

BPJ

BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL VOL. 67 Nº2  
WINTER 2016/2017

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**Seth Pennington**, Design

**Martin Wittfooth**, "Moratorium," oil on canvas, 2016.

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# BPJ

THE EDITORS OF  
THE BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL  
ARE PROUD TO AWARD  
THE TWENTY-FOURTH ANNUAL  
CHAD WALSH POETRY PRIZE  
OF \$3,000

TO  
MARJORIE STELMACH  
FOR HER POEM "THE DIVESTMENTS OF AUTUMN"  
IN THE FALL 2016 ISSUE.

HONORING THE POET CHAD WALSH,  
COFOUNDER, IN 1950, OF THIS MAGAZINE,  
THE PRIZE IS THE GIFT OF  
ALISON WALSH SACKETT AND PAUL SACKETT.



# BPJ

WITH GREAT PLEASURE  
AND WITH THE SUPPORT OF  
THE ADRIENNE RICH LITERARY TRUST,  
WE INVITE SUBMISSIONS  
FOR THE FIRST ANNUAL

**ADRIENNE RICH AWARD FOR POETRY.**

THE WINNING POEM,  
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WILL APPEAR IN THE BPJ,  
AND THE POET WILL RECEIVE  
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“... EVERY POEM BREAKS A SILENCE THAT HAD TO BE OVERCOME ...”

—ADRIENNE RICH

**COREY OGLESBY**

**Commissioning a Snow Globe**

The Mayor looks out  
across his constituency  
from the top floor of a hotel.

Behind him, a woman  
unzips her thigh  
from a length of rose velour,  
wonders if it's worth  
her time to ask what's wrong.

He'd been watching  
the cloud shadows inch  
water tower to water tower  
like an armada of bruises  
against the town's flatness,  
casting zones in patches  
of temporary evening. Now,

he finds himself fixed  
on one place in particular—  
a street called High View  
with a red house at the end.

In the cellar, a man floats  
in a sensory deprivation tank  
he built from scratch. His son

stands by the door, slowly turning  
the temperature dial  
toward boiling. He's in too deep  
to notice. Upstairs, his wife

combs through family albums,  
finds a shot of her husband  
decades younger and posing  
like he caught a Frisbee  
in his mouth. And if you can,

make it so everyone is smiling.

**COREY OGLESBY**

**In the Quiet Before a Hike, the Star Quarterback Experiences  
an Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response**

It comes to him like warm air  
on the wrist after opening  
a microwave, when he imagines  
being in love. Or the way  
a poorly played piano rubs  
the mind, the misfired notes  
blurring together. Somewhere  
beyond the stadium's glow  
a widow alphabetizes books  
she's never read. A busboy  
takes the harsh drag of a first  
cigarette beside a dumpster.  
We are little hills of sound  
is the name of the play. Full row  
of hairy, painted chests rises, reads  
How Tall Would The Grass Get  
If You Didn't Stomp It Back Down  
Every Other Night? Snap—  
ball disappears into white light.  
Someone's always there.  
Touchdown. Clockwork. He is  
the center of the universe, finally  
unable to surprise itself. The crowd  
a bowl of bees, the applause  
heavy rain. The Chests:  
We Love You And We Are Sorry  
You Cannot Be One Of Us.

**VIRGINIA KONCHAN**

**To be alive is to be present**

at the quick takeover  
of body by mind.  
To be dead is not to see  
the white flannel curtain  
that is the world before the window;  
it's not to see the molecules of starch  
on the freshly made bed  
or the quivering boy  
wondering whether the world  
will soon end and how.  
He extricates himself  
from his environment,  
studies history from  
King David to Gaul.  
He begins to levitate,  
the way a painting begs  
to emerge from two dimensions—  
bruised skin and dappled fruit—  
to announce its theme: the all.

**DAWN POTTER**

**John Doe's Love Letter**

He was a man as clear as water.  
Catfish twitched in his shallows  
and nibbled the strands of his hair.  
His bald head shone.

Rust-drunk, his ripple  
shimmered among hubcaps and broken bottles.  
Now and again he splashed, now and again  
slipped to a weaving amble.

Frog spawn glistened on his scarred thighs,  
willow-weed roughened his whiskers.  
Behind his silted lungs,  
his heart dipped and quivered.

Arteries sighed, silver-edged in leaf dapple.  
From his callused palms, from his chipped bones,  
his days floated, up, up,  
papery and frail, remote as telegrams.

Cows fed Hay raked  
Stop. O I think of you.

**LUCIEN DARJEUN MEADOWS**

**Rust**

Out here, where wild gentians twist around rusted cars,  
These yards become indistinguishable—  
Porch swing, tomato patch, kiddie pool.

No matter that the kids have grown and gone,  
Some far enough that no neighbor can tell them  
The difference between lignite and anthracite,

Some just down the road with a pool of their own.  
No matter that every plastic swimming pool turns  
From its original blue to rust pink in a year or two.

