



# THE POETRY PROJECT

December 2018/January 2019

Issue #257

# The Poetry Project

## December 2018/January 2019 Issue #257

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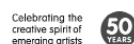
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**Cover image:** courtesy of Stacy Szymaszek

# Announcements

2019 approaches, which means the **45th Annual New Years Day Benefit Reading** is also just around the corner. The Marathon is The Poetry Project's biggest event of the year with performances from 140+ people, as well as donated books, food, and gifts for sale -- all orchestrated generously through the support of 100+ volunteers. A still growing list of readings and performances is below. We hope to see you there!

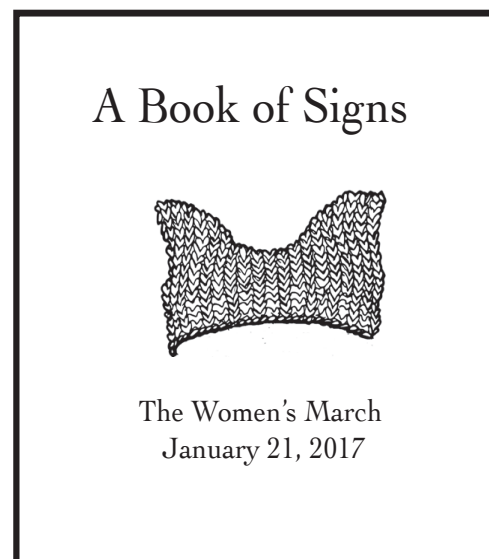
## New Years Marathon 2019: Reader List

Andrea Abi-Karam, Ammiel Alcalay, Ashna Ali, Justin Allen, Julie Alsop, Jonathan Aprea, Ed Askew Band, Daisy Atterbury, James Barickman, J. Mae Barizo, Peter BD, Jim Behrle, Anselm Berrigan, Edmund Berrigan, Fabienne Bottero, Michael Broder, Lee Ann Brown & Janice Lowe, Marie Buck, Steve Cannon, Wo Chan, Yoshiko Chuma, Lauren Clark, Todd Colby, John Coletti, CA Conrad, Lydia Cortes, Brenda Coultas, Alex Cuff, Matty D'Angelo, Kyle Dacuyan, Jordan Davis, Ted Dodson, Erica Doyle, Anaïs Duplan, Marcella Durand, Mel Elberg, Betsy Fagin, Will Farris, Avram Fefer, Camonghne Felix, Jack Ferver, Jennifer Firestone, Jen Fisher, Jameson Fitzpatrick, Dorothy Friedman August, Kay Gabriel, John Godfrey, Suzanne Goldenberg, Phoebe Greer & Arthur Cañedo, Diana Hamilton, David Henderson, Barbara Henning, Laura Henriksen, Erika Hodges, Bob Holman, Sophia Hussain, Cori Hutchinson, Omotara James, Paolo Javier, Cyree Jarelle Johnson, Pierre Joris, Millie Kapp & Matt Shalzi, Vincent Katz, Erica Kaufman, Amy King, Anna Kreienberg, M Lamar, Yaz Lancaster, Sue Landers, Denizé Lauture, Paul Legault, Rachel Levitsky, Matt Longabucco, Brendan Lorber, Jimena Lucero, Filip Marinovich, Erin Markey, Douglas A. Martin, Eline Marx (technical issues), Greg Masters, Andriniki Mattis, Jillian McManemin, Caitis Meissner, Carley Moore, Tracie Morris, Dave Morse, Stephen Motika, Sahar Muradi, Uche Nduka, Peter Neeley, Precious Okoyomon, Laura Ortman, Trace Peterson, Nicole Peyrafitte, Matt Proctor & Sarah Safaie, Lorelei Ramirez, El Roy Red, Batya Rosenblum, Bob Rosenthal, Douglas Rothschild, Judah Rubin, John Rufo, George Emilio Sanchez, Tina Satter, Tom Savage, Simon Schuchat, Purvi Shah, Frank Sherlock, Jayson Smith, Sean D. Henry Smith, Pamela Sneed, Patricia Spears Jones, Tammy Faye Starlite, Max Steele, Jim Stewart, Sara Jane Stoner, Bridget Talone, Susie Timmons, Edwin Torres, Tony Towle, Cat Tyc, Viktorsha Uliyanova, Aldrin Valdez, Cecilia Vicuna, Anna Vitale, Morgan Vo, Asiya Wadud, Anne Waldman with Fast Speaking Music, Nicole Wallace, Lewis Warsh, Jacqueline Waters, Rachael Wilson, Chavisa Woods, Matvei Yankelevich, The Double Yews, Don Yorty, Sparrow / Foamola, The Blow, St. Mark's Choir, and more TBA (Updated 12/7/18)

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The future is nasty





# Letter from the Executive Director

All week people in the Sanctuary of St. Mark's have been practicing some kind of choral improvisation -- wordless vowel sounds moving toward harmony. A resolution that happens in ongoing, plural unknowing. Revise: a resolve. It is the longest night of the year now, winter solstice, and we are making our way through it.

By sensing one another. We invent geography through our attention to different, inevitably shifting relativities. I am thinking about place partly because this issue of the Newsletter so originally and insistently approaches distance -- boundary and remove, but also intimacy and assembly. Place between persons and characters; across concentric spheres of language and culture; from one practice of routine to another. But also place as in position, one's own, the moving point one occupies inside a community; as well as the kaleidoscopic subjectivities we turn individually inside the apertures of ourselves.

One and ones. A place is many persons more than a statically unified people, something that vibrates powerfully at The Poetry Project—in the physical church we share with neighbors (and ghosts), and in the psychic terrain we share with poets and readers far beyond—the pitching of voices into chord and retreat, the poem-circuitry that scatters light around the commons.

Poetry is hardly a place; more, I think, a vapor, rangy, uncontainable, sensitive to whatever elements or co-conspirators it encounters. Place happens only through listening and exchange, the social act of poetry given, received, critiqued, refashioned, refracted, verbed so on and so forth. And here is where we meet.

kd



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## ANNOUNCEMENTS

We are thrilled to welcome our fifth cohort of Emerge-Surface-Be Fellows: **Kay Gabriel** will be working with **Rachel Levitsky**; **Francisco Márquez** will be working with **Douglas A. Martin**; and **Andriniki Mattis** will be working with **Pamela Sneed**.

We gratefully remember and honor two friends of The Poetry Project who have passed away since our last issue of the Newsletter: **Ntozake Shange** and **Meena Alexander**, two extraordinary and beloved poets who indelibly changed our literature, culture, and community. A remembrance of Meena Alexander is included in this issue. An event for Ntozake Shange will take place in the Fall of 2018 at The Poetry Project.

We would also like to note: in order to dedicate more space to new modes of criticism and scholarship, and with the recognition that our readership extends beyond our immediate geography, The Poetry Project's calendar of events will now be circulated separately from the Newsletter.

# Letter from the Editor

Yall. Whut?

It's December. My brain is fried. No drugs.

How did we even?

Thanks for being here. This newsletter is a light for so many reasons I won't be able to capture it all in this one letter, but I will try. Grateful for the honor of putting this newsletter together. In a world that continually tries to edit (read: erase) people like us, it's beautiful to have space to share these necessary voices and points of view. Here's the roundup:

1. lucky 7/11 -- on those pages you'll find two incredible ekphrastic by the luminous Calvin Walds who allows us to look at Beauford Delaney's work with him as he reflects in the archives

2. Randa Jarrar warms us up on p. 8 with her evocative prose

3. feeling seen and complicit as usual thanks to

Roberto Montes on p. 14 with the latest (and timeless) poetry world GRIEVANCES

4. and then boom: TWO ART FEATURES on p. 14 and p. 19 -- just go straight there, not telling you what they are, I will just say they are THE BEST

5. p. 22 kicks off our reviews where John Rufo enlightens and entices again with their selections

6. and finally, an interview with Carina del Valle Schorske you will read and read -- on the importance of intersectional translation -- and so much more.

Always a pleasure.

Happy 2019. Blessup.  
mh.

ps. peep that cover! thanks, Stacy!

EDITORS EMERITI: Ron Padgett 1972–1973 / Bill MacKay 1973–1975 / Ted Greenwald 1975–1977 / Frances LeFevre 1977–1978 / Vicki Hudspeth 1978–1980 / Greg Masters 1980–1983 / Lorna Smedman 1983–1984 / Tim Dlugos 1984–1985 / James Ruggia 1985–1986 / Jessica Hagedorn 1986–1987 / Tony Towle 1987–1990 / Jerome Sala 1990–1991 / Lynn Crawford 1991–1992 / Jordan Davis 1992–1994 / Gillian McCain 1994–1995 / Mitch Highfill 1995–1996 / Lisa Jarnot 1996–1998 / Brenda Coultas & Eleni Sikelianos 1998–1999 / Katherine Lederer 1999–2000 / Ange Mlinko 2000–2002 / Nada Gordon & Gary Sullivan 2002–2003 / Marcella Durand 2003–2005 / Brendan Lorber 2005–2007 / John Coletti 2007–2009 / Corina Copp 2009–2011 / Paul Foster Johnson 2011–2013 / Ted Dodson 2013–2015 / Betsy Fagin 2015–2017

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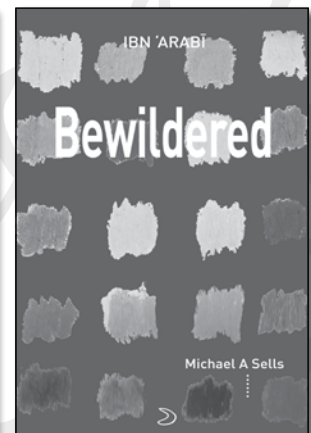
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# POETRY: Calvin Walds

## Dark Rupture (James Baldwin) 1941 - Beauford Delaney

I've stopped appraising my skin.

