rules.
It has power, like an animal
whose business is survival,

the swarm of knowing, so I let go,
give up the pointing alphabet,
for once just give up the alphabet.

KIM ROBERTS

Medicine

for Martha Tabor

Fog lay atop the single field
 like a balm,
 perfectly contained,

hovering just above
 the long grass.
 Perhaps descending

from the sky,
 or rising perhaps
 from the earth, in the field

fog connected the two,
 the ground and the air,
 sewed them together

in loose white stitches.
 It looked medicinal,
 the fog healing the field.

To your doctors
 who live
 by the body's obliquity,

who make their living
 by your swerving,
 I raise these wisps of vapor,

indeterminate fog fixed and bounded
 by a slim rail fence,
 like the tenuous knots

of abraded bandage, like a prayer,
 shapely
 in its shapelessness.

It was nighttime,
 just, the sun gone
 and the last shreds of luster

KIM ROBERTS

leaching from the trees,
the pale pantheon
gathering in a field before dispersing.

VENUS THRASH

Rare

2000 Block of 4th Street NE, Washington, D.C., circa 2009

Kind of Blue wafts from the boom box
on the moss-covered deck into the tepid
breeze of a rare November warmth.

The hip-hopper next door, khaki cargo
pants hanging low as the electrical wires
behind our homes, emphatically bops

his cornrowed head forever stuck to iPod
headphones & sweeps dead leaves
of giant cedars from the concrete patio.

Two rowhouses down, original go-go,
chockfull of congas & cowbells, shakes
the block like beats from the back

of a souped-up '74 Impala, rattling
aged windows & weak slat fences.
Mr. Wright fires up the grill one last time

this year. The smoky aroma of barbecued
chicken & ribs stirs mouths of passersby
to water. He shares the spoils with the Lees

as he has for thirty-six years. They laugh
easily in spite of war, endangered generations
of youth, prisons stuffed dark with skin,

the demise of music they once slow-dragged
or hustled to, & faces changing from
familiar neighbors—grandmothers

rearing grandchildren best they can,
World War II vets who flash tattered photos
of younger selves in uniform, & Granddaddy

Charles who grows cotton in the front yard
because it's pretty—to the newcomers
clinging to cell phones, walking mastiffs,

VENUS THRASH

rollerblading, cycling, jogging,
who never look their new neighbors
in the eye, never say hello, & ponder

a block that will someday mirror their skin.
The Wrights down beers from the Lees'
icebox & sing to themselves "A change

is gonna come" in mumbled breaths.
Chuck's go-go holler becomes Aretha's
I Ain't Never Loved a Man, Bill's *Ain't No*

Sunshine, James's *Please, Please, Please*,
a rare time in music this whole
block remembers except the children—

hyper on bass-heavy rhythms, wanton
materialism, gross braggadocios,
& stripping down of young women—

who'll never know the art of dancing
close & slow at basement rent parties
under hazy red lights to Chaka Kahn's

Sweet Thing, while all the broke-down
furniture is piled outdoors to make room
for get-down all-night grooving.

CARLOS ANDRÉS GÓMEZ

Belief

Hell is REAL. Judgment Day is coming! REPENT! the placard screams in cartoonish, fire-fonted lettering. He clutches it, rigid and unmoving, as though it is his last surviving friend. Not his best friend. But the only other one to make it this far. Or maybe it is his wife of twenty-three years, the spark long gone but the comfort of what is known calming the knots in his chest.

And I am curious about where this man goes to rest. He, dutiful spouse that he is, continuing mostly out of fear of having to figure out being anyone else. What quiet place cradles him as he closes his eyes to lie down? What summer meal makes his face light up? What song does he belt out twice and doesn't care who hears? I want to hear that song. I want to hear it bloom from his tired mouth.

I want to hear his fractured story. What has left him by himself, with me and the big-breasted Latina woman we just caught each other checking out. We made eye contact. I was defensive. Wanted, at first, to scream, *I'm not that guy, asshole! And fuck you and your dogma.* Then, I noticed how softly his eyes were soaking me in, just wanting to feel a momentary brush against his chest. Know there is still touch.

