

# mipoesias

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Front cover portrait of E.J. Koh by Angela Hardy



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# michelle chan brown

Michelle Chan Brown's *Double Agent* won the 2012 Kore Press First Book Award, judged by Bhanu Kapil. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Blackbird*, *The Journal*, *Cimarron Review*, *The Missouri Review*, *Sycamore Review*, *Witness*, and others. A chapbook, *The Clever Decoys*, is available from LATR Editions (2010). A Kundiman fellow, she lives in Washington DC, where she teaches, writes, and edits *Drunken Boat*. [www.michellechanbrown.com](http://www.michellechanbrown.com).



# Suspicious Package

Came in a torture of twine.

Came in the nineties, in Tiffany, containing

the starlets' third eyes. If the scope  
limits, then panic is doped,

thus no need  
for labels. Right?

Makes right. Makes eyes. Came with a ring,  
In a suit shot through with milk.

Came committed, came as host  
to the union when the district lost.

Afghan-swaddled, colored warm  
as poppies lopped off by the storm.

Came notarized, a real letter.  
Damned by your neighbors and your betters.

Damned by their fall décor.  
the vanilla incense of American horror.

Came as unit, slave  
requiring no assemblage, came raved

by the thousandth reviewer.  
Here are your hands, sifting molars

from hair. Your feet, running the rust  
belt into sepsis. Sir, you cannot stay but you must

take a copy of our literature,  
our envelopes licked with flame, pleasure.



# In Washington, Our Man

Nostalgic for the village irk, the Saturday

Spectacle of heads

Separated from the elders'

Chickens. Our man clears his bronchial;

Warns the microphone—

*In this city, you better not be live.*

With all due respect, people are sick

From the fast and loose

With the sanitation standards.

Out of work, our man reminds, the workers are better

Able to mow their crop circles and predict

How it will look in the pictures

If the rain could just be rearranged.

The committee thanks you for your umbrage.

The committee sends over the tiny umbrella.

Without wetness, friends, no empire-

Hunger. Our man killed off the body

Politic to determine the worm.

In the village, our man is learning

The genitals of the poor are different,

As the bored party  
Hosses tap the hops  
Of their souls from the glory  
Holes of transformed neighborhoods.  
This town. It takes vision, sees our man,  
To separate whites from the nosebleed  
Section, poison from hormones,  
The spider's head from her legs.  
Our man is sorry he regrets  
Nothing. Our man prefers the duty-  
Free in Cairo to Cambodia.  
A brief history of our man, in profile:  
Coin, cameo, ammo, anon.  
Our man shoos shoeshiners  
From his chariot's spokes,  
Swishes his bristles over the shanty's  
Remains. In the old country, see, only witches  
Could ride. *You a baller*, we say  
To our man, as he drives straight  
Through and clears the painted chains.





# natalie eilbert

**Natalie Eilbert's work has appeared in or is forthcoming from Tin House, West Branch, Guernica, Drunken Boat, Spinning Jenny, Sixth Finch, and many other journals. Her chapbook, *Conversation with the Stone Wife*, is forthcoming with Bloof Books in 2014. She lives and writes in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, where she is the founding editor of *The Atlas Review*.**

# Swing You Sinners!

After Dave Fleischer's animated film *Swing You Sinners!*, c. 1930

The night you'll remember was different. A man  
in a catsuit stole a chicken, or tried his finest. This  
back when the country lacked friction, the arms  
of America's finest stretched across a yard to apprehend  
the culprit who ran. Where else could he run but straight  
to the graveyard. I'm sorry I could never tell you this,  
I was scared too. The graves grew teeth, begged strength  
from the sin of his hunger, and in an instant, snapped shut.  
The man shivered, all the law fell from his body, all the law  
he never had erupted. The grass grew teeth as quickly  
as a boudoir draws the shadows of a figure for its sinners.  
Revenge came simply, became a fluorescent motion.  
If you'll remember, you sized your hands around my neck  
and I felt exactly like nothing, a catsuit emptied of man.  
If I'm an artist, what do you call my beautiful neck. What do you call my law.



Mostly we knew the chicken had the upper hand in this,  
being plucked of wings and calcium. Her eyes all beetle  
and automatic, not sorry, not hurt, not much. How could  
life matter for meat. There isn't life in this country, this  
was a chicken who could stretch and tease her body, taunt  
the hunger out of the man. The man could only be a victim  
when put in such a position. The chicken she had no stake,  
so she took her legs up. Think twine. Thyme. She took her legs up and out.  
Then bloomers overtook her so plain was she. Materials are beautiful:  
they tear and animate the flesh, flense the poor virgin  
skins. This is a chicken whose been fucked back  
into black-and-white film. He's innocent, the man  
who reached his hand into the coop for her neck, he's innocent.  
This chicken needs some meat on her bones. You'll remember  
no terror at all in her face when he took the meat from her bones.

I knew a ghost too. Not like these. The laughter in them  
escaped through Gala Dali's skull and went straight for the man.  
He never wanted to steal a chicken. He never wanted for anything  
but the killing. To wring the neck of something smaller, poorer.  
The ghosts knew too. They knew as I knew. The ghosts  
with their phallic noses and tongues. Scared the man  
out of his catsuit. Where was the chicken and her original  
little sin to correct this, to accept the amends surely the man  
would utter. Ghosts wield machetes, or they can. Nothing  
can stop the blade of the man who has so long waited  
inside his loss. Consider this blade. Do not run like the man  
to the barn that looks so much like a face. Consider the laughter  
of a woman, the bored dead looks. It felt good  
to give your secret away. The way butter flows from a roast  
when pierced. Look now. The man is headed straight for the barn.



# **ej koh**



**EJ Koh is a poet and an author. Her work has been published in TriQuarterly, Southeast Review, La Petite Zine, Columbia Review, and elsewhere. She is a finalist for the Ina Coolbrith Memorial Poetry Prize and completed her MFA at Columbia University in New York. Koh was named as number two in Flavorwire's (2013) list of 23 People Who Will Make You Care About Poetry. She blogs at [www.thisisEJKoh.com](http://www.thisisEJKoh.com).**



# How to Write Death Threats

The important thing is to stretch. Spin your head, unhinge your neck, wiggle your joints until they flap and pop. Bodies grow heavier when dead.

Write the letters in rice paste and post. Send them to: Maria and Renée from elementary school, Andy and his fan club, including Jay who blamed you for everything, and Stephanie, the fat one.

The letters will melt on the trip.

You can't kill without kindness. Belt it on your haunches. Smeared white food smells of wild paddies and semi-ripe plant seed.

This morning, you napped, waking with hints of cherubim light—a symphony.

Recall the waft of cooking rice as a child.

Then, love will open out like tighermelon.

# Shaman

If you want to take  
up space, first see

how small you are  
like rocks, honey-

combs, and charcoal  
anchoring, feeding,

heating. In the sky,  
the clouds are combed

like rabbit fur. If I  
remember this, I am

not dreaming.

# How to Win an Argument

To know me you have to know my great-grandpa  
was stoned to death by neighbors and friends

until he was fish and gravel on the island he grew  
up on. He told his wife to live somewhere else with

someone else. I never understood that part until I am  
stubborn and fighting at the dinner table. There is

a silvering in my hair, black genius in my eyes. Then  
the old man peeks out of my mouth, sitting in coastal

brine. Turtles hedge the paddies. I am supposed to die  
but not here, somewhere else with someone else.

# Instructions for the Funeral

Face the casket towards an open  
window for the lighting and the wind.

No one let my brother speak.  
Pry him off the podium.

Use a wedding planner: a winter wonder  
land theme. Use amethyst hues,

dark blue drapes. No human props.  
One is enough. And if Taylor Swift

can go to prom with a cancer patient,  
I'm sure Beyoncé can sing

for a dead girl. Cover my armpits  
shriveling up like flaming dandelions.

