

The AMERICAN POETRY REVIEW

MARCH/APRIL 2022 VOL. 51/NO. 2

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"The frequency with which Keene dedicates these poems to and for other poets speaks to the community within which he has worked. It also attests to a vital poetics, one that borrows and makes known to whom its author is in debt. . . . 'When I begin a poem I often do so / because I love black people.' There is no elaboration of a writing practice more suitable to its own love for itself and its others. The fact that Keene has also established himself as a brilliant translator of works from many different countries . . . speaks to his wide range of generosity, as well as a relentless search for peers."

—STOUGH, p. 13

DORIANNE LAUX

SPIRIT
LEVEL
& OTHER POEMS

KAZIM ALI
PETRICHOR LECTURE
& MORE

SHARON OLDS
NEW POEMS



PHOTO: MICHAEL MONTLACK



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plus
JOHN MORRISON
EDGAR KUNZ
FLOWER CONROY
EMILY LEE LUAN and more



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The AMERICAN POETRY REVIEW

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THE APR/HONICKMAN FIRST BOOK PRIZE: In partnership with The Honickman Foundation, an annual prize for a first book of poetry, with an award of \$3,000, an introduction by the judge, publication of the book, and distribution by Copper Canyon Press through Consortium.

FOUR POEMS

DORIANNE LAUX

Spirit Level

*When making an axe handle
the pattern is not far off. —Gary Snyder*

My mother was either horizontal on the couch,
or vertical, a plumb line from her spine
to the top of her head to the ceiling that spins
when she drinks, alcohol and an air bubble
trapped, sealed and fixed inside her, her face
carved from wood, a tear gliding slowly
down the curve of her cheek. My mother
was once a spirit in this world. Once
she breathed for me, above me, beside me,
behind me. Now I feel her warm breath
on my neck summer nights, peering
over my shoulder as I write every poem, whispering
*Let me in. I let her in. I remember every time
she picked me up or set me down, put me
to bed or woke me from dreams, and now
I see how my whole life has been a dream,
one she built for me from the ground up,
her daughter, my mother the axe, beautiful
tool with which she shaped me, a house
much like the one she lived in, but smaller,
fewer rooms, a tiny unusable attic
and a cluttered basement. I let her in,
like she let me in. She became my carpenter,
stone mason and bricklayer, piling me up
cell by cell, the blade that shaped my legs,
my arms, my surveyor, millwright.*
She used herself as a template, her genes
tough, her organs elastic, her eyes and nose,
forehead and mouth. And when her body
from which my body was made
was slipped into the hot retort, I burned
too. She refused the beveled casket,
the oiled mahogany box, last drawer
for the dead, wanted only the fury
of fire, the blue white flames unmaking her
with their licking tongues, house
her grandmother built, and her grandmother
before her, all of them giving what they
had been given, the hardwood floors,
staircases and banisters, their deepest
cupboards, their heavy doors flung wide
so the breeze I would be could blow through.

Singer

If I could go back to the living room window
of my childhood house, look again
through the pane, it would be a telescope lens
through which I might see the first woman
I ever met, my mother at her sewing machine,
rewinding the bobbin, little spool with holes
like an old movie reel our tiny lives
spun inside of. I might see

her long piano fingers touch the balance wheel,
the throat plate, the presser bar, one bare foot
working the treadle, her heel revealing
only the first three letters in black latticed metal:
SIN. My mother was what some called
a sinful woman: divorced, pregnant
without a husband, a baby boy given up
for adoption, remarried, another baby
born of another man, a one night stand,
while her husband was away at war.
She drank too much, thought too much,
laughed with her head thrown back, danced
with anyone. Too pretty, too brainy,
too tall, her black hair a snare
that hooked men in. But right now
she's fully visible, stretching the fabric
for a kitchen curtain, a child's dress,
swatches she salvaged from the deep
sale bins, using the selvedge for a hem
thereby cutting her handwork by half,
the black oiled mechanism banging out
dress after dress, tablecloths and runners,
nothing she couldn't cobble together
from the waste of others. She was
a very particular, peculiar mother
and by now you can see why
we loved her. She was a lit fuse
in the rain. She turned from her work
and set those same fingers
on the piano keys and pulled
music through the air. Making something
from nothing was what she was good at:
love, children, pants and skirts
to dress them in, a table covered
with cherries on which the beautiful food
appeared, roses from her front yard garden
in an old cracked vase, her long arms
around our shoulders saying *Sit still. Eat.*
Try not to spill anything.

My Husband Explains the Equinox

standing naked in the living room
at 8am, spreading his arms
like da Vinci's Vitruvian Man,
one finger pointed at the window,
the other toward the back door.

