

BPJ

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COVER

Mary Greene, design

Randi Ward, front cover, “Grindadráp 1”; back cover,
“Grindadráp 2,” digital photographs, Tórshavn,
Faroe Islands, 2004

POET'S FORUM (blog.bpj.org)

The participating poets for this issue are Michael Broek (June), Randi Ward (July), and Liz Robbins (August).

→

An arrow at the bottom of a page indicates the stanza does not break.

PETER LEIGHT
Lost Occupations

Hander in, slicker on, upsetter, overlooker,
Level man, bottom man, note man, hold man,
Blanker, booster, bracer, buckler,

Nipple threader, head swamper, paunch trimmer, lip cutter,
Change person, action finisher, brim pouncer, joy loader,
Beater boss, face boss, mud boss, undercutter,

Flocker, linker, gigger, slicker,
Floater, flesher, fingerer, flipper,
Puffer, puddler, legger, sticker,

Faller, feller, filler, slacker,
Duller, dinger, dinker, dogger,
Scarfer, sider, flamer, jacker,

Goggerman, cleater, clincher, clicker,
Hooker up, knocker off, layer out, screw down,
Face burler, tongue trimmer, body bumper, bone picker.

LIZ ROBBINS
Under Pressure

—*after* *Tranströmer*

The blue mountains like paintings, modern and stark, but in no way
requiring a smart comment.

Long gone, the nirvana of real work, of playing within the risk of
irreparable failure.

Back then, we were heaven-duped, close to the plots that would uproot
and signify.

Then, we snacked and telephoned, skinny heavy people eager for a
hasty if cold exit, how the terrible

dates would suddenly shift, the house of self cycloned by the gulf
stream of a single question,

the nightmare swallows made sluggish by perpetual frustrated nesting.

And this is how we'd cripple ourselves away from forever and gold.

Some would speak. More falling. . . . Like midnight in the garden,
a singing jag both beautiful and sad.

And how we'd move on, drivers in our long sculling boats.

DANIEL BOURNE

Absinthe

Inside the wormwood of Europe
the compressed grain

sharp blossom of mold
in the moored boats

the edges of the harbor
where the deer drown—

such leeches
even the priests cry out

the father's cough
his own child eats like

an obedient carp

KARL PLANK

Gravity

When night calls for sounds
to cease, the barred owl
yet cries "Who cooks for you?"
and somewhere a woman
slippers through the dark
to a kitchen where water drips
a slow beat on the worn basin.
She nooses the tap with string,
a strand that drops to the drain,
and waits for each bead
to catch the thread and
descend into a well of silence
not even night can bring.

CLAIRE ÅKEBRAND

Reading *In Search of Lost Time*

(or Lullaby) (or Trying to Remember How to Write a Villanelle)

A mouse scurries in the attic. Outside
autumn reads convincingly in winter's voice.
The neighbor's wind chime turns the pages

of the early cold. You stir when I turn
the page: Aunt Léonie grows old. She reads
the street outside the window. (And about

this Moncrieff translation: the French echoes
like church bells in the distance announcing
some foreign ceremony.) The lamp glows

exactly like a lamp. Silence upstairs. Something has found
what it was frantic for. The cat has stopped whining,
no longer tosses and turns

in its hunger. You turn the pages of your sleep, pause
at unknown passages. Decipher
dark. The mouse's absence turns

the pages of the attic. The pages
turn themselves. You open your eyes, a line
of milk down your chin. And amid all these pages,
was there no story? No refrain?

TÓRODDUR POULSEN

Tøgnin og eg (The Silence and I)

tøgnin uttan
fyri meg
sjálvan og
sum eg
vakni til
eins og
ein buldrandi
býur sovnar

i wake
to the silence
outside myself
the way
a bustling
city falls
asleep

translated from the Faroese by Randi Ward

TÓRODDUR POULSEN
Slóð (Spoor)

blóð er eitt dýrt orð
at taka við sær í býin
saman við skriftini

tey gera eina slóð
sum eingin kann fylgja
uttan at verða ákærdur

fýri einki at gera

blood is a costly word
to take into town
with scripture

they leave a trail
no one can follow
without being accused

of doing nothing

translated from the Faroese by Randi Ward

LAURA MCCULLOUGH

Witness

The dog was thirsty, the man could tell.
The choice: to crawl, maybe fall, along the edge again
to capture water, so the dog could drink.
Not as he himself had done, by dipping face
into the gated reservoir, but from all he had, his shoe.
In the dark, as always, police possible,
maybe more so now than ever,
armed with their suspicion, poison in itself.
All I wanted to do, officer, was help the damned dog.
Just *dog*, no adjective nor expletive, danger in inflection.

JEFF EWING
Rice Burning

We drive north
through silence
 and rice fields

bristled with
stubble, blackbirds
 and herons.