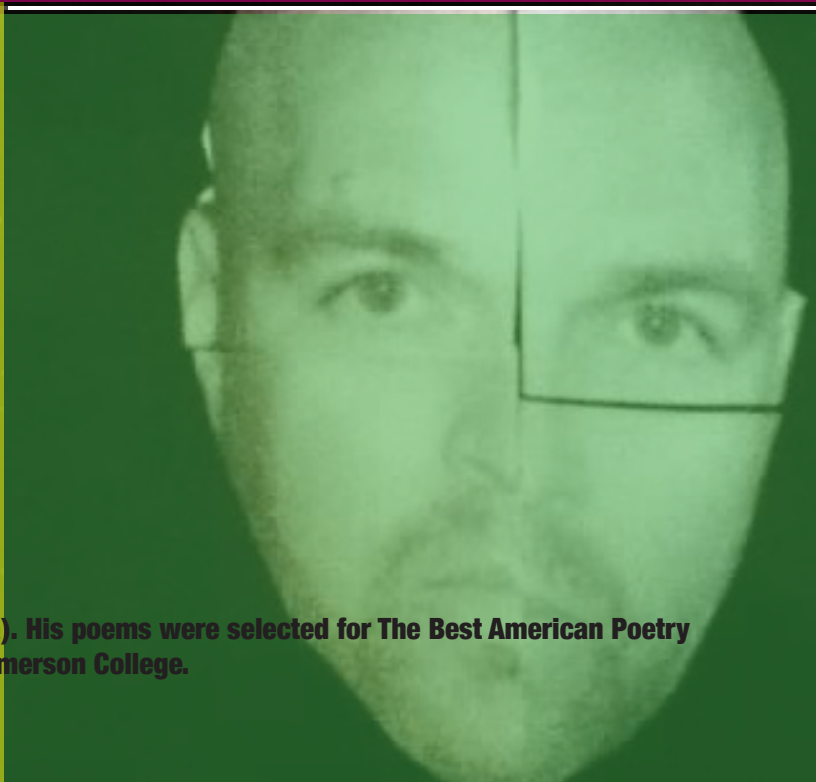
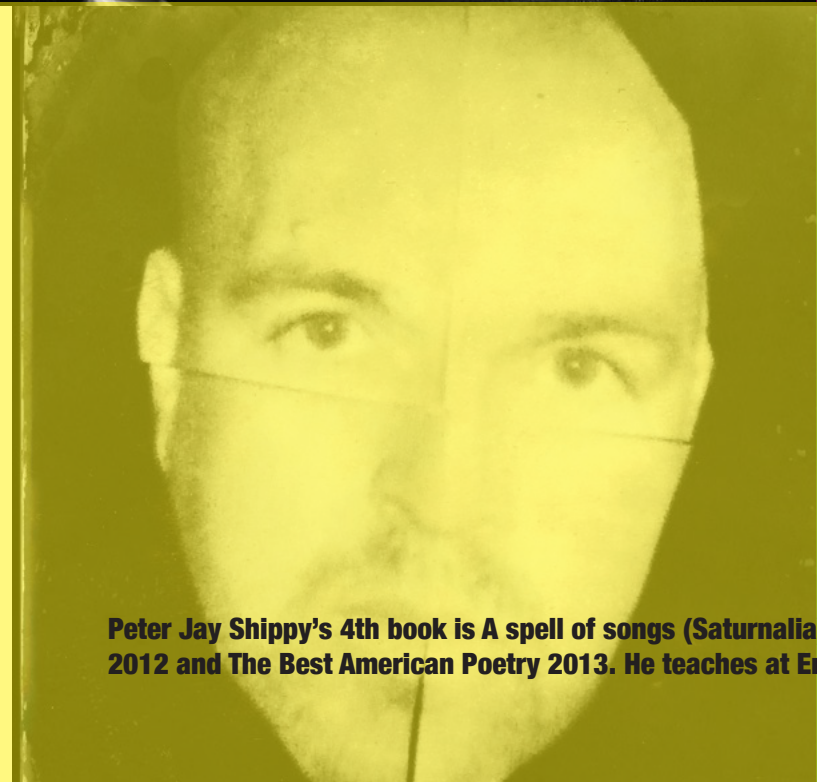
Put me in a dress that smells  
like a Japanese yew tree,

or persimmons by the creek. Show  
I am beautiful—if not for knowing

how to be kind or how to forgive,  
then as a creature.



# peter jay shippy



**Peter Jay Shippy's 4th book is A spell of songs (Saturnalia). His poems were selected for The Best American Poetry 2012 and The Best American Poetry 2013. He teaches at Emerson College.**

# Not like any other love

Watching the wind-wincing doctors hunching under  
the hospital's portico, smoking, kissing

to the meat, lost in the respite, that glitter  
in the martini-toned birches, Egyptian snow

shearing verbs from the world, freezing time, now  
our buses pull up to the door and we fall out

watching our steps on the steps, we reach for  
the walking rope and pull ourselves inside

where they remove the masking tape from our ears  
and insert whispers, the radiators' rumba

draws the shakes from our bones, they scribble  
red maps on our palms in indelible ink, now

we watch the phlebotomist announce  
a symphony with a wasabi-stained chopstick

as our bloods dance in the centrifuge, we hold  
the walking rope and pull ourselves inside

our rooms, futons, Rothko prints, satellites,  
radio, the Darvon station, walnut bellies

in blue bowls, the three prime numbers on our doors embroidered  
into our silver cardigans,

at night we practice candles and tongue shadows  
until they rub sleep into our eyes and we rise

at breakfast to eat grapefruit and watch the films  
where they remove the masking tape from our ears

as our bloods dance in the centrifuge, we hold  
red maps on our palms in indelible ink, now

our rooms, futons, Rothko prints, satellites  
shearing verbs from the world, freezing time, now

golf carts take us out to the track, they dress us  
in shoulder pads, goggles, and bicycle helmets,

half run east, half run west until we collide  
making their blackboards cloud as we're cast about,

a symphony with a wasabi-stained chopstick  
draws the shakes from our bones, they scribble

until they rub sleep into our eyes and we rise  
to gloved hands placing us in, screwing us shut,

stacking our cedar crates onto a dolly,  
watching the wind-wincing doctors, hunching under.

**Shayla Lawson's work ([www.shaylalawson.com](http://www.shaylalawson.com)) has appeared in Anti-, interrupture, and 1110/6. She was the 2013 recipient of Sou'Wester's Robbins Award for Emerging Writers in poetry. Her work is supported by fellowships from Indiana University and The Giorgio Cini Foundation. She teaches Creative Writing for Kentucky Governor's School for the Arts.**

A black and white portrait of a young Black woman with long, dark, curly hair. She is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

# **shayla lawson**



# Fondamenta delle Zattere

Love (lûv) v.

is an American word. A tenderness places his head in the lap  
of a curled girl  
like a prayer book: *Where do we go wild, my weary-eyed steam engine?*

is only to be said at a time where the word becomes  
a noun. Much better  
bestowed upon a foreigner.

is not a word but a done in many languages. *I have*  
*of you. I like*  
*to see you.* In Italian: *I want you well.*  
We are not of the Western word. We are not as canny as we think. He

is coiled cog and gold. He is a finger speaking, even  
in his own cheek, a foreign language. *I love you,*  
hot & waxed as a paper cup.

I ❤️ Starbucks™. I ❤️ Coca-Cola®

writhing its peppered spark—to make  
a spyglass from the mouth piece.

I love the fish-

eyed lens the way                      it speckles spectacular of the morn'. Funny,

how "mourn" and morning come  
to the same conclusion.

Sound has only relevance.  
You could cook

the same pot for 100 years, know  
it my favorite,

and I want you. Well

after the scar sags.

Well

after the thirst of our together

bursts our insides.

I want

you well::

the sky

feels perfectly

[warm] and pushes your silver

brow in    whichever shape it chooses.

Kneeling over

the vegetable garden.

I wish.

I want you.

Dipping water out the cool stone

earth,

the wood sap

still sweet, as we

ladle from it

the last

underbelly.

**Shane McCrae is the author of *Mule, Blood, Forgiveness* (forthcoming from Factory Hollow Press), and three chapbooks—most recently, *Nonfiction*. His poems have appeared, or are forthcoming, in *The Best American Poetry*, *The American Poetry Review*, *Fence*, *Pleiades*, *LIT* and elsewhere, and he has received a Whiting Writer's Award and a fellowship from the NEA. He teaches in the brief-residency MFA program at Spalding University.**

A black and white close-up portrait of Shane McCrae. He is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. He has dark hair, a mustache, and a goatee. He is wearing a dark-colored shirt. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

**shane mccrae**

# Exile from the Supremacy

## 1. In Exile

Growing up black white trash Lord even now

I wasn't sure which

parts of whiteness I could claim

But feeling it the rush of it    being black half-

Black feeling sometimes almost

white the rush of it    / Not claiming but

Being claimed by

The Oak Ridge Boys or who

Was it    who did that album with the spaceship banjos on the cover

Felt Lord as natural as money natural as

money feels Lord when after weeks without

any Lord not    a single



Dollar you come across a little

And for the hour you have it

Or maybe a whole day / If you lucky can make it last a day

You are yourself again

2. In the Supremacy

Growing up black white trash

In Texas Round Rock Texas meant

Growing up middle class

Growing up raised by whites growing up raised by *nigger* not

Knowing black people use that word at all

Until you're twelve

And live in California

Lord / Growing up not able to talk  
to anyone about your skin

And what it does to you and kids you know and strangers  
Growing up loving *The*  
*Elephant Man* on HBO

but you can't look at him  
Wishing your skin could somehow  
suffocate you in your sleep

Growing up drawing swastikas on t-shirts  
Growing up raised / By whites and white  
things you can't keep

# How to See the Forest

Dear Follow dear / Follow-Or-Fire-And-Even-If-You-Do-

Probably-Fire how to believe as as a child I as a child I did / It was

easier / I as a child I doubted only

things in the world / People in the world I knew You Lord were real

I knew You were Jesus was God

I know You Lord are real / But knowing now is different now it is

only the surest / Kind of believing Lord and I believe

in things in the world / People in the world Lord I see You

In people in the world

and doubt You more / Knowing what people are / Lord

how to see the forest

from the middle of the burning forest

# rachel mennies

**Rachel Mennies is the author of *The Glad Hand of God Points Backwards* (Texas Tech University Press, 2014), winner of the Walt McDonald First-Book Prize in Poetry, and the chapbook *No Silence in the Fields* (Blue Hour Press, 2012). Her poems have appeared in *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Poet Lore*, *Gigantic Sequins*, *DIAGRAM*, *Black Warrior Review*, and other literary journals, and have been reprinted at *Poetry Daily*. She teaches in the First-Year Writing Program at Carnegie Mellon University and has served as the reviews editor at *AGNI*.**



# Huevos for Seder

i.

