Poems

Research has been at the core of my poetic work for the past 15 years—largely because it gives me the chance to pursue questions of language while I pursue a subject in the world at large that interests me.

Duck River Latitudes

I conceived of the series of poems as a lyric travelogue, in which, mile by mile, the speaker positions himself on a raft floating on the Duck River, or on its banks, or beneath its surface, or no more than a quarter of a mile from the river.

Poems

A Letter to Jefferson from Monticello

Westward the course of empire makes its way. —Bishop George Berkeley

I

I climbed through what remains of your oak forest
& passed again our gated family graveyard

(Granddaddy’s stone & Bennett Taylor’s
& Cornelia J.’s & all the Marthas—)

& up the leafy slope to Monticello
& slunk into your study filled with pedestals,

translations of the Bible, Livy, Herodotus,
porcelain head of Voltaire as inkwell, plans for

an ornamental farm, Nouvelle Maison Carrée,
feeling that Rome might yet exist, forum, project

of appropriation: your America.

O hypocrite—you make me tired.
Like Whitman, you contradict yourself.

II

Images: you, lofty, curious,
child of a mapmaker & New World aristocrat

in your one-room schoolhouse on the Randolph land grant,
learning Latin in a wilderness.

Writing that in sixteen generations
the “aboriginal” Native Americans

would be like the Britons after Caesar
& produce “their own Cicero.”

Defending America’s greatness
from French snobbery with a moose.

Nine generations later
very few of us read Cicero,

moose reclaim New England after heavy farming,
& your house is a *museum*, whose enormous gift shop

sells your profile cast in crumbly chocolate,
versions of your favorite peony

& umbrellas with your signature…

Here’s your garden:
marrow peas asparagus

& nubbed beginnings
of the scarlet runner bean.

I still hear schoolchildren asking
why you needed slaves to grow them.

O great rhetorician, tell me: What should I say?

III

I wait
where your publics did
in the balconied front hall, your wonder cabinet.

Re-creations of buffalo-skin & beaded dress,
relics of tribal peoples
you courted Roman-style, with coins.

As tourists shuffle
off to the last buses, I hear other silence:

Behind this great hall and upstairs
a dome room and wasp-filled cuddy,
the cramped quarters of your grandchildren

who inherited your debt.

IV

Families are still stories: Now we look
for them with DNA. DNA would have
fascinated you: It is

symmetrical, almost rational,
the way you thought America's rivers would be
when you sent Lewis & Clark west

to collect & cross the continent, to gather birds & roots
& pipes & pelts & herbs & a ram's skull that hangs here,
& dialects of tribal languages, which they

subsequently lost.

We haven't found those dialects.
We have found DNA:
& tests of it suggest (though cannot fully prove)

that you had two families:
legitimate & illegitimate,
two rivers proceeding out from you—

remembered unevenly,
like names that have been saved and those
that have been lost.

Your family

made of structured absence.

Some people in your
white family this makes furious.
Others simply wonder what a *family* is.

The word, like *freedom*, shifts
beneath us, recombinant, reforming.
Our country argues now about it.

We can’t decide what it should mean.

V

Looking at the buffalo robe that is a Shawnee map

I think about asymmetry,

the ever-presence of a story we can’t tell / won’t see.

All stories contain opposites:

If only you look at DNA, you do not

see the whole buffalo: country: self.

Whatever frame you look through

changes what you see.

(I admire your 17th century micrometer, your telescope.)

We saved your hand-cast silver spectacles,

but I don’t know how to see you despite

wanting to, also because of

your fractured families.

You disappear behind

your multitude of portraits.

VI

So much (I think) of what we love about America
is hybrid like a fiddle, like rock ‘n’ roll, which holds

African and English rhythms meeting
near a river that in the 1800s you

called *the Cherokee Tainisee*—
“beautiful & navigable,”

you said. Aesthetic, practical.

A complex way of being, a difficult pose to hold.

I wondered driving down here

listening to *True Colors* & the Christian station,
how to feed body & soul. Cherries bloom

at Shadwell, near the ex-grounds of Lego

(all the lost plantations

where our many families lived)—

VII

In this house museum I get special permission
to touch your bedspread, peer into your Virgil, hunt as if
for clues.

It all only looks still
but was always unfinished. You designed

porches & dumbwaiters, elaborate passages
like those beneath the Coliseum

where the Roman slaves died
in the *Panis et Circenses*. Your craft:

Keeping people hidden. I ask you:

Must beauty do this?
On what must beauty rest?

VIII

Nine generations later,
I live on a fault line.

I hike through redwood, sorrel, live oak—plants you'd love to name.

Berkeley, where I grew up, is utopian, too.

Many people there build experimental gardens

& devote their lives to cultivating

the best kind of tomato: Because one has to try

to make the world a better place.

& Berkeley is segregated.

Its promise is unhealed.

(O & this is also inheritance from you)—

IX

California's road map calls it

"geologically young and restless"—

it is literally in motion & in ten million years

will be someplace else.

Now it is coastlines, traintracks, mountains,

underfunded universities, overcrowded prisons,

factory farms, expensive cheese.

Pesticides & ocean, budget crises, artichokes.

I learned Latin there. I re-crossed the continent.

I stand in your mote-filled sunlight in my solitary fancy.

The doors close any moment.
Mr. Jefferson: You've also left me this.

I've never had to work in

any field except for gardens that I've planted.

I roam with a lion's share of your uneven freedom.

I pass as a dreamer, recording names.

These are beautiful & come from many languages,

reminding me how in Rome columns rear & overlap:

Madrone: Eucalyptus: Manzanita:

Scars themselves—unsolved or healing.

O architect of hopes and lies,

brilliant, fascinating—

ambitious foundering father I revere & hate & see myself in.

Statement of Poetic Research

I have had the strange experience of coming of age as a white descendant of Thomas Jefferson just at a moment when Jefferson, always somewhat contested, became a more complex figure for us all. The news about the DNA evidence linking Jefferson's family line to Sally Hemings's came out just as I was studying rhetoric in college. The evidence was many things: to some people it was validation of a long-held family history; to others it was a pioneering use of new science to probe old mysteries. For me, it provoked a dramatic realignment of how I saw my own family, how I understood the ancestor I acknowledged but had not spent much time thinking about. The arrival of the DNA evidence coincided with a moment when I began to understand the tide of history itself as slippery and malleable, subject to multiple transformations. Like the chain of canonical authors in Harold Bloom's seminal work of literary criticism, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry,* our own canons of personal knowledge can be reshuffled. I was discovering that the very facts by which we come to understand ourselves can be realigned, reframed, resettled. *Family, history, ancestor, knowledge, truth, proof:* all these words gained a new and challenging sense of provisionality.

Even for those not given to thinking in poetic forms, it is hard to miss the ways the figure of Thomas Jefferson can feel allegorical. Again and again he enacts the dramatic metaphor: at Monticello he had an inkwell in the shape of Voltaire's head, suggesting his writing was formed in the ink of Voltaire's brain. The very desk on which that inkwell might have rested—the desk on which he was said to have crafted the Declaration of Independence—was itself made by enslaved carpenters who were members of the Hemings family, men who were, in essence, already his wife's unacknowledged family, her inheritance. Jefferson—the great-grandson of William Randolph, scion of one of Virginia's most powerful families—sometimes avoided eating sugar, and bought maple syrup instead, in the hopes that doing so would hasten slavery's demise. Jefferson once shipped a moose skeleton to France, directly to the naturalist Comte de Buffon, so that it could serve as a testament to American greatness. This was an earnest attempt to prove the American continent's superiority by showing off the size of its mammals.

Despite having revered Jefferson as a child, I was coming to realize that Jefferson's stories embodied not just mammoth acts but dramatic absences. Even for a keeper of many of his era's best scientific instruments, only some volumes deserved to enumerated, only some fields were worthy of study. Jefferson, who only partially recorded the names of his enslaved population, donated all of his books to what would eventually become the Library of Congress as a way of settling his debts. Jefferson then bought many more books. When Jefferson died, he did not free his slaves, but left them (and the debt) to his children to settle. The catalog of books at the Library of Congress is a national treasure, while the records of where the enslaved men and women and

children went after this auction is incomplete. Here is a fact that vibrates in my heart with every allegorical quiver: when Jefferson died, his personal debt was greater than the nation's.

I can trace some of the stories that lead forward from Jefferson, that mark the paths where his story bleeds toward mine. Jefferson's grandson, Thomas Jefferson Randolph, lived until 1875 and spent his life literally settling Jefferson's debt, before then losing a great deal more money by investing in Confederate bonds. My grandfather's grandfather, Bennett Taylor, Thomas Jefferson Randolph's grandson, fought in the Civil War and was captured at Pickett's Charge, at Gettysburg. Bennett sits at a hinge in American history. There are as many generations between Thomas Jefferson and Bennett Taylor as there are between Bennett Taylor and me. But how was Jefferson's debt my debt? How was his legacy my inheritance? And how is Jefferson's legacy our broader inheritance? What did the presence of this newly validated set of family relations have to do with it?