The soused thin of it; a receding  
held curlicue.

I imagine it. My skin. To be something  
auxiliary. Unraveling about. Consuming.

Beauford begins to paint Jimmy.  
*Were you singing?* Baraka asks.

The rest in the tremor of dots, *a white sun*.

Beauford's brush gently strikes the linen acid.

A gesso laced canvas. Jimmy's unbuttoned oxford.

Russet slides into black opsins, eye bags.  
The one lick of blue, *winter's*  
*rainless fog*.

Shadows drench the portrait's budding flora.

*Inviolable Halleluah.*

A glass vaults through a diner window. Jimmy threw it

in New York. Beauford caught it in Paris. In Istanbul, they drank, again.

Beauford's hematic hand. Fringed peaks of the opus.  
Peeling red chimes surrounds.

---

**Calvin Walds** is a MFA candidate in cross-genre writing at UCSD. His work with 20th-century painter Beauford Delaney is part of a project on black abstraction and practices of relational fugitivity. He has received fellowships from The Watering Hole and Callaloo Journal. His writing has appeared in *The Felt*, *Moko: Caribbean Arts and Letters*, *Coldnoon: Travel Poetics*, and *Hyperallergic*.

# December-January Workshops

## **Shifting Concepts: from Poem to Body** **3 session workshop with Yoshiko Chuma**

**Wed 12/12, Thurs 12/13, Fri 12/14**

**6:00 - 9:00pm**

**Parish Hall, St. Mark's Church (131 E 10th St, New York, NY 10003)**

Movement Research, in partnership with The Poetry Project, presents *Shifting Concepts: from Poem to Body*. Yoshiko Chuma, Artistic Director of the award winning company The School of Hard Knocks will guide participants in a 3-day workshop about the transformation of conceptual ideas into physical movement vocabulary. The investigation process of transformation from intellectual concepts to physical movements will be an exercise for both the brain and the body. During the 3 days, the participants will work with Ms. Chuma, in a combination of demonstration and participatory exercises. Chuma will also present action exercises with props. The workshop is open for anyone of all ages. We will use our own gestures, words, images and experiences to create movement.

How can the abstraction of words and movement guide one another toward new means of communicating? How do these practices speak to urgent political and global issues today? Dance is a monologue, flowing resistance activity using dance to deliver a delicate and powerful message. Poets will speak a kind of monologue composed of abstract dance movements. Dance is poem. The 3 day workshop will end with a small private presentation with the participants. There will be surprise guest appearances every day.

**Yoshiko Chuma** is conceptual artist, choreographer/artistic director of award winning company The School of Hard Knocks.

\*\*\*

## **The Vocal Trace** **5-session workshop with Judah Rubin** **Tuesdays, January, 29 - February 26, 2019**

**7:00 - 9:00pm**

**Neighborhood Preservation Center (232 E 11th St, New York, NY 10003)**

In this workshop we will listen to, and attempt to think through, archival recordings from the Poetry Project's extensive collection housed at the Library of Congress. We will aim to bring to craft a collective language for talking about readings: what is happening at a reading? How might we develop an historiography of listening? How are voices preserved, ignored and, at times, actively suppressed? How does close listening (to tone, to banter, to heckling, applause, echo, vocal gesture) help us to understand not only the archival and institutional record, but our own poetics? How can we theorize the grain of the voice while contextualizing and historicizing it? What social solidarities come to bear on the reading, the talk, the workshop? We will be listening to previously unheard recordings of readings and talks by David Antin, Cookie Mueller, Audre Lorde, David Wojnarowicz, John Wieners and more TBA.

**Judah Rubin** is a poet, educator, cataloger, and former Monday night coordinator at the Poetry Project. He is the editor of *A Perfect Vacuum*, a magazine of poetry and poetics.



## Love is Blonde, Act I

My first crush on a girl may have been on Thumbelina. In her, I saw a sister, a diminutive lover, my mother, and then, myself. She was trapped on a lily pad with a frog who was unkind to her. She had been sold off by her community. She was tiny, insignificant.

I knew about Thumbelina because we had a book about her and a book on tape to go along with it. The tape would beep when I needed to flip the page. The voice of the woman who read the story was commanding, elderly, and informed. Later on, listening to Cynthia Ozick read on a New Yorker Podcast, I discovered that she shared a voice very similar to the narrator of my childhood Thumbelina book.

I was probably five or six years old when I listened to the Thumbelina tape, thumbing my way through the book at each beep. Thirteen years later, I would have a child. And within me already were all the tiny eggs I would ever have; deep within me part of my child already existed. And because my mother had lost her mother just before I was born, my own motherhood was already a part of my identity. I mothered my mother. And I mothered my brother, who was born 30 months after I was, and who I patted and cared for at night when my parents went out, or in hotel rooms while we were traveling and while my parents were at dinner.

The origin story of Thumbelina, or Tiny, as Hans Christian Anderson tells it, is that an older woman wanted a child but couldn't have one. She went to a sorcerer and was given a seed to make her own child with; when she planted it, the seed blossomed into a tulip. And now the gayest moment of Thumbelina: the old woman kisses the petals of the tulip- two petals, to be exact, and out came Thumbelina. She was half the size of a thumb. A tiny, perfect, anthropomorphized clitoris. As a child, I was drawn to the miniature nature of this perfect being, and to her tiny accoutrements: her bed was a walnut shell, her blanket, a petal. She took up almost no space at all. She was nothing like me and she was everything like me. If I mothered my own mother, who actually came first? I wanted to be like Thumbelina: born of no man. It was like Surat al-Samad, the verse of the Quran I repeated in class and before bed: God did not beget and was not begotten. As an adult woman, I feminize the Quran so that this part reads, She did not give birth and nor was She given birth to. Thumbelina, like the divine, is perfect, whole, and mighty. Her physical size is irrelevant. She is indivisible, above all others, and the entire length of her story, attempts to escape lascivious masculinity as embodied by both the frog and his mother. She is never penetrated, and is finally able to get away from her captors, releasing into a world of other fairies. She will never give birth to any other. In the fairy tale, she finds a prince her size who also emerges from a flower. The rest of their people join them, emerging from other flowers. It's a marriage of clitorises in a magical kingdom of clitorises, the final touch being a pair of tiny wings bequeathed to Thumbelina, giving her complete freedom. In that buzzing, the story ends, her entire self-transformed into an orgasming, climaxing queen.

\*

The foil of Thumbelina was, is, Tinkerbell. The first time I saw Tinkerbell glide across our television, I was aroused, though I didn't know what it meant to be aroused. Her tiny green dress and long legs, with pointed feet, shoes with large white pompoms, and the fairy dust trailing her signaled an otherness and an inaccessibility, as did her white skin. Her red lips. Her indigo blue eyes and black brows and lashes. Her jealousy. Her possessiveness.

Her moment with that mirror, realizing that her hips were large. Even as a child, I knew I was too much. That shorts and other pieces of clothing would fit me imperfectly. I wasn't fat yet, but I wasn't skinny. And seeing that even Tinkerbell, who could fly and was tiny, was worried about the size of hips, made me love her more. For a moment, I thought we were alike. I could relate to her.

All of this, and her unavailability, made me desire her deeply. I wanted to be her, and I wanted her to be mine.

Thumbelina and Tinkerbell are both, in my imagination, queer, visual representations of clitorises. They buzz, they yearn, they are tiny and hidden, and sometimes tiny and visible. They are wet. They flicker. They want. They make you want back.

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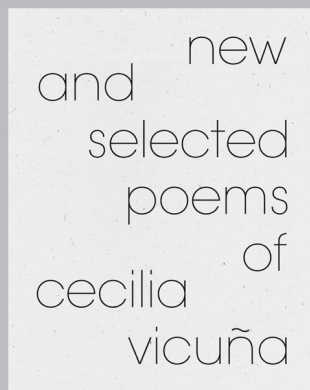
**Randa Jarrar's** work has appeared in *The New York Times Magazine*, *Buzzfeed*, *The Utne Reader*, *Salon*, *The Offing*, *Guernica*, *The Rumpus*, *The Oxford American*, *Ploughshares*, *The Sun*, *Medium*, and others. Her first book, the Arab-American coming of age novel, *A Map of Home*, is now on many college syllabi. It was published in seven languages & won a Hopwood Award and an Arab-American Book Award. Her most recent book, *Him, Me, Muhammad Ali*, won an American Book Award, a PEN Oakland Award, and a Story Prize Spotlight Award, and was named a Key Collection for Fall 2016 by Library Journal and one of Electric Literature's 25 best collections of the year. Jarrar is a columnist for *Bitch Magazine*, has worked with PEN American to judge fiction prizes and to put on events, and was the *PEN Ten Interviews* editor in 2016-17. She is the Executive Director of RAWI, a literary nonprofit that serves Arab-American writers. Jarrar has received fellowships from the Civitella Ranieri Foundation, the Lannan Foundation, Hedgebrook, and others. In 2010, she was named one of the most gifted writers of Arab origin under the age of 40. She is the translator of several Arabic short stories and a novel, and has taught for MFA programs at CSU-Fresno and Sierra Nevada College, and at Tin House's Summer Workshop. She holds an MFA from the University of Michigan, where she was a Zell Fellow.