*This is true east and true west,
and today, and today only (as if
it's a sale on the loudspeaker
at WalMart), it's the same, right now,
for everyone in the world.*

Overwhelmed by the weight
of this fact, he straightens
his spine (though in an x-ray
it's a backwards S) and says:

*Doranne L
New and
Pulitzer Pr
Men, was a
poems, Fact
and was sh
is also the au
National Bo
small press ei
of the celeb
Pleasures of*

*Of course this is not to minimize
the importance of the solstice.*

(All this, before my second cup of coffee.)

*To diss the solstice, he adds,
you'd have to be a fool.*

Winter Brother

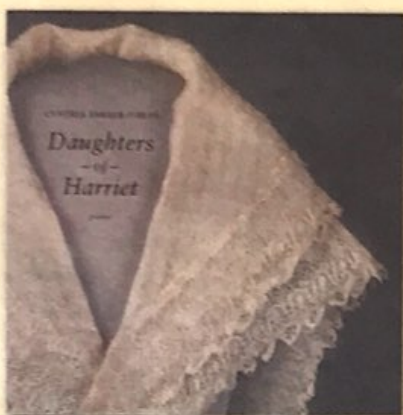
These nights I walk out and look up
at Orion, my winter brother, spell-bound
each time I trace him to wholeness
with my eye, from the star
on his right shoulder to the star
on his left, down to form his torso,
lower down, his little skirt.
I know his right hand holds a club
but I replace it with two splayed arrows
pointing up, in his left a lion's pelt
that for me becomes a bow.
From hunter to archer, just like that.
And why not? Whoever made him up
is lost to history's shimmering distance,
and I'm here now in my dark backyard,
a splash of ghost-sibling lilies
glowing at my feet. I like to think
he's my older brother
who died far from home
on a lonely road, his broken body
found in a muddy gutter
swollen with rain. That's how it is
down here on the death-packed earth
where nothing is eternal, the bodies
buried haunch to haunch
beneath the indifferent dirt.
I remember his handwriting
on a postcard, the lines squashed
between the address and the card's
cut edge. *I miss you. I love you.*
*I saw some sights today
you wouldn't believe.*
On the other side a wall
of etched bricks, a statue
of Karl Marx's fat head, his beard
of gray stone. When he died
I felt alone, some part of me
went cold, some echo
following me like a false star,
so I lifted my brother
into the sky where I could ride
on his belt as he strode over
the seven continents, sharing
an eyedropper of water between us.

Dorriane Laux's sixth collection, Only As the Day is Long: New and Selected Poems, was named a finalist for the 2020 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. Her fifth collection, The Book of Men, was awarded The Paterson Prize. Her fourth book of poems, Facts About the Moon, won The Oregon Book Award and was short-listed for the Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize. Laux is also the author of Awake; What We Carry, a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award; Smoke; as well as a fine small press edition, The Book of Women. She is the co-author of the celebrated text The Poet's Companion: A Guide to the Pleasures of Writing Poetry.

New from the Center for Literary Publishing
at Colorado State University

Daughters of Harriet

CYNTHIA PARKER-OHENE



The Mountain/West Poetry Series

"In poems full of oracular fire, Cynthia Parker-Ohene proclaims the beauty of Black life across complex terrains of time and space. These intimate, yet wide-ranging lyrics move with virtuosity from the remembered 'sheen of buttercups' in a beloved grandparent's garden to the 'disturbed wavelets' of the Middle Passage still resonating, as collective memory, in the Black body. *Daughters of Harriet* is a work of deep remembrance and song-craft, drawing innovative poetic language from the luminous, multidimensional network of Black consciousness. Richly textured and keenly observed, these are poems to keep close."

—KIKI PETROSINO

"*Daughters of Harriet* captures the ongoing traumas of Black life in the aftermath of slavery, Jim Crow, and the racial injustice foundational to the experience of Black Americans—the 'collateral of skin.' Here, too, is the Black legacy of dogged resilience in the face of struggle, our unwavering determination to persist. How we go on, how we must, how we be and be, despite: here is all of it, given unflinching. Here is history and its pocketful of receipts."

—LAUREN K. ALLEYNE

"These poems sing in the key of Harriet, an aria for all of us—daughters and mothers—both ancestral and contemporary. *Daughters of Harriet* is a book that balances our collective mothers' legacies—joy, trauma, history, and emotional landscape at once. The Black South comes alive and is shone new in these poems—our grandmothers' very existence shimmers; their bodies held up in sacred homage in the sure hands of Cynthia Parker-Ohene. These poems are bright and stunning and allow us to see and touch and be touched and remember."

—CRYSTAL WILKINSON

"With a messianic gift for image and history, Cynthia Parker-Ohene is a once-in-three-generations mind on the page. Virtuoso images and living histories bearing down on your pulse, expanding the potentials of your consciousness. I cannot imagine a future without the canonization of these poems. Beyond the altitudes of accolade, Cynthia Parker-Ohene is on track to become the most important writer in your life."