Down by the river's edge, we slip back to biblical,  
See death as the ultimate baptism, whether lungs fill  
With the grit of a collapsing tunnel, river water, or both.

It has happened before. Sometimes, we lie down  
In our plastic pools to rest, to wait—if the rain fell right,  
This whole holler could be wiped clean in a night.

**CAROL ANN DAVIS**

**GREAT SORROW IMPOSSIBLE ATTEND PLEASE ARRANGE FLOWERS WRITING**

It can't in this aspect conceal itself the moon its eyelash blue hindrance its bright-fallen room  
can't its rumor-taking take or hide its widowed good will prone in slipping remonstrance can't  
make what would be amends or from air-broken edge return itself unhinged unharmed what  
matter now in this aspect it was born naked and returns to pale beginning what dreams  
it had it sheds like scales iridescent like rooms fielded open or bones folded outer to inner  
interchangeable *world in us* say the teachings where they drop the drowned deeper from one  
into another solitude imprinted as markings bloom to be felt but can't in this aspect confirm  
or deny the horizon likened toward or away nor leech path toward opening nor relieve any  
musted valve in this aspect it is naked as it was born it noses blind burgeoning outward upward  
and in toward what blue bone recalls its being and toward no burnishment will it turn  
its lyric face away

Title is taken from Beckett's telegram sent on the occasion of Jack B. Yeats's death.

**CAROL ANN DAVIS**  
**The Oblique Approach**

Away he moves from us    away though his body    stays    an outline of sound    thus has it    been  
written    *thus*    fox in ruins    fox in open    *must it be sung*    the boy with the scent    the fox has  
given him    also a messenger    from the divine    his ear    shell-like and sheltered    a hunted thing  
listening    for red of earth    and sound to blend    that's the oblique part    that a boy's call    is also  
by closing his eyes    and hand over ear    in case he misses it    a fox in mountains    his coat blending  
this world towards    something distant    though his body stays    so each of us    hunts    and is  
hunted    how he seeks    something ancient    in his ear and    in hills    which he imagines  
approaching    since people tire    of    the human voice    try    its *call to prayer*    the body    an ugliness  
the body    a burning-building quality    try the oblique    try the oblique    and approach it like scent  
don't say it outright    since slaughter    listens    and answers in song    the boy moving    away into  
the deep    the better    to feel tongue    in back of mouth

**CAROL ANN DAVIS**

**Dear Thief Say**

To think a beauty of nothing to knife before see what it's made of from vein to bone dear  
thief tell me where to look to play as you do one for worship of small damned against  
another for vine flower which drinks its milk as part of landscape thin as rail or asp-near dear  
thief tell me the rule for given up for dead or tail between legs up driveway semi-seen or  
never dear thief you best if invisible you effaced one skyscraper to next as you make your  
sideways attempt dear thief what is your mimic host and guest of song which digs as it scales  
thief what is your sky slim vertices of *y then x* dear wire when you thief next take me third of  
place to cock of walk as you track down guiltless doves in their pith and room let me nest as  
you make of your river a desert your babe a meal thief of way locked in or latched through  
thief private miser of shadows let me come when you track me sky-sill to ocean floor dear  
thief say what is your torment what is your rule

**JACQUES J. RANCOURT**

**Lot's Wife**

Another dead man's apartment  
to empty. Someone will want

this tea set, chipped lip  
and all; someone will sort

through these magazines,  
and never think

of whose lips kissed this cup,  
whose hands hung this charcoal calyx

on his wall. Heartache City,  
city whose streets are quarantined

to the lovers and lepers,  
city that in some real way

is burning, how eager you are  
to carry on, to call this over

before it is over. See the young man  
across the street hobbling

with a cane and a pink bathrobe  
under these Valencia trees

made late by the heart's salt?  
A city has no need to apologize

and there are more boxes to pack,  
but look now, back to where

your people are dying.  
You, most of all, must look.

**JACQUES J. RANCOURT**

**Fissure**

Who would I have been back then? A nondescript building  
with a nondescript name where the tile's grout,  
where the jizz drifting like smoke through the Jacuzzi  
is holy. Outside the bathhouse, even the moon,  
pocked by its seven seas, its light poking through  
the storm drain, is slung to something larger.

Thirty years from this, a man who lived on the other side  
of catastrophe will tell me how he worries over all the men  
he's ever touched. Lust's fog lifts in 1987 or 2017—  
men who should have showered, who smelled foul  
from it, the one whose cumshot lashed his face & chest,  
the one he let stay inside him—all buttoned their shirts quickly.  
Always, I am the one leaving, or the one who is left.