When I teach poetry, I discuss with students ways that the uses of pronouns in poems can be slippery—the way an "I" can speak for a "we," or a "you" can imply an "us," or a poem about one event can resound beyond what is spoken. My challenge in this project was to marshal material that folds between "I" and "we," between private history and public reckoning, between specific circumstance and allegorical resonance. After all, if Jefferson is a founding father, what does it mean to be his family? I spent two summers in archives looking at old wills, at elaborate family trees scratched in by distant and long dead Randolph and Taylor ancestors, at a commonplace book kept by Martha Jefferson Randolph. In residence at the International Center for Jefferson Studies at Monticello, I hiked around the mountains with the gardener and the archaeologist looking at the grassy berms or wooded dells where they were excavating the remains of the dwellings of enslaved people. I held in my hand a few buttons that seemed to have come up from underneath a cellar, the small hooked nail that some young boy whose name we may never know might have surreptitiously made into a fishhook in the nailery. I heard the latest news on the Getting Word Project, the genealogical work to reconnect African American descendants to their ancestors who had been at Monticello.

There was a great deal of information about some things. At Monticello one can examine files on what Jefferson thought about sheep or wine or importing glass from England, and one can consult a bevy of talented librarians at work on multivolume editions of his letters. In fact, at times I would feel that there is almost too much information about Jefferson. I would go to my room at night overwhelmed, dizzy, feeling as if Jefferson was disguised behind the sheer magnitude of his artifacts. Turning up a Virginia Department of Transportation report about a freeway spur being built above the site of Wilton, a former Randolph plantation, I was struck that no one had a name to connect to any one of the human bones found in the unmarked burial site. When I found a will of an early Taylor ancestor that said that he was deeding "books, Negroes, and land" to his sons, I did not know what people had been so traded. All I could see in

that document was something hauntingly telling—a sense that bodies and books had been seen as being of equal worth. For a writer, who reveres books, who was spending her days with written material, this was chilling. I felt the paradoxical position of being a writer who had inherited written proof of my own descent from Jefferson, my legitimacy. To put it allegorically: I had inherited the books, and the debt.

At each turn there was a dialogue between what was written and what was not; whose history was written and whose was not; what could be inferred through artifact and what must be inferred through margins. I felt the jaggedness of relation between what was seen and what remained tantalizingly invisible. And I felt the presence of secrets and powerful unknowns not only in written documents but within my family's oral history, within its own understanding of itself. I talked to cousins. I looked at wills and letters and deeds. The poems began to form as a kind of shorthand. When something I learned felt most painful or quivering, I would hear a little song vibrating in my head. Auden once said of Yeats that "mad Ireland hurt him into poetry," and it is possible that I began to think of this as poetry because there is a madness to this history, because it hurts to uncover.

Indeed, because so much of what I initially knew about my own history relied on dramatic and sometimes violent absences, I began to feel that looking closely at the absence *was* the center of the story. My challenge was to find a way of dramatizing this incompleteness. For indeed, part of what is haunting about Jefferson's debt, and Jefferson's drama, are the omissions in the record, the presence of all we still do not know. What is haunting about my family story is how much is still left out.

Who then is the "I," the "we," the "us," the "they," the "them"? What is the dialogue between the material in the archive and the material on the margins? To what extent are such absences themselves representative of wider absences in American history? What are the politics of cultural transmission, of historic survival? As I began to write, I found that the poetry suggested ways of exploring shards, of exploring their margins. In a piece of prose, a text occupies the page with its fullness. In poetry, the line breaks, and we are invited to make use of silence.

To some extent this is a specific story about my inheritance; yet I hope in its search through archives and imperfect family stories it provokes questions about how we inherit anything at all. When I ask my cousins, who are genealogists, about the names on our family tree, they know many facts about every one of the recorded ancestors. But when I ask them about how slavery was practiced by the Randolph-Taylor family (of which Jefferson was only one member) from 1680-1865, they know little. We have few records, few names. In my reckoning, I perch my speaker between the public and the domestic—at the space where family lore and torn attics themselves begin to constitute what we know as the archive. My poems retrace misremembered family stories even as they explore deeply flawed American ones. When I stumbled on those things that

seemed to quiver, I wrote. I tried to follow them where they would lead. If they pointed toward something absent, I tried to walk up to the edge of that absence.

Ultimately, I came to feel that this work embodied the role of the poem. It is what the poem can offer that the report or essay might not. The poem uses its own incompleteness. It attempts to point not merely toward what has been said, what can be said, but toward the sources of its own silence, toward what has not been said, toward what cannot be said, and toward what may still need saying. It is my hope that these poems do justice to this difficult margin; that the poems grapple not only with historical mystery, but also record the strangeness of trying to encounter the past at all. In this gesture, I hope they move through my reckoning, and lean toward some lyric truth.

Tess Taylor was the 2010-2011 Amy Clampitt Resident. Her chapbook, *The Misremembered World,* was published by the Poetry Society of America. Her book*The Forage House* is forthcoming from Red Hen Press in August 2013. She teaches writing at UC Berkeley and reviews poetry for NPR's *All Things Considered.* She lives in El Cerrito, California.

Poems

“The Last Speech and Confession of John Ryer,: who was executed at the White-Plains, on the 2d of October 1793…,” woodcut at the top of a broadside (New York? 1793). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Last Words of the Dying

VI

Listen! This’ll
hurt someone!

Do not disturb
my circles.

You can get more
with a kind word

and a gun—Lady,
you shot me!

…this is a mortal wound.
But how the devil

do you think
this could harm me?

That picture is awful
dusty.

Sources: Archimedes, Al Capone, Sam Cooke, Denis Diderot, R. Buss Dwyer, Alexander Hamilton, Jesse James
[All dead by suicide or murder]

VII

What's that? Do I
look strange?

Come, come, no weakness;
let's be a man to the last.

I must go in, the fog
is rising.

Sources: Lord Byron, Emily Dickinson, Robert Louis Stevenson

The Last Words of the Condemned

To Loved Ones

Y'all stick
together. In your hearts.

I'm going home
babe—out of here.

Keep me—the love
the closeness

given me.
Don't waste any time

in mourning.

Sources: James Allen Red Dog, John Cockrum, Joe Hill, Kevin Watts, William James "Flip" Williams, Jr.

"Life, last words and dying speech of John Sheehan,: who was executed at Boston, on Thursday, November twenty-second, 1787…," woodcut at the top of a

broadside (Boston, 1787). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Statement of Poetic Research

While watching Ken Burns's television miniseries *The Civil War*, I was struck by the telling of Confederate General Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson's death from complications after being hit by friendly fire and having to undergo amputation of his arm. The documentary included Jackson's final words: "Let us cross the river and rest under the shade of trees." I was immediately charmed by this poetic utterance, and wrote it down in my little writer book. The documentary continued but, in my mind, the words were running on loop. I picked up my little book again and wrote, "Poems using last words."

That is the romantic beginning for the poems from my chapbook *Death Centos* (Ugly Duckling Presse, forthcoming). Now, for the actual—and more tedious—beginnings. I had just finished the first year of my MFA at the California Institute of the Arts, and had taken a workshop on poetic form. Aside from the traditional, we also explored alternative forms. Though I had used collage in the past, it was in this course that I realized how much I loved working in the form. I had also recently read Christian Hawkey's *Ventrakl* and fallen in love with his Trakl color centos (along with the whole of the book). With these poems I saw the power of weaving whole lines of thought, versus merely a cluster of words or a small phrase from each source, as can often be the case in collage.

The cento (pronounced *sent-oh*, as it is from the Latin word for a cloak made of several patches, versus the Italian word for "hundred," which would be pronounced *chent-oh*) is an ancient form dating as far back as the second century. Just to show that I've read about the cento in sources other than Wikipedia, the *Princeton Encylopedia of Poetry and Poetics* defines a cento as the following: "A poetic composition made up of passages of some great poet of the past." It goes on to state that since Hosidius Geta's *Medea*, written in the second century, poets have been employing this form using works by Homer, Virgil, Cicero, Shakespeare, and others up to our modern era. The cento is a way to simultaneously pay homage to poets and the beauty in their writing, and also bastardize their works. In employing the cento form, we believe we are doing for the poet what she or he could not do her or himself, hoping to illuminate the poetry in some way not done in the original text. In a sense this is what my centos are doing with history and reality. I weave voices that are otherwise separated by time, space, history, and sense: Sam Cooke and Alexander Hamilton, Archimedes and Al Capone. These ostensibly are voices that would never have found one another save for in this manuscript—voices that one would think don't have much to say to one another. But, as I hope these poems

illustrate, even the most disparate sources of thought can and do say things to one another, and can even work together toward lyricism or another kind of beauty (and I use the term “beauty” loosely, for really anything that is captivating for any reason has a beauty, even if horrific). So I am bastardizing history in these poems for the sake of my defined beauty, and to examine death if only to allow me some agency in facing the terror of that unknown.

