

MONARCH_{No.1}



MONARCH

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Monarch

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This is the first issue of *Monarch*. Each copy is available for \$10, plus shipping. Expect next issue in Summer 2012. Please visit our website at **www.themonarchreview.org** for submission information, to purchase a copy, donate, and view web content. Send inquiries to editor@themonarchreview.org. The Monarch Review was founded by Nicolai Koveshnikov, Caleb Thompson, and Jake Uitti.

Thank you to J.W. and P. for your generous support.

Printed in Seattle, WA by A & A Printing.

Cover: "Just Another Chameleon" by Ollie Glatzer

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ISSN 2164 - 1749

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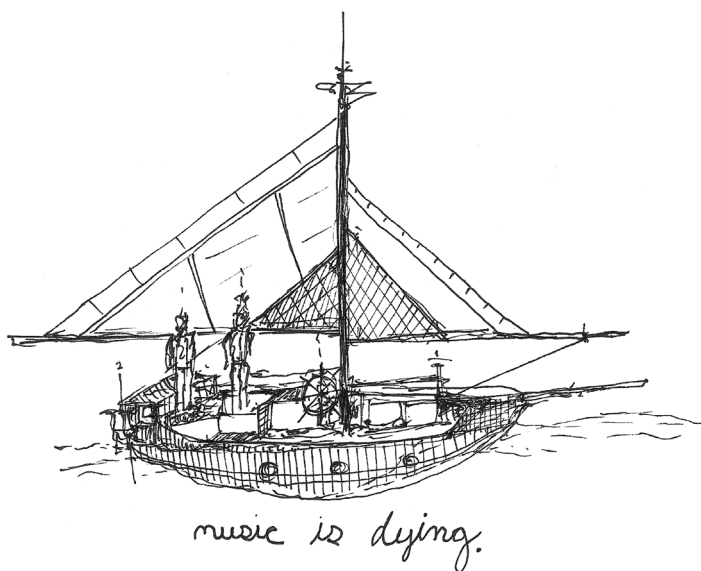


Note from the Editors

The stoop of the Monarch Apartments has heard its fair share of grandiose notions and lofty ideas. It's often the default living room where a rag-tag assortment of tenants and friends will spontaneously gather to talk and drink, make music and make merry. It's not uncommon, on summer evenings, to watch an impromptu salon convene and converse, gaining members here, losing a few there, and so on, late into the night. Aesthetic theories give way to exercises in loving insult; extemporaneous film reviews and arguments for their own sake float in the air alongside intoxicated anecdotes of comic sexual escapades or other foolish enterprises. Meals appear and disappear, bottles of wine are opened and emptied. Almost always someone is smoking a cigarette and someone else is bumming one, and someone is invariably going to the store to replace whatever goods most recently became scarce.

It was on just such a night that a few of us had the wild idea to start a literary magazine. We haggled names and themes and angles of all sort. Somebody insisted on publishing all work anonymously. Someone suggested beautiful women on the cover. Could we manage to fashion the entire publication around the issue of technology's effect on the arts? Should we publish our own work? What's the "con"? The possibilities were endless, a fact we would soon come to find is often more troublesome than advantageous. That night we shook hands, and we knew, one way or another, sooner or later, you'd be holding this very first print edition. For once, at least, the idea has come to realization.

As it turns out, there is no unifying theme, no over-arching theoretical tenet to which we collectively adhere. There is no “con,” only the simple belief that the vibrant, pluralist spirit of the Monarch Apartments can be extended to an audience at large through the publication of excellent new works. In these pages you will find an eclectic mix of poetry, prose, and visual art, from Zac Hill’s ingenious fictional interview with Justin Bieber to Rebecca Hoogs’s cleverly allusive, mellifluous verses; from Chris Engman’s eye-bending photographs to Jim Brantingham’s quieting meditation on mortality, and many more. We trust you will enjoy.



Jason Whitmarsh

History of Travel

Those who have made the journey have never returned. They plummeted from the edge (one theory), or disappeared in the storm, or died of thirst between wells. Actually, some have returned, but it was a long time later, when they no longer spoke our language, and their eyes were sunken, and we'd forgotten their names. Well, in truth several have returned after only a few days, with suntans and stacks of photos. But the photos were blurry, or too saturated, or not of us.

Bukowski Sleeps with the Most Beautiful Girl in Taiwan

Caleb Powell

Kai Na was the youngest of three daughters, and the most beautiful. She was the most beautiful girl in Taipei, and the most beautiful girl in Taiwan. Half Atayal aborigine, and half Chinese, she had serpentine physique and black eyes, with silk hair that Oriental poets thought extraordinary. Her soul, if not noble, carried a detached air that showed humility. She did not walk down the center path. Some said she was crazy. Usually mediocre people thought this. The men she came across considered her a sexual machine. They did not care if she was crazy.

Her older sisters disapproved of the way she used beauty. They called her foolish, but they were wrong. Kai Na was intelligent, clever, insightful, and she could draw well, dance, sing, and sculpt from clay. She sensed physical or mental anguish in other beings, and offered them understanding and sympathy. Her sisters envied how men became entrapped by her charm, and cursed her failure to take advantage. She gravitated toward the ugly. The pretty or the rich did not interest her. They made her nauseous.

Her father died of alcohol, and her mother abandoned the children. The three daughters sought distant family. Their relatives sent them to live in a monastery. The austere charity emitted unhappiness. Especially for Kai Na. All the nuns and other girls did not like her. Enmity developed. She cut herself with needles and razors. Her arms

scarred. If another girl antagonized her, instead of acting demure, she would strike. One girl gouged her cheek with the handle of a ladle, leaving a scar. But the scar did not diminish her beauty, it accentuated.

When she left the monastery she had to work. Though young and pretty, a scarred half-breed orphan girl had the chances of an old maid in Taiwan. She worked at a convenience store, and then as a “spicy hot girl,” dressed in a bikini top and shorts, selling betel nut, candies, cigarettes, and cans of beer at the side of the road to passing motorists. She discovered alcohol, and “rented” a room at a massage parlor. She serviced men and paid her boss a share at the end of the night. When she did not work at the massage parlor she went to bars.

Old Bull was twice, maybe three times her age, corpulent, with a bulbous nose. He sat at the bar and drank beer, and he was the ugliest man in the bar. He was the ugliest man in Taipei, the ugliest man in Taiwan, and the ugliest man Kai Na had ever seen. But Kai Na sat by him.

She asked, “You want me to put out your fire?”

“You drink liquor?” Old Bull asked.

“Why not?”

Old Bull motioned to the bartender. She had chosen to sit by him, and that was enough. Even massage girls never chose him. No pressure. He offered a drink, and she accepted. Old Bull felt proud. When the bartender poured, he smiled and said nothing. Kai Na was the most beautiful girl in the bar. Not only was Kai Na the most beautiful girl in Taipei, but she was the most beautiful girl Old Bull had ever seen. She guided his hand to her belt and let it rest underneath the counter on her upper thigh.

“So you think I’m beautiful?” Kai Na asked.

“Of course. But there’s something else...it surpasses beauty.”

“Everyone despises my beauty. Do you really think I’m beautiful?”

“Beautiful is not the word.”

Kai Na’s hand went on top of his hand, and then it went into her purse and grabbed a sewing needle. She showed him, and then she impaled the left flap of her nostril. She kept the needle there, the point protruded out the nose hole. Old Bull battled nausea.

She laughed. “You still think I’m beautiful? Tell me? Now what do

you think of me, old man?"

Old Bull grabbed the end and pulled the needle out. He wiped her blood with a handkerchief. He wondered if anyone saw. The bartender had. He walked over.

"Listen," the bartender said, "You do that again you leave."

"Fuck you, you old tortoise!" Kai Na said.

The bartender said to Old Bull, "Take her home."

Old Bull said, "I'll take care of her."

"This is my nose!" Kai Na said.

"I can treat my nose how I want."

"No." Old Bull said, "Unless you want to make me sad."

"A needle in my nose will make you sad?"

"Yeah."

"Okay," Kai Na said.

She touched his leg from underneath the counter, and then she smiled. They went to Old Bull's one-room apartment. They chatted. Old Bull thought he felt love. He knew that if she gave her body she would do so with savagery, an animal ferocity that Old Bull rarely saw even from the most professional and well-trained whores. She would be the most beautiful savage animal he had ever fucked. Only a few men or animals could ever be fucked so savagely. They went on the bed, he turned off the light, and Kai Na said, "You want it now?"

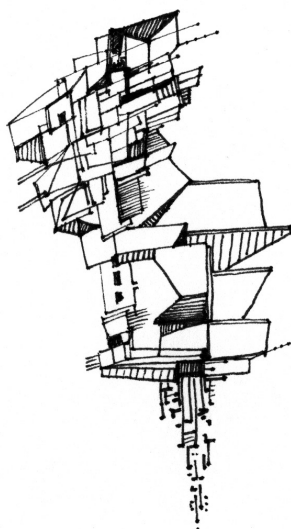
"In the morning." Old Bull was drunk, he was tired, and he turned his back.

In the morning she said, "You're the first man ever to refuse me."

"I am?"

"I want to do it. Let me go to the bathroom. Make myself pretty."

Kai Na stepped to the bathroom, and moments later looked even more beautiful, her long black hair reflected Taipei sun and smog



streaming from the window, her eyes and lips shone, she shook with a quiet tremor, and returned to the bed.

She said, "Love me!"

Old Bull went on top, and she let him kiss. His hands massaged her back, her whole body, her hair, and he went inside, warm and tight. He started to shake and stopped, held ejaculation, not wanting to waste.

"What's your name?" He asked.

"What's the difference?" She answered.

Old Bull laughed, they continued to make love, and he held to keep from release. This made her crazy. After sex she dressed, and he drove her back to the bar.

He could not forget her. Old Bull had no work, and searched for employment, but most days he slept in. In the afternoons he read the newspaper in the Taipei Botanical Gardens, or submersed in a tub of tepid water. One night she knocked on the door. He let her enter.

"I knew you were home," she said. Old Bull stood in a bathrobe.

"How'd you know?"

"I just knew."

