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POET'S FORUM (blog.bpj.org)

The Poet's Forum is taking a break for the months of September, October, and November. All previous forum posts remain accessible through the blog archives.

→

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

DANEZ SMITH
For the Fifth Grade Black Boys
of Benjamin E. Mays Elementary School

I am sorry I have no happy poems
about the ashy hallelujah of knees.
Whenever I open my mouth, ghosts raid

my poor tongue demanding names. I say
Devonte & my mouth drips stray braids.
I say *Keshawn* & vomit gold teeth.

It's always like this, my one good song
still unclaimed at the morgue, my hands
try to clap & end up cupping a skull.

DANEZ SMITH

my father gives a lecture on the power of good pussy

meanwhile, I smack my dry mouth practicing Darren's width, for whom I must make my jaw a legend if I want him to call me again. I make myself a wet absence of light, almost pussy with the lamp off & no cellphone glow. I've been mustering my way up to Darren. Before him, Michael. Before Michael, Kendrall. Before that, God knows who. Before my memory ends, there was me, playing contortionist in the basement, my body a fucked-up crescent moon, grandma upstairs cooking something with too much salt, & my tongue finally reaching the sweet slit, a first kiss all my own. At this point, my father is explaining what good pussy is & ain't & gets mistaken for, how good pastors turn foolhearted nigga at a whiff of uncrossed legs, how it can make a man ditch a woman with clean up his mess or give it a name & raise it. But I know what my mouth is & ain't & what I try to make it. I try my best to vanish my teeth, make my mouth soft & warm & almost named Kim. Darren, who say he ain't gay, say *shit*, *nigga* & shake & rattle & roll his pants back up. He say it damn near feels like a woman & don't look me in my eye. He pounds my fist when he leaves like we just finished playing horse. I know I should let my daddy finish, but I want to tell him I already know what my mouth can do. That the slick he preaching 'bout is a language I've practiced in the dark. He say *only good pussy can make a man lose his religion*. I say I have heard Darren speak in tongues, I say my mouth is a shiny, new god.

MATTHEW KELSEY
Nuestro Pueblo

—for Will Camponovo

*Why I build it? I can't tell you. Why a man
make the pants? Why a man make the shoes?*

— Sabato Rodia

After the Wide Awake Gang pried away,
after *Los Traqueros* laid their sleepers down, long
after China left town, he build the tower.
After the gandy dancers arrested beds with ties,
bolts, steel that bled in slick silver plates. For the hand
to mouth to hand and back to god, for the god the strong-arm
pulls and four-beat chants, all dogging drawls
for the doppling down.

The tower stood before the night
that lasted for days—the night of Frye and Price—
before the errant wave of Thin Blue Lines' batons, before
blockbusters, knuckledusters, Grape Street Crips,
toy drives lame at the feet of Bloody Christmas.
Before zoot suits were black and white and all hung out
on the line to dry, before the blur of claw bars, blues bars, rebar, death
of the difference in *de jure* and *de facto*. The tower stood
and the tower remained.

Because a barely-five-foot man had it in mind
to do something big, out of sight. Out of the blue. Out of being
out of place, character, fashion, control. Out of hand
and shallow pocket: seashells, mortar, perlite tiles,
rare ware. With the help, here
and there, of mothers who sent their children with the broken blue
glass of milk of magnesia. A man build the tower
because it's not enough, because it's not enough to pretend to be
untrained and clumsy—it takes nerve to commit
to naïve. Because we're all outsiders
for now. He climb, he glue, he stammering hammer, he
good, good, good over bad, bad, bad all day for the divorce
from home. For mnemonic device, vice, for fear the sled
is drifting away with Marie. For *art*
brut, no law but the raw and the rough, because it is
absolutely enough to be alone and silent
and must be, whether we like it or not.

JONATHAN MOODY

Olympic Butter Gold (United States East Coast Interlude)

*If there was a HIP-HOP or Rap Olympics, I really don't think
the United States would get the Gold, Silver or Brass.*

—Chuck D

The speaker is Fab 5 Freddy

MC Agent Orange, a former chess prodigy,
likens his rapping style to a drunk

kung-fu master: his unorthodox
cadences are purple centipedes

winding around grimy beats.
No Cuban Link, diamond-

studded Jesus piece—
just a wreath of firecrackers.

With a brown paper bag cloaked
over the mic, he steps to the stage

& chugs imaginary swigs
of truth serum. In the other

hand, a tray of horse mackerel
sushi & bluefin tuna

suggests he's about to serve
some raw verses.

ROBERT LUNDAY

Aubade

The turntable's faithful skinny arm has needled the 45
over and over all night while you have lain, I assume,
passed out. Our shared wall's thin as an eyelid
so now I know the lyrics "Green Onions" doesn't have
by heart. Wake up! Night has sung its way to morning,
the town already fidgets and shouts. The street bosses
have mopped your vomit from the sidewalk
and cursed your good times. The clock
has nailed its coffins for the new day's losses.
Don't be dead! Wake up and play the other side.

