POETRY
MARCH 2022

Founded in 1912 by Harriet Monroe
Volume 219, Number 6
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The *Poetry* staff at their office in the Newberry Library, 1956: Robert Mueller, Margaret Danner, Elizabeth Wright, Henry Rago, and Frederick Bock.
Srikanth Reddy

Editor’s Note

Like many readers of Poetry, I’ve occasionally clicked on the “About the Magazine” page at the Poetry Foundation website over the years—so this photograph may feel somewhat familiar to you, too.

There’s the big table of magazines with titles like FOLIO, Hudson, and a cryptic series of figure 8s intersecting the picture plane. Jaunty plaques on the bookshelves advertise that we’re at a staff meeting of Poetry: A Magazine of Verse—or a dramatic reenactment for the camera, more likely. All eyes are directed stage right, to the professorial figure wearing a bow tie, hands tucked in his pockets, holding forth on some literary matter for a rapt audience. Nobody addresses the young woman off to the side, her eyebrows raised, but she addresses a sidelong glance over her shoulder at the speaker.

I’m not sure how many times I’ve overlooked her.

Overlooked in her lifetime and ours, Margaret Esse Danner (1915–1984) made an art of looking intently at the world around her. As the first Black woman on Poetry’s editorial staff, she routinely sought out other overlooked writers to publish under the magazine’s “Open Door” policy during her workday at the office. In her off hours, she gazed with fascination at newly popularized arts of Africa in magazines, museum exhibitions, and private collections, including a few prized items in her modest apartment on the South Side of Chicago. In poems like “The Lady Executive Looks at a Mangbetu Palm Wine Jug,” she even looked at others as they looked at African art, viewing these artifacts through their imagined perspectives. Inescapably alive to the look of things, Danner felt, on some level, that works of art watched her—and us all. “Who can escape the quaint, spellbound, gargoyle-like bronze faces/that stare from their settings of thin metal lace?” she asked of the ornate bronze bells transported—or more properly speaking, looted—from Benin, on display in a Chicago museum (“The Bronze Bells of Benin”). Danner looked long and hard at other forms in captivity too, such as Bushman, the first gorilla on display at Chicago’s Lincoln Park Zoo, who died on New Year’s Day: “I’ve studied Bushman for years,” she wrote of this racialized African animal, “and can, along with the thousands of others who/loved the big brute, attest to his dignity” (“These Beasts and the Benin Bronze”). Throughout her life, Danner searched for the common lineaments of humanity across lines of race, ethnicity, and nation: “Whether Russian, French, Italian, or American” or “Ibo, Yoruba, Zulu, Congolese, Fan,” she wrote, “as I look into each different face,/I am exalted” (“Through the Varied Patterned Lace”).
But if you look for Margaret Danner’s poetry in your local bookstore, you won’t find anything in print.

I first began looking into Margaret Danner after hearing the Chicago writer Ed Roberson discuss her poem “The Elevator Man Adheres to Form” at an online panel on “Chicago Poetry: Then & Now,” organized by the Newberry Library of Chicago in our first uncertain autumn of COVID-19. Roberson spoke knowledgeably about Black elevator operators in US labor history; the minister at his hometown childhood church had previously worked as an elevator man, a respected profession at the time, in Pittsburgh’s financial district. Yet if elevator technology expanded Black workers’ economic horizons, Roberson observed, it also furnished a vehicle for our nation’s claustrophobic racial tragedy. The 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre, he noted, was sparked by an encounter between a Black boy and a white girl in the volatile social space of an elevator. As I watched Roberson speak in the aftermath of Charlottesville and countless other acts of racist violence, my own lockdown began to feel like an elevator compartment with all of America crowded inside—and it wasn’t going up.

Later, I learned that Danner would have taken the Newberry Library elevator to the fifth-floor offices of Poetry from 1951–1956, ascending from the position of reader to the unexalted rank of assistant editor during her time at the magazine. Did she address a sidelong glance at the genteel white passengers exchanging pleasantries with the Black elevator man in that crowded compartment? The elevator, for Danner, must have felt like a space where she couldn’t avoid thinking about upward and downward mobility, race and society, and poetic justice. (In an upcoming editor’s blog post, I’ll consider the complex racial politics of Danner’s time at the magazine in further detail.) “The Elevator Man Adheres to Form” concludes with the poet’s wish that her literary vehicle might lift others, too, above their “crippling storm.” Today, Danner’s choice of adjectives would warrant a query to the author about metaphors of disability from the editorial offices at Poetry; her elevator continues to be a difficult site for thinking about race, gender, and class through our troubled historical language of access and accessibility.

“It indicts me,” Roberson said of the poem.

As I started to imagine a series of issues for this guest editorship at Poetry, Danner’s elevator seemed like a possible place to begin. Its sliding doors opened onto a panoply of scenes from mid-century Chicago, including neighborhood poetry workshops with Gwendolyn Brooks at
the South Side Community Arts Center, Bushman’s terraced enclosure in the Lincoln Park Zoo, and the vaulted expanse of the Baha’i Temple on the city’s North Shore. (Born into a family of Christian Scientists, Danner later converted to this universalist world religion from Iran.) But Danner wasn’t exclusively a Chicago poet, or a Poetry poet, or a Baha’i poet for that matter: she established a vibrant literary community, Boone House, at the historic King Solomon Church in Detroit; she taught an emerging generation of poets at Wayne State University, Virginia Union University, and Le Moyne-Owen College; and she traveled to Africa on a John Hay Whitney Fellowship to join Langston Hughes at the First World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, Senegal. She sought to construct “a new free-form screen/of, not necessarily love, but (at the very least, for all concerned) grace” (“The Slave and the Iron Lace”). She adhered to form, and she broke forms.

This issue of Poetry seeks to address an overlooked poet—and to bring Margaret Danner’s artful manner of looking at things to a wider readership. Several poets, scholars, and editors have generously contributed to this project: Ed Roberson enters into an animated literary dialogue with Danner for this folio; Adrienne Brown contributes an expansive meditation on the social history of Black elevator operators in “The Elevator Man Adheres to Form”; Liesl Olson writes an illuminating essay exploring Danner’s life and work in multiple historical contexts; Rebecca Zorach contributes an insightful reading of Danner’s adherence to the “blazing forms” of African art; and CM Burroughs addresses an intimate lyric essay to Danner herself. Throughout this effort, my coeditors at Poetry—Holly Amos, Angela Flores, Lindsay Garbutt, and Fred Sasaki—have labored with immense care for their historical colleague at the magazine. They ought not to be overlooked.

Our folio on Margaret Danner is only one element of a more extensive work-in-progress that will continue beyond my guest editorship at the magazine. The Poetry Foundation has committed itself to supporting Black historians in the research, documentation, and preservation of literature by Black poets and presses in the years to come. In a forthcoming issue, the magazine will highlight another overlooked poet, Carolyn Rodgers, who advanced and deepened the Black Arts Movement through her poetry and work with the seminal Third World Press. The Foundation and the magazine are currently planning further events, initiatives, and exhibitions to recognize and celebrate overlooked Black writers, editors, and activists whose work continues to shape contemporary American poetry today.

My own guest editorship will turn, next month, to the diverse communities of language-users from a transnational perspective, with a special issue on “Exophonic Poetry”—featuring work by migrant, refugee, and other poets who write in a “non-native” language. And I’ll conclude my guest
editorship at the magazine with a May issue on pre-modern poetries of the world in translation, titled “Make It Old.” A Black Chicago author who worked in Poetry’s offices; an immigrant chorus of exophonic voices; and the ancient poetries of our world in translation—addressing poetry from past to present, from the individual to the community, and from the neighborhood to the planet might, I hope, open new dimensions in our experience of art, language, and society.

Along with our folio on Margaret Danner, I’m grateful for the opportunity to introduce an extraordinary group of contemporary poets, hailing from Nigeria, Turkey, Bolivia, Japan, Chicago, and beyond, who have contributed their work to this issue of Poetry. Let’s turn now to their “blazing forms.”
Hannah Emerson

Peripheral

Yes I prefer the peripheral because it limits the vision.

It does focus my attention. Direct looking just is too much killing of the moment. Looking oblique littles the moment into many helpful moments.

Moment moment moment moment keep in the moment.
Mandible Wishbone Solvent

After “Oracle/Hero” by Howard Smith

roped in incremental ghost tens
future tens clairvoyant tens home tens
blue slips beneath the exposed wing
tilt then seam then an angle spent all inside
the distance between thumb and thimble and fingerprint

height exceeds then brims
makes a solvent of it

what vaunted green excess enclosed in each skimmed year then the years
vanquished any fuchsia sky
the excess leaking forward filmed aqua
filled aqua

fastened by ulna by increments of ten
fortunes sidled with
what have we when we give the mandible the fragments by
tens?
tender tilt at ninety degrees to unearth
blue slips beneath the exposed wing
continents
contain
futures
you
be here

you
be here tender tilt
remiss in skies
scant excess enclosed in a film that gives more than
brimmed solvents to wrest time

This poem was originally commissioned by the Finnish Cultural Institute in New York for the Exercises in Togetherness event at PUBLICS.
Casual Chandeliers

so understated he could be
swedish or so sehr praktisch
even deutsch with his grey haus-
schuhe in the door of a space
safe with church tax rent control
an automatic heating plan
and cheap light softened by
synthetic glass refracting
the abyss of memory
foam and cut-price bedding
bought online on the off chance
of drinks and kisses irl
then breakfast then conversation
during which she’d follow
his gaze to the stylish reserve
of independent living and oh
these casual chandeliers
Heavier, heavier

I should speak of the peacock—he would want me to. It had a marvelous traipsing tail like an Arabian rug. From where we spoke, it was so dark we could only think bright things

It was dark
the way inside of the body
is dark, a dark
without an eye

At least, the white stone fact of the walls we knew well,

the way they curved the mango trees toward compounds we thought of as our family’s once upon a time dwelling

And what about when you talk: scoff of: at Abuja? And about the fable,
being kidnapped by my father

There are other things missing from the daily birdbath
I sustain impetus with, but in this scene,
beyond the garden, in the woods...

I say the peacock himself propels along the wall, under the heavy petting of scythe leaves.
He doesn’t so much walk
as molecularly snap into place,
each claw finding
an oblong and syncopated
drop onto the limed edge. I know,

but don’t remember
the tenderness beneath
the feathers’ slick shield.

The luminous green, bluer,
nightshine. I won’t say anything.
I will keep my mouth shut.
Krystyna Dąbrowska

Duch lasu

Dałam się oszukać jak wędrowcy, którzy tropią ducha lasu.
Idą po jego śladach nie wiedząc, że ma stopy odwrócone na wspak.
Szukają go na północy, a on jest na południu.
Wspinają się za nim na wzgórze, a on znika w dolinie.
Chcą go zmęczyć długim marszem, a sami, ledwo dysząc,
zatrzymują się i kręcą w kółko tam, skąd wyruszył.

Gdyby to był kapryśny duch lasu, gdyby on wyprowadził mnie w pole.
Gdyby trik był jak z groźnej baśni: ślady stóp odwróconych na wspak.
Ale to byłeś ty. Twoje zwyczajne słowa, małe gry,
znane nam obojgu aż za dobrze. Najbardziej zdradliwy las.
I was tricked like the wanderers who seek the spirit of the forest. They follow his tracks, not knowing his feet are flipped backwards. They pursue him in the north, when he's already headed south. They clamber uphill after him, when he's slipped down to the valley. They try to wear him out on a long march, themselves short of breath, then stop and circle back to the point he started from.

