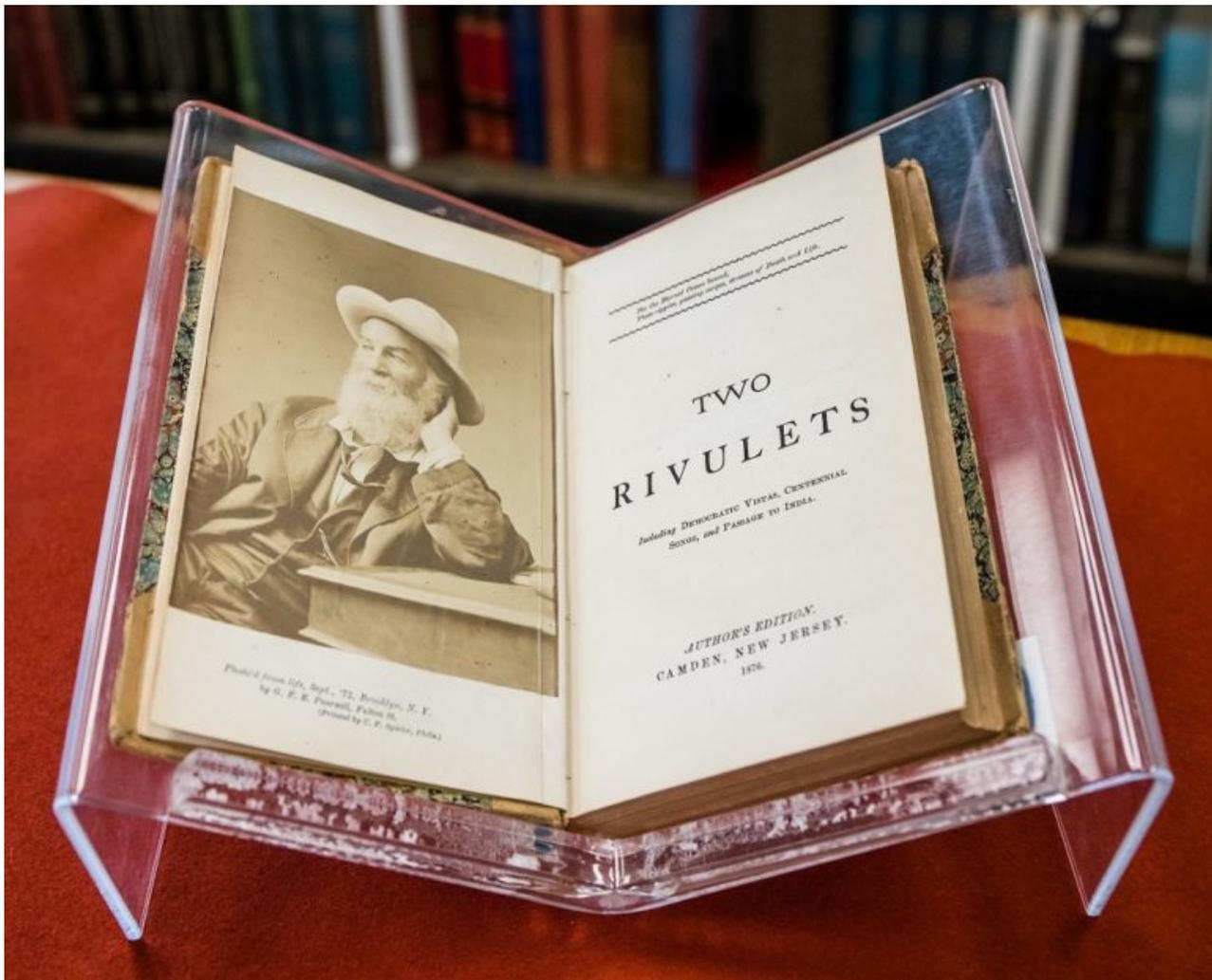
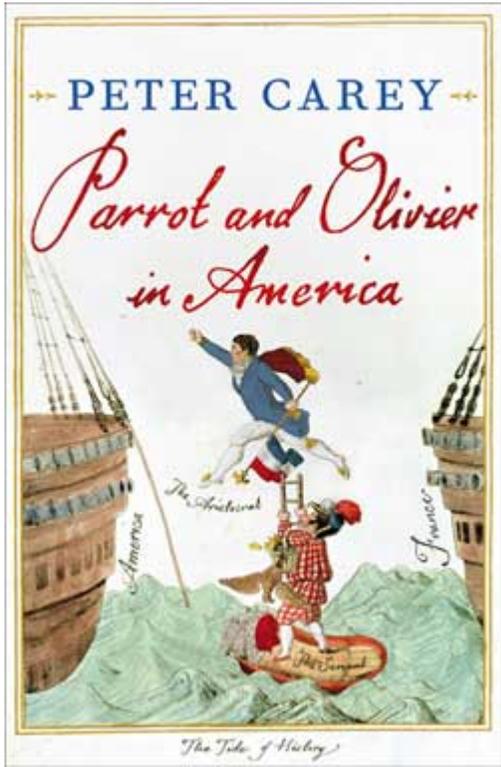


