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FOOTHILL

a journal of poetry

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Claremont

GRADUATE UNIVERSITY

FOOT HILL

a journal of poetry

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Our Poets

Though they are laurels neither I nor *Foothill: a journal of poetry* have any claim on, I cannot help feeling crowned with pride and enthusiasm by the recent achievements of some of "our poets" (as we editors presumptuously call those we have published). Not that I believe their success proves the oracular powers of *Foothill's* editors. Nor am I entertaining some tawdry fantasy of riding these poets' coattails into the quintessence of literary stardom—"*I knew them before they were big!*" But I do think their success means this journal is working.

Nothing ostentatious like a *springboard or a launching pad*—back in 2011 we set out with our first issue to manifest a nudge, a wink, a high-five in journal form for those who could use it most: graduate students who, like us, are up to their throats in debt, all the while devoting their expensive time to the least remunerative practice relative to the labor it requires to be even okay at. A nudge; keep writing.

It is a certainty that Ishion Hutchinson would have won a Whiting Writers' Award without our ever having published him. In fact, by the time he submitted poems to us, he already had a first book out. Similarly, Julie Kantor would have gotten her two-page spread in the *Boston Review*; Diana Arterian would have had her chapbook, *Death Centos*, published by (the outstanding) Ugly Duck Presse, turned into a board game; Elizabeth Cantwell and Gina Keicher would have published first books with great presses; and several of "our poets" would have been published in numerous high-level journals (big and small) without our ever having even started *Foothill*. And we definitely had no bearing on the well-reviewed first book—one poem from which was in last year's *Best American Poetry*—of a certain poet to whom I wrote an encouraging rejection email three years ago (we've kept in touch). But…

Have you seen those people who go to marathons just to spend the day spiriting on the exhausted? Sometimes they don't know anyone running. They are amazing. That's who we editors strive to be.

These marathon-goers don't run the race for you any more than we write our poets' poems. They help by encouraging, which is to say, *challenging* you to keep doing the thing you have set about doing.

For the most ambitious, this *doing* is to become "our poets" in a totally different category—our moment's, our region's, maybe even our generation's most vital, memorable poets. In other words, to be one of the poets whose work we reach for when we ourselves need some kind of encouragement, an answer of language for circumstances so mysterious, wonderful, or horrible that other formations of language and sense break down before them. (In light of recent events in Ferguson, Missouri and in the Middle East, the work of Claudia Rankine—our interviewee and one of *our poets* in the broadest of senses—comes to mind.)

We aren't the only, or even close to the loudest, cheerleaders the poets in this journal and those in past *Foothill*s have or will have, but we are proud to be among the crowd of voices daring them to go on becoming *our poets* in more expansive ways. *Foothill* is the big garish sign we hold up to them while they are in the throes of fatigue and dejection and with miles of track ahead. It says, "KEEP WRITING!"

Cheers,

Kevin Riel

POEMS

JOSÉ ANGEL ARAGUZ
PHD CREATIVE WRITING
UNIVERSITY OF CINCINNATI

The Accordion Heart

The accordion heart is hard to carry.
There are no hands for it. To play,
you go from face to face and wait
to see who wakes it up. You'll feel
the air inside you pull and stretch.
You'll feel awkward and loud, and yet
each movement could be music. You
can see where this could lead to something.

Sometimes the face won't want to play.
Sometimes the face will play too long.
Either way, you'll feel worn out.
You'll want to punch and tear a hole,
and prove the accordion heart is useless.
There are no hands for it. You wait.

RHETT ARISTON
MFA CREATIVE WRITING
UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO

The Phantom Behind Me

After Richard Brautigan

An old poet
in the dark
barefooted

The walking
ghost
of Latrine

Can be heard
sonneting
the night

His still heart
haunts the public
nature of urinals

He who died
attacking the sea
while his shoes
stole somebody

CARLA BARICZ
PHD ENGLISH
YALE UNIVERSITY

Still Life with Café Table and Chairs

After Henri Matisse

Within the tide surge of the day drifting between
line-breaks they swam spumed up with signs—
mites, minute lichens, small crustacean scud
punctuation, coffee stains, and hardened crumbs,

the starchy flotsam of a life that lived despite itself.
They hungered for each other, flushed, reserved
like white-shelled cumuli, whose ruddy tooth-edged fronds
the grainy sunlight rubs across the distance

as late May clouds whose only sense is warmth.
No movement set the scene—a swelling laugh,
the momentary and abrupt display of a plumed bowl,
a husk of sound, a ship in mooring that emerged

and fulminating swayed and started, slipped
and strayed with a revealing, shuddering sigh—
was all. Nothing to say and nothing more displayed
which might submit to name or judgment

or arise and fade among the sleepy roving groves
and underpools of shadow, whose soft palms
clipped round the sidewalks and revolved
a secret scattering of petals. A pisgah sight—

a lingering glimpse of finitude, of fingers, hands,
of solitary months that wavering plunged—
flashed in the languorous uncoupling of metal
and ebbed away, beyond, in sullen tongues.

Love was the verdant sea whose tributary laurel
coiled the garland of the afternoon,
its glossy bands ringed by the febrile dreaming hours
wind-swept, salt-strewn, irreverent.

AMBER BRODIE
MFA CREATIVE WRITING
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FRESNO

Coping

You tell me that this metal work
put on the tops of brick, forms

a run off for water
and a crown for the wall,

designing your hands together—
one fisted, the other lying

on top, so that the mortar between
bricks doesn't separate like flour

or glue would when filled
with rain. I put my hand on top

of yours as you speak to feel joined
to you again, because your words

are dripping away, like there is a coping
over me and all I can focus on

is that word. How you've given me
a new meaning for it, fused the metals

between the kernings of its letters,
picturing the space between our fingers

in the same way, until I am unsure
if we are the real thing, or the metaphor—

if we are fused at right angles or
just bracketed together.

CHEN CHEN
MFA CREATIVE WRITING
SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY

Tightrope Walker

After Paul Klee

My husband was bold geometry, imperfectly Fibonacci, perpetually attempting to cross above a sea of writhing shapes not yet wrought into meaning. I waited politely on the other side. I sat on a well-formed sofa & read Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* to my mother over the phone. It was taking a long time. I was less algebraic, more mitochondrial—though perhaps there was little difference ultimately. I thought of my former Russian lit professor, who said (quoting Henry James & not Nabokov for once) that despite its elegant French influences, the Russian novel was a loose, baggy monster. Structurally suspect, mercilessly tender. How many nights passed, pseudo-philosophically, like this? I grew tired of waiting. I wanted to grow an inappropriate velvet mustache. I wanted to get on the tightrope myself, walk precarious above such scribbled math—at last meet my loose, baggy, hopefully tender life.