The air through the vents
is sweeter
 than it should be

but sweetness
about to change
 to something else

like candy held
in the mouth
 too long.

Our eyes water
we taste ash
 on our lips

a crackling sifts
like static through
 the window.

The flames are
not yet visible
 just the smoke

flat as a dry cloud
pulled taut
 over the fields

and the lights
of the county truck
 flashing.

Someone at least
is watching, tending
 this smoldering

that could so easily
get away
 from him.

LAUREN CAMP

Hush—18

Tell me why being there was always ending.

Tell it four times or six.

I'm back to the way the liquid ran out of the cup.

Back to the twang of a body, and its declaration.

From this I learned that I believe in grief.

I'm not revealing the gaps, the familiar

repeating strange without echoes,

but want to remember driving into the mountains

when there was hardly snow.

MATT SALYER
Silly Old Bear

How lucky I am to have something that makes saying goodbye so hard.
—A. A. Milne, *Winnie-the-Pooh*

Girlhood takes practice, like all proper violence.
Perhaps this is why I find it so natural
to accommodate the work

of my daughters, all the princess rehearsals, doll covens,
the confusing menagerie of picture book
killers with animal families.

There are never any mothers in their wild, just
the spontaneous generation of carnivore males'
cubs, and I, poor naturalist that I am,

must be constantly reminded of this fact; I must be shown
the big cats, bachelor wolves, bruised bad bucks,
and the silly old bear—they are all a mess

of me. Consider this, then: what makes Owl coax a suicide
of drones from my fur, or Rabbit unlock the queen's comb
from my jaw? It is not love, it's fear; it's not much

use telling that to daughters, though. Children are medievalists,
sucking crucifixion through every broken reed
in the hundred-acre wood,

and allegorizing every last cub, lost to the teat. Let them.
Girlhood looks so arduous, and it must feel good
to keep a killer beside you,

buttoned in bearskin. Who else should raise daughters?
Who else can make a hunter but a hunter?
I work my work

and do not question why nature seems to follow our nature
nowhere, or why the wild things pursue the hunt.
What did you think I was doing

all these years? My paws clang in a bother of brown pots
and honey. Did you hear me coming? Did you?
I should scare you to death.

MATT SALYER

The Boy in the British Museum

Cataloged: a child and a stone child
neverland: the crowd of cupids,
claw-chiseled; speedracers drag
the coarse grain of a last lap; a lone
horse gags, buck-wild on the bridle.

Everything is Circus Maximus twee
for the gods, and every hungry son
of a bitch in Rome loves a dead driver,
buys those racecar beds from blue boys'
rooms in the Sears catalog.

Perhaps this explains the custom of carving
little sarcophagi with lost races,
leaving the bright flags and gilt dolphin
lap markers rough, the cupids half-relieved,
the rock rock. All decent customs

have these silly calculi. Take elegy.
You make the bed, arrange the busywork
of games, lump the toys in nightlight,
and say goodnight: goodnight moon,
goodnight little room, toys, monsters,

hush, and little monsters say goodnight.

CHERA HAMMONS

Bail

At least he had a new reason for not coming home.
The fender of the Firebird curled darkly
in the grass beside the highway several miles from the house,
catching each pair of headlights that went by
and devouring them within its curve.
As I passed I tried not to look at it,
deep green relic of the second car totaled in as many months,
obscene and surprising as the proof of some old ritual.
The neck of the broken brandy bottle would have gaped near it,
the spirits discovered, they told me over the phone, against all odds
because of the glint it made thrown from the window
as the Firebird was rolling. Then they gave me directions
and told me to leave right away. It was urgent.
So I drove thirty miles in the clothes I had worn twenty hours
and didn't bother to fix my makeup.
When I arrived the sun had frozen in the haze
over the mountains and stopped getting brighter early,
trapped in icy gray and weak pastel that paled the mesas
that ended right before Nine Mile Hill. I went in just to be told
to get back in my car and wait. It wouldn't be long.
As the morning unstopped, the gray cinderblock building
reached to the parking lot, where I was the only one waiting.
I turned off the engine to save the regular unleaded
we couldn't afford to waste, and grew too cold to shiver.
They told me he had to detox. That it took four hours
to get him sober, while I wondered about lawyering up.
He came out as if he had stepped out of the bathroom
at a restaurant and was looking around for his place,
studying the sweat-brown brim of his cowboy hat
and scuffing the burgundy boots he called "ostrich titty."
He opened the door, saying not to say a word, not to ever
say a word. Did I understand? There was nothing to talk about.
This was my first marriage, one I'd agreed to,
and I knew too much now to want to know more.
Not about any of the things he'd done,
how we'd pay the rent, what he told his mother in Oklahoma,
where he believed his prayers, if he did pray, went,
or whose miracle it was, his or mine,
that he was so good at walking away from every wreck.