Nothing has ended; what has happened before  
will happen again—the fog belt will roll in with the chill  
of the dead, the moon will be cut by waves,  
& I will watch from shore as the boys from seminary swim  
naked in the sea. Or else I will be one of them,  
at seventeen, buoyed by waves, hard in the sea water,  
those white Victorians dotting the hills.

**JACQUES J. RANCOURT**

**Kirby**

*1990 LIFE photographs by Therese Frare*

How could I forget  
your wrists  
                  so thin  
your face set against

your father's face  
hollowed  
                  fixed on  
something outside

this room? Once I wanted  
to be a martyr.

                  This Ohio  
pieta—two nurses

swapping out two bags  
of saline  
                  a photographer  
wiping her lens

with a cloth. And through  
the slit

                  in the curtain  
I can nearly see

your body failing  
your spirit  
                  in equal measures  
growing larger

as only someone  
who did not live  
                  through this  
could possibly see.

**JACQUES J. RANCOURT**

**Wake**

What seemed necessarily bleak became.  
Two wet cormorants filling the branch of one tree.  
More than just wading birds, more than just.  
A lake, a dark scar at the center of my city.  
More than anything I wanted to forget.  
A time when desire named its price. In summer.  
Two hummingbirds take turns sucking one.  
Beardtongue dry. I was born over there.  
I say, in a place between two hills.  
When I checked the registry I was relieved.  
That no one shared exactly my name.  
That migration might mean the birds won't.  
Come back. That six hundred thirty-six.  
Thousand of us died, and I did not.  
Know a single one.

**STACY NIGLIAZZO**

**Nocturne**

Evening breaks kindly,

without bruise or blow.

The sun unpins its blue veil,

exhales as it sets.

It is not yet spring.

Night spills softly through the owling air,

a black bowl wreathed in fireflies.

■

I wash his hands and face with castile soap,

bear up

my greenstick heart,

wait for his parents who don't yet know

his new moon stare.

The reap hook—

small boy draped in soft white,

first mistaken for cord wood,

pulled from a ditch

on a dim road,

his face in the black water.

His eyes will not close.

**JENNIFER METSKER**  
**from Solid City**

This is a performance piece performed  
inside a cloud                      due to the electrons  
in the chemicals that seed this cloud.

I must wake up to the chemical that I am.

Possible tropes:                      rough cement  
and salt                      and acid                      sleepless nights  
with men in lab coats  
cluttered kitchen                      scattered tablets  
that make me                      foggy                      as a coastline.

I'm a deer-shaped cloud.

■

Chemistry is not a story                      but a city  
made of brittle earth  
and powder kegs                      and manifestos  
a city sunk                      in nine depressions  
waging for a flood.

Take a picture                      of the spots on my liver  
an ancient ruin                      inhabited by  
time's arrow                      echo                      hectare after hectare.

Maybe all of this is ritual  
like the chicken picture on a microwave oven.

They say you have to stand inside to truly see it  
but I've never been invited.

JENNIFER METSKER



Salt scatters in a chemical burn  
as I navigate cities on a pink horse.

Thunder clouds clap as I gallop  
with my head down.

It doesn't matter  
what the blueprint says;

shaving inches off  
the surface of a burial mound

won't bring back the era  
when the government

didn't gather intelligence  
through our firewalls and tombs.



Park anywhere;                    lots are non-existent here  
and carnivals.                    There's no need for  
carousel horses to take you up and down.

I line my pockets with pills            like shadows, my body  
growing stiff                    in the saddle.

I'm getting ready for the day            when  
here we go again  
with a dangerous punctuation.

It's a pattern the way a placemat is a pattern  
or a river is a pattern until the storm arrives.

JENNIFER METSKER

■

Will you shatter the glass case  
filled with fossilized bugs

to make a colored ink  
(not pink)

and draw me a map  
of a city where I'm sanctioned

to forget my name again,  
and it's okay, little doggy,

faded rose is just the color  
of the dying sun?

■

The moon and the earth are the largest objects

man has ever held                      but        what about the space

between the particles    in my pills

and the space that I make        with my mouth

agape?                      My throat is scratchy

from the words that tried to escape as I waited

for a fortress to take shape.

Isn't that how you build                      a city out of rocks?

A mad man wanted something                      what?



It's the first day of summer. I'm waiting for a formal invitation to arrive on my tree-lined street. Children skip across the crosswalk with their rubber balls and dolls and wagons. In a recent mailer for a meat sale, all the meat pink, bloody molecules propped up, photographed, and slipped into my mailbox. There's no harm in imagining forbidden structures. The mailman has pink knees. He's wearing shorts. Beneath his skin his thighs are similar to the meat in the mailer. But I just want to hold space, caress space, not unlock it. Lawn mowers carve up the plate tectonics with a constant sonic tear while a black bear charges at a man on The Weather Channel. The man spreads his arms and yells Yaaa! or maybe Baaa! or maybe Bear? Hard to tell. I put my hair in a Baggie so I can show the doctor terrible things are happening to my body. It's all part of the performance: I cup my hands; I open wide. See the warning label on the side of the bottle? Don't take this if you are pregnant or even plan on letting children run rampant through your garden where bright pink peonies burst like wombs. The chemical shape of such equations is heavier than a hope cloud; it fills my lungs construction cloud unfurling gradually until my own face comes as a surprise. When a mountain gets in the way we have sophisticated methods of moving it. See how the goldfish doesn't get too big for its bowl? There is no bowl here. Perhaps we should invite all the neighbors over? Perhaps we should barbeque tonight?