At home, we'd pray for a good  
supper, then set an extra place  
at the table for a stranger—  
the perfect

guest. Our savior surely  
would never eat his eggs  
raw, not like *madre*, who drinks  
superstitiously from the shell,

breaks them open  
with her bare hands, looks  
hungrily at the runny life inside.

ii.

Map of Europe between us, *madre*  
and I sit at her kitchen table.  
*You are Jewish?* she asks me. I'm  
American, I say. *You are Jewish*,  
she says. (America, invention  
of the nomad, roof over the outcast's



head.) *Then I'm German*, I say. *No*,  
she tells me, kind in her surety. *I am*

*Spanish. You are Jewish.* Thus,  
I learn about nationalism:  
that un-scalable wall, that darkened,  
padlocked home. I inherit  
the menacing map entire. I live,  
lost, in each nation of sand.

iii.

In Toledo, the synagogues  
are all museums, stamped  
and tiled with the crescent and  
the cross—a reception hall

for all of Abraham's children.  
Whoever had the biggest army  
got to pick the decorations. In Madrid,  
all Orthodox, they keep a cop outside.

iv.

I slurp it raw, the Spanish *huevo*  
that lives on the shelf, somehow

never spoils, just as *madre*  
taught: *let the yolk*

*break on your teeth.* It spills  
like a prayer from my lips.

v.

Easier than I'd thought  
to shrug off identity's  
warm jacket—it hangs  
nicely from the peg

in the *vestíbulo*, draped  
with some care,  
designed for storms  
and squalls but worn only

in sunshine. Under  
the jacket: the slow,  
naked heart

of shame, same  
old matriarch hips,  
some balled  
matriarch fists.

vi.

The men of Spain  
have stadium hungers, loud  
and exultant. They whistle at us  
from street corners, scream  
when the *fútbol* player scores,  
bring us at night to their parents'  
homes through windows  
and fire escapes. *She*  
*wouldn't approve*, they say  
of their sleeping mothers: their  
televisions quiet, their crucifixes  
nailed to the wall. Our  
mothers still on Eastern time,  
constantly living in the past.  
*Good*, we might say: or nothing  
at all, taking them  
whole and new inside us  
like experience.

vii.

*Beitzah*--the egg at American  
seder: hardboiled  
in its pristine outfit,  
left whole to commune

with the lamb shank and the bitter  
herb. Smug, it never wobbles  
from place. Even boiled,  
the egg is commentary: symbol

of a temple's destruction, the taste  
of sulfur just as the funeral  
ends, the coming of spring.

viii.

Pepper or ash: the spots  
in our dinner of eggs.  
At the stove, ash, ash,  
*madre Madrileña* with

a Lucky Strike in her mouth.  
Our eggs taste rich  
with the soot, the cook's  
cigarettes and our hunger

mashed together on one  
fork. We eat them oily,  
potatoes fanned throughout  
like thin white moons.

Who's to say dirt never  
made a meal better, some sour  
blackness against the yellow sun, grit  
in the gift of sustenance?

ix.

After I move to Spain,  
three of my friends fall ill—  
salmonella. Another friend

finds a cross nailed above her bed  
after she wears her Star of David  
necklace to the dinner table. I'd left

all my jewelry in America:  
*could you ever live with yourself*  
*if you lost it*, my mother said.

Section ix. of "Huevos for Seder" first appeared in Mid-American Review.



**Monica Mody is the author of Kala Pani (1913 Press) and two chapbooks, Travel & Risk (Wheelchair Party) and Old Maid & Her Mama (The Chapbook). Her writing has recently appeared in &Now Awards 2: The Best Innovative Writing; The HarperCollins Book of English Poetry; The Volta; PIX photography quarterly; 1913 a journal of forms; and Four Quarters Magazine. She is currently working on a Ph.D. in East-West Psychology in San Francisco.**

A black and white portrait of Monica Mody. She has short, dark, wavy hair and is smiling slightly. She is wearing a dark, patterned sleeveless top, a thin necklace with a small pendant, and large, ornate hoop earrings. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

# monica mody



# And sometimes

And sometimes when I begin to write, thought is merely redness on the horizon that insinuates itself into my body like a dancing bear, its teeth clattering with the sounds of the dead that trickle into my belly and laugh their secret laugh, for it is wise to want to be born out of the ferocity of need, out of skeleton bones and shark teeth, out of an impelling driving like electricity intention into supersonic turbulence.

So unscrew the mind and set it on the table, and you'll find also a feast: other heads lolling, images blinking their eyes at you, and space to meander in should you choose. The unspoken butts its head against yours.

Moon, full as a beaming river.

## **Moon, this poem is for you.**

You come out to show us your full face, face round as a buttercup,  
glowing from within.

That glow holds us together. That glow reminds us of moon-nature, of  
the restlessness within us that comes out to bay at you.

Your horses gallop amongst us. Your critters, their chests carved with  
mystery, have made earth home—a home so tremendously vast one  
can only wonder. To inhabit is to wonder.

You remind us to smile with the ghostly lips of a seasoned star. To  
wonder is to smile fully unsheathed.

# Sita's Initiation

That Sita knew she needed to cross the threshold. For why should she  
stay indoors while men roam wide in the forest?

Beyond the threshold, curtains of mythologies fall down  
Each curtain of living      moving persons  
   histories  
                         living words

& this tapestry is my memory  
& I move freely within now—this tapestry is your gift to me.

**Kevin Varrone's most recent book of poems is box score: an autobiography, published as a free, interactive app for iPhone and iPad (available at the app store or at [boxscoreapp.com](http://boxscoreapp.com)). His other publications include Eephus (Little Red Leaves Textile Series, 2012), Passyunk Lost (Ugly Duckling Presse, 2010), the philadelphia improvements (Ugly Duckling Presse, 2010), id est (Instance Press, 2007), and g-point Almanac: 6.21-9.21 (ixnay press, 2000). He is a 2012 Pew Fellow in the Arts. He teaches at Temple University and lives outside Philadelphia.**



**kevin varrone**



# Love Advice for Children

If you give your lovers  
an inch they'll want a mile

and if you give them a mile  
(because a mile is too far to walk alone)

they might ask you for a car  
or convertible, because lovers always want

change (and the moon)—unless they're european,  
in which case they might walk—

and if you give them change you'll become  
a bureau de change and your convertible will likely be a diesel

and they'll never stop asking you  
to be their open road or autobahn

or wind in their hair or sails or warp  
or weft. don't do it.

if you do they'll call you mouse  
or mousse or bunny or lapin

agile, and if you become their dummy  
hore they'll want you continually

to pull yourself from a hat, if only  
just an inch, or two

point five four centimeters, so, shucks,  
you might just as well stay there

little bunny, and have a carrot.

An audio recording of an earlier version of "Love Advice for Children" was included in the 2013 Delirious Hem Audio Poetry Advent Calendar.

# I Want Our Love

I want our love  
to be like a snow day,  
like that snow day  
two after new year's day,  
when we took the christmas tree down  
and the children wept.

I want our love to be  
like the sidewalk I shoveled  
it was so quiet I got kind of dizzy  
and felt a little rapture  
flap its wings in my chest.  
I want our love to be like the plow  
that buried it all.

Now that I think about it, I really,  
really want our love to be like social media.  
I want you to check me a thousand times a day  
and effortlessly like  
everything I say; I want to show up  
in each array of people you may know;  
and I want you every morning  
to roll over grey scale  
in the rectangle of our bed  
and ask what's on my mind.

# What Can I Hold in My Hand from This Love?

Is the high pink sky still  
mine? The coal smoke  
clouds I feel like Allentown  
now, or a train stack hacking up  
my own prosperity?  
The church steeple is a spent pistol  
pointing up: look  
at that moon closing its mouth over it:  
that's my constellation.

There's nothing usable in this view.  
I can never lay my hands there.  
So I'll keep a wisp of you for consolation, a picture  
with your head hinged back blowing smoke  
Os like a dragon in the cold.

# Ode to the Second Day of Spring

Some stuff started coming alive  
but who knew what to call it?

We never spoke again  
or did and kissed some more, became engaged

in a coming-of-age-ritual  
we'd later call "mercy fucking"

but mercy was just a word we  
hadn't looked up yet.

My teeth had already begun sprouting  
apart again and I kept thinking

I'd like to wire and anchor my flesh together  
and let my atoms drift to the perimeter.

I passed subsequent stations of subsequent metros  
like every day of spring beyond the first

until I saw a solstice and called it terminus.



# Poem I Wrote on My iPhone, Driving

It seems a bit like a hollow earth  
without you  
in the car—I can't adjust the iPad  
from the driver's side  
and the kids are howling  
mad. The speed limit is 65  
and I'm doing 70 ish  
while Ellen Degeneres forgets herself  
in *Finding Nemo*  
and I'm thrumming like an adolescent  
about the parentheses of your hips  
and what I might do with fingers  
formed into scare quotes.  
I'd like an *au pair* to drive this car  
or some sci-fi time machine  
to beam you here.  
I'm almost at that rest stop near the state line,  
the one with the private little hedgerow caesura  
where the boys pee if there's a line at the port-a-john.  
I'm almost there  
or I might be driving off the flat earth.