FIONA CHAMNESS
Choreography for Ensemble

—for *Bob Fosse, Pina Bausch, Nina Simone, and J.*

1. Sweet Charity

Your cigarette will never leave your lip
though it dangles on the edge of falling,
caught between the smolder and the slip—
your legwork isn't fucking, but it leads
to fucking, stillness meant to make you beg
the bones to grind, and stop, and groan, and grind
until you've sucked the ashes from your griefs
and stubbed the husks against the railing;
a whole life limned in burnt and broken lines,
the sour heart that went off like a bomb
with years of powder waiting in the keg
almost as though it didn't think you gone;
a molten substance coiled in your core,
the red slick your footprints leave on the floor.

2. Rites of Spring

The red slick your footprints leave on the floor
is paint I've spilled, or let's pretend it is;
I spent so much of high school on the stage
I might not know the difference anymore.
Oh ugly body, up there even now
with no way down. Pina's young dancers writhe;
the girls flinch toward the boys; the cellos rage
and crumple into heaps, not knowing how
to stop. And who does? Not you, gray-haired queen
who taught me my first steps. I mimicked yours.
You told me I was gorgeous, and I tried
to hide how much I needed what you'd seen.
Oh dead man. I remember that first dip,
the sleek pop hidden in your left hip.

3. Cabaret

The sleek pop hidden in your left hip
is all the lust I wished I'd learned to wield;
nine, I kissed a boy on his left shoulder
to stop him jumping off the stairs; thirteen,
my tongue untied, sweeping a girl's mouth clean;
six, my father saying my bare skin
would harm the leather of his chair; older
schoolgirls asking why I wouldn't shave
or wear a bra; my next-to-nothing slips
at parties where the women pulled me in
to look like rebels, then turned boyward, safe,
my softness both a weapon and a shield,
and I went home to finish, like a chore,
left, and leaving hungry: give me more.

4. Pastel Blues

I'm left, and leaving, hungry. Give me more.
Blues has a language for this too. Fishtail
and shuffle, jelly roll and drunken braille.
The needle drops, the record spills its guts.
I sway and lean against the kitchen door,
come here, come here, and press my eyelids shut.
If this is shame, the flooded well of breath
she stirs in me, then give me shame, and play
the thing again. I learned to dance to sounds
like this in basement rooms, in strangers' arms;
we held and left, and held, and spun, and left.
No blues on earth can make the living stay.
But ask me anyway. Lull my dreams dumb
and then some. I want some more and then some

5. More

and then some. I want some more and then some,
then flip the vinyl to the other side,
and this is church, where we pray for the dead.
But my dead are drunk queer lunatics,
my dead slugged vodka, groped and slapped and cried
for Judy Garland, knelt to cock and clit,
so spare me psalms, give me the wine and bread
and blood. Sinnerman, where you gonna run.
Piano acrobats the river down
to dust. I'm through with soloing. Get up
and crush my bones, my friend, teach me the ground;
there's still a film of red left in my cup,
and floor enough to spin, so might as well.
I want a dip so low I can see hell.

6. Café Mueller

I want a dip so low I can see hell
though I'll be blind when I turn back. These chairs,
all over the damn place, nothing to do
but stumble, shove, and stagger toward the wall
only memory can tell us is still there.
A woman trembles as she struggles through
to clamp her arms around the first man's neck.
He holds her tight before the second man
steps in, manipulates their limbs, a lift
they can't maintain, and so she drops, then back
to clutching him, again and then again,
faster and faster, desperate in their grip.
This room's a dark sea. I'm a piece of jetsam.
Hold me for a measure, then for ransom.

7. A Snake in the Grass

Hold me for a measure. Then for ransom
take this dusty footage of a serpent
becoming a bald man in a black hat.
Fosse's last captured performance: dancing
as the Little Prince's snake. A desert
and a thirst, of course, the dry temptation
and dream of death. A budget musical
no one with pride would cop to watching, much
less more than once, but here we are again,
because the body still believes there's such
a thing as going home, a faith as dull
as skin he tries and tries to shed, but can't.
So sting the child, as though you wish him well;
then wind right round the body, sad old shell.

8. Ein Trauerspiel

Wind right round the body. Sad old shell
on a hospital bed at fifty-eight,
a stroke; Fosse was sixty, heart attack;
Pina, sixty-eight, lung cancer; Nina
seventy, and if you try to tell
me about how she never choreographed,
I'll dash your eyes against her fingers, sharp
as they became from leaping on their own.
Too, go ahead and tell me they were straight,
as if that means anything to a corpse.
To be queer is to make your need an art
and try to meet it anyway. The hearse
your dressing room. The streaking lines of makeup
and then the water. Get yourself naked.

9. Run to the Rock

and then the water. Get yourself naked
for once, peel off your fifty layers of cloth
and own up to the cipher left inside.
When they dress your body they won't know
what uniform to give you, you makeshift
carcass, home-repaired cocoon, the moth
that only knew to flutter toward the light
burned out inside your eye's white bulb. A simple
drive: to notice things that blaze, and go.
As if directed on a stage built from the dark,
glare blinds all your lenses and heat crumples
down your armor, leaves your case a charred
black scrawl no one can read, but let it stay.
Say what it was you had to say.

