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from the editor

Dear readers,

Previous editors' notes have emphasized transition, but this year saw comparatively few changes. We've maintained for example our annual publishing schedule, online presence, and staff size. While some might take this continuity from one year to the next as evidence of complacency, I prefer to think we're gradually perfecting our model.

The model fails of course without committed staff to put it in practice, and so I must thank all of the students who have invested time and energy in this publication. Collision's relative smallness enables each staff member to shape the magazine's overall sensibility. In other words, each piece collected here had its proponent(s) whose enthusiasm for that piece swayed the rest of us. I want to thank the staff for said enthusiasm and for their additional contributions to the various phases of our publication process.

It gives me great pleasure as well to reflect that 2012 marks the third time we've published an issue supplemented by a critical piece. I refer in this case to

Alicia Salvadeo's book review. I have long thought that the University of Pittsburgh could use a forum outside of departmental conferences for literary conversation, and so I proposed two years ago that we consider pieces concerning contemporary literature – its challenges, pleasures, preoccupations, and so on. I trust readers will agree that such critical works add to the interest and comprehensiveness of the magazine.

Special thanks go out to our departing seniors Amy Hayes, Sarah Ivins, Sarah Reagle, and Alicia Salvadeo, all of whom have played key roles over the years. Finally, I wish to thank our readers, whose continued interest is all the motivation we require to produce the magazine you now hold.

Cheers,

Ryan McGinnis

Collision Literary Magazine owes many thanks to

The University of Pittsburgh Honors College, for their continued support and their promotion of the arts.

Karen Billingsley, for her knowledge and budgetary assistance.

Jennifer Lee, for her guidance and dedication.

Rick Baker and the staff of Print Tech of Western PA, for printing this magazine.

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**The Lost Language of Longing,
or Two Women Walk Into a Bar**

**Hannah Aizenman,
University of Pittsburgh**

**The Lost Language of Longing, or Two
Women Walk Into a Bar |**

Hannah Aizenman, University of Pittsburgh

Two women walk into a bar; they are Lilith and Lot's wife
and they are lonesome tonight.

You are Lot's wife
and you are still looking back. I have no home, you say
to the naked woman beside you. You can't help but
let your eyes linger on her bare breasts. In
recent years,
you have felt the erosion of your own body:
you have felt geological, ankles grown into the earth,
standing solemn as the ocean and the wind move around you.
Your body is your home and you wish that you
could leave it.

Once you might have worn your desire like a dress—once
you might

have tempted, had wings, a one-night stand.

The thing falls apart.

The woman next to you says nothing because you, in fact,
say nothing: you do not say *I have no home*

but inscribe it on her forehead,
 let it belong to her.
 Now you can look at her and call her your
 reflection; now,
 somehow, you can look at her and call her yourself.
 The thing falls apart. No closure but a question
 you do not have the words for, no answer but a late-night
 and lovesick lament:

if only,
if only,
if only.

Two women in a bar and you are Lilith this time.
 You are here in this bar and it might as well be anywhere else
 except this woman beside you keeps staring at your tits.
 Her eyes are glassy with liquor and sadness and
 she's somebody's wife—
 you can tell—or perhaps a divorcée; it doesn't really make a
 difference.

She wants you to possess her, to crawl beneath
 her skin;
 she imagines you avian, reptilian, angelic—you've seen

it all before
 and it's never a surprise. The thing with this woman is she
 compels you

to confess—you want to tell her:

I am the serpent and also the fruit,

I am Eden and also the act of casting out.

I am made from the same earth as Adam.

I have always wondered where I became what I am.

You have nowhere to go, which is always the case, but
 women just aren't your thing—you suspect they want to
 know you,

suspect they want to get inside you: they refuse to
 make you

demon, which is what you wish you were.

Not one for sacrifice, you offer up nothing;

you let her become you, and leave it at that.

It's possible this woman was beautiful once.

You are thankful for time, for your own naked body—
 when faced

with real beauty, or what might have been beauty, you
 can always

dismantle it, always say *no*.

Lilith and Lot's wife walk into a bar, and you're the bartender
working the last shift. The bar is almost empty—two guys
playing pool; one standing at the jukebox; a sleepy
couple at a table in the corner.

You listen to the conversation these women are
not having—
this intercourse of want and not want, of real and
not real.

As you wash out a glass, you are glad of your work,
of the boyfriend you know is asleep in your bed,
even the regrettable tattoo on your wrist,
you consider the tragedy of being a myth:
how easy it is to be forgotten—
to start out a woman, become something else
you were never meant to be: nameless,
a nightjar,
a pillar of salt,
a hypothetical moon.

second prize

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Shark Season in Kanawha County

**Nina Sabak,
University of Pittsburgh**

**Shark Season in Kanawha County |
Nina Sabak, University of Pittsburgh**

1.