Kai Na started to visit regularly, sometimes early, sometimes late, and they would make love. They would talk. Sometimes she would not come for days. Sometimes she called, and one time she needed help because she was in jail. She had thrown a bottle of wine at an old rat-faced pig who wanted liquor and sex. Old Bull vouched for her, and paid a fine for her release.

"You accept liquor, you invite trouble," Old Bull remarked.

"I accepted yours."

"You did."

"They only think my body is interesting."

"Let me tell you, your body is also interesting. They can't get over that."

Old Bull left Taipei for six months to work at a factory in Nantou, seven days a week, twelve hours a day. Before he left he argued with Kai Na. He had no money. He had to move forward. He returned in six months, and did not forget Kai Na. He went to the same bar, but figured she would have already moved on. But after a half hour she

entered and sat down by his side.

"Asshole!" she said.

He poured her whisky.

She wore a turtleneck. He had never seen her dress that way. She had pierced her lip and eyebrow.

"Are you trying to destroy your beauty?"

"You shrinking turtle head. This is vogue."

"You're crazy."

"You remembered me." She said.

"Are you with other men?" He asked.

"No. Just you. But when I meet other men I charge them 500 NT. For one time. For you, though, I'll give it free."

"Take out those piercings."

"No. This is the fashion. My fashion."

"They make me unhappy," Old Bull said.

"Really?"

"Yes, really."

Kai Na slowly pulled out both rings, and stuck them in her purse.

"Why do you want to destroy beauty? Why can't you accept?"

"Because everyone wants me for my beauty. What's beauty? Beauty doesn't last. You don't know how lucky you are to be ugly. If someone likes you it's not for your looks."

"I'm goddamned lucky."

She said, "Other people may think you're ugly. I think you're interesting."

"Thanks."

He ordered another bottle.

Kai Na asked, "What are you doing these days?"

"Nothing."

"Me too. If you were a woman you could turn tricks."

"I don't think I'd like to sleep with strangers all the time. Too much work," he said.

"Yes," she said, "Too much work, way too much work."

They left together. People on the street stared at them. They stared at her. They stared at him. She still was the prettiest girl in Taipei, perhaps prettier than before. They arrived at Old Bull's place. He opened a bottle of wine. They conversed. When they conversed they

could relax. She talked about her life. He listened. When Old Bull told her his secrets, she laughed. A singular laugh that confused Old Bull. As if this place in her heart had been set on fire as soon as it discovered she could be happy. They embraced. They shared excitement, and went into the bedroom. Kai Na took off her turtleneck. He saw. On her throat a long scar, still bright red, and thick.

He said, "What have you done?"

"I took a beer bottle, broke off the top, and jammed the broken glass into my neck. You like it? Am I beautiful?"

Old Bull pulled her on the bed. He kissed her body. He kissed her neck. She pushed him down and laughed, "Some men pay me 500 NT. I take off my clothes, and they change their mind. They let me keep the money. Funny."

"Oh yeah? That's funnier than death. You bitch. I love you...but don't ruin yourself. You're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

They kissed. She cried, but she made no sound. Old Bull could feel the moistness of her tears on her cheeks. Her long black hair covered his body like a flag of death. They fucked, slowly, no...it was not fucking, it was making love. Solemn. Beautiful.

She stayed the night. In the morning she was quiet. Then she hummed a tune. Old Bull stayed in bed and savored her joy. She shook him, "Get out of bed, you old fart. Splash some water on yourself and eat breakfast with me."

That morning they went to a park. Bums slept on the grass. Some sat on the stone steps staring at empty liquor bottles. Pigeons spiraled above, without thoughts, distracting the attention of souls who had nothing better. Seventy- and eighty-year old women sat on benches discussing business, their tenants or stores and merchandise and negotiations inherited from their dead husbands. They had entered death and half-life, the march of music into twilight. Silence lingered beneath the cacophony of Taipei.

Old Bull and Kai Na lay down upon the grass. They did not converse. The sunlight felt nice. Old Bull bought taro cake and skewers of chicken and colas. They ate. Old Bull put his arm around Kai Na. They fell asleep for an hour. Old Bull felt better than making love. They soared without pressure. When they woke he drove back to his place and he prepared dinner. After they ate, Old Bull

suggested that Kai Na move in with him. Maybe he could afford a bigger place. She hesitated, staring, and finally she said, “No.”

Old Bull took her back to the bar, they went in, he bought her a drink, and he left. He returned home.

The next day he went to a packaging factory in Keelung. He worked sixteen hours a day until Saturday. He slept in a dormitory. On Saturday he worked the half-holiday, eight hours, and with his remaining energy returned to the bar. He sat down and waited for Kai Na. An hour passed. The bartender kept filling his glass and did not ask him to pay, and when Old Bull’s eyes oozed drink, the bartender told him, “I’m sorry.”

“Sorry?”

“I’m sorry about your girl. You know?”

“I don’t know.”

“Suicide. Yesterday they buried her.”

“Buried?” Old Bull said. It seemed like she would walk in at any moment. How was this possible?

“Her sisters came and got her. They buried her.”

“What happened?”

“Her throat. Cut it almost in half.”

“I see. Another drink.”

Old Bull drank until closing. Kai Na was the youngest of three sisters. She was the most beautiful of the three. She was the most beautiful girl in Taipei. She was the most beautiful girl in Taiwan, and she was the most beautiful girl Old Bull had ever seen. Old Bull drove home. He opened a bottle. He should have persisted and kept asking her to live with him. He should not have accepted her “No.” He should have seen what lay inside her. He had been negligent. He should have committed suicide with her. He was a dog. No, a dog had more honor. He dozed and woke, and drank again. Kai Na was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. Twenty years old.

Outside a driver honked. Loud. Continual. Old Bull put his bottle down and went to the window, “Die you ghoul! Fuck you! Fuck your parents and fuck your ancestors! Eight generations!”

The dark night hung. Old Bull looked at the tips of his hands and saw they were bound, and there was not a thing he could do.

Rebecca Bridge

No Doors Slam Like Billy

Rebecca, said Rebecca, just like that.
Billy was a deep breath, like that
and like that she was adequately lighted.
Just like that and it's been
so long since she's needed metaphor.

They've got so many minutes to
discover every synonym. I mean,
it's so early yet and suddenly there's
all the time for using words like that.
For today, tomorrow, and the day after.

Like Most Novels We May Remain Half-Read

The next few months will either end, Billy, and soon, or else they'll not. The truth in all of this may be as tiny as an answering machine message one of us might leave.

Or perhaps our truth is factual as a newspaper. But really, Billy, I think we both feel our exactness is something that will take many chapters to write out.

With this fear of moving forward, I'm afraid we'll never make it to the dénouement. Let us remember the final moments in one slightly retarded lady's life which she spent remodeling her parlor into a scene from a novel. Please, think not upon her siblings who came for the wake and, terribly bored, rushed through.

St. Peter, a Fitter

Valery Petrovskiy

We never sat at the table with my old friends again. Afterwards my country house was sold out. And my alarm clock was left behind there. Sometimes I wake up at night as if it's ringing.

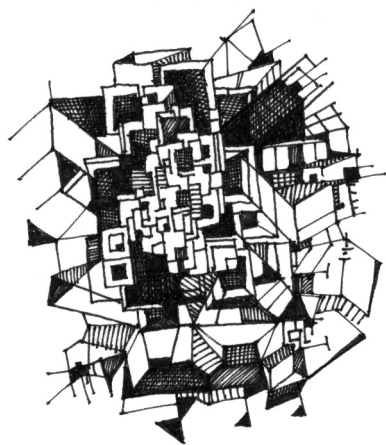
... Once, I took my newly married wife to the old family house, already empty then. I wished she'd get acquainted with my childhood friends. I had been present at their weddings and none were there at mine. My friends came not single-handed; their wives were like ripe fruit from the same apple tree, and of the same season. They looked similar, as if sisters, though the eyes were of different color and the hairdos were arranged in their own manner. And I liked their smiles, except for Pete's wife; she kept silent, very young.

Maybe we guys looked alike for them too: the chaps from the same village, and classmates once. We laughed the same way, easily got each other, and recalled the same events as we always did. Sooner or later, the wives would learn the guys' adventures by heart and laugh at them in good time. Then it would seem as if they served in the Army with one, or studied at the same college as well. Wives ever learn their husbands' recollections, and the kids do too.

We had no kids yet at that time. A strange period of my life it was: I was not a child but not an adult when we gathered together in

my parents' home while no parents were in. We had wives but they didn't bear babies then. And adults are those who have grown-up sons and daughters, I think.

... We moved aside the table I had used to do my lessons once, to take seats around. It was in front of the cold stove, at the very furnace. The table had never stood there, next to the oven door. And the occasion for the party was my new college diploma. Hungarian



vermouth proved to be rather bitter. The wine was impossible to drink despite a chic label. The ladies nearly didn't drink and we did neither.

We were screwing up our faces while pretending to be adults. Then the young wives happened to be more adult than my guys, even more adult than Pete, who had spent some years as a fitter. It was summer, and a few days had passed since his birthday, St.

Peter's Day. We congratulated him upon it and took a sip of bitter vermouth each.

Sorry, we had no presents prepared for him. We hoped it was not the last time we got together. Besides, it was Pete who made presents as a rule! Some people like to receive gifts and there are some who prefer to make presents themselves. And Pete was one to give his presents to us. Once he had presented me with a good alarm clock, and I used to wind it up in order not to be late.

And my guys could never get together and present him with a really good thing. The most precious thing he owned at the moment was his wife, young and pleasant, not talkative yet. Pete told us that he had bought a lamb on St. Peter's Day. We tried to elicit an explanation for why he didn't treat the leg to us. Pete clumsily made excuses.

His young wife who failed to put in a word during the party uttered at last:

Well, we didn't expect anybody and had the lamb slaughtered...

Ed Ochester

My First Teaching Job, Boston University Night School, "Intro to Lit"

The day after Salinger died
I remembered that class because
Catcher in the Rye was my first assignment,
a novel I was young enough to believe
captured all the sadness in the world.

But most of my students were Boston cops
getting credits obligatory for promotion
and they hated the book:
"kid's a spoiled brat,"
"another goddam whiner,"
"could use a good knock upside his head!"