10. Kontakthof

Say what it was you had to say
for breath and growth, the heart as it expands
its catacombs and trailers (then balloons
to bursting? combusts above its basket?)
When the theater is empty, one light stays
for ghosts. I used to climb to the dark room
below the catwalk where the costumes hung
and whisper blessings till the curtain rose;
the cloaks muttered at the floor. Prop casket,
empty as a long-abandoned lung—
and what of that desire, that death suspend
its hold and give me back your obscene jokes?
Queer too, how superstition seemed so dated
before you imploded and turned sacred.

11. All That Jazz

Before you imploded and turned sacred
we flirted in the back of choir practice
as only a young dyke and an old flit
can; I said I'd marry you for your money
and you agreed I would, and then you died
not three days later, lover at your side;
I've told this story twenty times. Service
in the movie theater. A found clip
of you in tap shoes, humble, shuffling, wicked
in brief flashes of eyes and teeth. The choir
director asked your limp expanse, "Am I
supposed to teach the dance myself, buddy?"
You started kicking. Senseless muscles splayed:
the strangest turn your back has ever made.

12. Orpheus und Eurydike

The strangest turn your back has ever made
came in a dream I had before we held
your main memorial. I wandered up
the stairs at a gay bar and found you, no
shock, obviously, except that you had
died. I told you I was afraid I might
forget the dip and how it worked. You smiled
and said you'd teach me again. As you cupped
my back your age reversed. You swept me down,
then back, then said goodbye. The service showed
slides of you as a young man: my blood stilled.
I can't explain what happened, how I'd known
how you would look, but here's as close as truth:
your ghost taught me to dance, taught me to prove.

13. Who's Got the Pain

Your ghost taught me to dance, taught me to prove
these things do happen. I never forgot,
and every time I let my body drop
the weight's a conversation with the void:
hello loves, I'm still thinking about skin;
how do you fare without it? How's it feel
now everything that is can be your clothes?
Are you the shoe that fucks the ground, the sun
licking the steel, kiss of the chalky pill
against my throat each morning, the barbed voice
that murders me against my speakers, groove
as deep as grave, to keep me living? Those
are the ghosts we need, their tender shove;
pain's the only place where we can move.

14. The Red Shoes

Pain's the only place where we can move
as though we mean it. Pleasure is that too,
of course, a sea of vast and deep allowance
laced with teeth. Blood is as blood does. Ghosts
are as ghosts did. These are the steps. Come now
and learn them over. Remember the girl
whose shoes forced her to dance until she died
and begged an angel for forgiveness? Be
too proud to beg. Move faster than the tide
that slices at your ankles as it grows,
your spine the long horizon's swooning curve
behind which there is nothing we can see.
Smoke in a bottle, tossed against the ship;
your cigarette will never leave your lip.

15. Ensemble

Your cigarette will never leave your lip.
The red slick your footprints leave on the floor
and the sleek pop, hidden in your left hip,
left and leaving, hungry. Give me more
and then some. I want some more and then some.
I want a dip so low I can see hell.
Hold me for a measure, then for ransom;
wind right round the body, sad old shell,
and then the water, get yourself naked,
say what it was you had to say
before you imploded and turned sacred,
the strangest turn your back has ever made—
your ghost taught me to dance, taught me to prove
pain's the only place where we can move.

SUSAN TICHY

Only Allowed One Step at a Time

and each step replaces the last

Yarrow sparse among the rocks
Trail sign crooked on its single bolt

yet ant with a moth-wing dashes by

■

Climb all morning to the granite ridge

Love is stubborn, not always sweet:
stonecrop growing from his bones and ashes

Mist on the wind, all day

ASHLEY DAVIDSON
On Childlessness

A house sparrow smacks into the window; the cat punches two red holes. I wrap him in tinfoil—this seems dignified—not the cat, feline tin man, moody and ill-humored. No, I wrap the sparrow, the weight of two slices of bread, set him in the trash gently, giving him a pat. You see, I am not completely lacking in maternal instincts. *There, there. I'll unwrap you later and warm you up in the microwave.* Sometimes I hate the cat for the things he does, and because he is a cat. There are issues my husband and I no longer discuss, a small no-man's-land in our marriage only the cat is permitted to cross.

Once, driving down a dirt two-track in Sedona, a family of javelina crossed in front of us, brash, hairy, pompous in their ugliness, and my husband hit one. The mother—or perhaps it was the father—turned and rammed our bumper with her tusks. She nosed the limp pup, glared up at whatever animal she imagined our car to be, but a machine cannot alter the past, cannot ask forgiveness.

I've been thinking of the sparrow, sandwiched in his foil sleeping bag. The dents the javelina left are still visible in the right light. I've been thinking all day; I could use a snack. A songbird on toast. My mother always said humor was an unattractive quality, like buckteeth, said it was really only a kind of meanness. My husband has one of those terrible belly buttons that swells outward like a hernia, but at least he is not too funny.

What you have heard is true: the saddest moments occur privately, lugging the vacuum down the hall, stopping before a closed door. I might have put the sparrow in a shoe box and left him in the spare room. Sometimes the dead come back to us, the way a longing you haven't felt in years quietly returns: *Here I am. Did you forget I live here?*

MARY KANE

Beech Tree

You are attractive because you have a beech tree growing out of your head.