If only it was that capricious forest imp who lured me out. If only the trick sprang from a sinister tale: tracks from backward feet. But it was you. Your ordinary words, little games we both know so well. That thicket most treacherous of all.
Rüştü Onur

Hülâsa

Cahit Sitki Tarancı'ya

Ben ölsem be anacığım
Nem var ki sana kalacak.
Ceketimi kasap alacak,
Pardöşümü bakkal
Borcuma mahsuben ...
Ya aşklarım
Ya şiirlerim n'olacak
Ya sen ele güne karşı
Nasıl bakacaksın insan yüzüne.
Hulâsa anacığım
Ne ambarda darım
Ne evde karım var.
Çıplak doğurdun beni
Çıplak gideceğim …
In Sum

Translated from the Turkish by Hüseyin Alhas & Ulaş Özgün

To Cahit Sıtkı Tarancı

If I were to die my dear mother
I would have nothing to leave you.
The butcher would take my jacket,
The grocer, my coat
On account of my debts…
What about my loves
And my poems
How could you face the neighbors
And not be ashamed.
In sum, my dear mother,
No corn in the cellar
No wife at home.
Naked I was born
Naked I will die…
Memnuniyet

Benden zarar gelmez  
Kovanındaki arıya  
Yuvasındaki kuşa;  
Ben kendi halimde yaşarım  
Şapkamın altında.  
Sebepsiz gülustüm caddelerde  
Memnuniyetimden;  
Ve bu çılgınlık delicesine  
İçimden geliyor.  
Dilsiz değilim susamam  
Öyle ölüler gibi  
Bu güzel dünyanın ortasında.
Contentment

Translated from the Turkish by Hüseyin Alhas & Ulaş Özgün

No harm would I pose
To the bee in its hive
To the bird in its nest;
I live in my own world
Under my hat.
It is my contentment that makes
Me smile without reason on the streets;
It is my heart,
The source of this raving frenzy.
I am not silent, I can’t keep quiet
Like the dead beneath the dirt
In the midst of this sweet world.
逍遥遊篇——吉岡実追悼

＜ミューミュー＞と 鹿は鳴く
絵画の
松葉を添えて 客人として降り立っては
天変のための眼で
地異を受肉しているのだ
朝の光のもとで 玉石を積み。
その頭上を浮遊する渦鞭毛虫類
ペリジニウス、あるいは

（精霊?）
林は透けつつ。
朱絹を骨は纏う
頸のあたりに抹消のキイを持ち、人外に
後背へ、と出て行く眼差、
詩人?

夜明けには茄子を摘みに行く
午後には揺れる、瓢箪の下で眠り
ふたつの実をキリキリと磨いて 夜になれば
言葉が「映るようにする」
生涯の夏至

世界を覆うのは沈黙である
世紀末の花粉症を抱えて 青麦の波打つ
女体を想像せよ （骨の）
残影はただよい。
Wandering Beyond

Translated from the Japanese by Tomoyuki Endo & Forrest Gander

A eulogy for Minoru Yoshioka

The deer croon, “Miew, miew”—
Who arrives
as a stranger with a pine bough
from a picture,
with an eye foreseeing cataclysms falling from the sky,
cataclysms that hatch open here on earth?
Under the morning sun, piling up round pebbles?

Above his head flows a stream of peridinian
plankton, “dinoflagellates,” or
(a form of spirit?).

The woods go transparent. Some
scarlet silk pulled over a skeleton.
His lips, a “delete key,” his eye pulling
back from and focused behind the company of others—
some poet?

At dawn, going out to pick eggplants,
and in the afternoon, napping under
the swaying double-peaked gourds, and later polishing one until it shines,
and then at night, finding words “reflected” on its surface.

The summer solstice of a life.

What prevails of the world is its silence.
Suffering hay fever at the end of the century,
imagining the curve of a woman’s body where green barley waves.
The afterimage (of a skeleton?) floats by.

---

1 The title comes from the first chapter of the book Chuang Tzu.
2 In Buddhism, an impossible act which those who precede their parents in death perform after leaving this world.
渴水期

文字に縋る
焚書に星位は狂い
重い掌 指 のあわいから
地誌は洩れ、病む骨
(夏の草の間を疾るひとかげを一瞬、)
焚書に星位は狂い
不眠の (有為の)
核へと弓を引く
(何の宵祭、)
ねじれた垂直面を降りてくるかのごとき母の声
を月光のようなものとして観じ (心の) 禁圧の
沼に尽くす
仮設の素木 腐蝕のあとを留める銅板にも響く
竹の葉擦れを裂いて
障子をよぎる(見知ったと錯覚した)
女の笑い
(先行する一行によって) 何かが購われているのだろうか
そこに文字のようなものが怯えて見える
つぶらかな甘い歯をした (顔のない)
不老の母系が揺すぶっている (のだった)
揺すぶられて
つねに問いへと置換され (また客中.........)
冥合はなく 帰に 搢たれる
(生まれ.........生まれ.........)
霧れ月、蝕の
扉絵を伏せてあらゆる器も朽ちよ
(化身は斃れ、)
稀には優曇華も見える
千年の葬礼に盈ち (放たれ)
馴らすことはできない
(炎のようなものだった.........)
だが庇護もことばからだとは
(与えられるとは) もう、
わたしが呼んでいる、のではない
The Dry Season

*Translated from the Japanese by Tomoyuki Endo & Forrest Gander*

All of it dependent on words.
When books burn,
even the settings of stars collapse,
and slipping from thick palms and fingers,
the history of place falls away,
even the structure of the human body goes wrong then.
(At this moment a figure passes quickly through the summer grass)—
Letting the blessings of ancestors fall on the body,
drawing a bow toward the sleepless (karmic) core.
(What is this festival eve for?)
Recognizing, as something like moonlight,
the maternal voice of origin as it ricochets through time's usages
and sinks (into the mind).
A word, unseasoned wood.
A woman's laughter floats out
from bamboo leaves that rustle
in a kind of rhyme with the strum of grooves in a copper board,
as she passes behind the sliding door of half-transparent Japanese paper
(although I recognized her for what she was).
Is anything redeemed (by one preceding line)?
Something like words can be imagined, trembling,
the long genealogy of the mother-tongue,
each phoneme standing clear (without its face)—
(having been) arousing, aroused,
aroused, always, back to questions (echoing back)
ever finished, but nested by echoes.
(Being born ..., being born ...
Oh moon, come back from your eclipse! Melt down
the utensils at hand,
mute the images we see on the sliding door!
(The incarnation diminishing)—
Only occasionally can the *udumbara* flowers be seen.
Stuffed with thousands of years of funeral services, (released)
not tamed,
(a flicker of something like flames ... )—
Still, endorsement, words, body
(these, which are not given)
are not even what I can call for.
I was trying
to get the water hot.

I was unwrapping
a tiny soap.

I was preparing to take
a shower with you
dead in the other room.

And should I wash my hair
does lemongrass go with
grief. How can
my body shower itself
like it always did.

I was meditating on the
reflexive verb
in Spanish
to avoid the next step.

Then I was throwing out
take-out containers
bottles of wine
from the night before.

We had gathered and
told stories around
your motionless form
and though you couldn’t speak
we tried to make you laugh.

Carlos impersonating
the Irish priest
sent to give the last rites.
Sorry, he said in a brogue,
a Peruvian priest
would have made
more sense.
And then he and José left and I slept inches from you and listened to you breathe.

When you stopped breathing we gathered again.
Imani Elizabeth Jackson

From “Flag”

Lately I am preoccupied with flimsy boats, the shape of them, and the fear I have of open water, which overwhelms me when I’m in it, always it’s cutting me somewhere in my lower half, that is, the ocean’s hard materials are cutting me at my heels, my ankles, my knees. Today I studied a photo of a precarious tent with thin cotton for cover, some sticks that might fall over, and the tent was incidental, the photo was of a man, he stood by the sea, smiling, the tent atop a flat rock and I thought of certain objects used to warn off thieves, their careful and flimsy arrangement, and I thought of the beach in Florida, buried wind, the impotence of some objects, I could have lived there, I do live there, in some sense, it’s one point of departure.

I would like to live usefully, present conditions fail that possibility, and I give way to capacity. My mother used to enter people with a camera, tiny and sterile, through the rectum or the throat. She’d see them, loop their flaws, they’d sit upright and thank her. Land. The gut came like tide.
Laze laps in green against the sun I go

Out askew

A most fragile scene of west

Where I live is a shifting line

No one has hurt me more than residually

The bridge will break soon

I don’t live there anymore

The moss and lichen will fall off

As poison

Coast

Seeping out the line
My banner is a shawl, multifunctional as a towel and sack. I like to cloak myself in color, any color that would draw me, this contrasts with my previous insistence on neutral dress.

My friend a rose lake on an open boat set. Taking on memory, shade ebbs with time.

Oil top, dilute again, other extractions would yield a concrete or an absolute.

This morning, I watched water gather more water, speed toward shore, gather surface, rise, break on itself. I lived off a wave, my own.
From “now”

at the borders of systems always something a bit extra

like beyond the slash of begonia an ancillary, almost

bitter, pink—there linger there drugged out

on phenotypical essences, craven & horny & hardwired

for whatever’s on the brink splintering

oranges erupting in odorous flame—linger

by the exquisite corpse of this delay

dragged out & fatally nervous

& in the head derision roses

you minister the margins

of apoplectic reed, murmurs in the hearts of palms

a speed of thought hitherto unrealized

a speed of access to what’s now

where the margin of error is is
Jasmine Elizabeth Smith

Jonestown Death Tape: Part I

00:34–1:30

I have loved you, how very much
I have tried my best to give you the good life.

The world did not begin with light but began
with this commandment—

No man takes my life from me, I lay my life down.
If you look closely enough, you can find God

of my face, holiness drowned in mass, a vat

of muscadine bittered by cyanide. For this is one
of the many tricks of faith—how to translate violence

into the rite of passage; bend shadows posed as overseer,

unkept, grief, & pistol into reeds of worshiping
hands. You see, I have lived in hope too long, so much,

there is no longer a distinction. If I can’t live

in peace then I must die in paradise
more than the syringe can hold. Plunged into the part

of a world that refuses to call me by my name.

When all is said and done, there will be no difference between I,
the father, who gave you a second chance, beautiful & blood-close

& the powder keg you believed you narrowly escaped.
Melissa Sauma

Definitiva

Entre mi amor y yo han de levantarse
trescientas noches como trescientas paredes
y el mar será una magia entre nosotros.
—Jorge Luis Borges

Crecerán entre tú y yo las montañas
ancho y extenso el río de piedra
nos arrastrará en su cauce a orillas opuestas
naufragarán los barcos y los puentes.
Se elevará sobre nosotros y sobre esta ciudad
la selva
y sólo quedará en sus senderos
el eco entristecido del murmullo del viento.

Serás para mí la larga ausencia de una ausencia
seré para ti la espuma de un mar que se disuelve.

Cuánta ansia disfraza mi semblante
mi pálido mirarte indiferente
mi súplica de azar hecha silencio
la noche aprisionada entre mis vértebras.

Immune como la niebla
será tu voz el canto de otros viajeros.
Definitive

*Translated from the Spanish by Janet McAdams*

*Between my love and me three hundred nights must be raised like three hundred walls and the sea will be a witchery between us.*
—Jorge Luis Borges, tr. by Janet McAdams

They’ll grow between you and me, the mountains, wide and vast the river of stone will drag its riverbed to opposite banks will shipwreck boats and bridges. The jungle will rise above us and over this city and leave in its paths only the saddened echo of wind’s murmur.

For me you’ll be the long absence of an absence
For you I’ll be the surf of a sea dissolving.

Such yearning disguises my appearance my pallid face watches you indifferently my entreaty for a chance made of silence night trapped among my vertebrae. Immune like the fog your voice will be the song of other travelers.
Reminiscencia

Exploro antiguas aguas
busco el primer fuego.

La infancia,
esa casa poblada de fantasmas;
el patio de mi abuela,
la tierra, los árboles de los que estoy hecha.

La guayaba que se estrella contra un mosaico rojo a media tarde,
las tardes en que observé pasar la vida desde una vereda.

Y me engaño creyendo que mis manos se hicieron para narrar el mundo.

Escribo, es cierto,
hay tanto que quiero nombrar y que no puedo;
tanta vida escurriéndose en mis manos,
tanta sombra ondeando mis cabellos,
tantas palabras suspendidas en el aire
—minúsculas partículas de polvo
iluminadas por la luz de una ventana—
que debo sacudirme de ellas
como quien se sacude de la piel la última capa.

Y miento
si digo que es la piedra, la montaña, el mar, el río,
los pájaros alzando vuelo, las esquinas de una casa,
el rostro de mi abuela, sus múltiples fantasmas
los que hoy
me piden ser contados.

Hay tanto que quiero nombrar y que no puedo.

Escribo, es cierto.
Del otro lado está la muerte
levitando.
Reminiscence

*Translated from the Spanish by Janet McAdams*

I explore old waters
I search for the first fire.

Infancy,
that house filled with ghosts;
my grandmother’s courtyard,
the earth, the trees from which I’m made.

The guava smashing against the patio’s red tiles midafternoon,
afternoons where I watched life pass by from a sidewalk.

And I fooled myself believing my hands were made to narrate the world.

I write, that’s for sure,
there’s so much I want to name and that I can’t;
so much life slipping through my hands,
so much shadow ruffling my hair
so many words suspended in the air
—miniscule dust particles
lit by the light from the window—
that I must shake off
the way someone shakes off the last layer of skin.

And I lie
if I say that it’s stone, mountain, sea, river,
the birds taking flight, the corners of a house,
my grandmother’s face, her numerous ghosts
the ones who today
ask to be counted.

There is so much that I want to name and that I cannot.