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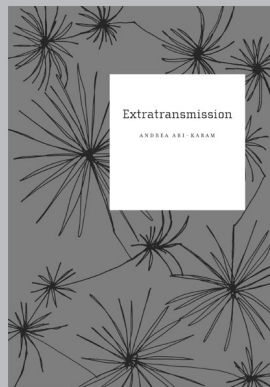
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## BENEFIT PARTY

**Tuesday, March 19, 2019**

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more info and tickets at  
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# POETRY: Calvin Walds

## Untitled

watercolor and gouache on paper  
(after Beauford Delaney circa. 1957-1958)

Neglect a heat map canvas.  
Aerial shots of lava drenched Hawaii.  
Earth cracked open, egg split, droop  
Beauford, last night, you smiled  
a mouse scurries your loft, pried  
orbit you slept, blood dripped  
a palette, I slept a phone, as to hear that asunder  
acuity dipped blue, your loved  
sour yellow, segued  
over everything or every sorrowful  
thing runs. Beauford, I touched  
your letter, you were buried in an unmarked  
grave. Beauford, why do we  
We? Did you can you hear, we only love.  
You paint nothing. I write nothing.  
Loving what isn't there.

---

**Calvin Walds** is a MFA candidate in cross-genre writing at UCSD. His work with 20th-century painter Beauford Delaney is part of a project on black abstraction and practices of relational fugitivity. He has received fellowships from The Watering Hole and Callaloo Journal. His writing has appeared in *The Felt*, *Moko: Caribbean Arts and Letters*, *Coldnoon: Travel Poetics*, and *Hyperallergic*.

# GRIEVANCES

compiled from the social media of Roberto Montes

What is a poem worth?	I have seen kind people forced	To relieve poets of the distraction
How many hours	To make unkind decisions	Of wage labor
Is fair to give	Because their livelihood depends	So that they might
To your employer	On publishing certain work	Finally!
In order to afford	In certain circles	Focus on their poetry
One collection	So that they might accrue value	With some relief
?	Which limits them	From precarity
I am wary of poets	I have seen people share their rejections	The current climate feels
Who crow about the labor of poetry	Proudly detailing the hundreds or thousands	Breathtakingly cynical
Who demand compensation	Of dollars spent before finally	That only a few of us truly deserve
(Compensation for the loss	Finally!	That relief
Of hours?	Being chosen for an award	That any judicial body
Compensation for the strain?)	(These stories	(Made of those already
I am weary of poets	I believe meant	Deemed worthy)
In It to Win It	To curry hope)	Might have the authority
Yawning at the thought	Valuation is an efficient system	To determine that worth
That their poem	If our aim is the production	?
Victorious	Of publishable work	The business of poetry survives
Would deserve anything less	Not poetry	Because some of us
Than a prize pool	What is our aim?	Only eat one meal a day
Of entrants' fees	What is it we mean	It survives because some of us
One of the great strengths	When we award some of us	Have children to support
Of poetry is its resistance	Thousands of dollars	And no help
To valuation	From the reader fees	Some of us have medical bills
The toxicity of valuation	Of others	Most of us
The institutional feedback loop	?	Students loans that never diminish
Cannot be ignored	If the goal is	It survives because we cannot write



# GRIEVANCES

compiled from the social media of Roberto Montes

From the depths of precarity	No longer reliant on institutional legitimacy
It survives because we are in need	To pad their CV
Because we do what we must	In the hopes of being chosen
But the business of poetry	To teach one more workshop
Does not exist	I wonder which would benefit poetry more
To fulfill our needs	Paying for poets to attend readings
What is its aim?	Or paying toward the cause of free education
Its aim	I am wary of libertarian poetics
As ours	That the market should be given more power
Is to go on	To decide worth
It does what it must	That the market
But I wonder how it might look	Having consumed enough marginalized poets
If poets were able to forego precarity	Could self-correct
As easily	To rectify its injustices
As the poem foregoes value	I am tired of writing the same damn poem
I wonder if poets	I am tired of reading the same damn poem
Rather than rely on compensation	What is the value of our exhaustion
For their poetry	Where might I trade in
Could rely on universal healthcare	The significance of survival
I wonder if poets	For a moment's rest
Rather than spending \$30	What is a poem worth?
For the 10th time	
In the hopes of later receiving \$2000	
And publication	
Were free to seek alternative means	\$25
To share their work	—

**Roberto Montes** is the author of *GRIEVANCES* (The Atlas Review)

## ROOF BOOKS

ANNOUNCES RECENT EDITIONS

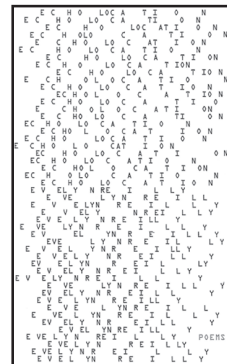


### Political Subject by Caleb Beckwith

The spare, bone-dry poems are concerned with language's utility, querying its potential to exercise any real resistance to its already co-opted status within late capitalism, where identity is merely demographic and monetized, and where political solidarity can be a "shoreline or / shipwreck."—*Divya Victor*

### THE RESIGNATION by Lonely Christopher

Lonely Christopher explores questions of identity, ethics, and power through the machinations of textuality in this bold new collection that updates formalist and conceptual practices to provide a searing, comical, provocative, and ultimately humanist critique of how we use and abuse language to form and enforce culture.

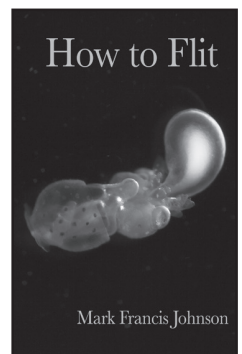


### ECHOLOCATION by Evelyn Reilly

"...refreshes one's sense of the thrilling necessity of poetry. Reilly's opening tour-de-force is a suite of poems conducted, with her uniquely grave humor, like a lepidopterist's outing in the Anthropocene: spotting, not netting, paradoxical fragilities of metamorphic selves: selves and echos of selves attempting to locate one another."—*Joan Retallack*

### HOW TO FLIT by Mark Francis Johnson

"...like an extended set by a dj dropping crateloads of warps and distorted riffs from the obscurities, b-sides, audio curiosities, and hoarded finds of a lifetime of dusty milk-bin trawls."—*Craig Dworkin*



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# ART: DRONE HUNTER

## DRONE HUNTER

The year is 2032. I am a survivor. It's been one thousand four hundred and sixty days since I left the army, a veteran of the Second Civil War (2024-2028).

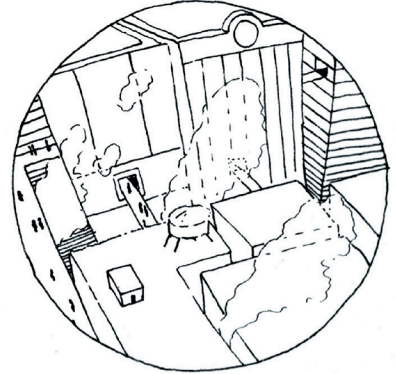
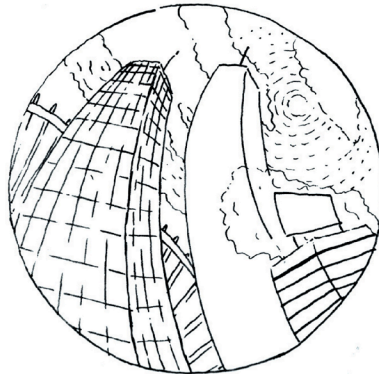
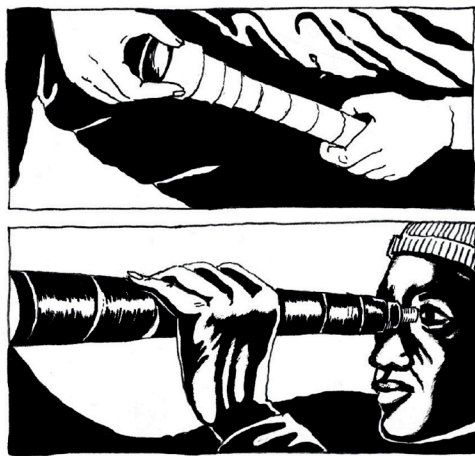
I have set up a mobile live/work shop in the desolate outer borough of Brooklyn. Former Governor Cuomo's 2017 pre-election, at-the-time unfulfillable, automation promises echo in my dreams. It all did not happen as quickly as planned, but when, as a result of intense lobbying efforts, automation was fully-funded, there was no way of stopping it. The Cruise Automation Corporation led the surge, using public funds at huge profits. Now all vehicles within the limits of most big cities are fully automated only. Policing is focused on the urban centers "...in order to maintain order," and automated traffic is a mathematical boon. Robots and drones perform all public policing. We're mapping their maneuvers, hacking away at the underbrush of their governing algorithms.

