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POEMS
The language that you are now reading is the most widely spoken in the world today. But you’re only a minority stakeholder in the global Anglosphere if English is your mother tongue. Around 400 million people are learning English in China as I write this—more than the entire population of the United States. Over 125 million Indians speak English as an additional language, a number expected to quadruple within the next decade. Hundreds of millions more are studying this language in church basements, public schools, adult education centers, and online across Latin America, Europe, the Middle East, Africa, the Pacific Rim, and elsewhere. Some will go on to careers in global finance, some will work at call centers—and some will become poets.

This latter vocation ought to come as no surprise. English literature has always been shaped by linguistic outsiders: Jack Kerouac, that quintessentially American voice, mostly spoke French into his teens; Joseph Conrad enlarged the British novel in his third language, after Polish and French; the most widely read book in African literature, Chinua Achebe’s English-language masterpiece, Things Fall Apart, was written by a native Igbo speaker. Literary nerds call them “exophonic” authors, and they’ve been writing the story of world literature from the learned Chinese verse of Nara-period Japan to the London-born Bengali American writer Jhumpa Lahiri’s 2018 Italian novel Dove mi trovo (translated into English, as if it were about a missing first-person, as “Whereabouts”).

Most of us find it hard enough to ask directions in another language; to write a poem in an adopted tongue seems almost miraculous. Yet contemporary American poetry boasts a chorus of exophonic voices, including Don Mee Choi, Ilya Kaminsky, Dunya Mikhail, and Javier Zamora, to name only a few. They hail from diverse backgrounds, but they can all claim membership in a global community of exophonic writers. Their work asks us to think deeply about language and identity, assimilation and acculturation, and the histories of collective violence, trauma, and displacement that have shaped our modern world.

Through a glass darkly, exophonic poetry might also be viewed as the renunciation of a writer’s linguistic heritage. Every poet in this issue sings their own answer to this open question. As English is increasingly entangled with issues of globalization, the erasure of cultural difference, and economic inequality around the world, exophonic poets writing in English must reckon with a language that isn’t only part of the problem; for many of these literary double agents, English is the problem. Exophonic poets project their own cultural histories into a new language, as writers always have done, and
always will do. They are translators of themselves. We might even read their work as a collective experiment in self-translation.

When I first drafted an open call for submissions to this special issue of *Poetry*, I'd hoped to hear a new story, told by immigrants and refugee writers, about “American” literature. But literary exophony speaks many languages, across numerous countries and regions, expressive of countless lifeworlds; a Persian speaker may write in Swedish, and an American poet may contribute to the story of Japanese literature, as you'll find in the pages that follow. So I'm grateful to the writers who have contributed essays from a variety of transnational perspectives to this issue: the Palestinian poet Ahmad Almallah writes of his work with Arab immigrants in Philadelphia for the cultural organization Al-Bustan Seeds of Culture; Lawrence-Minh Bùi Davis, Curator of Asian Pacific American Studies at the Smithsonian, introduces us to the pop-up Center for Refugee Poetics that he founded with the diasporic Vietnamese writer Ocean Vuong; and Sasha Pimentel, a Filipina poet raised in the US and Saudi Arabia, recounts her experience teaching Latinx poets in the bilingual MFA program at the University of Texas at El Paso on the US–Mexico border. These writers illuminate migratory routes of the imagination from the Arab world to Southeast Asia to the hemispheric Americas and beyond. Exophonic poets, they help us to see, are the unacknowledged legislators of world literature.

My own parents came to this country from villages in the south of India over half a century ago. I remember with middle-aged embarrassment my childhood embarrassment at their misunderstandings with various officials, salespeople, restaurant workers, and my teachers at school. Worried that it might interfere with our learning English, they studiously avoided speaking their native language, Telugu, with my sister and me as we were growing up. You might even say that our first language was English as a second language. Now when I talk to my parents, I feel at home in their manner of speech. It has a poetry of its own.
Tablets VI

1

When the sun is absent
the flower misses her
and when the absence grows long
the flower looks inside herself
for another light.

2

My flower will not wither.
It’s drawn in my notebook.

3

I am the plural
who walks to you
as a singular one.

4

Urgent artificial tears wanted
for dry eyes.
Natural tears leaked
for centuries
into the rivers
and overflowed.

5

Before you shoot someone
remember their mother’s eyes
will follow you wherever you go
until she drowns you in her tears.
They didn’t like his idea
so they shot him in the head.
From the hole the bullet caused
his idea will reach the world
and unfurl like a climbing plant.

Only one heart resides
in each person
but each is a train full of people
who die
when you kill
what you think is one.

There’s a sun inside each book.
Come and bring the new day
that’s waiting for us to open.

She asked the night:
*Why are you so dark?*
Night answered:
*So that the stars’ light reaches you.*

She asked the day:
*Why don’t you light?*
Day answered:
*Because I became your shadow.*
Life is beautiful and painful like a feather pulled from a wing.

When the pistachios ripen we break their shells like we do to the hearts of our lovers.

If thieves come to your home let them take everything except your dreams. Keep those in a safe box.

She dreams and her friend completes the dream. When they separate, the Earth rotates slower and with half dreams.

The trees, like us, resort to their roots in times of danger.

During the pandemic we are a forest—trees standing alone together.
We watch our days: a snowman melting away as he should.

There are days we wait for and they come and there are days that happen to us that we cannot avoid.

The bubbles in the aquarium are the fish’s notes about the world.

Like a patient teacher the sun brightens our wrongdoings, same time every day.

When the bird is prevented from singing, his body turns into music, filling the horizon.

The birds never ask if you are going to heaven or to hell and they never divide the sky into stations.
When the birds chirp in your head, trust their message for you, especially if they tell you, for example: *Flying is your true home.*

What if the guns turn into pencils in the hands of the soldiers and they underline the places on the map as sites they must see before they die?
I Ask That I Do Not Die

— but if I do
I want an open coffin
I am an American poet and therefore open
for business

Owls peck the windows of the 21st century
as if looking for
the board members
of Exxon Mobil
who who who who who

Listen
my beloved nothings
your seriousness
will kill you!

But before you die
my doctors
have prescribed happiness

God is a warm brick
or a claw
or the silence that survives
empires

An old woman
in the rain with a pot of mushroom soup
is one of God’s
disguises. Her dog
lifts its leg
another one of God’s shenanigans
and pushes its nose
into morning’s ribcage

I point my hand
God this and God that and
when God has nothing
I still have my hairy hand for a pillow
Put me in an open box
so when God reaches inside my holes
I can still see
how a taxi makes a city more a city
    slippers on my feet, and only half
covered by a sheet,
in a yellow taxi
so as not to seem laid out in state
but in transit
Dong Li

From “North of the Earth”

what was there to cover

the face of the village littered with baskets of bronze shouldered by the young
as they slowly trod along the new cement roads not a single child under the
shade of a tree to wave their parents to eat from the fields

a river of rust brightly black under the moon he heard their heartbeats or
was it the moon or the cold of a rain near dawn

a rivulet of words trickled on a page then flickered under the kerosene light
his hair grew long waving outside the window the earth was breathing

the far mounds under cover of the moon

carrots meats shredded mixed in bean-made vermicelli past spring festival
happiness mixed in fire cracks that he no longer missed

no return to a place called home

a train of thought-threads woven snaking around word after word until a
world birthed another world

sing and let sing

he wrote across nights when words flowered on a page of poetry that
attracted the company of flowers

outside his night window a world was lit as he looked through

a strange feeling of blue that night could not cover that night wound its way
to the heart burning

in the confinement of the body a shade of blue burst within a shade of blue
gleaming her ponytail weighing heavy on his lids

night eyes were staring in the pane then blurred by a thorn tree shriveled in
red

was red the shade of love
Tsering Wangmo Dhompa

From “Substitute Heart”

A single human life migrates through many lifetimes, according to the books she read to me.

The word migrant is cousin to nomad which is what her ancestors were.

When she turned refugee, she was told not to confuse herself with migrant.

There is no uniform legal definition of migrant. Blurring the terms generates confusion, aid workers explained.

We are often asked who we are and where we come from. We tell the story we’ve memorized by heart, we know when to insert facts and what emotions are better left in our bodies.

Practice compassion, the teacher says when we ask him to make decisions for us.

Good thoughts generate good thoughts without asking for an exchange.

Just the thought of wanting to help others is worth thinking on, he says.
Michael Dumanis

Flag Day

The flags flew in the wind and I saluted. 
We’d just moved out, my family, the lot of us, 
from one country into another. I failed 
to understand the consequence.

The flags clapped like the wind. I spent each yellow 
bus ride attempting to count toward infinity. 
My fellow children told me I was weird 
and couldn’t speak their language skillfully

enough for freeze tag. I replied you’re welcome, 
meaning please. Dear freckle-dotted, bowl-haired 
adversaries who chased me merrily in tartan vests 
around the shrubbery, chanting USSR

go home in dissonant harmony: where did you 
move, the lot of you? Each Flag Day, single file, 
we strutted through the playground with French horns 
and out-of-tune clarinets, some holding poles

aslant, like knights with spears, others saluting. 
Nostalgia is a pathological sickness. Photographed, 
I am as quiet as an apple approaching the mouth. 
In the Pavilion of Din, my skull stays a silence.

The customs agent palmed the wedding ring 
my mother had neglected to declare, unfastened 
one gold Leo from a chain around her throat, 
and called it contraband. My mother clasped

the thin residual chain, transporting it 
over meridians in her breast pocket. Flags 
danced drunkenly across the darkling field, 
unspooled their languid torsos listlessly

into the limpid sky of possibility. I spent 
every quarter I palmed from my mother 
on yellow eggs in the store’s prize machine. 
One had a plastic ring inside. I handed it
to my impassive mother as she steered
a cart overloaded with staples: detergent,
Snapple. One heavy flag, unflappable,
ginormous, bore down its shadow over her, then me,

a consequence, a language, an infinity.
Soldaterna som gick vilse i öknen
knackar på min dörr
Har ni dödat mina bröder?
Och den skrämda lilla flickan som gav er vattenkärlet,
blev hon våldtagen?

Ska jag skölja era händer?
Har ni hunnit se öknens natt?
Stjärnorna såg på er
när ni bombade de sovande
och drömmarna som blåste iväg till himmelen

Jag Sov på gatan i Herat inatt
jag hörde allt
Ni var där med
sparkade på mig och sköt en man
som bar varmt nybakat bröd till sina barn

Ta av er kläderna och träd in
Träd in nakna
From “Every Night I Kiss the Ground’s Feet”

Translated from the Swedish by Bradley Harmon

The soldiers that had gotten lost in the desert
are knocking on my door
Have you killed my brothers?
And the terrified little girl that gave you water,
was she raped?

Shall I rinse your hands?
Have you managed to see the desert night?
The stars saw you
as you bombed the slumbering
and their dreams gusted away to the heavens

I slept on the street in Herat last night
I heard everything
You were all there too
You kicked me and shot a man
who was carrying warm freshly baked bread to his children

Relinquish your uniforms and enter
Enter unguarded
Laura Theis

Ameisenverteilungsmaschine

my disapproving mother tells me
nobody wants to read poems about
ant distribution machines
in fact nobody wants to read poems at all
they are unnecessary

no one has ever heard of such a thing as a wealthy poet
so it isn’t really worthwhile she tells me I should consider writing
a best-selling novel or maybe the screenplay for a family saga
if I insist on being difficult
at least give the short story collection a go

except she says all of this in German
and the German word for ant distribution machine is
Ameisenverteilungsmaschine
I decide it is now my favourite word I decide to write the poem
to be poor and obscure

it will be a poem of defiance
about what at first seems like a nonsense invention
who would buy such a useless machine
who needs help distributing ants
they are not very popular pets

but here’s the beauty of my Ameisenverteilungsmaschine
it actually turns the critters into lovely new shapes
tiny giraffes little kangaroos and cows
a miniature camel small enough to make it
through the ear of a largeish needle
miðnæturblár

we have to look up when we search for our dead

even though we buried them in the ground

but the dead like to call to us from the moon

they try to spell out their wildering words in clouds or meteors

they try to wave at us through murmurations

and other such avian patterns in significant moments

they do this to teach us to make lifting up our eyes a habit

remember they say once

every day for a couple of minutes

the entire sky turns your favourite colour:

the very darkest shade of blue
es marzo marzo es
marzo es marcha
es amarse es marte de la guerra dios
amarte es a marte y es marcha
marchan los días y la batalla
sí la batalla sigue sí hay círculos
que nunca se cierran círculos que se cierran
círculos que se cierran círculos que nunca se cierran
hay círculos círculos y círculos semicírculos o circunferencias incompletas
hay círculos que son círculos que son ondas en lo menos hondo
de las superficies líquidas que son olas y círculos que son ondas sonoras
círculos sonidos que son idos o son nidos
hay círculos que son nidos y hay círculos que son idos
continuándose en círculo en espiral
los círculos nunca se cierran
LAST MAY

Funny, I wasn’t thinking of communicating in a language other than this one, but here I am. Feeling formally restless and leaving traces.