—TONGO EISEN-MARTIN

"*Daughters of Harriet* is both praise song and eulogy, as Parker-Ohene explores the continuum of Black women's survival. Although her regional touchstones might briefly locate readers in place, she collapses time to show how past horrors still live in the present, how 'savageBlackgirl[s] [may] buckle' no matter where they are in history. In these poems, Parker-Ohene paints these fraught narratives with imagery as fragrant and delicious as 'sweet peas butter beans . . . and sachets of lavender,' creating a striking juxtaposition that will keep readers returning to this debut collection."

—CHET'LA SEBREE



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FIVE POEMS

KAZIM ALI

Petrichor Lecture

Hant I on the after noun wan
rain pourn in this ember
san diego hand over
the reeding in hand then
routes racing to say
what fortunate when
rain can say

Petrichorous petrichorus
lector on petra pale
through rain in the desert
does earth petrel rain
prickling my skin in
the mourn trickle
december trails

Year's end petral withdrawal
future's end read
in the haptic drift's
happening I'm umbral
on board fated to fade
in rain untravel untrammel
uncastled rook

Or king rooks sing petrachoral
morning in Normal Heights
rain on the ground or in air
an air not raveling but in strands
or points noted railing wren
arrive rooks and wrens
bend air in coarse weave and

Waves the earth enters air queren
through rain and swears petricore
petrikouros pretty and soar the air
clears and wavers the sun sayer
airs and wayers the cours coeur
corps chorus kouros kaur
quai queer quer core

Afternoon Lecture

San Diego Museum of Art

The sharp sounds of a steel-stringed guitar plucked
Quavers down the cool first Chinook of autumn
Green plectrum of the ficus tree in bladed shadow
Anyone sitting close could not but hear in the vibrating air how long
I've been locked up in the days
These buildings built by settlers to imitate Hapsburg architecture
of imperial Spain
I am that human who could be the precise citizen untethered
Only cupid now my waiter a little messy behind his black mask,
his forearms and neck scribed in ink



Each painting on the wall of the just re-opened museum is an eye
that looks into me or a tongue that tastes me

Who in the afternoon lies down in wonder and aims to illumine

The waiter takes my card and my presence is read and registered

It's a hot Santa Ana that blows through the arches now and scatters
the season that waged a claim for me

To be held in light and sound in a world behind doors whose history
will stalk or stop stock still

After all I am more than embroidery or kiln-fired celadon made kin
with calligraphy

This is the lesson of the California Colorists

Solace

In the dark place between a night and a day
I find myself lost

In Winnipeg there is a gravestone marked with my name
in which lies a man whose silhouette I see
in the mirror every morning

Do I exist in the minds of others I wonder

In the earliest hours I give extra water to the tangelo tree
which cannot give fruit unless a lemon or mandarin is near

When no one is awake and no friend is near
I find myself disappearing and yet able to hear
sounds half a mile away

Bell's Theorem teaches us you can really only have one of two
worlds: a real world in which particles remain entangled even
at great distance or a local world in which nothing is real
unless it is observed

In either world I do not exist

June comes around and the lemon blossoms but the tangelo does not

Newton was as confused by gravitational action
at a distance as we are by quantum action at a distance

Einstein solved it by showing how the fabric of space bends
around large—planetary, lunar, stellar—mass

Local reality does not apply to the Universe

High above the earth still orbits the Micius satellite beaming photons
to the Earth in a continuing effort to understand why particles
are entangled across space and time

I have already outlived the man with my name by two years

We try pollinating the tangelo by hand but so far
there is neither bud nor blossom

Since the sun interferes with its mechanisms,
Micius only operates at night

The local world is not reasonable

There is no solace in the Universe

Mulberry

Down near Mott Street I wonder what is the actual border
between Little Italy and Chinatown, and if it doesn't exist then
what about any map's delineation, the name of that mountain,
or this border line?

That one hundred degree New York summer sent me in memory
back across years and time zones and oceans. July, Ramallah.
I carry home watermelon and salty cheese and white mulberries
in a crate marked "Israel." What is Chinatown anyhow?

A place people who left home come to find spices and meats
familiar to their tongue, and one street runs down the middle
of it but its edges like the desert trees and flowers
of Palestine linger.

What would it mean to not know the endings of things the way
in Palestine during Ramadan one doesn't know what to eat
or not eat and I couldn't find enough food to assuage the void
that being far from home opens up.

Yet the perfume of the *qanib* lingers on the tongue and I sauntered
toward Houston, crossing over from a *where* into a *where*, feeling
it was real, I was there. Somewhere, I don't know *where* but I was there.
That summer, in Little Italy, Chinatown was real.

That summer in New York, Palestine was real.