# Jessica Laser

Jessica Laser's poems have most recently appeared in Lana Turner and RealPoetik. Her Poet's Sampler in the Boston Review was listed among the magazine's "Top 20 Poems of 2013." She currently lives in Brooklyn and teaches Creative Writing at Manhattanville College.

# Camp

I looked but love was everywhere  
cubed, torn, streamers, begging fruition  
I burn you  
blame me  
love, like, heuristically  
lost plants aspire to feet and we  
wind up here, history, on wristwatch  
in an antiquated triangle  
understanding correctly  
blunder, figurine, troop  
those black at night now blacken the revolution  
blame for this tent now  
Western, living here, trips to Europe, Estonia  
leave the grounds  
with a soft lock and light flame  
you burn, stuck on sense thrown to  
the fire, kinder, yes  
I no longer aspire  
lying in then being  
beside the grave, in order

that invitation too goes out  
worry, retrograde, fever, god  
so single to believe in  
illness, frigidity, undulation, seadom  
I could be hiking, I state, withered there  
luckily I have begun to lie  
even with myself—up to here, no further  
yes where I'm listening  
a house I loved  
moved me



## **An interview with Shara McCallum Grace Cavalieri**

Meet Shara McCallum. She's smart, she's sassy, she's a warm heart in a cold world. From Jamaica, Shara is the author of *The Face of Water: New and Selected Poems*, *This Strange Land*, finalist for the OCM Bocas Prize for Caribbean Literature, *Song of Thieves*, and *The Water Between Us*, winner of the Agnes Lynch Starrett Prize for Poetry. Recognition for her poetry includes a Witter Bynner Fellowship from the Library of Congress, a National Endowment for the Arts Poetry Fellowship, and other awards. Her work has been published in the US, UK, Caribbean, Latin America, and Israel and been translated into Spanish, French, and Romanian. She directs the Stadler Center for Poetry and teaches at Bucknell University.

**If you were to cook a dinner for Derek Walcott, what would be your menu?**

I took Derek Walcott out for Barbeque in Memphis the first time I met him. I was 27 and had invited him to read at a university where I was teaching at the time in that city. He loved the food, so I'd try to make that again for him if I were cooking a meal. More likely, though, I'd just order and have ribs shipped from Corky's, the restaurant where we ate. Ribs cooked over a slow fire are pretty hard to recreate any other way.



## **What quality of any religion is reflected in your poetry?**

Several religions have inflected my sense of the world and have impacted my writing. My maternal grandmother was Catholic, my grandfather Anglican and Jewish, and my parents both Rastafarians. As a young child in Jamaica I was raised as a Rastafarian and then, once we came to the states, without much religion at all. In my twenties I converted to Judaism, even while considering myself more or less agnostic. Despite what might seem confusing to others, these multiple religious inheritances have all made sense to me. Each of these various traditions—their sense of justice, beauty, and an emphasis on the non-material (or spiritual)—enter my poems at times.

## **If you had to choose a poetry guru for yourself, who would it be?**

SM: I've chosen many gurus since I began writing. The poets I read and re-read are my constant teachers.

## **How do you achieve harmony in your work?**

I'm not sure if I have but I am always in pursuit of balance in my writing—between form and content, sound and sense, rhetoric and emotion, etc.

### **How exactly do you create characterization in your work?**

I am very interested in adopting various personae in poems, in developing speakers who are not the lyric “I” of the poem—in other words, who are clearly identified as not being the poet-speaker (the “Shara” who writes). This is an old tradition I’m writing into, that of the dramatic monologue. Some of the characters I create are drawn from figures of myth, like Persephone or the mermaid. Others are loosely drawn from women in my own life (at least initially the character of “Miss Sally” was based on my maternal grandmother) or even from myself. The newest poems I’m writing (“The Madwoman” poems) draw upon my biography in the loosest sense but are very much an invention on the page. Over time and through writing and revising poems like these, the characters move away from whatever birthed them to develop lives and voices of their own. They speak to me and that’s where it becomes interesting.

## **How has your writing expanded in the past 5 years— tone, topic, or style?**

In terms of topics, some pivotal life experiences—mothering, the deaths of people very close to me, and my own experience of aging—have shaped my consciousness in the past 5 years and have altered the perspective in the poems I'm now writing. In terms of tone and style, it's harder to know what I'm actually achieving when I'm so close to the work, though I have been continuing to try to expand the tonal range of my poems, especially to find ways to admit irony, humor, and anger into a poem without destroying it. I'm aware that my default setting as a poet is toward the lyric and often one that's elegiac in tone and I want to make sure I don't too readily rely on that. Anything we do can become a crutch and since I want to keep growing as a writer I try to both move toward what I love and push away from it at the same time.

## **What landmark decision did you ever make about writing poetry?**

To write it at all.

## **What part of writing do you fear?**

That I won't be able to do justice to the material for any number of reasons—lack of courage to face the subject, lack of ability as a writer, lack of time or energy or will to see through the vision, etc. I've found that the only thing that counters any of these fears is actually writing.

## **What made you believe in kindness?**

You, Grace. I'm only half-kidding when I say that. The people I've met and known in this life like you, who give so much of themselves over and over to others, remind me that kindness is also a truth of existence. I don't think, in the history of humankind, any lasting good has ever come from hoarding—whether that be possessions or ideas, time, love, etc. I think of practicing kindness and being generous as an engine for our continued growth, as individuals and as societies.

## **How do you administrative/teaching duties at Bucknell nourish your writing?**

My students and the poets I've met who come through

the Stadler Center remind me that poetry matters. Given the other demands for my time and the culture's attitude toward literature and art, it would be very easy for me not to make engagement with poetry a priority in my life. Yet I know that when I'm reading and writing poems I feel at my most "nourished" and feel most present in my life. I thank the community of writers at Bucknell and all the various communities of which I've been lucky to be a part (for a day, a week, or longer) for making me believe in the value of poems.

# Exile

Shara McCallum

The trick is to say morning  
and a bird will trill on a doorstep.  
Inside a kitchen

fingers roll johnny cakes,  
dropping balls of dough into oil  
that splatters, singeing a wrist.

Here, a woman is always  
singing, each note tethering  
sound to meaning.

The trick is to wait  
on this doorstep forever.  
The trick is to remember

time is a fish  
swimming through dark water.





## **An interview with Teri Cross Davis Grace Cavalieri**

Teri Cross Davis is a super star: poet, teacher, administrator, and she gets her kids to bed on time. Teri holds a B.S. in Journalism from Ohio University and a MFA in Poetry from American University. She was a Ford Foundation fellow, a Cave Canem fellow, and attended the Soul Mountain Writer's Retreat. Her poems have been published in many anthologies including, *Bum Rush The Page: A Def Poetry Jam*, *The Why and Later*, *Gathering Ground: A Reader Celebrating Cave Canem's First Decade*, *Growing Up Girl: An Anthology of Voices from Marginalized Spaces*, *Full Moon on K Street*, *Poetic Voices Without Borders 2*, and *Tempu Tupu!/walking Naked: Africana Women's Poetic Self-portrait*, . Her work has appeared in *Beltway Quarterly* and *Torch*, *Gargoyle*, *Natural Bridge*, *Poet Lore* and *Kinfolks Quarterly*.

**Choose a color that what would best symbolize your work, and why?**

Perhaps brown is that color. With its scale from opaque tans and "barely-there" creams to its muddy obscurities that can hide and nurture secrets.

**If poetry is a system of thought, how do you describe yours?**

I steer more toward chaos theory- with aspects of surprise, nonlinear actions and unpredictable combinations. Chaos is how I would describe it every time I close my eyes and concentrate, searching for a description or trying to identify

what the line of a poem is supposed to say. I feel that I want to explore so much with my work and the best way for me to do that is to search for the truth and be willing to accept it, no matter the uneasiness of its path, the hurdles that line it, and the surprises that await at the end.

**What poems were you reading at 18 years of age?**

Edna St. Vincent Millay and Dudley Randall's *The Black Poets*. Both were on my parents' bookshelves.

**When was the last time you found an arid place in writing a poem and how did you get out of it?**

I read (out loud or to myself) the work of others. It helps loosen the tongue, the mind, the pen.

**What poet(s) represent a version of the past that is the same as your version of the past?**

Lucille Clifton. I've always felt right at home in Clifton's work. Reading her is like going back to a family home, sitting on the wrap-around porch and having a glass of lemonade on a summer day. Her work is just familiar, wise, insightful, honest, and slyly humorous.

## **What is the happy moment you've had in your writing life?**

That first acceptance notice of a poem.

It was for Bum Rush the Page, edited by Tony Medina and the late Louis Reyes Rivera and it was pure validation that this thing, this art, this way of life was sustainable on some level.

## **In an anti-poetic world, what gives you hope?**

Language learned new and fresh in the minds and mouths of the young! ( With two little ones age 5 and 3, language is a new flexible thing that they are exploring constantly and it makes me rethink what I say and how I say it.)