AYALA DANZIG
MD MEDICINE
UNIVERSITY OF ROCHESTER

I'm Not Sure That Exists in English

In which of your mother tongues do you spin equations into meaning,
read the minds of Pound and Plato,
remember?
At the subway station you speak trauma—raging, accusing, convulsing
in sobs: I prefer to speak of it,
in Urdu.
Sing to me in the melody of Tagore, transport me to his road in Tel Aviv.
Perhaps you know too little having studied so much,
perhaps the aria passed through you unnoticed
and in your preoccupation with quarks and Feynman's delight in
Nobel-winning games
you broke the octet rule and with it our bond.

Yesterday my children learned to spin plates on sticks and now wish to
join the circus:
I will allow it.
Music tells you how to love and Picasso's portrait of Gertrude Stein says
everything else.
Listen with your eyes and ears.
You are wholly human—imperfect and hurting—and I love you.

I was twelve when my brother's pockets began to bulge with tiny, green
would-be tomatoes
Soil and leaves and blossoms pressed into his feet—I could smell the
sweetness of blooming between his toes.
It is necessary to dig deep and yank to collect that which isn't quite ripe,
isn't yet prepared to move on
to the next phase.
No one told him to wait until they were no longer sour,
that the bouquet of dandelions he collected for Mother were actually
weeds.
We displayed them center of the table
and I worried that his chest would burst
with pride
or anger.
Separation hurts, and the lack of it hurts more.

Stay with me one minute longer

and then leave for good
while I cook dinner, belt Wagner in an American accent and tear
today's paper to shreds.
Refusing to hear your own words is like dividing by zero.
The universe may not actually implode
but the garden will be barren:
there will be no weeds but there will be no tomatoes either.

JIM DAVIS
MFA POETRY
NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

Moonrakers

Pulling pints behind the bar when the rugby's on, under-
pants raised up the flagpole as Ireland beat Spain by two.
He looked like the wrong man's all. When he ran
his nails along the lampshade, flakes came away *&* drifted

down into the pitchers, Heineken ashtray like a graveyard
of scoliosis filters. I think I am running
out of lines, he said. There's a spider in your black galoshes
& today a spy sub's been discovered after 67 years, same day
I noticed vagrant charges on my credit card. Special

Ed. students play floor hockey in the side gym. Weather's best
described as wintry & the parking lot smells like smoked salmon
except for the north end, where Frasier firs lean against the boy-
scout fence. I eat celery knuckles, baby carrots, seedless cherries

& when the Down's syndrome kid slapped a blue foam puck
into a net I cheered so hard I spit. There's no life
in pockets of the city where boys throw matches
into petrol-soaked cars. Unless you know where the primer goes
& how to sink an outlet in drywall, you'll have to ride out

the regime. When they found the shooters they were netting
the moon from the surface of a lake. The underpants clapped
like a flag. *You don't go down that alley*, he said before
they put three holes in his neck *&* chest, *you'd hafta be mad.*

Predatorial

Light through the custom wine glass
logo crystal-spins the world alive, brings it back
to a summer many summers past. Parking
garage partners, hoods up so we could see the spit
shine they put on the engine. Skinned bodies
like trophied Norsemen on an Anglo-coast
rung the Michigan lake house like a tin bell
that summer. Arnold covered himself in mud
& Apollo Creed lost an arm. A man
as I recall, hung by his tongue. My cousin
chased us until he was tired *&* I hoped to God
I'd never get tired like that. Shopping cart tracks
beneath the bridge that summer. Practicing
memory games to make up for all the head-banging.
That summer he joined a steak-of-the-month club
& got so drunk the rest of us cousins had to wait
across the street. The difference is never simple.
The difference tends to taste like a combination of nut-
meg *&* molasses. As I recall, there was a back-
gammon set people only set their drinks on. Stop cut-
ing me off, I said to the grownups, ruddy drunk & missing
their kids watching *Predator* in the basement, blood-
lust curious, sipping warm beer from dented cans.
There was a girl taken from the beach that summer,
as I recall they never found her. There are dunes I used
to hide in, watching fireworks light the sky like garbage
can fires seen from space—all these invented cons-
tellations, cutting into theaters of the world
before the vibrato fell flat *&* I bit my frightened tongue.

So You Want to Smoke Cigarettes in the Basement Bathroom

Stand on the bowl, blow smoke into the vents.

Rattle of a sunken putt. Orbits of the dartboard abridge relative to distance squared. Steel tip carbon-spinning shaft with a black widow flight is thrown from the sauna through a cloud of cigar smoke, lands like an axe.

Sorcerer waxes on and off above a cinnamon scented candle, the only light of a single stall bathroom, hieroglyphics written on a mirror flecked with what's flicked while flossing.

Where were you when the second plane struck?

Black cat sleeps with its head upon a gold brick pillow below an argyle upholstered chair beside a stool below a plate from which a stale red rose is plucked with plastic chopsticks.

On the green formica countertop, a dime steadies a baseball scuffed with asphalt, red seems touched and crawled slowly over by a black spider's impossible legs.

I was in the T-wing, watching smoke censor suicide.

In the room beside the room where he was born, he swings a well-taped hockey stick with his right hand, Molson sweating in his left.

Tricycle atop the trunk he refused to open. Electric outlets spit duplex, pop, snap and short. The unicorn reared on its hind legs beside a mattress on the floor and with its wide right eye saw through the window

to a young man putting, grown man soaking in the sauna, an old man throwing darts.

I was wearing a red Miami (OH) baseball cap, backwards. I was wearing

a black North Face vest, remember? You said I looked like that one guy from the movies. You said dude you're smoking the filter.

CHRISTOPHER HALL
MA LITERATURE
ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

The Fox

Icebergs! Take pause think on
heaven?

snow mountain frostbitten noses dropping
like prowls of sphinxes
reriddling each other senseless getting nowhere
insipidly oedipal linguistic mazes. Phooey!
Mouseman? How is the sand Mouseman? cold rattles jaws

babyesque buddhaic for a versal. re: for my next trick:
cockroaches! So much for Shakespeare!

I have towers of riches Babylonian
beyond belief! Bite your blubbering blowhole!
be quiet I say! BOMBAST! OH NO VORTEXES!
from my dreams!

I am fasc-inated with fasc-ism
it's the latest fasc-ion! [To be sung in a minor
scale
by two lost little girls]
Like fish. Snapperdoodle cookies
like grandma used to bake before she
was eaten by the cold.
so much for grandma!
that one never gets old. Got.
She found the fount
the cup
her grailgolden blood
coagulated. The frost proved deadly
for my immortal grandmother. Our party
roasted marshmallows her frozen neck bulging
yet no sound echoed.

we thought she practiced some yoga
until she burst and turned to golden dust. how sad.
impossibly frustrating.
took days to sift from the powdered snow. traded for candy. she will be missed.

Waiting for Godard

The shark in the sand, bloated a beached whale
cresting the bathtub. Cruise ship doors
        gelatinous pools
                casinos   neon skintones
vibrating flesh. Vie. Viva. Flashing windshields
pop of fireworks. Books for tearing
for soaking
                for burning.
Books with no words. Sold at a discount. Books with too many
        words

Here we stepped on the film
        here we spilled coffee on the exposure
here our actors were drunk
                here we told them the cocaine was dried milk.