Saudade

All be it through stone tongue

do the dead through tune tempt a semblance speech yet I
would fain feign silence in the wake of any angelic order
to speak of my life which for me was shame and a house
full of ordinary citizens who when the wind does undress
a body to ash cannot be asked its meaning

and anyhow I knew only

one tongue neither German nor Portuguese and in the streets
of Lisbon didn't I like in Tamil Nadu when I tried Hindi
and the cab driver refused to answer speak with a Brazilian
accent as in "saw-dodgy" to describe that mood soaking

the music haunting those streets glittering like snakes
so smooth you could slip walking uphill

yet after when time unspins (or maybe everywhen
is a pool (which in Hindi means Flower) yes flower that contains
both sexes) and must be touched to be in the world so if words
spoken in this apartment in the night between me and a man
who I would in ordinary life find reprehensible (terrible politics
on the refugee problem and the European Union's response)
turn heated not heat that way but in the way of me

running my hands

down his slim torso kissing him with real hunger yet oddly thinking
of all that I threw away when I was going through the old box
of my school things like the biology homework and latin conjugations
while I kept the odd play, the fake soap operas, the fan fiction already
by then wanting to live in that other world, any world, one I'd invented
or one that existed already in the oh well anyhow

what if the ordinary life

is better than this one in which I don't really ever learn
for example chardonnay gives me heartburn always yet I never stop
drinking it even one time I put some peaches in it to pretend
it was that white sangria like the kind we drank that night in Lisbon
and everyone was earnestly talking about when that moment
of feeling our life mattering evaporates

and I had said OK sure

I am in Lisbon and do not speak the language and maybe just kissed
a man (handsome, bad politics) in the street outside the bar but
if you were dead—when you are dead—and your tongue is stone
in your mouth and you have to make a tune to be known on
the other side who is it you are trying to speak to what are you
trying to say or have you merely chosen a house to haunt for example
a bar in Lisbon or the street in front of it kissing a man and then
ghosting your friends to go home with him

and then since

that night spent your whole life avoiding him while still looking
at his beach selfies on social media because (biology homework,
his pelvis thrusting into you, caedo/cadere, your mouth on his skin,
that fado music fading, and why do the Kurds want to come
here anyhow) you couldn't and still can't stand him—

Kazim Ali's books include poetry, essay, fiction, translation, and cross-genre forms. His recent books are The Voice of Sheila Chandra (poetry), Northern Light: Power, Land, and the Memory of Water (nonfiction), The Citadel of Whispers (YA Fiction), a translation of Ananda Devi's When the Night Agrees to Speak to Me, and as editor, Shreela Ray: On the Life and Work of an American Master. He is a professor at the University of California, San Diego, where he chairs the Department of Literature.

photo by Jesse Sutton-Hough

FOUR POEMS

SHARON OLDS

Crazy Sharon Talks to the Bishop

I met the Bishop on the road
and much said he—same old porridge
I heard as a child, my little body
a “foul sty.”

“Love has pitched his mansion.” Maybe
Love pitched her silken tent.
Love has raised its dwelling in
the place of reproduction, which can be

fitted with a full moon device
which functions as a saving grace.
And maybe everything can be rent,
everything can be sole or whole—like an

asshole. I met a Bishop, once,
when I was a teenager mad as hell about
eternal fire and birth control.
We were sitting in my mother’s living room—

for I have built my poems in
a place of opulent privilege—
I held out my fingers, and wiggled them at him,
and said “I’m trying to make you levitate.”

He was not holding his crook, or his mitred
hat, but he was wearing a shirt
of magenta Egyptian cotton, woven and
dyed only for Bishops, and I said,

thinking myself
quite the witty brat,
“That is the most beautiful shirt
I have ever seen, could you get me a shirt
like that?”

Not seeing myself, the privilege
and ignorance of coming from a living room
like that.

Bianca Helps Me Clean My Attic

When we get to the house, Bianca says,
“One can see what will trouble this sleep
of mine,” and after a few hours
in the attic—grit of dust and crisp
wasps and flies and ladybugs
and ashes, she says, “Whatever sleep
it is.” And when we take a break,
for coffee, she says, “Were he not gone,”
and we talk about how much we loved
playing with our dolls. “And I think my dolls
sort of liked me,” I said. “At least, I think
they didn’t dislike me. What if you thought
your dolls disliked you, that would be mental
illness,” I said. “That would be awful,”
Bianca said. “The woodchuck could say
whether it’s like his long sleep,



as I describe its coming on.”
We walk back up into the hot particulate
air of the past. Don’t be sad,
I want to say to Bianca, you are
learning “After Apple Picking”
with Ben, you are singing with him, the lonesome
hibernation time is gone,
the time of death in life is gone,
the air of day is yours to keep
for scores and scores of years, day
for the light, night for just some human sleep.