An older Irish cop
kindly told me after class:

"You gotta remember
these guys never had no advantages"
and
"that Hahvard book bag,
it kinda makes you look like a fag."

Jim Brantingham
Memories and Mayflies

When this world turns old
To ageing eyes, to straining ears,
When memories, once plentiful,
Scatter like dry leaves across a field,
When each breath is a new labor
And might be the last at that,
The burden of all those years
Will weigh as lightly as a mayfly's wing
Snared by a waiting spider web.

A Conversation with Julie Larios

Julie Larios has had poems appear in *The Atlantic*, *Ploughshares*, *The Threepenny Review*, the *Georgia Review*, *Field*, and *Margie*, among others. Her poems have also twice appeared in the annual Best of American Poetry series. Her libretto for a penny opera titled “All Three Acts of a Sad Play Performed Entirely in Bed” was recently performed as part of the VOX series by the New York City Opera. She has published four poetry picture books for children, and she teaches at the Vermont College of Fine Arts in the Writing for Children and Young Adults program.

I met with Larios on July 5th to talk poetry and anything else that came our way. She was late by about twenty minutes—she’d run into Heather McHugh and had gotten carried away in conversation. I told her that if I’d run into Heather McHugh and had the chance, I too, would’ve been late.

Larios is warm and affable in conversation, and there’s a twinkle in her eye that hints of the trickster in her poetry, but her mood turns sober, almost solemn, when the talk veers from trends in publishing toward the unwieldy topic of patriotism and the state of the nation: “I tried very hard to feel patriotic yesterday. I’m not feeling too good about the United States of America. I used to honestly feel just a little bit of that exceptionalism, I would feel like, we’re young, we’re innovative, the little guy has a chance, and I don’t feel that exceptionalism any more.”

Again and again she comes back to the theme of uncertainty—it seems to inform in her a generous and full-hearted humility. At one point, discussing the difficulty of going back to older work, she quotes Aristotle (a trick she happily swears will always make people think you're brainy): "You thought you knew the answer, but the real thing you want to be able to say is 'How true. I was mistaken.'"

Larios comes across in her poetry and in person both charmed and charming. Her curiosity and care for the world is suited to whim and concerted contemplation alike. She has managed to retain that child-like wonder so many of us lose as adults. No doubt this is a large part of why she has four children's books in print. Now if only she would publish a book of poetry...

— *Caleb Thompson*

CT: You've mentioned elsewhere that "nonsense" is "a darker topic than one might imagine." Could you elaborate on that idea?

JL: We hear the word "nonsense" and think "silly fun"—but if we go back and look at the word, it's about something not making sense, and a world where things don't make sense can be frightening. Nonsense can operate not only at the silly level but at that deeper level, where we feel, as intelligent and sensible people with a healthy respect for cause and effect and logic, that there has been some slippage, that we're not quite as centered and the world is not quite as predictable as we like to think. So even something as simple as a nursery rhyme can be unsettling—"One flew east, one flew west, and one flew over the cuckoo's nest..." That goes into a dark corner, at least in my mind it does. So does a lot of Lewis Carroll ("When is raven like a writing desk?" Who knows?) I love nonsense, but it's not just for kids. It can be difficult territory, and in literature it's a way to make a reader lose his footing for a while. There's no sleeping through nonsense, in my opinion.

CT: A related question perhaps: do rhyme and meter, a sing-song approach to poetry, allow you to get at darker themes via the backdoor? I mean, it seems one of poetry's biggest problems engaging a general public is its seemingly unshakeable reputation as a medium for sad saps intent on nothing other than boring to death its potential audience with overly self-serious pissing and moaning.

JL: Well and passionately said! I totally agree that nonsense provides a backdoor to darker themes, because the delivery package (rhyme, meter, sing-song) makes us believe we're on the playground—all fun and games, child's play, right? Providing a backdoor (or a trapdoor) is the craft of magicians, who misdirect their audience's attention while setting up the trick. Good poetry is wonderful at this kind of misdirection (which involves metaphor—talking about one thing while actually talking about another.) Bad poetry, on the other hand, is boring, just as you described—like watching a bad magician. It makes you cringe. Somewhere along the way, mid-20th century (oh, no, was it another failure of the 60's??) we lost some of the magic and allowed “poetry” to become “overly self-serious pissing and moaning.” But it's okay—not to worry—there are still magicians around who can help us re-learn the old tricks, and there are young magician-poets doing wonderful work. To be fair, there is even some self-serious pissing which is interesting—it just can't be all one thing, right? Bottom line for me is craftsmanship—I like seeing it, even if it's a poem that moans.

CT: One thing I've thought a lot about in regard to American poetry is that quite a bit of what has been written in the last half-century would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to translate. Poetry is already the hardest of the genres to translate, given its nuance of meanings at the single word level—the homophonic and homonymic possibilities, the etymological fracturing and mending. Are there poems, perhaps your own “What Bee Did”, that simply have no chance of being translated? And if so, what does this say about a

poetry and a culture that takes such unraveling and reforming of its language for its creation?

JL: Maybe the fact that it would be very hard to translate is a good sign! That would mean something interesting is happening with the language, the musicality, the playfulness of it (though I mean “playfulness” in that nonsensical way discussed in an earlier answer.) If a poem is paying attention to dexterity with language, that’s usually good (as long as the dexterity doesn’t get too baroque and decorative.) To translate, you have to work on a poem as if you were an art conservator for a museum—you have to work at a practically microscopic level with gentle little brushes! I don’t mean that to sound too lofty—I could also say that you have to be like a cabinet-maker—measuring everything perfectly, taking into account the grain and give of the wood. You take one artifact and you turn it (translate it) into another. The difficulty of translation is part of the pleasure, I’m sure—though I’m not sure what it says about a culture when that culture’s poetry gets harder to translate. Maybe that the culture’s language—in this case English—has become such common coin that poets are working to re-claim it? Interesting topic, in need of an expert translator to help us understand, I think. There are two books which might be interesting to people who want to delve deeper. One is *Translating Rilke: On the Problems of Translation* by William Gass. And the other is *Reft and Light*, a brilliant collection of “translations” of untranslatable work by the popular German poet, Ernst Jandl. A multitude of good poets worked on providing translations that approximate his tricky work.

CT: I’ve noticed that in other interviews, when asked to list a few favorite poets, you’ve avoided mentioning any contemporaries. Obviously you’re fond of Linda Bierds and Rick Kenney, with whom you studied while pursuing your MFA at the University of Washington. Are there others out there you’d like to plug?

JL: On any given day, my favorites change—but I definitely love the work of Seamus Heaney and Richard Wilbur. They aren't really contemporaries of mine, though. I've enjoyed Jonathan Winter and Troy Jollimore lately (part of the younger magicians-with-a-sense-of-play crowd.) Same for Jason Whitmarsh, Cody Walker, Catherine Wing. I think one of the finest poets around, in terms of her interest in what language can do, and in terms of her intelligence and heart, is Heather McHugh—another one of my teachers. I was very lucky at the University of Washington to study with poets who believe that poetry can be both musical and rigorous. Todd Boss. He's got a poem in the current issue of Poetry, and I spent some time looking at his work online during these last few days. Really intriguing, with lots of attention to sound and wordplay.

CT: **The question of the Political invariably comes up when talking about poetry. What, in your opinion, is the place of politics in poetry? Is it possible to be political without upsetting the aesthetic order of one's poetry? Or, to take it the other way around, from the activist's position, is a poetry void of politics possible?**

JL: A few years ago I would have said that the political has no place in poetry at all—art and politics having such different goals. The poetry I like most often reaches for the ineffable—that is, a

delight in and fascination with a lack of control over the physical world—while the political examines the world as something regulate-able at the most physical level—that is, power/control over putting food on the table and money in people's pockets. Who receives that food first, who holds the power, that appears





to be the bottom line of different political perspectives, and where is there room for poetry in that? But I think that was based on too narrow a view of what is “political.” I feel myself leaning lately (maybe I’m listening rather than leaning) toward the idea that quite a bit of life (especially about the body) can be examined through a political

lens. I don’t have that idea well thought out enough to sound sensible about it yet, but I do believe poetry can glance sideways at oppression and despair. Not directly, maybe, but sideways—that’s the key for me. Poetry thrives in indirection. Fiction is better at incorporating the political more overtly, but there is some poetry (Yusef Komunyakaa, Seamus Heaney) that comes sideways at the political, with no apparent damage to any aesthetic order.

CT: You’ve mentioned Frost as a favorite, for his understanding of sentence sound. I wonder if you have any opinion on his personal life, his construction of persona, his necessary deceptions, both in life and verse, on his way to creating his enduring stature as one of the great American poets.

JL: My examination of Frost is limited to his work on the page. I’m fairly ignorant about his life, other than hearing that he might not have been an attentive husband or father, or the usual talk about him being a prima donna (I’ve met quite a few poets who could have put Frost to shame on that score.) Anyone who makes a patchwork quilt out of the academic hoods he is

given for honorary degrees is okay by me. If he constructed the persona of “Robert Frost” (rather than his admirers constructing one for him) I doubt that it was any more exaggerated an effort than that of a lot of lesser poets—Frost was just more successful, and I have no problem with that—it seems to go with the territory of anyone who has an imagination—they imagine themselves to be gods, and they work hard to turn themselves into characters in their own fiction. I’ve read hilarious speeches Frost gave about creative writing—from what I can see, he had a self-deprecating sense of humor in those, and he was speaking publicly, so I don’t think he worked consistently at creating his own enduring stature as one of the great American poets. His poetry did a pretty good job of that by itself.

CT: As far as I know you still don’t have a book of poetry published, aside from your poetry for children. Anything in the works?

JL: I took a teaching job about six years ago and it’s really eaten into my writing time. And my work in children’s books is necessary in order to keep teaching, so when I get writing time it’s often focused there. The answer to your question—I hate to say it—is no, I don’t have a manuscript out circulating through the contests right now. But soon. Any day now. I hope.