CRAIG FINLAY
Something Special

Fuckin' Dave sings and mutters aperch the corner steps of the store where you and everyone else went to rent your prom tuxedos. He sprouts like a mushroom, you think. Drive to the liquor store and as you pass the steps are barren and then there's Fuckin' Dave instead. You remember walking to the Stop N' Go Video on a snow day for a Sega game and Fuckin' Dave was already there, birthed through a stratum of soft powder, smoking, listening to a Walkman. He scared you, with his long hair and leather jacket and so did his friends at Smoker's Corner, hands in girls' back pockets and Mountain Dew at their feet. The girls smoked disconsolate cigarettes while their boyfriends held you down and shoved mud up your ass and so you walked home with mud up your ass and fantasized about slow motion blood sprays on the bleachers and gunshot-truncated pleas for mercy. Fuckin' Dave is there now as you write this, pulling the world tight and heavy into his concave chest and hooking his feet at the ankles so it spins faster and all the cities and lights are like a long exposure of stars spinning around Polaris in thick felt. Twenty years now he has perched and smoked, staring at the darkened and empty spaces downtown, writing an epic in geologic timescale. Oh my fucking god you think as you see that visage follow your car over the crest of the tracks and the gentle yellow sodium light sweep through the dark of your car and the rest of Hurst Street, your street, the warm patched asphalt inviting you to rest your head and wonder why you remember the things you do. Twenty years now but not finished. The babies who go there now to rent tuxedos and look like men in the tall three-fold mirrors are impossibly young. And if Fuckin' Dave is there on the week when all the tests come back positive and the diagnosis is terminal you may finally approach him and ask the right question.

JESSICA JACOBS

The Shelton with Sunspots

—*Georgia O'Keeffe, with Alfred Stieglitz (New York, NY, 1926)*

You, with your camera, are a boy with a Ball jar,
out trapping fireflies. My secret, though,

is there is no corner I cannot paint
my way out of. You want me as pupil?

Fine, I'm all aperture. All film stock—silver
salted and emulsified. But I won't stop

with just you—I take it all in.
Morning, with its halved-appled light,

exposes in me invisible images,
gray web of water towers,

wind-riffled river—painting calls them out.
Shows how even by day

this is a lunar city. An island of indirect
illumination. I stand to the east and fit

my eye to the grid—New York,
the country's kaleidoscope:

lit/unlit windows,
lumen-tiled towers. Here is where

we live—this gun barrel,
this crested butte, this jack-in-its-pulpit

of smog-hooded sky. And there, in that glare,
our window.

MICHAEL BROEK

The Cloud and the Counterpane

The Cloud 1

citi of never-ending gates
citi of evidence collected in barrels
DNA the 100-year storm left
waterlogged
along Kingsland Avenue in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, muck—

citi of Sutton Hoo of golden breastplates
punk teeth false hair

citi of candied orange slices & sushi
that preserved that raw that saturated color
inside the steam-mouthed kitchen

citi of birth
documents floating down to Jersey

citi of preserved women
hanging from fat rafters like antique brooms

citi of preserved men
shut inside glass cases on soft black sheets

citi of gods

citi of devils

citi of can't tell the difference.

The Counterpane 1

Here in my bivouac
on the other side of the world

I will write to you
about all the head-sunk people

eyes bowed thick with fear
walking like statistics up
& down the streets & the ones
who turn their faces

& who I misbelieve are you.

I am not sure I know the difference anymore
between this person & that
along Kingsland Avenue
though some point guns & others
kiss me hard on the lips
& I am so glad
we are one of those
kind who point with our mouths
most of the time.

I could say your name
or I could just crawl across your chest
& our thighs would speak the text
lay your head against my neck & come
nameless one
everywhere

London, Mumbai, New York, Shanghai
these species: citis
this genus: citi
slicing off the *y*
no good asking anyway.

You are in another citi & I
am deep here in myself
—less these numbers, less these names & eyes—

but it is the same sky, isn't it?

The Cloud 2

well, there were people not on any maps
but in citis
on the maps

in statisticians' shop drawers
shedding citizens' data onto squared
tile floors
& in the server's ever-spooling numbers

circumnavigating solar systems
since numbers
were light
& seemingly infinite

space
& on Tuesday at 5 p.m. the Milky Way is finite
while at 5:01
there is more, *encore du, encore du*

in bodega storage closets
& police precinct bathrooms
where there loom broomstick endings

fractions

systolic/diastolic

in private club parlors where countries
meet histories written
under invaders' thumbs &

numbers men gobble tables where eyes are
multipliers
citis' fissures, fissions, fractures

. . . the ethics of loving are complex
if this can be called loving at all
the 4:05 p.m. from Newark arrives at Penn not at all . . .

but solidly within dream
nightmare & imagined futures arriving
softly

across bridges leering brightly
in breezeway corners & last-century
elevators

crossing each storey's
horizontal steel
each light-pierced foregone life-line

water-line food-line power-line
line-up
line of defense

graph paper
the Arecibo message:

11
11
11
11
11
01
11
11
01
11
01
11
01
11
10
11
11
01
X

double-helix human

the extraterrestrial
signal 6EQUJ5
forwards & backwards WOW!