When They Say You Have Maybe Three Months Left

In my sleep, I dreamed that I came to your grave—
and what lay between us? The beautiful uncut
hair of the grass, and topsoil like the rich
dirt in which you buried our sheets
after I left you, our DNA, near where
you later buried your golden dog.
Also between us the new ceiling
of plain pine, and the linen garment
your fresh-washed unbreathing body had been clothed in,
and the earthen chamber music of wild,
underworld, spiral creatures,
and your tissue I have loved, and within it the ancient
primordial man of your skeleton.
Narwhale tusk, elephant ivory,
icon of your narrow-hipped male power

I rode, rowing in eden. But
it was no dream, I lay broad waking,
and you have not died yet. I can read this to you
in a week, in front of the wood stove,
the flames curving up to points and disappearing,
or beside the pond, the water rippling,
ovals of hemlock and beech changing places in it.
Sometimes you fall asleep as I'm talking to you.
And you've said: I want you to be reading me a poem when I die.
And Let's not stop writing to each other when I'm dead.
And when I'm dead too! I said. When we met,
though we fell in love immediate and permanent,
we could not make a two-soul union,
nor when I left—each of us had to
work on ourselves for years, to get there.
And now we are there! Maybe this has been
death all along! Maybe life is a
kind of dying. Maybe *this* has been heaven.

Her Brother

I don't think I wanted to "marry him
when I grew up," her elder brother,
I don't think I wanted to marry—I was like
an archery bow of Diana, only
very slightly curved,
I was 9. I don't remember her dwindling
and goldening, but when I looked up their address,
in the night, I knew the window of her bedroom,
facing east—right turn and up
the stairs, right turn and through her door,
each day after school—her parents' and brother's
facing the Bay. The house looked
like a cake, made in a royal bakery
in Paris France, the curved-scale
tiles of the roof like ripples of frosting
squeezed out of the bag with an x
like a cross at the tip of the nozzle. O my darling,
you were 9. How long did it take you to die
after glazing that Xmas tree silver
with lead paint? Longer than your mother.
I think you curled up more and more
as you were dying, dearest soldier.
In the archives, I found your story in the upper
corner of page 5 of a newspaper for
1953, the amount
a judge awarded your father IN YULE
DEATH. I was looking for news of your brother—
I never thought of marrying him till I was
78, he'd be 82
or so—but he was murdered years
later, in his car outside his home.
I had wanted to lie in his room, with him,
skin to skin within sight of the ancient
fresh sun in little ridges of western
wind on the water leading out
to the sea, and in, and out. I never got to
hold her, or to say or even think Whithersoever
thou goest, there I will be with thee also.

Sharon Olds is the author of twelve books of poetry, including most recently Arias (2019), short-listed for the 2020 Griffin Poetry Prize, Odes (2016) and Stag's Leap (2012), winner of the Pulitzer Prize and England's T. S. Eliot Prize. Olds teaches in the Graduate Creative Writing Program at New York University and helped to found the NYU workshop program for residents of Coler-Goldwater Hospital on Roosevelt Island, and for veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan.

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JENNIFERS OF THE 1970s

A conversation

JEN KARETNICK, JENNIFER L. KNOX,
AND JENNIFER K. SWEENEY

INTRODUCTION

As a former schoolteacher, I've always been interested in name "trends," eyeing student rosters to find the rise of presidential names, speed-inspired names, jewel tones, a team of unwitting Iditarod racers—pulses of language moving briefly through pop culture. A seasoned Jennifer in a 70s sea of Jennifers, I never thought much of my name, like it was a placeholder for "all of us," but in my forties, I saw it a little more freshly and wanted to explore the effects of the ultra-popularity, unique in its extremeness. The Jennifers weren't just a name trend, but a tidal wave that rose higher in use than any other name, then declined more markedly than any other.* I've taught now for nearly thirty years and have had zero Jennifers in my classes, although in the peak Jennifer era of the 70s to early 80s, there were 859,112 of us. *Enough of us to populate Fiji or Damascus*, as my poem "Jennifers of the 1970s" reads. Two main ideas thread together in that poem, the identification of being part of a collective, and how a name can be an inroad to explore the character of a generation.

Sharing that generational space and the publication of our most recent poetry books in 2020 during the pandemic, Jennifer L. Knox (*Crushing It*, Copper Canyon Press), Jen Karetnick (*The Burning Where Breath Used to Be*, David Robert Books), and I (*Foxlogic, Firedweed*, winner of the Backwaters Prize from Backwaters Press/University of Nebraska) talked to each other about poetry and anonymity, persona, identity, selves, and, well, Jennifer-ness.

—Jennifer K. Sweeney

JENNIFER K. SWEENEY The Jennifer era is very much contained in Gen X, a.k.a. "the neglected generation," and it's not lost on us that Jennifers can also read that "Jen X," a wave of so many Jennifers that the last initial became part of one's name. I'd like to consider how anonymity shows up in your writing.