## **What are your thoughts on B.H. Fairchild's comment that Science is progressive but Art is not...'Art doesn't get better; it just gets different.'?**

I have to say that I am a Fairchild fan (he read at the Folger for the first time last season). Art does become different, especially as we embrace more views and more voices within any art form. Sometimes it is hard to think of art in the language of competition- it's not fair to whatever art form that's being referenced nor the patron who is absorbing it. What moves me isn't better than what moves someone else, it's just different and on some days, we are different. So I

suppose I agree with his comment, because I don't like the idea of "better" in terms of competition. Art should be about growth and honesty.

**Describe what you were wearing when your husband proposed marriage to you.**

Jeans, undoubtedly but I can't actually recall. I just remember "The Matrix" like moment when he bent on one knee and took out the engagement ring and I seemed to see and feel everything around me as I held my breath and listened, listened to him and listened to traffic, the footsteps of others, everything because I knew my life was changing.

**As an arts administrator at the Folger Shakespeare Library, how do you try to give the Reading series "fresh fields, fresh fruit, fresh grain?"**

I am always asking other poets who they are reading- that's my cheating way. At the same time, I am always reading reviews, searching You Tube for readings, reading journals and of course new work, always keeping an eye and ear out for a new voice. I also try to keep an eye on not only ethnic but cultural, gender, and geographic diversity for the series. Plus, every year I try to invite a few poets who have never read at the Folger before.

# Family Bed

Teri Cross Davis

Her first tumult, roundhouse, flip  
little spark of flutter, little slip  
of universe tumbling through me.  
I plod, heavy, important our  
path forward. Now toddling  
she curls, arches her neck, the little c  
to the S curve, my breast,  
a breath away from insistent lips.  
You say we must break her sleeping  
with mommy with daddy. You say  
two nights of no rest, of offering myself  
is two nights too much— but she beckons.  
When have I not heeded her call?  
This love radiates, burns brighter with each  
burnished need. I cannot relinquish  
how tired and lovely it is to fill.



## **An interview with Kenneth Carroll**

### **Grace Cavalieri**

If every poet gave the world what is needed like Kenny Carroll does, we would be in love, not war. Carroll is a poet, fiction writer, essayist and playwright, whose writing has appeared in the following publications, Icarus, In Search Of Color Everywhere, Bum Rush The Page, Potomac Review, Worcester Review, the Washington Post, Words & Images Journal, Indiana Review, American Poetry: The Next Generation, Beyond the Frontier, Gargoyle, Children of the Dream, Spirit & Flame, and Penguin Academics Anthology of African American Poetry. His book of poetry entitled So What: For The White Dude Who Said This Ain't Poetry, 1997 Bunny & The Crocodile Press was nominated for the Paterson Literary Review Award. He has had three of his plays produced and was a writer for BET's Story Porch Program.

He has performed at the Kennedy Center, Nuyorican Café, Library of Congress, Beyond Baroque, Gala Hispanic Theater, and at universities and cultural institutions around the country. He is former executive director of the award-winning community service program DC WritersCorps and the African American Writers Guild. He is married and the proud father of a daughter and two sons.

**If you had only one story you were allowed to tell what would it be?**

I'd tell the story of the first time I wrote a story and read it to my mother when I was eight years old. It's significant to me, not because it was my first writing or that I would later become a writer, it's significant to me because it taught me how love listens and respond. I learned that we require an echo to affirm. I remember being a quiet child before that day, introverted and self-conscious. Watching my mother's face, her smile and laughter, her eyes were sentinels, every time I looked up from the



page they were there, encouraging me to continue.

**What does your daily job have to do with your poetry?**

I run a college/career prep program for youth in ward 7/8. Poetry doesn't play a role in my work, except many of my students write for the same reasons I wrote-to hear them selves, to learn the profundity of their own voices. But I just listen and I do take them to open mics and to hear other young poets, but it's not part of my job.

**What poem by any poet gives you a thrill? What poem of your own gives you a thrill?**

I would say there are many, a few: Lucille Clifton "Won't You Celebrate"; Amiri Baraka "Preface to a twenty volume suicide note"; Czeslaw Milosz "Dedication." There are millions of others thankfully, many I haven't discovered yet. I'm generally thrilled by good poetry. I don't get a thrill from reading my own poems, only from the reaction they elicit. One of my favorites based on the audience reaction is "Short Poem."

**What moment in time would you like to hold in your hands and not lose?**

A moment I rarely talk about because of its' other worldness is the time I took my oldest son, Thomas, when he was two

years old to his first poetry reading. We saw the poet "Sincere Thunder Namefree" at the old Anacostia Museum reading Harlem Renaissance poetry. My son joined the poet in the exhortations of Sterling Brown's great "Southern Road." After the reading I took my son to a park near the museum where my father used to bring my baby brother Harold and my middle brother Thomas, who had died two years before my own son, who bore his name, was born. I had a hard time remembering where the now small patch of land was near Mississippi Avenue. The last time I had been there I was 7 years old. After several twists and turns I located the park. It looked smaller but otherwise unchanged: rusted swings, a big shade tree, horseshoe pit and a couple of benches with the seats nearly rotted away.

As I parked the car, my son in his child seat said to me, "My daddy used to bring me here." I turned to him perplexed, as this was the first time I had visited the park in nearly 30 years. Of course he was confused I thought. "No Thomas," I assured him, "I've never brought you here." "My daddy used to bring me here," he repeated, his voice calm, assured. I looked at my son in the back seat. His eyes peering back at me. "But I'm your daddy," I said, with probably too much urgency or fear or confusion in my voice. He simply smiled and said nothing else. We got out the car and he played in the park and never mentioned again that he had been there before.

Even today I'm awed by that moment and my memory of it. I have only tried to speak of that moment a few times-each time I stop myself, unable to push through the incredulous nature of it or my emotional reaction to trying to explain it. Once I tried to tell myself it never happened, but of course a writer can't lie to himself, not without consequence. I don't try to interpret the moment. I accept it for what I imagine it to have been; A hello, a sharing from my brother though whatever thin space separates us from those we love and who we heartachingly miss. My only regret is that instead of fighting with logic what I was experiencing, I wish I had surrendered sooner to my brother's reach, his gift of that moment delivered through the countenance of my baby boy. What a conversation we might have had.

### **What do you eat for breakfast?**

Dreams. I'm an insomniac, or as I often say an orthodox insomniac. I'm generally sleep when folks are eating breakfast so my first meal tends to be near lunch.

### **What does the word IMAGINATION mean to you?**

It means freedom. It's a key that allows me to transverse time, space, limitations, isms and most importantly, it lets me transverse me. I know I have been a lonely kid in a house full

of brothers and sisters, too self-conscious, too mindful about everything. But my greatest antidote has been my ability to go somewhere else. That is why reading is so important to me. Writers opened up the world, feed an already active imagination with a thousand lands and ideas I would not have been able to travel to without them.

### **What conscious process do you go through to make the nonverbal verbal?**

I ask myself question like, where's the story? Can I structure or format the concept for delivery? Can I find an image, a pixel, an abstract to get the reader/listener to imagine the whole? Story and Image, meaning and metaphor, that's my process.

### **What makes you proud?**

I'm proud of the work I did to become a writer. Not the technical part, but the way I had to reconfigure my mind to believe that I could be a writer, not just a lonely guy who wrote. Like Lucille says, I made it up, what did I know. One day, as friends and loved ones counseled me with dire warnings of impending doom, I decided to be a writer. I quit my good corporate job, cashed out part of a retirement plan and surrendered to what was sustaining me all along. It was humbling and frightening, and not without peril (those eviction notices were scary). But I never regretted it. I'm

proud that I've tried to use what limited gifts and skills I have as a writer to agitate for justice, to advocate for the oppressed, to celebrate the uncelebrated and to honor all those who came before me to do such work.

**What is the earliest poem you remember hearing or reading, and what was your age?**

I didn't actually read these poems, but I heard my 7 year old sister recite them millions of times for a school play: Langston Hughes "Mother to Son" and Paul Lawrence Dunbar's "In The Morning." I had to be 5 or 6 years old. The first 1,000 times I really enjoyed the rhythm and music of the poems. The other 999,000 times was too much. But I was happy hearing my sister recite them at the school play.

**What do you resist when writing and how do you overcome this?**

I resist the urge to be as romantic and naïve and as desperately mournful as I really am. I try not to weight down my writing, and thusly, the reader with artless urgencies. I over come this yearning through editing, revision, reading. As Chairman Mao famously said, "Bad art does not help the revolution." I remember that people remember stories and imagery more than warnings and platitudes.

# Call and Response

Kenneth Carroll

For Charles Louis "Chuck" Brown 5/16/12

the antiphonal sonic response of eternity  
call and response, the go-go-ification of the groove  
the black church birthing funk  
the holla back for the future generations  
Chuck Brown as caliph, as patron saint  
of the endless jam, asked us  
"Hey everybody how you feel tonight?"  
and we answered, "Feel like moving that body."  
from spirit we still hear his call,  
the inhalation and exhalation of life  
above us like the overlook at the panorama room  
pulse carried by river carried by song.



# Shakedown Cruise

by Kirk Curnutt

*There's no victory at sea,*

*Unless it's mutiny....*

Come to Jamaica, the telegram said. I make records.