Now, to specifically reference Wikipedia, simply because I love this fact: there were people who created centos (patched cloaks) for Roman soldiers, and they were called *centonarii*. Whether or not this is true, I hope any writers of centos will take up the title.

This gets ahead of my own thought process in writing these poems, though. I was unaware that I was employing a variation on the age-old cento form, though the seeds had been planted by professors and poetic texts alike. Really I just wanted to weave these lines together and, if any last words were as beautiful as Stonewall Jackson’s, the poetry was waiting there for me. Then began the hours and hours of research, which often led me to unsavory websites, but, all the same, websites that purported to catalog people’s dying words (I have since found far more appropriate sources to appease the Ugly Duckling Presse editors and my conscience). I wrote down any and all that caught my attention, along with the person who spoke the words. The variation on modes of death was what struck me the most, and it was illustrated remarkably through these utterances—some were peaceful, others were uttered in moments of delirium, of anger.

I also frequently found the last words of people just before being executed. This presented a hodgepodge of people from an array of periods and walks of life: royalty, intellectuals, radicals, sociopaths, murderers. I did not quite know what to make of these phrases, as they did not “fit” with the others. They rather seemed to fit with each other. So when creating the chapbook of these poems, I split it into two sections: “Last Words of the Dying” and “Last Words of the Condemned.”

I have been making mixed tapes (now just “mixes”) since I was in middle school, and these poems allowed me to play in a way that felt undeniably similar. I put lines next to one another that seemed to hum more than when placed next to others. I shuffled them around, read, reread, shuffled some more. I had an incredible and instant agency with tone and meaning, and I would be lying if I didn’t say it was nothing short of a gleeful experience. This is not to say I was unaware of the gravity of it all, that these were the final sentences spoken by people before death. In writing poetry that one feels is revolutionary (and by revolutionary I mean within one’s own writing) it is thrilling, no matter how difficult the content. So my own personal history has played a role in these poems, beyond my aesthetic proclivities.

This was the case in writing the “Last Words of the Dying” section. There was

ostensibly less at stake there—combination for poetry's sake, an attempt to create vignettes in which the words potentially communicate and/or capture similar experiences of passing on. In "Last Words of the Condemned," especially considering my personal objection to capital punishment, I wanted to have the words "say" more. I wanted to show that condemned deaths can be in turns terrifying and heart-wrenching, but mostly I hoped to illustrate the horror of any governmental or ruling body feeling it has the right to take a life. Each of these poems had a thesis, so to speak, and I often clustered lines together depending on whom the person about to be executed was addressing ("To the Public," "To Loved Ones,") or the subject they spoke on ("On God," "On Innocence").

Once I felt the chapbook was complete, I realized I had been essentially writing centos. The title *Death Centos* captures the content of the chapbook, but also my feeling about those who spoke these words, as the cento is defined as a form employing words of poets. In most cases the speaker was aware of impending death and spoke. It would be callow or even callous of me to assume that these are words of choice, but my hope is that there is potentially a quiet intent to convey something before death. My own quiet intent is to honor the tragedy, dignity, and/or atrocity of the deaths of those whose words I have used in these poetic texts. To plait a diverse group of voices in such a way is to play with the historical reality of their isolation from one another and with the poetic reality of their being marshaled together.

Diana Arterian was born and raised in Arizona. She currently resides in Los Angeles where she is pursuing her PhD in Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Southern California. She holds an MFA in poetry from CalArts, where she was a Beutner Fellow. Diana is the Managing Editor of Ricochet, a publisher of poetry and prose chapbooks. Her chapbook Death Centos is shortly forthcoming from Ugly Duckling Presse, and her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *H_NGM_N*, *trnsfr*, *Two Serious Ladies* and *The Volta*, among others.

Outlet Fire

“A garden of medicinal flowers…”

“Cake!”

Such answers help

insofar as how many days

were you a child? Or can you fix it

with your mind, since it did not happen

in your mind? “Time crashes

into words so often.”

•

An experienced fire scholar

observes we hold a species monopoly

over fire, fire

is a profoundly interactive technology, yet people

rarely burn as nature burns.

And out of the wilderburbs

we reinstated fire to remedy a longtime

fire famine. An expected major wind event

took place. Light ’em or fight ’em

and shoving biomass around, hazards

of reintroduction of the lost species of

fire resulted quickly

in a 14,000-acre black-and-silverscape

to anneal our eyes. The flicker

folding denuded understory, traversing undone

growth in its slight rise and curve whose carbon plateau

resists, the way we scanned our bodies to fix

I and got a Pleistocene, some shiny

seeps, “a tickle

at the back of the throat”

•

A come-home urge, a short-term

wedding ring or nerve tonic

of conversation in the car

•

Not unintimate

but a claw into the sector

•

In this area where quelling

worked or gracious

tissue has not surged back. To anneal

is to harden, and I was told

so many times to love the killed place

charred, the charnel

and charmed skeleton-of-ghosts place. Appeared moonlit

in daylight and its narrative

was goblin, homeless

burrow, carburetor. Intelligence instigated this

big elegy

•

Conscious

with its retardant like let’s live together. But cut by river, worn

by air, détourned by wind like I won’t disappear

if the line of wavy green in the non-shatter glass

maintains its vein

in tangibility. If adrenalin splits

chemicals with this sector. Immolated-to-the-

drop-off place that shimmeringly

waits

•

Snags, slash, deadfall, flesh of

charcoal flower burns its

urging off the tongue. Leaves a

husk-shape perfect, subject

to astonishing dispersal. So carve a channel

in your voice, go coursing

rockily

along the burned-up hologram of I

make a plan

•

The question had been as usual what is

ultimate? Cake of

burning shimmer in the

woods, your

question had been too much

of the wrong kind of fire and not enough of the right

kind. Apocalypse dryads

without new weeds or saplings to befriend, emollient

tar and failure

medicine. We come through

you, null

quadrant, in our vehicle. And fumes of wanting

to be otherwise escaped

Frances Richard
Statement of Poetic Research

In summer 2010, my partner and I went camping in the Kaibab National Forest north of the Grand Canyon. Driving the forty-plus miles from our campsite to the North Rim, we passed through meadows and mixed-conifer forest; we knew that we were on a high plateau that plunges on three sides to the rift cut by the Colorado River, and in a vague, animal way we sensed those edges. But it was sunny, and all around us were grasses, wildflowers, fluttering aspen leaves, dense stands of pine. Arizona State Route 67 curves gently now and then. We

rounded one of these bends and crossed into another landscape. Everything was burned—ground blackened, trees black and silver, trunks charred in eerie ranks on both sides of the road. It was like driving through a gelatin-silver print. We saw an information marker and pulled over in the remains of the Outlet Fire.

The Outlet Fire was set by Grand Canyon National Park fire management as a prescribed burn on April 25, 2000. Strong winds sprang up. The fire escaped, and when it was declared contained on June 15, almost 14,000 acres had been consumed. Conifers thrive on normal wildfire, with thousands of seedlings per acre germinating in burned land; combustible materials reduce to nutrients in soils, and this in turn supports biodiversity and carbon sequestration. The ferocity of the Outlet Fire, however, killed even fire-resistant Ponderosa pines. In places, it stopped only when the plateau dropped away beneath it.

“The total area of forest annually affected by fire currently is only about one-tenth of what it was prior to 1850, due to fire suppression,” explains Chad Hanson, director of the John Muir Project. Fire historian Stephen J. Pyne, of the School of Life Sciences at the University of Arizona, calls this state of affairs a “fire famine.” It was through Pyne that I encountered John Wesley Powell’s 1878 *Report on the Lands of the Arid Region of the United States*. Powell named the Grand Canyon, and was the first white man to traverse it, by boat on the Colorado, during his 1869 Geographic Expedition. Traveling north of the Kaibab, he noted in the *Report*:

> The protection of the forests of the entire Arid Region of the United States is reduced to one single problem: Can these forests be saved from fire?…Everywhere throughout the Rocky Mountain Region the explorer away from the beaten paths of civilization meets with great areas of dead forests; pines with naked arms and charred trunks attesting to the former presence of this great destroyer. The younger forests are everywhere beset with fallen timber, attesting to the rigor of the flames, and in seasons of great drought the mountaineer sees the heavens filled with clouds of smoke.

“Different people have created distinctive fire regimes, just as they have distinctive literatures and architecture,” Pyne writes. Powell’s *Report* sought to foster a new regime. His section on “Timber Lands” continues:

> Only the white hunters of the region properly understand why these fires are set, it being usually attributed to a wanton desire on the part of the Indians to destroy that which is of value to the white man.

Powell (1834-1902) attended Oberlin, my alma mater. The college was a progressivist hotbed: a station on the Underground Railroad, the first

institution of higher learning to consistently admit African Americans, the first to admit women. He stayed for periods with the Ute and Shivwit Paiute; he helped to establish the U.S. Bureau of Ethnology, and ran it for two decades. Should we receive his statement on native American burning practices as a plea for intercultural translation? If so, how to interpret its next sentence: “The fires can, then, be very greatly curtailed by the removal of the Indians”? As Pyne puts it, “Fire enters humanity’s moral universe.”