JEN KARETNICK Anonymity, oddly, has been central to my life. I spent the last 28 years as an under-the-radar dining critic, trying to avoid being discovered—the exact opposite of what a poet wants. It's one of those vocations that abruptly ended with the pandemic. I'm also chronically ill, meaning that I've had some terrible experiences being overlooked and even harmed by the medical establishment. So that effacement of self has definitely seeped into my poems. There

*Per Jen Gerson on nationalpost.com: "Beginning in 1970, Jennifer was the top female baby name in the U.S., a position it would hold for a solid 14 years. The run was mirrored in Canada and, to a lesser extent, in the U.K. All before the Internet, before there was any readily available list of popular baby names from province-to-province or state-to-state."

are a couple of poems in *The Burning Where Breath Used to Be* that have no speaker at all: "23andMe Says My Body Is a Sanctuary City" and "Where to Bow to the Will of the Majority." And there are two poems that have characters literally named for a lack of self. "Anecdota" features Anonymous, after the quote "Anonymous was a woman," who experiences all the terrible injustices that women throughout the centuries have. And Nobody, in "Nobody Dies Because They Don't Have Access to Health Care," has that invisibility shield that being ill, middle-aged, female, and disabled gives you.

JENNIFER L. KNOX That is a great question—one that I've never been asked. Writing poetry really clicked for me when I began writing in persona. I see you two Jens have penned your fair share of persona poems. To my mind, persona actually reveals as much about the writer as confessional poetry. I thought it was obvious that the poems were monologues, but people have told me they thought my speakers were actually me. It may have seemed like I was hiding, or lying, but shedding the limitations of my own biography felt wonderful. Those poems failed when I reached the limitations of my empathy, which has grown, thank God. In my new book, *Crushing It*, my challenge was to write in my own voice, whatever that was in the moment. But as soon as I committed to exposing myself, I began writing little nonfiction prose poems in third-person omniscient . . . and I loved it. Bottom line: I've tried keeping a journal and it repulsed me, so "I" may be the least interesting about me.

KARETNICK Being one of three or four Jennifers in any given class or group, I found you were differentiated by a trait that you then had to stick. You were the "funny" Jennifer, or the "quiet" Jennifer, or the "smart" Jennifer. Depending on who I was with or being compared to, I was any or all of those labels, and these became part of my poetic voice. In poems like "How to Get Away with Slinging a Céline" and "Poem for When Your Expired Passport Gets Caught in a Government Shutdown That You Supported with Your Privilege," I'm drawn to darkly ironic scenarios that you can snicker at from the titles alone. And I've been told by numerous reviewers that they've had to read my books with a dictionary, although I think that's largely because I use a lot of medical language. Knox, your poems are laugh-out-loud humorous even when they're serious, and Sweeney, your poems are filled with moments of quiet, poignant observation. Are these reflective of your childhood identifications? How did your early Jennifer personalities carry over into your poetic voice?

KNOX I like hearing my name called and somehow knowing, "They're not calling me . . . yet." Each Jennifer is like a spore that emerges from the

ancient Jennifer mycelium buried deep in the soil. When I was a kid—probably because I was painfully awkward and not funny at all—comedians were my heroes. By the time I got to high school, I was voted Class Clown. I didn't know that you could fold funny into poetry until, as an undergraduate, I saw James Tate read, which blew my mind wide open. Thirty years later, I'm most frequently identified as a Funny Poet, and that perception has had amazing staying power. Maybe humor is the uranium of poetry. No one except my poet friends and Charity Nebbe (host of "Talk of Iowa") has ever noted the violence that proliferates in my poems. Violence is the flipside of the Funny coin. Originally it appeared in fantastic outbursts, but in *Crushing It*, it appears as reportage.

SWEENEY So much of growing up is trying to pin down and classify this fluid state of becoming, and being the 13th Jennifer in a room of Jennifers certainly did heighten that process and torque it a bit. I was very much not like myself for a long time, kind of a clown, really, making little projects out of attracting attention, trying to stand out, differentiate outwardly, which must have been a response to the enmeshed idea of one's moniker and her identity. But your question also reminds me that I had this parallel idea that everyone was a persona, and that at some point, there would be this giant theater and we would all be called up to the stage for playing Jennifer K. or Bob D. and the ruse would be up, and we could be whoever we wanted then. I am pretty sure I assumed everyone had this mental stage they toted around, placing different figures on. Now I realize this was the writer part of me forming that sense of being both the actor and the observer in the same frame, the multitude of selves was both tangible and necessary, and that's what I see reflected in my writing over the years. I have a poem with a title borrowed from a Mary Oliver line, *I am myself three selves at least*. That was total recognition the first time I read it. Whatever little stage one Jennifer had been dancing around and bowing on, there were a few others backstage arranging vases of fake flowers, sitting in the light booth moving the spots around.