I can’t get into it right now, so I’ll switch back and forth, if it’s okay.

In the spirit of the diagrammatic, sitting maskless under a blooming tree at a coffee shop.

Not a European copper beech. There’s no room for such majesty in this enchanted catastrophe.

He was speaking about the words’ disobedience, about how poets work by not working. Meanwhile the world’s machinery was running its course.

When even shadows peter out.

The possible end words in a looping poem all related to nutrient broths, nanoparticles, and mRNA. Not surprisingly it ended up turning into an anti-sestina.

Before February’s disorientation there were family pictures in November.

You were shown the future of fitness on mirror.com.

As with all mirror reflections, the image was flipped—a translation.

The future’s only visible retrospectively.

No, not last night. In the afternoon, when she warned us that things would be getting intense.

The lightbox announced a “trend watch” in all caps. Under it, the same unhoused woman from last night, her belongings in plastic bags spread out around her.

The underground is the only true measure of the grid.

Another incident derails the day again.
Describe the incident.

An occurrence of an action or situation that is a separate unit of experience.

So it takes you out of the flow of existence?

Something like that, yes, although it is usually familiar and doesn’t feel separate. It’s actually woven deeply into the fabric of everyday life, but still manages to feel isolated from everything, unlike a current.

What’s your currency?

No crisis.

Is that the cruel optimist in you speaking?

Absurd. What’s for breakfast?

I take care of you. It’s a sign of respect.

Unrequited.

Mutually so.

Bad better than best. That’s what Rodrigo had suggested.

The reference to Beckett was obvious; still, he thought the connection was brilliant.

*Quería que me volviera más mala.*

When John spoke of Rodrigo I thought of peacocks.

That makes two Rodrigos then.

*Me lo dijo un pajarito.* A little birdie told me, back when birds of the resplendent type could talk.

Epic commute, and still the continuous loop of the present.
Such were my nonmusical subtitles for Richard’s *Psalms for the End of the World*.

Ninety more seconds to go, then the return to psychogeography.
THAT MARCH

A glove is no banana peel on the sidewalk.
Uncoupled or twined, sighted often. Recumbent, released by the hand’s reach.

Signaling to passersby, left behind, discarded—either way, overlooked. Speaking gestures of waste, how we protect ourselves. One becomes many, spreads.

Nitrile among utility markings, masks, trash, in lots, parks, amid shopping carts and hieroglyphs in a different key, stains. Ghostly ciphers of fear.

Mimes in a minimal choreography of absence. Dormant, thought infected. Fallen blossoms, mock birds.

MÓNICA DE LA TORRE
There were lilacs my body
was june I was reckless
with my breathing
I was handsome
even for june even with
the peculiar dew dripping
down my forehead I could tell
what I was looking for
a sound ett ljud nej
ett oljud för min oskuld
eller the sound of debt
the virgin sound of nightingales
when they are poisoned
I was poisoned
jag drack giftet
jag var golvd and now
on the floor I can’t
breathe I make a sound
I should never have
taken these seeds in
my mouth now I can’t leave
sommaren pours through
my throat my throat was made
for summer it’s horrifying
to play king me
with my beautiful throat
in summer I refuse
to bury this body Lillian
in summer but I can’t hear it
here detta är en elegi king
me king me detta är en elegi
till sommaren king me out
Sawako Nakayasu

From “Pink Waves”

6

was it hardly a wave
collimation dreams of narrowing waves
the consolidation of my particulate odds
sliding between dreamlight and the way it rolls off
she was elegylight and circumstance; she pitched her light away
and bid you love
previous utterance catches in the memory like death
closer to the range, the table, the unrepentant tongue
English utters a line for the dead
and then somebody is mouthing my kick
it’s haptic; it’s your normalized membrane
cantilevered muscles in the backyard of my body
extent that we need another resolution
atop a sharp pink hat, Emma Post just went away
some things don’t die so easy
i want the drifting organisms of the ongoing intermission
i want Amber DiPietra and Denise Leto’s waveforms to protect us from heavy waves
i want a decidedly animal resolution, J K Chukwu and Stacey Tran are here but they too will leave, others crowd in at the last minute
a higher concentration of my predicate silence is cause for a crash, that would be me

positioned at odds with myself

she was a function of x, her geometry projective; light while there is light which is now gone

the growing concept of her back

the formal struggle of a line on fire

who and where, why all of a sudden? Adam Golaski went away again

i have a very animal claim, a brick and mortar politics

yes we are erotic warm anemone

when the sun is saluted, all interventions are off

i think that some people just have no history of art

sediments and molecules burn up in the present moment

hip replacing humans

internal findings crawl back in the dirt and undulate out while you cede your control

SAWAKO NAKAYASU
With My Father, like Scent with a Flower—IV

My father catches a beetle exploring the extravagance of a lamp on the side table. He says all living things have a tendency for death. All living things desire to be references to nonexistence. I disagree like a week of sunshine does with rainfall in August. I say the end of all living things is the beginning of living. What dies transfers itself into every nerve which once knew it, aiming for survival. My father takes my poem and reads it aloud, and I hear something broken in his voice. I ask how he knows without knowing Death. He says: well, your mother is a memory now, is she not?
You heard evening birds,
A pandemonium of whispers.

Early mornings, a sad old man
Sleeping under it, dreaming hot May.

Under the big rain tree
Lived a night forest.

The strange woman uttered deep profanities.
*Do you know where fruits come from?*

*Come here, I will make you breathe.*
*The moon just did the stars.*

Always overdressed, her rags
A mountain even in summer.

Another rag added, the next time you saw her.
Leaves above, leaves under her feet.

When the big tree fell, everyone came.
Children from long ago, after school

Saw ants crawl out, birds hatching, a snake slithering
Into the watery dark where every tree became a story.
Sarah Ghazal Ali

My Faith Gets Grime under Its Nails

نِل—SAY, HE IS ALLAH, THE ONE

I confess to sleeping coiled on my night-blue prayer mat

more often than I stand bent in ruku.

Even when I posture piety
I blink steady, lashes keeping count of the hand-knotted flowers fringing the rug

rather than God’s pristine names.

The places I’ve prayed—elevators, Victoria’s Secret fitting room, the muck-slick meadow after rain—

will testify for or against me,
spilling through my Book of Deeds

in ink of blood or honeyed milk.
جـ،—SAY, I SEEK REFUGE IN THE LORD OF MANKIND

My faith is feminine, breasted
and irregularly bleeding.

My faith gets grime under its nails,
unburies maybe-mothers
to suckle them sacred. I believe
what I can’t leave. I eat
hand-slaughtered beef

spared of pain. I laugh about the Banyan tree

in Khyber chained by a drunk British officer
convinced it lurched toward him. I pull up a picture
online, show my mother the roses
planted neatly around it,

the rusted shackles no one dares remove.
—SAY, I SEEK REFUGE WITH THE LORD OF DAWN

Once a month blood roams
like mint over immaculate grass,

the adhan trills from my arboreal center.

Though excused, I wake
before the white thread of daybreak to open my window,

let the angels in
to witness the ache
and erase a sin for every devoted cramp.
Lord, you pardon my pain.
Lord, I parable my name.
As best as I can,

I am raising my hands—
٤

SAY, O DISBELIEVERS

I read my chaar qul, cup my hands and blow.
I misremember and enter with the wrong foot first. A woman crowned

holy is a calamity worth repeating.

Eve languished
motherless among rotting cores,
the sweet stench of fruit flies
at last shown their purpose.

What wilt, what putrefaction

of her will to wonder. I wonder how
to hallow the women I’ve sprung from.
I haven’t begot a thing but inherited
wounds, I can’t help but bear

what barely belongs to me.
After our talk about my future nears
Feversh disquiet for both of us, I walk
To a park and sit on a bench at night after telling you
That I do not want to follow your plans.
I have done worse, I think.
You call again when I am there, and I see your face
On the phone. But you are not with me.
Am I sitting on that bench right now?
Or am I seeing myself sitting there when you say,
“But what about me? What am I going to do?
What was all this for if you aren’t...”
I want to stay in that moment now
And now and now, but I can’t
Remember the rest you said (or are saying)
But only my reply, “I’ll do it then. I’ll do it. I’ll do it myself.
Let me make that choice—” Am I making
Sure to remember every word
(Or am I acting it out) but that is how I know—
And if this memory is a piece falling out
From what really happened, a poor copy usable until the last
Attempt at recall fails and the dark takes it,
Then we will not meet as we met on the bench,
But only here in the moment of this poem
That barely resembles the night,
The echo of which is the foundation of this structure
Without instruments or notations for how fast
Or slow the scene should be played.
I know you are not reading this out loud.
The voice in you is the only sound.
We will never speak as well as it speaks.
There is no true silence because of it.
We are loud despite it, ringing air,
Creating differences that split open—
The ray of sunlight splits through the tree’s
Green leaves and will keep shining on this bench
When I am gone and when the tree is gone
And when this bench is gone
And when you are gone.
Yes, I will come back here.
If I wait long enough before my return
I will not know where this was going.
This bench was a tree with branches.
When they made me play a tree
In a Christmas pageant, I thought there was a tree
In the story, and I stood pretending still.
I was a shade for a doll meant to be the babe
And the doll had a sound box.
A little girl played the mother. She kept crying
When we needed her to sit on the stage.
We got a bench for her.
Not knowing what her character will go through
After the event we players were a part of
On the stage, the girl rocked her lifeless doll
To sleep. And I sit on my bench
And look down on your face,
Wondering about the girl under my arms.
When pressed the doll said,
“I love you. I love you with all my heart.”
Ahmad Almallah

Christos

Jesus: a prophet or a god  
Because in the shop, he  
Made, as every carpenter  
Of the time:  
  Tables and chairs—  
Out of wood came the  
  Word,  
As the original impulse  
  Was to hide  
Behind an act. One can’t  
Be a prophet or a god with-  
Out a cover. Something to  
Do  
  Till the word  
  Gets around—  
So to speak—and as metal  
Was not a thing for laymen  
To play around with, it had  
To be wood,  
  The only dry thing  
That could catch  
Fire, and lead—like the  
Word—peoples, animals  
And angels—off course,  
  Toward the light.
For Dick Davis, who translated “Layli and Majnun” into English

Reading a parallel-text tragedy,  
Persian and English on opposite sides  
like lovers whom an ancient grudge divides,  
I think of gentle Mr. Javadi  
copying the cloudy verses out in white  
as I followed with blue meanings where he led  
and we alternated, trying to keep straight,  
until the board looked like the striped bedspread

I sweated my pent-up love out on each night,  
then lay there with my hands unwashed and read  
the story of Majnun’s forbidden love  
which sent him roaming deserts in search of  
the sweet beloved he would never reach.  
When I close the book, two tongues touch.
Hiromitsu Koiso

Benjamin

Walter Benjamin was taking hold of me at my parents’ house. But then I was not reading Benjamin. My elderly parents were unable to economically communicate with me. I would read and examine Benjamin, even though I was supposed to start work. Since I don’t understand German I read both the Japanese and English translations. The two translations differed in the length of every sentence and there was no difference in the length of the thoughts. Benjamin gave me the phrase “reine Sprache,” which is “pure language” in the English translation. I don’t know how much I understood this concept, but it made me happy that Benjamin is, on my behalf, critical of “communication” and says that the salvation of pure language is the translator’s task. Benjamin read me. I followed up on an old conversation I had with my parents. The number of sentences exchanged. The length of the sentences exchanged. I picked up the crystallized words at the bottom. Benjamin read us and we were being read by Benjamin.