Something of this floated through our car window on the Kaibab. The poem “Outlet Fire” appears in a forthcoming collection titled *Anarch*. I was thinking, writing this book, about disasters natural and otherwise, and about the prefixes *an-* and *arche-*, one designating absence or denial, the other archetypal foundation. I was groping toward some method for absorbing 9/11, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Hurricane Katrina, the Deepwater Horizon spill. The Outlet Fire, as an anarchic collaboration between federal agencies, history, weather systems, and dry tinder, seemed to belong to this topography.

The Outlet Fire was named for Outlet Canyon, a small side canyon branching toward the North Rim. But Google “outlet fire” and you will find discussions of faulty household wiring, pictures of soot and flame on plastic baseboard plates. Woodlands, of course, *are* power sources, and natural fire—as distinct from what Pyne terms “anthropogenic fire”—is often kindled by lightning. Domestic electricity and wildland conflagration arc to touch, too, because the provision of energy cannot be neutral, whether this means connecting war, climate change, and oil drilling to the little live port in the wall, or acknowledging that our “species monopoly over fire” does not (yet) alter the fact that ecosystems have evolved with fire, and require it. Mythemes of the west as an outlet—a wide-open space for outlawry and letting off steam—and of combustion as pure release flicker in the name. And on the long-haul drives of that camping trip, we were talking over what it means to live together.

How did the Chinese Zen master Yun Men (c. 864-949) get into this poem? The *Blue Cliff Record*, the compendium of koans, records that a monk asked, “What is talk that goes beyond the Buddhas and Patriarchs?” Yun Men yelled, “cake!” He meant rice-cake, but I somehow envision a petit four—ordinary, trivial, intricate and sweet. Another monk asks, “What is the Dharmakaya?” which in Sanskrit means the “body” of the Absolute. Yun Men answers, “flower hedge!” or “garden fence!” This sounds lovely, but the term he uses denotes, specifically, plantings around an outhouse—hence, perhaps, the occasional reference to these flowers as “medicinal.” (Yun Men is asked, “What is the Buddha?” “Dried shit-stick!”) Archival documents, and incinerated woods, and worry about the future, and poems are just different kinds of waste, perhaps. All liable to bloom.

I worried, with “Outlet Fire,” about nakedly indulging the pathetic fallacy. Research was a way to locate its argument beyond myself, in the grain of what occurred. But the point is that landscape and human fantasy co-create.

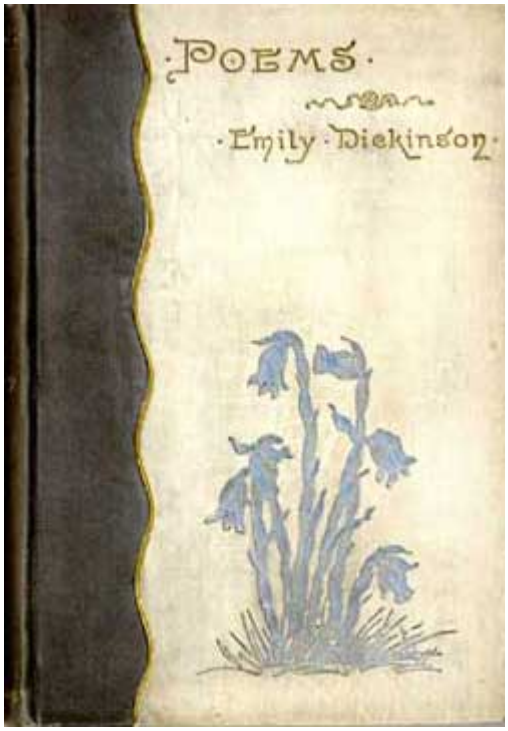
Frances Richard is the author of *Anarch.*(2012), *The Phonemes* (2012) and *See Through* (2003), as well as the chapbooks*Shaved Code* (2008) and *Anarch.* (2008). She writes frequently about contemporary art; with Jeffrey Kastner and Sina Najafi she is co-author of *Odd Lots: Revisiting Gordon Matta-Clark's "Fake Estates"*(2005).

Poems from Strange Country

I first came across Thomas Harriot's strange and wonderful account, A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia (1590), in the large, sepia-toned Dover edition—"The Complete 1590 Theodor de Bry Edition"—on the shelves of the university bookstore.

---

from The Emily Dickinson Reader



Statement of poetic research

One day I decided to rewrite the complete works of Emily Dickinson in “plain speech.” She wrote, in an almost foreign English, 1,789 poems about life, death, and who and what she wanted to have sex with. If she was worried about death, I said that she was worried about death. If, for example, she wanted to have sex with the idea of “sex” itself, I simply restated that and called this “translation.”

I was in a seminar on Dickinson’s poetry in which our discussions of, and reading about, her creative work placed an inordinate emphasis on her biography. Each poem was consistently “unlocked” by the time in which she wrote it—who she had a crush on at the time, which one of her relatives had died most recently, and so on. The minutiae unearthed and recorded by the Dickinson biography industry had became the most important part of every poem—despite the fact that we actually had the poems to read. There was no real harm in it, but we treated the poems more like souvenirs than reading experiences. It was as if the poetry were something the facts of her life had produced, and we, her newly instated audience, having a sort of memoir-driven discussion relatable to *our* lives, were making ourselves the facts of her new life and its heirs.

I started by jotting down notes in the margin, applying a *Cliff’s-Notes*-esque reading. Paraphrase is also an act of translation. So I was translating the poems from one history and language to ours.

(#s correspond to the R. W. Franklin edition of *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*)

900. I rented one of my vital organs from the hospital and now I have to give it back.

901. The relationship between the soul and the body is tentative.

902. The relationship between the body and the soul is tentative.

903. Escapism is what makes life worth living.

904. I like to believe that walking under ladders is unlucky because approaching life with a consistent sense of logic is too heartbreaking.

905. By dissecting a bird you can locate its vocal cords.

906. Even though we live in the same city, we're in a long distance relationship.

907. I'm glad I'm dead, but I hope death isn't death.

908. Worms can't wait to eat us. Actually, they can wait. And they are.

909. If you wanted to have sex with a bee, I would dress up in a bee costume, Sue.

910. Once you find something, you'll probably lose it. And then go on an epic exploration looking for a mythical blanket. And then you'll probably not find the magic blanket. And then you'll probably realize that your whole life is a sham.

911. You know it's cold outside when people start dying of overexposure.

912. Things exist no matter where you go.

913. Matter contains potential energy.

914. I was lost, and then I saw a family living in a house. Everyone appeared to be so comfortable and at home there that I felt even worse about being lost. I tried to join them, but they closed the door before I could get inside. I just wanted to live with them. I don't know why they wouldn't let me live with them.

915. It's autumn, and I don't know what to do.

916. Who lives in this mushroom?

917. Ghosts like to haunt familiar places. They're not that into travel.

918. The fact that I'm alive and that other people are alive is very disorienting.

919. I want to be so famous it physically crushes me.

920. I prefer scars to jewelry.

921. I hope it snows so that all the zombie-children can have a snowball fight.

922. I like sunlight unless I’m hungover.

923. I have a small crush on the man who delivers ice to our house. I hope he notices when I’m dead and feels a little sad about it.

924. I better be immortal. Otherwise, I’ll be really sad.

925. I don’t care if someone kills me as long as they’re attractive.

926. I walk funny.

927. Dying’s worse than not dying. Just so you know.

928. Nature is only important if humans say it is.

929. Would you still love me if I were a zombie? Would you give me a big sloppy kiss on my rotting-flesh-zombie-mouth?

930. Poets die. Poems, on the other hand, corrode slowly.

931. If the oceans wanted to take over the world again, there’s not much stopping them.

932. If God didn’t survive on a steady diet of human souls, he would probably kill all of us immediately.

933. I guess maybe Heaven isn’t a prison.

934. My friends died and now I don’t know where they are. Maybe Vegas.

935. I guess it’s autumn now. Summer is a sneaky little bitch.

936. I guess it’s nighttime now. Daylight is a sneaky little bitch.

937. You either become a man by going through puberty and gradually aging into adulthood, or you can just skip all of that and go ahead and die.

938. Death is a commie.

939. The only good things that exist in life don’t exist.

940. How often do you have sex and where can I go in order to watch you have it, Sue?

941. This guy probably drowned himself. I wonder what it was like. I wonder if

he’d mind if I took his hat. Probably not.

942. Now that you’re my slave, you don’t get two weeks paid vacation.

943. I’m really upset that my slave got away, because you can’t buy them anymore.

944. Nature’s kind of gaudy.

945. If someone’s trying to kill you, the best thing to do is hide until they give up, and then give yourself away. That way you’re the one in control.