**PAUL NEMSER**

**Landscape with View of Lawyer**

I press up near the big window  
on the 19th floor  
like someone who cannot  
make out much in a face  
but must go up to it  
and squint close, run fingertips  
over the cheeks to be sure  
of its shape

though my desk  
has disappeared  
under the nimbus  
and the precedents

and every dawn I dream  
I'm a ritual slaughterer—  
an honest, kind, and upright man—  
with a knife, a whetstone,  
and these teeth.

**J. C. TODD**

**The Damages of Morning**

*Daughter*

Hunger-gnawed, and raw  
from grubbing for bugs  
in deadfall or moldy seed  
the soldiers overlooked,  
my fingers reached for a fleck  
of gold tarnished in the thatch  
of shell-pocked field.

What depth of empty drew  
me? The empty I'd known  
from the grain basket's maw,  
from the ricey dust that powdered  
its weave, the paste it made  
on my tongue when a sliver  
of ice thawed into spit.

The empty of *won't eat*,  
that vow I made on each  
new moon when I'd wake  
to Mother's sob and the bitten  
knuckle that silenced it,  
my *no* to her failure  
to produce a crop whose yield

outlasted war and winter, as if  
a daughter's self-denial  
could reverse a curse  
or replenish a larder,  
the god-barter a mother wagered  
to eke a family through.  
For six months I'd fed on

bitter refusal. I knew  
the buttery glint within  
reach wasn't low-hung  
sun's all-knowing wink  
but the yellow-eyed squint  
of a narcissus marking  
its food hoard underground,  
bud of a terrain below  
my mother's cultivations.

*Commander*

I learned to long for the damages  
of morning, ruptured buildings, scorched  
and cratered fields, for a brigade  
of four-limbed men up and out of  
the trenches, dazed and grimy,  
horrified awake and hungry  
for schnapps, bread, a skirt before sleep.

Without a mother, she was no one's daughter,  
just another pretty to pass around,  
the first thing my men caught sight of  
that might leach from their flesh  
the char and stench of bombardment,  
saltpeter burn-off and under it  
the regrettable sweet of early rot.

There are ways to enter one  
so wounded—a gypsy's salve  
to knit what forcing ripped  
and struggle ripped again,  
a poultice for the swollen mouth,  
later, one to heal the itch.  
A few weeks under lock and key

in my quarters eased her down.  
Thin soups, tinned biscuits, the grub  
an army eats, a feast to her.  
Lisle stockings, a foolish trinket  
stripped from a corpse, gifts  
an officer can command.  
When she lifts her eyes to me,

I pat her cheek, open her mouth.  
I drop a caramel in as if  
to implant in her a girlhood  
such as I gave my daughter, Ruta,  
darling songbird of the parlor  
where on my sweet accompaniment  
she rose beyond the reach of war.

*Mother*

So packed tight with silence that cave,  
even the idea of it, is redacted by  
my presence. Dark matter of  
earth, terrestrial and sensate.  
Without sky, air inside me bruised

blue-black, a char that blocks sight.  
I live as a body of longing, visceral,  
cells spinning into clots and thinnings  
of a decay no one speaks of except  
when death is too clear to refute.

Not yet. She has not come back.

J. C. TODD

*Earth*

They cavort and die. I persist,  
My motion not a quest for power  
Or longevity. Theirs is; thus

Their brevity.

J. C. TODD

*After*

into the blank  
*scherschnitte* of a face  
sketch what might be  
the seed of a face  
replanted  
after long absence

**STEVE WILSON**

**Abstracts**

Look, ok, whatever is  
beyond the body is

precipitous—abysmal, a cliff over:  
notions  
that diffuse and diffuse  
above the roiling Atlantic,

that tree-to-tree even  
the merest of warblers  
dart through. Look,

it's not so much the unknown  
as the unmade—its sprawl

and everywhere-ness.

There's hurt in here,

at least. Ache.  
Ache's shape.

**JANICE N. HARRINGTON**

**The Uses of Melanin**

Amid blackberries, black juice, black pulp, and purpled canes spined with thorns, our fingers stabbed and pricked, rent for sweetness: glad injuries. At the Regent, your hand moored in the small of my back. Shoulders back, spine straight, a good frame, our bodies guided by pressure and glide, a wrist moving out or in: pattern, space, forgiveness. The eyes that turn to watch.