We humans
Talk about this and that
——Old table
Temporary Matter

I was instructed not to go out into society because of a temporary matter where corpses were multiplying every day. I thought it was a chance to do something I hadn’t done, and so I signed up for an introductory poetry course on a Massive Open Online Course because I am a beginner at poetry and am a good self-learner. The course reached out to me: Start learning today by watching your first video: watch a video on Emily Dickinson’s “I dwell in Possibility.” I was not sure whether my residence was possibility. My chamber, upstairs, has two windows—one of them offers a view of the magnolia tree in the garden below; its thousands of purple and white shapes loom up toward me, with a perfect curve for the blue sky. I counted the flowers in the tree. Watching the light accumulating in the tree was the only thing I could do at the time. I was subtracted from the world. I saw light as not a form but life; light not a concept but a rhythm. Light not understanding but inspiration after all.

Every moment
big bees in wrappers of purple and white

This poem borrows and alters phrases from Hagiwara Sakutarō’s “Hikari no setsu.”
Suphil Lee Park

End of a Journey

Across the plain, flat joy a boat sails.
Though many have before, this one draws a simple line on water for which I love it. Its journey ends at a pine that’s been standing all this time alone.
You look for another by which the pine must have stood, which I understand has nothing to do with truth.
Yes, you have lost too. I see that now.
No Day Has Been as Clear but We Kept Saying

There's a slim enough chance
we're edging our last century.
On its brink I sit or I think it.
Snow, white itself, whites itself
out and us along the way.
Words of no gravity kept floating
into water where a future perched
a comma between brackets
of waves: [Are we here] barely [Are we
not now] barely [Leave it] barely
[And leave] ... Or I think it.
Or feel it. Whichever is closer
to knowing. What do we know
after all. I mean—tell me
what aided you in your longest grief
as a glass of water.
Death with three left feet

I. EMPTY MAN

What if there’s death inside me and I am unaware of it traveling at midday through scolding grains to the house where it is decided: is it there the infamous button the golden finger that kills?

to the kind eye
even the moth is golden
but not in the scary way of noons

II. FOREST WITH ILL WOMAN

Death is always inside us ear to the otherworld nose futureward which is north like moss waiting for the perfect collision of ring and bone barking at everything so we don’t have to hear the minutes— not heartless, this inside hound the only question is who is the fox

III. THE LEAP

I open when it opens and I peruse its wheels lovely clock that inside has an orchard and horses that eat apples and the farmer shoots the horses and that’s how time passes
the :ized is part of the celestial object vis-à-vis the :ist
she discovers that her mind also thinks form is a super-
-ficial thing ears are innately reflexive and so she listens
but isn’t buying the total deficiency
homogeneously an imperialized is as envious and is told
to remain seated meanwhile she attends to what extent
the two worlds are fundamentally different a.k.a one is
under excessive stress
argus-eyed ambivalent on justice how one realigns
and whether she is out of line reads the note in trans-
-lation: Only one. / The one that is more tired. / This
is the instruction.
then counting the counterintuitive her tourist love
who claimed her country is a land of contradictions
the grand Buddha who ate his shit her father who was
both revolutionary and mechanical
home simultaneously warm and at war marching on
monetarily dependent with checkpoints deep down
she finds a voice infused / of neither hope / nor
question comparatively indicates a tenacious presence
day in and out this subject in diction in peace
punctuates is aware of the case for :ialism pm
writhes in her circadian rhythm barbed wire whose
disentanglement should be a paid position

The italicized are borrowed from Ahmad Shamlu’s poem, “Anthem for the One Who Left
and the One Who Stayed Behind,” translated by Jason Bahbak Mohaghegh, and some
concepts discussed in this poem first appeared in Frantz Fanon’s The Wretched of the
Earth. From Disbound by Hajar Hussaini, forthcoming from University of Iowa Press,
fall 2022. © 2022 Hajar Hussaini. Reprinted with permission of University of Iowa Press.
Farid Matuk

Moon Mirrored, Indivisible

move, Moon, less west
of a word strung down to men
being just some couple guys borne

as tropes in a discourse
on rights—to express
to malcontent, the right to run that voice

along the walls of the agora
stretched to fit a reasonable night
coming on

and in the mirror I’ve said, immigrant
my name is argument
small as my means

weak as the custody of the one star
you mirror down trying to unearth
ancient huacos—vessels for gods

otherwise inhabiting local boulders
traffic circles, the Circle K
but I’ve been dreaming

of killer ghosts to be dealt with
in real-time ways like
    breathe in, hold

    turn away—blood
    on my face
    and shirt and hands—

from a wayward truth about great ancestors

“they’re damaged, they’re damaged
they’re so
comfortable,” you say
in a three-lined English that should help me wash the present moment of belief, this

on the day when the whole story back to the bus station is turning the whole town understands
citizens as threats that could catch and burn a light so you can see us, little Moon

making a gateway to wholesome desert seaside living, no gods only the staff they offered to strike Earth

and there make the navel of the world don’t even bother to break it, lie down in what you look at and rest
For a time the home was lost to me
my mouth forged in the night as I dreamed away
the barriers—stars lengthening the line of my gaze
beryl bones rushed to storm—

To my eternal right clouds in immediate rotation
mother mutating past clay and desire
too light to form
too dead to surrender
like meat made tender by memory—
effortless
my head at the helm towards pardon
my hands passing through water
her eye on the wretched edge seeding air
with every intention of life—
such mischief even from the wilds of death
from the alcoves full of metal and shadowy glass—
dust heavy on my crown—

What I pretend to gather here still dies
past the trees—absent from birth—the promise
to lie by dusk—to set ablaze the home—
veritable fire coming west
for the lonely shores—

In the periphery I’ve not returned before—
have stayed lost just to retain the impossibility
of ends—a march to bury what remains—
and no I don’t fall in—I just lean weakly
into the weeds
Shash Trevett

The Intimacy of Scorpions

These are the things I miss:
Squat mango trees.
Benny’s old Ambassador squeezed with fourteen to school each day.
The earth-smell on the first day of the rains.
The warmth of rain.
The intimacy of scorpions.
The surprise suddenness of nightfall.
Idiyappam and mutton rolls.
The crack, then thud, of falling coconuts.
Parrots on neem trees.
The hiss of a tarantula on fire.
Of Earth in nomadic detachment although also the one who does not move, who remains an insight into the real scope of invention when inventors of every child love their own best. Let us then talk together about our own black hole and become dangerous in that hole, with self-assurance about a case, a role-dimension on which the whole assemblage might topple over

Introduce preparations. Is this assimilated enough to become ethics? So that one can behave as one must when an event presents itself? In belonging to a guild, words like expert and objective have resonance. To acquire a dialogue, know where and how to trace it out. And then it has its own danger, which is perhaps the worst. It is not just in life the idea of a war to be waged, which leads us closer, just as passionate as an overcoming of whatever is unique in every existing social order, to be punished in some 45 folios containing 12 photographs each

So far we have a sample volume of water, and Lulu’s death-cry, vertical, celestial. How is it that the examples of the fact and the right appear untimely—a time which is not pulsed, a haecceity like a wind blows transversally: each time the machine will produce binary choices between elements which are not pre-upon us, but also a new serenity.
Fluxes have moved, they are part of the conditions, including our organism—and our very reason. The prudence with which we advise ethnographers and sociologists, but, as the publisher says, “!”

Many politicians standing in the dusk on an abandoned shooting field. A war-machine following lines of the steepest gradient, of the steppe or desert sinking, sinking—

The physiognomy, sinking as it was, as it was presented to them at face value. Whether the spectacle is a questionable social fact or was given scarcely a glance. And yet the impact of the reproduction of the machine has a nature, that of the apparatus of the State

The accumulation of allies sometimes organized the social space, conditions sometimes curiously written in simoom passages

Here is now only an abstract line, an impure movement which is a difficult fraught speech, erratic search for meaning delinked in vivo no more valid than the discourse of a scribbling hand once illustrated
Sige, Sige, Sige, Said the Utak

After T.S. Eliot

Sige! Sige! Sige! 
If all time is eternally present, all time...
other echoes expelled
is the time of tåno, taotao, hånom, yan paluman siha.

Sige! Sige! Sige! Bring us life, lina'la'. Bring us death, finatai.
Hokka our own voices, shaping our own future.

Sige! Sige! Sige!
500 years of other echoes inhabit i håtdin y CHamoru
Sige! Sige! Sige!
We have borne too much colonial reality
Sige! Sige! Sige!

fanggualo' fanggualo' fanggaulo'

---

1 Ornithological spectrogram still of an utak, or white-tailed tropicbird (Phaethon lepturus), sourced and reproduced with permission from the McCaulay Library at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, as recorded by Jon Erickson. In addition to having a lifespan of 10–16 years, the white-tailed tropicbird has the ability to fly backwards.

2 The utak or itak is a legendary bird in CHamoru society. From ancient times, the utak has been noted as a bearer of news. Though beliefs vary about the meaning of the bird’s shrill cry, hearing the utak is most commonly associated with either the pregnancy of a young woman or the coming death of someone in the family. Sourced from www.guampedia.com.

3 CHamoru words: sige (go on, advance), tåno, taotao, hånom, yan paluman siha (land, people, water, and birds), i håtdin y CHamoru (the CHamoru garden), lina'la' (life), finatai (death), hokka (gather), fanggualo' (planting season/time to plant).
Dogs’ Wedding

Intending to write a poem about the snowfall, I’ll fill this blank page with ink. At their wedding: dogs are periods that escape their footprints. Whitman’s dogs walked further, further than any cleric’s bloodline. My grandmother did not know who Whitman was, but she befriended the grass. She sang, in white, while harvesting cotton in the field that she was. When we wanted to find her, we looked for a song. She dulled her sickle and knitted socks. In her tales: anyone who died would nestle in the clouds. I was the only tale she could never tell, I roamed over the clouds; alive. The sky was a cotton field, I looked for her and found myself knee-deep in a song.
Emi Miyaoka

Early in Summer, Diophantine Approximation

It is exactly
like a wedge polished perfectly.
The dawn as the space.

The past is also the future.
The wind exists in the deepest bottom of this life.
The wind blows from the origin.

Close tense one line.
An infinite number of lives;
they are kept as is.

It is the moon standing in the distance.
Hearts sound.

After I lost everything
lights remain.

To change the context of living once in a while.
There is nothing that must be so.

The ocean’s voice somewhere.
Still, I take no notice of it.

The rainbow is straddling a large, grand scale.
Everyone is looking up at it.
Somebody is calling
in the distant sky.
Javier Zamora

[Immigration Headline]

REASONS—I dreamt I lost a child.
The second one. I woke up.
I walked to their hammock.
The wood on the stove crackled.
The pot didn’t move.
The chicken pio-pioed.
They were not in their hammock.
I woke up again.
This time with a scream.
I pinched myself.
Slapped my face awake.
My children looked at me
like they do when I hit them
when they deserve it.
Their eyes like my eyes
without a light in them.
It wasn’t the empty pot,
the last chicken, the hammock
patched with pieces of cardboard.
It wasn’t the dream.
I wanted to wake up from this.
All the Stones That Built Me

In this house are things:
a boy, a lantern,
dead mice, silverware,
running water, screams.

There is filth in this house,
and there is a mop,
and the filth is mop,
and the mop is filth.
And there is me: mop and filth.