I write, that’s for sure.
Death, from the other side,
is levitating.
I'm a Bad Engineer

I fold paper into
An origami—mimic an airplane.
Hand it to a little girl whose
T-shirt reads fly. She leaps
Outside with that sun-soft
Smile, roots her feet
    Between
The balcony railing, casting
This false work into
The lazy summer air. It is
Motioning to

    Fall—neither crashing
Nor burning.

Sun
    Down—
The afternoon wilting
Under our eyes.
I am a bad
Engineer, I tell her.
Say, things that tarry
With air are lifted
By gods—invisible arms,
Outstretched, over the vast,
Infinity spilling
From their fingers.

She asks, what's out there?
Say, too many stars,
Dancing naked
In the holy dark,
Neil's footprint
Still fresh on
Moon's dust.
Something out there
Looking back at us with
Its bulgy eyes as
Though it's looking
Through a glass.
These sentences will electrify the plain with black gathering; they will be blackened and will rise and cleave, magnetically, in an intake of housing

These sentences will edge the void, will edge the plain and edge the towering structure; they will grain and blacken where they house and swoop where they fail

These will flutter and spire and go dark with grain

These sentences will be half of something loving and half of something gone
These sentences will line the plain in modules for listening; they will hold and wait and lean in an absence of weather; they will be the calmative for the field

These sentences will make a tight, enclosing harmonics where the linking phrases turn and gasp in miniature and will lean in muted light

These will distill the question about the weather—“Is it fine?” “Are you fine today?” They will flute and silo
These sentences will awn the ethereal in formations of slow, climbing subjunctives; they will match the speed of that which has not occurred and that which is not yet known, and will show the stillness of that speed.

These curved enclosures will thin the plain; they will gasp where they void, will void where they cleave.

These places will gather in a succession of hollows, just edging above the grass, in effigy of the known, fraying; they will slant and hold and fray above the void, in around the plain.
Laura Wetherington & Hannah Ensor

Feel Fragments

I

Would you like to go find a sunflower field?
There’s a raining in here, a valerian hangover.
How many bodies have you carried into your meditation?
Pine boughing into the window.
How many naps could you take there?
Awoken, suddenly, on a sunflowered rug.

II

Waiting and things supposed to get better.
Making space. Waiting it out.
Panic is / another reason to panic / about health.
Sometimes the child lets out a single cry and I think he’s awake
but he’s just changing his sleep attention.
There are peacocks in the kinderboerderij (petting zoo).
There are peacocks in the Wallace Stevens poem (petting zoo).
I have had dreams like Bernadette Mayer’s:
a sudden houseboat; inexplicable violence;
et cetera. Do you remember when Rachael said
that italicizing book titles was passé? I imagine the field
from I Love You where the two rabbits are on their backs
looking up at the clouds. I imagine meeting my child there.
Sometimes I walk to the edge of the sentence
and remember what I came there for.

III

If we were still a tea kettle we would be
weeping around our middle, condensery.

Ik vind
je lief opa is about a grandpa bear.

There are
very few ticks in the dream field. I have never told a bear

how cute I think they are. This might not be exactly
what I mean,
but I hope you understand. In French they’ve begun using a comma to mark multiplicity of gender. A period is not a punchline. Time to skip ahead to before. What happens in the middle of a sentence? Vislowfeeling.

V

Anaphora makes a narrative. Every risk a color field.

VII

I do not think of ____ as my enemy.

Whenever we talk about this, I never try to tell you about the fish.

Weird burden to lift:

Across the street, more window, and here, a tree.

I have been wanting to feel the emotions of the convention. Is that sentimentality? My desire for a specific knowable feeling?

I can bear the clock, the wall, some redeemable aspect of sound, or memory, later I’ll remember the sound but not the time I was in.

I still don’t understand how sounds clicky clack against each other, how to turn off the TV.

What sense is to be made across people?

Oh, are you sad?
This one time I was
and I opened my eyes
I guess the thing
and in my mind
you finally get to
“the thing” about
both bodies, two shoulders, creek knees
the rug upon which
in classroom a rug
have you carried
can you carry
an iteration of the present
Is that a feeling?
full of sunflowers
the field in
“the world over” feels like such a different idiom
after a pandemic and rising fascism

how is any metaphor tied to a straight line
when the world is so cyclical, so round

I sometimes pretend I am sitting still
inside the whole body buzzing alive

sunflowers, the circuitous route of a fruit fly
is the thing about meditation the way the legs are crossed

is a sunflower field a body
more house, or not more house; earth, or not earth
Dream

Someone has stolen the thing you love most. You are surprised, because what the thief stole, you did not think this was what you loved most. If someone had asked you what you loved most, you would not have said that it was this thing. But now that the thief has stolen it, you understand from its absence it is the thing you love most. You wander around town, looking in dumpsters, checking pawnshops, asking strangers, hoping to find the thing you love. You get some good intel from a few cool snails & head to the bluffs overlooking the cacophonous river. The thief is there, standing at the edge of the bluffs, their back to you. You walk up & stand beside them, listening to the whitewater thunder over the rocks, watching clouds slip & twist into & out of existence. You took from me the thing I love most, you say to the thief. No, the thief says, I didn’t. That’s not how love works. The thief hands it back to you, the thing you love most. But when you have the thing back you do not once again feel the love. Even with the thing you love most in your hands, you feel the absence. How do I get it back? you say. How do I get back the love? The thief hands you an armful of tangled yarn. Here, the thief says. It’s up to you. You need to make it out of this. You look more closely at the yarn & see that it is not made of wool or acrylic, but that contained in the interlocking fibers of the yarn is everything you have ever felt & known & believed, & wrapped up with all of this is everything you might one day feel & know & believe. You hold the armful of yarn close to you. It is heavy, heavier than you would have thought. Do I have to do it now? you say. The thief says, No, not now. But soon. You say, How will I know when I have finished? The thief says, You won’t.
Arvind Krishna Mehrotra

Mulla Muhammad Amin Khurasani

Burhanpur, 1615

I do not
understand what is written in these pages
or the script
in which they’re written.

I bind
as the calligrapher copies.
He reads the words,
I the paper, the size, the inks.

An expert in the art of paper marbling and a renowned bookbinder and illuminator, Khurasani worked in the library of Abd al-Rahim Khan-i-Khanan (1556–1627). Rahim was a poet, translator, and military general, fluent in Chagatay Turkic, Persian, Arabic, Sanskrit, and Braj. His library, one of the great private libraries of the Mughal period, would have held books in all these languages.
Simone White

From “or, on being the other woman”

For ED and WC

I am an ignorant fucker. Difficult to be close to in that I am unsentimental and intimate with everyone. This is connected to the problems I am working through regarding metaphor. As a form of patriarchal control over language and a currency of poetic power. My ex-husband calls me an “ignorant fucker” when I complain that his hugely pregnant white girlfriend, who I do not know, who I tolerate since for the last month and indefinite future my son must live in her house two days in a week, cannot show up unannounced in my child’s classroom where I pay all the bills and and I watch and half do nothing and half help in the acquisition of literacy and reason. I say this is no place for this white woman; she is a free rider on my labor and love for my son. I will not support any white people with my work. I tell him all of this pretty loudly. He calls me an ignorant fucker. Now you are street? What, are you going to punch her in her face? I have fought exactly three people with physical violence in my 46 years of life. Two men. And my sister.

“Pain—expands the Time—/ Ages coil within / The Minute Circumference of the Brain” “Pain—has an Element of Blank”

I Am
An ignorant
Fucker—
I’ve learned a lot from Eileen. Lay claim to the processes of your mind, deal in the maniacal properties of the oscillating sign that is the mark on you like black is on you but don’t let them force you to sing. All BUrning prerogative.

“Since a Rack couldn’t coax a syllable—now”

EMily talking shit. Vs me “being” “ ignorant” “fucker”

What “is” is is determining the terms of exaltation, praise and defilement, the turning off and on of the pleasure and pain centers. Subjectivation. Profanity’s nonce forms engage linguistically in what sound people call muddiness, profanity’s imbrication with epithet is a richer form of meaning making that taps into sign at a zero level, incredibly powerful, elementally so.

“fuck that mumbling shit” : “you are an ignorant fucker” what has to be said beyond off/on : good/bad; what happens when a
linguistic field is generated by high-energy-signs across a flat plane of signification—there’s no need for logical progression or ... “narrative.” Each word or phrase can function as foregone, forethought, already known; that’s a black ontological truism that trap music knows deeply. That’s its language game.

On the one hand we experience a unidirectional surge (Playboi Carti, “R.I.P.”) and on the other intense confusion via harmonic scrambling (Future, “F&N,” or the new music like Lil Baby, “Word on the Street”).

I am an ignorant fucker wherein the comedic shock of the thing resides in the manner in which I do not resemble and yet am the thing, impossibly misperceived

This is like this. I regard this as baby work. Ultraconservative pandering. I seek to dwell outside the figure in a zone of “Pain”

This is my country. What is the difference between the figure that destroys and the figure that breaks away

This is excerpted from *or, on being the other woman* by Simone White. Copyright Duke University Press, 2022.
The Canonization

Jay Hopler

davis islands florida 2020

no man convinced he was going to die
on an island would on an island live
unless he wanted to die
on that island & i did

talk about an end rhyme
but my life's a poem my death's
been writing for a long time

& death abhors a well-wrought urn
i'm done

& they will burn me where i fall
the aspen clapping ashes
against the sky's blue wall
& they can burn these verses
too send us all to naught

let them revel in the smoke
let death upon my life
& life's work choke

i'm done
i leave death to work what urn

it will

my father was a sack
of ash my mother kept
on a windowsill for years after he passed
it didn't seem to cause him much distress
i left him on the island
when i left
An officer I did not know greeted me outside the museum, drove an electric pulse through my belly. They broke up the sit-in. They knew our names. I was one of 18 women. They took us inside. Old Kingdom scribes watched wide-eyed as men poured water on us. Shocked us. Flung boots at us. I was sure it was the end. Then they put us on a bus. Before spring I had come from the south on a train. Walked right up to the frontlines of music and fear. Hours into the desert, I still had no idea where we were headed. Our hands were tied. When we arrived at Huckstep they dragged us across the sand like dead goats. Ripped our clothes. All night we were beaten and grilled. What do you want from this country? At the time we still had answers to a question like this. Had broken our breath singing justice to the wind. We handed everything over. If we had them, we slipped the wedding bands off our fingers. A fresh portrait of the deposed president hung behind us like a blind. Even the scotch tape was new. What is he still doing on the wall? The officer said, we want him watching over us and used the word love. One more word I’ll bury you in the sand. I was sure he was serious. Swollen, I slept and saw a leopard-clad priest slaughtering a bull. Giant incense in the sky like palms. Lone foreleg twitching in the sand. Then a pail of cool water woke me. Now we test if in fact you are virgins. We said what test? One woman held her head in both hands. Another told stories about the mourners of the past; two women were paid to beat their bare breasts and smear their skin in dirt to lament the deceased. As stand-ins for Isis and Nephtys, these women had to be hairless—their bodies shaved like stone. And they could not be mothers. If you still have a hymen, make a line. I was one of seven girls. They took us one after the other into a room with a big window. Door left ajar. A jailer—a woman—asked us to undress. And the prison gate was wide open. She untied even our hair. Removed the pins from our scarves. Shook out our clothes like stiff winter blankets. Imagine your body, seen from the outside. I asked her to close the window. A whole wedding is watching me. She said, no. Daylight flickered like the limp spine of a kite. My hands are tied. The doctor who examined me was dressed in olive green. If he really was a doctor, why spend five whole minutes searching with his hand in me? We found the hymen, said the report. He gave me a blue pen. A space had been left blank between the finding and the dotted line. On my dead body, I said. You will be shocked and beaten. I signed. I wanted to die. What did you want me to do? You can’t look a lion in the eye and say let me be, I am a black-winged kite too far from home. In court they said we broke the sidewalk. Charged us with carrying white weapons, gas cylinders, Molotov cocktails. They looked us in the eye. I denied all of it.
Hala Alyan

After Iraq Sweidan

I’m not sure you’d want what I’ve stolen.
I’m not sure I say your name right.
I forgot about you with my mouthful of cake.
My scales. My husband. My fingertips smelling
of weed. I know you’re in there somewhere.
Should I have poured rose tea instead? Whiskey?
What’s the trine of planets in the sky?
Where can I find your intestines?
Can you believe the apple trees this year?
Pink as slaughter. Perfect for a photo shoot.
Today I cut calories but at night I eat worms.
I won’t say what I paid for this mattress.
You can’t put a price on good sleep.
You can’t put a corpse back together.
One bomb dives into the sky like a rose.
If I don’t say rose, you’ll skip ahead to the end.
I think I’m in love with the murdered poet.
I think I shouldn’t say that. His voice reminds me
of strawberries, red and sour at the farmer’s market
in Brooklyn this morning, virgin mojitos afterwards.
The physical therapist says my serratus is tight.
The prime minister says that high-rise has bad posture.
Who sweeps the glass? Who rakes the graves
like an itch? The screens will spoil my eyesight.
After all that Lasik. After all that shelling,
a mother walks her child over rubble.
Prays the young will forget.
Sara Nicholson

To C

When you wrote “Un coeur en hiver”

When I listened to you read it

A little lyric poem

Not set to music but invoking music’s name

When you insisted on using

A name that was not your own

But was of you nonetheless

I was already in love

With you, had been for so long

That I became a person

Of the world, obsessed by prosodies

I couldn’t yet break down

But heard everywhere

Around me, in you, of us, the heart

Of winter in your poem.