	Do not marry a white man, he said. But chance did not heed, nor circumstance, nor that inward mind that sets the body's compass, or maybe there always waits in affection some insurgency, always a rub. <i>I am convinced</i> <i>that these differences in vision are</i> <i>of no importance. One sees as one</i> <i>wishes to see, Degas said.</i>	miscegnationjunglefever interculturalmarryingout multiethnicLovingsb/w zebracouplebarcodemixed biracialinterracialtraitors
If I warm my skin with a gun barrel?		
If I replace my skin with coal dust?	<i>It's false, and it is that falsity</i> <i>that constitutes art. Let's make</i> an art of it, Beloved. You be my cane, I'll be your sunglasses. You be Louie Bellson or Solomon. I'll be Pearl Bailey or Sheba. Let's drink	
If I wash my skin in the Mississippi?	pineapple juice. Let's sit in a window in a small Midwestern town and watch them secretly stare. On a fence post, a magpie peck-pecks a beetle's carapace, dark meat dangled from a closed beak, iridescent wings splintered, frayed into fans.	
If I delete my skin with a keystone?		

**CHARLES WYATT**  
**The Ten Thousand Ways**

Dog and I in our morning, after the dark  
around the dog-tooth moon passed  
as it sank in the south and almost east,

following the woman in the white coat  
up the long hill wondering if we could  
match her pace—foolishness.

Dog must digress in so many ways.  
Finally I resign myself—I am he  
who picks up after the white dog,

who brushes her ears and tail,  
not he who can follow the woman in white,  
her arms swinging like Miyazaki's girls.

Oil on the pavement—I remember  
breaking down, days lost, weekends.  
Now it's just the body refusing

to find a new pace—remember the moon,  
its blackness low in the sky,  
that rind of light that remains.

**JOSE A. ALCANTARA**

**A Note to Fernando Pessoa**

We must not be afraid to buy the bananas in the street,  
the yellow bananas with the black splotches,  
the bananas hawked by sellers with unseemly  
yet beautiful voices, the bananas that have captured  
the entire morning's sun in their electric skins.  
Even if the eyes of the seller do not meet our eyes  
in the way we think they should, even if the scales  
read a little high, we must buy the bananas.  
For what else is there? And if our voices break  
when we ask the price, if we change our minds  
picking first this bunch, then that one, then let us fail  
perfectly, with bananas in our hands, yellow bananas  
with black splotches, and the sun swinging  
at the ends of our arms as we walk.

**A CONVERSATION WITH JACQUES J. RANCOURT: In the Nape of the Rake**  
**Lee Sharkey**

Jacques J. Rancourt was a *BPJ* intern during the 2008 spring semester. I worked closely with him and fellow intern Matthew Luzitano two afternoons a week; we read manuscripts retrieved from the *BPJ*'s post office box and discussed the ones that piqued our interest, considering their musicality, technical skill, handling of form, consequence, and ability to surprise. The *BPJ* editors have since followed Jacques' poetic pursuits with not a little familial pride, from his graduate studies at the University of Wisconsin at Madison to his two years as a Stegner Fellow at Stanford. We were delighted to publish his poem "Field" in our Spring 2011 issue. In March, 2016, Hadara Bar-Nadav chose Jacques' manuscript *Novena* for the Lena-Miles Wever Todd Poetry Prize; Pleiades Press will publish it in February, 2017. Four poems from a new sequence, "Covenant," appear in this issue of the *BPJ*.

**LS:** Jacques, since *Novena* is among other things a coming-of-age story and I have the advantage of knowing something of your childhood, I'll begin by asking how a child growing up in rural Maine in a French-speaking family with little formal education comes to see himself as a poet and to devote himself to a life in poetry.

**JJR:** Thanks, Lee, for the question. Honestly, I did not read any poetry until I was a sophomore in college, when I took an intro to poetry class as an elective. Books were not a big part of my home growing up. My mother would read the occasional pulp mystery novel, and I had never seen my father read anything. My path to poetry was further complicated by the fact that my undiagnosed dyslexia kept me illiterate and in Special Ed until I was nearly eleven years old.

What saved me—I truly believe this—was my grandmother, who loved books more than anyone I knew back then. One wall of her house was a recessed bookcase filled with black leather-bound tomes. During these years, I spent most of the summer with her, and she would read to me for hours from these books. Mostly, she read the classics—*Beowulf*, *The Odyssey*, *Great Expectations* stand out in my memory. She was a beautiful reader, and because of her, literature became for me, first and foremost, an auditory experience. My first distinct memory of being in love

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with the way language *sounded* was listening to the way it sounded when it came from her mouth.