This house is a broken Louvre.
In it, I do not have a face,
only a coin ... on the floor ...
In its shimmer—ghosts pushing me off the roof,
daring me to fly.

And the bedroom?
We sleep when we are dead.
The kitchen?
In this house, we break not bread but stones and promises.
How long have you died here?

My mother lived in this house when I lived in her.
She was many a thing:
a girl, a dark room, scurrying mice,
rust, dripping water, silence,
and at the end, the last spoonful of canned beans.
They collect, dancing on the ceiling, the memories.
They cry, they howl,
they put a bounty out on me.

How do I quell the place that built me?
Set fire to all your bones.

There is no dreaming in this house.
I want to dream that I was old.
Self-portrait with phonemic analysis

I kneel at the Calvary,
  the sun—pelting on my skin like a rainstorm
of fragmented pieces of glass,
  I drag my self towards a crucifix
where phonology says:
[a boy] —> [a broken boy] / [grief]—[grief]
I think myself a guitar’s string
blessing the threnodies of the aches in this poem,
  who will crush pomegranates
into juice for me?
  Who will beat the bush of this boy into
a floral garden of roses?
  Who will pour joy like a fricative sound
into the living of this boy?
I seek the rule to the deletion of grieving, where:
[grief] —> [deleted] / [bliss]—[bliss]
Where I will sleep through the night
  without the body of a knife lurking in my dreams.
Where I will sleep through the night
  without drowning in the pool of my own fears.
Where I will sleep through the night
 & not wake up as a butterfly’s wing.
But insertion says:
Recently, I touch things & they flower out a
monochrome
of death & my father—how he squeezed life out of him
like an orange.
Dear poet, when will you stop performing an autopsy
  with poems on all the broken things you know,
especially including yourself?
This poem, a psych ward, this poem, a psych nurse
which grew from your psyche.
  Like a wood frog, I’m still holding my pee
through hours, through the night
where pain is a bagpiper blowing its pipe
to me in these times of war.
Mayowa Oyewale

Baa Baa / Black Sheep

III

One for the master / in Georgia / who stuffed his chair with slave hair / it nearly felt like wool / comfy and convenient / This pipe-smoking pig / whom I cannot but imagine / his hardened legs / lounging on the beaten back of a vassal / a vase / anything that can break

II

And one for the dame / down Louisiana / who sipped tea from a cup / so white her servants wore gloves / whenever they set the tray / Desdemona she’s called / and one fateful afternoon / she fucked / the strongest Negro slave against his will / hands on his throat / threatening to call rape

I

And one for Olaudah / captured at eleven / from his homeland / without his mamma / but with memory / I imagine him onboard / listening to the dip of the ship’s bow / ferrying & ferrying & ferrying / into a land that would never / belong to him

The last stanza of this poem is inspired by “Woke” by Roger Robinson, from the poet’s collection, A Portable Paradise (Peepal Tree Press, 2019).
The house I was born in was near the Hangang Bridge. On June 28, 1950, the bridge was blasted by the South Korean Army to deter the advancing North Korean troops. Many refugees fleeing the city fell to their death as the bridge collapsed. Our house is no longer there, but it persists in my memory. It speaks to me in a language only the homesick understand. My mother tells me that, as soon as I could walk, I reveled, walking on the bridge. I grew up listening to the rippling laments of the bridge. As children, my sister and I believed that angels flew down from the sky to bathe inside the hollow legs of the bridge. The angels sang as they bathed. That’s how we knew they were inside the legs. Sometimes, we waited till dusk on the sandbank, where we played, to catch a glimpse of the departing angels.
Before I was born, when my mother was pregnant with my older brother, she
dipped into Han River and floated about. She was not exactly a swan, but
she might as well have been because she looked so happy then, her eyebrows
drawn so far apart. I must repeat that swans have nothing to do with S or T,
for that matter. I think of Taedong Bridge in Pyongyang, North Korea, as my
father’s bridge. He stood on it sometime in the late fall of 1950, during the
Korean War. When my father was dispatched to Pyongyang to photograph
the city, he walked up to the old Angel’s pagoda, which gave him an angel’s
eye view of the city. Angel’s panorama O beautiful! The gate the river the
bridge O marvelous! Angels are waving to us. My father couldn’t help being
overwhelmed by the beauty of the panorama of Pyongyang despite the fact
that the whole city had been bombed to the ground. Craters are formed, and
the impression of traveling on the moon is born. An aerial view reveals that
the angels are, in fact, gooks in white pajamas, normal for the daytime.

= Swan = Eiserner Steg = Langenscheidtbrücke =
Langenscheidtbrücke is above the rail tracks, legless, yet the angels still bathed in evening dew, singing and crying, perched on nearby trees as if they had been waiting for me. Sparrow, what took you so long? How was it that they could speak the rippling language of my childhood? How did they know to wave? That I would return? Spree O beautiful! The gate the library the TV tower O marvelous! The overwhelming beauty of Berlin’s panorama. I owe it entirely to wings of utopia.

= Damiel = Homer = Albert Camus =
The country in which I was born
cannot be seen anymore

you can smell it sometimes
turning a corner, crossing a sewer

or underneath the trees that take
the power-line between their flowers;

sometimes crossing drainage ditches
between streets you can hear it sing

and the abutments of city blocks
rub together like chafed skin

on a cobbler’s wheel
trying to make chamois out of cow tongue;

and the children running
in between the cars where I was born

do not know there was ever any earth
between these two rivers of sand.

I sit. I hear the start
of rush hour over my coffee

and somewhere the little house
where I was born is full of nothing.
Öykü Tekten

a great nowhere

if you constantly move toward the west, you will always end up in the east. or the other way around.

a news reporter says, *they* bombed the only children’s hospital left in aleppo. thank goodness the corpses were rescued from the morgue.

in syria, there are still two rivers. hope the dog is in shelter with one eye, half a tail. nothing left to smell. no more children.

the situation sculpts the imagination. there is no other way around. and now nowhere to put the names of the dead.

what was yours?
In Arabic, the Word for “War” Is Similar to “Love”

On his way to a first kiss, a soldier enters a flower shop. He fingers dozens of roses and determines the longevity of each by the number of its petals.

When children protested the regime then died in its prisons, officers sent their fathers notes that read:

*Come pick up the corpse in exchange for the mother, we’ll ensure she bears another one.*

On the table, a bouquet of 24—one for every month in service. His nails tug until the red tissue, lining a sacred opening, unravels, a torn uterus where once a butterfly didn’t ask permission.
Tino Zhang

Map Concurrences

stories in silence.

constellations in the departed child.

my bicycle into the shadow

there is no trace of Youth

traces were labyrinths
Lynn Xu

From “Tournesol”
	here
the sun lingered

and soft as wind it passes

pure moon of the doorway

pure zero in the diadems
of the coffer’s edge

the empty cart clattering

one to ten
ten to one

all things unclose
their portions

in the hour of distribution
of the balancing of accounts
and those who fight
for a few scraps of food
to renew each day unguarded
by the angels

at last—
all life passes
through the smiling air
windows open noiselessly
as one that in a silver
vision floats
already
decembering with the
aggregate
of time’s eternity—

and life
in that black or luminous
square—life
lives

repeating thriftless-
shadow
beneath the few branches
galloping through night

clear stream
wooden horse

blue sword

awaiting the few small acts
of cowardice still to come
リターンの用法

リターンには様々な種類がある
元に戻るのが最も多く
遅くなると帰ってくるリターン
宛先不明の手紙の郵便箱への返送
眠りのトンネルを通り抜ければ
再び　明るい寝室での目覚め

自然の周期が打つリターンもある
真暗な夜から蘇る月
梅雨の後の緑の噴き上げ
楔形になり　北へ渡っていく雁
大きくなった姪と手を繋いで
一年振りの眩しい砂浜への散歩

私のリターンはこれらではない
わたしのリターンは　最初も最後もない
飛行機が銀色の円弧を描き終えたら
また　反対の方向に戻っていく
書き終えた行の安全圏から
何もない空白へ飛び立つ改行
The Usage of Returns

Translated from the Japanese by the author

there are several kinds of returns
most common are those that return to the start
the return when it grows late at night
the return of the letter, addressee unknown
the awakening into a brilliant bedroom
after passing through the tunnel of sleep

there are also cyclical returns
the rebirth of the moon in the blackest night
the eruption of green after rain
the angled migration of geese back north
the walk with my niece, grown taller, one year later,
to a blinding beach, her hand again in mine

but my return is none of these
my return has neither start nor finish
mine is the return of the plane that draws
its silver arc then turns back the way it came
mine is the return abandoning the safety of the written line
for emptiness where no words await
The Calling

1

In the haunted house

I've a friend

I'm afraid

to call a friend

2

Many rooms

behind the walls

of my bedroom

are strung

with police tape

3

I wake in the cold of morning to a man lying in my bed
with his eyes open. He looks like the man in the deep

of my brain who taught me about shame in my shame

-less years. I remember his breath. Overripe apple. Inside him,
I hear a crackling. A burning orchard. Or an empty house?

4

First a room

full of portraits

of my life:
there I slouch
in the mud
& there the bus
station of the first
city I lost there
my first fallen
tooth in my hand
blood there
in my smile—

5

My friend has done terrible things. Or thought of doing terrible things.

6


7

& there

the portrait

of a child

who isn’t me
at the center

of the room

or the center

of my life

her face

bursting:

glitter & teeth—

8

I wake to the amber light of a wound—not a scar—unspooling from my past & the man whose name I don’t recall, who I learned to call Shame, gnaws at my thighs.

Most of my dreams are full of teeth like this. I call for my mother to appear in the hall. Her face: copper & smile. The door opens but outside there’s only light.

9

In the last

room: a flat screen.

& on the screen:

a flat line
Sasha Pimentel

Cats

For weeks we’ve cradled stilled strays from our street, scooped each near weightlessness, their fallen heads, each still-soft neck, strange fur so velvet it grazes the plastic. We shimmy their extended limbs into drawstring liners, as if our swaddling could coax them from their permanent reaching. Hard, not to read a question into each new body’s appearance, to wake each day slow to draw back the curtain, or to spackle this desert with a memory of the ocean, in the Philippines my small aunt streaked into her pillowed box. Heavier to see México shimmering in our eyes’ corners with each daily lightness we bear. Even in cats, the body is testimony to movement, and its arrest: has pulled from the shadow tinsel with light: —troubled the air close to shelter, or an unknown expanse, and in our hands we can still feel their weight, fragrant with the territory for which they strained, though we already know no love, nor music, can harvest this breath back. A radio we can’t see streams from a nook in our neighborhood, telling our days, our city’s name, El Paso, fastened to a sorrow between the words refuge and nothing. Each morning another reporter tows the word border through our air, as if it’s not the where we live. So we wake to gather who we claim, even if just for the minutes we can carry. Migrant countries of sand whorl around us, soot our lashes and grit our wind, our present whisking to history. So we shelter our own gradations, each fresh injury of time stunned from a body’s pulse, mark the day’s brutalities, and heave into our arms these light-filled limbs, still stretching to a place within reach.
Dani Charles

Coágulo de la vagina

Coágulo de la vagina
De madre maria
Puede salvar la vida
Of someone aprendiendo
A articular what it feels like to bleed
To those that see the scene
It is the groundhog of a season
The shy mountain hides behind
With a more than slighted
Fear of womanhood
La muñequita linda

La muñequita linda
Amanezco, apareció
Con frío
Se hizo
Stale, stiff
Slightly restrained
In smell
Sound
Su retención
Withheld the rest at hand
Handstand
Crumpled
Cayendo, cayó
Sin mortificación de la cabeza
La linda no necesita
Such cositas
Deadweight
Failsafe
Fall
Call:
    Honey
    Doll
    Little Wrist
Llegando para llegar

Llegando para llegar
No sé porque
She just told me to be there
That moved further from
Mis patas de gallo
Gallena, me mortifica
That there there would
Retract such a statement
Acción, reacción a la posibilidad
De tocar, unir con intención
That oozes out into the floor
For more than the concrete can offer
Buscando se sumergió en un pozo de todo
Tanto todo que no sabía subir a menos o bajar a más
I could just stay still in the compact dirt
Trying to become that which sought to love me once more
Though it still shied away de mis patas de gallo
Not allowing me a descansar con gusto
Gallena Gallena ya sabes por qué
Valzhyna Mort

Extraordinary Life of Tadeusz Kosciuszko in Several Invoices

Coffee was his preferred bitter bread of exile.