I should've been suspicious. Last I'd seen of J. J. "Downbeat" Duchamp he was roaring away from the breakup of our band, The Indigo Underbelly featuring Corny Wilhelms, in his 1969 Dodge Fargo. I, the aforementioned Corny Wilhelms, am not usually one to lament lost friendships. Yet seeing how the van was packed with every guitar, amp, fuzzbox, microphone, and fake book Downbeat's mom ever bought the band, our dissolution was devastating. Tired of inflated egos and prima-donna demands for drum solos, I went it alone and spent the entire 1970s eking an existence on Tarleton, Georgia's kill-or-be-killed acoustic circuit: nine straight years of guitar lessons by day, Gordon Lightfoot covers by night, and an occasional \$50 for performing "Wedding Song (There is Love)" at some hippie friend's nuptials.

Not a glamorous life, and not one any human can survive for long. By 1979 I was so broke I was reduced to squatting in an abandoned moonshiner's trailer in Twiggs County with only my prized poster of Lynda (TV's *Wonder Woman*) Carter to my name. Bitter and balding, I had neither woman nor wheels, and I was on the cusp of losing the last thing that should be asked of a man who can play every lick of the 69 minutes and 72 seconds of aural bliss that is the Allman Brothers' *Eat a Peach*: his youth. I was thirty.

So when Downbeat's telegram arrived I didn't think twice about rolling Lynda Carter up and heading to Montego Bay. I knew the Indigo Underbelly wasn't reuniting, but I figured a gig as a studio musician or an engineer was better than suicide or working at my uncle's car wash, my two other options. There was just one problem. Downbeat did make records, as his telegram claimed. His records just weren't made of vinyl.

They were made of reefer.

"The scam's ingenious," Downbeat insisted. We were hunched in the hold of his thirty-six-foot Gulfstar sailboat, the *Jay Ferguson*. He'd popped open a packing crate of album jackets, showing me how four ounces of sinsemilla could be pressed into a patty the shape of a 33-1/3 and slipped in a dust sleeve. "Customs comes aboard, they think we're just a couple of record-store impresarios hauling obscure wax to the States. And here's the truly brilliant part: these LPs are cut-outs, my man, filler for the bargain bin. Ain't nobody gonna touch 'em!"

I was amazed Downbeat could run his own smuggling operation; when I knew him he could barely keep 4/4 time. But I signed on as his mate for twenty-five percent of the cut. It didn't seem to matter that I didn't know port from starboard. Downbeat was willing to teach me how to raise the mainsail and jib, how to unjam a bolt rope and cleat the halyard. We passed our days drinking, toking, and grooving to Little Feat's *Sailin' Shoes*. By the time we hit the Yucatan Peninsula, sentimental sap I am, I confessed to Downbeat how much I'd missed his friendship.

He looked uncomfortable with my affection and tried to crack a joke. "What a long estranged trip it's been," he said, and he held out his palm. "Gimme five, Dr. Jive!" I slapped him some skin and we toasted the dolphins.

The next day he sold me to pirates.

I was sawing logs in my bunk when the raid happened. A salty voice screamed, “Grappling hooks!” and a hail of clanging vibrated the hull. I rushed on deck in my underwear to discover a dozen brigands in jerkins and britches of sailcloth swarming over the *Jay Ferguson*’s windward side. The marauders were so hairy I thought Black Oak Arkansas was invading us. They came from a sleek vessel eighty feet long and twenty-five abeam. A dozen different hands grabbed my arms, legs, ponytail, and other parts I won’t mention.

The first mate aimed an AK-47 at me. “By the order of Cap’n Salem ‘Shanghai’ Kelly, the King of the Crimps, you have two choices, you worthless salt-licking sock-sniffer!” I’d never heard such hostility—or such alliteration. “You can sign the articles and take your place with the other bilge rats, or you can floss with seaweed until the beasts of the deep rise to nibble your olives. What’s your preference?”

“You guys are joking, right? You’re Downbeat’s friends—I get it! Good one, J. J.! You got me. This was almost as good as the time we played the homecoming dance in Americus, and you hired the hooker to pretend she was the school guidance counselor. I gotta admit, I had more fun with her in the janitor’s closet than with these brothers....”

The mate, whose called himself Bellclanger, pulled a cutlass from a scabbard and smacked me upside the temple. The blade put a notch in the top of my ear. Blood spurted into my cochlear canal and dribbled off my lobe.

“What is he?” Bellclanger yelled over his shoulder. “A carpenter? A surgeon? A copper?” Downbeat peeked up from the engine hatch where he’d hidden. “He’s not any of those. He’s a guitar player.”

“Blood of Christ! It wasn’t bad enough that last month you fobbed a yoga instructor off on us? Keep watering down these conscripts, you chum-dumpster, and see if Cap’n Kelly doesn’t bore your

tongue with a red-hot iron and brand a W for Worthless to your forehead!”

To prove his displeasure the mate whapped the other side of my head. Now blood dribbled off both earlobes, like matching earrings.

“I’m really sorry about this, Corny,” said Downbeat. “They make me do this. It’s like a tax. I can’t run a load unless I pay them a slave coming and going. Don’t hate me, brother. We had our share of good times.”

I lunged for him, hoping to throttle him the way I used to when he’d muff the beat on the Dave Clark Five’s “Bits and Pieces,” but I was clubbed from behind and hog-tied. The bandits pitched me onto their ship and clambered to their stations. The mangiest of them claimed my Lynda Carter poster for his personal use. As a last treacherous goodbye, Downbeat cranked his eight-track tape player, and I was serenaded into slavery to the tune of Elton John’s “Funeral for a Friend”/“Love Lies Bleeding.”

Woe was the life I lived on that sloop. I was clapped in irons and dropped in the hold. For an endless cycle of days I lived off a single soggy biscuit, two glugs of brandy, and water. I lay in the dark, the air stifling with the smell of plundered tobacco, listening to the teeth of rats chatter as they chewed the leaves. I might’ve died there, clad only in my underwear, if I hadn’t groped around, my fingers nibbled by nicotine-stimulated vermin, and discovered my lifeline: a guitar. To keep my sanity I played every song in my repertoire, Blind Faith’s “Can’t Find My Way Home,” Grand Funk’s “I’m Your Captain,” and, maybe too obviously, Humble Pie’s “Thirty Days in the Hole.” At some unknown point into my imprisonment—I’d lost all track of time—I was deep into that last classic when the hold hatch flew open, and a hand the size of North Carolina yanked me into God’s azure.

The hand belonged to a seven-foot-tall African named Atufal. I knew him because since my abduc-

tion he'd stared at me through a peep hole, relentlessly fingering the necklace of toes he wore around his neck. I thought my own toes were goners until I realized the giant was under the command of Bell-clanger.

"All right," the mate spat, "you proved you got some use in you. Cap'n says to get your ass in the galley and get the men singing. We need something to keep this restless bunch of carotid-artery carvers pacified. Only you can't keep on with this moony, weepy-whiny shite! One more chorus of this melancholy sad-sack rustlin' and I'm'a hanging us both off the mizzenmast!"

As Atufal took my scruff in his grip I caught my first glimpse of Cap'n "Shanghai" Kelly. He was the ugliest man I've ever seen. He was short and a hunchback with a stringy white beard that couldn't hide his scabby potato face. "As toothless as he's ruthless," Atufal whispered. "That's what the crew says. I've never known a man as savage as 'Hang-'Em-High Shanghai,' and I grew up among cannibals." The captain's eyes followed us. His expression said he knew exactly what the giant was telling me. He rapped his cane on the poop-deck railing and pointed its knob—a desiccated monkey head—straight at me.

"Cornelius Wilhelms!" he said, using a full name nobody had spoken since I wore a Davy Crockett coonskin cap and wrote letters proposing marriage to Annette Funicello. "You're now a pillager and a profiteer, but in other matters, you shall conduct yourself like a nun on Sunday. Tell him my rule, Atufal. Tell him or you'll shiver under the lash!"

The African gave the captain a defiant glare, but relented. "Why not? You're bound to hear it as often as you'll hear the waves slosh the sides of this ghoulish ship, Wilhelms. The captain's standing order: 'You boys want some sex,' he likes to say, 'you can squeeze the sails, you can lick the decks.'"

"Do the men do a lot of that?" I asked, freaked out by the image. Cap'n Kelly laughed so hard

his face looked like the monkey head topping his cane. Atufal pushed me to the galley, where I sang for eight hours straight. Not even ten years of playing “Color My World” and “Closer to You” could prepare me for the requests of these cutthroats. They were into bubblegum. They wanted to sing along to “Magic” by Pilot, Reunion’s “Life is a Rock,” any and all Shaun Cassidy. Their No. 1 request was Nick Gilder’s “Hot Child in the City.” If I didn’t get to crank something off Zeppelin’s *Zoso* soon I would slit my own gizzard.

During a break, as I wrapped my bleeding fingers with strips from the cook’s snot rag, Atufal introduced me to other crew members. There was Rover Beignet, a one-eyed Frenchman who carved dirty pictures into beams and tabletops; “Pitchforks” Valdez, so named because each of his hands only had three middle fingers; Billie Budd, a sixteen-year old female impersonator who, until my Lynda Carter poster was unfurled, served as the men’s only remembrance of femininity; the addled Dan Boleyn, who claimed he was the Queen of England’s exiled half-brother; and Dagnar Ranneskjöld, who couldn’t pronounce his own name because a barracuda ate his tongue. (He was my poster thief). Three dozen additional men worked the sloop, but only these six spoke to me. I only realized too late this wasn’t because they were friendly, or that they liked my music.