946. Dying is only unfortunate if you have friends. Luckily, I don’t have any. Take that, death.

947. I put my money in a savings account, so it could earn interest.

948. God lets it all hang out in spring.

949. Death always ruins a party.

950. It’s been two years and the raspberry bushes I planted in the backyard haven’t produced any fruit. Come on.

951. If nobody loves you, you should probably just go ahead and die already. Thanks, Sue.

952. It’s more noble to die at sea than to go on a cruise.

953. God likes it when people make castles, because he enjoys making ruins.

954. If you want my V-card, you have to give me yours.

955. I sing when I’m scared.

956. Everyone’s beautiful. It just takes a lot more effort to see the beauty in certain people who aren’t as attractive as the people who are actually beautiful.

957. People should be allowed to hate their jobs and not get shit about it.

958. It’s spring. There are daffodils. Someone is sexually reproducing at this very moment.

959. My dead mother finds me embarrassing.

960. My heart isn’t good at long-range planning.

961. Dying people are pretty laid-back.

962. Society distracts me from my precious hallucinations.

963. It’s hard to control nature. Nature or human nature will eventually destroy us.

964. Zombies get no respect.

965. I can’t find Heaven. I couldn’t find it in Connecticut, so it must be in Maine, or else Canada. I hear that Hell is located somewhere in the Midwest.

966. Death is good because it cheers up people who really wanted certain people dead and who can now move on with their lives, happily ever after.

967. Two lovers are dying of cold. The first lover says to the second: I think this is it. We’re goners. The second one replies: No big deal, now we get to go to Heaven. So they did. And their friends slowly joined them, one by one. (I’m not very good at telling jokes.)

968. Fame is nice but is also limited by the short span of human existence. I’m sorry, famous people.

969. God’s kind of like an old aunt who wears a lot of rhinestones and hugs you a little too hard. It’s difficult to get away from her. Sometimes I wish I could go to the beach and be by myself. But it doesn’t really matter where you go, she’ll follow you there, because she’s creepy like that.

970. Mountains are like really old fat people.

971. Peace and God are great, but I don’t actually believe in any of that crap.

972. You either get into heaven or you don’t. It doesn’t really matter what you do. It’s all politics.

973. When I die and death tells me I have to stay dead, I’m going to be like, “No thanks,” and see what happens.

974. This entire town was on fire, so I called the fire department, and they told me it was just the sunset.

975. Someone died and I’m sad about that. Based on how sad I am, he was probably the most important person to ever have existed.

976. I don’t know where they put the month of May now that it’s over. Though they might’ve put it somewhere about eleven months in the future.

977. I wish I was good at something like climbing mountains, so I could feel like I was better than other people.

978. You have to believe in things that don’t exist, like yourself.

979. Bees have a really good sense of style.

980. Love is important because it encourages sexual reproduction and a general resistance to the natural human urge for death. Except if it’s with Sue.

981. The Virgin Mary has enough magic up her sleeves to cure cancer. She’s just a lazy witch.

982. I want to help people so I can feel good. I’ll start with myself.

983. Hurry up. I want to have weird sex with you.

984. I can’t get any satisfaction, and I prefer it that way.

985. When I lie down on the grass, the grass is probably screaming silently to itself.

986. I’ll have sex with you unless you’re scary.

987. I wish I was as sexy and as dead as my ex-girlfriend.

988. Death wanted to have sex, but everyone turned him down, so he gave up trying. He’s not looking so good these days. He kind of let himself go.

989. Sometimes I forget that air exists.

990. Woodpeckers burrow holes into trees in order to eat insects that live inside of them.

991. Trying is more important than succeeding unless it isn’t.

992. I didn’t see her for three weeks and then I found out she was dead. I hate the 19th century.

993. Dead famous people don’t care when famous people die.

994. This guy I know shot himself in the head.

995. I don’t care about things because I care about things that don’t exist.

996. I’ve never lived so good as I have since I became a zombie.

997. People who are in Heaven are generally happier than people who go to Hell.

998. Happiness is nice, but I still want to suffer at least a little bit.

999. Spring isn’t spring unless I’m getting laid.

This article originally appeared in issue 12.4.5 (September, 2012).

Paul Legault is the co-founder of the translation press Telephone Books and the author of three books of poetry: *The Madeleine Poems* (2010), *The Other Poems* (2011), and *The Emily Dickinson Reader* (2012). He's here.

Conscious Allegory

Statement of Poetic Research

My first real awakening to the poetic pursuit that has filled the last ten years of my writing life occurred outside of my graduate work, outside of any class. I picked up a copy of Thomas Hariot's *A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia.* Certainly, the language triggered in my ear a visceral reaction to an unexpected music, foreign and familiar at once. But

what struck me most in reading this first book describing the world known as America was the simple but difficult fact of witnessing a text in direct relation to that which was unknown. For the first time I began to understand that the work of poetry is not only a concern with the beautiful, and the complexities therein, but is also epistemological. Hariot's language describes what it also feared: wilderness and bewilderment. The catalog of resources became not simply a store of colonial enticement, but became for me the nervous and emotional categorization of a new world whose deeper resources lurked more darkly in the woods. The language hesitated in front of the very thing it named; it changed the way I thought about poetry.

It also resulted in a series of poems, "Hariot's Round," which mimicked that language, put that older tongue into the poem's speaking voice. I began to sense that a mode of language opened up a mode of perception, and in ways to me still quite miraculous, to learn to sing in that language isn't simply the post-modern gesture of appropriation, but more fundamentally, is the ongoing availability to see and think with eyes other than one's own. My poems began to be populated: Mary Rowlandson, Samuel Sewall, William Byrd II, Thomas Morton, Edward Taylor, Herman Melville, Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Jones Very, just to name a few. A poem didn't just open for me the fact of the historical. The poem became the unexpected ground in which history could be entered, could be brought into proximity, not to consider objectively the facts, but the opposite, to confound them back into experience.

This poem, "Conscious Allegory," comes directly out of my recent teaching of John Keats and Emily Dickinson. When asked who she read by Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Emily Dickinson, in part, replies: "You inquire my Books—For Poets—I have Keats— . . ." I became curious, to put it mildly, to discover in what ways Dickinson's reading of Keats could be felt within her own work. Such a question feels as if it should be the stuff of an essay, but I didn't want to discover the connection so as to explain the connection.; I wasn't seeking an argument or a conclusion; I wanted to discover the thick of that influence, and the only honest way I know to do that is to attempt to write a poem. Such a poem, in a strange way, seems to write itself. That is, I guess, the poem puts itself into conversation with the work that engenders it, and does so by including within itself the words or work it wants to enter into. Poetry is paradoxical in just this way (or in this way among many ways): if poetry wants to forge a path through the woods, it must first create the forest; if poetry wants to bridge a gap, it must create the distance it crosses. The reader familiar with Keats and Dickinson will note dozens of overlaps—from Keats's editing of Endymion's typesetting to his definition of negative capability, from Dickinson's shock at her friends' marrying themselves away to her Master Letters. The effort isn't conclusion; the hope is complicity. What end does it come to? Well, in the poem, none at all. It begins where it ends in part to put into question the space the poem opens within itself. I don't mean the formal effort to be coy, though I see it can be accused of that. I mean to posit the poem in the curious reality the imagination opens, seeing that the work of imagination is one of the complex links forged between Keats and Dickinson. Imagination creates a

world that exists by not existing—but it’s not that simple. There is no world but this one to imagine. And so imagination as a poetic act calls into question the ways in which beauty, desire, thought interact to posit the world as real. That’s no answer, I know. I hope it is a question.

Conscious Allegory

The first line of this poem ends right here.

The comma should be at *soberly*,

The next comma should follow *quietly*,

As I will demonstrate. Soberly, quietly,

He wrote down the first line of his poem:

The first line of this poem ends right here.

Beauty kept obliterating consideration

As the sun scathes the daisies at noon.

I mean, consideration kept wanting

Obliteration to arrive, as if I might say,

By example, the word *matrimonially*.

Some petals are for *love me*, and some

Speak more desperately other

Imperatives. Hands, cover my wounds.

But I have no hands, only these petals of

This poem’s second line concerning grammar

Is dry and without tone not on accident.

This poem circumvents that wandering

That happens against its own limit as if

By chance, but in this poem there are no

Accidents, no discoveries to be made,

No Cortez, no starry ken, no mask

By which I mean to say, no Magellan.

I have no petals, only these eyes that ask

What is All? A syllable

That threatens to explode.

Ask a volcano, What is beautiful?

The smoke says what isn’t told.

But I digress as does the cloth

Of a transparent dress

When a woman suddenly turns

And turns again in a kind of indecision

The fabric follows late behind

The body making a choice.

How many doors in the absolute dark

Are open, and how many closed?

The rhetorical question never arrives

Dressed “in white.” I only put it on

Around my head to distract you

As when a child points up into the air

And says, The ash is falling, the ash is

Falling, and then I am the empty streets,

All of them empty, of Pompeii.