I mean, whenever you have an intricate or powerful idea, a beech tree grows out of your head and I find this incredibly attractive.

I can't decide if you are attractive because of the smooth gray bark of the tree and its coppery leaves and the great roots that reach into the seams of your occipital and parietal bones or because the tree is the physical manifestation of an idea.

You are so sexy when you sit on a bench and the tree growing from your head spreads its branches wide, casting shade over the small park in which your bench resides.

I have seen one or two other people whose ideas manifest in physical ways. One grew dandelions that quickly turned to puff and flew away, and the other grows birch trees that are beautiful but cast less shade.

A beech tree is a novel in which characters come and go in rooms darkened by wide-planked wooden floors, worn tables. Where light travels across a wallpaper made of faint roses.

I like to sit in the shade of your beech tree. I like to take a sandwich from a waxed paper bag, eating while I read.

When you are finished with an idea, the tree disappears. Like that. Sun falls everywhere.

EMILY YONG
Suite 4A

A steamy fragrance, peracetic—
and two young women intimate,
dressed in disposable paper
in a field wiped out, almost entirely,
of teeming life. Under bright-beamed light,
one of them as if dead. The other, hovering,
her emotions fluid, contained,
like what you have seen in Vermeer's
milkmaid, pouring out of her hands.
Each gentle pinch poke scrape
of the blade: swift sure pressure.
The effort to heal becomes what it touches.

FRANNIE LINDSAY

Antiphon for Remembering and Forgetting

Now that my mother's elbows crinkled with loveliness
are bone grit and flake

*No broom can shoo her away from a cabin porch
nor kerchief cleanse her sigh from a storm sash*

Her atheist heart is rubble

*And now her worried miles wash away, a hurricane
lost to itself over northerly waters*

Gulls, take up your scavenged glints and go on
Fish, go back to your breeze-flecked leaping

*Psalmless woman, gone to the oldness
God kept for her, beyond the fatigue of erasure*

Coyote, crouch beneath the eaves of your cold, luxuriant hackles
Deer, come to the edge of your intelligent shyness
Drink, for there is no one to witness you

*She is unselfed, and safe now with all of her death
and strewn too wide for a meadow to matter*

O relic denture, wedding pearls, ungainly bifocals—toss these off any prow
and they will bob for a moment

Small things, O sink-thee-nots

BRIAN KOMEI DEMPSTER

Give and Take

A ghost mother

stands at our front door,

witch daughter by her side.

Wind blows

through us.

Outside, each house lit

with jack-o'-lanterns

squinting their triangle

fires. My son is a lion,

runs in circles screaming

“Hi hi hi.”

He can't help it.

My wife Grace and I

don't go out much. He's too

loud.

His head glows inside

with ancient women

burning. Epilepsy is sacred. Epilepsy

is profane.

“Trick

or treat.” I offer

the candy bowl. *I have little*

left. My son can't eat

sweets. His meals

must be measured. The little witch

takes a Starburst. *I can give*

this much.

My son slows, comes

to my side, his hand cold
as stone. Brendan is
a cathedral, radiant
as Joan of Arc with her visions.

“Can I have another?”

her small hand grabs

at the bowl.
I pull away.

Sorry.

No more.

TANYA KO
Comfort Woman

1943, Shanghai, China

One night
a soldier asked all the girls

Who can do one hundred men?
I raised my hand

Soonja did not.

The soldiers put her in boiling water
alive
and

fed us.

What is living?

Is Soonja living in me?

1946, Chinju, Korea

One year after
liberation
I came home.

Short hair
not wearing hanbok
not speaking clearly.

Mother hid me
in the back room.

At night she took me to the well.
Scars seared with hot steel
like burnt bark
like tree roots
all over my body.

Under the crescent glow
she smiled when she washed me.
*My baby! Your skin
is like white jade, dazzling.*

She made white rice and seaweed soup
put my favorite fish on top.
But Mother, I can't eat flesh.

That night in the granary
she hanged herself
left a little bag for me
my dowry, with a rice ball.

Father threw it at me
waved his hand toward the door.

I left at dusk.

RICHIE HOFMANN
Lives of the Typographers

1. Hans Lufft, Wittenberg

I was born
 in the terrible Century
The Word made Flesh
 and back again

to Words Everything
 was changing When
Luther rendered
 the Scripture

in our Tongue
 making the new German
it was I who
 made it material

in Blackletter illustrated
 appropriately
lined up Bodies
 on a Sheet

my Vendors cut
 from Animal Flesh and dried
in the Heat
 And the Wind moved

on the Face
 of the Waters
though in the Beginning
 there was no Wind

2. Aldus Manutius, Venice

The city from above the city broken
into woodcuts six of them and dressed
in ink The sun on the canals the rough white seams

between the parts of town Turpentine
and soot and oil flood the quays the docks
where gondolas are moored the tented markets