We, the Drivers, are a dwindling network of bandits roaming the ex-urb sprawl of all major cities in general, and, in our case, the outer boroughs of New York City.

Drivers occupy the fringes of this fully automated city as it lurches forward, ever forward, in step with the pervasive kyphosis of its citizenry. The average person's pocket brain usage is non-stop during waking hours. Their spines curve forward and their heads hang like pendulums. Bad posture is a contagious position.



# ART: DRONE HUNTER



# ART: DRONE HUNTER

The use of 3D-printed drones has proliferated beyond regulation. The black market drives the development of smaller and smaller swarm and solo drones. The federal government has been overtly guiding the black market since long before the push by Amazon and Google. In its efforts to make DNA data collection and general surveillance more discrete, the government is developing bio-mimicry drones called Micro Air Vehicles (MAV's), nearing the size of mosquitoes, ostensibly, to collect blood samples.

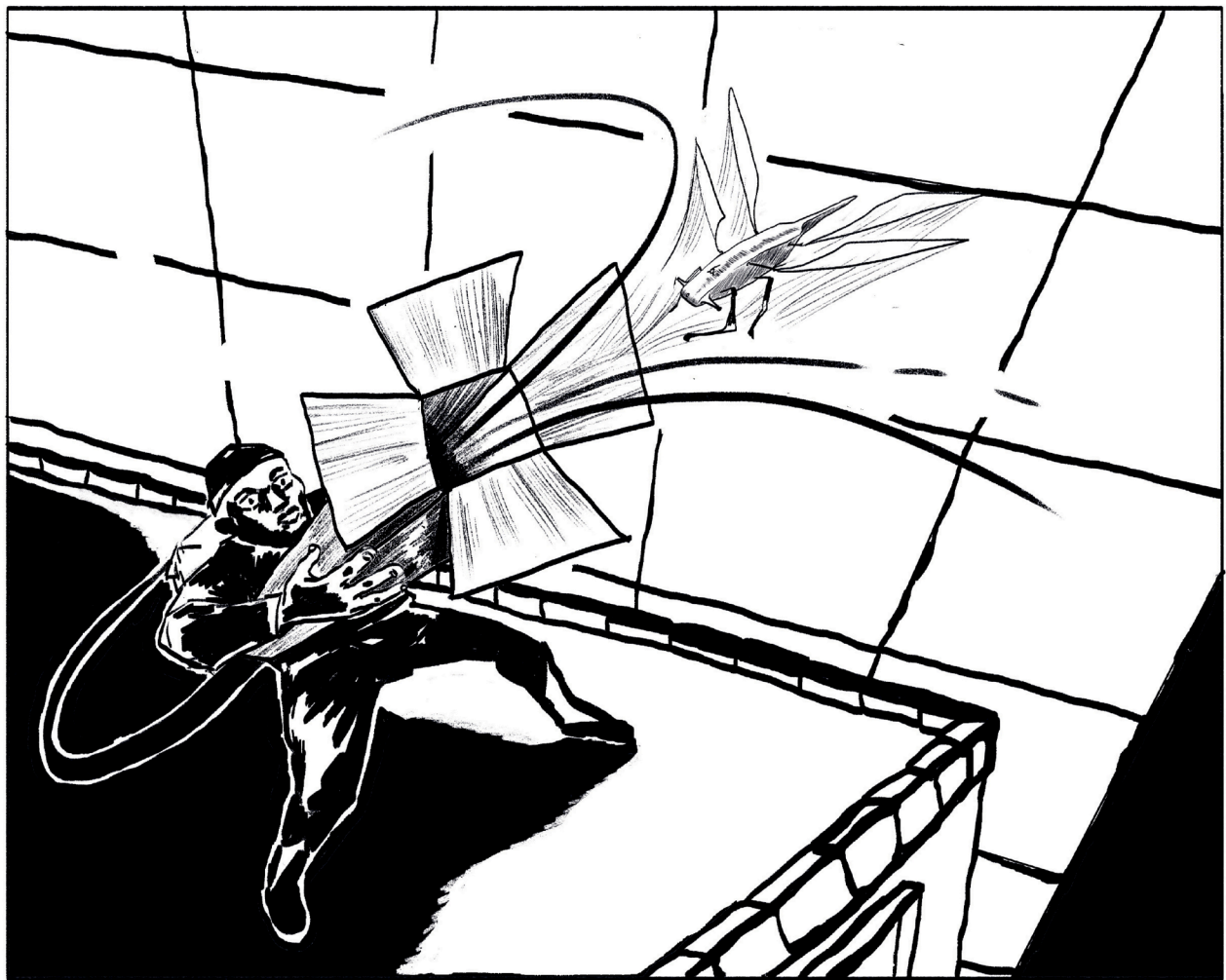
They tell us their plans for drone use are limited to 3D mapping and building during this, the Second Reconstruction, search and rescue missions, and tree planting to combat deforestation.

The actual uses already include fomenting small outbreaks (i.e. E-bola), and panic, and, silently, assassination.





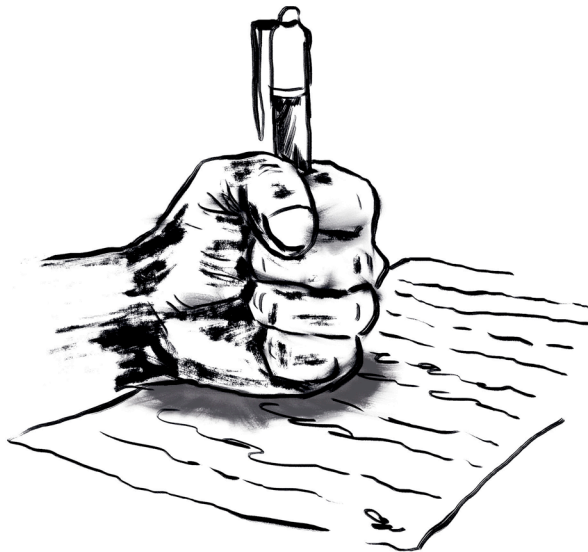
# ART: DRONE HUNTER



# ART: DRONE HUNTER

Collection, dissection, and reassignment are my primary sources of peace from my ghosts. I am a discriminating collector. I am also amassing an arsenal of drones to defend myself against the government when they come for me. In hindsight we are all naïve. The horrors we are sowing now shall be obvious upon future reaping.

A vestigial plan of action germinates in the fecund soil of my gut.



# DISPATCH FROM MISSOULA: Stacy Szymaszek

Charles told me to write a poem today. It's 12:45pm and so far the only honorable things I've done are write back to Charles, eat breakfast, and take a long bath. I put on clean clothes and laced up my boots. All of my other actions were intended to keep me from writing a poem. Look at how much I love Charles, to confront the notion that I have nothing more to say in the manner of the poem.

I read recently (in a library book "due a year from today") that Adam and Eve only spent three hours in paradise. And that Adam lived 930 years and was 90 feet tall. Olson (another Charles) said there is no limit to what you can know. I think I can no longer know anything. How about I just be kind to animals. The bible rarely mentions the deaths of women, except for Jezebel, who was defenestrated and eaten by stray dogs. You can look up "How bad was Jezebel?" for the history (history, what Olson calls the function of any one of us). If Adam lived to be 930 I have to entertain the belief that he was never born.

I remember a photograph of Olson at Black Mountain with a poncho on but when I look for it I find one of him writing shirtless with a bottle of wine covered in woven straw on his desk, a blanket over his left shoulder, and another of him wearing a suit with a blanket over same shoulder. Did I invent his poncho as an authoritative vestment? "WOT 'APPENED?" To get at the density/not so easy. The man who declares he will not solve any problems or answer any questions is nearly extinct, as is the mountaineer whose intent is across and not up. I misread a sign with a mountain's name as WOOL WIND. A solution and my problem presented hand in hand, hateful of wind blowing against my body. I'd like to don a wool poncho to exemplify my vocation in its westward iteration. I wander in wool, tho unsure.

A nun could strike a bell for nocturne and I'd be there. I'd run up the fire path and leave the phone behind, I want to say "off the hook." What of life before 1850,

pre-telegraph, don't tell me human consciousness wasn't different then, and before then... and lost to us. The pink and yellow Petite Gerberas I presented Charles with when she was here one week ago still have their life force. When I want to get a message to her I remember those to whom smuggling was second nature, and what patience. Her boots are by the door for next month's walk.

A student from the east coast introduced himself to me the other day in my office. I felt the need to tell him I was just borrowing it from a poet on sabbatical. These are definitely not my books. I miss my books. I printed my name in blue marker on an index card and taped it to the door. We talked about being surrounded by mountains for the first time. He said he felt embraced by them. Being from the Midwest I don't like to feel surrounded, not even by the skyscrapers of the city I most love, but once I'm up in the range I realize that I am surrounded by nothing. When I think I'm alone, usually it's because I'm not paying attention:

tops of ears visible in the wheat

a golden stance in new air.

14 September 2018

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**Stacy Szymaszek** is the author of *Journal of Ugly Sites & Other Journals*, *hart island*, *Emptied of All Ships*, *Hyperglossia*, and many chapbooks. She has worked at Woodland Pattern Book Center in Milwaukee, WI and was the Director of The Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church in New York City from 2007 to 2018.