I don’t mean to embarrass you

With my shy ways. I sit down

At one table almost each day,

A sober, quiet, method or way

To return to the first point, a period

That tells the breath to end

Because the music has ended.

I don’t need to wear a mask

To pretend the woman is naked

Underneath her dress. Poor daisy knows:

The first line of this poem ends here.

[Poems]

Mittimatalik (Pond Inlet)

I had been twice to Pond
before I learned you had
not only been there, but filmed it.
Of course I felt stupid, losing
the trail so clearly marked.

Each time we went, all hundred
of us plus the Russian crew, some
older one who saw the steep climb
from the beach, the long dirt road
to the store and cultural center
became visibly daunted and then
was offered a ride on a four-wheeler
by a passing elder.

Each time drugs were offered
by teenagers on the co-op steps
(*coop*, I kept seeing). *I want to kill myself*.
One of the black poems inked
on the porch rail. Once,

a whale (narwhale, beluga) rolled
in the tideline chip. Just spine
and gristle, but the rope
that tied it a brilliant yellow
and its lungs the lapis of Keats.

After throat singing and Arctic
games, I bought a copy
of your film. It is on the shelf
by my desk, still wrapped
two years later. There are
so many reasons I am
afraid to watch it.

On Beechy

The stones on the graves, like all the other stones, are fossils:
corals and crynoids from the old seas of an old climate. There is a lot to say
about Franklin, the man who ate his boots and whose grave

is not among these, is not yet known. And Lady Franklin,
who made sure his ghost was chased across the Arctic, his name
hove into news. On the point above Somerset House,

built and stocked should he return, ruining in Arctic time,
my favorite cairn: rocks topped by a steel plaque, metal etched
with a man in thick-framed glasses. Caricature of a scientist

from a time even stranger than Franklin’s, another lapsarian age.

Iron hoops that once ringed barrels of food and fuel
decorate the shore, circle stones. A ship’s mast points out
toward where they might have gone: horizon, heaven, hell.

We wander. We avoid what’s forbidden. We wonder
what’s in the brass tubes laid out like kindling. Someone
keeps watch for bears. Someone talks about history.

I pry a fossil from frozen mud. I don’t want to leave
anything of myself, but to take a mnemonic of what I’ve marked,
marred? That tribute feels right.

Thinking of Places I Have Begun to Know

Yearn, yearn
what bloom has gone
to paper now, brown?

What bulbil ready
on which stalk?

Campion, gather
your snow drift
Your loess-blanket

Which bay is iced?
Which glacier slows?

Leaves here, south burnish
Then an odd warmth
& grass sprouts

Which lead? Which polynya
What hunt now
at Pond, at Clyde?

What, shot, drapes
the snow-go,
the towed sledge?

Oh my holiday knowledge
My Augusts   Deep
in years but not broadened
to seasons I try

to picture it   Caribou
over the tracks of caribou
left last year that
I walked   Fox white
Ducks gone   And what remains
and so belongs

Things I think you'd hate about Provincetown in 2008

Portuguese families cashed out and moved to Truro.

Apples, chokecherries, peach plums, rose hips, blueberries ungathered. Fallen.

Not so sure about whale watching—you may have even liked it.

Condos on the edge of the quaking bog.

That so little’s changed (taffy, kites, summer’s ephemera).

That town hall still stands but this year’s town meeting will be in the basement of the high school annex, hall condemned and funds for repair uncertain.

Fast ferries.

Unsure about the old museum with its ½-scale model of the *Rose Dorothea* repurposed as the library; the old library a real estate office.

(Where did the art, the horse-drawn fire truck, the model of Harry Kemp’s dune shack go?)

Drag queens balanced on segues.

You’d love the West End Racing Club—Flyer in his eighties still teaching the kids to swim and sail, still terrifying in his blustered love.

Wired Puppy—fancy coffee sipped while blogging.

Maybe Ellie, who each night sings in the town square, linebacker shoulders, short skirt, heels.

My slant attention and squint questions.

Maybe me—childless (you were, too), paired to a woman twelve years older than me (thirty years between you and Miriam), calling this place home and yet so often afield (your ship not even housed here, but halfway north, in Maine).

Statement of poetic research

In the Wake of:

MacMillan Pier:

I’d worked on boats that docked there for years before thinking to ask who it was named for.

On the Display at the Museum:

Stuffed polar bears? A kayak? What did they have to do with this place, with what the town’s landmark tower was built to commemorate: the landing of the pilgrims?

Discovery:

Maybe it was Flyer (or Dan?) who told me about MacMillan. It started to come together. I was leaving Alaska, half returning. I was done with the manuscript of poems about explorers and ice. I was moving to California for a fellowship

and my love was moving back to Cape Cod. How are distances bridged? How do you return to a place that once was home? I looked for role models I could fight with. Hello, Donald B. MacMillan.

Sleuthing:

I read all of Mac's books. Hunted down his old *National Geographic* articles. Got into the museum archives to read his cranky letters about the proper management of collections. Tried to get to Bowdoin to visit the Peary/MacMillan museum (just a drive away but for some reason still unseen). Found a goal: go north.

A Plan is Hatched:

I pulled strings. I schemed. I got work on a boat in the Eastern Canadian Arctic.

Getting Hooked:

More than I ever expected, the landscape and history resonated. Deeply. There is nothing like the world above treeline—small flowers huddling together to create enough warmth to bloom, seasonally thawed ground soft/hard/rolling/mushy underfoot, horizon. And to come upon rings of lichen-covered stones that, centuries ago and then just decades ago, held down skin tents? Ancient foundations with old copper kettles and monofilament fishing line? To feel miles and hours and moods of looking suddenly collapse to a single, hot point: Bear. Musk ox. Walrus.

I am a slow writer. I know this now. A late bloomer. A deliberator. I hide under a rock and try and be the rock. Quiet. Spying can you teach a lot. I spy on myself. I try not to get caught. Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle applies: the observer changes that which is observed. Observing changes what is observed.

After writing the poems of my second book, *Approaching Ice*, which investigated the romance of polar exploration as an armchair traveler, I wanted to write into the high latitudes differently. Living in Alaska made the Arctic less theoretical. More familiar and also more complex. It was no longer distance and discovery that moved me, but the concept of a storied land. A land beautiful and inhabited for millennia.

I wanted to be culpable, to find a way to look at place more deeply and with more at stake personally. The idea of investigating place through a conversation between two people (myself and MacMillan), two places (Provincetown, the Arctic), and two times and all the awarenesses of each (his, mine) began to develop. It would be an intimate dance, a wrestling match of cultures, a frustrated love song.

The fact that all our lives, here and there, are being affected by climate

change and other human-sourced impacts was part of the draw. Cape Cod is low-lying and sandy. Sea level rise is on the minds of insurance underwriters. The Arctic is a place on the globe where temperatures are warming more than elsewhere. The most toxic lake in the world is on a remote island north of Norway—airborne mercury and organo-pollutants fall out across the north. What will happen when all the methane stored in permafrost is released? What will happen when ice no longer covers and so reflects light back from the ocean's surface?

How does a poet write about highly politicized issues in a way that is integrated with both nature and culture? In a way that is seductive? In a way that isn't didactic?

Donald B. MacMillan made thirty voyages to the Arctic. He almost went along with Peary when Peary made his dash for the pole. And he was born in Provincetown. A place with deep meaning for me. I was not born on Cape Cod. I wasn't even born on the East Coast, but I came of age there, in a way. I moved east for love, stayed, and fell in love with the place, too.

What drew me to Provincetown was both its physical beauty and its culture. I even liked its tacky fringe. There were boats, artists, oddballs, writers, and secrets, which for me is an ideal mix. Queerness is the norm (although there a conservative countermelody can be heard on the wharf, in the schools, tossed from rolled-down windows of cars stopped in traffic), which allowed me to live without needing to consider sexuality, to defend it or figure out how it might or might not define me *against.* I can't say strongly enough what a freedom this was and is.

MacMillan didn't spend his whole youth in Provincetown. His father died in a fishing accident, leaving his mother to raise him. She couldn't quite manage, so he left to live with relatives in Maine. As an adult, he returned. He married a woman thirty years his junior who, when *she* was growing up, "played MacMillan." I haven't yet figured out how to wrestle with that strangeness.

Mac, as people called him, built a schooner, the *Bowdoin*, and took it north. He brought Miriam. He brought color film. He brought boys in a floating classroom. He died near the time that I was born. We didn't quite overlap, but it was close. I am not a continuation of him, and yet

I don't know how the story will end, how the book these poems begin will shape its arc. I'm trying to hold off a bit. Next summer, I'm scheduled to work again in the Arctic, and for the first time part of the trip will be in Greenland. Mac spent a lot of time up there. How my trip will shape the way I see him and his trips, how I see the Arctic itself, how I interpret his interpretations of the land and people, is a blank on the map.