The Counterpane 2

Your back
is a constellation
is code map & lexicon
leading the way
across & inside
the counterpane. Time
we have wasted
wanting. This
humming of hands
smoothing
tugging
piecing
palming the skin. Take
the batting. Take
the needle
& sew the
we of us between these

crosswise stitches
mating belly on top
of belly halves:
flax duff
wool tips
cotton waste
& rags.

Whatever it takes to be warm.

Whatever it takes to hold together
two horizons pierced

through with light:

Jacob's Ladder
Flying Geese
Monkey Wrench
Crossroads.

Underground
Railroad quilts
signaling what everyone

desires

kissing—revolution—the gasp—
your hip fastened to mine
unfurled & free.

The Cloud 3

Tal Afar

citi of

blood stars

patterning soldiers' boots

splintered windshield

wheeling about Lt.

_____’s head

firing the warning

shots

flashing

the hand

signaling

“Stop”

the Arecibo message

humans

cringing

in the statistician’s

office corner

Samar

Hassan

officially unrecorded

all these blossoming

terrors

Samar

beauty

exploding citi.

The Counterpane 3

The pattern is here.
The shop is mine.
Hour passed hand along
nape of neckline
fabric which
choosing chooses me—
tools:
scissor, machine, spool
blade & rule.

What happened
last night along the roadway
home?

What happened last
star-splintered year
manning the checkpoint?

Or in that secret tree
split open in the garden?

Pattern is here. That
pattern I wasn't meant
to have. Stitches organizing
sky—constellations
pointing toward futures
I didn't know was there
plural.

P = slow loves
perambulations
of dresses around the garden
market flowers
patterning the day.

Do you have this?
Is there one of these?
What I go finding
is never what I leave
having found—
you.

MICHAEL BROEK

Dear shopkeeper
stocker
prophet

I came today
imagining
just where I was going &
you suggested
new ideas.

The Cloud 4

the A train to Far Rockaway was bound
to run over Sunando Sen.

“If I’d smoked a blunt that day, I wouldn’t have pushed him,”
Menendez said.

a universe of subjects
encoded in things

[a dictatorship

of—(preposition) belonging in, composed
in—(preposition) of perpetuity]

once Blake opened his mouth
“all sublimity is founded
on minute discrimination”

object becoming subject
remaining object

Sunando Sen was bound
to fly when the A train to Far Rockaway
arrived.

The Counterpane 4

My head is full of you & the wind
has picked up your scent
bringing you back to me. My head

aches from feeling
& the lights along the sidewalk grow
yellow with their simple being

in the face of all their glassy eyes have seen—
backpacks walking into distance
& shopping carts, carriages & scooters

people too. People not
in cities or on maps—people in each
other's arms. Along the blue black walkway

beside benches crying with sweat
are her & him & dogs
tethered to their masters

sometimes many in the hands of one
walking with his head down.
In my brain today is hurt

I had not known I wanted & wouldn't
give up. I had finished the quilt
so I went down & sat by the smell-less river—

just a frosted gray strip of moon
laid down between cities that see
each other across the river

but do not touch. These quilts
are called crazy. Patches pieced with no
pattern—random except for intent.

The city on the other side of the river looks
like the city on this side of the river.

Except I looked & someone looked back.

The Cloud 5

citi of alleys all *back*
behind the boulevards alley-living
alleys of strays alleys of broken pipes
alleys of rich tenants & porters
alleys of runaways & unconquerables

reading Plato
by nite light

citi in which the philosopher is not wanted
ideal citi
every citi where

“an hour cannot be spent more pleasantly”
than at Harry Hill’s place on 25 East Houston Street

brothel, towers
of shuffled papers, bodies
leaning toward dissolution in water

187 metal slugs or 2,200 gallons of #2 jet fuel

& amortizing memorials advertising grief
because telling always seems
the way

’cept the aliens ain’t listening

citi of broken eyes navigating sidewalk cracks
because placing eyes back in the head means scalding fire

walking the dead man’s route—
the Jornada del Muerto—Manhattan
Oppenheimer quoting the four-thousand-year-old
burn-your-eyes-out texts:

De Civitate Dei.

The Counterpane 5

She walks into the vestibule & leaves
a bomb meant for the ambassador.

She walks into the vestibule & leaves an umbrella
I left at the table

which pattern chooses:
“we’ll see when they carry them out” (Szyborska)

I take the elevator down from 14E
step into open space

such saturated color, light, heat
flicking like a peony—the concentration

required to press my eyes against
her nape like a brave limb of birch

as she retreated into the kitchen
stepped back out again wet & on fire—

exiting the vestibule I
unfurl myself in the rain.