On a rainy Sunday at 9:38 p.m. on this empty C train going local to Brooklyn, none of us are ever as good as we wish we were. I am proof. So is he. We are disappointed in who we have become. But he's not trying to be good right now. He's just tired. Looking for anything to help carry him under the East River and up to the 4th floor walkup and onto a half-deflated mattress. Jesus has been asleep.

The doors open and his body twitches to move but cannot. We make eye contact again. And I know he wants to tell me something. Maybe hold out his quivering palm and smile, finally. Maybe tell me his entire shaking story, even the boring parts in between. Maybe he'll pull out the faded album of frayed pictures in his back pocket. His body is softly singing a chorus of *Save me, brother. Save me, please, oh merciful God.*

JOSÉ PADUA

Kubla Khan

This poem is writing itself on a bathroom wall in 1992 when I am drunk and drinking too much and am probably in need of some kind of guidance, which of course I won't seek and would refuse if given, because now that I think about it again I don't need any direction, I know where I'm going and who I'm taking there with me. The poem is about constipation, my rapid heartbeat, my daily morning headache, and the woman singing loudly and badly down the hall from my apartment. She used to avoid eye contact with me, but now she nods and sometimes stares, having recognized that despite my smooth hands and soft voice I am one of her tribe. Her boyfriend even makes the effort to speak to me in English instead of mumbling at me in Spanish, a language they thought I would understand and which if I were a better person I would understand but I'm not. There are no air-conditioners in this building. No one can afford to buy one and if someone were to steal one he or she could not afford to turn it on. Fans blow the hot air back upon us, the speed being what makes it more bearable. My mattress lies on the floor, and when I'm there the air is filled with smoke and sound, a symphony of car alarms wrapping itself around me like a blanket of insecurity gifted to me with a bouquet of parking violations. We are not moving here, and the cars don't belong to us but to the people who are trying to avoid us and the liquid look we give them when we pass through their valuable white spaces. When I dream I am driving fast with the windows down into tunnels that pass through both tenements and high rises at the time of day when the heat is most dangerous. I drive until I am surrounded everywhere by words, until there is nowhere to turn, no exit to take, until the pure sound of water wakes me.

JOSÉ PADUA

On the Beach

Our hearts are looking inward
with the leaves, the briny crust
of ocean on evening skin makes us
ill with motion remembered
in thick swipes of rubber blades
against shiny glass. No gull
subverts its arc toward a surface
filled with shells, though dolphins
rise and fall with every hellion
of restraint. Let's break through
the bastions of propriety, unseal
the wax that protects the inner ear.
Let us be monsters
smashing through the force
of that cold, white wave.

JOSÉ PADUA

Dance

Dance. Until it's last call on a sweat-stained night.
Until the traffic lights flash red to express the human
condition. Until dawn rises with the sound of birds
to remind us we no longer belong here. Until
the new day is over—the week, the year—and no
seasons have passed. Until books turn yellow
and crumble because thought is disappearing.
Until gray smoke and black rain filter clean light.
Until the end of the world when you and I are dead.
Or until you are like a man seeming to stand still among
the clinging vines and pale walls, held aloft by a woman
who is always in the act of falling, who will break
every law there is to dance this apocalypse with you.

DOUGLAS KEARNEY

Thank You But Don't Buy My Babies Clothes with Monkeys on Them

Costco Pulls "Lil Monkey" Doll Off Shelves

—KTLA News headline

"It's so unfortunate because now it's portrayed as a purposeful act to be disrespectful and that's not true."

watch the carriage turn to a monkey cage,
but for now, see the sugared ladies lean
in, the stroller's mouth wide. they are greedy
for toes, for fingers, for lips plump before
those tiny, bright incisors. and why not?
these babies are almost people. ladies
with candy-addled handbags would give, give, give
but the pudgy arms stretch, reach. growing feet
claim earth. lips draw back at the wrong angles,
withholding the grins the ladies demand.
what must they turn into? when do purses,
aburst with strawberry and cherry sweets,
crawl into the ladies' chests, their hearts pressed
up and out into their blenching throats?

“We really apologize. We don’t think in that way.”

see **WHAT IT DO**?
& do say what
IT IS?

if evil
here
WHAT IT DO?
swing some into history’s way

if evil here, who hears it?
a tree falls in the rigged jungle
(nobody here
but us _____)

if evil here, who sees it? **WHAT**
some see what sum gets the get
of the once got. (how much that lil
monnnkey in the window?)

if evil here, who speaks it? **DOES**
retail re-tell the re-tailing of— (nobody here but us.)
history has a way **IT DO** don’t you think?
?