Above them all the domes of the Basilica
like letters drying in a holy name
In my hand I hold a weightless sheet of paper

and lift it to the window's radiance
until each slanted letter legible
on either side when held up to the light

is moored to another margin: the woodcut book
St. Catherine of Siena holds swung open
like a city gate in her lined hands with four

italic characters my invention
*ie*u *ie*u on the open page
of the book in the image of the book I made

3. Christophe Plantin, Antwerp

I press it to the page: the name
my father gave me bound in an iron frame
and Latinized Each new-cut majuscule
awaits illumination Oil
and ink are heavy in the air
as I prepare
the double-column index
and stir a tempest in the text
though outside too a landscape set aslant
the house the storefront
blotted out in fire As on a night
when I might walk until the sky is white
with stars over Antwerp
and watch the dark canals below usurp them
record their images
beneath the bridges
beneath the ships
which passing trace their cursive scripts
in the black water
Sometimes days after I've rolled it on to paper

the dim signature
of a single backward character
will linger
against the grain of my fingerprint
a word made visible through technique
though it's not a word I speak

MICHAEL BROEK
The Golden Venture

The freighter Golden Venture ran aground off Rockaway Beach, Queens, in 1993, carrying nearly 300 illegal immigrants from China. Ten died trying to reach shore. Many others were jailed for years in York, PA, as their asylum claims worked through the legal system. Those who were paroled are still without final legal status.

The mouth is a flooded machine
—Terrance Hayes, from *Lighthouse*

1

The law demands a representative.

Asked to translate, I cannot translate myself.

My family came for the Golden Mountain (Gum Saan), the California gold rush. When the earthquake destroyed the records (there were no records), my grandfather became a “paper son.” His slot was bought.

My father moved east to New York, found work, then west to York, built his Wonderful Garden.

He said Americans can’t eat enough Chinese.

The law demands a defendant understand the charges.

I barely know his dialect, this refugee, Shengqiao Chen. Not Manchurian. Not Cantonese.

I was born here, where the Underground Railroad ran. The Lincoln Highway travels through town, a ribbon tying two coasts.

The law demands habeas corpus.

The law demands a body to be prosecuted.

Messiah College in Mechanicsburg is my alma mater. My degree is in English. China is my Epcot Center where no one drowns and everyone buys souvenirs signaling happiness.

The law makes demands of the body but never of the soul.

If interpretation is what you need, that’s more than I was hired to provide.

2

I write in the report

The *Golden Venture*
freighter
foundered
& Shengqiao Chen
was dragged to shore
eighteen-years-wet illegal
lungs split with salt—
off Queens
off Rockaway
off ship ten
jumped
over the side
into the screws

“I would do it again”
though
“the water was cold”
as was the beach
where nearly nude
girls
chests crushed
under latex hands
trying to restart hearts
were muled from Fujian
to America
vomiting sea.

I write in the margins

what the screws do to you
what lack of love does to you
every law does to you
every single law signaling
imagination failed

3

On my shelf, I never find the book I am looking for.

There is another, in a different language, with another spine.

Another way to cover what's underneath.

Alphabetization is a border fence holding out/in chaos.

Chinese has no tense.

Shengqiao Chen wants to learn.

The language of buying and selling.

I adjunct at the community college—English as a Second Language.

Proper use of the comma and the full stop.

Proper frame for an argument.

Proper attitude toward the opposing view.

An attitude toward anger.

Errors of article and agreement.

How to create great forts of words, impenetrable.

To experience.

Of the actual.

I choose a dictionary and *Pilgrim's Progress*.

The proper use of the subjunctive requires a lifetime to learn.

And even then unnecessary.

This counterfactual condition.

4

CSX ["how tomorrow moves"]

train cars full of chemicals
through York

east to Port Elizabeth
seagulls circling

toward Chengdu
where oysters drop from the rooftops

Foxconn built
into Apple's leaky

suicide nets ["how tomorrow moves"]

shift over or
about to begin

China that new old Eden
née America

rumbling out prison slits
["how tomorrow moves"]

beside the railroad tracks
the mind's hand

lets go

5

I write in the report

Shengqiao Chen
watches the prison vigils
outside slitted windows
folding origami hands
from donated GQ mags—

“my friend drag me out”
the sea.

I write in the margins

how many folds

right angles

shaped in laps

against rounded bars

form palm's meat

hand arching up the back

hand praying upstate in York

which buys the refugees

to fill the jails it built

awaiting the ships crashing

down on Far Rockaway to come

drowning to come

border crosser come

criminal walking five nights

against desert come

the profitable refugees

to York

“my friend drag me out”

come, the sea

What Chen cannot say

“I had been watching the mockingbirds
on the ledge outside all night
& given up thinking
I was like them with their prepositions
signaling they knew their way
in, around, above, over, with & through.

“There was just me here alone
so when the jailer shaking keys
like a baby’s rattle told me to go, I thought
just knowing the door opened was enough
but when he threatened to walk away
I said, *Yes, I am coming*, gathered my papers
my origami hands
so that he did not think I loved his
blue eyes enough to stay
& ran.

“The door was like that.
When I thought it would not open & nothing
could be on the other side, it did
& when I think it will never close, there is
someone there saying, *Hurry up*.

“Here is a flower I folded for you
when I thought I would not see you again
& here are my empty hands.”