Meanwhile, things accrue. Home, I walk by Mac's old house every once in a while. The broken antler on the strange orange elk mounted over the front door dangles for the fourth year, still not broken off. Would Mac have fixed it? Or

would he not have noticed, too busy living again, from home, his time away?

I'm going to try and convince the owners to let me go through the house. Or maybe sit on the porch. Look out over what has changed, what hasn't. Try and figure out how to celebrate, castigate, laugh and mourn at once.

Further Reading

Biographies of MacMillan range from the young-adult-appropriate *Captain Mac: The Life of Donald Baxter MacMillan, Arctic Explorer,* by Mary Morton Cowan (Honesdale, Pa., 2010) to Everett S. Allen's hero-worship-esque *Arctic Odyssey: The Life of Rear Admiral Donald B. MacMillan* published by Dodd, Mead and Company (New York, 1962)—note the suspicious overlap of publishers between Allen and Miriam MacMillan. Miriam MacMillan, whom Donald married at age 60, wrote a fair amount for the general public, and one can sense the hand of Mac behind them: *Etuk: The Eskimo Hunter,* Dodd, Mead and Company (New York, 1950), *Green Seas and White Ice: Far North with Captain Mac,* Dodd, Mead and Company (New York, 1948). I had high hopes for juicy tidbits in Miriam's *I Married An Explorer* (London, 1952), but alas. Samples of MacMillan's own voice can be found in his two full-length autobiographical accounts of his explorations, both written fairly early in his career: *Four Years in the White North* (New York, 1918) and *Etah and Beyond, or, Life Within Twelve Degrees of the Pole*(Boston, 1927). I do wish he'd done more writing in his later years. *Kah'da: Life of a North Greenland Eskimo Boy* (New York, 1930) is a more romantic/fictionalized view of the North by MacMillan. Mac's articles in *National Geographic* are also rich. One of my favorite moments is his explanation of why the musk ox rubs its hoof to its eye.

The Largest Glue Factory in the World

Forgetfulness is like a song
that, freed from beat and measure, wanders

Hart Crane

When knowledge will cover the earth
like water covers the sea

Peter Cooper

A Walk through Blissville

I’m traipsing through gardens that once were farmers’ fields,

looking for burrs and ostrich ferns. An ornery African priest

shoos me out of his orchard as this November sun sets

beyond his apple trees. I breathe in sassafras, burning leaves, lichen,

liken the day to 1891 when the Smelling Committee of the 15th Ward

punted up the Newtown Creek to catalog the stench. Maybe I’ll

glimpse a cedar waxwing or Labrador duck before heading home.
Or wild turkeys running across a treeless boulevard, like I saw
in Staten Island, spitting distance from the Fresh Kills compost.
Lately I only dream of offal, garbage scows and gulls, plowing up
East River cul-de-sacs with carcasses of carriage nags and cows.
I pass black limo parking lots, cement factories, cracked asphalt
of the L.I.E, poke around for cabbages and a place to start my slow
seepage of words to combat stress, the weariness of the same old odors.

Black-Crowned Night Heron

A mile and a half up English Kills, we spy a heron with an eel in her beak,
high in an oak above the dead-glass water. Shouts from the Schamonchi,
a Martha’s Vineyard ferry with a box-container swimming pool, that
thick brown sludge will keep channel worms alive. At Furman’s Island,
the remnants of the largest glue factory in the world, Peter Cooper’s
rendered fat works before they moved upstate to decimate Lake Erie.
Here fish bladders were boiled to isinglass for parchment and for beer,
and collagen from cows was used for furniture and violins. Here origins
of Jell-O are found in the slurry and dross of civilization, burning skies
a purplish hue. The distant tip of the Chrysler Building can be seen
beyond digesters of a sewage treatment plant. Rat powder, azo dye,
methane, turpentine, soak the oily banks where no otters somersault,
by waterfront luxury lots for 2025. For now it’s the heron that patrols
the creek, in search of a millionth minnow to steer here after midnight.

The Endless Chain

I smell Epsom, lime, and sulfur in the wind today off toadfish mudflats.
Cord grass matted with mud snails, tern quills, a stink of conch decay.
Picture tidal mills that pock the marshes of New York, years before
a crossing of the Brooklyn Ferry. Grinding corn at Gerritsen’s near
Mill Basin, along the Bushwick creeks, where breweries sprang up
by pigsties, mill wheels driven by Peter Cooper’s saw-tooth chain.
Picture the East River with cable iron to replace the narrow boats,
barge mules, dike dogs, and towpaths of the canal at Canajoharie.
I dream lug nuts, gear parts, for mechanical advantage, propelling
elevated trolleys along Third Avenue, dripping creosote and ash
onto a maze of pushcarts, with steam and smoke of locomotives
down below. I keep inventing things to let the pull of sea and air
do the heavy lifting, like an American language unburdening itself,
like the endless chain of our forged relations, hauling us forever on.

At Jamaica Bay

A paradise for glossy ibises! Even in January, with rime ice forming
on cattails, the shorebirds congregate. If humans were bodies of water,
I’d be Jamaica Bay, always in the shadows, a rusted heap in shallows,
a piano standing mid-pond near the Raunt. I trudge in snow
with my daughter, who’d rather be at Bell House in Gowanus
for an indoor barbeque. But a hundred kinds of moths live here,
and some say it would have made a great world harbor. Railroads
bought all shipping rights-of-way, and a cross-borough parkway
made sure it stayed an undeveloped swamp. I like its relative obscurity,

a gleaming gem despite the half-dead oyster beds, the noise of jets,
dilapidated fish oil fertilizer farms. Fields of kale, urban rangers
spearing Styrofoam our parents left on trails at Dead Horse Bay.
A cloud of countless passenger pigeons, a pirate’s dinghy. Not even
Peter Cooper saw its promise, despite his designs on New York City.

Plants of Manhattan

My friend’s exhibiting pressed flowers from the Arctic, but only ones
that grow right here. I find a spot in underbrush to note the long parade
of indigenous and invader. There’s a weed patch north of Harlem,
not far from Spuyten Duyvil, where I’ve found a cache of flora
dating to the Pleistocene: seaside amaranth, Macoun’s cudweed,
colic root, cow parsnip, meadow zizia, Jesuit’s bark, widowsfrill.
There’s nodding chickweed, blue huckleberry, American ipecac
sprouting by my knee. Lotti’s got New Jersey tea like Peter Cooper
used to brew. There’s kinnikinnick, leatherleaf, prickly bog sedge,
not to mention scald weed. Have I made up these names myself?
Azure bluet and wild leek blanket the ravine, while swamp pink,
skunk cabbage, spread out in shafts of light. Evening primrose,
orange grass, common moonseed. I see so many Manhattan plants
but wonder why there isn’t any cursed buttercup or common juniper.

At Penny Bridge

We take a rose to Calvary, in the name of countless girls and boys
who died of cholera, exhumed at midnight, ferried to this rural tract
where the dead outnumber the living, a million unkempt tombstones,
in shoddy Gothic churchyards fed by man-made ponds and peaks.

We walk under elms and evergreens and climb a plain of worry,
gathering toadstools in a glen. We want to smell a cinder
in the wind from ancient chimneys, and lie in fragrant fields
of white impatiens bursting into bloom. We scull to an island
of industrial decay, by the hulk of a boxcar and a red caboose.
We chink at mausoleum doors and clocks all stop at once.
We watch monk parakeets mob in a potter’s field, at closed-down
tram-stop Penny Bridge, where mourners used to come in droves.
We stand on a hill to see the sea, the far-off tomb of Peter Cooper
in lavish Green-Wood, where he sleeps and dreams of Tinker Toys.

A History of the Newtown Creek

Forgetting is a measure of the mind in a city that’s hard at work:
The smell of linseed oil, the smell of pine, the smell of opalescence
The smell of hyacinth, the smell of burning rubber, the smell of wax
The smell of car exhaust and coal and tar, the smell of sap and vitriol
The smell of squalor, diapers, dogwood blooms, the smell of sex
The smell of sharkskin, selfishness, anemones, the smell of wine
The smell of eucalyptus, locust droves, axel grease, and lemon rinds
The smell of boiling bones, of caulking and pickle barrel brine
The smell of goldenrod and ragweed, paint fumes, rotten fruit
The smell of sweetened gelatin, creampuffs, fresh-baked bread
The smell of gunpowder, oily, oak-hewn hulls, hydrogen peroxide
The smell of diesel, tar, mud flats, cat clay, peat moss, gasoline
The smell of weariness, of dog-tiredness, of autumn in the wind:
Forgetting is a measure of the heart in a city that’s found at rest.

Statement of poetic research

Journal October 2010-March 2011: The Making of "The Largest Glue Factory in the World"

October 5, 2010: Do you start with an idea, a scent, a flashback or a dream? When you take on studying the life of Aaron Burr, Paul Cuffee's ideas of Back to Africa in Sierra Leone, a day in the life of the Shay's Rebellion, or eating habits of King Philip's Pokanokets, what is the initial flash of thought? Something you read, a shadowy childhood memory, an overheard comment in a bar, or a trip on the water on a crisp autumn day?