# DISPATCH FROM MISSOULA: Stacy Szymaszek





# DISPATCH FROM MISSOULA: Stacy Szymaszek



# Reviews

## LETTER FROM REVIEWS EDITOR JOHN RUFO:

*This set of reviews feels particularly special to me, as two of the writers written with here – Simone White and Stacy Szymaszek – previously worked at The Poetry Project, first as reading series coordinators and then as Program Director and Executive Director, respectively. The work of The Poetry Project is labor of poets with poets, and I'm excited to present reviews reading those who have done so much to ensure that writers, coming from New York City and from "out of town," have a place for performance and sociality at the Project. Simone and Stacy – thank you!*

*Other connections exist here as well: reek bell, with immediate lyric and careful work on Simone White's *Dear Angel of Death*, read with Jasmine Gibson during the release party in Philadelphia for *Don't Let Them See Me Like This*, a collection that came out this past June and is also reviewed in this issue. Stacy Szymaszek's *A Year From Today* was also published that June on the same press, which is when William Camponovo corresponded with me about reviewing Meena Alexander's *Atmospheric Embroidery*. And for Meena Alexander's work, among other place, at CUNY Graduate Center, where Laura Henriksen gave me a review copy of *A Year From Today*. There exists a certain summer buzz about all of these reviews being published together. All of them have been worked on for some months, almost in a reverse hibernation: there are ready, now, to be published in our December/January "wintry mix" issue.*

*The issues covered in these books range widely, to which our writings attest. Themes of care and state violence seem to come to the forefront: these are a poetics of seeing to each other's needs and pleasures in the midst of brutality. Intimacies through pain, shared, chosen care and Black maternities becomes reek bell's lens through which Simone White's *Dear Angel of Death* gets taken up. Though I write a bit differently regarding *Don't Let Them See Me Like This* by Jasmine Gibson, the importance of live commemorative spaces emerges in a related sequencing. "Traumas, be they historical and personal, are not hermetically-sealed events," Camponovo reminds us in a deep study of *Atmospheric Embroidery* by Meena Alexander. "The situation of illness, of surgery—or of environmental devastation—is not anathema to the everyday; it is endemic to the everyday." Keeping this in mind, tuned towards regularity, the final piece on *A Year From Today* by Stacy Szymaszek keeps the quotidian kaleidoscopic, where shifts in light engage the many daily windows into restlessness and rest. We never stop moving, even in our stillness.*

*After completing this issue's letter, we were informed that Meena Alexander had passed away. We are incredibly grateful for her presence and her work. William Camponovo has written a reflection appended to the *Atmospheric Embroidery* review in appreciation of Alexander.*

— John Rufo

*If you would like to send writing about/with writing for The Poetry Project Newsletter, send an email to: reviews.ppnl@poetryproject.org*

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## **Simone White's *Dear Angel of Death* (Ugly Duckling Presse, 2018) Review by reek bell**

Last June, during my 12-day stay in an inpatient psych ward, I met a fellow patient, a black woman who didn't speak except to warn us when our behavior was about to get us in trouble. The first time I really saw her I was crying and yelling, feeling confined without control. She mouthed the words "the quiet room." I was confused at what she meant but then remembered that if you're too loud, too upset, too intense, make them afraid in anyway, they put you in the quiet room and sedate you. She reminded me as quickly as she could. I shut up as quickly as I had started to cry. She didn't talk to me much during the rest of my time there, but I loved her enough to make sure she had enough iced tea boxes at lunch. My angel of psychotic malaise. I thought of her often while reading Simone White's new poetry collection *Dear Angel of Death*. I hoped she was okay, missed her quiet love, wondered if she was tired – if she ever actually felt rested. I thought of the Black mothers whose children live beyond their blood, and their body, but of their love and care. I thought of how often our expectations in relationships can be non-consensual, due to the social obligations that come with a role, or a perception of identity. But sometimes, sometimes, we get to choose who we share our care and support with. I'm grateful she shared some of that with me.

"...Its paradigm is the burning bush; psychosis matériel, madness of cause..."

*Dear Angel of Death* opens up with tender revelations from a new mother mourning the ends of relationships and the beginnings of so much unknown; the chaos of hope in times of uncertainty. The book transitions from poetry to prose through

"Dollbaby," "Endings," and the closing essay, which has the same title as the book. The essay is essentially a dissertation about what White questions as the role of music in the "contemporary thought project of blackness." The position of music as a gathering stone, what we gain, and what we overlook within that.

"I'm asking whether the music we have today, not the music we used to have or the music we imagine, costumes to offer up, as it actually is, something we might look to as a prophecy of being different in blackness, some impossible writing on the air like thought balloon" (*Dear Angel of Death*)

The movement from intimate poetry to theory and cultural critique can feel a bit daunting, yet it all makes sense as a collection. I had to take some breaks, in which I found myself drifting back to poems like "Stingray," and "We are Here to Slow Time."

"what if  
my own being  
broken  
is the new law" ("We are here to slow time")

White's poems left me thinking of birth, death, what to leave behind, what to hold on to. Being Black under the state's shadow of violence. Divesting from what we think vs. what we know, what we're uncertain of, but we hope to explore. The crash of it all. The fight for what we love and the bits of culture we're allowed to claim. The exhaustive repetition of pushing against structural chaos.

"Is Stingray the atomic principle of gigantism  
Make my whole mouth move around the fire  
Make the fire everywhere or cold" ("Stingray")

Re-reading the poems that resonated with me felt like sitting with a stinging sensation. Like when you rub sanitizer all over your hands and forget about all your small cuts. Just sitting there quietly in pain, waiting for the release.

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**reek bell** is an artist based in Philadelphia. A poet since the third grade, their work embraces melancholy, values intimacy, friendship, and militancy. You can find more of their work at [reekbell.com](http://reekbell.com)

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**Jasmine Gibson's *Don't Let Them See Me Like This* (Nightboat, 2018)  
Review by John Rufo**

The pages of Jasmine Gibson's *Don't Let Them See Me Like This* come drenched. As one line relates, "[I] got soggy on my way here." Saturated and sinking, yet also floating burning pyre, quicksand historicity moving with invoked place-names of Philadelphia, New York, Finland, the Bay Area, the American South, and endless shaking seas, Jasmine Gibson's poems believe in and bleed an oozing viscosity that bends the categories "nature," "the body," and "politics," pushing them into pressurized zones of distortion, blending to disappearance fictional borders. All of this work is done in order to more precisely hold false categories to account and under the piercing lights of sun and moon. The dense fracture at play in the lines doesn't give the reader the sense of an incoming weather pattern; instead, right now, right here, *Don't Let Them See Me Like This* centers the silty cyclone of street protest and riot, police violence (a redundancy), prison breaks, and, among all of that "governmentality," the thickening thunderstorm of incantation attending to shifting emotions and actions between friends and lovers.

In its whirlpool of both cosmos and cyst, one could be tricked into thinking *Don't Let Them See Me Like This* is a poetic of reckless abandon and pure bender off everything. But the anarchy is planned, even if each section break is a surprise. Gibson is a meticulous, matter-focused thinker and poet, one whose dialectics and critical signs admix historical materialisms, psychological scrutiny, poetics concerning the disruption of relation, and what Hortense Spillers has crucially theorized as "the flesh." These are not sloganeering poems, but sloughing off dead skin poems for the weight of a burning world. There is placement and removal, birth and abortion, of all substance. Spinoza, despite his genderqueer propensities for immanence, couldn't propel and shake like this. So if there is a genealogy to which the book belongs, maybe it's that one for which Jasmine Gibson gathers her writing in the thoroughgoing, revolutionary Book of Revelations that could be called the Black Radical Women's Circle, some of whom "live, love and die without names" as the book's dedication recites.

In the epiphenomenon of this epigraph, *Don't Let Them See Me Like This* surges forth a series of devotions for those who lived and died but were not consumed, a poetic earthquake ritual. Gibson writes: "Imagine all of the stories slaves would have written / If they didn't die writing with their flesh." This signification of the flesh marks that punctured reality which Hortense Spillers reveals: that the flesh belonging to the enslaved African and their



# Reviews

descendants becomes something before “the body,” a mechanism for writing that tells, sings, and screams even when so many insist on the silence in the archives, the absence in the ledger, empty corridors or listless statistics. “Don’t Let Them See Me Like This” is a burning request that churns out of the waves for those who went overboard: like M. NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!*, Gibson follows the lines already written with and by the flesh to come into something greater than any canonical story or odyssey. This might be called staying “up deep into the night,” a midnight song that demands intense excavation. What it is to look and to see, “not like this,” like them, but, maybe, instead, as “fleshy sea floors” and “the marshy, dewy feeling of freedom”? It’s something that has been revolt of the many, in all place-times, the nature of which is “holy work, and I find pilgrims everywhere I go.” The damp past condensates as the present, so that we might inhabit and learn from “the crochet text-flesh of our friends.”