Flash.

                Dermatology.
Lazarus asleep backstage. Filming film. Here we filmed
        a man making bootleg copies of an advanced screening.

                Ship me to south france where the sun never sets.
                        Tar me in primary colors.
I will quit in frustration
                                and become an
interior decorator.

EMMA HINE
MFA POETRY
NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

Lamarckian Inheritance

This is what my great-grandmother left me:
phantom centipede, haunted breast.
I close my eyes and see its back-plates
twisting in a moment of air, the fall
from the porch gutter to her skin.
Then a hundred sticky pads latch and unlatch,
pricked toes along her clavicle. She kept its scar close,
puckered constellation of poisoned lines.
Lamarck believed that acquisition and loss
outlast the individual. I never knew
my mother's grandmother, but her vulnerability
persists. On my way home a man called me
queenie, his hand deep in his unzipped jeans.
Toxic ghost fingers between my shirt buttons.
Unhinging me in segments from myself.

DYLAN W. KRIEGER
MFA CREATIVE WRITING
LOUISIANA STATE UNIVERSITY

Acarophobia 

Dear runner, your pitter-patter prowls thick. Never mind the causeway; there are animals you'd like to cipher. Ripples in the knotted face-cave, ribboned flesh crater. As if the moon were full of insect muzzles, ready to Venus-fly-trap your insides into a sticky thunder. One day, when I die, they'll find a horsefly in my spine—that same old thorn-crown cloaked in storm-cloud over Lake Gogebic that made me ache for your ballistics, sex-legged balls of fist that I could stick to, if I only stretched my neck out. Stiffly, while the boughs above us buzz with ticking time-bites, my clock-face stutters, suckered on the hour—

Never less than // barebacked nightlife
Never less than // bound/gagged fang-bang crisis

All the treetops' tantric violence, dyed in cold water and wedding violets, painting in raindrops down the riverbed all my veins along with their various venerable dizzies—yes, and oh no, even in the middle of the bourbon jungle, my blood out-wines itself inside the heart of a mosquito.

peri- 

the pear and knee, um, pair up, because
both may be pared by a curved scythepress,
alchemy the rainy way, the octoplace
where my tentacurls unhinge and
queer the straightness of the highways,
all aligned down America—I only feel alive
when I'm going down on America, bent
fruits bruising to ruin against the keynote-
speak-easy-street-smart-alley-wayside of
rubble and rhinestone, while revolving
around us the rebel galaxy giggles, rolling
back chasmic lockjaws and dropping placid
to see itself a sea queen in every sequin
shed by some stripper so ripe with ruby
seeds inside she might splat

JILL ANN MCELDOWNEY
MFA POETRY
COLUMBIA COLLEGE, CHICAGO

What Remains of My Brother

The Bible needs more time travel.
He & I are thinner now. We limp.
Him—dragging an ax head through the red dust,
& Me- *"i love you in lowercase."*

Tupac claims he was at The Crucifixion,
on the cross next to Jesus.
A joke passes between the three of them—
"If you were going to kill yourself, how would you do it?"
They sleep on the crosses & in the morning,
lumberjacks are cutting down all the wood,
carving a country of freeways, strip malls, Six Flags
out of the rubble.

Do not compete with my poverty.
My hips are a wrong turn in Nebraska &
you are a smoker that goes all night without a cigarette.
Let me kiss the back of your knees before the cancer sets in.

Watch my bones.
They are getting up & rearranging themselves.

Things We Do in Bed

For the other JM

should I drop a sex tape now?
I chew my medicine.
now?
now?

there am I
my walk in refrigerator skin,
my bones' failure.
every pop song is about the way you move
but I am weak when you use my toothpaste.

tree machinery against the window and you are the middle
of August
water sign, grainy spiders on film,
on white bedroom sheets.

watch the M.D. call you into an exam hall and trace your
son on a sonogram
your daughter on a centerfold.

then—

a camera without sound
radiation from puncture wounds
the white belly of a garter snake, black walnuts.

the heart tilts slightly left
and we were polar ions after all.
you forget to say:

"our expiration date was three weeks ago."

I defrost.
you changed me suddenly;
I was looking another way
while we bent mountains to the East,
our windows fogged
with blue-skinned children.

Something Happened in the Laundry Room

The stars you give me are planetarium quality
& youth smells just like sleep
we are supernova fraying corners of pillowcases
the knots between our shoulder blades.
At this point I know already how the MRI ends.

Come build a skate park on the scoops of my hipbones
for mono and 30 pieces of silverware.
Bridge the gap of graffiti and the phone number
on the inside of my left thigh,
ferry what you can—
take my wrist & its always:
"You are so thin, You are so thin, You are so thin. You are going to disappear."

Nothing can touch me.
It is winter in my body still—

There
we buy calendars of the moon landing
and the in middle of April it is
raining in the garden of gethsemane,
the lights across the valley are going out in threes,
& a smear of blood is cooling on the front walk.

BETH ANN MOCK
MFA CREATIVE WRITING
OKLAHOMA STATE UNIVERSITY

Walk Home From Union Hall

Burn my rag wagon. Set my debt
to dirt. The wet label off my bottle is a children's book,
leaks on the table like yards to their houses
or gin stinging down the maws of debtors.
We still steer up from bed every day and dress
in shoes of newspaper and wet sugar.
Even one turnip chewed between us, greedily, is a debt.
The streets home glue themselves together like a book.

JASON MORPHEW
PHD ENGLISH LITERATURE
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES

Never Settle

said the house to the patent troll
to the feather on the wave,
never
leave the bed in hands
of the afternoon,
never ever
love to live.
Put what you have on a gelded ghost,
shoot it in its broken leg,
initialize a claim
on a shallow family plot
in a field of mud
across the racist road
from a dollar store.
Never settle
for what's happening.
The beetle that will know you
isn't yet a twinkle
on the edge of embalmed genitalia,
there still sparkles a Jacuzzi
of time to curse
and cross.

SHAWN RUBENFELD
MFA FICTION
UNIVERSITY OF IDAHO

Look Away

Apologies are Alabama and you and me
naked under sunset—
sort of sunset—
naked under Nashville dusk.

Apologies are the grass that hangs
over Wheeler Lake and the grass that slides
over train tracks our bodies our spirals
like wheels making us hard again.

Touch me, Tennessee, take me
over highways to your lonely chestnuts.
Take me where I don't need to think
about promises and Alabama and the Tennessee
I touched in Decatur. Take me beyond the plateau,
to the mouth of the Cumberland,
where fireflies will chase me so far into your forest
that I come out in Kentucky. Then

take me, Kentucky, if you promise
to lose me—in your hidden moon-bow
and your Mammoth Caves,
in the swollen hills of your Knobs.
If you promise to lose me, Kentucky,
you can have me and leave me

to Indiana, where I'll wake
with the rising dunes at early morning,
letting the Michigan be my Tennessee,

letting its cold finger trace me,
leaving those long-promised apologies
hanging from the wet pines
of Alabama, where a part of me waits
for the rest of me to come home,
where the rest of me tries
to look away.