Back in the country with large cabbage reserves, he was little pan Tado from a thatched house under the doting trees afraid to drown in a small pond of shade pouring from an old ash.

Over time, on his face, pan Tado grew Pan’s grotesque mask.

From Paris, he sent an invoice to Thomas Jefferson: Outstanding balance for American independence. Remit urgently: Kosciuszko Family Cabbage Farm Far Far Far Away

“Worthy friend and General,” “Son of Liberty,” Jefferson addressed him in his letters. He didn’t know how to spell Kosciuszko’s name.

The dotted i’s and crossed double t’s of “remittance” speckled the pages like specular stone.

Jefferson owed to this military engineer with a background in Brassica oleracea, leader of scythemen, author of one polonaise, a Pole but more like a flying Dutchman, who popped up on both sides of the Atlantic, wanted by wars, revolutions, uprisings named after him, a prison and his family’s cabbage estate where forget-me-nots speckle the red fescue.

Out of applewood, Kosciuszko carved a tray for his coffee
and wrote to the clatter
of a wooden leg on a never-deserted road:

*I beg Mr. Jefferson that in case I should die without will or testament
he should use my money for manumission, with 100 acres of land for each
freed man,
instruments, cattle, and education in how to govern.*

As a knife takes off through a cabbagehead,
I think of him here,
on the East Coast, on horseback,
scouting these hills, rocks, the rapidity of the local streams.
Indeed, Pan Kosciuszko, hooved god of the wild
from a thatched house under the doting trees.

Ladies loved Pan. In Philadelphia,
he drew their portraits, flattering them beyond belief.
He also drew blueprints
fattening General Washington’s rosy-cheeked faith
in victory.

Tado cracked cheeky envoys from Krakow:
*at this point big honor to eat
body weak English weak
remit honorarium for the fortification of West Point.*

And, to his sister: *Anna, You must do better with cabbages.*

I try not to think of him here, this
general of the homeless with unpronounceable
names, fortifying
foreign forts, growing
impatient, suspicious, suicidal, never
married, suffering from jaundice, depression,
and from the failure of the regular remittance.

Blue forget-me-nots in the red fescue,
the scornful twinkle of his will.
He was a lonely person among cabbageheads.
He was the only person among cabbageheads.

Now his overcaffeinated heart
is crammed into a bronze urn.

*I embrace you a thousand times,
not in the French manner,
but from the bottom of my heart,*

Kosciuszko wrote to Jefferson from Solothurn, Switzerland,
at a secretary desk with gazelle-like legs,
facing a wall.

In court, Jefferson denied three times
Kosciuszko’s gift of manumission
(“I’m too old for gifts”).

A Swiss pathologist undressed
his corpse that used to be addressed
by General Washington    as

“... Coscu ...?”

He was surprised
by its small size
under all those clothes,
so coarse with scars:
scars closed, scars
breathing, ghostly,
gross.

An invoice to self:
*out of a corpse
already shockingly scarred
already surprisingly small
they carved out a heart.*

The casket with this heartless corpse
was carried by paupers
paid, according to Kosciuszko’s will
—of which nothing else would be paid accordingly—
one thousand francs each.

A lonely person among cabbageheads.
The only person among cabbageheads.

An invoice to self:
*Tado’s small heartless body*
*Tado’s bitter sorrowful heart*
I’m watching no birds remembering how you complimented my dress last night.

*Classy,* you said. The birds are gone, perhaps a crow, perhaps a body

on the street no birds, no birds on the ____ no birds, no sunbathing of

words can amplify our cackle, no courtyard means low light, not birds,

and when I thought you were looking you weren’t—a sound but no bird?

Last night you wore the birth you kept on me, velvet classified a bird, no bird

no remembering how to classy-fy me into a bird next time, no time,

no time means no birds; no lids on my dress tonight like you don’t mean it,

like taking birds off is not what you—no birds, no birds means no eyes,

cría cuervos y te sacarán los ojos,
cría ojos y te sacarán las aves, las aves.
Lawrence-Minh Bùi Davis

On Refugee Poetics and Exophony

Please imagine this essay printed in the font at left, on stark white paper, with scattered litho/Xerox marks, at least temporarily housed in a beige filing cabinet.

Founded in 2018, the Center for Refugee Poetics (CfRP) is a mobile literary arts and education project, a Center without a physical home, a roving sanctuary. Sustained in collaboration with refugee diasporas across the US and beyond, with support from the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center, it deepens engagements with refugee artmaking and nurtures refugee imagination and memory.

To my knowledge, CfRP remains the only institutional space in the world, certainly the US, devoted to poetry of the refugee experience.

Why no other devoted institutional spaces? One reason is the transhistorical and deeply seductive understanding of the refugee as passive object, as victim. A distant cousin is the refugee as “Ein Bote des Unglücks,” messenger of ill tidings—Bertolt Brecht’s framing, and one that, like Hannah Arendt, I have come to love.

Object, victim, or messenger, but rarely an agent—rarely a thinking or feeling or acting creator. A refugee might happen to be a poet, and conversely a poet might endure displacement and continue to write poetry—but what is refugee poetry, or a refugee poetics? Can there be an abiding and reciprocal relationship between the refugee condition and artmaking, where each might complicate and open an understanding of the other? For good reason, the prevailing answer has been no.

Other days, your tears sound like “mẹ,” sound like “mệ,” like “Ngày đó, không một thứ gì là chưa mà.”
In these moments, I know that I have failed you, that English has failed me.
—From “Judas Regrets His Betrayal” by Khôi Nguyên Trinh, unpublished poem

For the poet and artist Khôi Nguyên Trinh, raised in New Orleans, Louisiana—by a mother who left postwar Vietnam as an immigrant, and a father and stepfather who fled as refugees—both viet and English are native, if not equally so.
Or maybe neither language is native, and as the lines above suggest, movement across the two can be a pilgrimage of failure.

I’m reminded of the poet Khaty Xiong, raised in Fresno, California, who has written in *Poetry*’s pages, in Hmong and English together:

> paludal in the folded tongue  
> two half-shadows thanking tus rab liag  
> the gift of a curved bone  
> carving our way back  
> to Zos Phab Nab  
> thiab Zos Vib Nais  
> —*From “The Pardoning Hour”*

Displacement is always a disruption of what is linguistically and culturally “native” versus what is “adopted”—a catalyst for new pluralities, hybridities. Native language in the country of origin becomes heritage language in the country of resettlement, a fraternal twin, or sometimes a pale shadow. For refugees raised in the US with two (or three or more!) tongues spoken at home, relationships to languages vary; balance between them ranges and tilts; but is English really non-native if it was “there” before you were born, before your family was forced to leave your country of origin, an imperialist language tied up in the circumstances and even mechanics of your displacement? A poet’s political and affective relationships to a country of resettlement—the US for Southeast Asian refugees, among many others, as an invading power, a colonizing power—must shape their exophonic use of its language. Precisely how is tricky to parse.

Poetry itself might be viewed as a “second language” in the sense that the refugee’s first language is always victimhood. Which is to say, the refugee is rendered a victim so absolutely by the popular imagination that the only language they could conceivably produce—the only one legible to a reading public—is one that confirms the refugee’s fundamental need to be saved. How can poetry possibly further the perpetual rendering of that need? The poet who is a refugee, writing about refugee experience, can only reach for poetry as a second language. Their poetry is not a *native* expression of what it is to be a refugee. Of course, refugees can and do speak poetry as a first language all around us, but we just don’t recognize it as such. Refugee poetry as a collective body is mostly invisibilized, a shared refugee poetics made
inconceivable, and any devoted literary infrastructure—reading series, publications, retreats, workshops, a Center—is destined to remain a fantasia.

In this sense, refugee poetry is always exophonic.

For some refugees, often but not always those who were displaced as adults, English remains forever at arm’s length. You will find many of them at Da Màu, a literary website devoted to viet-language poetry, written by US-based viet refugee poets, and almost entirely untranslated into English—a body of work that, as a second generation diasporic viet from a refugee family, like many of my generation and those that follow, I find I cannot read at all.

(Apologies that my references in this essay are all from the Southeast Asian refugee diaspora, limited in scope by my lived experiences and reading practices; I don’t mean to suggest that there isn’t a much, much broader refugee poetic tradition to apprehend.)

Da Màu might seem to be the very antithesis of exophony. And yet! The viet language that Da Màu’s poets use is one at least partially frozen at the point of time when they left Vietnam—as opposed to the viet used in Vietnam today, which has changed considerably since the 1975 Fall of Saigon, dictated in part by governmental decree. The majority of viet-language readers (living in Vietnam, at least) might recognize some of Da Màu’s poetry as slightly “off,” not-quite-like their native tongue, or somewhat like a dialect—not as strange as Chaucerian English to contemporary Anglophone readers, but not wholly familiar, either.

So what does it say about viet refugee exophony if “non-exophonic” writing, in the supposed mother tongue, is only received as such by a small expatriate wing of the viet-speaking world? And on the other hand, what does it tell us about refugee exophony that a segment of the diaspora refuses to write poems in English?

The “refugee as victim” endures in popular understanding because it is endurably functional. If refugees are produced by forces of war, nation-making, and colonialism, seeing refugees as singular victims directs
our attention away from the deep collective operation of those forces and the nation-states that continually benefit from—and depend upon—those forces. The refugee is not just a waste product of a system WAI (Working As Intended, to translate from institutional language); the refugee plays a necessary rhetorical role in the collective social imagination to keep the system WAI. The refugee turns away, deflects, hides, softens, mollifies, and sometimes bores: they help everyone live inside, and sleep under the sky of, a global system predicated on the exploitation and periodic violent displacement of others’ bodies.

Unlike the poets of Da Màu, many other members of refugee communities in the US speak English as their only language, period. As I alluded to earlier, I myself can’t read a viet book meant for a preschooler. Show me a viet sign to a grocery store and another to a bus station and you might never see me again. Many second and third generations, even some 1.5 (migrants who relocated between the ages of early childhood and full adulthood), of refugee communities are this way. They’ve forgotten or never learned a heritage language.

For some subset of this group, there is the possibility of reclamation: the work of learning a heritage language as a second language, as a teen or adult, when language acquisition is, ah, painstaking (and in my personal experience a comic spectator sport for native speakers). Sometimes a different kind of refugee exophony may emerge from this work of reclamation—not poetry in English, but in a heritage language that is stubbornly, sometimes agonizingly non-native.

I think of the Twin Cities–based poet and playwright Saymoukdada Duangphouxay Vongsay, born in a refugee camp in Thailand, who is learning Lao language, as we speak, expressly as part of her mid-career writing practice and diasporic art-making vision.

In a sad irony (one dear to the heart of colonialism), the “refugee as victim” is a paradigm often absorbed, and reproduced, by refugees and children of refugees themselves. This logic of victimhood makes its claim not directly, but inversely: through a compulsory gratitude to America and Americans for what wünderscholar Mimi Thi Nguyen calls the “gift of freedom” in The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Other Refugee Passages, a gratitude that is a passive acceptance of victimhood. A showy gratitude
that is nation-bolstering propaganda, and the death of poetry. Or at least a kind of survivalism that is not quite death but a sleep from which poetry has difficulty waking.