If there is a romance in this, though, Gibson seems unconvinced. Heroes are not welcome here. If one of the longest poems is titled, “Love Life,” it’s only because the concepts of love and intimacy are maneuvered in all of their surrounding and cloudy hurts, aches, and geologic pains, pleasure and fighting in the same yard. Gibson writes of being the “Queen of Ache,” making a nomination towards the strange strains of coming together, where all becoming cannot be thought of without a kind of brutality. And the psychological and social cannot be thought and felt without the processes of ingesting. There is so much eating and drinking in these pages, like a blood feast on the molecular level that geysers and gestures into the city, into the desert, finally running forth into the sea, then back to the shore “like Heavy Metal.” See how Gibson calls us up into the context of flesh on the atomic level: “I want to merge, live inside, split into your cells / Until flesh itself is only thought of as contextual.” There’s even a narrative around the abortion of a tooth to make more of a gap, to fit as to burst, and then all together, as “all my friends’ teeth decided to commune with mine.” The cell and the gap of one’s body and one’s mouth converts and turns into the structural fact that “people have been dying on the cellular level” and cell blocks made by “progressives” believing deeply in the Prison Industrial Complex. These are some recordings of the violence and wetness cycling among and spider-webbed between persons, friends, and nation-states.

As Gibson might say, “it’s capital that sputters in our gestational tracts” and “viscus is the value begotten from labor.” Desire is drenched with political longing and political failure, “that can’t be seen because there’s a sea between.” Against the cruel evils of racial capitalism and

those who shy away via thin critique loosely costumed, there’s a Marxist undertone that can’t be anything but Black tracing these histories, doubling down on an analytic of desire, hungry all over, eager for the mythic breakdown of the myth of the United States and Europe in order to enable a new geography with no walls. There’s no mistake in the shattering that happens under the wheels when “abolition is my chariot.” Entropic and complex, Gibson cares for the cutting song that “the ocean always knew.” What does the sea say? What might the mountains moan? Difficult but true, this tint and stained strain of interpersonal relations, that “poetry is very much like schizophrenia.” Psychologically dense because it’s fucking complicated.

At least there is music. This poetic protest follows from official party channels having failed again and again, with blood “the same color as MAC’s “Ruby Woo” and a soundtrack featuring Black Sabbath and Depeche Mode, among others. Jasmine Gibson’s reminder is a rejoinder to those who promote the political and utterly fail to consider the failure of companionship. It is a commemorative space for those “who would’ve been happy to just taste the sun once.” And it all sounds really good, play that fucking loud, again and again, because “you like the noise of me,” our sacred scarred shouted secret, the secretions of being seen and heard like that, a sensual world turned inside and out. This is the theory of how we scream.

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**John Rufo** is the reviews editor for *The Poetry Project Newsletter*.

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**Meena Alexander’s *Atmospheric Embroidery* (TriQuarterly Press/Northwestern University Press, 2018)**

**Review by William Camponovo**

*I’m not sure I have the mental distance yet to step back and properly contextualize things, but I will offer this, if you think any of it would be helpful, or of use, as an addition: I had the privilege of knowing Meena over the years in various capacities as a teacher, a mentor, even a fellow writer-in-residence in Malibu, in which we traded poems and wine over the Pacific Ocean, wondering if this hallucinatory existence could possibly be real. One of our constant conversation topics was the poetry and legacy of Adrienne Rich, a poet we both loved and admired, and whom Meena had known as a friend. My current project is a manuscript about Rich’s poetics, much of it informed by my many conversations with Meena, but as Meena’s health declined, she quite understandably found herself unable to provide*

*feedback. And then, one morning, out of the blue, she wrote to me saying, "Last night Adrienne visited me," and told me how the poet spoke to her in a dream. "Adrienne has written of the body's pain," Meena said, and told me how Rich worked indefatigably until the end, as Meena did. And so, naturally, Meena said to me: send me more work. And that is the Meena I recognize--kind, giving, but also tireless. She would correspond with poets in dreams and would take her cues from their spirit. I hope she visits in a dream someday.*

Meena Alexander is a truly international writer: born in India, raised and educated in India and Sudan, later educated in England, and currently a long-time resident of and Professor in New York, her work is, then, transnational, often dealing with the effects of passage and migration vis-a-vis memory, identity, and citizenship. She works through a variety of forms, from poetry to fiction to memoir, and in so doing interweaves personal narrative and theory, inviting and demanding various genres and discourses, asking the reader to work through collage, fragmentation, assemblage.

Alexander's new collection of poetry *Atmospheric Embroidery* opens with the poem "Aesthetic Knowledge," and this title frames immediately the line(s) of inquiry Alexander aims to undertake and pursue in her newest collection. The book, both lyrical and historical, intimate and maximal, engaged equally with the epic and the fragment, fundamentally interrogates knowledge and the various forms it can (and must) take—discursive, rhetorical, yes, sure, but also memorially, experientially, in and through the sensorium, physically and psychically.

The book works through an ever-expanding sense—and I do mean this in the literal as well as figurative definition of the word—of place. Place is the ground of experience but is also the memory of it, is thus temporally and spatially dislocated, is a thing inscribed on our very bodies as lived markers. Even the poem itself becomes a place, and so reading activates that site of contestation and negotiation. Knowledge, then, roots itself in sites inhabited as well as imagined, and Alexander is concerned with the ways in which these necessarily various forms and structures of knowledge are recognized—and by what power structures—as legitimate, and to what political or psychological effect.

In this first poem "Aesthetic Knowledge," Alexander opens with the lines: "These are the practices of

bodily art— / Burn an almond, collect the soot, mix it with butter." In these commands, these instructions, information is inscribed in the sensorium, inexorably linked with the body. The "art" is experienced physically, and we can assume individually, but it also operates too in the realm of tradition. In here and in many of the poems, the bridge between knowledge and art occurs and also becomes intentionally blurred at the local, at the site of the experiential body.

The poem "Magnificat" (already plunging us from into the realm of the liturgical from the onset) enacts for us the blurring of the private and the public to sweeping effect. It opens:

On the road near the hospital  
A plum tree points to Krakatoa and her plumage

The skies Munch painted athwart an open mouth  
Are molten still, the tint of ripe plums.

The radiologist a young thing quips—New kind of  
tattoo—  
Marks initials on my breast [...]"

In the first stanzas, our setting is intimate on the level of the hospital and also historically expansive, taking us to Krakatoa and to Munch (—that the artist's masterwork is unnamed seems to me part of the point: The Scream is ubiquitous, is already understood, and yet, in this poem, is sourced to its creative origin, is given, in some sense, a voice). The "plumage" of Krakatoa is juxtaposed with the temporary-yet-permanent marks that indicate a surgical procedure. And while we have entered the intimate register of the breast, the sentence does not end there, continues:

A man in a mask scrawls X under that  
His eyes dark with volcanic mist

(The one in Iceland,  
Sooting up airspace, grounding planes)."

Far from being a parenthetical aside, the ecological fragility of the planet hovers over this poem, and "Magnificat," for all its bodily intimacy, ends somewhat hallucinatorily in a state of anxiety about nothing less than the air and the literal ozone. We have come a considerable distance, geographically, to be sure. But we've also come a considerable



# Reviews

distance temporally, and it's this I find key for Alexander. Traumas, be they historical and personal, are not hermetically-sealed events. The situation of illness, of surgery—or of environmental devastation—is not anathema to the everyday; it is endemic to the everyday.

While volcanoes are, surely, broad representations of situating oneself within the world (and perhaps depersonalized), the book deals with urgent, contemporary traumas. In the final section of the book, Alexander includes "Death of a Young Dalit" and "Moksha" in sequence. The first poem memorializes—"We who dare to call him by his name—giddy spirit/Became fire that consumes things both dry and moist"—student and activist Rohith Vemula, a young PhD student at the University of Hyderabad who wrote, in his suicide note, "*My birth is a fatal accident [...]*". The subsequent poem, "Moksha," is dedicated to Jyoti Singh Pandey, killed in a barbaric gang rape in South Delhi in 2012. The woman is referred to as "Nirbhaya," meaning "fearless," and in her physical fight—"She fought back with fists and teeth"—joins a symbolic and spiritual one:

Last night in dreams I watched her  
In a crush of women severed from their bodies

Drifting as slit silk might  
In a slow monsoon wind.

In an interview with Ruth Maxey in Alexander's *Poetics of Dislocation*, a collection of essays, autobiographical vignettes, prose poems, an intentionally-varied and genre-defying meditation on poetry and poetics, the poet states, as a kind of call-to-arms, "In a time of violence, the task of poetry is in some way to reconcile us to our world and allow us a measure of tenderness and grace with which to exist." This newest collection of poems asks us to manage that grace in this, a time, certainly, of violence. This collection manages that task, but its foundational achievement is to recognize that we, as readers, also have a reciprocal responsibility in that task.

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**William Camponovo's** poetry has appeared in Iron Horse Literary Review, The Seattle Review, The Los Angeles Review, and online at Poetry Northwest. With Lost + Found and the CUNY Poetics Document Initiative, he has edited and published work by poets Gregory Corso and Jack Forbes.