Jesse Sugarmann and Chris Engman

The twenty-fifth anniversary of the American minivan is a milestone that probably eluded most of us. Yet the “symbolic edifice of the nuclear family,” as Jesse Sugarmann calls it, was a minor revolution in car design instrumental in resurrecting the Chrysler Corporation in the 1980s during the reign of Lee Iacocca. This kind of industry context—the specific history of each car—anchors much of Jesse’s art and provides a kind of automatic cultural relevance akin to Ed Ruscha’s mod paintings of Standard Oil gas stations.

It’s surprising, given the political baggage and loaded associations cars carry, that the videos and sculpture lack overt political critique. The designs Jesse chooses—typically mid-eighties to mid-nineties American and Japanese cars—de-romanticize the mythos of personal freedom and identity that comes packaged with the typical muscle car: “I’ve found that cars from the opposite end of the cock spectrum make a more interesting entry point to automotive consideration.”

Whether hefted by forklifts, propped up on two-by-four stilts, or pumping out oil-thick exhaust, a late ‘80s Lincoln Towncar or Nissan Pulsar express their true strangeness as ubiquitous cultural relics. Their once novel and technologically advanced design elements (retractable headlights!) become, after twenty years or so, evidence of short-sighted gimmicks; what was once a cultural necessity becomes an obvious pose. Each car’s rapid decline into bad taste, coupled



Jesse Sugarmann, *I'm on Fire*, 2010, stills from a dual channel video with sound, 08:53 minutes.

with our evolving perceptions of the past, encourage us to revel in the aesthetic oddity. Where one might expect mocking, there is reverence, as in “General Motors Unity Structure II,” which surprises with its striking elegance (though not without a touch of irony).

In troubled automotive times, when even the word “car” carries baggage of consumerism, environmental damage, and oil wars, these videos and sculpture strip away the latent symbolism and layered associations of cars, revealing how absurd and oddly beautiful these vehicles really are.

Chris Engman might share some of that absurd humor in his art. If so, it is an interior one. He tells a great story about one of his trips to the Black Rock Desert in Nevada, the site of several works: His car breaks down in the middle of the playa and he must walk to one of two nearby towns he can see on his GPS. He’s familiar with one town, but it’s twenty miles away. The other is much closer but may be deserted (a common occurrence in this no-man’s land). He chooses the first town and, after a full day of walking with little water, arrives safely. Later he discovers the alternate destination is in fact a ghost town. This story always struck me as epitomizing the spirit of Engman’s work: isolated in an inhuman landscape, the mind must discern between illusion and reality.

Like French photographer Georges Rouse, so much of Engman’s work is behind the scenes: driving to remote sites, building elaborate structures, performing solar calculations, meticulously reorienting pyramids of sand or piles of cinder blocks. The irony is that the photos often look as if they were digitally manipulated. The same effects could be created digitally, but the physical labor gives the image an unnameable authenticity. Is there such a thing as an authentic illusion? In parsing that question, his photos expose and complicate the deception inherent in all representation. We are left with an enigma, and the process of creation—so often the focus of art making—is left to speculation.

When I first saw Engman’s visual riddles at Greg Kucera Gallery in 2010, I was blown away by his clever manipulation of landscape. Almost always there is an elaborate contrivance in the photo that interacts with the landscape—a photo within a photo, or an object that appears square because it is distorted by perspective. In this

sense, Engman is aligned with the land-artists he admires, Robert Smithson, Walter De Maria, and Michael Heizer. Though the work is photographic, the camera, in Engman's hands, is a tool for capturing mind-bending installations that play between the flat surface of the photograph and the physical geography of the land. The photos seem to insist on the fact of their own construction and the importance of perspective. By extension, they also suggest the mind's construction (and distortion) of experience.

There's a part in Sugarmann's video "I'm on Fire" when a brown Lincoln rambles out of the frame and we're left staring at a green rural field and a few wild trees. The audio picks up the sound of birds singing, and the bizarre gives way to speculation of the banal vastness of American landscape. Anything can be staged against such a suggestive backdrop, and in both artists' work landscape becomes symbolic: a social landscape in Sugarmann's work, or a mental landscape in Engman's.

I chose these two artists for their spare aesthetic and how they interpret physical objects and the environment as not simply given but created. On the one hand that suggests an incredible freedom, on the other hand, baffling self-reflection.



Jesse Sugarmann, *General Motors Unity Structure II*, 2010, glass and clamp, 68" x 60".

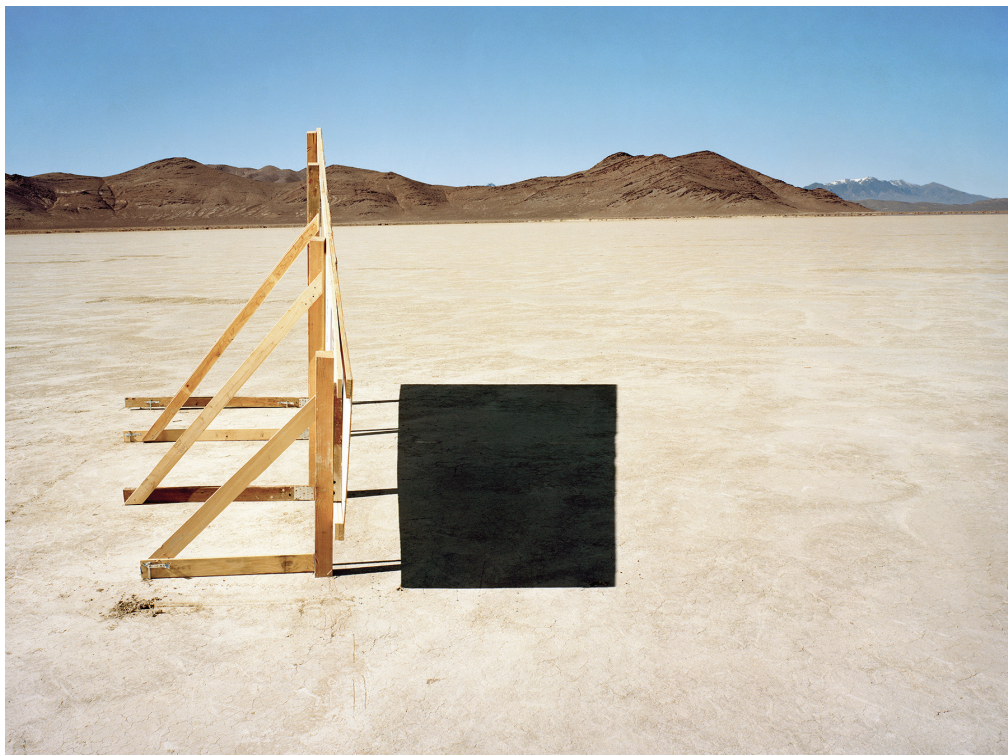


Jesse Sugarmann, *Silver Anniversary III* (for S. Christa McAuliffe), 2011, stills from a single channel video with sound, 02:44 minutes.



Jesse Sugarmann, *Dad Effigy*, 2011, car seat and beaded seat covers, 67" x 37".





Chris Engman, *Object, Shadow*, 2009, archival inkjet print (ed. of 6), 38" x 48".



Chris Engman, *The Empty House*, 2006, archival inkjet print (ed. of 6), 48" x 36".



Chris Engman, *Equivalence*, 2009, archival inkjet print (ed. of 6), 38" x 48".

Rebecca Hoogs
Modern Aubade

I lived a lifetime of aubades
sitting for twenty minutes in the exhibit

of the emperor's wife's sunken,
simulated garden room. Every two minutes,

the lights would dawn on me,
blow past lunch and then conjure up

a sinking feeling that another day had passed
with nothing to show for it. All this to show

how the room would have looked in the light
it never would have seen. I admit,

it was cool there, a good place to sleep,
or eat, or make that love we kept meaning

to make. That reminds me: I never wrote
that aubade for you, did I? Every sunset,

the quince were ready to pick. If only
I was a little more chimerical—half-woman,

half-myth—I would have stepped over
the trompe l'oeil wicker fence

and picked them to my heart's content.

The Muses Narrate a Slideshow

History

Here I am sucking on cherry pits
leftover from the cult of Mithras.

Dance

Here I am on a child's sarcophagus:
children collecting walnuts to chuck
at a pyramid of walnuts.

Comedy

Here I am with my melon hairstyle
and my prosciutto smile which identify me
as belonging to the 2nd century.

Music

Here I'm the sound of one sense
through a bone flute in past tense.

Hymns

Here I am as she who walks and as she
who walks behind and as she who walks behind behind
and is only the hand which pours water or wine.

Astronomy

Here I am as a pair of sheet bronze hands
with gold buttons to feel my way by.

Epic Poetry

Here I am writing epic poetry in my head
since I lost my epic pen.

Love

Here I am announcing the flood.

Tragedy

Here I am a copy of a copy
of an original feeling now lost.

My Colorado Cabin

Jim Brantingham

The cabin was, and still is, perched on a hill in Manitou Springs—in the afternoon shadow of Pike’s Peak. We could walk out the front door and hike right into the hills below Pike’s Peak and then onto the mountain itself. The back door faced east squarely into the sunrise. The sun rising over Kansas and shining like a laser over Colorado Springs and into Manitou Springs could be spectacular—orange, yellow and red—not really the rosy-fingered dawn of Homer and Sappho, but the hot hairy-knuckled fist of dawn feared by the day laborer. During the summer afternoons and evenings, thunderstorms would either rumble across the flatlands or slide down out of the mountains. The storms’ afterglow could linger long into delirium. And the alpenglow in the winter was sublime.

The cabin consisted of three rooms—a living room/bedroom, a kitchen and a bathroom. It was all a single guy could ever ask for. There was enough room for my books, my guitar and a bed. Usually, there was just me living there, but sometimes there were two on those several occasions when I was lucky enough to have a girlfriend, and occasionally there were multiple visitors squeezed into the tiny rooms. It was the early seventies and lifestyles still echoed the sixties. It was a good time to be young and occasionally employed.

The interior walls and ceilings consisted of ship-lapped knotty pine which made for a very homey, but still sturdy mountain cabin.