7

What my dreams say

who does not want
a new land
new city
clean
like god
smelling Tree
 the first time?

 that is what you are to me
 U(S)

clear, sea, unctuous lover
contraband

& Shengqiao Chen
pinches dumplings
along Red Hook Batteries

singing subways
great underground tunnels
crossing & recrossing
exiting
everywhere

What the papers say

Death of the freighter
Golden Venture towed
down off Boca Raton
mouth of stones
mouth of ship's bones
rats caught in the trap

the Coast Guard
the water cannons
making her sink
making her grave

→

MICHAEL BROEK

marking her a site
for divers
swimming through her belly

“within sight of the Gold Coast”

“laid to rest”

“an artificial reef”

“I am not dead”

inked
in the skin’s creases
washed away

BOOKS IN BRIEF: Things to Keep

Melissa Crowe

Emilia Phillips, *Signaletics* (Akron, OH: University of Akron Press, 2013, 86 pp, \$14.95 paper)

Jamaal May, *Hum* (Farmington, ME: Alice James Books, 2013, 91 pp, \$15.95 paper)

I was raised in Maine's Big North Woods—a place of pine forests and potato farms, and not much else. During my girlhood in this wilderness dotted with tiny towns near the Canadian border, the shoe factory and the french-fry plant were the biggest employers; neither paid a living wage. Folks struggled against poverty and long, cold winters, not to mention geographic and cultural isolation. The interstate ends an hour south of my hometown. I'd never been anywhere, I thought, and until I was nearly grown, I didn't believe there were living writers or artists, let alone that I could be one. Once I got out, I meant to stay gone, feeling I'd left behind only scarcity.

It didn't take long before I knew I'd been wrong. Jostled by crowds on Madison Avenue or pressed against strangers on the train back to Yonkers, I longed for stretches of untouched snow glowing beneath a cobalt sky, for the smell of fried trout, the vegetable fur of a fiddlehead unfurling on my tongue. My poems were full of deer eyes shining on midnight roads, of uncles, each with a beer between his legs and a harmonica keening between his lips. They were full of salvage, all that sweet, broken stuff I'd overlooked or undervalued. I felt a sudden urgency to collect from my past what I could, to take possession of every brilliant thing and much, too, of the bitter, the hard. In Emilia Phillips' *Signaletics* and Jamaal May's *Hum*, I find fellow scavengers, bent on sifting difficult pasts and places, a personal archeology aimed at saving—and transforming—artifacts, so they may serve to create a livable present, a viable self.



In *Signaletics*, the speaker of the poems and those who people them attempt a series of saving measures against the tendency of details to escape, of meaning to evaporate. Several poems feature jars that contain some object avulsed from the body—a tumor, a bullet, a tooth. In "Subject in the Position of the Soldier with No Arms," Phillips writes:

Here's the missing finger
of the porcelain Christ—delicate as an eyelash, a blue

flake of paint from his robe. Don't ask where the teeth are
you exchanged for coins as a child. Your first lesson

in compromise. And what was next—Discipline?
Duty? In the mouth of my mother, a molar dissolves

like soap.

The poem catalogs physical losses and their attendant substitutes or consolations: “Here, for an ear, a halved shell / and calf leather for a stopgap tongue.” As a measure of the self one learns—or refuses—to trade for currency, teeth act as symbols of compromise and the inevitable breakdown of the body. Efforts to hold that body together figure as futile traps: “Here’s a shackle for your ankle, a pin to hold / your elbow together, three screws for a broken heel.” In the end, what’s most real, most pressing, isn’t these fasteners or the remaining parts of the diminished body but “the fist clenched at the end of a phantom arm.” The speaker emphasizes what’s missing, but also the pain and anger that memorialize loss.

Such memorial is powerfully evoked in “Vanitas (Latent Print),” in which the speaker’s father—an expert in police forensics—desperately tries to take the fingerprints of his young son in the moments after that son’s death. All attempts to take them directly, using an ink “so heavy it flooded / the ridges,” fail; the “record / wanted” seems “impossible” to obtain as the boy’s body begins to deteriorate. Finally, the speaker suggests her father press her brother’s fingers to a soda can and dust for prints later, and we see that the poet (like the police) has her methods of saving and recording, but that they, like any effort to hold onto the past, feel distressingly ephemeral.

Throughout *Signalitics*, named for Alphonse Bertillon’s nineteenth-century system of measuring the facial features of criminals, Phillips insists on this vulnerability—of bodies, of meaning—while reflecting on her father’s attempts to establish some permanent record as a means of staving off danger. In “Latent Print,” he drives her to his office to take her fingerprints “one Sunday / after the divorce,” and we gather that the dissolution of their family leaves him fearing she’s all the more vulnerable to mishap, specifically kidnapping. Of the prints,

he tells her, “*These are yours— / they don’t change,*” and the heartbreak we feel as readers arises because, while we know in one sense he’s right, Phillips makes quite clear throughout the collection how flimsy this notion is.