“We don’t operate in that kind of thinking.”

here:

[if] throughout history black baby bottoms’s blue as baboons’s noses.

[if] throughout history black babies get blue black bottoms
’til the stump of their circumcised tails black over.

[&] a circumcised black baby tail must not be discarded but kept
for later for show.

[thus] a circumcised black baby’s tail was often for
showed after removal in a jar or dried on the mantle
below the buck bust.

[i.f.] sing a blues of black bottom! sing a blues of blueblack bottom!

[if] throughout history history has a way with blueing black babies.

[or] say history has a history of blacking black babies.

[or if] a history of blueblacking black babies blue.

[e.g.] peekaboo black babies’s a black mama gut bucket blues.

[i.e.] you wanna see ma’s black baby?

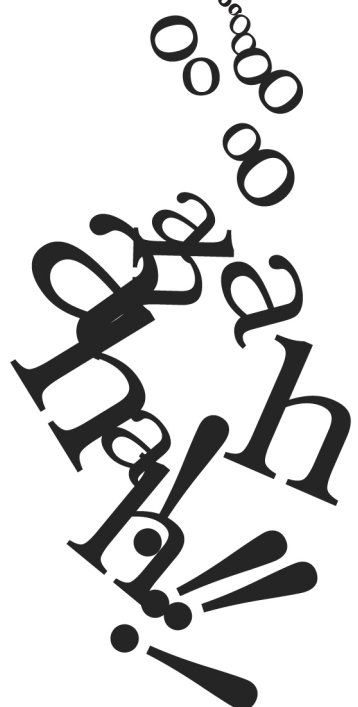
[&] jigaboo black babies is history blacking over a blue black hide.

[thus] picayune black babies’s history’s way
of knowing black babies is discarded
to hide its history of blacking black babies
blue as a baboon’s nose knows tails.

[q.e.d.] pitiful black-at-the-bottom babies!

“We have a really diverse, family operated company that’s been around for 28 years.”

precious
 lil monkeys! curlicued tails troop queries on my babies. curious
 lil monkeys and the uniformed overseer—who can tame them? unruly
 lil monkeys no ways tired with new IDs and bipedal reveries. musing
 lil monkeys’s pointless—stick them with sticks! big leaps
 lil monkeys: go chew on the saw of “fruit-falls-when-ripe.” wait! hungry
 lil monkeys! smiling lil monkeys climbing pajamas.
 lil monkeys pincer the cribs, bent senators my daughter’s onesie. leering
 lil monkeys’ hands all murder sopped! put your hands up! hissing in lil monkey beards.
 lil monkeys shot. love for lil monkeys,
 lil monkeys?! humans over motherfucker!
 lil monkeys over babies, bucking on the lamps,
 lil monkey shadows on my son’s face. messing the light, smearing
 lil monkeys jibber from the nursery, porch, the street.
 lil monkeys —a-ha! freeze! lil monkeys
 lil monkeys foul my babies’ clothes like blood, like shit.
 lil monkeys no no
 thank you no lil monkeys
 noo thanks
 noo o o ooooo



“What would we have to gain for heaven’s sake?”

yes yes black babies’s born already with four-finger
tuxedo gloves over bristling fists of opposable thumbs.

black babies’s born in tuxedos or in tatters
but stay born tuxedo-gloved for their prehensile feet.

when said babies wear monkeysuits over birthday suits they’re
still naked but for four-finger gloves on their bunches of genitals.

every several hours a black baby’s born with a hunger
for what the gloves cover. fling cash to gag its palms.

one such baby may be ID’ed as blacker than not black. tall as not taller.
its four-finger gloves—you’ll discover—seem reddish. it went down that
street!

they found a black baby then we did too. had to get it down with a ladder.
when it was swinging it didn’t need four-finger tuxedo gloves. no cover at all.

Section titles are quoted from Mary Gustoff, CEO of Brasskey Keepsakes.