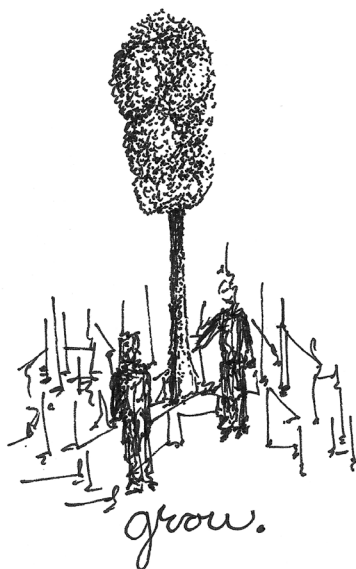
During the spring run-off, the water turned to a muddy brown, so taking a bath often was a no-gain proposition. It could be hard to tell if any progress had been made.

For a while I had a Siberian husky whom I misnamed Anais. That was one miserable, stubborn dog whose favorite pastimes were running away and barking. The last time she ran away I didn't look for her. She did walk up Pikes Peak, Mt. Elbert and Mt. Massive with me—all fourteeners, but I'll do her no further honor by saying more.

That dog was not the greatest pet problem I had, though. Cockroaches loved the spaces in the paneling. They loved the kitchen cabinets and loved to crawl over the plates and bowls. Being essentially lazy and a can't-we-all-get-along kind of guy, I let it go too long. Way too long.

I finally was forced into extermination efforts to rid the cabin of its unwelcome guests. I bought a bug bomb, opened the doors so I would have easy exit, opened the cupboard doors and set off the bomb.

I was pretty quick in those days but I wasn't quick enough to avoid the astonishing deluge of cockroaches that rained down from the ceiling. They crawled out from the knotty pine joints by the tens of thousands and dropped to the floor—except those that found a soft landing in my hair, in my beard and down the back of my shirt. I bolted for the door as the monsoon of roaches streamed down from the ceiling. It was like the ceiling was a storm cloud bursting with rain-roaches. I slammed both doors and let the bomb do its lethal work. I ripped my shirt off immediately. I frantically brushed out my hair and beard. I did not open up the roach tomb for two days. And when I did, the scene on the floors and countertops was astonishing.



Jed Myers

Trespass

There are no thresholds. Or it is all
threshold. Think of the lips

parting, where the message begins
its crossing. The turbulence of air,

that range of anything but
silence. Before the words are

words, the threshold potentials
behind the eyes—there, another

crossing. You've entered a room,
never to leave by the same door—

brought with you the vortical hurdle,
spirited muscle around your core,

and inside that, the hunger
to be trespassed, crossed-into.

Amy Gerstler
Come to Bed

Shed your funky, aching raiment,
your dispensible selves. This quilt's stitched
with the names of bridges your mother crossed
every day that summer in Prague,
to lie in the arms of your *real* dad.
En route to their trysts, during which
he'd pin down her wrists, she'd pass town hall,
the astronomical clock, Jewish-town
and its synagogues. As she hurried along
she'd lob her lunch crusts to the swans.

So come to bed. It's the shivery season.
This bluegrey wool blanket will lap at your ankles
like clouds of river silt your mother stirred up
as she waded into the Vlatava, weeping.
Enter this vessel not clobbered or spent,
but mind alight with bursts of tiny
meteorites. We will row this skiff,
this watertight basket coated with pitch,
toward that patch of rainsoaked daylight.

Justin Bieber is Luke Skywalker

Zac Hill

You're thinking about a mallard duck," he says, and suddenly I am thinking about a mallard duck.

I'm sitting onstage with Justin at a sound check in Waukegan, Ill. His right hand makes the "Wax on, wax off" gesture. Although the weather is basically hot he is sporting a black leather jacket with large silver buckles and studs. His hair is the modern-day Roy Orbison. His shoelaces are purple. I don't really understand what is going on with the eerie airbrush smoothness of his pearl cliff cheeks but now his eyes have locked with mine and I have never been so seized by a person.

"I am howling," he says. "Listen."

I am not going to pretend to understand Justin Bieber's songs or Justin Bieber's music or Justin Bieber's fans or Justin Bieber's incongruous flatbill caps. But I know that so far tonight Usher has handed him at least thirteen Shirley Temples in fraternity-red plastic cups and he has gulped them down like emergencies. I know that when he doesn't think people are looking he fidgets with the hood on his hoodie. Earlier I asked him about this and he said, "You saw?" and smiled. It was the smile of a puppy. It was the smile of an elated animal. It was the smile of a porcelain doll.

Justin Bieber can use the Force. That is why I am here.

Last month I published an essay called "Justin Bieber is Luke Sky-

walker.” The point of it involved the archetypal myth, the Western classical hero. The point involved rhetorical analysis and a bunch of shit having to do with Joseph Campbell. The point involved Bieber as a tabula rasa to project upon, a vacant face with some latent talent who made it big on YouTube and thereby empowered consumers of American pop culture to validate their own exceptionalism by aligning their narratives with his, or whatever. Aside from the haircut, the Luke Skywalker comparison was in no way specific to Luke Skywalker. It could have been to Harry Potter or to Gilgamesh or to Baseball, the American Pastime. But Bieber must have read it and thought it was, because shortly thereafter he started talking to me inside my mind.

“Yo,” he said one day. “Let’s kick it.”

This is not a metaphor for something. I mean that he literally started talking to me via brain-waves and literally said, “Let’s kick it.” We chatted for fifteen or twenty minutes and then he booked me a flight out to Chicago, where I was picked up at the airport and chauffeured north inside a massive Bieber van with a massive Bieber face spraypainted on the side. In Waukegan, Usher greeted me at the stadium and presented me with a freshly minted 2011 G-Shock G-Lide GLX-5600-7 Chronograph.

“From the man himself,” he said, and slinked into a hallway.

If this entire buildup seems surreal, that’s because it was. But what I’m coming to realize now as I write these words is that I think that surreality was deliberate. In fact I think all the surreality about Bieber, from the purple shoelaces to the flatbill caps to the stunning manner in which he always seems to be shorter than everyone around him, is deliberate. And that makes sense, because (as I learned over those couple days in southern Illinois) Teen Sensation Justin Bieber is omnipotent.

But he really hopes he isn’t.

But I’m getting ahead of myself.

—
Justin Bieber is seventeen years old and is worth just shy of \$100,000,000.

“Does that blow your mind?” I ask him.

“Have you ever had sex?” I ask him.

“But seriously,” I ask him.

“I first learned I could do this when I was about three years old,” he says. He motions me over to a corner. He takes a quarter out of his pocket and flips it into the air and asks me to call it.

“Tails,” I tell him.

The coin lands tails.

He flips it again.

“Heads,” I tell him.

The coin lands heads.

We repeat this process ninety-eight times.

“So are you changing my mind or are you fucking with the coin?” I ask him.

“I have no idea,” he says.

I realize now that this is why Justin Bieber is terrified of everything all of the time.

—

“Anybody have some dental floss? Hook me up with a thing of dental floss. And some tape. That roll of tape over there.”

We are in the process of duct taping every one of Usher’s belongings to the ceiling of his dressing room. Three vials of “Only the Brave” fragrance in limited-edition exclamation-point-shaped containers. A pair of Dwight Howard Superbeast All-Star kicks. A hat rack. The Sealy PosturePedic mattress was the most difficult part but we jury-rigged a kind of pulley-thing with the help of a support beam, some towing cables, and four or five empty film canisters courtesy of the Never Say Never documentary crew.

Presumably Bieber wants some dental floss to bundle together the wad of toothbrushes he’s holding in his right hand. This is odd for a couple of reasons. First off, I know for a fact that Usher isn’t sharing this room with anyone, meaning he packed like five different toothbrushes for a three-day trip. Second is of course the obvious fact that Justin Bieber is perched atop the shoulders of his bodyguard, Barry Dickens, demanding dental floss in order to duct-tape Usher’s shit to the ceiling.

“Over there by Daryl. See it? It’s laying by the sandal.”

Lighting designer Ku’uipo Curry interrupts her relocation of a signed poster for the Michael Jackson’s Moonwalker video game

(‘signed’ not by Michael but rather by Michael’s pet chimp Bubbles, who appeared in the game as a power-up) to toss Bieber the floss and a fresh roll of tape. I hear the tape screech. Barry adjusts his weight. Ku’uipo straightens out the poster’s dog-ear and surveys the result.

Bieber, of course, doesn’t need the help. He could reach out his hand and close his eyes and summon the floss and the tape to him in an instant. But he doesn’t.

“I don’t want people to know,” he told me the day before. Rehearsal had just ended and I had just arrived and we were eating Chinese takeout from those white Chinese takeout boxes with red line-drawings on the side. In the sea of lighting designers and backup dancers and pyrotechnicians I was concerned that I’d be lost in the fray. But Bieber came straight to me and said, “Hey,” and showed me the coin



trick and so there we were sitting in the back of the Bieber bus.

"Then why are you talking about it with me?" I asked.

"Because I can trust you."

"I'm a reporter."

"Because you understand."

"Justin."

"You do."

"There's nothing to understand."

"You do," he had said.

Having successfully bound the toothbrushes, Bieber dismounts Barry and surveys the result. Everything in the room is in fact duct-taped to the ceiling.

Bieber thumbs-ups.

We wait for a second.

Usher walks into the dressing room.

"Why the fuck are all y'all in my dressing room?" he asks.

"Where is all my shit?" he asks.

He looks up.

"Everything is taped to the ceiling," he says.

"Including my toothbrushes," he says.

He grins.

"That is hilarious."

It really is very funny.

"That is fucking hilarious."

Barry is laughing at Usher. He points and then continues to laugh at Usher.

"That is fucking hilarious."

Bieber gets a running start and jumps on Usher's back. He scrampers up Usher's shoulders and springboards off and grabs the Dwight Howards and the tape rips and sticks to the Dwight Howards on the way down. Bieber lands and rolls and bolts out the door. Usher tears after him.

"Is this type of thing, like, common?" I ask Barry.

"There's always something," he says.

—

Fifteen minutes later Bieber is curled up in the fetal position in the

hallway outside my room sobbing furiously. I'm walking back in from the restroom when I see him.

"That prank was funny," I tell him.

"Yeah," he says.

"You are sobbing furiously," I tell him.

"Yeah," he says.