In a move central to Phillips’ poetics, the story of this fingerprinting is braided with a description of the work of Thomas Eakins, among the first painters to use a camera in a quest for verisimilitude, a certain precise “record wanted.” Specifically, the poem reflects in its ekphrastic sections on his *Thomas Eakins Carries a Woman*. Phillips describes Eakins’ model as appearing “helpless with / her fallen head, neck // exposed” and refers to her as “deadweight” that “grows heavier / & heavier in his arms.” The connections between the model and Eakins and young Phillips and her father go wholly unspoken. Phillips manages deftly to link art and autobiography via juxtaposition, so we are inspired (rather than directed) to reflect on the similarity of the prints her father takes and those Eakins makes: both men attempt to hold something fleeting, to protect something vulnerable (the moment itself, really), by means of ink on paper. When the poet says of Eakins that he will “Never let go, he will never” and then quotes her father as saying, “*I will find you,*” we understand the desperate longing to hold on, but we know, too, that he will let go—he’ll have to.

If Phillips were merely asserting that the moment passes no matter what we do, we might be tempted to respond that this goes without saying or at least that it’s been said a million times. One defense against such a charge might be that no one can be faulted for grappling, in art, with the central existential crisis of human life: the death and dissolution not just of self but of all we hold dear. Indeed there is some of this in *Signalitics*, but it’s offered with such intelligence, restraint, and lyricism that it feels like news. In the long poem “The Study Heads,” Phillips recounts her father’s accidental shooting of himself in the leg—“The blood was fathomless, the femoral grazed”—but reveals she mistook the phrase for “*ephemeral* artery,” which might well have served as title for the collection, had this leitmotif of impermanence been its dominant note.

As the book’s actual title suggests, however, it’s the effort to read that becomes Phillips’ central concern. First, clearly,

the poet reflects on her father's profession—forensics, the endeavor to read the traces and faces of criminals in order to curtail crime. Eventually, bertillonage was displaced by a more reliable technology, fingerprinting, which Phillips also reveals as imperfect. All languages have their limits, these poems tell us, interrogating a wide range of efforts to establish or communicate identities through postcards, portraits, photographs, sculptures, and audio recordings.

The speaker's father himself is the text that most frustrates her own desire to decipher, to know. "*In vacuo: Universal Studios*" portrays the two waiting in line for an amusement, where she passes the time attempting, and failing, to read him. She laments, "Each time we open the mind, / it dies like a movie / astronaut in a holey spacesuit." She measures her father's love as the distance between his "old silence" and "his new," all his communiqués oddly empty, like the mementos he sends when he travels—"personless photos, mountains / in a war-country he sends / without caption."

In the final lines of the collection, having received from her father a postcard of Afghan ruins, Phillips writes:

I never wrote back, never

sent what I'd written,

for the father I've looted,
the ruined city

I could reach out to but never touch.

Here, the speaker's effort to know a closed-off father is personal and quite literal, but it also dramatizes a more general human (and writerly) struggle, our shared desire to know the world, the past, those we love, the self—and the essential unknowability of all these things.

A poet of the post-confessional lyric, Phillips also expresses ambivalence about what she'll reveal, in writing, of herself. Raised to understand that we have the right to remain silent, she chooses sometimes to remain absent "from the knowledge // of others" ("*Ars Poetica* [Latent Print]"). In the end, though, she seems to recommend we "break cover," ending the poem "*Latent Print: Pale Suits*" with what seems a straightforward call to arms

but which I can't help reading as a call to write: "Bow & pick up // your weapon. Now anything blunt will do."



If Phillips means to calibrate the degree to which we can penetrate the world and each other, Jamaal May seems concerned with the degree to which the world infuses us. The poems in *Hum* read as his attempts to have a say in how and how much the stuff of his world inhabits him and those he loves. In other words, if Phillips' father is the ruined city she lovingly loots, Detroit is May's, and the city is often, for good or ill, the stuff of self.

In "Still Life," the boy who acts as protagonist in much of the book appears in a series of still shots, wearing self-fashioned armor and wielding makeshift weapons. In one stanza he's got "roof shingles / duct taped to shins and forearms"; in another he wears a bath-towel cape and hides an exacto knife in his sock. May tells us this boy, living in "the shuttered district, / a factory of shattered vials" attempts "pushing a fire door wide," an image of escape from some place about to burn. The boy has a "tiny voice / and crooked cursive handwriting," both of which sound meager but prefigure the poet's capacity to be heard and read. In a move that makes us hope the boy will become the poet, his watchful eye and discerning vision his saving grace, May writes:

[He] takes notes on where
overpass paint hides rust,
where the cyan bubbles up

into a patchwork of pock
and crumbling disease,
a thief in the bridge's body

The boy sees—and records—decay, disorder, evidence of the corruption of bodies and buildings, and this very record hints at his potential to survive, even to transform, his life and the life of the city.

Though my rural, northern New England upbringing was different in many ways from the urban Detroit childhood I imagine as I read May's poems, I feel a kinship with the speaker of *Hum* because he's engaged in an effort to understand what the city took from him, celebrate what it provided, and finally to take the measure of how much of that history to carry forward.

Having returned to what he once tried to escape, he seems to know—crucially—that he’s not helpless there, that he can to some extent now mediate what he keeps and what he keeps at a distance. And May’s speaker advises those he addresses to do the same.