A line from a song, maybe “Ave Maria”

To measure our distances with.

A paradise that is by nature

Material, it’s where

I make my home. I’m not American
In the same way you are. Just so, the nightingale

Was never a lover

Of knowledge in the old-time sense.

When I went to school

To learn the words

That no one ever writes or speaks

When I learned the big words

Like primogeniture, eschatology, and love

I became a person

Aghast at midnight, its sublimity

The vainglory of poets

On Facebook, in Brooklyn or L.A.

I became a person who grew to hate

The sweet flower of April,

The red-and-white one, the purposes

Of meteors and stars.

I listened to a maiden’s prayer

Made many centuries ago.

I became a person

Forever cursed to discourse on beauty
In front of nobody on earth

But you.
Isidro Li

Nomanneslond

There is a street of toads
in Germany

a beyond house of pale light
running reel of dead keys

There is no dreamtime
in Germany

but this flicker of a rune:
control shift delete

You have not lived
until you have died

inside the ark
of the covenant

a thorn in the paw
of the unhumble
Ariel Yelen

Poem Toward People

I’ve always been obsessed with people—
whether or not I know them. Obsessed
by our knowledge of each other, the quality

of connection, our friendship or non-friendship,
its relation to other connections. Obsessed
by the way a new connection can change pre-existing

ones, reorder them, renew them, fine-tune
or disappear them. By the light pressure
of an other’s existence, which in turn grows

me. Obsessed by memory and lack of memory
for the way things were—I don’t think I’d recognize
you if I saw you on the street, though in the past

so obsessed I thought almost everyone
was you. Obsessed with leaving people
so I can obsess about them again.

By thinking with and through people, dead
and alive, without whom I’d be a different person,
think different thoughts. Even obsessed

with the version of me I don’t know, walking around
having met different people, thinking different
thoughts, moving in a different direction, away

from people and toward the self,
or the desert, or the sea, or the god, or the page, or the mountain,
or the canyon, or the forest, or the dark.
What Is This Air Changing, This Warm Aura, These Threads of Air Vibrating Rows of People

This small effort
Because this little singing
This little sound
Small song
This fathomless effort
This voice which comes from the gut
This soft effort at making song
This effort at song
This effort to make song which birds do effortlessly
What birds do effortlessly
This tiny bird
This tender worthy effort
And sometimes it is no effort
No effort to sing
Sometimes I’ve had a drink or two
Sometimes it’s effortless to make song
If enough people sing in a group
If I’m part of that group, I cry
I am holding a thing that breathes and makes sound
Where song comes from and goes to
"THESE BLAZING FORMS": THE LIFE AND WORK OF MARGARET DANNER
Guest book from *Poetry’s* offices. Margaret Danner’s signature on left side of the page.
Margaret Danner

The Painted Lady

The Painted Lady is a small African
Butterfly gayly toned deep tan and peach
That seems as tremulous and delicately sheer

As the objects I treasure, yet this cosmopolitan
Can cross the sea at the icy time of the year
In the trail of the big boats, to France.

Mischance is as wide and grey as the lake here
In Chicago. Is there strength enough in my
Peach paper rose or lavender sea-laced fan?
**Best Loved of Africa**

It is New Year’s day.
The blasé people rise.
They face a sleet-like ray
Of light. The low slung skies
Send shadows down. It’s dark.

The earth is treacherous to the tread.
And deep in the upstairs bedroom
Of his terraced suite in Lincoln Park
Lies Bushman, best loved of Africa, huge
And beautifully black as he ever was, but dead.

Bushman (c. 1928–January 1, 1951) was a Western Lowland Gorilla from Cameroon, the first gorilla on display at the Lincoln Park Zoo.
Through the Varied Patterned Lace

_Greeting from a Baha’i_
_
_“I salute The Divinity in you.”_

As I look into each different face,
I am exalted.
I am exalted to recognize His Grace shimmering through the varied patterned lace.

There is God’s Good in every man
whether Russian, French, Italian, or America

And glowing so in you,
O, Ibo, Yoruba, Zulu, Congolese, Fan.

I look at you and feel It flooding me.
Divinity must win the race. It will not be halted.
We are all small sons of one clan.
I am exalted.
The Convert

When in nineteen-thirty-seven, Etta Moten, sweetheart of our Art Study group, kept her promise, as if clocked, to honor my house at our first annual tea, my pride tipped sky, but when she, Parisian-poised and as smart as a chrome-toned page from Harper’s Bazaar, gave my shocked guests this hideous African nude, I could have cried.

And for many subsequent suns, we, who had placed apart this hour to proclaim our plunge into modern art, mocked her “Isn’t he lovely?” whenever we eyed this thing, for by every rule we’d learned, we’d been led to discern this rankling figure as ugly. It hunched in a squat as if someone with maliciously disfiguring intent had flattened it with a press, bashing its head, bloating its features, making huge bulging blots of its lips and nose, and as my eyes in dread anticipation pulled downward, there was its navel, without a thread of covering, ruptured, exposed, protruding from a pot stomach as huge as a mother-to-be’s, on short, bent legs, extending as far on each side as swollen back limbs of a turtle. I could look no farther and nearly dispensed with being polite while pretending to welcome her gift.

But afterwards, to the turn of calendar pages, my eyes would skim the figure appraising this fantastic sight, until, finally, I saw on its stern ebony face, not a furniture polished, shellacked shine, but a radiance, gleaming as though a small light had flashed internally; and I could discern through the sheen that the bulging eyes were identical twins to the bulging nose. The same symmetrical form was dispersed again.
and again through all the bulges, the thighs
and the hands and the lips, in reverse, even the toes
of this fast turning beautiful form were a selfsame chain,

matching the navel. This little figure stretched high
in grace, in its with-the-grain form and from-within-glow,
in its curves in concord. I became a hurricane

of elation, a convert undaunted, who wanted to flaunt
her discovery, parade her fair-contoured find.

Art clubs, like leaves in autumn fall,
scrabble against concrete and scatter.
And Etta Moten, I read, is at tea with the Queen.

But I find myself still framing word structures
of how much these blazing forms ascending the centuries
in their muted sheens, matter to me.
Poetry class led by Inez Stark at the South Side Community Art Center, Chicago, circa 1941. Photograph by Jack Delano. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.
I think about Margaret Danner often when I enter the Newberry Library, where I work. Here, Danner would have stepped through the arched entrance on Walton Street, a Romanesque exterior of pink granite designed by Chicago architect Henry Ives Cobb. She would have walked through a lobby tiled with stone mosaic. On days when she did not want to climb five flights of stairs to the offices of Poetry magazine, which then operated out of the library—and where she was an assistant editor—Danner would have taken the elevator.

Danner’s metafictional poem “The Elevator Man Adheres to Form” first appeared with this epigraph: Not really the elevator man at Newberry Library. Perhaps the figure in the poem embodies many kinds of men: he is a “tan man who wings the elevator,” a Black man who is light-skinned, who displays his comportment and “Ph D aplomb” as a means of upward mobility. Yet despite his education, he is still consigned to employment as an elevator man, in acquiescent service to library patrons. He almost certainly would have been the only other Black person at the Newberry when Danner worked at Poetry.

If the speaker of this poem bears any resemblance to Danner herself—a Black woman in a circle of mildly condescending poetry editors at a research library where everyone was white—then her ride to the fifth floor was a moment of preparation and passage, a lift through a shaft, the final daily ascent from the South Side of Chicago where she lived to the editorial tables of Poetry. The poem wonders how the elevator man’s Blackness squares with the lives of “other tan and deeper much than tan” men who are not lifted up, but rather cast down into “subterranean grottoes of injustice.” What responsibility does the elevator man have to these underground, working-class Black people? Or to her, the Black poet whom he “gallantly” escorts to the top floor?

In her poem and in his “polished pleasantries,” both Danner and the elevator man seek a language of Black unity in the face of social difference. Before she became a member of the Baha’i faith in the early sixties, and before the emergence of the Black Arts Movement that celebrated Black pride, resistance, and solidarity, Danner sought to express a connectedness among people, writing poems that wove her experiences into the dream of a universal human pattern. Lace is a frequent motif in Danner’s work: from the lace of a christening dress to the interlacing architectural motifs in the massive, white-domed Baha’i temple in the Chicago suburb of Wilmette to the lace-like filigree of iron in the fences of New Orleans, built by enslaved artisans such as Samuel Rouse in Danner’s poem “The Slave and the Iron Lace.” Her poetry itself is a lacework of rhyme, prosody, and syntax that
seeks to integrate otherwise irreconcilable social and personal elements into an art of formal complexity.

Throughout her life, Danner laced herself into multiple realms, not always sure how her own aspiration connected to others who shared her commitment to poetry. In 1941, she joined what would become a legendary Wednesday evening poetry workshop at the South Side Community Art Center (SSCAC), taught by a white woman, Inez Cunningham Stark. The workshop was composed of artists and writers of extraordinary talent and ambition, including Gwendolyn Brooks, who was then working on the poems that would become *A Street in Bronzeville*. Others included Edward Bland, a promising poet who would die tragically in WWII; John Carlis, who would become a well-known artist; William Couch, a charismatic writer who attracted Brooks’s attention (and made his way into at least two of her poems, as well as her only novel, *Maud Martha*); Margaret Burroughs, an artist, activist, and writer who would go on to found the DuSable Museum of African American History; and Fern Gayden, who coedited *Negro Story* from 1944–1946. This was Danner’s early Chicago cohort, a circle of writers and artists with whom she learned, swapped books, and often disagreed.

Danner’s papers at the University of Chicago are not extensive—two boxes—but her letters suggest that she could be competitive with others, distrustful of certain people’s intentions, and uneasy with those she perceived as threatening. After a party for William Couch in 1946 at the home of Gwendolyn Brooks, for instance, Danner wrote a tortured letter to Brooks, expressing surprise that she was invited, and apologizing for her behavior. “I am not really like the moods that possess me at times,” Danner tells Brooks. This self-difference, or the disconnect between identity and affect, may furnish one of the most universal elements in Danner’s work.

Like her SSCAC poetry teacher Inez Stark, Danner was a boundary-crosser, riding up to “5” on the elevator to the offices of *Poetry* magazine. Years before the founding of OBAC (the Organization of Black American Culture) and AfriCOBRA (the African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists), she fashioned her own cultural politics from a home-grown Pan-Africanism. *Poetry* editor Henry Rago published the poems that would become Danner’s most anthologized, including “The Painted Lady,” a nine-line poem that describes a “small African/Butterfly gayly toned deep tan and peach.” The color “tan,” which also describes the elevator man, is a motif as frequent in Danner’s work as lace. (This affinity for “tan” may indicate Danner’s ambivalence about the binary of Blackness versus whiteness.) The “tan and peach” butterfly is both delicate and tough, migrating long distances from the deserts of Africa to the gardens of Europe. “This cosmopolitan/Can cross the sea at the icy time of year/In the trail of the big boats, to France.” The final triplet of the poem wonders about the “strength” of the poet’s own colors and art:
Mischance is as wide and grey as the lake here
In Chicago. Is there strength enough in my
Peach paper rose or lavender sea-laced fan?

What connection does Chicago have to Africa, or the female poet to feminist politics? Will writing on “peach paper”—the making of her art—be enough to find connection and meaning across seas and continents? Perhaps. And yet Danner fears “mischance,” stray winds over a big grey lake.