Then I am transported through the air inside a bubble, hovering. I am in Tokyo floating above a stage. Justin Bieber is performing on that stage. The crowd undulates like strands of kelp in a current. The crowd does not appear to be composed of individuals. Everyone is screaming. Everyone cheers. My bubble floats to Sydney, Australia.

A crowd is there, too. One girl in particular is screaming. She is not however screaming because she is elated that Justin Bieber is performing. In fact Justin Bieber is not performing. He is not on stage. No one is on stage. No one is on stage because it is three in the morning. Yet still the girl is screaming because even though it is three in the morning she is being crushed, trampled, sacked against the fence by the surge of the crowd. Because even though Justin Bieber is not performing now, Justin Bieber will be performing later, and so the crowd wants to be close, to revel in that closeness by the act of watching, and therefore they advance, and therefore the girl is crushed.

"Her name was I don't know what the fuck her name was," he says.

I am back in Waukegan, Illinois.

"Her name was Julie," he says.

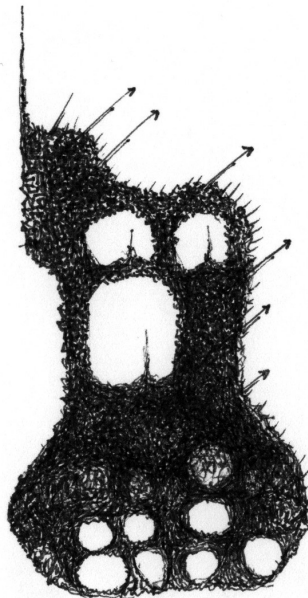
"This happens a lot," he says.

"Because of me," he says.

He looks sad, like an old hotel.

"I could stop this," he says.

Absentmindedly he flicks the hallway lights off from across the



room with a gesture of his thumb and index finger. Then he turns them on again.

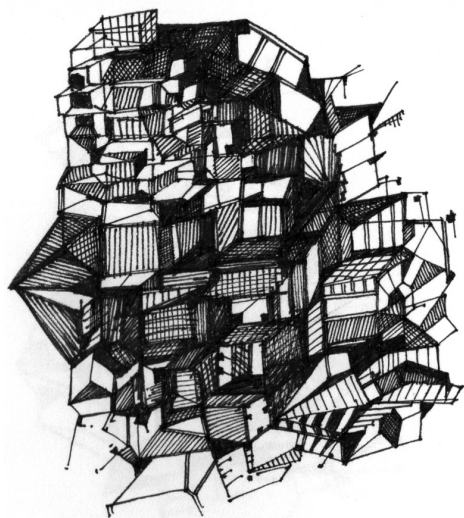
“But I don’t want to,” he says.

—

Either the most-or-least-surprising thing about becoming personally acquainted with Justin Bieber is that you realize he is actually a phenomenal singer. Everything is musical with him. It’s like a fucking Disney princess. A drop of dew on a blade of grass, a chill from a passing car—all of it evokes a song. Cool Ranch Doritos have evoked a song. Cherry Jolly Ranchers have evoked a song. Aluminum siding. The Baltimore Orioles. Cuticle discoloration. And it’s not like I’m going to call the Library of Congress and ask them to preserve these little ditties for posterity, or anything, but I am just saying that the tunes are actually pretty damn catchy.

“You and I should write a song!” he says to me.

Justin and I are sitting inside an Arby’s restaurant. He is wearing a balaclava. We are here because Justin is contractually obligated, due to a long and complicated agreement, to consume one hundred (100) Arby’s Beef’n’Cheddar sandwiches and an equivalent number of Arby’s Jamocha milkshakes per calendar year. Earlier he told me he’d been lagging but thought he could make up ground during his tour of the Midwest. Today he’s on sandwich number six and milk-



shake number two, earning him no small amount of grief from his show manager Hilda, who has warned him three times now about the negative effects of dairy products on his “alluringly fragile timbre.” Sound check is scheduled for 6pm tomorrow.

“For serious. I’ll perform it and everything.”

“What’s our song about?”

"I'll sing it a capella," he says.

I tell him I think anything overtly about Arby's sandwiches/shakes is probably too transparently corporate, but we might be onto something vis-a-vis consumption, flavor, short-term-desire-satiation-versus-long-term-viability, etc.

"It'll be a love song," he says.

"You can't perform a song you write today tomorrow."

"Can too."

"But again, what's the song about?"

"The Arby's, like you said," he says.

"Uh huh."

"Maybe that people look at you weird when you wear a balaclava inside a restaurant."

"Uh huh."

"I should write about that girl," he says.

I feel the grease of a fry between my fingers even though I must have eaten the fry like fifteen minutes earlier.

"You and me. We'll write a love song. About Julie. About that girl," he says.

He nods vigorously at himself.

—

Then later that night as I am about to hit the hay he corners me.

"Are we going to write that song?" he asks. His hands are stuffed in the warmers of his hoodie.

"Justin, I have never written a song in my entire life. I don't know a thing about songwriting. I don't know a thing about music. I don't know a thing about what your people will and will not let you say. There is also oh and seriously why in the hell are we writing a song?"

His eyes close and then open and when they open they are like glass.

"Sure. Fuck. Okay. Let's write a song."

"I need to show you something," he says.

—

Justin Bieber's official YouTube username, kidrauhl, is a reference to the Terry Goodkind novel "Wizard's First Rule," which he tells me used to be one of his dad's favorite books back in 2007 when the account was started. For the last hour we've been watching some

of the original videos Bieber uploaded—an acoustic cover of Edwin McCain’s “I’ll Be,” a three minute nineteen second improv drum solo on a local TV show called “Amazing Kids,” a not-nearly-awkward-as-one-would-think workout-room mirror-dance to T-Pain’s “Freeze,”—and munching on some Orville Redenbacher’s.

“You point at your crotch a lot when you dance.”

“Do not!”

“I am just saying,” I say.

“You say ‘I am just saying’ a lot,” he says.

What Bieber wants me to do is comment upon the utterly unbelievable rate at which his “views” count is skyrocketing. The video right now, for example: we’re at four million seven hundred sixteen thousand nine hundred thirty-one hits for a high school talent show, which (like being worth \$100,000,000) is such a vast number that it’s literally impossible to comprehend. And I know he wants me to comment upon it because he keeps compulsively refreshing his browser window, which lets us see how fast the numbers are ticking up. I am not going to comment upon it, though, because despite the fact that I know exactly what he is thinking and exactly why he’s thinking it I don’t have anything resembling a good answer to give.

What he is thinking is, “All these people—I want them to like me. Do they like me?”

This is what everyone is always thinking.

This is what no one ever knows.

“Zac.”

“Yeah?”

“Do you like me?”

His right leg is twitching at about a million miles an hour.

“Justin.”

“Do you like me?”

“Yes.”

“How do I know that?”

My mind flashes to the thing with the quarter.

He does not and cannot know whether I actually like him.

I do not and cannot know what he is and is not controlling.

It dawns on me that maybe that’s okay.

“Well,” I say.

“Well what?”

“You’re not forcing me to.”

“I might be.”

“You’re not.”

“But I might be.”

“But you’re not,” I tell him, and at this point I reach over and grab the bag of Redenbacher’s and I dump it over his head. He executes a sort of spin-move away from the bag and grabs a popcorn-nugget off the ground and chucks it at my face. I deflect it with my right arm like a ninja. Then he waves his hand in the air and the nugget and the bag and a couple napkins and a discarded chopstick and all those little unpopped kernels start to whirl around my head and pour like confetti into my lap.

“Checkmate.”

“That was like totally totally mega ultra unfair,” I tell him.

“Gotta use what you got, y’know?”

“Durr I have super powers
hurr durr.”

“You know, I really do sound exactly like that,” he says.

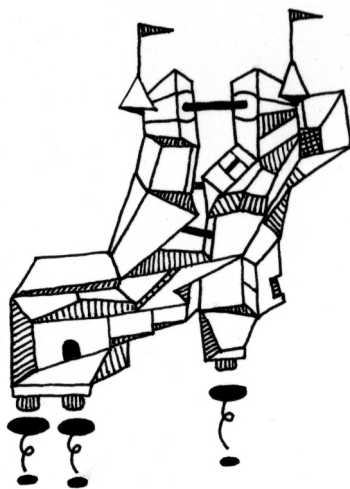
“Care to allow me to exact payback via rocket launcher in a game of Halo: Reach?” I ask him.

“Mmhmm,” he says. And he walks over to the Xbox, and he starts up the Xbox, and we begin to play a game, and we laugh, and it is at least kind of fun. And that’s my answer to his question, and that’s my best answer to his question, and I pray to God and everything else that my answer is good.

—

“I wrote the song.”

We are onstage at the sound check. A sound check is a rehearsal, which is a performance without an audience. I am unsure if Justin



Bieber really knows how to perform without an audience. Nothing makes noise. No one is here except for Usher, who is sitting in the third row wearing sunglasses sipping Courvoisier from a red plastic cup. The black hood of his sweater crests past his hairline and he looks uncannily like the fucking Emperor from fucking Star Wars. The layers of empty seats look like the scales of frozen fish.

I am writing down notes about Justin's leather jacket and purple shoelaces and Orbison haircut when he walks over and tells me about the song. He has just finished practicing different ways of ensuring his microphone remains close to his mouth as he executes a variety of different dance moves. For reasons that are unclear to me but probably involve the structural integrity of his hair, he has chosen to eschew the standard dancer-pop-star headset. I tell him it's a bold choice.

"Thanks. But yeah the song. I wrote it."

"Good. Proud of you."

"Um," he says.

"So you want me to ask you if I can hear it?"

"Yeah."

"But you won't make me ask you."

"Right."

"You could, though."

"You are thinking of a mallard duck," he says, and suddenly I am thinking of a mallard duck.

"You are thinking of a white elephant wearing Bermuda shorts in the middle of Times Square," I tell him, and suddenly he is thinking of a white elephant wearing Bermuda shorts in the middle of Times Square.

"You made me do that?" he asks.

"Not at all."

"But it just like appeared."

"That's also true," I tell him.