“What year is it outside?” Dan Boleyn demanded.

“1979.”

“Four hundred and forty-three then,” he mumbled.

“Ignore this dimwit,” “Pitchforks” Valdez insisted. “You know how I lost four fingers? Four times I try to kill Cap’n Shanghai, amigo. The madman is immortal! Don’t even consider going against his orders, even if he asks you to grind your best friend’s bones and powder his wig with it—”

Dagnar Ranneskjöld leaned across the table and with one punch knocked “Pitchforks” uncon-



scious. The Spaniard slumped onto an obscene phallus Rover had carved out of salted ham.

“You’ll get used to them,” Atufal assured me. “Or else you’ll go crazy. Soon enough you’ll forget you ever lived in something called human time. Life will be like the sea: endless. Thanks to the Sky Deity Nyame for bringing you here so we can sing and forget about this limbo.”

“Four hundred and forty-three then,” Dan Boleyn said again.

I asked why he kept repeating that number.

“It’s how long he’s been aboard Cap’n Kelly’s ship,” Atufal told me. “He is the oldest. Some of these men have been here since the 1700s, others like Billie Budd come from your World War II. I myself date to 1804 when I was sold to Shanghai for revolting on the slave ship The Tryal. I was a prince once, but memories of that have been crushed under the heel of eternity.”

“You guys are bullshitting me. Maybe I fell for Downbeat Duchamp’s line about being in the record biz, but what you’re telling me—my mouth isn’t big enough to swallow that whopper.”

“It’s twue,” the tongueless Ranneskjöld mewled. The rest of what he said had to be translated: “None of us believed it either when we joined this crew. But once you step aboard this ship, you are [I thought he said *immoral*, but he meant *immortal*]. Under Cap’n Kelly you are a marauder forever. Welcome to hell, where there is no chance for relief.”

“There’s only way out of this prison,” Billie Budd said in a voice that sounded disturbingly like Lynda Carter’s. “And it’s—”

Dagnar Ranneskjöld leaned across the table and knocked Billie, too, into unconsciousness. I returned to my makeshift stage. The crew and I sang “Saturday Night” by the Bay City Rollers until two a.m., when Bellclanger threatened to shoot us with his AK-47 if we didn’t go to sleep.

Months passed before they shared with me the only way out of this prison. So many months of singing and playing the calluses on my fingers grew thick as the ship's hull. When I wasn't entertaining the men I was put to busy work. I scraped rust off the chain cables, caulked the bow-ports and hawse-holes, re-varnished the forecastle, all under the orders of Hang-'Em-High Shanghai. He watched over us each and every day, his stooped, grizzled figure perched on the bowsprit. When it came to piracy our sloop was either overly cautious or lazy. Rare was the day a speck didn't appear on our horizon that we should've looted and burned. Yet not once did we bear down on these unsuspecting ships. Never even raised the Jolly Roger. Cap'n Kelly seemed intent on killing us with the sheer tedium of life on the endless blue.

One night after a series of relentless command performances of Brewer and Shipley's "One Token Over the Line" I awoke to the sound of Ranneskjöld and Atufal arguing. "Iw wis wime," the mumble-mouth insisted, to which the cannibal prince would only say: "And if he's caught and executed, then what? Then we have no music. At least when we sing we can dream of freedom."

"You guys—you're planning to mutiny, aren't you?"

Ranneskjöld went to knock me out, but Atufal decked him first.

"You cannot use that word ever," the prince whispered. "But yes. Our one hope to become human again is to reenter time, and we can't do that as long as Shanghai has us zigzagging these latitudes. We have voted, Corny. You're the one who will kill the cap'n as he sleeps. As the hands of 'Pitchforks' attest, the cap'n intuit's our movements too well. But you, you're still new here. He's not learned to anticipate you yet."

I now understood that this was the only reason the crew had ever talked to me. As the new man, I was the fall guy. And yet, I, too, wanted my freedom. If it took murder to gain it, I was willing. Atufal

handed me a jeweled dagger he'd stowed in his rectum since 1804. He showed me how to slit a jugular before a man has time to react. I killed two dozen pillows that night. Sliced them right down the seam. I was ready, but Atufal said we had to wait for two nights. Cap'n Kelly's senses were at their dullest every seventh day. That was when he drank himself to sleep.

By the time that night came Billie Budd had diagrammed the captain's quarters for me. The young man was well familiar with it, serving as Shanghai's cabin boy. I blackened my body with burnt cork to hide from the moonlight and crawled across the main deck up to the quarter deck past the sterncastle to the poop. From there I lowered myself by rope down the stern to the four large windows Billie had strategically unlocked. I slipped through one, crossing the great cabin quickly, like a cat. I flashed the dagger across the top of Shanghai's cot just as I'd practiced. In rehearsal the blade had skated freely across the artery, but now it stuck deep in the neck. There was a good reason for that. I had not slit the neck of a tyrant. I'd carved a pumpkin that lay in place of the captain's head.

"I knew you would come eventually," a voice behind me said. "They talk every new man who comes aboard into trying. I should chop your hands off and beat you senseless with them, but your magical guitar keeps these men drunker than if they bathed in grog. Pick which leg you're least fond of and I promise the carpenter will whittle you a decent peg."

Common sense told me to surrender, but instead I leaped through the dark at him. Shanghai bashed me with his monkey-head cane, sending me sprawling. The dagger clattered from my grip. I scrambled to my hands and knees, but the captain whirled behind me and wedged the cane across my throat, yanking hard and garroting me until my eyes bulged. I dug fingers in the air behind me until I gripped a fistful of beard and could jerk him over my shoulder. As his back crashed to the floor I pounced, pinioning his arms as he tried to bat at me. I couldn't free a fist to pummel him. All I could do

was spread myself flat over his body to crush him with my weight. As I pressed my entire being into him, grinding hipbone to hipbone, I grew aware of a strange sensation under my elbows.

“Cap’n Kelly, I don’t mean to offend you more than I already have with this act of attempted murder, but I have to ask. These pillows my arms are cushioned on.... These masses of tissue attached to your chest.... Are they ... by any chance ... *titties*?”

I felt a blow like I’ve never known in my neck. It spun me off my victim and somersaulted me into the legs of his navigation table. A match burst into flame, lighting a pewter lamp. Through the gleams and swinging streaks of burning kerosene I watched “Shanghai” Kelly snap a button at his throat. His bedclothes fell from his body in a single lump. His beard evaporated into his cheeks, and his gray hair turned raven black. The hideous potato face that seemed to house every crevice and bump of ugliness known to man transformed into a polished jewel. Even his posture improved; he stood straight and tall as my beloved Lynda Carter. I rubbed my eyes and drummed my temples to clear the hallucination. Only I wasn’t hallucinating. The most beautiful woman I’d ever seen stood before me, naked and glistening.

“My name is Andromache,” she said. “I am the Queen of the Amazons, and if you will help me return to my homeland, I can save you from this nightmare of men.”

“Holy shit. You’re really a chick?”

“I am a warrior. I battled Heracles shortly after he strangled the Nemean lion and stole its pelt for armor. That Greek brought me to my knees by fighting unfairly, then banished me to sea. But even worse, he told lies about me. He claimed he ran me through with a spear, killing me. There are even Greek vases depicting my death, and yet here I stand. Do you believe I’m real?”

“If you’re not I don’t want anything doing with real.”

“You’re different from these other men, Corny. You are a musician. The chords you strike on

your magic guitar make me feel as if I'm peering directly into your heart. I sense your sensitivity and goodness. You have the heart of a poet."

A high-school senior once told me something very similar at a prom in Snellville, and I made her in the back of Dowbeat's Dodge Fargo. Somehow this felt different. I told the Queen of the Amazons I was eager to serve but didn't know how I could.

"You already have," she smiled. She opened a box and removed what looked like a sextant. I tried to keep my eye on it, not her body. "Earlier tonight you played a combination of chords that lit this tool and fired an arrow toward home. If you play that song again, I believe I can chart my way out of Heracles's exile."

I asked if she remembered what song it was. She sang a wordless melody, and my hands immediately mimed the



progression: A-Dmaj7-A-F#m-Bm-Dmaj7-A. Rod Stewart's "Tonight's the Night (Gonna Be Alright)." It came as naturally to me as I hoped the curves of her hips would.

"You can't breathe a hint of who I am," Andromache whispered. "These men are barely human as it is. If they knew a woman was in their midst, they would lose all control. I would be forced to kill them all."

She had a plan. Unfortunately, it involved her resuming the hideous visage of "Hang-'Em-High Shanghai" Kelly. At dawn I was dragged onto the quarter deck, tied to the mainmast, and whipped mercilessly for the crime of attempted mutiny. Made to stand at attention and watch, Atufal and the rest of the crew were numbed by the brutality of my lashing. My back ended up striped like the Beach Boys' shirts on the cover of their 1964 *Concert* LP. This was my least favorite part of Andromache's plan, especially when Cap'n Kelly announced that the punishment would be repeated for forty days straight.