Danner’s sense of her own precarity—blown about by winds, delicately poised between realms—reappears in the collaborative chapbook Poem Counterpoem (1966), coauthored by Danner and Dudley Randall. Bright yellow with bold red lettering, Poem Counterpoem was published by Randall’s Broadside Press, a groundbreaking vehicle of the Black Arts Movement. The back cover announces that the chapbook is “unique in all literature” for its collocation of “poems arranged in pairs,” in which “the authors treat the same or similar subjects.” Indeed, the call-and-response structure of the book is like conversation, or musical form, a positioning of one voice in distinction from the other. Danner’s precarity in this collaborative performance is most apparent in her poem “I’ll Walk the Tightrope” where the poet imagines a high path that she must traverse alone:

I’ll walk the tightrope that’s been stretched for me,
And though a wrinkled forehead, perplexed why,
will accompany me, I’ll delicately
step along. For if I stop to sigh
at the earth-propped stride
of others, I will fall. I must balance high
without a parasol to tide
a faltering step, without a net below,
without a balance stick to guide.

Other people “stride” the solid earth but Danner must “step above” them. The speaker of the poem is without support, no “parasol” or “net” or “balance stick.” Uncertain of her aim, but too scared to stop, her prosodic feet must walk a poetic line “that’s been stretched for me.” Or perhaps she has chosen her own virtuosic elevation. It’s a remarkable description of solitude in a volume of poetry structured by collaboration and counterpoint.

Dudley Randall’s poem in response to Danner’s solitary tightrope performance, simply titled “For Margaret Danner,” features the epigraph “In establishing Boone House”—a sly reminder that Danner did not walk alone. A cultural center that Danner founded in Detroit for Black artists, musicians, and poets, Boone House took its name from the pastor of King Solomon Church, Dr. Theodore S. Boone, who had allowed Danner to take over its empty parish house from 1962–1964. Under her direction, Boone
Postcard (front) from Gwendolyn (Brooks) and her husband Henry Blakely to Margaret Danner inviting her to a party at their home in honor of writer William Couch, March 22, 1946. Danner used the last name Cunningham after she married Otto Cunningham. From the Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.
Postcard (back) from Gwendolyn (Brooks) and her husband Henry Blakely to Margaret Danner inviting her to a party at their home in honor of writer William Couch, March 22, 1946. From the Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.
House served as the literary headquarters for what would become known as the “Detroit Group”—including Randall, Naomi Long Madgett, Woodie King Jr., and Oliver LaGrone—hosting visits from distinguished literary figures such as Robert Hayden, Hoyt Fuller, and Langston Hughes. Danner may have expressed in her poetry a profound sense of isolation, but she worked quite visibly through Boone House—and during her extended residencies at Wayne State University, Virginia Union University, and LeMoyne-Owen College—to build a literary community of her own.

In the early sixties, during Danner’s time in Detroit, she converted to Baha’i, an Eastern faith founded by a nineteenth-century Persian leader who believed in the universality of all religions. Danner shared her faith with Robert Hayden, who taught for many years at Fisk University, and whom Danner deeply admired. Being Baha’i nurtured a spirit of generosity in Danner and may have been the “tightrope” that lifted her above a younger set of poets with whom she did not always agree. Her Baha’i faith also furnished a universalizing alternative to the separatist and segregationist black-and-white religious factions of her time.

Even as she participated in her own quiet versions of literary activism at Boone House, Poetry magazine, and beyond, Danner’s universalizing views of art and society suggested her ambivalence toward certain forms of political activism. In a May 8, 1967, letter to Hayden, on returning from a poetry reading at Fisk, Danner expresses her bewilderment at the radical spirit of LeRoi Jones, also known as Amiri Baraka.

Fisk was really jumping and I needed you, although I did get a long standing ovation. And much praise. I told it as it was and took LeRoi Jones into my bedroom and tried to reason with him. He had those kids walking the walls with incredible four letter words under the name of poetry.

She describes her intervention with Baraka as if she were a mother reprimanding an unruly child. Danner remained aloof from—or rather, she might say, above—the revolutionary aims of the Black Arts Movement. It is unclear how she imagined racial and political progress, but she emphasized to Hayden that her ideas about poetry did not square with the radicalism of a younger generation of Black poets. “There is so much that we should talk about both being Baha’is and both being non-political,” she wrote to Hayden in March 1968. Nine months later, when she was poet-in-residence at Virginia Union, she wrote to Hayden: “I do not know what is happening to any other writers since Negro Digest seems to have gone completely political. Please write and tell me if you would think of coming down, not to the militant group but to one of the other higher level poetry appreciation groups.” Danner’s reference to “higher level” poetry communities suggests
that the author of “The Elevator Man Adheres to Form” has yet to fully free herself from the hierarchical literary cultures of her time.

But Danner’s commitment to the cultures of Africa, even before she first traveled there in 1966, informs a cultural radicalism that animates her Pan-Africanist politics, of which she was deeply aware. Her wonderful poem “The Convert” describes a formative exposure to African art, in 1937, through the collection of Etta Moten Barnett, the famous singer, philanthropist, and doyenne of Black Chicago. When Barnett, “sweetheart/of our Art Study group” presents a “hideous African nude” as a figure for their study, the speaker of the poem is repulsed by the statuette’s “huge bulging blots/of its lips and nose.” The nude’s “navel, without a thread of covering,” makes Danner dread looking at it. But over time, with “the turn of calendar pages,” the speaker begins to see the figure’s beauty:

The same symmetrical form was dispersed again

and again through all the bulges, the thighs
and the hands and the lips, in reverse, even the toes
of this fast turning beautiful form were a selfsame chain,

matching the navel. This little figure stretched high
in grace, in its with-the-grain form and from-within-glow,
in its curves in concord. I became a hurricane

of elation, a convert undaunted, who wanted to flaunt
her discovery, parade her fair-contoured find.

The poem bears comparison to Rainer Maria Rilke’s “Archaic Torso of Apollo,” a poem about an encounter with a statue “suffused with brilliance from inside, / like a lamp, in which his gaze, now turned to low, / gleams in all its power.” The sexual power of Apollo’s form, like Danner’s African figure, spurs a spiritual revelation in Rilke’s poem, which ends with the famous lines, here in Stephen Mitchell’s English translation: “for here there is no place/ that does not see you. You must change your life.”

Danner did change her life, again and again. She was a perpetual “convert,” reviving and celebrating African culture, pursuing her literary evangelism at Boone House, and attesting to the Baha’i faith. Amid the “hurricane of gargoyles” blasting out social unrest in the period, this writer’s inward “hurricane/of elation” became a sustained language of poetic praise. It spilled over into letters of gratitude. “I LOVE EVERYBODY. ALL OF MY ENEMIES AND EVERYONE, JUST ANYONE AT ALL,” she typed in all-capital letters to thank Etta Moten and Kathryn Dickerson, another prominent Black Chicagoan and arts patron, for coming to her
poetry reading in Detroit. Danner could feel nurtured and supported by her community—here, two Black women—and she channeled that feeling into poetry’s earliest form, a ritual form of prayer.

Poems for Danner became a raising up of oneself to a higher power, an elevation of the soul. Her poem “Through the Varied Patterned Lace” includes the performative epigraph: *Greeting from a Baha’i/“I salute The Divinity/in you.”* The poem expresses the poet’s unity with “each different face,” rhymed artfully with “race,” through which she recognizes “His Grace.” In the violent year of 1968, to publish these lines of praise must have been an effort, a willed conviction:

Divinity must win the race. It will not be halted.
We are all small sons of one clan.
I am exalted.

Exalted is to be *elevated*, lifted up. But there is no elevator operator facilitating the exaltation in this poem. Exaltation is a language that belongs to Danner herself, who appeals to a spiritual realm above the politics of division and unity alike, the residence and dwelling of “one clan” far beyond a library’s fifth floor. It was no doubt a difficult elevation at which to live.
The Elevator Man Adheres to Form

Not really the elevator man at Newberry Library

I am reminded, by the tan man who wings the elevator of Rococo art. His ways are undulating waves that shepherd and swing us cupid-like from floor to floor. He sweethearts us with polished pleasantries, gallantly flourishes us up and up. No casual “Hi”s from him.

His greetings, Godspeedings display his Ph D aplomb. And I should feel like a cherubim All Fleur-de-lis and pastel-shell-like, but instead

I vision other tan and deeper much than tan early Baroque-like men who (seeing themselves still strutlessly groping, winding down subterranean grottoes of injustice, down dark spirals) feel with such tortuous, smoked-stone grey intensity that they exhale a hurricane of gargoyles, then reel into them.

I see these others boggling in their misery and wish this elevator artisan would fill his flourishing form with warmth for them and turn his lettered zeal toward lifting them above their crippling storm.
The Elevator Man Adheres to Form

Except in office buildings and large stores and hotels, this occupation is given over to the Negro, who spends twelve hours a day drowsing in a corner or standing to turn a wheel. Paul La[j]rence Dunbar wrote poetry while he ran an elevator, and ambitious if less talented colored boys today study civil service examinations in their unoccupied time; but the situation as a life job is not alluring. Twenty-five dollars a month for wage, with perhaps a half this sum in tips, twelve hours on duty, one week in the night time and the next in the day—no wonder the personnel of this staff changes frequently in an apartment house. A bright boy will be taken by some business man for a better job, and a lazy one drifts away to look for an easier task, or is dismissed by an irate janitor.

—Mary White Ovington, “Half a Man: The Status of the Negro in New York” (1911)

The elevator man’s job is a riddle of in-betweenness. He travels dozens of flights up and down, but he himself does not move very much. Both confined but always in motion, he is paid to “swing us cupid-like from floor to floor,” as Margaret Danner writes in “The Elevator Man Adheres to Form.” He is a connector, the Charon of ever more vertical cities in a world of lofty high-rises and skyscrapers. Though he labors long hours, his presence is increasingly a formality—indexing that a building will ensure its mostly white users arrive at their destinations in a certain style. He is both a worker and a decoration, a “flourish” and a figure.

He is also Black, a key aspect to the archetypal form of the elevator man since the job’s nineteenth-century invention. The rise of white-collar professions in the Gilded Age—expedited by elevators which permitted a greater density of businesses to lease space in centralized downtown locations—led to the creation of new kinds of jobs and laboring types. White women entered the white-collar workforce as typists and secretaries, new forms of work that held little appeal to white men. Black women had a harder time finding a labor form in white-collar America. Though they were a relatively cheap workforce, Black women’s employment suffered from the high costs of maintaining physical segregation in office spaces, necessitating separate bathrooms and lounges. As the historian Jacqueline Jones notes, the largest employer of Black clerical workers in the early twentieth century was the Chicago-based Montgomery Ward—which notably processed retail orders through the mail, conveniently hiding their Black female employees from sight. Ward’s Black employees had trouble finding nearby places to eat lunch, spurring the company to build its own cafeteria to “shore up its image and remove its Black employees from public view.” In a white-collar world, Black
women were meant to work in a way that disappeared their forms.

Black men, however, had even fewer opportunities within the vertical microcosms made possible by elevator technology. Anxieties about the menacing physicality of Black men’s bodies originally impeded their employment in the confined spaces and workplaces that elevators tended to serve. In her 1911 analysis of Black labor in New York, Mary White Ovington gestures to this history, referring to the “office buildings and large stores and hotels” where Blacks still could not be employed as elevator men due to their potential proximity to unaccompanied white women in the tight space of the elevator car. Despite these anxieties, the Black “elevator boy” had become a familiar figure by the early twentieth-century, the latest in a long line of racialized positions—porters, drivers, and chauffeurs—who conveyed whites comfortably from one destination to another.

The elevator man is a riddle, and a metaphor, too. Unlike a porter, a driver, or a chauffeur, the Black elevator man lifted himself and others upward, quite literally, through the air—but he also soon became associated with social uplift. As Ovington notes, working elevators was the favored position of “bright boys” who could study during the time between the morning and lunch rush; eliciting tips from their white riders through good service and pointed flattery, they were also quietly launching the next post-elevator chapter of their upwardly mobile life stories. Paul Laurence Dunbar, the most renowned of these “bright boys,” haunts the scene of both Ovington’s and Danner’s visions of the elevator man. As a young man, Dunbar failed to find any opportunities in his native Dayton, Ohio, to be paid for his work as a poet and journalist. To keep himself afloat, he worked as an elevator operator for several years during the early 1890s in the Callahan building, Dayton’s first skyscraper—at seven stories, a relatively tall building for its time. From this origin, the mythos of Dunbar as the “elevator poet” grew with his literary acclaim. Critics have since credited his exposure to a diverse, multilingual public during his shifts at the Callahan as seeding his poetic interest in spoken dialects; Dunbar writes about and, at times, like the people he ushered between its seven floors.