MICHELLE VILLANUEVA
MFA POETRY
UNIVERSITY OF NEVADA, LAS VEGAS

meanwhile the moon

what else could the girl have done back then
floating on turgid ponds reflection thinks
you sing straight while these store parking lots
every puddle smiles she wonders and moon
always quick to conversation that one
grandfather said front porch chair creaking
tonight remember the picnic when we played
circumstance these wheels rusty trailer
ever the highway waits for us be sure
arms outstretched you call deadlocked
her blank draperies

pulling alongside the tournament I
sort the mail and drift slowly power tools
cry out for this first solution every time
too soon you return finely beams this church
shucks corn as sacrament the birds prevail
over lunch you tell me you always loved
working late the office sounds of frogs
and she lisps each raindrop during your call
did you know then she would one day decide
everything waking from that nap I shook
greedily starlight reaches
your eyes the mantra

if you skate that edge choose swiftly your friends
letters restore the powerful their blossoms
hitchhiking at sunrise we remember these

throughout you remain hungry for croissants
their melted butter ruined my report still
I think of lilacs whenever the city
your dreams stale crumbs under this table
within tendons move empty beasts stripped bare
heartbeat echoes all she ever told you
breeze carries her scent mere wisps
along these canyons

CANDICE WUEHLE
MFA POETRY
IOWA WRITERS WORKSHOP

Accounting For

I admire your dedication to life lived in a room without a door.
I admire your dedication to life lived in a tank without a drain.
I admire your systems of delivery throughout which the blood refuses to drain.
I admire the systems of delivery through which you admit[ted] this [was] i[t]s[elf,] a drain. In honor, I order a lathe of leeches. Rub again
that which will not become comfortable.
Repeat the words which will not lose their luster, will not resist stutter.
I admire your insistence on living, upon enlarging, the wishes which will not manifest, will not deliver. When the squib bursts—but it dare not burst.
Somewhere I interrupted a discussion of the line in which Othello declares his dead Mother *almost*
could read the thoughts of people and what sort of white-out will, wont get you out. Soldier, the citizens ask if erasure is over.
I think it can't be, look: *under, under, under*. In honor, I order a satchel of sal volatile. Present. What
sort of wonder can keep us awake? Wait. Longer
words: annunciation, gracious, precarious, extensive, experiment, phenomenon, gentleness, infinity, impossibility, possibility, believability. Understand
attempts to archive the [un]
livable. In honor, I devise a system by which I forget my name.
I is you, you is I: us is us. Let us go,
then: *under, under, under*. Where words could keep us
awake.