Some portion of the work of the refugee poet, whether conscious or unconscious, lies in grappling with displacement, the forces that continually produce it, and the new shapes of humanity that bloom and wither inside it. This grappling necessarily happens via language—or languages. It must be plural: even if conducted singularly by way of one language, refugee poetry willfully refuses some other linguistic option(s) that a refugee always knows to be available. (Every refugee poet feels something—maybe guilt, maybe resentment, maybe release—for not using this “other” language). Maybe every refugee poem in a native language can be viewed as a choice not to write in another—with a phantom exophonic version still suggested, or charted out, by way of a path-not-taken that we can sense if not read or hear.

Refugee exophony: a fluid and complex morass, affectively fraught. Quá dâ!

Regarding stark white paper: the enunciation of what it is to be a refugee also happens, crucially, via the language of institutionality. The paper is part of this language.

That is, refugees come into being as refugees by becoming eligible for asylum and aid from “first-world” nations, and through the institutional apparatuses of these nations. This can only happen by way of entering (paper, legal, official) records. For instance, the one that opens this essay.

This process takes place through a precise and scientific, formal and recognizable, reproducible and transmissible system of institutional language. Its trappings bespeak its function: cheap paper, arcane reference numbers, data that in sports lingo might be called counting stats—“subject,” “name,” “date of birth,” “country of origin”—the paper copied and recopied, filed and stored, intended for efficient record-keeping and classification, panoptic surveillance and totalizing management.

Such an institutional language, essential to the birth of every refugee as a refugee, enacts and documents at once the refugee’s incorporation into the US and their integration into the national project. Refugees resettle. They
start receiving aid. They start working. Children go to school. They buy stuff. They pay or dodge paying taxes. Recorded, recorded, recorded. They have been asylumed, they have been aided, they have been gifted freedom: the efficacy and value of the national project are affirmed, with receipts. US magnanimity and pity are affirmed. The country’s fundamental white supremacy and xenophobia are “proven” not to exist. The US is a better home—the best home. Whatever sent the refugees tumbling across the world to the US—a “whatever” in which US geopolitics are surely imbri-cated—is obscured. Refugees play a necessary symbolic role. Their humanity is not just fungible; it’s irrelevant.

When Ocean Vuong and I first started cooking up the idea of CfRP, sometime in 2017, we began with the question of why no institutional spaces devoted to refugee poetry existed—and we soon arrived at the fraught prospect that no such space might ever exist. Ocean was about to join the University of Massachusetts Amherst as a junior faculty member; this was before the publication of his celebrated novel *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*. I was a junior curator at the Smithsonian. Junior-ness mattered because we realized that our idea would have little support and neither of us had the institutional cachet to claim attention, divert resources, carve out space.

So we decided CfRP would be just an idea. It wouldn’t be a physical space, homed inside some brick-and-mortar building. It would be a nomadic, pop-up conceptual project, a fantasia—but one that drew upon the legitimizing language of institutions. CfRP imagined itself as a “center” in order to become legible, viable, sanctioned, fundable and ultimately funded. It would have the trappings of an institutional center (a physical location, if temporary, a visual identity, signage, and advertising collaterals), with most of the functionality (performances, reading groups, workshops, etc.) and little of the overhead. It would align with the systems of institutions and articulate how it could integrate into their workings to serve and advance their institutional aims. This meant that Ocean and I would have to learn to navigate institutionality via language; we learned to listen and speak, write, and, most importantly, fabulate in this language—in pitch sessions, bud- getary narratives and spreadsheets, formal presentations and backchannel conversations, grant applications, grant reports, and on and on.

This too is refugee poetry, the exophonic poetry of CfRP, its play and performance with institutional language that is at once native and non-native.

Its deployment is not simply for the sake of existence and survival; it is meant to critique and subvert. To trick institutions into supporting the necessary work of preserving and nurturing refugee artmaking. If refugees are rendered less-than human via institutional language, we have the opportunity
to learn and deploy that same language—or perhaps an elevated register of that same language—for purposes of our liberation and humanization.

CfRP is a mock institution with a manufactured, parodic institutionality. Our agenda is to illuminate the relationship between institutions and the refugee condition. Our mandate is to lay bare the tragicomic dialectic that refugees forever are and are not institutional objects.

Exophony as expropriation, as undercommons-ing.

(Is this a larger truism? Must exophony always contain a whiff of subversion and critique? Always a whiff of expropriation?)

In closing: in the beige filing cabinet, on the stark white paper, imagine this fragment of a poem—the same poem, by the way, that Ocean selected for us to read together to inaugurate the first iteration of the Center for Refugee Poetics, in Philadelphia, at 1219 Vine Street, at the Asian Arts Initiative, in May 2018. Imagine the poem as, at once, an exophonic official record and, also, as a mine that might, upon discovery, detonate the page and cabinet and explode outward through the larger filing system, destabilizing, with any luck, society’s continued performance of institutionality:

If you happen to have watched armed men
beat and drag your father
out the front door of your house
and into the back of an idling truck,
before your mother jerked you from the threshold
and buried your face in her skirt folds,
try not to judge your mother
too harshly. Don’t ask her
what she thought she was doing,
turning a child’s eyes away
from history
and toward that place all human aching starts.

And I bet you can’t say
what language your father spoke
when he shouted to your mother
from the back of the truck, “Let the boy see!”

—From “Self-Help for Fellow Refugees” by Li-Young Lee
My dream, from childhood, was to belong to the tradition of Imru’ al-Qays and al-Mutanabbi—to write in the Arabic I lived with and loved as a child growing up in Bethlehem, Palestine. Here’s how the story I heard over and over from my mother goes: when I was five or so I had memorized verses from the seven pre-Islamic odes (the *mu'allaqat*), and started reciting them without any clue about what the words to the poems meant. She dressed me up in a brown corduroy suit and asked my father to arrange for me to recite what I’d memorized from those odes at my school’s end-of-the-year celebration. That memory still haunts me here in the US today: Arabic poetry was fundamental to my connection with language; it began as a child’s play-thing for me, even before I understood it as poetry.

Many years later, as an engineering student at Manhattan College in New York City, I found myself immersed in the sounds of a strange new tongue. To a newly-arrived immigrant on the streets of the Bronx, people’s words and conversations in English constantly drummed in my ears; it made a deep impact on me, all of those day-to-day interactions and transactions taking shape in my mind, as sound, as “serious play,” just like those Arabic odes. I still dream in Arabic, if you are wondering, but art derives its shape from lived experience, rather than dreams. As an immigrant poet, I’ve decided to quit what’s most dear to me, my Arabic writing, to focus on writing as a day-to-day practice in the language of exile, in English. *I will exile myself further in my exile,* I’ve promised myself. *I will not write at all in Arabic till I have a body of work that I can claim as my own.* This is the exophonic experiment, one of self-translation, if you will, which gave shape to my first book of poems, *Bitter English.*

I certainly do not wish to give the impression that I’m living some assimilationist version of the American dream: “I am well and happy…I deserted my language and got the reward.” It does not work that way. The essential problem of the “mother tongue” continues to haunt your existence as a newcomer; your degrees, your bank statements, your certificate of naturalization, and the many documents you’ve been collecting to make up for the loss of your original home do not account for your language. It is the essential matter that gave you your voice *in the first place*—and the persisting problem for you, for your psyche, to be exact, is that, as George Steiner puts it, “everything forgets, but not a language.”
Leaving behind my engineering studies in New York, I first had to make a long detour through a PhD in Arabic literature en route to my ongoing experiment in exophony. As I studied for that PhD in dreary Indiana, my intent was still to become a poet in my own tongue—and I wrote in Arabic constantly. I thought learning everything I could about Arabic poetry would help me to become the poet I wanted to be in my native language. But another harsh realization set in as I wrote Arabic poems in Indiana; my Arabic was no longer “my Arabic.” Since I’d come to the US, my distance from my context, my home, had rendered my language and those Arabic poems of mine into a mere exercise in textuality. They gave no hint of translating experience into art; it was all nostalgia shaped into metered and measured free verse. I was simply obsessed with recreating the old sounds! Thus, I settled for becoming an academic, and I landed a tenure-track position teaching Arabic at Middlebury College.

But something of that new arrangement did not fit with me, either. Vermont was no place to write Arabic verse. The experience of teaching my native language as something foreign to others was devastating to my art. Maybe it was the reduction of my mother tongue to the abstract phonetic sounds of language instruction that are foreign even to me. It was the epitome of alienation from one’s own dear tongue. I asked myself, as I often do: “Am I destined to teach my own language to Americans so they can butcher my first sounds?” There was no real expressiveness in such a constructed context, not for me at least; it was a language constantly tailored for practical communications, without any poetic dimensions. Moreover, the repetitiveness of drilling verbs and vocabulary lists was soul grinding; and so was putting yourself and your culture on display all the time, whether you wanted or not, because you represented that part of the world to those students, to the institution at large, and to the entire community. Often, conversations with neighbors I met in a shop would turn into: You’re from the Middle East... so what do you think about the latest news from Egypt... or some other place in the Arab World?

After putting up with Middlebury for almost five years, I quit my tenure-track teaching position there in 2015 and moved, yet again, to a more cosmopolitan environment—to Philadelphia this time—hoping it might be the place for me after all this wandering. In financial and professional terms, this was a huge step down. But for the first time in my life, I felt that I had given up something to be closer to what I wanted to be: a poet. In Philadelphia, living in an apartment building full of “young professionals” who constantly asked, “what do you do?” I’d say, “I came here to write,” which was enough for them to give me that look: “You’re nuts!” Yes, particularly pistachio! I would say to myself, while steering the conversation somewhere else.
I wish I could say that sharing my love for Arabic poetry is what prompted me to join the community organization Al-Bustan Seeds of Culture in Philadelphia after quitting New York, Indiana, and Vermont in my haphazard pursuit of poetry. To be honest, I was without a job at that point and merely working with what came along. The founder of this nonprofit, and its director at the time, Hazami Sayed, invited me, out of the blue, to the basement of her house where the organization was based; there she offered me tea and the position of “Project Manager” for a new initiative to promote and teach Andalusian Arabic poetry. This involved selecting and translating classical Arabic poems from the time of the Arabs in Spain—what might be referred to as Islamic Spain or Andalusia. The selection of poems from al-Andalus would be put to music in the tradition of that period, only now with a contemporary musical composition commissioned by Al-Bustan. We would teach the poems to the immigrant Arab community at large. We set up readings, small concerts, workshops, and lectures, leading to a final event presenting a selection of poems set to the new music and sung by a choir and soloist. Frankly, I believe that my lack of any management skills forced me to end up doing most of the work myself. After all, I was an expert on the subject, with a PhD from an American institution which I’d obtained to announce to the world my mastery of classical Arabic poetry. But all along, I really only wanted to write poems.

Joining the Arab diaspora in Philadelphia, working with Al-Bustan after a series of self-imposed exiles, it seemed like things had just begun. But it felt as if I and my fellow Arab immigrants, many of them artists, were merely stumbling upon ourselves, or maybe on what remains of those selves far from home. The sounds that have no place on the set of our American lives, how could we make room for them in our lives here, together? Wasn’t this rather like what I’d been doing in Indiana, writing all that metered Arabic verse to recreate something of our past, far from home? Why did we feel this call to return to the Arabic poetry and music of Andalusia of all places? Will al-Andalus always be the emblem of our lost abode, al-dar, al-manzil to use those words repeated over and over in Arabic poetry? Is this why al-Mutanabbi, as I translate him now, once said:

For those places have places in the heart
They are lost, abandoned ruins now—
But their places in the heart remain alive,
Inhabited, and full.
I'd come to Philadelphia to become a poet in English—to exile myself from all beginnings. But I found myself beginning again, this time in an empty church with a group of other lost Arab artists. Among them was a Moroccan with a hand disability who played the traditional string instrument called the *qanun*, which like a harp requires the use of every finger on both hands. There was also a Syrian who embraced the cello but couldn't speak English or Arabic without dissolving into shyness. Another Syrian on the drum, or *derbakkeh*, who lost all his teeth to heavy smoking when he came to the US, liked to recall his triumphs over cigarettes and bare his new teeth whenever we all stepped outside for a smoke. And finally, a Palestinian who (unlike myself) wouldn't say the word “Palestine” out of fear that someone might hear us, served as the violinist and head of the band. They were all accomplished musicians, but we still needed a lute or *oud* player for the ensemble to be complete.