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**Stacy Szymaszek's *A Year from Today* (Nightboat, 2018)**

**Review by John Rufo**

[*Summer*] I read Stacy Szymaszek's books on the train, bumped up against backpacks and elbows, hands wrapped around cold metal stanchions to stabilize, though invariably everyone wobbles and pivots as the subway gets dizzy in its speeding up and slowing down from stop to stop. The words on the page bounce with the tracks: are they spaced on the page to mimic these leaps? Opening and closing the book as I get on and off, I am always trying to stand clear of a closing door in the middle of reading Szymaszek's recent *A Year From Today*, "stand clear of closing doors 3x / nothing / derailment on my mind." It's summer, but I count the number of boots vs. no boots, trying to determine if the no-boots people forgot to check the forecast for sudden July thunderstorms or are simply braving their chances and doing it for fashion. In these poems, seasonally arranged starting in spring and concluding in winter, we often await the F train from Brooklyn to Manhattan and back again. I'm taking the B downtown while writing this on my phone, taking pictures of phrases and sending them to friends, saying "From Stacy's new book!" then maybe getting photos of some stranger's wistful whiskered small dog looking askance over its shoulder bundled into a bag, and an afternoon light picture of St. Nicholas park once I emerge from the underground. A consistent awareness of corporeal time in the poem's light: "hour and ½ uptown and back down / hour waiting / 2 minutes to look at my ovaries." Writing is never not with the person writing, as Szymaszek says: "forget half of what I write as I write / in my head walking if I wrote on my hand / I'D FORGET / MY HAND." In these poems, we never forget the hand nor the time, how it's told, how it's archived vs. how we perceive it: "the test result service emails / auto-send at 4am when I tend / to wake in panic or from a dream." These things are an autobiographical mattering of the psychological, social, spiritual, and corporeal experience of floating in the informational sea: events, medical reports, plans, meeting up, travel. And information meets imagination: Szymaszek envisions a "butch angel" performing gynecological exams: we awake from dreams to our emailed 4am test results and then slumber with the numbers rattling around the room. I feel a kinship of kinetics and movement both in the crowded train space but also in the atmospheric collectivity made by the activity of this stationary-in-motion daily way of being. Stacy Szymaszek knows what it means to be in communion on the commute, the importance of where we're going to or departing from and the

additional attention paid to how we got there.

[Fall] Szymaszek's three recent books *Hart Island*, *Journal of Ugly Sites*, and *A Year from Today* exist in this quotidian zone of habitual wandering, purposefully presented as poetics speaking in a private language that's still for you, becoming "more autobiographical," more revealing as they go: "Why would I write if I thought no one / — would read it"? An odd joke goes something like: "What if you opened your daily newspaper and, instead of the dryly written reports, you were given Pascal's *Pensées*?" Stacy Szymaszek's poetics dance where the abstract philosophical and theological fragments intermingle with the day-by-day weather and warfare: where every question about St. Francis meets a delayed subway; where the pile of books in the apartment is always in relation to both their contents and the dog sniffing around their paperback covers ("Diderot's *The Nun* / Perec's *La Boutique Obscure* / Baldwin's *Another Country*..."); where making breakfast in the morning almost always also means reading about terror committed by the United States, in and outside of its invented borders, and hearing a "robin making a ruckus" in the flower box. We "have to learn some ITALIAN...Italian for beginners — at 12:45" while, in the same day, facing a string of homophobic stings as "gay news makes me cry." We have the daily news and the regular neighborhood image: one recurs in *A Year From Today* of schoolchildren holding onto the same rope while they walk together: "the preschoolers grip the rope and walk / around and around," "preschool walks lines of 15 kids holding a rope / — day in — day out," "15 hands on a rope / singing about bees." I admire the slow zoom, where singing about bees and state violence are part and parcel of the everyday without succumbing to a pessimistic grind. Violence in Ukraine, Palestine, and Staten Island sit adjacently without losing their particularities, and the page isn't simply a space for reportage but for processing as well. When you hear news like this, what are you eating? Do you eat for the rest of the day? The emails don't stop either, the duties of "REPORTS / GALORE." How did you sleep?

Frank O'Hara finds his way as an influence (with a great piece of advice about finishing *Lunch Poems* and then leaving it in a public restroom for the next person to find it), but also Pasolini (his unsolved murder, still unsolved), Leopardi (imagining his work on onion skin), Alice Notley (phrases from *Mysteries of Small Houses* milling about, and the spacing of *A Year From Today* feels indebted to her crystal ships), Renee Gladman (who appears throwing a

frisbee in the grass and presiding in philosophical geographies), Eileen Myles (grabbing coffee in the afternoon, casually poeticizing), and many others. It's a life brimming with poetry and poets, and yet we don't feel like this is simply a list of names, but a living-with. "Administrating isn't processing," Szymaszek takes care to remind us. There are many types of archives, and Szymaszek's *A Year From Today* is about future and belief: "somebody should get this down — otherwise no one — will believe it!" This archive work wants the reader to face the incarceration crisis of the United States and specific antiBlack violence sponsored by the government, while insisting that we "all take notes / on the dreams of others" as a form of socialism. Writing in *A Year From Today* becomes active listening and action, to the "spider — spider" forming a web in the bathtub to the preschool children holding the rope outside to the anti-Fascist protestors all on the same page. The problems are forward: "Phobia as energy," writes Szymaszek. "That moves around." In order to counter and fight phobic violence, Szymaszek reveals a certain complexity shining in the everyday, bristling lovingly and humorously like a spruce tree with reminders: "drift / wake — DRINK WATER FOOL."

[Winter] I drink water and I try not to be (too much of) a fool. We miss Stacy Szymaszek dearly at the Poetry Project. This review can't even begin to get entangled in all the work Stacy has done here, from organizing marathon New Year's Day readings to editorial notes, the grant writing and workshops, reading series and their various introductions: all of this activity and more in service towards intimate and gathering poetics. I might sound nostalgic (one of the first readings I went to in New York City was the Marathon as assembled by Stacy) but all of these events — some enormous and celebratory; others smaller and humming — reverberate through *A Year From Today* as well: any casual reader will glimpse what the Poetry Project has done and continues to do by way of Stacy. We are lucky to have had Saint Stacy Szymaszek, "in an everyday theology," in our midst, "haunt[ing] the religion section," and the Project's copy of *A Year From Today* (although it has made its various pilgrimages, courtesy of Laura Henriksen who kindly smuggled it up to CUNY for me one afternoon) proudly sits on top of the office bookcase, a cool orange-covered altar gazing over the desks.

[Spring] There the book will continually re-visit, cyclically, a year from today and many after.

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**John Rufo** is the reviews editor for *The Poetry Project Newsletter*.

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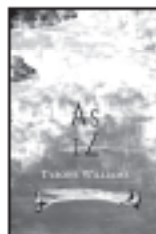
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**OMNIDAWN**



# Q&A: Carina del Valle Schorske

## 1. Did you always want to be a poet?

Weirdly, yes. Or at least—a writer. There's a video of me in second grade for a school time capsule project, where the second graders interview each other, and many of my answers are eccentric. When they ask me where I'd like to take a vacation, I say "England—because of all the HISTORY!" Kind of a colonized mind moment. Much later I'd read Jamaica Kincaid's essay "On Seeing England for the First Time," where she visits the white cliffs of Dover after reading about them in countless poems. "They were not white; you would only call them that if the word 'white' meant something special to you." Well then! Like Kincaid I think I was influenced by what I had been told was literary. *The Little Princess*, *The Secret Garden*, etc. I wanted to participate. But when they ask what's most important to me, I say "my family, my feelings... and oh! The big book of stories I'm working on." This is the early evidence. Soon after, I would discover that I don't have a gift for plot, and poetry presented itself as an alternative to storytelling. Poetry permitted my precious feelings—I was an only child, a crybaby, and a precocious people pleaser—a proper place. Yikes, that alliteration! Over time I'd have to learn that my poetry couldn't stay proper if it was actually going to help me live. Let alone others. But poetry remains a place where I can keep secrets out loud. A place for paradoxes like that.

## 2. What has surprised you most about your dedication to this writer's path?

I like this question, with its implication that dedication is itself surprising. That's definitely how I feel. Even though I'm a Taurus, I experience myself as disloyal and impatient, so the evidence of my own steadiness always takes me by surprise. Sometimes I "wake up" from rough stretches in my life and am amazed by the way I've unconsciously rationed my energies towards the projects or opportunities that are most likely to sustain my writing life. I think I haven't done anything but then I see I've done the one thing that enables me to go on. I'm surprised to find that I'm a good enough mother to myself. Not good, but good enough. On the other hand I'm surprised to find how vivid the lifelong torments remain. I guess when I was younger I thought I'd either quit or be cured.

## 3. What has been inspiring you lately?

The Spanish word *muchedumbre*, which means something like crowd or throng or undulating mass of bodies. It has an onomatopoetic quality. And then, relatedly, that Samuel Delany quote about the St. Mark's bathhouse: "political power comes from the apprehension of massed bodies." These readings or talismanic words inflect all I see, including the gulls at Deer Lagoon on Whidbey Island, where I'm in residency at Hedgebrook as I answer your questions. I'm inspired by their group choreographies, the way

form is always being dispersed and reasserted when I observe the flock at a distance. I'm not even sure if they think of themselves as belonging together. If they're family or what. Sometimes there's an eagle in there too, cruising for a meal—eagles eat gulls. But the gulls can't let that ruin everything. I guess I've been trying to think a lot about the powers and pleasures of crowds in tension with the urge to stand out or escape from them.