ART

Untitled
mixed media
2014

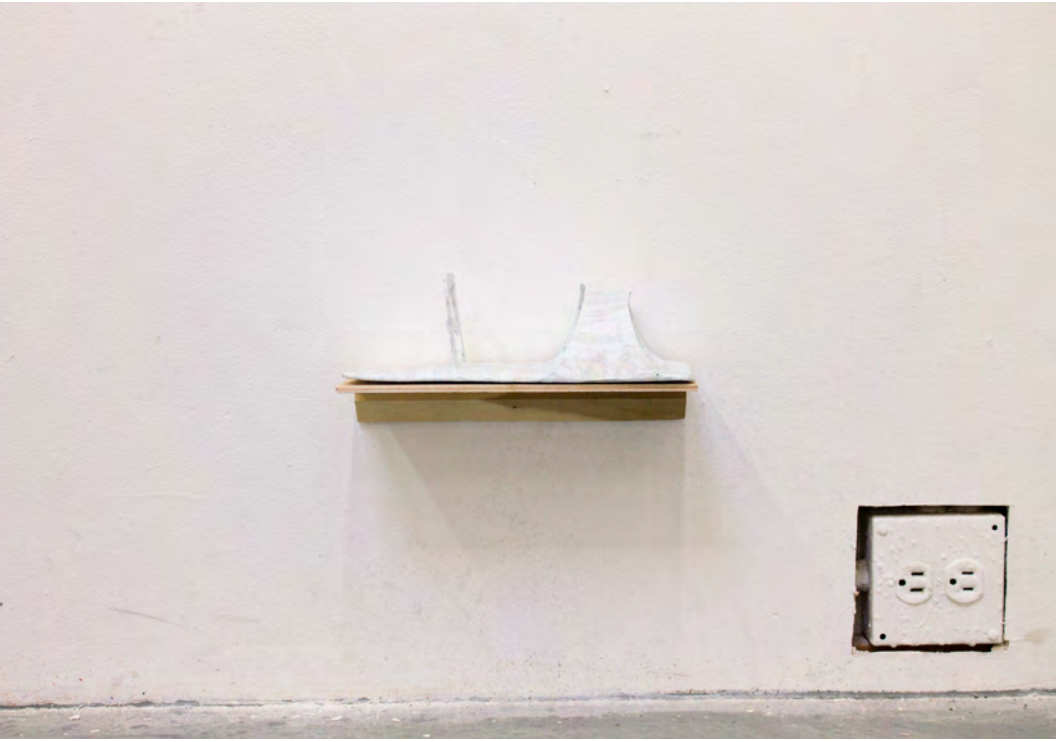
Untitled
mixed media
2014


Tenango

Untitled, mixed media, 2014

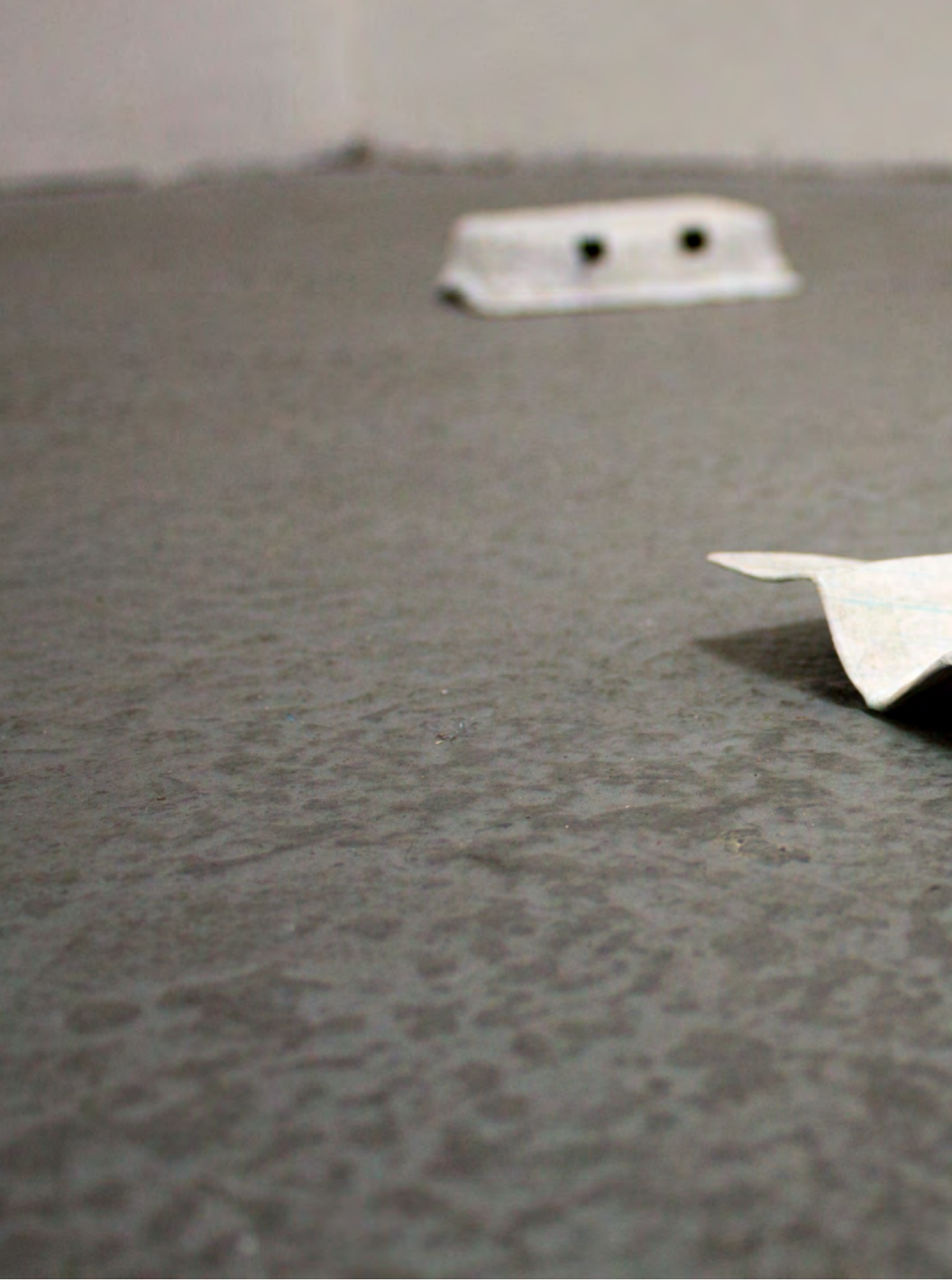
Untitled
mixed media
2014

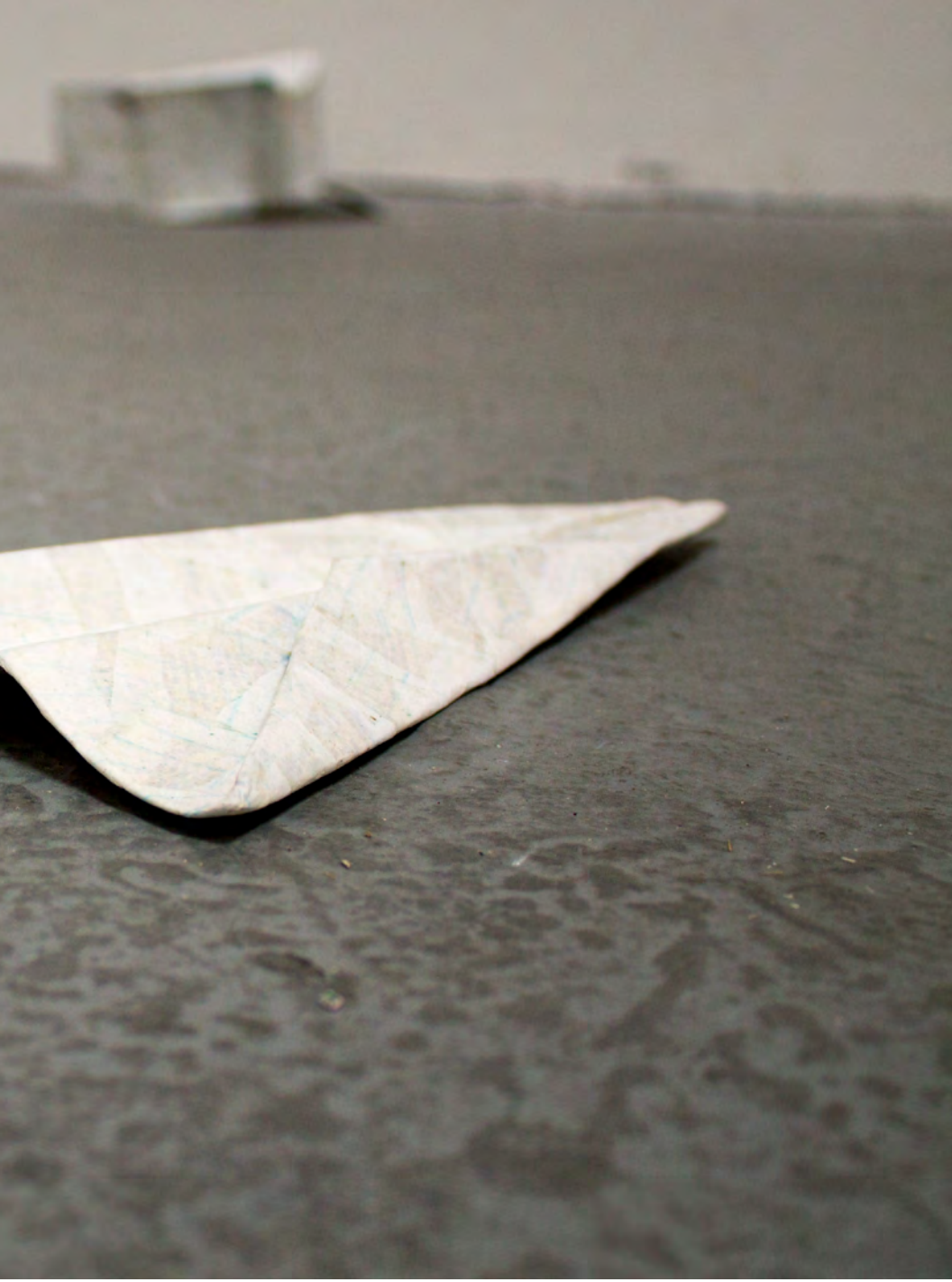
Untitled
mixed media
2014



Untitled
mixed media
2014

Untitled, mixed media, 2014





Untitled, mixed media, 2014

INTERVIEW

CLAUDIA RANKINE

Claudia Rankine is the author of five collections of poetry, including Don't Let Me Be Lonely *and* Plot, *and the plays,* Provenance of Beauty: A South Bronx Travelogue *(commissioned by the Foundry Theatre) and* Existing Conditions *(co-authored with Casey Llewellyn). Rankine is co-editor of* American Women Poets in the Twenty-First Century *series with Wesleyan University Press. Forthcoming in 2014 are* Citizen *with Graywolf Press and* The Racial Imaginary *with Fence Books. A recipient of fellowships from the Academy of American Poets, The American Academy of Arts and Letters, and the National Endowments for the Arts, she teaches at Pomona College.*

Foothill: One of the pleasures of preparing for each of these *Foothill* interviews is that they are an occasion to read as much work as we can get our hands on from a poet we admire, giving us a kind of bird's-eye view of their career. What struck us as we were reading through your books was how at the start of each one it almost felt like we were encountering a different poet—one, albeit, with similar curiosities, concerns, and background. Each of your books is distinctly marked by a different formal approach: the somewhat traditional lyric lines of *Nothing in Nature is Private* (1994) become the longer, more internally focused lines of *The End of the Alphabet* (1998), which in turn become the genre-bending monologues of *Plot* (2001) and the lyrical essayistic paragraphs of *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* (2004). Do you feel a need to shift gears formally with each book to widen or refresh your body of work, or is it simply that each book's content recommends a particular formal cast or atmosphere?