October 6, 2010: What will dictate the form of this new conversation? Remember the map of Europe as portrait of Queen Elizabeth (or is it the other way around?). Enumerating all the stars, with touch points to Orion and Andromeda. A legend of the Atlantic sea floor, with names of seamounts and canyons where life began. A truck route through Nebraska. The biography of an inventor.

October 7, 2010: Fourteen lines per poem, twice as many breaths, a wistful turn toward the end of each stanza, a hint of love and loss. Timelines (of industry, information technology, human genomes, battleships, Islamic art, feather beds or cars) and lists (craters on planets, forgotten street names of Manhattan, birds, spiders, parts of the body, etc.). You might call them photographs from an interior life lived a hundred years ago, delivered in a whisper.

Fourteen poems to construct the project grid, using a loose sonnet form, as well as echoes of the Persian ghazal (using the name of a persona, in this case Peter Cooper), with an emphasis on olfactory things we smell by day and by night.

October 10, 2010: I want to map a moment in the changing landscape of New York City, topographically, intellectually, spiritually, scientifically, and through the sense of smell, as seen around the Newtown Creek—bordering Queens and Brooklyn (the most polluted and trafficked body of water in America in the 1850s), as agriculture and mercantile spirit gave way to industry and railroads.

October 11, 2011: I am fascinated with Peter Cooper, at once abolitionist and candidate for the U.S. presidency, pre-Gilded Age self-made man, railroad, steel, and manufactory entrepreneur and social reformer interested in the rights of working men and women, but also a great polluter of the New York waterways. His glue factory stood mid-creek for years.

October 13, 2010: James Agee's *Brooklyn Is* has fired me up, and takes me back to Hart Crane, candy factory heir, who—after Whitman—was the great democratic voice of a developing industrial world. Many a poet (Philip Levine) and historian (Daniel Walkowitz) has told me to use the vocabulary of the world I am trying to evoke! I want to capture here the world before Crane, figuring in the invisible and the meandering, as he put it:

Forgetfulness is like a song
that, freed from beat and measure, wanders

October 14, 2010: Putrid and fabulous smells all around, a history of the Fresh Kills compost (after 9/11's last remains), the Brooklyn waterfront, time as defined by mule barges poling the canals, a bustling, creosote-dripping Third Avenue El, great cemetery interments of mid-century (when all the dead of Manhattan were re-buried in a belt of ever-expanding cemeteries in Queens), underwater circuits of an urban sphere, the mythic and historical roles of Peter Cooper. Why do this now? Unlike the sage of *Leaves of Grass*, I write in the twenty-first century, looking back at all those green graves and glory. I see a future for the creek.

October 15, 2010: My daughter Lotti moves to Greenpoint, Brooklyn, and joins the Newtown Creek Alliance (shortly to be designated a Superfund site for cleanup). I walk over the Pulaski Bridge where we meet for tea at Ash-Box (we dream up billboards to be seen from the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway). Just look at the creek, with its sailboats and numinous flotsam! Now I get to thinking.

Barge Park

We walk up Box Street past stray cat chicken coops filled with straw,
looking for Queenie, our neighbor's Abyssinian. Wild green grapes
climb a chain link fence near sets for *Boardwalk Empire*.
A lake scow, Lucinda May, channels bits of scum and filament
from an underground lake of oil that bubbles up towards English Kills.
The whole history of science has been accidents at work: time pulling
backwards against your un-hunched shoulders and wistful smile.
The drawbridge opens for a tug. At Jungle Press, lithographs
dance on vellum, cross-hatched flags and dresses and kittens,
to mark a sense of urgency, our love for things that come from nothing.

October 18, 2010: Lotti suggests we take the Newtown Creek boat tour, a source of historical riches, thanks to the Working Harbor Committee, with Bernie Ente and Mitch Waxman on board. Notes and photos abound: the old plank road to Maspeth, a green heron fishing in the black mayonnaise of the waters.

October 19, 2010: After a tour of the creek, I dive into the dust and gems of history, my way … walking, talking to people, a trip to the Queens library in Jamaica … looking at pictures … and back to Peter Cooper, whose glue factory was here as well as upstate, still polluting Cattaraugus Creek in Gowanda, New York.

October 21, 2010: I start to look at Peter Cooper's life—he was a great proponent of education for the working class—seeing the agrarian, Jacksonian past melt away into cottage industry and the smelting fields of Bessemer, where Cooper was to make his money. During his lifetime, with incentive, cash, and ingenuity, he wrought a revolution amongst the belching trains, the reeking barrels of brine and pickles and the horse-cart log-jams.

October 31, 2010: Giant plush-red Elmos, vampire anesthesiologists, poodles in serapes. It’s Halloween in Jackson Heights. How to start to capture a history of every neighborhood in Queens?

November 5, 2010: Picture North Korean middle-schoolers, hoeing yarrow on a hillside in the cold. What sort of corollary for this in Peter Cooper’s day? The coal-smutched, sooty-eyed, toiling children that Jacob Riis took pictures of?

November 13, 2010: My life as an oil spill (an idea for a painting or the crushing feeling of wanting to make a difference in the life of the Newtown Creek):

- Lakeview Gusher 1910
- Deepwater Horizon 2010
- Gulf War Oil Spill 1991
- Trinidad and Tobago 1979
- South Africa 1983
- Brittany Amoco Cadiz 1978
- Nova Scotia 1988
- Gulf of Oman 1972
- Pylos, Greece 1980
- A Coruna 1976
- Torrey Canyon Scilly 1967
- Newtown Creek (Greenpoint) 1940s to now

November 30, 2010: Biked over the Pulaski Bridge to the Newtown Creek Nature Walk, at the city’s water treatment facility, built as a part of the percent-for-art program with the Department of Environmental Protection. George Trakas, an environmental artist, integrates Lenape and Canarsie Indian names and indigenous plants growing sideways up the towering concrete. Three teenagers are smoking hash in a weed-infested cul-de-sac behind the chop-shops and barges filled with trash-compacted cars.

December 1, 2010: Just focus on how everything smells: St. Johns wort, baby’s breath, wet dogs, fish-kill, stagnant water, sewer gas, hydrogen sulfide, bikini wax, liquid penicillin.

December 17, 2010: Trip to the Cooper Union library, my old haunts. Ecstasy in the library: meandering across boundaries of knowledge. Read about 1883 eruption of Krakatoa (and global optical effects, including *The Scream* and red-skied watercolors by William Ascroft); 1894 smelling committee tour up the creek, animal glue for woodworking, *Aristotle’s Masterpiece*, Jell-O from horse hooves, etc.

January 3, 2011: Want to read all of *Clarel* (out loud), Melville’s Holy Land epic, the longest poem in the English language! And more about the human bottleneck (11,000 BCE). Also want to research the evacuation of Newport.

January 18, 2011: I dream of the Queensboro Bridge in 1907: it's half finished, a giant steel structure on two stone foundations in the middle of the river, going nowhere. Traffic on each side continues its daily orbits, unaware that when the bridge is finished the world will be changed forever.

February 5, 2011: A poem like a gear-shaft pull-chain towboat rig, back when there were breweries in Bushwick (think of Emily Barton's *Brookland*, of Colm Tobin's *Brooklyn*). Teeth—friction—backbite; insouciance!

February 11, 2011: How to paint in memories of the canals and ponds of Manhattan, back when half the island was farmland? What about the East Side Bus Terminal where I first met my beloved better-half? When I finish the glue factory poems, I must honor Blood Alley or Death Avenue, where cattle pens, coal docks, breweries, and abattoirs all thrived before they were bulldozed for the U.N. Secretariat.

February 19, 2011: I say to Lotti on an iPhone "I'm spelling licorice" instead of "I'm smelling licorice." "To err is human" is the heart of well-made art.

February 25, 2011: What do attempts to make a world port of Jamaica Bay have to do with Peter Cooper? It's the inordinate will to power, like Robert Moses and his Belt Parkway or Donald and his Trump Tower. Cooper was a parvenu, with designs on all of New York City, at a time when a single man had vast power to shape his surroundings. And for all that, we have the leaking, fuel-oil mess of Newtown Creek.

February 28, 2011: Paw palm graze scrape skin lick lap tongue mouth burn tweak pinch. Swum in the sea, unbelievably. Gather a list of everything ever written about the ocean.

March 3, 2011: The poems are complete! I take the Q53 bus out to Jamaica Bay to walk and to mull over what I've done. Who reads poetry anymore? Who reads history? How will we (humans) know who we want to be, except by setting examples, finding good models (or bad ones), and putting them into a form that rests outside of the stream of everyday information gush and gossip?

There's a snowy owl about, and sanderlings. I find a coconut in the salt creek marsh. Who knew? The looming brown mass of Starrett City, in front of the gleaming skyline of Manhattan, reminds me how we've transformed the landscape, but a light crisp breeze says otherwise.