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COVER
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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.
WITH GREAT PLEASURE
AND WITH THE SUPPORT OF
THE ADRIENNE RICH LITERARY TRUST,
WE INVITE SUBMISSIONS
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ADRIENNE RICH AWARD FOR POETRY.

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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.
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.
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 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
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.
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.
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.
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.
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.
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.
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.
Earth

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

Their brevity.
After

into the blank
*scherenschnitte* of a face
sketch what might be
the seed of a face
replanted
after long absence
Look, ok, whatever is
beyond the body is
precipitous—abyssmal, 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.
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,
or circumstance, nor that inward
mind that sets the body’s compass,
in affection some insurgency,
always a rub. I am convinced
that those differences in vision are
of no importance. One sees as one
wishes to see, Degas said.

If I warm my skin with a gun barrel?
If I replace my skin with coal dust?
If I wash my skin in the Mississippi?
If I delete my skin with a keystroke?

It’s false, and it is that falsity
that constitutes art. Let’s make
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
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.
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,
er 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.
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
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).

J JR: 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.
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 off / 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 metaphorical transformation in the mind of the speaker come together in this image. In the moment’s compassionate vision,
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.