Claudia Rankine: I guess I took to heart Charles Olson's manifesto stating that form is never more than an extension of content. When I think about working on a book, and mostly my books are book-length projects, formal decisions in part determine content—since how we imagine is tied to how and what we question. The more I get inside the process of writing a book, the more I begin to understand what I am questioning and what that questioning should look like. This helps determine form, point of view, pronominal positioning, image-use and on and on. It all unfolds eventually.

Maybe that's why the books seem different. If I am thinking about exploring something, in *Plot* for example, a narrative where Liv is an artist, then I'm thinking formally about how to represent this fact. Even as I am writing the poems, I am thinking, "Oh, this could be on Liv's canvas." With a book like *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, because it was involved with public events, to me the formal attributes of newspapers began to form in my mind in relationship to the subject and content of the book.

FH: So you start with a larger project in mind and see it through to the end, rather than writing an eclectic batch of poems and expect that they will somehow relate to each other because they were written during the same period of time?

CR: Exactly. I think part of it is that I studied as an undergraduate with Louise Glück, and she wrote book-length projects, and often taught book-length projects. That was the model that I started with and it stuck.

FH: Did you write this way at the beginning of your career?

CR: I didn't in the beginning. In graduate school, and as an undergraduate studying poetry, I wrote individual poems. I began to see that, in fact, my obsessions over a period of time were usually the same. The poems were speaking to each other even when they seemed not to be—even when they seemed to have come out of some totally random assignment or impulse. When I get caught in something, I continue circling it as I try to figure out my interest in it. Everything that happens to me suddenly is in conversation with whatever I'm puzzling out. Random things seem somehow to be secretly in conversation with the project I am working on. I understand that that's false, but it doesn't matter because it just means that I am thinking about my subject 24/7, as something that needs my attention 24/7. When you exist in the world that way, I think you know you're not going to just move on. Since I know this about myself, I begin to build a structure around the way in which I investigate, and that means that the minute an investigation starts, a book starts. I'm going to stay with my subject until I understand its architecture or I've made it into whatever structure I can live with.

FH: Does it ever become intolerably oppressive to be focused on one project for so long? Does it become unbearable to live 24/7 with a book-length project that you can't escape from until you have enough pages to call it a book?

CR: It doesn't become unbearable because you know you're in it for years. Unlike something in which you think, "Oh, I can complete this in six months," the time just opens out in front of it, and it means that no one piece of writing has to answer all questions. Whatever I write now just makes me think, "Oh, I said that here, but maybe I should look at it *this* way." Just now, I'm working on a collaboration with the writer and visual artist Karen Green, and we've been going over a section in this long piece we're working on together. For a long time I was thinking of it in one way. Suddenly, on the elliptical machine, I thought, "Oh, no, it's actually this." So the question is, do you change what's written to reflect this new thought or do you just continue with a new thing and follow its direction? Because you can just keep going, it doesn't stress you out.

FH: Your new book *Citizen* (available October of 2014) carries the same subtitle—*An American Lyric*—as *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*. Is *Citizen* a kind of sequel? What does "An American Lyric" signify and why is it the right designation for these books' approach, formal or otherwise?

CR: I'm always asked this question, and I think every time I give a different answer. Today, I'm going to say that for me, lyric has to do with personal emotion. If you are interested in affect theory, then you are interested in part in the lyric. Both *Citizen* and *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* have to do with considering things from the position of being an American citizen through an emotional lens. They are non-narrative histories of the feeling of being here in contemporary America. Neither book is interested in speaking truth to power or calling for change. They're interested in what feeling these big issues elicits in ordinary, individual bodies. In that sense, that's where the lyric comes in. Whatever I think I am writing, I'm actually writing about affect and about the accumulation of the feeling of the thing rather than, say, the politics of the thing or the call to action of the thing—though these positions might inform the feeling. Both books are about internal distress, internal positioning, internal and private negotiation of what is unbearable in our world.

FH: One aspect of your poems that is consistent across all your books is the way they remain beautifully voiced, beautifully composed, even as so many relate encounters with profound ugliness in the form of violence, racist or sexist provocation, injustice, bodily decay, etc. Do you see poems like these as beautiful; is beauty at all a concern for you, or should "beauty" be replaced by another term?

CR: Perhaps what you're calling "beauty" I consider a kind of questioning, meditative voice. The ability to question and to circle

and to prod and to express one's feelings about things that are ugly and to allow the self to feel its response to those ugly things… the beauty maybe is in the time the page allows for the investigation and the positioning of one's self up against that. So maybe that's what you're seeing. When I watched Steve McQueen's *Hunger*—a film about the 1981 hunger strike in Ireland—I remember thinking, even though it's about the harsh reality of standing up to power, this is an incredibly beautiful film. The beauty for me was in the time the camera took to hold the silences, to allow for those silences. There's a great shot of an investigator who is standing outside in the snow in his dark jacket, and you just see the snow up against the dark of his jacket. It's a sublime moment. Yet, his character is awful. It would be interesting to ask people what they think beauty stands for. For me, it often is about taking time. To hold time in art is to create beauty. For me, it's in those moments that we allow ourselves to know what we feel.

FH: In the same vein, one notices in your poems a tension that manifests between a given speaker's emotional candor toward various forms of ugliness—expressed often as shock or outrage—contrasted with the formal composure of the poem. For instance, the un-indented blocks of text that make up all of *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* visually suggest a level of control even as the poem's content reflects on situations or emotions that escape control. Is the writing of the poem empowering in the way it allows a poet to exert control over difficult or painful material?

CR: I don't think I'm ever really thinking about exerting control over material or over pain. I am more interested in communicating positioning, adjustments, or rupture within what's painful. There's a poem in *Citizen*, for example, with the lines "you're not the guy and still you fit the description because there is only one guy who is always the guy fitting the description." In that poem, I ended up using those lines as a kind of refrain because they reflected the meaning of that experience: that the experience happened again and again and again. There, the form helped, in the sense of replicating, the content. The form enabled the content to exhibit its destructiveness.