RACHEL MCKIBBENS

Across the Street from the Whitmore Home for Girls, 1949

The Mad Girls climb the wet hill,
breathe the sharp air through sick-green lungs.
The Wildest One wanders off like an old cow
and finds a steaming breast inside a footprint in the snow.
She slips it into her glove, holds it close like a darling.

At night, she suckles the lavender tit, still warm
in her hard little hands. She drapes it over her heart—
the closest she will ever come to a Woman Thing.

She sleeps on her right side with the breast
tucked between her legs. Her eyes flutter like a rocked doll.
She dreams of Before the Father, when her body
was smooth as a crab, her fingers
tip-toe soft. Her mouth was a shining crown,
her hair moved like a hungry dog.
Outside her bedroom, the Lonesome Boys hide in trees
to watch the Father lift her gown.

In the morning, she is who she is again.
Her hair, a soft black brick, her body held together
by hammers. The breast is shriveled up. Gone cold
in her lap. A death-blue fish with one stone eye.

HOMERO ARIDJIS

La Violencia en México Comenzó con los Dioses

La violencia en México comenzó con los dioses.
Antes de que hubiera ciudades y templos
ya había desmembrados, desollados y decapitados
en los ritos del alba. El Painal,
sicario de nuestro señor Huitzilopochtli,
ya descendía de los cerros
con un corazón humeante en las manos.

HOMERO ARIDJIS

The Violence in Mexico Began with the Gods

The violence in Mexico began with the gods.
Before there were cities and temples,
they already flayed, quartered, and beheaded
in the rites at dawn. Painal,
executioner for our lord Huitzilopochtli,
was already descending from the hills,
a smoldering heart cupped in his hands.

translated from the Spanish by Betty Ferber

HOMERO ARIDJIS

Somos Hijos de Dioses Crueles

Somos hijos de dioses crueles.
De nada sirve ver sus pirámides derruidas.
Aún no se borra la sangre en sus peldaños.
Aún sus manos asfixian nuestros sueños.

Su imagen está grabada en esas piedras.
Sus espectros andan en nuestras ciudades.
Al fondo de la pesadilla sus sicarios
nos acechan con puñales negros.

Aunque se vayan de esta tierra a otra parte,
volveremos a procrearlos, volverán a emerger
de nuestro adentro con nuestras facciones,
atrocés, despiadados. Somos padres de dioses crueles.

HOMERO ARIDJIS

We Are Children of Cruel Gods

We are children of cruel gods.
No point looking at their ruined pyramids.
The blood still hasn't washed from the steps.
Their hands still strangle our dreams.

Their likeness is graven on those stones.
Their ghosts stalk our cities.
Deep in the nightmare their enforcers
lie in wait for us with black daggers.

Should they leave this earth for elsewhere
we will go back to beget them—they'll come back up
from inside us with our features,
appalling, merciless. We, parents of cruel gods.

translated from the Spanish by Betty Ferber

KHALED MATTAWA

After 42 Years

Five years old when the dictator took over in a coup—
Curfew shut our city down.
Bloodless coup, they said,
The many who thought this could be good.
The dictator, a young man, a shy recluse, assumed the helm, bent in piety,
The dead sun of megalomania hidden in his eyes.
Could not go to the store to buy bread or newspaper,
Could not leave home, visit friends,
The radio thundering hatred, retching blood-curdling song—
Signs that went unread.
Factories built and filched, houses stolen, newspapers shut down,
Decades of people killed, 42 years.

But that's all over now—
How can you say over when it took 42 years—
I was five when the dictator took my brother away.
Over now, 42 years, must look ahead.
His face half blood-covered, half smirking
Like Batman's Joker,
Hands raised, fingers pressed together upward,
Saying wait, calm down, wait.
Wait 42 years—five years old when my father was killed
Standing in front of a hotel.
Bloodless coup, the country like a teenage girl
Forced into marriage, hoping her groom will be kind.

In between there was blankness
That burned like a million suns into our eyes,
Death like air, everywhere.

What was it like to be held by his men?
Fingers pulled out, testicles fried,
To be hung from a clothesline rope,
The dictator's mistress pulling at my legs.
How many killed by his men over the decades,
The cracked skulls, the mass graves, the uncounted dead?

What and who taught you, O sons of my country, to be so fearless cruel?
Him, they say, for 42 years, 42 years of him.
Who taught you to be reckless heroic?
The no-life we had to live under him, the lives we were asked to live as dead.