“Garments,” “Glances,” “Limbs,” and “Rivulets”



Written to mark the bicentennial of Whitman's birth, my poems operate within that lacuna, occupying the dissonant threshold between Whitman's optimistic vision for America, "out of hopeful green stuff woven," and my own personal history.

Tocqueville, Falling for America



So who, in Parrot and Olivier in America, is Parrot?

Power, Space, and Race: Evangelical Gotham

RELIGION

≡ and the ≡

MAKING OF

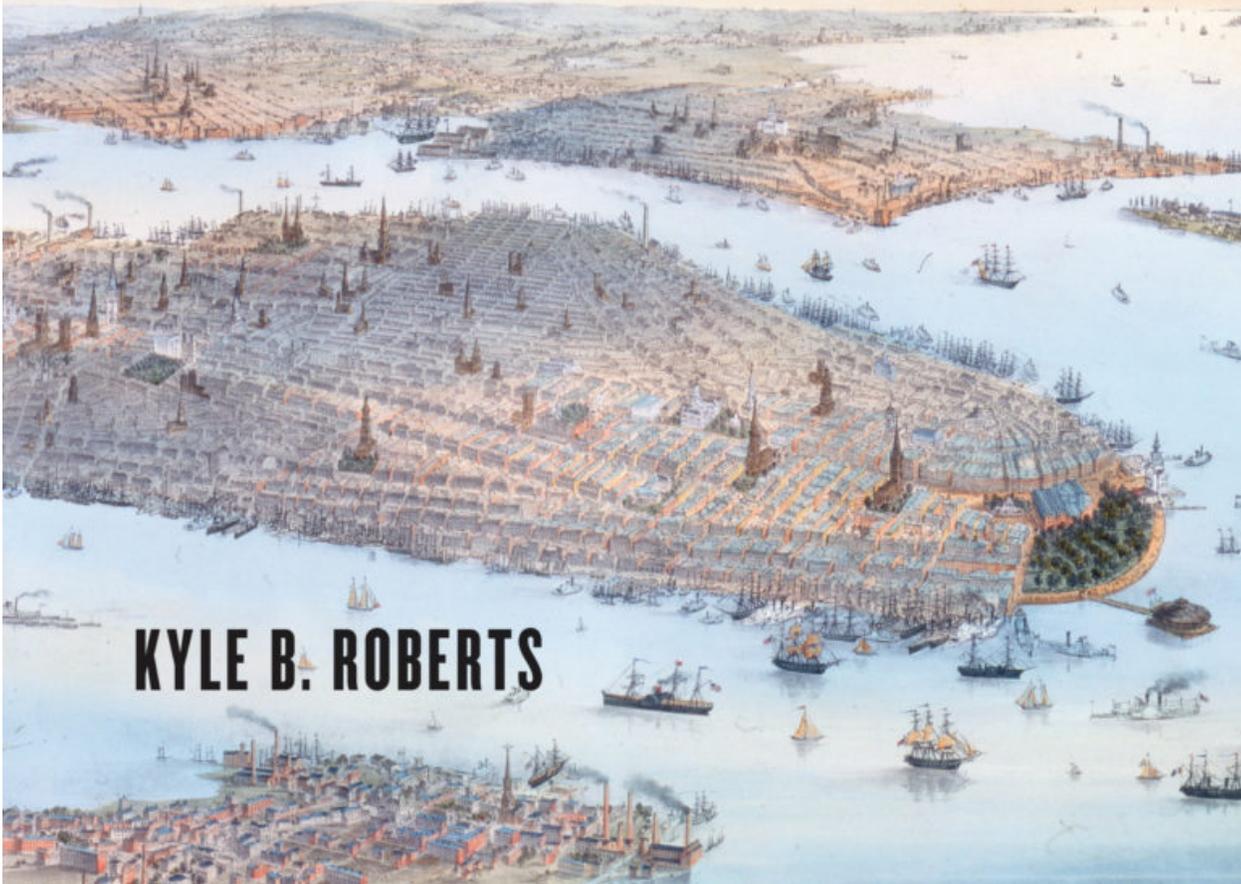
NEW YORK CITY,

1783–1860

EVANGELICAL

GOTHAM

KYLE B. ROBERTS



Even as New York was becoming an evangelical power center, it nevertheless also remained a foil against which ministers committed to the New England ideal of village life—homogenously white and Protestant—could rant and rail.

from “Bright Advent”

'These seen Gen.I, 1-2.

'Yeush naumukish Gen.I, 1-2.

These words are single notions
Yeush kuttiwongash siyeumoe wahittumiash.

God, created, in beginning,
God, ayum, weskekutchissik,

heaven, earth:, earth, not formed
kesuk, ohke: ohke, matta kukkenauuneunkquttinno,

nothing in it; darkness, upon deep:
monteagwuninno: pohkennum, woskeche moonoe:

the spirit of God moved upon waters.
Nashauanit, popomhau, woskeche, nippekontu.

These words binding words:
Yeush kuttowongash moappissue kuttiwongash:

And, was, or, again, but,
Kah, mo, asuh, wonk, qut,