In a marked departure from the usual procedure, Justin requested earlier that instead of lining up outside the arena in the hours before the concert, each ticketholder ought to be emailed or texted a special code that directed them to one of forty-two designated GPS coordinates inside the Waukegan city limits. They were to arrive there

at a specified time and would, when a sufficient mass of people had accumulated, be whisked away on a Bieber bus to a 'behind-the-scenes' member party with real Bieber VIPs. Waukegan was deemed 'rural' (i.e. low-population-density) enough that such a stunt would be feasible. "A brilliant nod towards intimacy," one PR exec would be quoted later as saying.

That meant, though, that right now the arena belonged to Justin.

"So can I hear the song, mate?" I ask him.

Justin nods his head like thirteen times in the span of two seconds and dismounts the stage and actually trots to the sound and lighting booth. He brushes aside a technical-looking person and fiddles with some knobs and when he is done fiddling with the knobs the lights have been eradicated except for a low slim spotlight at the center of the stage. Justin exits the lighting booth and comes back around to the stage and jumps directly onto it from the floor. Then he heads backstage and rustles around with some props and comes back holding a microphone stand which he places deliberately inside the low slim halo of spotlight.

"Usher," he says.

"Yeah man?"

"I need you to leave."

"What's up?"

"I really really really really really really need you to leave. Please."

Usher stands up and takes off his sunglasses and looks around and squints and puts his sunglasses back on and sits back down. Then he stands up again and takes a sip of Courvoisier and mumbles, "Whatever," and plods down the aisle toward the exit.

Usher exits the arena.

Justin says, "Check," into the mic.

"Check," he says again, and seems satisfied. He turns to look at me. Against the contrast of the spotlight I am bathed in layers of dark.

"I am howling," he says. "Listen."

He begins to sing.

Desmond Kon Zhicheng-Mingdé

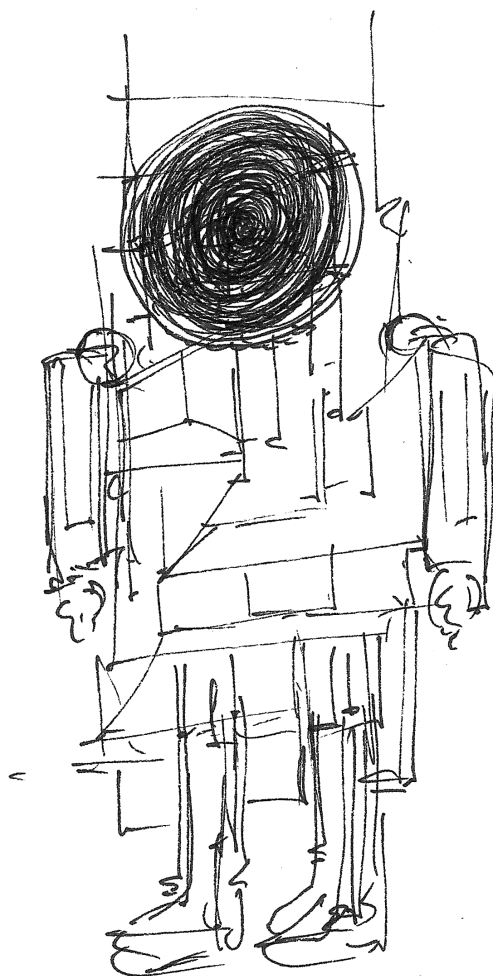
The Cubist's Mirage

Cubism is a vest pocket is a handkerchief is an attenuation. Cubism is the dimming mullion, bronze bust of Raoul Hausmann built on a plinth. Cubism is Virgo wearing the stonemason's chiton instead, her bloodied kneecaps wrapped in balbriggan. Cubism, the look of Georgia's child now motherless, buying her own pencils, hemming her pinafore. Cubism, the sandpit where another child is playing, burying a plastic star dislodged from a jewelry box. A siteless anomie, a sense of displacement that recognizes no borders. Liminality. Transom light. Cubism of no mirrors to take in this room, its indwelling corners as indissoluble and undying.

Abigail Warren

DADA

I heard it happened in Yonkers before the move to Bay Ridge, before my great grandmother bought them the house on 92nd Street. Margaret, Eileen and Jack were there. He was an Italian landlord and not fond of the Irish or children. My grandfather said, *We'll take the place.* The landlord said, *I won't rent to anyone with more than three children.* Dada said, *We'll take the place.* The landlord said, *No more than three children!* Dada said, *We'll take the place.* My grandmother said, *Paddy, did you hear the man? No more than three!* Dada said, *I heard the man, now let's go home and kill two of the children.*



fortune 500

Pop Music died with Kurt Cobain (but there aren't enough shovels)

Caleb Thompson

It was twenty years ago this fall that Geffen Records released Nirvana's *Nevermind*. The record went Diamond, eventually selling over thirty million copies worldwide. No rock and roll record since has attained its level of cultural significance. Radiohead's *OK Computer*, Beck's *Mellow Gold*, The Strokes' *Is This It* all marked their place in rock history, but none could be argued (sensibly) to have come anywhere near the epochal event that was *Nevermind*. *Nevermind* distilled and beatified the disillusionment, angst, anger and sorrow of a generation that otherwise had nothing much for consolation. It was art, and it still is.

I received the cassette tape for my thirteenth birthday, and I can still recall the distinct feeling the music evoked. It was the same feeling I later experienced when reading *Catcher in the Rye* in high school and "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" in college. The feeling was: "That's me! That's me inside the music! That's exactly how I am!" And it seems everybody else felt that way too, or at least thirty million of them. I didn't at the time have any intellectual capacity to make sense of the record in any cultural or historical or socio-political context, but I did recognize the non-sense of the lyrics, and they somehow did make sense to me. I was only thirteen, but already the disfiguring effects of adolescence were taking hold. My self was strange and muddled, and so were the words, and the music was loud and raw and gorgeous. (Odd, now, to listen to those songs and hear how pol-

ished and produced they sound. At the time, I'd heard nothing so primal in my life.)

The album's title reads as an answer to the question of civilization. "We've come thousands and thousands of years, what do we do now?" "Nevermind." On the cover of the record, a baby swims after a dollar bill on a fishing hook. What could be a plainer, more sarcastic statement? Go for the money, kids.

Listening back now, and thinking about the lyrics to "Smells Like Teen Spirit," the words aren't nonsense at all: "I feel stupid, and contagious. Here we are now, entertain us." What a perfectly honest expression of what it is to be a young citizen in our consumer society. An overwhelming (and ubiquitous) confusion about our place and purpose in the world will be alleviated by entertainment. Let the cause of my problems be my cure. As John Ashbery once noted: "We need all the escapism we can get, and even that's not going to be enough."

"Oh well, whatever, nevermind" sums up perfectly the lazy cynicism of a generation that had none of the quixotic illusions the rock and roll boomers reveled in thirty years earlier. In fact, one could argue that it was the sixties generation, aided and abetted by opportunistic record labels and all-too-willing artists, that created this notion of improving the world through music in the first place. My mentor, the late poet William Dunlop, claimed that rock and roll was Capitalism's greatest triumph, and I tend to agree. Nowhere else can one cite so glaring an example of the cries for freedom, justice and equality being so neatly packaged and sold back to the people. They wanted peace, and what they got was entertainment pacification.

The rock and roll of the sixties paradoxically inoculated the pop music culture of any real power to protest and put to action certain humanist ideals. Punk said fuck it. Glam said freak it. Butt rock said more coke. Huey Lewis, bard of the eighties, put it simply: "It's hip to be square." It became aesthetically impossible to address directly socio-political problems, even if you could get a clear idea of their complex nature. Hence: nevermind.

By the time Nirvana's *In Utero* came out in September of 1993, Kurt was singing "Rape Me, my friend." By April of the following

year he was dead from a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head.

It's not too terribly hard to read into the lyrics of that song, and guess the rapist. It's the adoring fans, it's the adoring critics, it's the happy labels selling millions of records, it's you and me. Kierkegaard sums up Kurt Cobain's predicament when he writes, "A poet is an unhappy being whose heart is torn by secret sufferings, but whose lips are so strangely formed that when the sighs and the cries escape them, they sound like beautiful music...and people crowd around the poet and say to him: 'Sing for us soon again;' that is as much as to say 'May new sufferings torment your soul.'"

For a number of years, labels poured gobs of money in advances to underground "grunge" bands, hoping to strike it rich again. But it was over. They would have to change their tactics. Boy bands and Britney Spears were on their way. And though the entertainment industrial complex would juice these new pop acts for all they were worth, it seems that because none had the talent or the art, they had nothing to die for, no final integrity to defend, no guilt to absolve. They just ended up with shaved heads or in rehab.

And then there's Amy Winehouse, the best, pure pop singer in decades. We all danced and sang along as she sang with sultry conviction her dark indulgence and utter defiance. When she wound up dead at that superstitious age of 27, everyone was saddened. But were any of us surprised? There we'd been, cheering her on as she sang and drank and drugged her life away, and for what?

"Pitchfork and indie rock are currently run by people who behave as though the endless effort to perfect the habits of cultural consumption is the whole experience of life. We should leave these things behind, and instead pursue and invent a musical culture more worth our time."¹

Thus Richard Beck concludes his thorough examination of indie rock culture, a culture that responded "to the Iraq war by dancing" and whose "general mood was a mostly benign form of cultural decadence." "Effective management of the hype cycle" allowed indie rock to entertain, and get paid, without suffering the fates of their overex-

¹ Richard Beck, "Reviews 5.4 Pitchfork, 1995-present," *N+1* #12

posed predecessors. The stakes have been lowered but the game is the same: make money.

What would a music culture more worth our time look like? Can we imagine a music culture that not only addresses the most difficult conversations of our time, but also embodies (as the Ghandi bumper-sticker suggests) the change we want to see in the world?

We won't see the answer on the cover of Rolling Stone. We won't see the answer headlining at Coachella. We won't see the answer given a 10.0 review on Pitchfork. A music culture more worth our time will not be an entertainment of our dreams and hopes for humanity repackaged and sold back to us in high-def and glossy print. We will not be able to buy it.