By the time Danner’s elevator man enters this workplace in the 1950s, our spatial metaphor for social uplift has contracted to a cramped compartment—one that has room for one, maybe two, but certainly not all. The elevator man is now a gatekeeper, helping to maintain the social order instead of working toward its dismantlement. W.E.B. Du Bois notes this shift in the elevator man’s social function in his 1920 book of essays, Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil, including the elevator man among the figures who slight him on an average day. In addition to the studious neglect of the milkman, the truculence of the policeman, and the women in streetcars who “withdraw their skirts or prefer to stand” in his presence, Du Bois feels the sting of “the elevator man” who “hates to serve Negroes.” Though Du Bois doesn’t state the race of the disgruntled elevator man, Du Bois’s explicit
articulation of this figure’s specific hatred for Negroes suggests there is an irony to his disfavor. If so, this vision of the haughty Black elevator man who looks down on his own people echoes earlier historical depictions of house slaves charged with not only serving whites but enforcing white supremacy on a larger scale. Like his antebellum predecessors, the elevator man’s job is to charm and titillate whites, stay in his proper place, and keep others out.

Danner recalls this freighted history of the Black elevator man while she simultaneously reimagines his form. As Liesl Olson has discovered, an early version of the poem included an epigraph that read “not really the elevator man at the Newberry Library”; and it’s worth noting that Danner herself would have been quite familiar with the elevator in the Newberry building during her years of employment as an assistant editor at *Poetry* magazine on the fifth floor. This archival epigraph serves as a disavowal of historical readings, disassociating “The Elevator Man Adheres to Form” from real people and places before the poem can even begin. But the epigraph also prepares us for the internal contradictions of both the elevator man and of the poem that he inhabits. The elevator operator serves his mostly-white clientele with decorum and “polished pleasantries”; and yet Danner wishes that he would, or could, use his skills—mechanical and rhetorical—to also lift up “other tan and much deeper than tan” men who find themselves “winding down subterranean grottoes of injustice,/down dark spirals.” This elevator man is not just a striver, but a hustler of sorts, one aware of his striving in the bustle of modern life—and the poet treats his efforts with both tenderness and melancholic reproach.

The poem’s pronouns register this drama of individuals and collectives, agency and passivity. The “I” who speaks the poem is an active grammatical subject, but she also belongs to the plural grammatical object “us” that is transported by the elevator man “from floor to floor.” This “us” recognizes the elevator man’s work as a “display,” and Danner’s “I,” too, wishes that he could elevate those members of society who are blown backward rather than upward through life. While she describes the elevator man in terms of his “Ph D aplomb,” we are unsure whether he’s a pretender or academically “credentialed” to address lecture halls instead of elevator cars. Not only is his spectacular speech itself a kind of florid façade, but it also acts as a cloying spackle encasing those it falls upon. Upon receiving his verbal bouquet of niceties, the poem’s speaker notes that “I should feel like a cherubim/All Fleur-de-lis and pastel-shell-like.” But this shell fails to fully solidify, as Danner cuts the rhetorical cable that has been elevating the poem’s diction to plunge us into the gray, subterranean miseries of those living beyond the reach of the elevator man’s “lettered zeal.”

It is the clash between two visions—one of western Enlightenment’s rococo sweetness and light, the other of catastrophic racial injustice—that Danner breathes like “a hurricane of gargoyles” into the cramped space of the elevator, forcing its doors apart and its walls to fall away. While the
elevator man may adhere to form, Danner transplants and rearranges social, grammatical, and literary forms throughout the poem, concluding with a wish for a world in which “this elevator artisan” might be allowed to make art that could transport those without access to the levers of uplift, the miracles of underground railroads, or the easy movement smoothed by a crystal stair.
Margaret’s Question to the Elevator as Much as to the Man

the whole point of this is what she asked
of him not who he thought he was but what
whatever his accomplishment could do
— and here’s the finer point — for whom—?

and if I follow that up and down
the stories I come to the landing
where she asks even the elevator itself anew but
inveterate climber what it thinks it’s all about —

this getting — nowhere up than down — then out —
on the street leveled again enough to look up. — What
into balance does that un-staggering
moment bring fetch down?

We always did think up
there held treasures like how to —
raise more land out of what we had. — but what
about us what does up
there have to say to lift us?

up if it’s into whiteness black ain’t all that
interested. all that already got
it’s own god bless. this chile know where it’s at.
all it’s asking is what is it next what

is his own up to?
his own could be we know how to get down
deep and dirty into it fuck it through
the wall’s off the see how deep is down

existentially or up out of aspiration presupposedly
we blow into what we have taken in
and take over the party
change affiliation to up to somethin’

surreptitious as always have had to
under to get over over what we wanted
it to be. done. really over the up to
now fulfilled. the bloody running done its vaunted lip.
“These blazing forms”: African Art in Margaret Danner’s Poetry

In Margaret Danner’s poem “The Convert,” the lyric speaker awakens to the beauties of an African statue, shaking off her internalized preferences for European forms in “a hurricane of elation.” The poem appears in Impressions of African Art Forms in the Poetry of Margaret Danner, published by Dudley Randall’s indispensable Broadside Press in 1961. It was the year that Margaret Burroughs opened her home—populated with African objects she had collected in her travels abroad—as the Ebony Museum of Negro History and Art, later to become the DuSable Museum on the South Side of Chicago. In the same year, Ebony magazine profiled Etta Moten Barnett’s rich collection of African artworks. The author of “The Convert” wasn’t alone in her elation at the arts of Africa in mid-century American culture.

Cultural historians often associate the revelation of African art and its inspiration for African American artists with the Black Arts Movement of the later sixties, seventies, and beyond. But the artists of that period drew on a longer history of discovery and cultural restoration in the city of Chicago. Earlier generations of Black Chicagoans—notably the indefatigable author, publisher, and curator F. Hammurabi Robb and the actress, vocalist, philanthropist, and activist Moten Barnett, who makes several appearances in Danner’s work—had begun decades earlier, in their own travels to Africa, to collect and foster an understanding of African artistic heritage. Margaret Danner began looking at African art in childhood and continued to look at artifacts from Africa, with ever-deepening intensity, in her poetry of the early 1960s—and beyond. She views African art as enlivened and enlivening, art that “leaps, churning up,/flaming out” from an ancestral legacy “within us, wherever we are flung” (“From Esse to Handy to Hayes”). Her awareness of this legacy resonates with the ideas that would inform the Black Arts Movement, but her ancestral elation is iterative and mediated; Danner’s verse recounts a series of repeated and hard-won reawakenings prompted by contact with African forms.

Danner’s interest in visual art was intense and wide-ranging. Along with African objects, her artistic purview encompasses modern European artists, Chinese porcelain, contemporary African American artists, and the Baroque and Rococo styles she associates with a jaunty elevator operator. Visual motifs recur rhythmically throughout Danner’s descriptions—lace, tangerine, lavender, and Ming blue, cutting across cultures, geographies, temporalities. In a recorded conversation with Langston Hughes (Langston Hughes and Margaret Danner, Writers of the Revolution, Black Forum, Motown Records, 1970), she describes an early encounter with African art while perusing the “Home Forum” page of the Christian Science Monitor as a
child. I have not been able to identify any instance of African objects depicted there, but the Monitor’s “Home Forum” page reproduced art every week—if typically European paintings. From time to time, in the twenties and thirties, the page included articles on African artworks and the modern European artists who drew inspiration from African art.

Depending on the artist, such inspiration can also be diagnosed as appropriation—or worse, as the ejection of African people from modernity by the seizure of “the primitive” in their artworks. But it is precisely a desire to be “modern” in their tastes that motivates the aspirational art club members who appear in Danner’s “The Convert,” only to find themselves discomfited by Etta Moten’s gift to the poet of an African statuette, perhaps a Fang reliquary. Moten was a famous singer and actress, best known for her role as Bess in Porgy and Bess, who settled in Chicago, married Claude Barnett (founder of the Associated Negro Press) in 1934, and went on to become one of Black Chicago’s most important philanthropists. Danner generously alludes to Moten Barnett’s status as modern Black royalty in the poem; she is “at tea with the Queen.” Moten Barnett also possessed a varied collection of African art, lovingly photographed for a May 1961 article in Ebony magazine, under the title “Etta Moten Brings Africa to Chicago.” In a poem on “Etta Moten’s Attic,” Danner describes Moten Barnett’s collection as a vivid plenitude of art in motion: splashing, spilling, dripping, splashing (again), moving, splotching, shimmering, sparkling, intriguing, slipping, dyeing, quickening—and finally charming. If this last participle seems like a letdown, we might note that “charm” appears in Danner’s poem “The Small Bells of Benin” as something that has the force of a spell, a bewitching power rather than a fey decorum. “Without ringing,” the bronze bells, housed in an American museum—probably the neocolonialist Art Institute of Chicago—still chime, “bringing their charm.”

“The Convert” is all about time. Time before and time after, the modern time of punch cards and hours and calendars and the mythic—which is not to say false—time of suns and drums and the radiance that lives within a timeless work of art that “ascends the centuries.” Moten Barnett arrives punctually to grace the club with her timely presence: “in nineteen-thirty-seven,” she “kept her promise, as if clocked.” Rhyming with Moten Barnett’s clocked promise, the club operates within the regulated time of bourgeois modernity, setting aside (“placing apart”) a mere hour for aesthetic experience—“this hour to drum for our plunge into modern art.” The line itself beats a drum-like rhythm, its central dactyls (“drum for our,” “plunge into”) framed by two sets of three long beats. But the art lovers don’t yet recognize how exquisitely Moten Barnett melds modernity with the fulfillment of ancient promise: what she brings to the group doesn’t immediately please, “for by every rule we’d learned, we’d been led to discern/this rankling figure as ugly.”

Danner describes the African statuette first from the disfiguring perspective of European aesthetic norms, finding it embarrassingly ugly,
recounting how the group ungratefully mocked the gift and even its bearer “for many subsequent suns.” But something changes. “Afterwards, to the turn of calendar pages,” her speaker revisits the statue to view it again—and now the figure reveals itself to be speaking the formalist language of modern abstraction, of curves and symmetries and chains of form:

I could discern

through the sheen that the bulging eyes
were identical twins to the bulging nose.
The same symmetrical form was dispersed again

And again through all the bulges, the thighs
and the hands and lips, in reverse, even the toes
of this fast turning beautiful form were a selfsame chain,

matching the navel. This little figure stretched high
in grace, in its with-the-grain form and from-within-glow,
in its curves in concord.

It is not only the unexpected modernity of abstract forms that echo and chime with one another, but the sense of a life within the object that brings Danner to this epiphanic understanding. “Finally,” she says,

I saw on its
ebony face, not a furniture polished, shellacked shine,
but a radiance, gleaming as though a small light
had flashed internally.

Throughout her poetry on African art, Danner adopts the personae of artist, collector, art club member, and museum-goer with the perspectival agility of a method actor. In this theater of the imagination, her poem “The Christmas Soiree and the Missing Object of African Art” may be read as a reversal of “The Convert.” This poem’s speaker aspires to play a role like Moten Barnett’s, as an aesthetic evangelist—only this time the evangelist faces a gathering of whites that finally leaves her feeling defeated socially, professionally, and personally. The Christmas soirée that she hosts is a scene of loss after racially inflected loss: her landlady is evicting her, her boss and his wife snub her, the furniture store has foreclosed on her “influenced-by-Louis-Quinze set.” At this gathering of white art lovers, the speaker had originally hoped “to dazzle/the guests with how much moon, star, unbowed/true ebony art could display.” But the key participant in this effort to win white converts to African art “didn’t come to the party.” Who is this missing guest? Or better, what is absent from the imagined scene? When Danner
reproaches “the missing object of African art” for not being at her Christmas party, one cannot be quite sure whether she is speaking to an artwork or a man. This missing object assumes an aspect of embodied longing animated by physical desire:

But you didn’t come to the party.  
So, I stranded the guests and walked the floor 
and looked out the windows and watched the door 
for a glimpse of your panther-like pace, for 
a glimpse of your smoother-than-panther 
and almost as beautifully dark, face. 

In Danner’s frantic movement of walking, looking, and watching, we feel the anxiety of waiting for an absent guest—one who can slow and calm the poem’s tempo with even an imagined glimpse of his “panther-like pace” and smooth, “beautifully dark” face. It’s hard not to imagine this absent object as a missing person. The question of desire also surfaces in an edit Danner made, equivocating between a narrator who seems single and one who forms part of a couple (“no one couple needs seven rooms” substitutes for “she can get more for her rooms”). In the version of the poem published in *Impressions of African Art Forms in the Poetry of Margaret Danner*, the objects at the party are just “gadgets,” wind-up ballerinas (as European as Louis Quinze furniture) that produce “tinkling” sounds—lacking the liveliness of African art or an African man. In the poem’s equivocation between objects and humans, perhaps we can view these tinkling wind-up gadgets as figures for the white guests themselves.