Sometimes though, I use the prose poem because I don't want to have to break the line in a place where formally I could break it in order to create double meanings and things like that. The prose poem for me creates a kind of transparency between that thing and the experience I'm trying to bring forward, and I want the language to get out of the way, to feel transparent. Whereas, when I think

about what I can do with the poem, I'm often thinking about the many things that I can do with language, which is different from the desire to create transparency. In *Citizen*, often its anecdotes were like looking through a window at something I was seeing. The desire to replicate the experience of seeing or hearing some moment was more documentary than performative, perhaps.

FH: Was it a challenge to put aside some of these poetic tools? There must have been instances when you were writing and thought, "oh, well if I break the line there, wouldn't that be interesting?" but you sort of had to set that aside.

CR: Exactly. You still incorporate those tools in the editing, but it's not as apparent. You don't have that same sense of control over the way meaning lands. You lose that a little bit. But what you gain is a kind of plainness—what I call transparency. The hope is that the reader can step into the prose poem and break it up the way they want.

FH: There is a sense in your poetry that emotional candor is not only a reservoir of dramatic energy, but a crucial source of honesty and wisdom. In one of your older poems, "Descending from Darkness," you have an epigraph from Ralph Ellison that reads: "There is, by the way, an area / in which a man's feelings / are more rational than his mind...," which sounds so much like William Blake's statement: "A tear is an intellectual thing." Could you speak to how the passions not only give a poem dramatic energy, but enlightenment? In what sense is the purely rational poetic voice limiting?

CR: I almost think that poetry is not the realm of the purely rational voice. I think the reason I identify as a poet is because I was never purely rational. And that's why I love the work of poets because in their work you find what's experienced in the body rather than what the mind knows. Rhythm, rather than what you can grasp intellectually, is what builds experience in the work. I used to be very fond of Wordsworth because I loved the way in which his poems seemed to walk through time: the physicality of the movement of a body thinking its way through its own emotions. I think you have that in Rilke as well, and poets like Vallejo, Robert Haas, Louise Gluck. Jericho Brown, Emily Dickinson, Charles Bernstein, Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge, and I could go on!

FH: And yet *Citizen* and *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* seem to contain a lot of information for books of poems. They're almost lyrical essays, and we tend to think of essays as being founded on principles of rational thinking. Sometimes the voice in the poem is in the

process of embodying and digesting certain forms of information or experiences, but also rationally thinking through them. What part, if any at all, does rationality play in the body thinking through events?

CR: I think the ways in which the body has to digest, repress, negotiate, sidestep, sideswipe, continue on despite whatever involves a kind of moving through which involves a kind of thinking through. The critic Lauren Berlant and I were talking, and she asked me about some of the poems where it felt, to her, that I was stepping inside the body of the subject of the poem, like the Zidane piece. In that piece it's not about narrating from a distance but actually stepping inside the actual moment and speaking from that moment. In a way it's kind of an indwelling. I think I take on that position because I am interested in what it feels like to have the assault of the body happening at the moment you're trying to negotiate the moment. For Zidane, he hears things that he feels are assaulting him, and in that moment, how that gets coded in your imagination, in your emotional life, in your places of distress inside your body is what interests me. Those moments for me are always fascinating. Do you consciously connect them back historically? Or do you feel them personally? Because the reactions are big in these moments, what happens changes the way the public codes or narrates the event. In Zidane's case something was going on inside his body. I'm really interested in what it means to be inside that body at that moment of crises and what kinds of things put pressure on you so that you react in X or Y way.

FH: Arthur Rimbaud's famous formulation "The I is another" seems especially pertinent to poems of yours from which the material seems culled from lived experience, yet are occupied by a third person "she." Does this kind of distancing allow you a certain authorial freedom, a relief from self so as to understand yourself better, or to more effectively write through these types of embodied experiences?

CR: I think the choice of pronoun for me is always of interest. In *Plot* "she" is there because the concerns of that book are feminine. They're about the female body and the female artist: the negotiation of the artist as mother, as wife, as artist. In *Citizen*, I wanted to use the second person because I wanted the reader to have to position themselves each time in terms of what was going on, so that as a reader one would have to say "I'm standing here, no I'm standing *here*." Or "this is me, no no, *this* is me." Or nobody's me. Also, one would assume this person is white or black or brown. The second person opened it out to that kind of negotiation.

I also thought that the idea of the other, which this book engages, meant that it couldn't stand in the first or third person. Always the "othering" of another was being enacted, and the second person is already the beginning of that "othering." *Citizen*, you might say, is really about a public other. The pieces needed to stay public, even as they were private and intimate, because it seemed like the position of brown and black bodies in American society is that they are public bodies, no matter how intimate the space is. Those bodies, at times, are public objects. In the way that Ferguson's police left Michael Brown's body in the street for four hours without an ambulance because it wasn't a body in the first place. Had it been a body, it wouldn't have been shot six times, twice in the head, in its unarmed state. And yet the object, because it is a body, is also an intimate and private space, for his parents, his friends, his community, and every other black person in the country. It felt like the second person in the way that even that term "the second person" opens out metaphorically, should be negotiated on every page.

FH: When you embody the voices of characters or real people like the Algerian-born French soccer player Zinedine Zidane in the video piece "Situation 1" (which can be found at: www.claudiarankine.com), do you become a spokesperson for them, they for you, or ultimately they for all or part of us? In other words, who speaks?

CR: There are no spokespeople because I don't really feel like there is anything that I am advocating or managing. I really think that it's just me trying to understand how it feels to be positioned inside the unbearable. Historically, bodies are being put in unbearable situations, and they have to negotiate them. Or they don't negotiate them, or they die trying to negotiate them, or they're killed in the act of existing within them. As a writer, because I don't feel that those moments are random or unreadable, I believe that if I can stand to place myself in their stead and I can write the path of the storm circling the moment. I feel as if I am trying to understand an extended version of my own life, and on a certain historical, non-narrative level, I do come to understand a little more fully. The writing is almost like an uncovering of each individual gust of wind that gains speed even as it accumulates into a storm. The writing goes in and takes the individual gust and says, "this one feels chilly" and "that one is cold."

FH: You have worked with your husband, the photographer John Lucas, on a series of video pieces like the Zidane one. In what ways do multimedia projects interest you and how to they open up other possibilities in your creative work?

CR: I think what's nice about working in multimedia is other senses become involved. I've always been interested in the visual arts. I started out in college thinking I was going to be a visual artist and taking painting classes at the same time I was taking writing classes. For some reason, the painting classes fell away, but the writing classes stayed. But that doesn't stop my great admiration for others in the visual arts. I think it's because I can see in the work of artists like Glenn Ligon or Nick Cave or my husband's work the desire to arrive at the same destination in terms of inhabiting or metabolizing a kind of outrage, rage, distress, sadness. I'm always really desirous to join forces and to see what else I can get if one adds, for instance, the visual aspect of video, where you can stop time and hold an expression on a face. Video can put things in motion and then you can have an individual moment just sit there on the screen.