The Cloud 6

a topography of citi reveals
monuments to Babylon
ticking through the pavement—
glass, levers
slaves sleeping upright in dim corners
& tunnels sniffed by rats
stealing gold: pharaoh, mayor, architect
embalmer, saint

atop the thwarting bull Wall Street
a ballerina *en pointe*
a bronze man reading
literature dumped from the Free Library
a card catalog unwritten: occupied

blue horizontal lines, margin at the top
categorizing “citi”:

she “will go out in time, will go out
into time, hiding even her embers” (Duncan)

I love you even as love refuses names
refuses to be named

because it is refugee
my sweet untold ballerina

Hassan.

The Counterpane 6

If the branch is to bear its birds & angles
featherweight leaves & invisible winds
for as long as it is possible to hold anything
then it must make peace with earth
sleep-spot, dirt bed & disassemblage. Swaying

early October toward ice & that clear
lacquering weight, the nuthatch & its love
still hang upside down & that branch bend
might be your crook of arm & sleep while below
that improbable mattress unfolds itself with

warnings, wind signaling too, beaten up
leaves showing their veins.
The nuthatch does not love its mate. Such sloppy
thinking. Nor does the branch care either
dropping here or there onto lives built & lives

spent. Hear the snarling wind its teeth
in a hurricane season biting the hide of time
& you whom I want in my mouth, both your past
self & your future long-haired bark beauty—a soft knoll
I might kern into, forget for a moment this fall.

I want what the many have wanted, my own
failings a nest of reeds holding up the tunnel's mouth.
Reed, water, splash & break, whatever's left
there where earth asks sky its questions
worth the price of bearing.

The Cloud 7

sometimes there is no edge—

just sheets of cloud
statistics underneath, dying in each
other's arms, equations exchanging messages
on the backs of napkins & stars

sometimes there are no clouds—

nothing to cup hands around
color pure & tender-less, a message
reader-less, the cobalt blue bedsheets
crease-less & empty

seven million drops are walking citi
merging into cloud, falling, emptied, collected, rising
again into five-storey walk-ups bleeding

mold the 100-year storm left
documents signaling life
strewn about the apartment & underneath

the coffee cup a note left encoding
the next coming, the next Sutton Hoo
treasure sunk in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, muck—

our unearthing. sometimes genetics
explodes from alien directions
& Samar Hassan crouches

in corners. sometimes, there is
life where none is wanted—
but not in this house. I want

this & this & this, but not all
of these things want to be sewn
together. the pattern counter to plan is love.

The Counterpane 7

Disarmed is a word
dreamt by men who don't
love: what I have to embrace

stricken away & patterning
the landscape's empty floor.

These limbs are weapons & forgers of salt
triggers & lines of sight

stretched across the plane of bed
on the one hand
& nighttime the other

where my enemy might be
myself pointing back, pointing toward

what cannot be stood—
outside the light is daisy, your hair spilled

pillow-wise
wets the edge of my arm
& though I do not think of you, I

dream of you & our coming
into a clearing

holding your arms to your sides in my
embrace out there

under the drone's eye, the sun
lighting the crosshair's eyes its green
undeniable desire.

The Cloud 8

tonight the lights of citi come on for us
or at least this is the story
we tell isn't it because

the citis on the maps are never
the citis on the maps but a border that begs
crossing this night & that remorseless fence

that cold-wet water welcome
drowning in sight of land until "my friend
drag me out" & strangers in white gloves

pound the water out the refugee's chest
turning over coughing dust
from tunnel-low below sedimentary

rock below pressure
below green water oil tankers & cruise ships
swimmers embalmed in their yellow frog suits

fishing bodies from the river
below catatonic skyscrapers staring at their
beautiful skins winking in the river's mirror

below air & stars & void. we dug
another void below it all
& there were souls where everyone knew

they might be hidden but no one
since the last god had thought to see
& then to us it seemed

the bores we made & the souls we had claimed
easing their way out the walls now
& into air

were the crest of it all, everything below
now rock now above then air
transfusing into air

all the ghosts in love with diggers' light.

The Counterpane 8

You are the ship & the sea
I had to leave I never
had to leave—at night the lights
scanning the beach
seemed a new world
& as I crawl between your thighs
placing my nose in your hair
arms wrapped round your back
you are the wave between
me & the shore
I must swim through when the ship
founders, briny grind whirling
sirens & a song signaling
“Stop”—not
heeding the lieutenant’s
glare. There’s a matter of life & death
worth discussing
sure sure the lights are one
a new world
the same old world
I have grown to love
& will ravish
again
you citi
you nameless original (clear blue) smile. All
dissolution lingers too long—
then a yellow
Vespa flies by, two women on the machine
scissor, machine, spool
blade & rule

& we sew.