In Danner’s work, the liveliness of African art forms makes visible the resemblances between artworks and humans, even if the comparison is not always flattering. A “lady executive” sees herself in an empty Mangbetu palm wine jug whose “womb is neither warm nor wet,” and ponders her own childlessness; conversely, Danner imagines a fertility goddess carved on the handle of a letter opener as if this figure were alive and giving birth with the aid of “indigo magic, tangerine witched fire.” Danner observes contemporary African American artists, too, as they create works alive with interior fire, like the Chicago painter William Carter’s Egyptian women at “Sadie’s Playhouse” whose forms flicker and dance before “flotsam, pimps, [and] jadies” after a night’s carousing. Years after the making of the Wall of Respect in Chicago she makes a pilgrimage to see a mural by Jeff Donaldson (one of the Wall’s creators) in Birmingham; the Alabama mural, which features a Senufo Firespitter mask from Danner’s own collection, establishes “truth for future generations” (“Jeff Donaldson’s Wall, Five Years Later”). The kaleidoscopic colors of Danner’s work also bear affinities with Donaldson’s painting *Ala Shango* (in the collection of the South Side Community Art Center) in which two young Black men deploy a carved wooden axe of the
Yoruba god Shango to shatter the glassy surface of the fourth wall into a burst of colorful shards.

More enigmatically, Danner also wrote a series of poems about her encounter with an unnamed artist in Memphis, “the boneman,” who was both a vibraphone player and a maker of bone carvings. The boneman and his work are “an emanation, a materialization from and throwback to Benin” in Danner’s aesthetic imaginary (“Boneman”). Inspired by her Senufo Firespitter mask—the same one Jeff Donaldson had incorporated into his Birmingham mural—this boneman makes a “modern masque” for the poet. Like Danner, this artist senses the life within artworks, carving bones into figures he calls “dudes”:

For his fingers can carve  
(from any bones that you have thrown away)  
exquisite figures and masques  
equaled only by our Benin past.

These “Dudes” he calls them  
rattle your heart and shake your mind  
and bring your aesthetic senses  
around down front and center

—From “And He Carves These ’Dudes’”

The line “rattle your heart and shake your mind” arrests the poem’s rhythm; and the musical phrases “aesthetic senses” and “around down,” with their assonance and syncopated rhythm, prolong this rattle and shake. The boneman accompanies this music on his vibraphone too: “he curls a carving melody/that vibrates in me from the earthly ground” in the poem “Vibes.” His living sound drowns out the “tinkling” of European gadgets; perhaps it also gives voice to the captive, unringing Benin bells.

At the end of “The Convert,” the art club has disbanded. “Like leaves in autumn,” its members “fall,/scrabble against concrete and scatter.” Nonetheless, Etta Moten Barnett’s African statue still casts its spell on the narrator:

But I find myself still framing word sketches 
of how much these blazing forms ascending the centuries 
in their muted sheens, matter to me.

With “I” near the beginning and “me” at the end of this sentence, it’s as if Danner were hugging within herself the blazing forms. They animate her, too, with an inner fire where she can find herself. Their forms remained ablaze, working on her and through her, through decades of framing word sketches, of tangerine witched magic, of from-within-glow.
The Christmas Soiree and the Missing Object of African Art

The landlady tendered me notice today—me after twenty-one years treading these upper floors. Her reason? With folks so flocking this waterway-to-be no one couple needs seven rooms; and then, too, there are neighbors who think she is housing the hub of a Communist wheel—I was hostess to whites here for the holidays—and she fears a snub from the neighborhood club.

The furniture store has ended the stay of my influenced by Louise Quinze set. It left me regretting that I couldn’t pay. The remaining Rococo wall scones are bereft.

My boss has replaced his soft smile with a stare. His wife says I’ll have to excuse her from any more parties. That once crowded cupboard is just about bare now. She says I was trying to use her.

The doctor of aesthetics murmurs complaint. I’ll deflower my spell for significant form, curb the artistic curve, he says, if I enter this racial fray—

But had you been here the power of your African swerve would have steadied my listing art-lovers’ soiree.

For as soon as he’d seen your symmetrical sheen, your stately Watusi-like stance, your contours, as true as the bronze of Benin, your tread of near Masai war dance,

this dean of aesthetics would have echoed Picasso before him in praise and conferred a prized prize. And I would have foiled fictions like filthy, brute, slum; and spiked a few racial preference fear wheels by exhibiting you as my overall goal to the present daring white dears.
Later, I could have lost furniture, home and been proud, had I but been able, that day, to dazzle the guests with how much moon, star, unbowed true ebony art could display.

But you didn’t come to the party. So, I stranded the guests and walked the floor and looked out the windows and watched the door for a glimpse of your panther-like pace, for a glimpse of your smoother than panther and almost as beautifully dark, face.
The Visit of the Professor of Aesthetics

To see you standing in the sagging bookstore door
So filled me with chagrin that suddenly you seemed as
Pink and white to me as newborn, hairless mouse. For

I had hoped to delight you at home. Be a furl
Of faint perfume and Vienna’s cord like lace,
To shine my piano till a shimmer of mother-of-pearl

Embraced it. To pleasantly surprise you with the grace
That transcends my imitation and much worn
“Louis XV” couch. To display my cathedrals and ballets.

To plunge you into Africa through my nude
Zulu Prince, my carvings from Benin, forlorn
Treasures garnered by much sacrifice of food.

I had hoped to delight you, for more
Rare than the seven-year bloom of my
Chinese spiderweb fern is a mind like yours

That concedes my fetish for this substance
Of your trade. And I had planned to prove
Your views of me correct at even every chance

Encounter. But you surprised me. And the store which
Had shown promise until you came, arose
Like a child gone wild when company comes or a witch

At Hallowe’en. The floor, just swept and mopped
Was persuaded by the northlight to deny it.
The muddy rag floor rugs hunched and flopped

Away from the tears in the linoleum that I wanted
Then to hide. The drapes that I had pleated
In clear orchid and peach feverishly flaunted

Their greasiest folds like a banner.
The books who had been my friends, retreated—
Became as shy as the proverbial poet in manner
And hid their better selves. All glow had been deleted
By the dirt. And I felt that you whose god is grace
Could find no semblance of it here. And unaware

That you were scrubbing, you scrubbed your hands.
Wrung and scrubbed your long white fingers. Scrubbed
Then as you smiled and I lowered my eyes from despair.
The craving of Samuel Rouse for clearance to create was surely as hot as the iron that buffeted him. His passion for freedom so strong that it molded the smouldering fashions he laced, for how also could a slave plot or counterplot such incomparable shapes, form or reform, for house after house, the intricate Patio pattern, the delicate Rose and Lyre, the Debutante Settee, the complex but famous Grape; frame the classic vein in an iron bench?

How could he turn an iron Venetian urn, wind the Grape Vine, chain the trunk of a pine with a Round-the-Tree-settee, mold a Floating Flower tray, a French chair—create all this in such exquisite fairyland taste, that he’d be freed and his skill would still resound a hundred years after?

And I wonder if I, with this thick asbestos glove of an attitude could lace, forge and bend this ton of lead-chained spleen surrounding me? Could I manifest and sustain it into a new free-form screen of, not necessarily love, but (at the very least, for all concerned) grace.

Samuel Rouse was an enslaved Black artisan whose ironwork decorated certain historical residences of New Orleans.
These Beasts and the Benin Bronze

“Africans are beasts.”
—The Reverend Carroll

Dave Garroway’s Mr. J. Fred Muggs often thumps quite a rhythmical thump with his feet, doesn’t he? Sometimes he seems pretty clever.

But irrespective of his Fauntleroy and other neat and obviously dear apparel, have you ever wondered whether he, if his very life depended on it, could take a stave from a barrel and curve a small, smooth, round stick? And while it is evident (from the ever growing strife resulting from the wider scope of guile) that a talking snake is working overtime, not even in the bible did a dragon horse or serpent use a sculptor’s knife nor can as sacred a thing as a Hindu cow carve or even draw one of those lovely Indian girls, or a wagon for that matter. And I’ve studied Bushman for years and can, along with the thousands of others who loved the big brute, attest to his dignity and near-human intelligence, but he couldn’t have fashioned one true free form or, if given a knife, whittled one whistle. No history has chronicled a four-legged sculptor, so how can we reconcile this beast epistle to this pure Benin bronze, for with all the contraptions that moderns have to aid them their skill doesn’t compete with these masks, so what beast made them?

David Garroway (1913–1982) was a white American television personality who cohosted the Today show from 1953–1957 with a chimpanzee named “J. Fred Muggs.”
The Small Bells of Benin

In a Chicago museum, these small bells of Benin are bringing their charm to a foreign scene, without ringing.

The concave cylindrical draping of some is as prim as the poise of a Quaker maid, while the rare quadrangular forms of the rest, with their molded latticed designs, suggest the iron fences, displayed in New Orleans, and everywhere, now.

And who can escape the quaint, spellbound, gargoyle-like bronze faces that stare from their settings of thin metal lace?

I wish I could obtain one of these bells or even a facsimile, but the formula to their deft moldings was lost and hasn't been quite rediscovered or found.
Dear Margaret: An Epistolary Collaboration

Because I am weighted down with these problems I find that some mornings I cannot face my life so I read a detective story. I read four a day if I find that my mood does not lift.

I escape from it and in so doing I loose (sic) hundreds of hours that should be placed solving the problems. I feel hopeless and helpless and that it is too much for me.

[Excerpt: Undated letter from Margaret Danner to public relations manager Chandler Owen explaining her needs for a publicist. In the letter, she expounds upon many subjects that she calls “Obstacles.” This entry comes from her section titled “Procrastination.” (Form: Typewritten on 8.5 × 11 plain paper, blue ink.)]

I have written about moods that do not lift and what becomes of the poet in them. It is too easy to consider the other side. My godparents knew Bill Styron; he forgot his pills (leveling meds) during a visit, which put him in a state because his surest self was in those pills, but they were able to find a doctor to prescribe what he needed to get by. I have been there—placed without my pills when my surest self is in those pills. When I say “surest self” I mean: self that understands the field before me rather than furled into a listless den reading myself out of the light. Margaret, I mean: I engage detective stories, too.

Brandy; La Tricoteuse

I do not intend to begin to drink. I know better. Nor do I intend to taste all of (sic) different drinks I have missed. As it is I only like to drink brandy and that only with Frederick and we talk poems and about life.

[Excerpt: Undated letter from Margaret Danner to Hoyt Fuller. (Form: Handwritten in cursive on 8.5 × 11 plain paper, blue ink.)]

I don’t want to ruin everything by bringing up the worst, but we (all people) are deep into the second year of a pandemic. As I write this, COVID-19 has killed 5,241,868—and counting.

The last worst thing happened in your childhood, the 1918–1920 Spanish Flu. Margaret, I know more than you about worldwide lockdowns. I bought a bar cabinet early in the pandemic. Took me two hours to put it together.
with an old drill. Then I spent $400 stocking it—scotch, vodka, gin, bitters, vermouths, wine, brandy, and an 8oz bottle of absinthe. I must confess that because millions of people around the world were dying, I intended to drink.

[... and I become relaxed and feel warm and all that is missing is that I want to be held.

[Excerpt: Undated letter from Margaret Danner to Hoyt Fuller. (Form: Handwritten in cursive on 8.5 × 11 plain paper, blue ink.])

The first year of the pandemic was a very lonely time for very many people. If you were dating, you broke up. If you were single, you spent even more time with yourself. If you were married with kids, all of your people were, all hours of day, underneath you restless. All to prevent the spread of the contagion and, frankly, to stay alive. The greatest sign of the lockdown was the absence of cars on the road, which made it possible to hear the birds across the highway in the park. The birds were the freest thing. And so mocking. People didn’t touch one another, could not embrace, and often, like you, just wanted to be held. The most communal thing people did, from Chicago to Barcelona, was to lean out of their windows and make noise.

They don’t like Poetry that they can’t understand nor people who write it. But all in all I have received many calls and many congratulations etc.

[Excerpt: Undated letter from Margaret Danner to Hoyt Fuller. (Form: Handwritten in cursive on 8.5 × 11 plain paper, blue ink.])

Metaphor is less prevalent these days. The world’s boundaries are well-defined, and the facts of living during a pandemic are instructional. Six feet, that’s the rule. Keep six feet between yourself and other people. Wear your face mask in all common spaces.

I try to keep a wide berth between myself and what I do not understand. I do not completely understand the virus. It thrives; this is the elemental truth. As it evolves, so do its names: COVID-19, then Delta and now Omicron.