another, like, for, but,
onkatuk, netatup, newutche, webe,

as, in, so, the, for this cause is it, &c. ...
neane, ut, nemehkuh, ne, newaj sun, &c. ...

All single Notions are Pairs
Wame siyeumie wahittumiash neqtayittumiash

which inlighten each other,
nish wequohtoadtumiash,

& them only:'
& nish webe:'

all source material is from the 17th century and appears in single quotes

[A Home: Liberia Poems](#)



But when it came to poetry, like many young poets, my first poems focused on myself. It was this exploration of my personal identity that ultimately led me to an exploration of the past. I'd brought several poems about my relationship with my father to a creative writing workshop, and a female classmate challenged me to write about the women in my family.

[Poems](#)



Published for the benefit of the Ladies Society which belongs to the Parish

St. THOMAS'S CHURCH, TAUNTON, MASS.

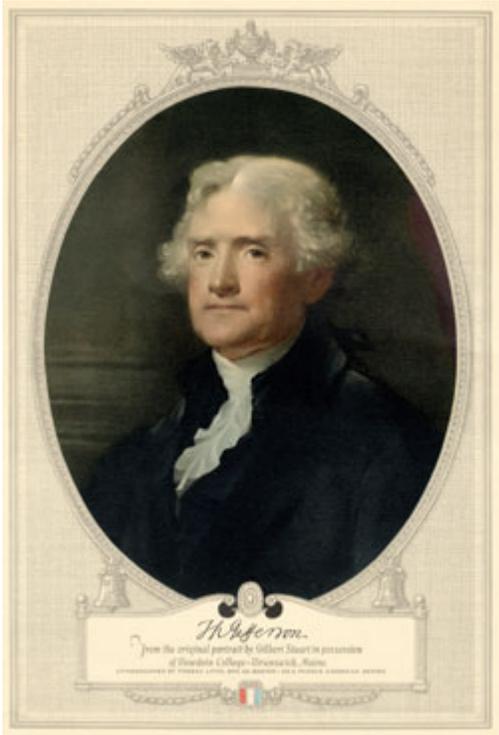
Research has been at the core of my poetic work for the past 15 years—largely because it gives me the chance to pursue questions of language while I pursue a subject in the world at large that interests me.

[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 public 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 be 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 Encyclopedia 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).