BOOKS IN BRIEF: Split This Rock

John Rosenwald

The room: full, but not crowded, perhaps sixty people. Relatively comfortable armchairs curl in a wide arc. At the front of the room, a moderator. I'm in the second row, an arm's length from him, as he introduces the four poets to his left. Each reads her or his poems, some from manuscripts, some from a special March 2014 issue of *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*. No amplification, no raised platform, no lectern. No physical separation from the audience. I hear lines I love, images I will remember, sounds that soothe or stimulate my ears:

My father. . . . learned English
by listening to the radio. The first four words . . .
he memorized: In God We Trust. The fifth:
Percolate. . . .

—Eduardo C. Corral, from “In Colorado
My Father Scoured and Stacked Dishes”

I know a dried-up riverbed
& extinct animals live in your nightmares
sharp as shark teeth from my mountains. . . .

—Yusef Komunyakaa, from “Envoy to Palestine”

When the stranger asks, Why do you care? you just stand there staring at him. He has just referred to the boisterous teenagers in Starbucks as niggers. . . . He is holding the lidded paper cup in one hand and a small paper bag in the other. They are just being kids. Come on, no need to get all KKK on them, you say.

—Claudia Rankine, from “Citizen”

Cinderella left her slipper in Iraq
along with the smell of cardamom
wafting from the teapot,
and that huge flower,
its mouth gaping like death.

—Dunya Mikhail, from “Tablets”
(trans. Kareem James Abu-Zeid)

The poets' voices resonate. Komunyakaa's elegant pace and timbre musically complement Corral's. Mikhail writes in Arabic; her accented voice brings us back to the “quotidian” that Rankine insists is essential to her own work. Some of the poems make political statements; some do not. The tone shifts at times

from comic to heavy, as in the Starbucks reference with which Rankine begins “Citizen” before she moves to the racial slur central to the passage she reads.

Soon questions come from others in the room: “What is your relationship to the audience?” Corral responds: “I changed from being a young writer when I began to pay attention to audience My job is to listen.” Mikhail adds: “I’d like to be understood by everyone, just not by the censors. That’s why I write a lot of metaphors. I write from right to left, then from left to right. I care so much to make it interesting.”

Another audience member inquires: “How do you write?” Komunyakaa comments: “I try not to be false to myself. It is a dialogue with myself. . . . I try to surprise myself with language A jazz musician performs around a melody. . . . A writer’s melody is his existence. . . . Poetry is a kind of beckoning . . . an attempt to make ourselves whole.” Someone else contributes: “We feel every word we speak.” And remarks the importance of reading work out loud, both in public settings like this one and while originally crafting the poem.

Rankine summarizes: “It’s just that we are sitting in a room, talking, all listening to each other.” And we are, listening not only to ourselves, but also to each other. It feels like an evening gathering of friends, neighbors you recognize but haven’t yet met. One last question, a closing comment from the moderator, chairs push back and the audience disperses, though some linger to chat with the poets, ask a few more questions. The room slowly empties, concluding this Saturday morning session at the March 2014 gathering of Split This Rock. The next one begins in ten minutes.



Split This Rock celebrated its first full festival in 2008. At the *BPJ* we had become aware of the organization a year earlier at the annual conference of the Association of Writers and Writing Programs, the AWP. Within fifteen minutes, serendipitously, Ann Arbor, Lee Sharkey, and I individually met three of the original organizers: Regie Cabico, Melissa Tuckey, and Sarah Browning. Late the next evening we attended a session announcing the formation of “a major gathering of poets of conscience,” a response in part to the continuing presence of U.S. troops in

Iraq. A coming together of poets committed to politics, political poetry, and political change? Sounded good to us! We arranged to meet the organizers for dinner, offered to publish a chapbook of their featured poets, struck a bargain, headed for Washington, D.C., the next spring to talk poetry, create a communal poem in front of the White House, participate in workshops, and listen to poems read aloud.

Poems read aloud. Sometimes we forget the oral/aural dimension that gave birth to poetry. Homer, the bards of many regions of Europe, Asian court poets, the singers of both then and now. To say nothing of hip-hop, spoken word, or slam.

Split This Rock reminded us. Harkening back to Langston Hughes and his injunction to join him in his attempt to “split this rock” of racism and power, pulling poets from around the United States, from around the world, hosting the celebration in the historic U Street neighborhood of Washington, centering on the new bookstore/coffeebar/hangout Busboys and Poets, the festival provided aural treats: Sonia Sanchez welcoming us, chatting and chastising in the down home open space at Busboys, advertising that evening’s reading by Martín Espada, Ethelbert Miller, Naomi Shihab Nye, and Alix Olson. From Espada’s rumbling “Carabanza” to Olson’s funky spoken-word “Dear Diary,” the mood was set. The next day added more youthful energy from sharp-edged work by Ishle Park to winners of the Youth Poetry Contest. A buzz of energy emanating from the spoken word. When we weren’t listening to poets read we feasted in the back room of Busboys, talking poetry, talking politics, talking with each other.