Thank goodness for the writers who survive. Anthologies are published in which writers communicate novel loneliness and baseline fear with little to no figurative language. As we say, and as you might’ve said: it is what it is.

For example: the first partial lunar eclipse in 600 years is the first partial lunar eclipse in 600 years. Margaret, it is exactly a half-obscured moon. Few people look up for it.

My grandmother had 7 sons and seven daughters. My mother was what I am a one man woman sexually so when my father died my
mother took me from Chicago (where I was born with proof) to her mother in Indianapolis Ind. At age of 5.

[Excerpt: September 24, 1966. Letter from Margaret Danner to Hoyt Fuller. (Form: Handwritten in cursive on 8.5 × 11 plain paper, black ink.)]

Margaret, there are so many articles written about the single Black woman. You wouldn’t believe how lonely the world would have us.

I’m glad that you found your other and only. One reason for marriage—economic security—isn’t always a motivation anymore. Many Black women live with financial autonomy, and I am one of them. I own a condo, have a retirement account, and invest in the stock market. With regard to certain delights of partnership, there are affordable devices for sexual pleasure that make the orgasm instantaneous and drama-free. Some women live alone and live well.

I am just turning forty and haven’t yet met someone with whom to share my life. What once might’ve been a domestic future is instead a full leaning into my writing life. I am quite liberated. For instance, I lingered in your archives at the University of Chicago knowing I did not have to feed anyone but myself.

Dear Bob, How are you, and equally important Where are you? I called a while back and talked to Irma. I also saw a student of yours who said you were at Princeton? I think it was. So, I don’t know where to reach you.

[Excerpt: June 25, 1975. Letter from Margaret Danner to Robert (Bob) Hayden. (Form: Typewritten in cursive on 8.5 × 11 plain paper, black ink.)]

Margaret, it still happens like this. Between changing jobs, escaping to residencies, and traveling for lectures and readings, poets can be difficult to reach—especially when you love them—or sometimes they just need time to be speechless and meditatively still. I schedule dates weeks in advance when I want time with a friend. Tracy and I will catch up today, but it has been six years since we’ve met in person. Recently, I talked with Camille. Then Jenny. It has been too long since I connected with Tarfia or Aracelis. Jennifer and I keep playing phone tag. From your letters, I see that Robert Hayden was a difficult friend to catch.

One of my uncles, still alive, was “different” from the others. He has your head, your features and ideas like yours. This explains why I loved you so intensely at sight.
I felt different from others growing up. I needed to be alone and craved solitude, so much that my family (my mother told me later) thought that I didn’t like them. This was far from true. I loved them fiercely but might not have expressed it. So much happened between my ears that I had to be alone, shuttered in a room, listening. This is how I became a writer—by tending to my thoughts and writing them down.

It is fair to tell you, because you are so exposed in this correspondence, that I am also different as in queer. My desire wilds along the spectrum of women and men. When I told my father I was in my first serious relationship with a woman, the first thing he asked was, “Is she fine?” “Oh my God—” I said, “Yes!”

One would never believe that this w[a]s the place that had gained the reputation of being fantastic... The place of which was written[.] Everything has been militarized [sic] and is meticulously filed and labelled. It is an office like any other office[.] There are no piles of old magazines laying around under which one might discover a priceless letter from Harriet Monroe or Ezra Pound or T.S. Eliot. There are no Pegasu’s [sic] left. No gold ones, flying face forward, no brass ones side view, no copper ones with aquamarine [sic] eyes. There are no Thurber cuts poppping [sic] up with their impish implications. There is no disorder at Poetry. [N]o dust.

Where do you reckon the Poetry Foundation put all the gold Pegasuses? I love that you were looking for remnants. The current building is all glass and clean-lined—you either love it or hate it. I enjoy the space, save that the library seating doesn’t invite lounging. A bit too modern and modular, I think. Your word “militarized” is curious; I suppose you had a romantic notion of how such a historical place should look. Like Shakespeare & Company in Paris—shelves and tables overflowing with books; ancient typewriters scattered about and sagging wingback chairs; dust not everywhere but certainly implied.

I bet there’s a storeroom somewhere with stacks of Poetry proofs going back to 1912, maybe Harriet Monroe’s desk with its time-warped wood, a pair of delicate spectacles.... Margaret, if everything that is fantastic were in disarray, I never would have found your letters.
You spoke of understanding the suicide urge. I do too but I have forever put that thought behind me since you came. Suppose in those dark days before you when everything went wrong and friends turned to foes before my eyes I had committed suicide. Look what I would have missed Hoyt.

[Excerpt: Undated letter from Margaret Danner to Hoyt Fuller. (Form: Handwritten in cursive on 8.5 × 11 plain paper, blue ink.)]

I wonder what it is like to never have considered suicide. I would very much like to meet the person who hasn’t. My first mentor killed herself. I dreamt of her dying the night before and was writing a poem about the dream when I got the phone call. Then I made calls of my own. A phone tree to say “she has died” and the other words no one wants to hear.

I focus on living so much now that I pay extra for cancer insurance. There has been a fair amount of cancer in my family—breast, colon, prostate, pancreatic. It turns out that insurance is a great help when you are trying not to die. My premiums keep going up, and I keep paying.

Dear Margaret, Just a note to say that I’ve not written sooner owing to the fact that I have been under great pressures, of one kind and another, have been working like a fiend, and therefore have simply not been up to a letter. I owe a spate of letters and am trying to catch up on correspondence tonight.

[Excerpt: April 5, 1964. Letter from Robert (Bob) Hayden to Margaret Danner. (Form: Typewritten on 8.5 × 11 plain paper, black ink.)]

I don’t want anyone to think your letter box empty; Hayden did write when he found the time!

I used to keep up written correspondence for over a year with Krista then Nicole. Long letters about our lives through the post. And why didn’t I keep them? I was going through my minimalist period and considered even paper to be too much to save. Silly, silly me. I’ve thought to strike up writing letters again, but haven’t decided to whom. I have to find someone who has the time for reading and writing letters to me.

The wonder of you. I can’t believe that you really exist—that such a person as you exists—

[Excerpt: Undated letter from Margaret Danner to Hoyt Fuller. (Form: Handwritten in cursive on 8.5 × 11 plain paper, blue ink.)]
I have spent several days writing to you. My honesty is a response to your honesty. I tried to write what you call “hair-down letters,” casual things that just talk. And I’ve said it before—I mostly want to talk. Now you and I have this: a collaboration.

Yours,

CM
Photograph of Margaret Danner from Poetry's archives, undated.
Notes & Acknowledgments

We gratefully acknowledge the original publishers of Margaret Danner’s poems reprinted in this folio. All of Danner’s books and chapbooks are now out of print, and among her original publishers, only Broadside Press, which merged with Lotus Press in 2015 to form Broadside Lotus Press, continues to operate today.


The item pictured on the following page was discovered by Liesl Olson in the SCRC’s Danner archive; the “Friends of Margaret Danner” was a Detroit community organization that sought to raise funds for Danner to visit Africa in 1960. (The Friends of Margaret Danner’s chairperson, Sylvia King, is thanked in the front matter to Impressions of African Art Forms in the Poetry of Margaret Danner; King also wrote the “About the Author” note for that volume.) We welcome any information that our readers might provide about Danner’s literary community, professional life, and bibliography in our ongoing effort to document the history of Black poets and Poetry magazine.

We would also like to express our gratitude to the Danner family historian, Robin Washington, who provided valuable information about the Danner family’s engagement with poetry across multiple generations. We hope this folio will encourage future scholars, and teachers, and readers to learn more about Danner’s life and work.
Friends of Margaret Danner ID Card from the Margaret Danner Papers 1940–1984, located at the Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center at the University of Chicago.
**Contributors**

**Rosa Alcalá** is a poet and translator whose most recent book of poems is *My Other Tongue* (Futurepoem, 2017).

**Hüseyin Alhas** is a Turkish poet, academic, and translator. His poem “Phantasmatopia” was published in *My Utopia: A Collection of Creative Writing* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018). His main fields of research include English Romanticism, Turkish Romanticism, literary topos in Lycia, and the metamorphosis of the epic hero in the seventeenth century.

**Hala Alyan** is a Palestinian American writer and clinical psychologist. Her newest novel is *The Arsonists City* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2021).

**Adrienne Brown** is an associate professor of English at the University of Chicago. She is the author of *The Black Skyscraper: Architecture and the Perception of Race* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017) and a coeditor with Valerie Smith of *Race and Real Estate* (Oxford University Press, 2015).


Chidozie George Emesowum* is a poet from Nigeria. He lives in Festac Town, Lagos.

Tomoyuki Endo* is an assistant professor at Wako University in Tokyo, specializing in American and Japanese poetry.

Hannah Ensor* lives in Ypsilanti, Michigan, and is the author of Love Dream with Television (Noemi Press, 2018).

Susan Finlay* is the author of three poetry pamphlets and five novels, including the novel The Jacques Lacan Foundation (MOIST, 2022).

Forrest Gander’s most recent book is Twice Alive (New Directions, 2021).


Jay Hopler’s* collection The Abridged History of Rainfall (McSweeney’s, 2016) was a finalist for the National Book Award in poetry. His next book, Still Life (McSweeney’s, 2022), is forthcoming.

Imani Elizabeth Jackson* is the author of the book Flag (Futurepoem Books, 2022) and the chapbook saltsitting (GLOSS, 2019). She is from Chicago.

Shuri Kido* has been an influential poet for over thirty years in Japan. He has translated Ezra Pound into Japanese, and his book of poems in English, Names and Rivers (Copper Canyon Press, 2023), is forthcoming.

Karen Kovacik* is a poet and translator. Her translation of Jacek Dehnel’s Aperture (ZephyrPress, 2018) was a finalist for the PEN Award for Poetry in Translation.

Isidro Li* was born in Havana, Cuba, and currently resides in the United States.

Aditi Machado* is the author of Emporium (2020) and Some Beheadings (2017), both from Nightboat Books.

Janet McAdams is the author of three collections of poetry, most recently Seven Boxes for the Country After (Kent State University Press, 2016). She teaches at Kenyon College, where she is an editor-at-large for the Kenyon Review and holds the Robert P. Hubbard Chair in Poetry.

Sara Nicholson* is the author of *What the Lyric Is* (2016) and *The Living Method* (2014), both from the Song Cave.

Liesl Olson* is director of Chicago Studies at the Newberry Library. Her books include *Chicago Avant-Garde: Five Women Ahead of Their Time* (Newberry Press, 2021), *Chicago Renaissance: Literature and Art in the Midwest Metropolis* (Yale University Press, 2017), and *Modernism and the Ordinary* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

Rüştü Onur* (1920–1942) was a Turkish poet whose poetry is marked by an unrelenting desire to cherish life despite his looming death due to tuberculosis.

Ulaş Özgün* is a Turkish academic and translation enthusiast. He has a particular interest in the poets of the Garip movement and their poetry.

Ed Roberson is the author of a dozen books of poetry, winner of many awards, and lives in the Bronzeville neighborhood of Chicago’s South Side.

Melissa Sauma* is a poet and photographer. She has published *Luminiscencia* (Editorial 3600, 2017) and *Maneras de parar el mundo* (El Ángel Editor, 2021). She has received a creative writing diploma and is part of the “Llamarada Verde” poetry workshop.

Jasmine Elizabeth Smith is a Black poet who is invested in the diaspora of Black Americans in various historical contexts and eras. She is the winner of the Georgia Poetry Prize and is the author of *South Flight* (University of Georgia Press, 2022).

Sonnenzimmer is the art practice of Nick Butcher and Nadine Nakanishi. Together they wade through the graphic magma.

Mathias Svalina* is the author of seven books and runs a dream delivery service.

Tola Sylvan* is a poet and writer from Massachusetts.

Asiya Wadud* is a writer, most recently of *No Knowledge Is Complete Until It Passes Through My Body* (Nightboat Books, 2021). She lives in Brooklyn,
New York, where she teaches poetry at Saint Ann’s School and Columbia University.

Laura Wetherington* is a US poet based in the Netherlands. “Feel Fragments” is part of a book-length work-in-progress.

Simone White’s* or, on being the other woman (Duke University Press), is forthcoming later this year. She lives in New York, and she teaches at the University of Pennsylvania.

Ariel Yelen’s* poetry has appeared in the American Poetry Review, BOMB, Conjunctions, Washington Square Review, and other journals. She holds an MFA from Rutgers University–Newark and serves as the associate editor for Futurepoem, where she also edits the blog future feed. She lives in Brooklyn.

Rebecca Zorach* lives in Chicago. She teaches and writes about early modern Europe, contemporary activist art, and the Black Arts Movement.

* First appearance in Poetry
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