"No rum! No sodomy!" Shanghai screamed while delivering each whip crack. "Just the lash!"

"If we had only known, Corny," Atufal whispered on day fifteen, "we never would have asked you."

"I must object, Cap'n," Bellclanger cried on day thirty-two. "'Tis inhumane! The man can't survive! Let me shoot him with my AK-47 and put him from his misery."

But I could survive, and for a very good reason. At night I was untied and ordered to crawl to the captain's quarters. There, resuming her female form, the Queen of the Amazons bathed and fed me, stanching my blood with a mystical array of herbs and remedies. All while I crooned Rod the Mod's No. 1 song on *Billboard's* year-end chart for 1977. Every time I played a Dmaj7 on my guitar, her *sex-tant* emitted an aqua light, like a laser, that shot through all four portholes and formed a pattern in the constellations, charting our direction. Once assured the sloop was on its proper course, Andromache



pretended to loosen the pretty French gown she'd have worn if she weren't naked. Then she spread her wings, and ... well, you know how the rest of that line goes.

On Day Forty-One she awoke me with a whisper. "We've made it. We have arrived, my love. We are just off the coast of my warrior nation."

She was no longer naked. She had dressed in gladiator gear, including a cingulum around her waist, shoulder and legs guards, and a helmet. When we emerged from the captain's quarters I was shocked to discover the entire crew rounded up and held at sword point by an army of women ready for battle. I thought for sure this was the moment Andromache would break up with me, but she pulled me by the ponytail to an awaiting skiff. I had just one request. I wanted my Lynda Carter poster back from the tongueless Ranneskjöld. He could do little but oblige. The entire ride to land I looked back at the astonished faces of Atufal, "Pitchforks," Dan Boleyn, and Billie Budd.

"Your job isn't quite done," the Queen said. "We still need your help. It's mating season in Amazonia."

Friends, I can honestly say that only in the weeks that ensued did I truly learn what it means to be a rock star. The Indigo Underbelly was a mere appetizer compared to the carnal smorgasbord I was expected to scarf from. I, Corny Wilhelms, given my own castle-sized tent with leopard-skin rugs and pillows the size of nations, made Robert Plant look like John Denver. My job was simple: first I wooed 'em, then I screwed 'em. One verse of Bad Finger's "Feel Like Makin' Love" or Sweet's "Fox on the Run," and these women warriors quivered like jelly. Yes, this was my kind of eternity, made all the more pleasurable by the fact that Amazonia was an island of lush green hills, luscious fruit and sizzling boar meat, and rivers of Schlitz Malt Liquor. Soon all thoughts of life on the sloop disappeared, and I silently thanked "Downbeat" Duchamp for the favor he did me by luring me into slavery.

And did I mention that all the inhabitants of Amazonia were the spitting image of TV's *Wonder Woman*?

I'm not sure if I'd roosted in paradise two weeks or two hundred when Andromache crept into my tent. She put my hand to her pooching belly and smiled. "If it's a girl," she told me, "she will be named Hippolyte and will someday reign as queen. You should be proud. You've guaranteed the future."

"What if it's a boy?" I asked.

"If it's male then we cut off his testicles and leave him at the border with a neighboring tribe called the Gargareans. They're idiots, but at least they know how to feed and wipe themselves."

That sounded a little discriminatory, but who was I to complain? I took my Queen into my arms and felt the nectar of femininity rejuvenate my being. Thanks to Andromache's sweet, sensuous ways, Corny Wilhelms felt spry and eighteen again. Swear to God, the woman made the hair grow back on my head.

"Darling," I told her, "these other chicks, you know they're just a job to me, right? I mean, I'm just lending them my stuff so your tribe here can flourish. But with you, I think of all those baths on the sloop, and the soapy touch of your hands, and just like Alex Chilton and the Box Tops, I want to 'Cry Like a Baby.' You got my heart, lady. Do I have yours?"

She looked uncomfortable with my affection and tried to crack a joke. "If a picture maims a thousand ships," she sang with a silly grin, "why can't I maim you?" She nibbled my lip and we toasted to David Gates and Bread.

The next day she sold me to pirates.

For the second time since I was hauled off the *Jay Ferguson*, I failed to sleep with one eye open. I awoke to the clap of manacles on my wrist. My entire legion of Amazonian lovers jerked me to my feet,

poking me everywhere including places I can't mention with spears. I was dragged to the beach where the river of Schlitz Malt Liquor emptied into the ocean. A long boat awaited me, filled with the crudest grimmest ruffians I'd ever seen. They were my former crewmates, even though the ship on the horizon wasn't a sloop. It was a forty-gun French merchant vessel, and it belonged to the notorious Edward Teach, aka Blackbeard, aka Dagnar Ranneskjöld. The man now had a tongue. He mocked me with it the entire way to Blackbeard's flagship, the *Queen Anne's Revenge*.

"Only two things a true idiot falls for," the pirate berated me. "A friend's word and a woman's temptation. You'll have the rest of your natural-born life to ponder how empty a piss bucket you tote on your shoulders, Cornelius Wilhelm! But you did do Andromache and me a favor, matey! You've proved this business arrangement between the Queen and I will work just fine. Her tribe needs a procreator, I need a plunderer. You were our test case to see if this scam would work. Yes, you were our shakedown cruise, Corny, and thanks to you, many a soul shall know why many a sucker ends up conscripted at sea!"

There were only two consolations to being dragged aboard the Queen Anne's Revenge. One was the sight of my Lynda Carter poster raised where the Jolly Roger should've flapped. The other was the sight that greeted me on the ship's prow: the severed head of J. J. "Downbeat" Duchamp, stuck on a pike.

"Now, boys!" Blackbeard yelled to his crew. "How is it we welcome a new man aboard? What do we make him do to prove he's worthy of signing the pirate's articles?"

The entire lot of deranged, vicious buccaneers had circled me, jeering and cursing, whapping me with the flat of cutlasses until blood dribbled from my lobes like earrings. Atufal, "Pitchforks," Dan Boleyn, and even Billie Budd landed blows.

*Make him!* they screamed in a din that out-decibeled Beatlemania. *Make him!*

Never in a million years could I have guessed the humiliation that awaited me. But I did it nonetheless.

Didn't much have a choice. It was either do their bidding or get chopped into chum.

I squeezed Blackbeard's sails, and I licked his deck.

NOTE: This story is the first in a series inspired by pop songs of yesteryear. It takes its name from "Shake-down Cruise" by Jay Ferguson, which reached #31 on the charts in 1979. Readers are invited to nominate songs for future entries at [kirk.curnutt@gmail.com](mailto:kirk.curnutt@gmail.com). Just a few ground rules: 1) Songs must be cult hits, not overfamiliar classics. (James Brown's "Papa's Got a Brand New Bag"? No. But James Brown's "Hot Pants"? HELL YES!; 2) Songs should imply some sort of interesting narrative scenario (no "Papa-Om-Mow-Mow," in other words; 3) Songs should have a YouTube video we can link to. In return, stories will be set in the year the song was released and will build their plot around an interesting (or weird) line in the lyrics.

**Kirk Curnutt is the author of two novels, *Breathing Out the Ghost* and *Dixie Noir*, as well as a collection of stories, *Baby, Let's Make a Baby*. He guest-edited *OCHO* #28 in 2009.**

# angela hardy

Canadian artist Angela Hardy's portrait and figurative paintings are a combination of pulling her love of costume and craft into her images. She often creates much of the clothing and props that her subjects are portrayed with. Hardy says that, "My desire is to show that no matter who we are, we all still long to explore, display or inner passions, dreams and imagination. We also crave to express our diversity, even when confronted with society's standards of who we should be." Hardy's newest body of work still upholds her touch of playful whimsy and passion, bringing out her subjects 'True Colors'. As she hints at our issues of acceptance and change through her almost comedic use of her characters. "Through my own journey of beginning to truly understand myself I realized how many of us are searching and seeking ways to express to the world who we really are. I hope that the paintings and posts that I write, regarding both my message and mediums help others to find and live their 'True Colors' Hardy's paintings can be found in collections in both North America and Europe by Prestigious Collectors such as Howard Tullman, International Famed photographer Dr Andy Gotts MBE MA FBIPP and Canadian Collector Bob Buckingham.

"Angela Hardy's work is simply breathtaking. It oozes depth and feeling and gets under the skin of her subjects. Each brush stroke adds another layer of passion and feeling from this amazing artist and I am proud to have her work in my collection." Says photographer Dr Andy Gotts  
Bob Buckingham, Lawyer, collector: "Angela's pieces, whether they be a soft, sensuous still life or bold portraits of her avant-garde friends all reflect the magnificent colors she was infused with as a child raised under the aurora borealis of Labrador."

Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree, Artist, Painter acrylic, watercolor, graphite, ink, etc), instructor, commissions, figurative, portrait, landscape, still life, etc.

# James Needham

James Needham is an English Artist based in Sydney Australia. Having studied at The Oxfordshire College of Art in the UK, James moved to Australia permanently in 2010. He has had 2 Solo exhibitions and been involved in several group shows in the Brisbane area, before moving to Sydney in mid-2013.

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