Lilliana starving is what we're used to. She says her bones don't fit right. What kind of bones does a sister need? She wants low hips, paper ribs, square hands for dancing with the state fair girls. She spends all morning on her belly in her whitewashed bedroom, watches herself move. The room smells like the pennies we've been saving for a candle. There are prayers, there are ways. Lilliana holds up her wrists, tamps down the veins til we can hear the blood slurring through. Her skin runs hot with fever dreams. She dissects talking dolls and leaves them chest-down by the columbine. When she hides, we push notes under her door until they block the light from her table, where our dolls' heads watch her sleep. Our sister cocoons herself in sweat on the floor. We bring her orange soda and greasy pepperoni rolls soaking through their plates. We fix grits and ramps and sweet sorghum and watch her throw them

into the woods. Her teeth are small and sharp. *Don't you know I'm haunted?* she says. She bites her nails to the quick and smears blood in her palm. *There are ghosts in the hollers and they're trying to catch me. I need someplace to run.*

2.

On bee-sting nights Lilliana spreads her lap wide and lazy. We don't remember seeing this hardness in her hips. She binds her heart, she cuts off her hair with pinking shears and lets it stick up ragged. Our mama sweeps up her braids on the front porch with her splintered broom and cries when birds steal the brightest. By nightfall the trees by the river are full of Lilliana's hair, shining gold and lonely. She shivers under the stairs, her skinny legs red with chigger bites. The back of her goosebumped neck is bruising. Our mama tells us go on get out, stop staring. There's nothing else to do in the summertime. We stomp up the stairs, scavenge her flooded closet for something familiar, the wreckage of our love. Everything rots sweet; we hold our noses. We bring her scuffed mary janes, half-broken earrings, photographs of her old face peeling at the corners, and she takes us by the shoulders and shakes us. Not Lilliana, she says, no name like that, not anymore. When we call our sister in the night, we don't know who we're asking for.

3.

We ride to town in a muddy pick-up truck, the four of us crammed in the bed, our mama up front. We stretch our legs toward the bumper and flex our toes, pretend to be dead. On Main Street the parade is gone. Everyone's packed up their lawn chairs and disappeared. We call for our mama to slow down, we want the candy on the curb, we can jump back up if we run. It's Thursday in May, the start of festival season. Down at the river, look, someone says, all them lights, the slides, the smell of sugar. We are afraid to ride the Ferris wheel. Even Lil is afraid to lose the feel of ground. The air feels like drowning fast. Our legs are slick and shining where we've crossed them like we're taught, our skirts clinging all unladylike. In the cab the music goes up so everyone sings too, we sing our driving songs, our hoping songs, our white trash running songs. This is what sisters do, they hold hands over potholes. They keep an eye out for a glimpse of grocery store. We hold our fingers up to squeeze the summer, waving to no one like tickertape queens.

4.

Our strange sister sits by the river in her cutoffs and cracked ribs singing radio songs. Her chapped mouth. Her staticky voice unfamiliar. We watch her from the tree house, where she can't run us off. We want her close enough to rescue. She drowns in our dreams and we wake with windmilling arms, trying to save her, but she's beyond our fingers now. We shove each other to stay put, hush up. We hold nothing but the sweat in our hands. What kind of skin does a sister crave? The skimmers hum on the water, waiting. She shimmies out the blues, leaves her shorts on the rocks. She plants her dirty feet on the bank, she leans forward until she falls belly-first, her calves are a flash of curve and stubble. Lilliana's thin skin fades, it blends with the fish below. We don't know about salvation, but we see her hold her breath til she's transformed. Her bones propped up while she's washed clean. No face, no legs, no nothing in between.

third prize

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After the storm

**A.C. Lambert,
East Tennessee State University**

After the storm |

A.C. Lambert, East Tennessee State University

Scattered chickens that didn't have sense enough to
face the wind
Stand folded up with feathers blown off their backsides.

Straw tucked into the wood of a telephone pole
Sticks out like a creaked note from a fiddle

Just before it stops.

honorable mention

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All Glimmering Mutts

**Christopher Stokum,
University of Pittsburgh**

All Glimmering Mutts |**Christopher Stokum, University of Pittsburgh**

- 1 -

Suffice it to say, I learned from my father. In nineteen sixty-something, he was accepted to an architecture program at Penn State University. He had wanted to be an architect, my grandfather once told me, since he was young – eleven or twelve at the oldest. Always designing vaulting mansions, impossible towers, colonnaded additions to his family’s stark little tin-sided house. When my mother wanted a split-entry Tudor, legend has it, he slept four hours in three days and wore six drafting pencils down to their aluminum halos; his columnar fingers were blistered from nudging protractor and compass across the paper so slowly it was no longer drafting but courtship, coaxing the lines and reticent angles onto the wide-open page.