Alive we want him alive, many kept shouting.
So that they could give him tastes of his own medicine?
Alive, alive!
And many others disbelieving they'd caught him,
Their shrill Allahu Akbars exclamations of astonishment—
What have I done, O Lord, to deserve the honor of capturing the rat?

The nightmare—GAME OVER—the night game of breaking
Into houses, arresting sons, the day game of civility.
We'll bring him in a few hours.
We'll bring him back in 42 years.
Could it be so easy—GAME OVER—the capturing of a rat?
A clown in a rat-colored outfit, a wild mop of hair, a wig, high-heeled boots,
Holding a golden pistol like a child playing hero—
Is that what our history amounted to?

Somewhere, there were suns that would never light.
Somewhere, there were holes in the air that was full of death.
We managed to hold our breath and live our lives.

Could it be so simple, O Lord, to end an epoch—
killing kidnapping murder massacre slit throats vaginal tests
for women he wished to sex vaginal rapes anal rapes of dissidents
humiliation denigration outsourced whippings money changed on
oil tankers boiling water poured on the heads of maids hot iron
pressed on servant flesh broken ribs feet whipped until swollen
like cantaloupes bodies left hanging in public squares—

I was five when my brother disappeared.
I was thirteen, I was twenty, I was seventy-six,
I was never allowed to reach birth.

One minute and all that history is found hiding
Like a rat, history like a rat,
Hiding in a sewer drain.
History too hot to hold.
The magic in seeing it come to an end—
The pain too dark to bear, too light, too cold,
The astonishment unbearable—would kill you if it lasted too long.

He died of his wounds.
No, no, they just shot him dead.

Perhaps he was a magnet and drew evil out of men's chests,
A magnet siphoning cruelty to itself.
His hands, his hands saying wait, wait,
Reached into their lungs and knotted their raw souls.

No, no, they just shot him dead.
But I heard he died of his wounds.

Somewhere, an earthly sun is shining on us, with us, within us again.
There is air in the air again.

What will our aftermath be then?

We wash our hands,
Put on spotless clothes.
There is no *after* until we pray for all the dead.

KHALED MATTAWA

Now That We Have Tasted Hope

Now that we have come out of hiding,
Why would we live again in the tombs we'd made of our souls?

And the sundered bodies that we've reassembled
With prayers and consolations,
What would their torn parts be, other than flesh?

Now that we have tasted hope
And dressed each other's wounds with the legends of our oneness,
Would we not prefer to close our mouths forever
On the wine that swilled inside them?

Having dreamed the same dream,
Having found the water behind a thousand mirages,
Why would we hide from the sun again
Or fear the night sky after we've reached the ends of darkness,
Live in death again after all the life our dead have given us?

Listen to me Zow'ya, Beida, Ajdabya, Tobruk, Nalut,
Listen to me Derna, Musrata, Trables, Benghazi, Zintan,
Listen to me houses, alleys, courtyards, and streets that throng my veins,
Some day soon, in your freed light, in the shade of your proud trees,
Your excavated heroes will return to their thrones in your martyrs' squares,
Lovers will hold each other's hands.

I need not look far to imagine the nerves dying,
Rejecting the life that blood sends them.
I need not look deep into my past to seek a thousand hopeless vistas,
But now that I have tasted hope
I have fallen into the embrace of my own rugged innocence.

How long were my ancient days?
I no longer care to count.
I no longer care to measure.
How bitter was the bread of bitterness?
I no longer care to recall.

Now that we have tasted the hope, this hard-earned crust,
We would sooner die than seek any other taste to life,
Any other way of being human.

SHERWIN BITSUI

Potsherds

You fill velvet sacks with body heat,
run east each evening,
waning daylight's tongue-scent
bleeding through your sun-dappled coating
as you silk smoky webs
to seal in this waxen light,
then cleave body heat
 from the thermometer with pine claws.

Departure gate's left lane open,
address book cupped by four mountains
drizzles down the side-view mirror
onto hands sparkling under rime
 reaching for the new *there*—
 thickening thinning air.

How the map must look when
it's your face that ripples silver,
not deer skipping across
the river's forgetting.

How it might be then
to look through their eyes
and see mountains
breaking into braided water.