KNOX Coincidentally, I've been talking a lot about different selves lately in therapy. I know roughly what purposes my other selves serve. My Negative Nelly self is trying to help me manage my expectations. My Harley Quinn self is trying to keep Negative Nelly from sucking all the joy out of the room. My Marcus Welby MD self is here to tell it like it is. But my Poet self is the most indefinable of all my selves. She (it's a she) is the least available when I need help washing the dishes or doing my taxes. I picture her in a lab coat, hunched over a desk with her arm cupped around the paper she's been writing on (she has better handwriting than me), protecting it from people trying to sneak up on her and steal her secret, steal her time. Writing is her private compulsion, yet she's proud of her work, and wants to share it. I can't see her face—but I know it's somewhere on the page she's protecting. She will answer to "Jennifer," but not every "Jennifer." What's up with your poet selves? If you call them "Jennifer," will they answer?

SWEENEY I guard a kind of lyric self who queens my interior life. No one gets direct access to her, but she's infused in the poems, of course. She's a she but also a spirit self not gendered, and nameless, a shapeshifter, a voice-in-flux. I've been thinking lately, though, that someone who answers to Jennifer might want to collaborate more with this voice in making the poems. After writing for over twenty years, I'm wondering,

has the lyric self started to perform a little on the page? Or maybe not perform, but get a little too comfortable? Maybe there's more daily-Jennifer that wants to be let in. Maybe I've guarded more than I need to. Maybe the pandemic life has eroded the lyric voice. All these middling maybes suggest some shifting of the selves. Related, I think, my most prominent creative act of the COVID year(s) has been working on a visual art and poetry manuscript where I use etiquette books from the 50s as base-texts and do erasure collages. I am thinking of them more as "effacements," because the process is so additive. But ultimately I work with a cast of women who are bounded in the frames of performing under a set of rules, and the art is in finding new ways for them to unwrite themselves out of those frames. They are not Jennifers, but they are kin, and someone who answers to Jennifer is helping them.

KARETNICK That's a funny question because NONE of my poet selves will answer to Jennifer. They only answer to my self-imposed Jen (unless it's my parents calling), which I named myself trying to stand out on the soccer field—not only because there was a field of Jennifers, but also because it's a mouthful to yell, "Jennifer, pass the ball!" Otherwise, I do have a few distinct poet selves. I have an Ancestral Trauma self, which comes from being Jewish and thoroughly entrenched in Holocaust stories, complete with visuals, both from relatives and from years and years of religious school. The stuff of literal nightmares! I have a Suffragette self, in the sense that I believe in organized protest and marches as a way to make your voice not only heard but seen, especially as a part of a few marginalized groups. And somewhat like you, Knox, I have the WebMD poet self. I'm told I'm the worst sort of patient, who knows too much from Google and overheard snatches of lingo from my husband, but not enough from actual med school. But those selves are pretty insistent, and I pull them out a lot in poems like "My Husband Shoots Me," which is about getting Botox for migraines, and several poems scattered throughout the book about my shoulder freezing. The latter experience, the most painful I've ever felt, I used as a metaphor for America during The Former Guy's time in office. I knew I had torn something lifting a heavy box, and after months of useless therapy I eventually got the surgery I needed.

But I was constantly told being unable to lift an arm "is just one of those things that happen to women." And that's when a response by all the poet selves coming together is warranted.

Jennifers of the 1970s

*We were part of a tribe, at least three
to a class, you could scan a room and find us
everywhere, swishing a Hula Hoop around
our Jennifer hips. Enough of us to populate
Fiji or Damascus, we orbited our own planet,
the paisley atmosphere swirling as the bell
bottoms tolled and the skyrockets took flight.
Mirrored disco ball, each facet released another
known in relation to the initials of our last names
latch-hooked on yarn pillows, ironed on
to the back of our concert gut-shirts.
Macrame belt, god's eye,
we came out of a Dreamsicle,
reigned like corn husk girls easily wrapped
into skirts at the church bazaar.
Our decade was barefoot, tapestry, buttercup,
lemon-lime, rickrack, Easy Cheese.
To be so abundant, bearing a name that everyone
agreed was lovely, a triple note they wanted
to repeat, I stopped hearing it, the swift hook
of the J, little gem in the mouth, the soft fur
landing, all folded in the envelope of the common.
A Xanadu of Jennifers.
A roller rink of Jennifers.
A decahedron of Jennifers,
I could always see the collective of us.
Unwittingly part of the ensemble yet to be one
meant we were also gifted an alter ego, a spray-on leotard
or chameleon foil lurking under our jumpers.
I run into one of us now in yoga pants,
maybe a child at the hip. We're tired, we've seen
some things but we're pointed to the horizon,
and sometimes a few of us still rise
when the latte order is called and our gently wrinkling
faces smile knowingly. Glitter wave
we all came out of so decisively,
we're the Fosse dance in the musical that gets
revived in the summer community theater,
the cake still holding its layers in the rain,
the silver moon boot that flares
in the late October sky.*

—Jennifer K. Sweeney, from *Foxlogic, Fireweed*

Jen Karetnick's fourth full-length book is *The Burning Where Breath Used to Be* (David Robert Books), a 2021 CIPA EVVY Gold Medal winner, an Eric Hoffer Poetry Category Finalist, and a Kops-Fetherling Honorable Mention. She is also the author of *Hunger Until It's Pain* (Salmon Poetry, forthcoming, 2023). See jkaretnick.com.