We were about to embark on a revival of Andalusian poetry, and especially the *Muwashshah* form, which marked a significant leap from the main form of Arabic poetry, the *qasida*. I was supposed to act as the literary expert and “Project Manager.” I started by naming the project “Words Adorned,” and while everyone seemed to like it, I thought to myself: this is what poets share with the gods, I suppose, the fallacies of naming.

Giving our project an English title, I couldn't help but feel that we didn't share a language, as much as we shared its loss. This put in motion certain theatrics where we all tried to shape a new image of who we wanted to be in this land, even as we sought to retain something of that old self we'd left behind. Try as we may, we couldn't revive our past selves because we had forgotten who we were. Only language remembers. So when my daughter came along with me to our sessions, my collaborators would talk to her in English, knowing that she was born in the US—but when they turned to me, they spoke in a formal Arabic dialect that we could all understand. “She can speak Arabic!” I insisted.

This is what we share, and this is what separates us. We simply don’t know how to belong anymore. Our Arabic is not one. Our tongues are split; in sheer numbers, the experts who like to count say that there are at least thirty-two varieties of Arabic spoken in the world today. I don’t know, there's probably more! When I was a child in Palestine, traveling from Bethlehem to my father’s village in the south, I heard so many varieties of the Palestinian dialect—I loved going along with my father on this trip—and yet I understood almost nothing of what people were saying to me on the way. And now I was supposed to teach immigrants from all over the “Arab world” the
correct pronunciation of old sounds? I began by talking about meter and rhythm in classical Arabic. I wanted them to pronounce the sounds correctly. “What am I doing here?” I was full of doubt. “I left everything in Middlebury so I’d teach language again, but this time Arabic to the Arabs?”

Out of nowhere, I began to sing the meter of a particular poem, just as my father taught me. Nothing I’d done to teach them about Arabic poems had succeeded so far. So I sang, like my mother often did. I created sound. It was the sound of the classical form I learned as a child. Nothing I wrote outside of it in my early attempts at verse ever qualified as poetry to my father: “It has to follow the classical sounds, like this.” He sang a meter here, taught me another there. It was the first and only time we understood each other. So I sang to my fellow Arabs in Philadelphia as though I would always be that boy I once was, reciting verses on a stage. They started to smirk and wink at each other: yes, beginnings are the source of all humiliations.

I sang, and my voice began to gain some tonal notes in this impromptu rendition of the poem. It is one I used to sing and sing, often to myself when I started off in this country. I’d find an empty chapel in Manhattan, and would sing aloud to myself, filling the structure with those old sounds; back then I could only hear those sounds as an echo of my own voice. Now we were all in this together, maybe.

I finished the parts I knew of that Muwashshah. The leader of the band, a musical genius on his violin who seemed to me to have difficulty ordering his thoughts without it, said at last: “Why don’t you sing? We can work with that. I’ll join with my violin. Let’s try it.”

A few weeks later, I was scheduled to give a reading and lecture on Andalusian verse as a prelude to the final performance of “Words Adorned.” But our irrepressible band leader had his own ideas for the event. “Sing,” he insisted. “We’ll accompany you.” After a hasty last-minute rehearsal the night before the show, I began to feel that repeating my intimate and spontaneous performance of our earlier Arabic lesson as a public event was a very bad idea! Afterwards, I walked off the stage, having performed and “celebrated” an art to which I don’t belong, feeling emptied. It wasn’t a physical exhaus-

Was it out of pure laziness that I, the “Project Manager” of “Words Adorned,” ended up singing in public instead of hiring someone else to do
it? Was I pushed to do it? Or was I tempted to be part of the show, on stage, for the audience’s applause? It’s hard to tell now. But the first words that came out of my mouth when I was alone again with my partner, Huda, and my daughter, Samaa, was, “I’ll never do such a thing ever again.” I came to Philadelphia not to sing, but to write poems, even if they must be in a bitter English that I must own. “I owe it to my mother tongue to speak;” I said to Samaa and Huda. And many months later I discovered why I’d said those words when I wrote in a poem: “because this English tongue owes me/a language.”

Organizations such as Al-Bustan make it possible for immigrant artists to rehearse and perform against the backdrop of their fading backgrounds. Yet all too often, othered artists are asked to perform their otherness on the stage of a receiving culture, and art becomes a political pantomime of received stereotypes. The immigrant artist will always risk this kind of erasure because they are invited to play the stereotype. To counter this, poetically and politically, I, as an immigrant poet, have to remind myself constantly that there is no such thing as the English language, just as there is no such thing as the Arabic language, or any other language with an incontrovertible set of rules that can govern the poetic act. There is only the tongue that can produce sounds and acquire its own taste of the fact. And while some are made for the stage, others are made for the page—I now sing only to myself, and to my loved ones. Whatever your art is, it can only be made by, or translated from, a language that you alone can create. This is the exophonic experience—at its core is the fact of translation in all its forms; at its core is the realization that poetry plays part in the self-translation that can sometimes move art to action.
I’m at the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival. I love the festival itself, the music, animal smell of the racetrack, salt of my own sweat, though I’m conscious the group I’m with thinks of me as other. So I try to take care with my difference. I smile often, dance when they dance.

In the taxi over, we passed by homes still marked with X-codes, spray paint flashed over disaster like graffiti. Not long ago, FEMA marked these doors after the waters receded, wrote under the large Xs: ___ alive/___ dead. I think of the history of this bridge when we pass it, where hundreds of refugees walked from New Orleans with their last clothes and their children’s fists in their hands towards Gretna, but parish deputies blockaded the end of that bridge, fired their shotguns above the crowd while across the city, prisoners hung their T-shirts as flags from the building, scrawling help us as they flooded.

On the Fais Do Do stage, the musicians are pulling the slides from their trombones as they blow hard on their mouthpieces. They slide the brass along their forearms as they force air to turn to music.

The group I’m in is so happy, the players are happy, my hands are in the air, too, in surrender, when I see the leader of the group hand something to the youngest to hold. It’s fabric wound onto a long pole, something I saw them heft together. When he unfurls it as flag, part cloth, part air, a declaration of the group’s identity high over the fairgrounds, over the city of New Orleans, it’s a flag with a monkey painted onto a stark, white background. As if in initiation, the group leader flattens a monkey sticker to my chest. She presses her palm against me, holds the animal shape above my heart.

Claudia Rankine is discussing Citizen for the Los Angeles Times. She calls up the final image she uses by J.M.W. Turner, which on the left page of Rankine’s book shows a ship at sea, the sun. But on the right page, she zooms her audience into the painting, to the detail in the ocean, so what at first may seem hidden becomes visible: the upended drowning man, his submerged body; above the churning water, his chained foot. “There’s something very beautiful about this image if in fact you just glance at it. So it holds a kind of normalcy, and even beauty. But then when you are pulled in to examine what is actually happening, you see that in this case, the slaves have been thrown overboard,” she says. “What happens when you interrogate, actually, what’s going on?”
In *Citizen*, Rankine writes:

> Between intention, gesture... the conversations you have with your eyes translate everything and nothing. What will be needed, what goes unfelt, unsaid... words encoding the bodies they cover. And despite everything the body remains.

I’m showing my students this video in a classroom at the University of Texas at El Paso. “I didn’t know there was a word for that,” one says about the word *microaggression*. “I did,” another student says, then tells us how when a police officer pulled her over for speeding, she pleated to her knees before his drawn gun. She blinks. Everyone here breathes from inside a Black, Indigenous, Latinx, or Asian body, so there are things we can say, and other things we need not name aloud. We already know what it’s like to be spoken to and acted with through assumption instead of perception, our hands in the air, our hands waving before our bodies, trying to name who we are and what we know below our contorted faces. How such experience, how we are seen by strangers who see us as other, is tied to language: *stop, please, you.*

I don’t say aloud the difference between the prefixes *micro* and *macro*, because such discernment can’t measure how the small so quickly becomes a weight, how used we have become to what should be uncarryable.

“There’s a word for that,” she says, “a word.”

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A student from our Bilingual MFA program is flickering across my computer screen, the pandemic become this distance between us. She is telling me that perhaps this weekend she’ll play a video game with her mother in which there are gender-fluid avatars, so her mother might eventually learn her pronoun, *ellx*—might sight, in the changed clothes, the lengthening hair, her child.

It is a word which in Spanish was missing, but as a writer she has made it, *ellx*, and one can see the contours of the femininity and the plurality of it in English, but in English, there is still no translation. In my first language, Tagalog, when we speak of a person as apart from us, we don’t denote gender, only plurality: every someone is *siya*; every group, *sila*. I tell her, in Spanish, that I hope the game goes well, that I hope her mother will play.

When we meet next, she hasn’t yet told her mother about who she is, who she’s become, is becoming. There was no way to wade across the distance. She drops her head toward the screen, knowing her poetry can at least cross our distance. We talk about the word *cargar*, how each language holds an absence against the meaning another language bears, like *a cargar lo que es insoporable, a cargarlo en el cuerpo*, the English words *to carry* or *to cargo* too weak or too slow to lade the weight the Spanish knows.
When I teach lineation in poetry, I teach from Benjamin Alire Sáenz’s “Arriving at the Heart of Tragedy”:

There are certain things that cannot be
Undone. Lot’s wife glanced back at Sodom as she was
Fleeing—and just like that she became a pillar of salt.

Sáenz, who is from Juárez–El Paso, knows certain things cannot be, just as certain things cannot be undone. In Spanish the word border becomes la frontera, which is to say at the verge, or outer front, of one kind of space touching upon another kind of space. Instead border in English has become confused with boundary, opens in subsequent breaths to words like wall and they and our security. But for we who live here, the wind courses through creosote, sagebrush, and the crevices of our windows in both Ciudad Juárez and El Paso indiscriminately, gathers the loose dust so when it finally rains it sometimes rains mud, withers our skin, and wraps its old song around each movement we dare make inside this desert.

The Chihuahuan Desert streams from what we call Texas and New Mexico into what we call Durango and Nuevo León, and yet, because of the brutality of the word border, we enforce limits upon a stretched out space; from language, imagine into iron post and gun, places untrespassable.

In his series “Meditation on Living in the Desert,” Sáenz writes:

I am looking at a book of photographs.
The photographs document the exodus of Mexicans crossing the desert.

I know and you know and we all know that the documents are forged.
The official is not in the photograph.

Only the frightened eyes of the girl.

On a bank of the Río Bravo, photographer Julia Le Duc captures Salvadoran migrant Óscar Alberto Martínez Ramírez and his two-year-old daughter, Valeria, who drowned.

That same week, my husband and I find three dead cats in our yard. We call Animal Services, who say they are being poisoned, how people will kill whom they consider stray, but coddle in their homes whom they consider their own. Michael, my husband, helps me to carry each animal gently into
our chests before we dispose of them, as if a moment of postmortem rocking
can tender their near weightlessness to some weight again.

In the photo, Valeria’s diaper protrudes from her red pants, which clinch
above her tiny calves. She has died trying to cross a river called border with
her father, her body swathed inside his shirt, which, bunched up, has bared
his back, but almost covers all of hers. Óscar Alberto’s right arm crooks from
his body and disappears into the muddy river as if the water could float them
to a soft weightlessness. Valeria’s right arm is slung over her father’s neck
and ear in a last moment of reaching and touch.

In class, I watch the faces of my students, who are mainly from Central
and South America. The rest are from across México, and Juárez–El Paso.
Their mouths open and close between intention and gesture. We who are
immigrants are only here, talking of poetry, by the privilege of planes and
papers, and the words writ on those papers which have somehow named for
us each a tenuous belonging.