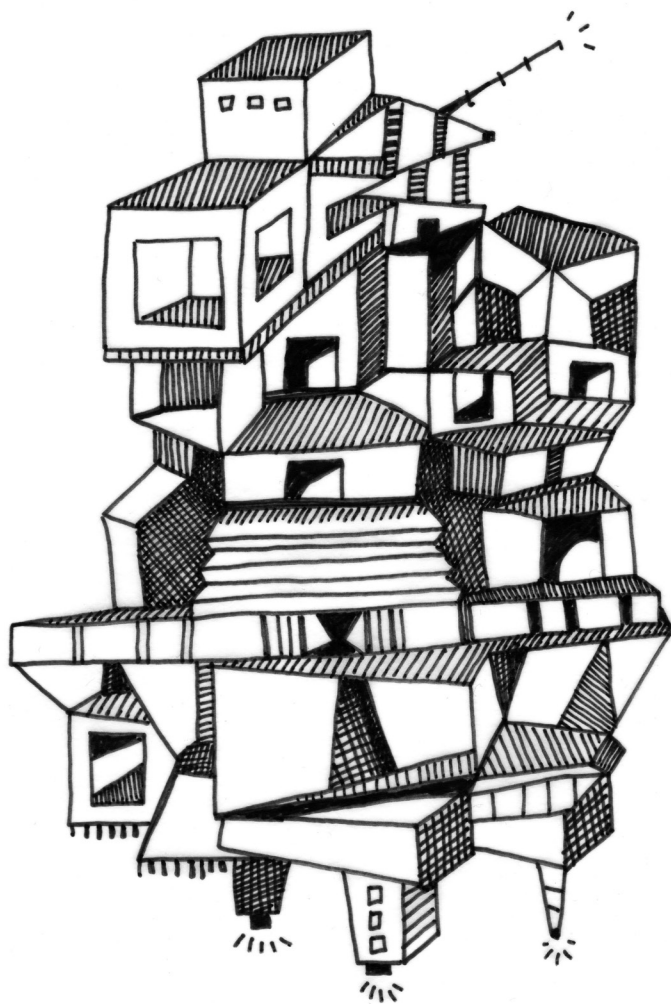
Popular music culture has always depended on the lie that the song was ultimately about me—millions of me. In the end it was never about me. It was about our collective gullibility to a falsified notion of individual freedoms and expressions. Ultimately, it was about money.

Paul Allen's Experience Music Project is currently exhibiting *Nirvana: Taking Punk to the Masses*. The cultural scab has been picked and the wound has been reopened. It turns out there was still money inside. Disgust and disaffection are now a nostalgia market!

Music is like bread and wine, it's been around for millennia, and everywhere you go there are a thousand kinds of it. Music itself is not the issue. Walt Whitman said: "To have great poets there must be great audiences too." And to have great audiences, we need great critics—moreover, we must ourselves become great critics. Tony Tost, writing about Johnny Cash, makes this fine observation: "Perhaps the song even reveals where Cash believed the reckoning between God and America finally takes place: within the emotional, psychological and spiritual interiors of the republic's citizens, the truly apocalyptic battleground."²

The lifting of the veil, the revelation, happens within the individual, within you and me. That moment cannot be bought or sold.

² Tony Tost, *American Recordings*, 331/3, 2011



Contributors

James Brantingham bucked hay in the Rogue River Valley, worked the pear orchards of Medford, poured concrete in the Colorado mountain towns, framed houses in Colorado Springs and Spokane. Remodeled much of the Pike Place Market and now manages a marine navigation software company. Studied Latin and medieval literature at Gonzaga in Spokane. Published poems, translations and short stories in publications such as *Crab Creek Review* and *ZYZZYVA*. Also published in the online magazine, *Glossolalia*, and *The Monarch Review*. His Seattle Small Books Company printed three short books and will soon release the fourth, *Traveling Light*. Two sons and two grandchildren light his life.

Rebecca Bridge is a poet, essayist, and screenwriter living in Seattle. Maybe a novelist, too, who can tell, but she's working on it. Her work can be found in a lot of places, including *The Boston Review*, *Sixth Finch*, *notnostrums*, *Can We Have Our Ball Back*, *The Columbia Poetry Review*, and *Weird Deer*. She likes climbing, sitting, and rolling over.

Chris Engman (born 1978) is currently attending the MFA program at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. He has received the Grants for Artist Projects (GAP) Award three times (2004, 2007, and 2010) and was shortlisted at the Hyères International Fashion and Photography Festival in 2009. In 2004 he received the Artist Trust Fellowship, and he earned his BFA in photography from the University of Washington in 2003.

Amy Gerstler's most recent books of poetry include *Dearest Creature*, *Ghost Girl*, *Medicine*, and *Crown of Weeds*. She was the editor of the anthology *BEST AMERICAN POETRY 2010*. She also works as a journalist and teaches in the Bennington Writing Seminars Pro-

gram at Bennington College in Vermont, in the MPW program at USC, and at Art Center College of Design. She lives in Los Angeles, California.

Zac Hill is clutch as hell in a NERF war, but is woefully unprepared for a zombie apocalypse. He is a game designer for Wizards of the Coast, a columnist for the *Huffington Post*, and a creative writing instructor at the Richard Hugo House. Previously he was a Henry Luce Scholar at the Centre for Independent Journalism in Kuala Lumpur, where he spearheaded the effort to pass the first piece of Right to Information legislation in Malaysian history. His stories, poems, and essays have been published in a variety of journals, newspapers, websites, and literary reviews, and his articles on gaming and the gaming lifestyle have been translated into three languages. Currently he is working on *Stories from the Collective Consciousness*, a collection of fictional celebrity interviews, to be released in 2012. He lives in Seattle, Washington.

Rebecca Hoogs is the author of a chapbook, *Grenade*, and her poems have appeared in journals such as *Poetry*, *AGNI*, and *Crazy-horse*. She is the recipient of fellowships from the MacDowell Colony and Artist Trust of Washington State. She won the 2010 Southeast Review poetry prize for her poem "Miss Scarlett." She received her M.F.A. in Poetry and an M.A. in English from the University of Washington. She is the Director of Education Programs and curator for the Poetry Series for Seattle Arts & Lectures, and was the co-director of the Summer Creative Writing in Rome through the University of Washington.

Desmond Kon Zhicheng-Mingde has three new chapbooks, *Dear Physical Environment*, *This Is Visual Poetry*, and *To Whose Mandolin It May Concern*. Trained in book publishing at Stanford, with a theology master's in world religions from Harvard and fine arts master's in creative writing from Notre Dame, Desmond has edited more than ten books and co-produced three audio books, several of which were pro bono for non-profit organizations. Desmond is a recipient of the Tom Howard High Distinction Award, Tupelo Press Poetry Project

Honorable Mention, and Singapore Internationale Grant. He also works in clay, his commemorative pieces housed in museums and private collections in India, the Netherlands, the UK and the US.

Jed Myers was born in Philadelphia in 1952. His poems have appeared in *Prairie Schooner*, *Nimrod International Journal*, *Atlanta Review*, *Chaffin Journal*, *Palooka*, *Spoon River Poetry Review*, *Floating Bridge Review*, *Fugue*, *Golden Handcuffs Review*, the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, the Rose Alley Press anthology *Many Trails to the Summit*, and elsewhere. He has served editorially for *Tufts Literary Magazine*, *Chrysanthemum*, and *Drash*. He lives in Seattle where he works as a psychiatrist with a therapy practice and teaches at the University of Washington.

Ed Ochester's most recent books are: *Unreconstructed: Poems Selected and New* (Autumn House Press, 2007), *The Republic of Lies* (Adastra Press, 2007) and *American Poetry Now* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007). He is the editor of the Pitt Poetry Series and is a member of the core faculty of the Bennington MFA Writing Seminars. Recent poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *American Poetry Review*, *Barrow Street*, *Agni*, *Boulevard*, *Nerve Cowboy*, *Great River Review* and other magazines.

Valery Petrovskiy studied English at Chuvash State University in Cheboksary, Russia. He studied journalism at VKSch Higher School in Moscow and psychology at Kazan State Technology University. His prose have been published in the US by *The Scrambler*, *Rusty Typer*, *BRICKrethoric*, *NAP Magazine*, *Literary Burlesque*, *The Other Room*, *Curbside Quotidian*, *DANSE MACABRE*, *WidowMoon Press*, *PRIME MINCER*, *Apocrypha and Abstractions*, and in Australia by *Skive* and *Going Down Swinging* magazines. He currently lives in a remote village called Aslamas in the Chuvash Republic, Russia with his elderly mother.

Caleb Powell was born in Taiwan. He often steals from Bukowski and says things like, "Jesus did OK, but I've gone further on less" and "We must bring our own light into the darkness, no one is going

to do it for us.” This drives his wife nuts. His recent works are in *Fourth Genre*, *Hayden’s Ferry Review*, *Post Road*, and *ZYZZYVA*.

Jesse Sugarmann (Danbury, Connecticut 1974) is an interdisciplinary artist working in video, sculpture, fibers, and performance. His work has been shown both nationally and internationally in venues such as the Getty Institute, Museo Tamayo, the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art, and the 2010 Portland Biennial. His work has been written about in publications including *ArtForum*, *Art Papers*, and *Tokion Magazine*. Jesse was recently the co-director of the Ditch Art Space in Springfield, Oregon and is moving to Bakersfield, CA to teach in the art department at California State University.

Abigail Warren is a resident of Western Massachusetts’ Pioneer Valley arts community. She currently teaches writing, literature, and poetry at Cambridge College. Her work has appeared both in print and online, and her previous publication credits include the Smith College Poetry Center Alumnae Poets, *Shemom*, *Gemini Magazine*, and the anthology *30 Poems in November* (an anthology of poems to benefit Center For New Americans in Northampton MA). She is a recipient of the Rosemary Thomas Poetry Prize.

Jason Whitmarsh lives in Seattle with his wife and children. His book, *Tomorrow’s Living Room*, won the 2009 May Swenson Poetry Award.





JIM BRANTINGHAM + REBECCA BRIDGE + CHRIS ENGMAN
+ AMY GERSTLER + ZAC HILL + REBECCA HOOGS + JULIE LARIOS +
JED MYERS + ED OCHESTER + VALERY PETROVSKIY + CALEB POWELL
+ JESSE SUGARMANN + ABIGAIL WARREN + JASON WHITMARSH +
DESMOND KON ZHICHENG-MINGDÉ