Back indoors after my windy walk, in a different mood, I'm more inspired by the small-scale. Right now I'm wearing these two gold rings with little emeralds that my mother gave me a few weeks ago, in acknowledgment of my book deal. They were hard to accept at first because I know she wears them a lot and they look beautiful on her—I didn't want to take. But she reminded me that she had originally given them to her mother, who gave them back to her years later. I love this circulating sense of occasion, of *bendición*, without a sense of ultimate ownership.

## 4. What is the best thing about being a poet right now? What is the most difficult?

I've noticed that other poets interviewed by The Poetry Project have spoken eloquently to the double bind of poetry's recent surge in popularity, and the relationship of this surge to social media's revolution in access. I share much of the excitement and ambivalence expressed before me, so rather than take up that refrain, I want to answer this question in a super personal way, as I feel my own identity as a poet waver. I haven't written "a poem" in a year, and I've only written five or so since starting a PhD program at Columbia in the fall of 2014. I'm not claiming causality there, just coincidence. In the dense tangle of academic writing I've found it easier to weave my way out of the institutional trap through essays adjacent to my research. I tell editors that I'm a poet in order to make excuses for my "leaps," because I still use image, sound, and intuition to project myself beyond sense, beyond what I think I know. Then of course I have to work backward to see what I'm saying. I guess what I'm liking about prose is the social aspect—prose circulates, and there's a culture of asking questions back at it. Sometimes I think we're kinda precious about poems—that the two choices are to praise them or dismiss them. As if poems are things, rather than propositions in public space.

## 5. Why is translating women by women (by indigenous or nearly native speakers) important (read: necessary)?

I want to answer this question in the key of shame and loss. I've often observed that people with the closest relationship to a given language are the most anxious about their capacity—both technical and ethical—to translate from it. I'm talking about

# Q&A: Carina del Valle Schorske

U.S. Dominicans worried about abusing their “American privilege” in relation to poets working in the Dominican Republic. Or second generation Cambodian immigrants stressing about how difficult it would be to render Hmong poetic practices in English. These anxieties are super valid—and let me assure you that white translators don’t have them. Or if they do, they don’t view them as disqualifying, which they’re not. People who grow up in multilingual environments know that the stakes of language are high, and tend to be particularly sensitive to the compromises, misunderstandings, powers, and perils of rendering someone else’s words in a new context. Of getting it wrong and of getting it right. Some of us have been punished for failing to preserve our “Old World” languages; some of us have been punished for preserving them too well. It’s taken me a long time to work on my Spanish and even longer to work through the knowledge that it will never be native, but rather, as you say, nearly native. I’ve come to understand these bad feelings as comprising their own language—which is ultimately a language of investment and care. It’s not Spanish that needs to be mastered (what a word!). It’s the space of translation that needs to be navigated tenderly. I want to share some work on translation that has guided my thinking here: Gayatri Spivak’s essay “The Politics of Translation,” Madhu Kaza’s special issue for *Asteri(x) Journal*, “Kitchen Table Translation,” John Keene’s “Translating Blackness,” and Raquel Salas Rivera’s writing on self-translation, “On Sovereignty and Self-Ownership,” as well as their book *El terciario / The Tertiary*. Spivak says: “Language is not everything. It is only a vital clue to where the self loses its boundaries.” That seems right to me.

Why is this important? Concretely speaking, translators often get asked to speak not only for the writer they’ve translated, but for that writer’s culture. And in some sense this isn’t wrong—ultimately a translator should be working from a holistic curiosity about the world language lives in. But it’s a problem when some of our only conversations about, say, Korean culture, are triggered by *The Vegetarian*, and then the translator—a person with a pretty attenuated relationship to that culture—suddenly becomes its ambassador. What else... I notice how white male translators have attempted to monopolize some of Latin America’s most prestigious women writers: Dulce María Loynaz, Clarice Lispector. Even if the translations are good, it can work as a kind of cultural colonialism. But I’m less concerned about these voices getting claimed by white men with little connection to the culture than I am about white men reinforcing, through translation, regimes of prestige that tend to favor the most Europeanized writers from non European countries. Who we choose to translate is just as important as how we choose to translate.

## 6. A passage from something you've read recently that has resonated:

I’ve been following Adrienne Rich’s essay, “Notes Towards A Politics of Location,” watching the way she dramatizes the process of thinking: “Theory—the seeing of patterns, showing the forest as well as the trees—theory can be a dew that rises from the earth and collects in the rain cloud and returns to the earth over and over. But if it doesn’t smell of the earth, it isn’t good for the earth... I wrote a sentence just now and x’d it out. In it I said that women have always understood the struggle against free-floating abstraction even when they were intimidated by abstract ideas. I don’t want to write that kind of sentence now, the sentence that begins ‘Women have always...’ We started by rejecting the sentences that began ‘Women have always had an instinct for mothering’ or ‘Women have always and everywhere been in subjugation to men.’ If we have learned anything in these years of late twentieth-century feminism, it’s that that ‘always’ blots out what we really need to know: When, where, and under what conditions has the statement been true?”

&

Derek Walcott in his Nobel Prize speech: “Tonally, the individual voice is a dialect.”

## 7. What do you think of the term "decolonization" and how we all seem to be throwing it around casually these days? Tell us about Puerto Rico. What role it plays in constructing your own terminology for "decolonization." Thrilled for your upcoming book!

Thank you! As the framing of your question already seems to understand, it’s hard for me to attend to the more abstract meanings of “decolonization” while the most literal colonial structures remain in place—for Puerto Rico, for the U.S. Virgin Islands, for Guam, for Palestine, and for many other places and peoples throughout the world. How can we “decolonize” when our understanding of who and what remain literally colonized remains so limited? I include myself in this we. Before I “decolonize” my mind, or my reading list, or my diet, or my romantic relationships, I want to develop a clear understanding of the colonial tactics—like trade and tax laws, like monolingualism, like depopulation, like debt—that block sovereignty for a place like Puerto Rico. To paraphrase Malcolm X, it’s hard to heal while the knife’s still in your back. Life has taught me that the psychic effects of material experiences are long.

I don’t expect my body or mind to ever be free of the effects of colonialism, nor do I expect that for you—I say that in a mode of compassion.



# Q&A: Carina del Valle Schorske

After all, we're talking about the long game here. Puerto Rico has the dubious distinction of being "the world's oldest colony," as a recent(ish) mural announces, in English, on Calle Norzgaray in Old San Juan, where the 16th century blue cobblestones shine and the beautifully restored old quarter is the jewel of the capital city—for tourists, but for Puerto Ricans, too. Our children are the ones who go to the Spanish fort at dusk to fly kites on the green lawn that sweeps down to the balustrades and the little white cemetery looking over the sea. This fort was the beginning of the end for Puerto Rican sovereignty, but now it's where we sit and plot and curse the cruise ships crowding the harbor. Fuck a cruise ship—even though that's how my grandmother and mother first brought me to our island, when I was 8. I ate waffles at the breakfast buffet and danced the Macarena on deck in a frenzy as the wind got wetter. Home had become hard-won, an affordable luxury. I can't decolonize that. But I don't have to erase that experience to protest or transform it. Like Rihanna, I'm always ANTI.

## 8. What is the key to a superb translation?

I'm always wary of keys! Does the door need to be locked? But if I accept the terms of your metaphor, I'd say that I want to feel that the translator has chosen to translate the work in the same way that the poet has chosen to write the poem. Maybe it's a commission, and that's ok. But the translator needs to connect to the part of herself that urgently seeks expression through writing. The loyalty shouldn't be to the original as it is written, but to the original as writing—the gerund that carries the impulse towards articulation through the unarticulated field.

Of course desire shouldn't manifest primarily as need in the manipulative sense, where the translator is demanding of the poem something the poem doesn't have to give... as in other intimate relationships, you need to be open to what the poem can teach you about new forms for your desire. All of this to the tune of "Love the One You're With"—the Aretha Franklin cover from *Live at the Filmore West*. I recommend it! A cover, after all, is a kind of translation.

## 9. What has been your favorite reading or moment at The Poetry Project?

I've spent less time at The Poetry Project than I want to, so I remember each time I've been very vividly. The memory that's calling out to me now: Christina Olivares wearing Fenty beauty's Stunna lip paint in *Uncensored*. I remember her mouth because she was reading from it, and later I'd purchase the same lip paint, which I'm sorry to say has the tendency to feather and bleed. That night Christina shared her essay on Audre Lorde's archives—and the startling experience of opening a box that contained (but almost couldn't contain) the artist's hair. The live version at the Poetry Project included material that I can't find in the published version at *Makhzin Magazine*—something about the garden in Christina's Bronx apartment, and the way seeds, like archives, store up information that requires care to access. In order to return to that material I have to call up the whole scene in sensory detail: Christina's lipstick, the chilly church, my chair at the end of the row and the experience of folding and loading it back up on the cart when the night was over.

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**Carina del Valle Schorske** is a poet, essayist, and Spanish language translator at large in New York City. Her writing has appeared in the *New York Times Magazine*, *Lit Hub*, the *New Yorker* online, the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *small axe salon*, and elsewhere, always elsewhere. She won Gulf Coast's 2016 Prize for her translations of the Puerto Rican poet Marigloria Palma—an ongoing project. She is currently at work on her first book, a psychogeography of Puerto Rican culture, forthcoming from Riverhead and tentatively titled *NO ES NADA: Notes from the Other Island*. Wherever you are, there is always another island to see through to.



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