We talk of the seeming normalcy of a river in terrain split by the word
border. How when one interrogates it, some bodies are free to move in space
while darker bodies, even if fleeing for their lives, are held to a limit. We talk
of words encoding the bodies they cover: how a difference of language—you,
them, nosotros, nuestro—can delineate what a body is allowed to freight
from one lyrical line to another, bank to riverbank. And despite everything,
the body remains.

How brutal how whitespace can turn the word be from auxiliary verb to a
state of being: things that cannot be.

We read together, down the page: There are certain things that cannot
be/Undone. Past the margin, the resolution of the sentence feels as unyield-
ing as that which cannot exist—there are things we can do from which we
can never come back—and though for most of us English is not our first
tongue, we bob and roll in the violence of the language: “Undone. Lot’s wife
glanced back at Sodom as she was.”

In my first language, Tagalog, tag-ilog, which means we are from the
river, the English word you changes depending on who is acting, who is
being acted upon, if something is for you, by you, done with you, or done
unto you. Meaning ebbs and flows with context, not just syntax, and while
linguists agree that Tagalog is verb-initial, some disagree if it’s a verb-object-
subject language, verb-subject-object, or a topic-comment language, where
sentences swirl around topics rather than subjects or objects—so many
outsiders have come to our archipelago and gathered our different tribes into
a word called nation, or colony.

In English, a stolidly subject-verb-object language, the you is firm, and
known at all times whether subject or object, no matter the verb. For people
from the Pasig River, which drifts now with mud and plastic but still ripples under the sun between our standstill Manila traffic, the word you can be sa iyo, sa inyo, ikaw, kayo, ka, mo, or inyo. I am trying to translate my uncle’s darkened hands shaking from Parkinson’s as he offers the glistening half of an opened crab to Michael. Like a poem, the gesture says what I hold here, I hold for you, it’s yours, as my uncle has risen shaky before sunrise to brave the slippery wet market, used the money we give him for medicine to buy these six crabs, one of which he has willed through his tremors to crack open so that he might offer as his to give this opened body, glistening with orange fat and ochre eggs. He is saying words that mean for you and this is yours, from us but not from me, by you, aware of the provenance of the money used to buy these crabs, and it sounds like how I know Tagalog most, heartbroken flutters, a kind of Morse code struggling to cross the distance. I don’t yet know how to hear it, or use it, beyond ache. It is the only language I speak that is not a language of empire, and the contexts in which it is spoken are always humbled by circumstance.

How to tell Michael in real-time English you must take this, he’s saying it was always yours, or to say in poetry to an English-speaking audience who cannot understand such want, that I still have family who die from hunger? I try to teach that it’s in the absences, in the unspeakable spaces we pry open inside language, where we can find moments of rest or acknowledgment, especially as writers of color who must give shape to the lived refusals our bodies know. Sometimes, against boundaries and limits, all we can do is make space for such recognition, to allow our subjects a little rest between the end of one line and the beginning of another. Sometimes, all we can do is flood language with our intent.

I was educated in the subject-verb-object syntax of English and French, as an adult learned the verb-subject-object and subject-object-verb structures possible in Spanish, but I still think, as a Filipina, that intent and signification can yaw with context. I love how in poetry the same words can shift meaning between line and sentence, and from one line to the next. Poetry is the only language that matches how I feel and speak with how I’ve been taught to think and write; it is the single language which, encoded into other languages, allows for the flux between that which is unutterable and that which we can dare aloud, because poetry is a language made both of river and air.

Before the river of words surges the page, Sáenz allows rest for Lot’s wife with the line, “Undone. Lot’s wife glanced back at Sodom as she was.” Here she is, as she was before fleeing, undone, becoming more undone as she turns to salt, but Sáenz gives her, and us, in that line break, one moment that
extends her being before her dissolution: as she was—before she, and all she knows, is ruined.

After our race-based massacre in 2019, when a twenty-one-year-old gunman posted words on the website 8chan like Hispanic invasion, them and us, our way of life, then drove through Texas to shoot the people of Juárez–El Paso, my friend told me his cuñado was a first responder. All his cuñado heard in the parking lot, and inside Walmart after the shooting, were text messages from the phones in the pockets and purses of our crumpled, each chime a flare in air become a song, an ask for breath, sound of another person from across our two cities, asking, asking each slumped love for touch back or reaching.

In class we recite Ross Gay’s summons in “A Small, Needful Fact” for Eric Garner:

continue to grow, continue.

His words unfurl as part flag, part air, a hope made that can only exist in language, and no longer the body—that is, even if only in the limited space of a poem, a place where we can still imagine a difference: extend being before dissolution. It is a possibility spoken precisely at the limit of history, our present, and at the verge of poetic line.

In Antígona González, Sarah Uribe writes of our land and river:

: ¿Es posible entender ese extraño lugar entre la vida y la muerte, ese hablar precisamente desde el límite?

: una habitante de la frontera

In Spanish and English, we have a conversation that translates everything and nothing. We say tú and you, you’re ours, as we inhabit this border. We try to lift, then offer to one another the separate animals pressed above our rushing hearts, and we search in our poems for the bodies that remain. How to open inside an order of words that can—against our lived realities—still churn toward some form of refuge?

A student writes: hoy se cumplen 4 años del asesinato de mi padre ... Sobre mi padre: he escrito mucho de él. Y después de todo la literatura es una forma de salvarnos. He is Ñuu Savi, from the people of rain, writing to me in his second or third language, in my fourth language. We are both water people, know the many ways language can drown. Today is the fourth anniversary of my father’s murder ... About my father: I have written much about him. After all, in an acknowledgment which surges through the pain upon which such recognition was built, literature is a way to save ourselves. It is a commitment that comes from a lived knowing that pierces grief.
In Juárez–El Paso, poetry is not just a language we share, but for some of us, it is perhaps the only language which can fully hold our silences, our places of anguish. It is also a language that can course and trill, gush freely from bank to bank of white space and still engulf us in the music of its capaciousness: where there is space enough to find moments of recognition against the violences of all other languages. The rest is felt, but unsaid.

How to carry, how to cargo, that which should be unbearable inside these bodies, our hands waving above the papers we hold between us? Undone, we glance back for a moment as we are. Then we turn, together, to poetry.
Contributors

Abdulkareem Abdulkareem* (Pānini) is the winner of the University of Ilorin Student Union Writers’ Competition. He is a member of the Frontiers Collective.

Sarah Ghazal Ali* is the author of Theophanies (Alice James Books, 2024) and a Stadler Fellow at Bucknell University. She currently serves as editor for Palette Poetry.

Ahmad Almallah* is a poet from Palestine and artist-in-residence at the University of Pennsylvania. He is the author of Bitter English (University of Chicago Press, 2019).

Aldo Amparán* is the author of Brother Sleep (Alice James Books, 2022), winner of the Alice James Award.


Dani Charles* is an MFA candidate at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop where they received the John Logan Poetry Prize.

Don Mee Choi* was born in Seoul, and is the author of DMZ Colony (Wave Books, 2020), which won the National Book Award. She is a MacArthur fellow and Guggenheim fellow.

Lawrence-Minh Bùi Davis is a curator for the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center and a cofounder of the Center for Refugee Poetics.

Armen Davoudian’s* Swan Song (Bull City Press, 2020) won the Frost Place Chapbook Competition. He grew up in Isfahan, Iran, and lives in California.

Moriana Delgado* has been published in Poetry Review, Hobart, Este País, and LEIZI. She’s an MFA candidate at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop. She has a black cat.
Tsering Wangmo Dhompa is the author of Revolute (Albion Books, 2021), as well as My Rice Tastes Like the Lake (2011), In the Absent Everyday (2005), and Rules of the House (2002), all from Apogee Press.

Michael Dumanis* is the author of Creature (Four Way Books, 2023) and My Soviet Union (University of Massachusetts Press, 2007). He teaches at Bennington College.

Ukata Edwardson* is a queer writer of color, posthumous, and sick. His poems are memories, fictitious, or true.

Johannes Göransson is the author of the forthcoming Summer (Tarpaulin Sky Press, 2022). He is a poet, translator, and editor of Action Books.


Bradley Harmon* is a writer, translator, and scholar of Scandinavian and German literature, film, and philosophy.

Hajar Hussaini* is an Afghan poet residing in Iowa where she teaches a poetry writing course. Her first collection of poems, Discord (University of Iowa Press), is forthcoming.

Somto Ihezue* is an Igbo writer. He loves white-soled shoes and the smell of rain.


Ilya Kaminsky is the author of Deaf Republic (Graywolf Press, 2019) and Dancing in Odessa (Tupelo Press, 2004), as well as coeditor of Ecco Anthology of International Poetry (HarperCollins, 2010). He lives in Atlanta.

Hiromitsu Koiso* is a Japanese poet and translator who has translated Anne Carson, Teju Cole, and Ocean Vuong into Japanese.
Dong Li* is a multilingual poet and translates from the Chinese, English, French, and German.

Marina Dora Martino* is a poet based in Venice. She works as a copywriter and draws comics about a man who is a bird.

Farid Matuk is the author of the book-arts project Redolent (Singing Saw Press, 2021), made in collaboration with Nancy Friedemann-Sánchez.

Dunya Mikhail is an Iraqi-American poet and the author of In Her Feminine Sign (New Directions, 2019).

Emi Miyaoka* is a Japanese poet and Hirakata city official. Her books and other works can be found in the Harvard-Yenching Library.

Valzhyna Mort’s third poetry collection, Music for the Dead and Resurrected (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020), was named one of the best poetry books of 2020 by the New York Times and was the winner of the International Griffin Poetry Prize.

Jila Mossaed* was born in 1948 and has published twenty-two books. She lives in Sweden and is a member of the Swedish Academy.

Sawako Nakayasu is the author of Pink Waves (Omnidawn, 2021) and Some Girls Walk into the Country They Are From (Wave Books, 2020).

Mayowa Oyewale* writes from Ile-Ife, Nigeria, where he currently attends Obafemi Awolowo University. He’s a reader at Chestnut Review.

Suphil Lee Park 수필리박* wrote Present Tense Complex (Conduit Books & Ephemera, 2021), winner of the Marystina Santiestevan Prize.

Sasha Pimentel* has written For Want of Water (Beacon Press, 2017), winner of the National Poetry Series, and Insides She Swallowed (West End, 2010), winner of the American Book Award.

Sara Abou Rashed* is a Palestinian American writer, speaker, and creator of the one-woman show, A Map of Myself. She earned her BA at Denison University and is pursuing an MFA at the University of Michigan.

Sonnenzimmer is the art practice of Nick Butcher and Nadine Nakanishi. Together they wade through the graphic magma.
Lehua M. Taitano is a queer CHamoru writer and interdisciplinary artist from Yigu, Guåhan (Guam), and cofounder of Art 25: Art in the Twenty-Fifth Century.

Öykü Tekten* is a poet, translator, and editor. She lives with her two tabby cats in Granada.

Laura Theis’* debut, *how to extricate yourself* (Dempsey and Windle, 2020), was the winner of the Brian Dempsey Memorial Prize.

Mónica de la Torre’s most recent poetry book is *Repetition Nineteen* (Nightboat Books, 2020). She teaches at Brooklyn College.

Shash Trevett* is a British-Tamil, originally from Sri Lanka, and the author of the pamphlet *From a Borrowed Land* (Smith|Doorstop, 2021).

Zêdan Xelef* is a poet and translator from Mesopotamia. He is the author of the chapbook *A Barcode Scanner* (Kashkul Books, 2022) and attends the MFA program at San Francisco State University.

Khany Xiong is a Hmong poet from Fresno, California. She is the artist-in-residence at the Asian/Pacific/American Institute at New York University.

Lynn Xu* is the author of *And Those Ashen Heaps That Cantilevered Vase of Moonlight* (Wave Books, 2022).

Javier Zamora is the author of *Solito: A Memoir* (Hogarth, 2022) and *Unaccompanied* (Copper Canyon Press, 2017).

Tino Zhang* is a poet and visual artist based in Iowa City. He received his MFA in poetry from the Iowa Writers’ Workshop.

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