On the last day, Sunday morning, Galway Kinnell stood in front of us, pulling together many of the themes others had presented during the previous four days, as we readied ourselves to march silently to Pennsylvania Avenue, where hundreds of us gathered then contributed a few words of poetry each to a long cento, or collaborative poem, read in front of the White House. I doubt Mr. Bush was listening. But our words were in the air.



Much of my love of poetry comes from hearing language spoken aloud. Poetry readings I attended in my twenties were often

conventional: the poet, introduced by a friend or mentor, moved to the lectern, stood behind it, read poems from his most recent book. When he finished, there was polite applause. Exceptions existed: Dylan Thomas had mesmerized audiences in the early 1950s with his bardic recitations. At a Modern Language Association convention in 1971 Adrienne Rich transformed a keynote speech into poetry that I listened to with new ears. In the early 1970s the poets the Worcester County Poetry Association brought to read, including Kinnell, Rich, Muriel Rukeyser, and Robert Bly, made fresh music with their words.

I met Bly for the first time in 1971, attended his initial Conference on the Mother four years later. During the first decade of our acquaintance I attended many of his three- or four-hour readings—sometimes as much performance as reading, moving from a monster-masked chant of the Campbell's soup jingle while he charged through the middle of an audience, to a Shakespearean sonnet accompanied by the dulcimer, to a falsetto recitation of his anti-Vietnam War poem "Counting Small-Boned Bodies," this time in the mask of a shriveled scraggly haired crone. Reciting, rarely looking down at a page, Bly convinced me of the power of the spoken word. For him a strong connection existed between oral tradition and political expression. With Kinnell and others, he had traveled the country doing public readings in opposition to our war in Southeast Asia, had published anthologies and poems of his own that condemned it. Bly was invited to the first Split This Rock gathering in 2008 but could not attend.

The original STR program booklet stressed the political element—"Poems of Provocation and Witness"—but also by its very design the event emphasized the performative dimension of poetry. The common effort envisioned by Langston Hughes, the location of the festival in an historic neighborhood known for its political oratory, the public readings, the White House cento all drew attention to the spoken word.

Mere presentation, however, is not enough. Contrast the frequent discrepancy at events such as the AWP conference between venue and size of audience, between distorted amplification and the resonance of an unaltered human voice. Even at some STR events during the early years watching a featured poet read

to a partially empty high school auditorium could undermine our sense of a unified political community. This spring, a shift of venue and increase in attendance helped to create a strong sense of shared vision and values. Although I missed the mood at Busboys and the U Street neighborhood, I welcomed the atmosphere at the National Geographic Grosvenor Auditorium, where we were greeted by recordings and large photos of poets such as Amiri Baraka, Juan Gelman, and Adrienne Rich, all of whom had died during the previous two years. Each featured reading included spoken-word poets—local competitors and/or those with national reputations. The presence of the D.C. Youth Slam Team immediately in front of the stage transformed these presentations, for poets implicitly shared the podium with their entire community, often to comic effect:

Poet: You can buy my chapbook in the hallway for ten dollars.

Slam Team (many voices): Only ten dollars?

Poet: That's right: ten dollars.

Slam Team (many voices): You can't afford not to!

Instead of Robert Bly taking his words to his audience, here the audience made its own (vocal) way to the stage.

One evening moved from the high energy of Slam Team member Malachi Byrd to the 2014 STR Poetry Contest winner, Karen Skolfield, to Tim Seibles to Anne Waldman. For my taste Seibles handled the format best. A big man with huge hands, he half stood, half hunched on a tall stool as he almost whispered a single long and astonishingly wide-ranging poem, "One Turn Around the Sun." Bitter lines morphed to sweet ones, trenchant political commentary jostled with personal anecdote. Some images, however, remained constant.

Time . . . running like ants all over the afternoon
and where are *they* going with so many legs—
as if it made sense to live in a frenzy. . . .

boxes full of work to be done, bosses / drones—
bizzy, the word repeated . . .

until it becomes a city itself—everyone
zigging to the zag. . . .

When I was a boy I threw ants
into webs and watched / didn't know

it was a preview of my life. . . .

while the ants, the trillion-trillion



hum just beneath us: do you think
they think we know something?

As in the Saturday morning session described earlier, Seibles made us feel as if he were reading the poem in his living room to a small group of friends.

Even more than such strong large-scale readings I long for what the *BPJ* tried to do with a panel we organized for the 2012 Split This Rock. We asked three featured readers, Douglas Kearney, Khaled Mattawa, and Minnie Bruce Pratt, to read and talk about a few poems in a relatively small setting. We allowed time for comments and questions, attempting all the while to make the audience feel an intimate part of the poetry. This presentation, Sarah Browning reminded me later, became a model for this year's Saturday morning panel.