I probably would have become literate soon without this experience, but I'm not convinced I would have become a poet, or have been instilled with a love of words, or have devoted myself to a life of writing and reading, once that skill stuck. She died shortly after I left for college, after years of declining into Alzheimer's. It struck me later that as she was giving me this gift of language, that gift was leaving her. Nearly a decade after her death, I am very proud to be able to dedicate *Novena* to her memory.

**LS:** *Novena* depicts a richly ambiguous relationship between you and your father. The first poem in the book introduces you to the reader as “the Jacques / of a Jacques / of a Jacques” who “broke open the American forest” and asserts that you and your father are “nearly the same.” Yet the lines that follow cast disquieting images suggestive of tensions in the relationship, and in the relationship father and son have to their surroundings:

So you already know we've placed ourselves in the nape  
of the rake. Copper harp. Sickle-tongued.  
You know  
each year we've braided strands of wheat into rope  
to tie about our necks.

Though the son looks up to the father, the father doesn't understand this child who “stomps crop circles in the high grass” and dresses in his sister's skirts, for whom the natural world is a vast field for the imagination where danger lurks not far below the surface. I'm struck by your use of natural imagery to suggest rather than pin down the relationship—e.g., father as “black horse,” son as “hummingbird”—and to give us a view from the inside of the boy seeking to know himself.

**JJR:** The lineage of men I come from cultivated a deep love for the natural world by living off the grid and practicing a spirituality built on manual work. The imagery in *Novena* attempts to capture their world. The queer community's utopia has always been an urban one. It was important for me to create a queer pastoral, one that is utopic in the sense that wilderness provides security and spiritual isolation—a place for desire to

run its wild course, a place that leaves one alone to be one's true self. However, with that isolation comes a sharp, untethered danger. The fields in this book serve as a landscape in that they are wide open spaces, exposed, "more of a stage," and yet in their high grass they hide everything. Similarly, forests offer protection and cover and yet are teeming with hunters. Given that this pastoral is queer, I suppose, one cannot have liberation in it without fear, or freedom without at least the suggestion of death. I grew up partly in the northern terminus of Appalachia; my world was a wild, private, open place, and I wanted to write that into my images. Images are complicated, symbols are complicated; I've admired discursive poets, but I have never been one. How else other than in images does one go about casting one's father as a character who loved you irrevocably and who also feared and hated the queer reflection of himself that you cast? The conjunction can never be "but" between these two perspectives. The father finds in his son a queer shadow; the son sees in his father the idealized model of masculinity, the *objet petit a*, of what and who he will never be.

**LS:** If the natural world is a pitiless man-space in *Novena*, might we understand religion in the book as the female principle that both structures and softens a world where "animals were always dying"? The two long anchor poems that lend *Novena* its title borrow their form from liturgical novenas; each is a set of nine prayers addressed to the Virgin Mary. Her name morphs deliciously, with each iteration, into another female aspect of the Divine: Ave Maria, Sweet Lady of the Juniper Berries, Beata Virgine, Salve Regina, Eve, Sancta Maria, Proud Mary (a drag queen dressed as Tina Turner), Our Lady of Crocuses, Our Lady of Tornadoes, Mater Dei, Madonna (performing with a boa constrictor). The poems reconfigure longing for God as a transgressive desire for homoerotic love. Yet they seem to me no less religious for that, their quest for transcendence through union with the Beloved no less intense (c.f. *The Song of Songs*).

**JJR:** Yes, absolutely. I wanted to rewrite the figure of the Virgin Mary through a new lens, so she would be not only a spiritual advocate but a queer one, too. And because my mother was the source of my sharply religious upbringing, some of her voice and protectiveness and power is there in this character, as well.

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According to Catholic dogma, Mary's body was assumed into the spirit realm of heaven, and so she serves as a conduit between the human world and the spirit world. She is believed to understand the weaknesses and failures of the body more than anyone else.

In these sequences, the apparitions of this queer and feminine Virgin Mother are juxtaposed with her foil, the Deerman, who represents a concentrated masculine brute desire that infiltrates the speaker. By the end of the second "Novena," the Deerman claims victory over the speaker, as the illusion of this drag queen Virgin is shattered when the speaker sees her alone in her dressing room. I wrote this sequence as a love poem of sorts, a prayerful petition, to my fifteen-year-old self, who was deeply religious with a newly articulable same-sex desire. This version of the Marian figure—at once entirely queer and yet devoid of sexuality herself—offers a watchful presence, a non-intervention, over the speaker while he falls deeper into a dangerous sexuality. The chopped-up narrative here, of discovering sex and of a sexual assault, surrounds a plea to retain some connection to a religious icon, to feel anchored by a spiritual protector, a figure who was promised never to abandon you.