In “Pomegranate Means Grenade,” May, like Phillips, offers a pained but hopeful call to arms, in this case to Jontae, a boy of eleven. Like many in the collection the poem begins with instructions: “Hold a pomegranate in your palm. / [...] Remember granada / means pomegranate and granada / means grenade because grenade / takes its name from the fruit.” Here we have a brief meditation on linguistic imperialism—a weapon appropriating its name from a fruit. But May also reveals the transformative and revelatory power of language, a weapon he will ask Jontae to choose over the grenade. Reflecting on the military’s practice of visiting schools to enlist young soldiers, the speaker hopes the boy will come to “carry verse as countermeasure to recruitment videos.” In a gesture of tenderness and solidarity, the poet addresses the child, extending to him a choice—and a power—that Jontae may not have understood he possessed, this “calligraphy of revolt”:

You stand nameless in front of a tank against
those who would rather see you pull a pin
from a grenade than pull a pen
from your backpack. Jontae,
they are afraid.

Here May asks Jontae to recognize the personal and political power of the pen, to turn the weapon back into fruit, a gesture of salvage that recurs throughout the collection.

If Jontae must learn to honor his own vision in order to avoid a deadly substitution, so must the speaker of these poems, who continually tries to distinguish inner voice from outer noise. The “hum” in May’s book is very often the voice of a mechanized world that speaks incessantly but appears unwilling or unable to listen. In “Hum of the Machine God,” a boy waits outside a garment factory for his mother to finish work. May tells us, “There isn’t much to discuss with the Machine / God, though its voice is hard to ignore.” The boy spends much of the poem wishing for the sea, emblem of escape and otherworldliness, but he can barely hear its siren call over the noise of machines.

Angry at a father who tries to school him to practicality and presence through violence (“*Boy, don’t ignore / me. A lip split open. Shovel.*”), the boy wishes for the snowblower to “take Father’s hand.” When it actually takes the man’s thumb, the boy wants to retract a voice and power that, like Jontae, he didn’t know he possessed: “*Ignore // my prayer, goes his stupid little prayer, please ignore / my voice.*” His mother, a skilled seamstress, taps her knitting needle in the waiting room, and the speaker imagines she wants to try her hand at reattaching his father’s severed thumb, but “the Machine God [. . .] ignores / the needle’s morse code prayer.”

May often configures the city as a trap—a “shuttered district,” a dark and jagged “room [he] could never leave.” But to focus too much on his depiction of Detroit as hellscape would represent both an oversimplification and an outright error. In *Hum*, May renders with intense lyricism details of decay that make the landscape rich if not beautiful. Its bubbling cyan and patchwork of pock, its smoke and crows and dirty snow, its shattered windshields and needles call us to attend their texture and reward us with their vivid bas-relief. May romanticizes nothing—but neither is Detroit, in any simple way, the villain of this book. Such an interpretation would ignore how internal the city becomes. The hum of the title isn’t simply around the speaker; it’s very much in him, and we understand, too, that May’s home is in his blood and bones. The poems enact and express ambivalence about this fact. The speaker of “The Hum of Zug Island” tells us his very body “is a building full of machines,” and in the collection’s gorgeous, heartbreaking final poem, “Ask What I’ve Been,” May writes, “There are days / I mourn being built // from this”—the “this” he refers to being wet cement, gravel, gravestone:

When I was a construction
crane, my balled fists

toppled buildings of boys,
I rifled through the pockets

of their ruins.
Ask what I’ve been. Detroit

is a stretch of highway littered
with windshield,

a boy picking the remains
of a window from his hair.

So clear here is the melding of boy and place—what he’s been and where he’s been one and the same. The line break after “Ask what I’ve been. Detroit” tells us all we need to know, and then we know it again when we see the boy picking remnants of Detroit from his hair. Some of what the city gets into him has to be picked out, discarded because it’s dangerous, ugly, silencing, but May tells us, “though all say the shelter is sparse [. . .] there is space here for bones— / a ribcage, brimming like yours.”

Detroit wrought May, who wrought *Hum*. The city put a song in him, and in his “excavation for spare parts,” I find much I recognize and even more for which I am grateful.



In *An American Childhood*, Annie Dillard says of her writing process, “Noticing and remembering everything would trap bright scenes to light and fill the blank and darkening past which was already piling up behind me.” She adds, “As a life’s work, I would remember everything—everything against loss.” Collectively, as we sift our experiences for what’s worth keeping, we enlarge the world for one another, so that I am, as I read, the policeman’s daughter in Tennessee becoming nothing “in the back of my father’s city-issue” or gingerly thumbing the bulge above my schoolmate’s kidney, where, painful and secret, “the teratoma hovered.” Or I am May’s “The Girl Who Builds Rockets from Bricks,” filling jelly jars with “broken glass, gravel, and fire ants.” As writers and readers, we are, as Phillips has it, “haunt[ing] our own lives with flashlights,” yes, but not so as to see only ourselves, save only ourselves. At the end of May’s “Aichmophobia / Fear of Needles,” the speaker intones, “I have come / to stitch all / this torn sky back together,” and I think, Yes. Yes, you have.