And as that panel ended, another was about to begin: "New Vietnamese Poetry: A Group Reading & Discussion." I had selected this one over five alternatives because of Ocean Vuong. Although I had not met him, the *BPJ* had chosen him for last year's Chad Walsh Prize. Often we make this award for a "big" poem—long, complex, ambitious. We had chosen Vuong for a powerful but relatively brief lyric. Meanwhile he had won accolades everywhere: poems in *Poetry*, a new book, a Pushcart Prize, a number of fellowships. I wanted to see him read, to meet him, to urge him to send us more poems.

At the same time, the subject of the panel drew me in. For my generation what we call the Vietnam War was transformative. Many of our fathers had fought in World War II and had not returned, or returned scarred but victorious, or had served, like many of our mothers, on the home front. Triumphant, confident of our nation's rectitude, even of the decision to annihilate Hiroshima and Nagasaki, they seemed satisfied at the remarkable power their country had amalgamated. Vietnam changed that. The power of song/poetry, the opposition of Bly, Rich, Kinnell, and others, the teach-ins of the mid-1960s changed that. Moving to Germany in the fall of 1965 I was stunned by the massive anti-American rallies opposed to our presence in Southeast Asia. As anti-war sentiment increased back home, affiliating itself with various civil rights movements, from race to gender, my view of my country changed forever.

To hear three young Vietnamese Americans read their poetry and talk about what they called “the American war” was irresistible, especially given the power of poems I had seen from Ocean Vuong.

One could not easily imagine three poets more different in appearance, voice, and writing style. They had met at an Asian American poetry festival, had shared their stories. On the surface they had little in common except their national background. And what could be more important than that? Especially given the presence in their country of the United States military on the trumped-up charge of a naval attack in the Gulf of Tonkin.

Cathy Lin Che began, describing their first encounter, their shared values/goals/experiences. She introduced a topic that ran through the session: a generation of fathers who, because of the American war, were not present, deeply troubled, or dangerous.

Then came Paul Tran. Twenty-one, a bit pudgy, his black shirt studded on the shoulders, tied only at the neck, his entire back exposed to the audience, he first created the world of his mother, who, like many Vietnamese women unemployed and often unemployable in their new country, survived by doing nails. His voice pitched like hers, his hands echoing her actions, his words (now not hers, though in her voice) cutting the polite air of the audience: “I will make you drop-dead gorgeous.”

Tran’s mother, however, was only the prologue. In his next poem he sharpened the knives, and cut deeper. He became his father. His father who had fought in the Vietnamese army, who had fathered five children by women other than his wife without her knowledge, who had abused Paul, and presumably his siblings, who now ran an ice cream truck selling goodies to young children in California: “I was always into giving people what they wanted.” As Tran narrated the poem in his father’s voice we saw the father flash back to war memories, shake one off in the middle of a sentence, come back to the present, smiling seductively, freed (on the surface) from whatever demons beset him, distributing from his shattered self demons of his own for his young imagined audience, and for us.

We had arrived at the core of Tran's work: poetry as performance, poetry depending on the power of language but heightened—through pitch, through gesture, through costume—to theater, but theater that remains poetry. As he sat down, I observed the third poet at the other end of the table: slender, short, with large dark-framed glasses obscuring much of his face, apparently deferential. How could they have agreed to let him go last?

But poetry is not merely a matter of performance. As Ocean Vuong stood and began his introduction, there slowly emerged from what looked like a twelve-year-old boy the poised, polished, professional twenty-five-year-old poet.

First, the father: "You move through me like rain through another country. . . . I wrote a better world onto the page and watched the fire take it back. From men I learned to praise the war. From women I learned to praise."

Then with a glance at a self-referential poem by Frank O'Hara, he addressed the issue of identity, of self-worth, that all three young poets asserted as central to their concepts of themselves as poets, as humans, as Vietnamese: "Someday I'll love Ocean Vuong."

Returning to the theme Cathy Lin Che had introduced, he spoke quietly: "Rather than investigate the lack of fatherhood, I want to investigate the power of motherhood. For me men were myths, women with their love and flaws were human. Women taught me we would survive. . . . My father's very absence raised me. I know what I had when he was there, and I know what I had when he was gone. . . . [In Vietnamese] the word for 'to remember' is the exact same word as to be missing someone. To say 'I miss you' means 'I remember you, I bring you back.'"



Split This Rock has moved beyond its first days, both physically and creatively. But the fundamentals remain the same: political commitment, the oral tradition, joining forces in the belly of the beast. Whether it manifests as the generation of Kinnell and Sanchez or the dozens of young slam poets who energized the stage without being on it, Split This Rock, simply, rocks.