Hunched over a sleeping child,
this story pivots a walking cane

then vespers through town,
sniffing vacuum-packed air

sealed in plastic bags
hanging from pawn-shop marquees.

It climbs cloud hair
only to fall back upon red soil—

saltwater masks
sweating onto our faces.

Cocoon-draped horses
weigh their spasms
on songs braiding
their highest leaves
into our necklaces of smoke.

KATHY ENGEL

Gratitude

This morning the sun souses
and shimmers through trees swaying

in an arc over a road I've never before
noticed called Millstone: two syllables,

accrued weight. Soon leaves
will flame and fall to the ground like prayer

reminding me why I keep vigil at the town
square, draft statements, help build a school.

This morning after the first sip of Native Thunder
coffee roasted by a neighbor, I pick up last

night's cups stuffed with crumpled tissue, not
annoyed about the mess but grateful the messers are

here walking through the house in underwear
and unbrushed endless hair. They are my life, as is

the light seducing the trees. My daughters, blinking
like stars dropped into life on earth, appear on this

summer morning and first Johnny Cash
then Chucho Valdez ripples through the house.

We plan what we will cook for dinner; green beans
their father grew spill out of baskets and bowls.

KATHY ENGEL

After the Storm, Praise

To the split mimosa, still standing, pink-tan bark fleshy in the
odd aftershine.

To the man who answered the storm info number at 4 a.m.:

Miss, you can sleep now.

To the women and men who lift branches from the roadside in
dark, wave cars to detour
in fluorescent jackets, and those who leaning out of cranes—tap,
pull, bend—work wires.

To the people who can't get to jobs and to the King Kullen cashier
who stowed a towel

in the car to shower at her friend's. To postal workers sorting
mail by kerosene lamp

and the poet, basement three feet deep in water, wading through
poems and letters.

To the children playing with worms in sudden backyard rivulets,
and to mud.

To the farmers upstate, crops wasted now by giant balls of hail,
and the farmer up the road who lost a week's business.

To the mother who insists on staying home with her dog and a
flashlight,

to the gaura whirling butterfly now burnt by salt and wind.

To the hibiscus saved, its lush yellow petals.

To the battered birdhouse and the scattered birds.

To criss-cross corn stalk, potato sog, ocean rock and whip, and to
this family, and to these friends, gathered at the table, where we
begin.

KATHY ENGEL

How the Light Gets In

for Alicia Ostriker (after Leonard Cohen)

Say the memory of tree in the body stops
the split, but the hand's stuck in its clench-

shape, having held the axe handle, blade
inside the tree. Say it was beech. Say it was

too late for fleshy bark. Say a fine yellow
filters through between hand and wood,

enough to read this line or plant the next tree—
ginko, cedar—light enough to forgive.

NAOMI SHIHAB NYE

The Woman in the Front Row

feels vexed with the poet on the stage.
The poet makes jokes. People laugh.
But everything is so bad, back in the old homeland,
separation wall towering
over farmers' skimpy crops,
constant battering from gun butts.
Americans against injustice
should be demonstrating
night and day.

Do you pray? The woman calls out.

I describe, the poet says. I invoke.

Encourage seeing a different side.

But do you pray?

I pray in my own way. (It's what the poet has always said.)

This is like plucking a wriggly worm from a bucket

as far as the woman in the front row is concerned.

She shivers with irritation. Her eyes are slits.

The poet doesn't want Palestinians

reduced to ciphers of sorrow.

Village laughter still echoes

though the people who laughed

are silent or dead.

Red poppies, despite guns.

What? Would you flatten them?

Don't lose this too.

NAOMI SHIHAB NYE

Every Window

Only the person living and working inside
will know which yellow cup sits
on a blue plate, waiting,
or the size of an hour without interruption,
or the haunting stroke of light beaming
sideways onto the next roof.
If we peer out lonely for everyone
who preceded us into cloud,
it's such a crowd by now,
and the swirl that surrounds
our continued presence on planet earth
feels confounding. Another day fumbled.
Another dialogue ground into dust.
I woke determined to be simple and focused again.
It was as if a houseguest had just arrived.
I cleaned off the counter for her, not me.

Don't you hear this hammer ring?
I'm gonna split this rock,
And split it wide!
When I split this rock,
Stand by my side.

—Langston Hughes