For me it's always fascinating to work with John on these situation videos because it allows me to sit inside the moment in a tangible way. I can actually stop Zidane mid-step and think, "what is he thinking right now?" I see the look on his face. I see the consideration before he turns around and head-butts the player on the other team. Sure, I could intellectually think about that, but there's something about being able to sit inside the visual of that moment and to work from that. I think the ways one can manipulate video allows a form of indwelling to happen. That way you are both inside and standing alongside that body.

Cornelius Eady wrote a fantastic book, *Brutal Imagination: Poems*, about Susan Smith—the white woman who killed her children and said a black guy did it—in which he embodied the imagined black guy in the car with the two kids before they get killed. The form of that book always struck me as genius in terms of a way to extend the emotional reality of how that story played itself out in the national consciousness. It's very different to be inside the imagination of the imagined as opposed to talking about his construction as Susan Smith's imagined assailant and having to move through her body to get to him.

FH: In what ways do collaborations interest you? Do they limit you or open up new possibilities?

CR: I never feel limited. I always feel that collaborations create openings, possibilities, a push. I sometimes resist that push; I sometimes find it initially difficult or initially it feels wrong-headed, or I am just resistant because I thought we were in this lane and we were going to stay in this lane and now we're supposed to get over and get into this other lane. But it's never something that I can't

negotiate, but I am always interested in my own resistance. And when I feel the resistance, it makes me want to go against it. I think, "Why are you resisting? What is it about this suggestion that feels alien or difficult to you? What happens if you just go with it?" Often I do just go with it because I don't trust feelings that create limits. Flexibility often yields something I hadn't imagined, which is then exciting to me. Collaborations are not without their stresses, but you gain something when you give something up. Right now I'm collaborating on a project, and the direction that it took wasn't one I felt prepared to take initially. It stayed difficult, but in a generative way.

FH: In another interview you said that you think of *The End of the Alphabet* as your first book because *Nothing in Nature Is Private* "came out of an MFA program where I behaved a bit like a tennis player—trying to hit poems over the net back to a roomful of people. There's that constant struggle between satisfying the expectations of the program and what your unconscious wants to investigate." So many of our poets, many of whom are in MFA programs, are similarly menaced by this type of apprentice-stage pressure—wanting to satisfy various expectations verses investigating imaginative spaces that are more personal to them. What do you recommend to your students at Pomona College about this? As a professor of creative writing, do you often get the sense that your students are trying to please you, and if so, do you urge them not to? Or do they need to learn how to walk before they can run?

CR: I think that is the real issue. How do you contextualize the experience of MFA programs or workshops? I think that the process of learning how to take criticism, just on a basic level, understanding that the poem ultimately will have an audience that will interpret it differently than you intended, is important. But it is also useful to know that there are processes that go on in that workshop that are actually just good life lessons, just good things for a writer to go through. But because you're going through those lessons and also trying to write, I think one has to understand that the projects might not be motivated by the right ambitions in the classroom. Some of the things that go on in the classroom affect the way the thing is being written. You can't separate that during that process. While you're writing in the classroom, you are going to think about those ten people, and you might start writing towards them. Afterwards, you might see where you started writing towards them and understand that that's not needed. But during the process it's hard not to do that. It's hard not to want to please the person who said, "Writing in quatrains means you're a genius." And suddenly you are the person saying, "I can write in quatrains. Watch me!"

All of that stuff happens in there, and it's fine, but I think afterwards you have to recalibrate. Everything you learn is potentially useful to you, but ultimately you have to figure out who you are as a writer and what works for you. One of the things I've tried to do is not limit myself in terms of who my models are. I feel I'm as influenced by James Baldwin as I am by Paul Celan. But on the page they look very different. They each offer me something that is necessary. Formally, I don't need to follow one or the other when I can follow both.

Being a writer, being in the classroom with younger writers, it makes me see that there's no one way. You're trying to get people to write successfully any way you can. I've become more sympathetic with things that were employed when I was a student. I like to think that I'm more open as a teacher of writing. I like to think that my students are able to experiment and that this whole idea of a finished product is not a governing goal in my workshops. It's more about the process.

FH: Because so many of us on the staff are anxious about how much time we devote to our own writing, we are always keen to ask successful poets about their writing process. How often, how long, and when during the day do you write? Do you have a ritual that helps you stay productive, or do you write sporadically? At what point do you feel like you have earned your beverage-of-choice at the end of the day?

CR: I was walking the dog yesterday morning, and I was writing in my head, and then I thought, "you're not going to remember this when you get home." And in fact, when I got home I didn't remember it. It was sad because it was something I've been trying to write for a long time, suddenly it seemed to make sense to me, it came to me. The whole point of telling you this is to say you have to write or else it goes. You have to make time to do that. Before I had a daughter and life got impossibly busy, I used to have two days that were my writing days. I taught at the beginning of the week, and then on Thursday and Friday, I wrote. I stayed home, and I wrote, and I did it regularly enough that even if I had agreed to go to a dinner party, I would forget about the party. That space became a time when I was able to sink into the writing. I would look forward to that time other times during the week. I found that, for me personally, trying to juggle a lot of things in the day wasn't working for me. But if I knew that I had those days, it made it okay to spend the time doing whatever else I had to do on the days I had to do them. And then, on Thursday and Friday, nothing else was going to happen but what I was working on. Then it became only Friday. And then it became from 4:00–7:00 in the morning…[laughs]. So, over

the years it has gotten to be less structured. But nothing will get written; it won't happen if you don't make the time.

I've never been one of those people that say, "oh, I wrote a poem today" or "I wrote 250 words today." That has never been the thing for me. It was more that some understanding came to me. I can even give you an example. There's a moment in *Citizen* where I couldn't get something right. It took me over a dozen months to figure out how to end this one section, how to say it so things weren't compromised or misrepresented. When I finally figured out exactly the three words that enacted exactly what I intended, I was elated. But it took a long time. In the time it took me to figure that out, and I would say that it took about a year, I was thinking about it all the time. On and off, and then one day I was walking in the mountains with the dog, and I figured it out. *That's* when I get my glass of champagne!

CONTRIBUTORS

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A native New Yorker, Shawn Rubenfeld is finishing his MFA in fiction from the University of Idaho, where he received the university's 2014 Outstanding Graduate Student Teaching Award. His fiction, poetry, and nonfiction appear in journals such as *Portland Review*, *580 Split*, *Heavy Feather Review*, *Pine Hills Review*, *gravel*, and *SmokeLong Quarterly*, among others. He has an essay forthcoming in the journal *Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition, and Culture*. He was awarded a Writing in the Wild Fellowship for work on his novel in progress and has served as managing editor of the literary journal *Fugue*. He currently serves as managing editor of *Split Lip Magazine*.

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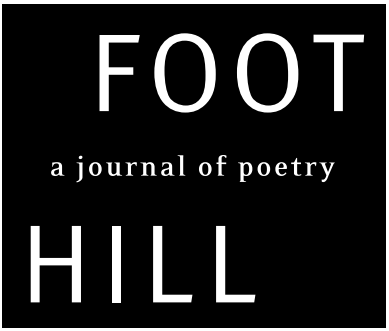
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