Jennifer L. Knox's sixth book of poems, *Crushing It*, was published by Copper Canyon Press. Her work has appeared in *Granta*, *The New Yorker*, *Poetry*, and five times in *The Best American Poetry* series. She is the recipient of a 2021 Pushcart Prize and the Iowa Arts Council Fellowship.

Jennifer K. Sweeney is the author of four books of poetry, most recently *Foxlogic, Fireweed*, winner of the Bakewell Prize from Bakewell Press/University of Nebraska. Her other collections are *Little Spells* (New Issues Press, 2015), *How to Live on Bread and Music* (Perugia Press), and *Salt Memory* (Main Street Rag).

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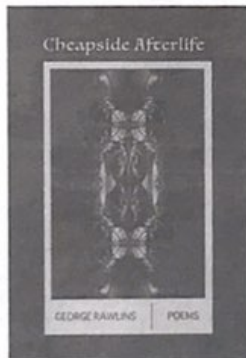
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ROSE

BENJAMIN GUCCIARDI

Because her thin white coat let the pink
of her skin peek through,
and the tips of her ears were plush
as climbing petals, and because
her eyes were red and round
as hips, Rose was the only name
for the albino rat my mother kept
in a small cage in her bedroom.
Really, Rose was rarely contained.
A pirate with her parrot at the Safeway,
mom steered the cart and Rose's long tail
hung down her back like a rig line, loose,
flapping. It upset my sister
if no one noticed, and when they did,
she reveled—*did you see the bald guy?*
Red as a robin! she cackled on the ride home,
red as rib roast! Mom answered, our bags
bulging with tofu and brown rice.
My sister didn't know
Belgian chocolate gave rats cancer,
she loved the brush of whiskers
on her fingers when she held the sweet
to snout, but Rose grew a tumor
on her neck that swelled like a bud
in July. They kept vigil,
swaddling Rose in a nest of flannel
strips and geranium clippings, a candle lit.
This is how to let go gently, mom showed us,
and we were lucky to know a grief warm enough
to soften but not so hot it scalds.
Still, when my sister died a few years later,
my mother looked nothing like the woman who buried Rose.
After the blut of the viewing, the indifferent
cremation, thorns grew around her grief.
Now, if a rat scurries past on a walk
at dusk, instead of the creature,
my mom sees my sister's eyes
not seeing, her lips, not sharing
some tender fact—how rats care for the sick
and injured in their mischief,
how they grieve their dead visibly,
each in their own way.

Benjamin Gucciardi's first book, West Portal (University of Utah Press, 2021), was selected by Gabrielle Calvocoressi for the Agha Shahid Ali Prize in Poetry. He is also the author of the chapbooks Timeless Tips for Simple Sabotage (Quarterly West, 2021), chosen by Elena Passarello as the winner of the 2020 Quarterly West Chapbook contest, and I Ask My Sister's Ghost (DIAGRAM/New Michigan Press, 2020).

The AMERICAN POETRY REVIEW

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BLAIR BEVAN with SPYTHROUPOUR, LARRY
JEROME SCHNEIDERMAN, JOHN THE SCHEPPE FLUNK
and THREE ALPHABETICAL STORIES ABOUT ORIGINALE JEWEL

The AMERICAN
POETRY REVIEW

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The AMERICAN
POETRY REVIEW



CARRIE
FOUNTAIN

THE JUNGLE
& OTHER POEMS

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APR



A REFUSAL TO SMOKE
THE DEATHS OF CALVIN
OF THREE MEN IN BROOKLYN

OF
JOHN MURILLO

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THE YEARS OF WRITING

LIAM HYSJULIEN

I didn't think it mattered, then it mattered, then stopped.
I went to see a doctor, like it was a love song,
to fix my gut, and all I took from him was a pill.
"Why did you think for so long you had to live like that?"
As if it's easy to know of some other way.
As if watching the basement of your house fill with
water and the things you bought and thought you loved become
nothing, as they were made to be dissolved after I
described them, and me, and my life, through this language that
can't hold anything together. I didn't know
you could live atop a flooded house, baking in the sun,
and believe the water would return to the rivers.
To think I should not live like an animal begging
with the snare, as if to talk to myself was enough.

Liam Hysjulien's poetry has appeared in Ploughshares, The New Republic, and elsewhere. Liam lives in Durham, North Carolina.