I love that you mention *Song of Songs*. It's been an important text for me, particularly the translation by Ariel and Chana Bloch. Since a novena is a nine-day sequence of rosaries, as you pointed out, it was critical for me to establish some formal restraints: to keep these poems in nine sections of nine lines, to "hook" the last line of each poem to the first line of the next, and to borrow some of their language and rhythms from the rosary's incantational prayers themselves—namely the "Hail Mary," the "Hail, Holy Queen," and the "Angelus." It's interesting to consider the different reactions I've received from readers: some see the tone of the poems as irreverent, sacrilegious, and profane; others read a sincerity in their religiosity and petition. And I suppose I have meant them to be both at once, in the way these two aspects of my identity at fifteen were simultaneously very much at war and in communion with one another.

**LS:** I'd like to segue to your new poem sequence, "Covenant," where the setting has shifted radically, from rural Maine to San Francisco, from floating time to time bound tight by history.

Twenty years after the height of the AIDS pandemic, the city is gentrified and “moving on.” A gay heaven that became a hell on earth is fading from memory. The young speaker in the opening poem walks the streets at night and finds himself slipping into the past. He meets an old man from “the other side of catastrophe,” who bears witness to the living scars AIDS left behind, and the speaker, echoing Walt Whitman, tries to position himself—as observer, as imagined participant—*vis-à-vis* what he has not directly experienced:

Nothing has ended; what has happened before  
will happen again—the fogbelt will roll in with the chill  
of the dead, the moon will be cut by waves,  
and I will watch from shore as the boys from seminary  
swim naked in the sea. Or else, I will be one of them,  
at seventeen, buoyed by waves, hard in seawater,  
those white Victorians dotting the hills.

The difference in purpose and language between this sequence and *Novena* is immediately evident. The speaker has assumed a responsibility the younger speaker in *Novena* could not have: to speak on behalf not just of himself but of his community. He will shoulder the weight of the dead so as to carry them back into the light.

**JJR:** There’s a moment in Sarah Schulman’s book *The Gentrification of the Mind* where she questions whether a young queen she sees walking down the street ever wonders why he doesn’t pass sixty-year-old versions of himself. “Do they know their own history?” she asks. When I first moved to the San Francisco area in 2012, I was struck by the lack of memorialization or institutionalized memory that this historic holdout city has of the crisis years. And struck, too, by the lack of awareness young queers have of their own freedom. We’re living in the age of PrEP and marriage equality, and with it comes a prevailing silence sprung from the false idea that this scourge has been eradicated—an effort to whitewash and commercialize the queer movement. I wanted to write into the mouth of this silence. More than just remembering the lost lives, I wanted this sequence to honor the resistance, the fighting spirit, that has also been lost. What does it mean to be the generation to live in the aftermath of the AIDS pandemic? What does it mean to grow up in its shadow? What does it mean that, even now, it is in no way over? By planting this sequence in

modern-day San Francisco, I seek to look back on the epidemic as a holdout against forgetting, an attempt to be haunted through the places that are left.

**LS:** This “attempt to be haunted,” this historicization of memory, is the hallmark of what I think of as a moral aesthetic. The covenant of your title seems to be a pact not between Jehovah and his followers but between the speaker and those who came before him, “cast offs / kissed by more than salt.” Like *Novena*, “Covenant” is richly informed by biblical imagery and rhetoric, but the speaker has lost the faith that sustained him in the earlier work: “There was a time / I believed in God: So convinced was I / that the Earth was his own beating heart.” Yet he hasn’t lost the idea of God, or the need to fault him for his cruelty: “that pleasure could poison; / that we could be punished even further.” And for his impotence. In “Abraham’s Pleading,” a contemporary recasting of the patriarch’s plea for the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, God lacks even the power to “spare the ghosts.”

**JJR:** The AIDS fight was originally a moral one, and its activists had to first combat the perception of God’s retributive justice. What was essentially a plague of biblical proportions went unchecked for many years because of two accepted positions: 1) that HIV/AIDS was a moral penalty, and 2) that the righteous were safe from it. It seems impossible to revisit the mire of the eighties and nineties without looking through a religious lens. Yes, the speaker here has lost his faith; if he still hangs on to a scrap, it’s a polemical one. I wanted to use the language of the Old Testament, in particular, since it was the language used against the victims of the epidemic. If political poetry shares a thread with prayer, it is because they share a similar goal: to plead for the audience to pay attention. In my poem “Lot’s Wife,” the speaker, looking back on the city that has been forever altered through death and gentrification, implores the new gay generation, “most of all,” to look back on their own history. As José Esteban Muñoz writes in *Cruising Utopia*, “My approach to hope . . . can best be described as a backwards glance that enacts a future vision.” In the 21st century, we live in a denial of the epidemic reminiscent of the Israelites’ lapse at the foot of Mt. Sinai. Before I came out and began to devote my life to poetry, I

had considered joining the priesthood, which is less of a jump than one might think. Like my speaker, my faith has been lost, or more accurately freely traded in, but my urge to spar with God has never been stronger. I find myself writing devotional poetry as a way to manifest my own dispute with devotion.

**LS:** I'd like to ask you to address the question of witness that is central to the sequence: how one bears witness to a history that has been largely erased. All the while the poems are constructing a linguistic setting in which the speaker and the gay community of the AIDS generation meet, they also acknowledge the impossibility of collapsing time into a simultaneous present. The speaker in "The Wake" searches the registry of the AIDS dead for his name and does not find it: "When I checked the registry I was relieved. / That no one shared exactly my name." This short, declarative sentence, when broken in two, suggests the "relief" may apply to either the results of the search or the act of undertaking it. That no one shared his name may leave the speaker at once relieved and isolated.

The poem that confronts the ethical complexities of vicarious witness most directly is "Kirby," whose source is Therese Frare's achingly tender photographs of AIDS activist and victim David Kirby and his family in the last days of Kirby's life. The speaker's memory of Kirby ("How could I forget") is in fact the memory of a photograph; he projects himself into Kirby's hospital room, but the photographer is there as well, "wiping her lens // with a cloth." Next we learn he is seeing, or "nearly" seeing, "through a slit / in a curtain," a distanced vantage that allows him to perceive, or imagine, Kirby's spirit enlarging at the approach of physical death. No one who actually lived through this, the speaker owns, could experience the scene this way, or would, underscoring the moral peril of mediated witness.

**JJR:** I'm glad you asked about witness, as it's been one of my primary concerns in writing this sequence. In "The Wake," my speaker admits that "six hundred thirty-six. / Thousand of us have died, and I did not. / Know a single one." There was a time I stopped working on this sequence because I felt that I had no right to its subject. How does one go about evoking a tragedy that he didn't experience? Why go digging up the dead? Writing

“Kirby” was my way of writing these questions into the sequence. At the end of this poem, in this imagined meeting place, the speaker admits his own trespassing, his own safe distance gained through temporality. He is able to read a romanticized holiness into David Kirby’s death only because he is looking backwards over a great gap of time. Writing about Frare’s photographs was also important for me because of the way my relationship to them has changed over the course of my life—and I assume for many of my generation. Though they were published to offer an unflinching look at the humanity of and suffering experienced by American families, for me in the nineties they served only as a warning of how I would die if I acted on my gay impulses. Now, as an adult, I see their iconic bravery.

Thinking on this question, it occurs to me that my own hesitancy to bring the lyric “I”/eye back to the epidemic was in itself an act of gentrification. To return to an earlier moment in our conversation, I wrote this sequence in part to better understand my history, and to look at this tragedy as a way of reminding myself that to be queer is always and will always mean to be on the perimeter of society. We live now in a time of complacency, “in the easy century,” and this in turn has made us vulnerable.

**LS:** Similar concerns about witness arise in “Voyeurs,” the final poem in the sequence. The poem’s speaker visits a bathhouse, a trip many readers will associate with Aeneas’ trip to Hades in search of his father, or with Vergil’s descent into the Inferno. The bathhouse is a damp maze of tunnels. Everything happens as if under water. Everyone, it seems, has lost the power to speak. Young men, who “came out *after*,” occupy the perimeter (to use your term) while, in the pool, old men touch each other tenderly or float belly up, “half in this world, half in another.” The speaker watches:

from behind the slats in the grill  
as they lean their heads against  
each other, as water falls in pearls  
from their flabby arms

How wonderfully the corporeality of their flesh and their metaphoric transformation in the mind of the speaker come together in this image. In the moment’s compassionate vision,

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the survivor's guilt and fear of inauthenticity that dog the speaker throughout the sequence are resolved. The "voyeur" becomes the watcher, *one who sees*.

**JJR:** The act of watching is important for this sequence. For as long as I can remember, I have been struck by the briefly mentioned watchmen in *Song of Songs*: "Then the watchmen found me / as they went about the city. / They beat me, they bruised me, / they tore the shawl from my shoulders" (5:7). To me, this excerpt has always offered itself to a queer reading. In my poems, the position of the "watchman" gets turned: watching, or guarding, is not an act of brutal policing against the maligned lover, but a way of protecting and preserving the past. It becomes the speaker's responsibility to take up the mantle of watcher as he connects the past to his present and future.

Your reading of "Voyeur" as echoing Aeneas' journey is illuminating to me. The speaker here expects to find that the bathhouse is a vestige, a journey to the underworld. He's come to gawk at ghosts. But instead he finds survivors who are not only alive but content and thriving. They serve as a reminder that not all was lost, and that the opportunity for connection still exists. This is the last poem of the sequence; I don't think I could have written it without first writing the others (and the dozens of failed poems discarded along the way). A residual effect of the AIDS crisis was that when a whole queer generation was all but wiped out, there was no mentorship for the next generation, and this schism can be felt now more strongly than ever. In both "Covenant" and *Novena*, my speaker searches for a father. Perhaps only in language can such a meeting place exist. I hope I'm wrong in that.