But he studied chemistry and education at California State University, taught physical education,

taught chemistry, and quit when he had nothing to say to his students. He installed HVAC equipment, worked as a janitor, and settled on environmental conservation.

He didn’t want to put the time in, my grandfather said. I couldn’t ask him to cosign my loan, my father said, because he couldn’t say ‘yes.’ Call it a patrilineal tradition of muteness when words matter most, framed in absolute terms that save us from having to answer to ourselves, “Why didn’t you speak up?” I couldn’t, we all say, I can’t.

If silence is carried in DNA, I want to know what the evolutionary benefit is, why that mutated gene would survive in my family. Many animals, humans included, chatter inanely until they feel threatened. When their confidence wavers, they stop moving, stop tittering; their ears prick and they listen for rustling leaves or a low-bellied growl, for heckling from alleyways or shrieking tires. The chatter confirms that they are alive, the pause that they are afraid, and I cannot quite imagine the boon in conveying premature death and permanent fear. My best guess is that silence is a placid pool, either laughably shallow or fathoms deep. Or, that it is a black cave stretching inches or miles. Uncertainty

gives pause. Others hesitate on the shore or at the mouth long enough, at least, for one to slip away.

When my father writes, as he rarely does, he forms his H's like truncated ladders and his A's like tiny pitched roofs, and he broods over every addition, as if the letters must be joined impeccably if they are to hold all that white space.

- 2 -

The maiden in the fresco to my left looks out of her canvas into a dimension she cannot know but seems to want. She stands dressed in a full-length maroon gown of late-Renaissance fashion in a hall of pillars and arabesques. Surrounding her are women, most of them older, craning their necks to see the pink newborn cuddled in her mother's robes at the center of the scene. I am in a pseudo-atrium, a square hall with inner walls of plate glass through which one can look out on a plaintive fountain and rows of shrubs from whose scabrous branches sprout more emptiness

than leaves. Reproduction art lines the outer walls, plaster copies of Greek sculptures, duplicate paintings of saints and prophets ripped from European cathedrals. The hall has the same secondhand aesthetic as upscale antique stores, an effort to ignore its own pretention so poignant you can taste it. The acoustics here are maddening: footsteps and coughs from the far reaches of the building filter in and ricochet back on themselves, colliding in midair, blending and copulating, the daughter sounds all glimmering mutts, traditionless and stronger and more ruthless than their parents.

The maiden's hall reverberates as well, with the voiceless whispers of the women around her. They are thrilled, yes, but also bitterly covetous, as all matrons are at the birth of a child. The maiden's lips are parted barely, as if she is about to speak or has just finished, and her eyes are round as dimes and turned away from her world. She, too, feels the press of the echoing around her. Know thyself, for the soul that does not takes on the shape of its surroundings. She is filled with resounding, chimerical thoughts – part fantasy, part anxiety, self-censorship, and jealousy. If only those thoughts would

slip away along the z axis, into that dream called ‘depth.’

Is it possible that thoughts do not form and fall within the mind? That they move on axes that we do not, passing through us in a facile three of their countless dimensions? We call the space in which thoughts move ‘silence,’ and we call their movements ‘that tune you can almost hear.’

- 3 -

My earliest haven, and I have had many, was the bathroom of my parents’ house. It is a boxlike space, almost a cube, with impressionistic blue wallpaper and scratched gold fixtures. When my parents had friends over and I was overwhelmed by the directionless noise of small talk, as I so often was in those days, I would wordlessly slip away into the bathroom. It seems like the obvious choice now: the only room aside from my parents’ that had a locking door, the only room I could disappear into with the assurance that no one, not even the most effusive middle-ager

buzzed on mid-shelf wine, would question what I was doing. But at the time, it seemed far from obvious and further still from sensible. It was an occult practice, a mystery I did not understand and yet depended on.

I would close the door as quietly as I could. One hand held the knob, preventing the latch from snapping into the jamb. The other I would place palm-down on the door, wood stripped of varnish by nights of steaming showers. It had to be goaded shut, treated delicately. The right looks had to be given, the right incantations mouthed. And then I would step into the shower, taking care not to let the curtain hooks squeal on the hollow metal rod, and I would wait as my socks grew damp from drinking in the cold droplets left of the most recent shower. The molded plastic around me, cyan in full light, would be the deepest black in the curtain’s shadow. Standing there motionless, holding my breath, I would feel the wisps on the wallpaper blow about the room like gauzy cirrus. I would feel cryptic lettering on the linoleum floor begin to emerge and glow, unpronounceable vestiges of an ancient civilization or of distant aliens who, I hoped, had

left marks for another who was not quite at home.

How long I would have stayed there, I cannot say. Seconds did not bleed into one another as they did in the living room or the kitchen, conversations did not sway dizzily between topics and moods, my actions had no consequences, my thoughts no glistening echoes.

On other days, though, when I was brushing my teeth at the sink, the shower was less familiar. Moving my hand as slowly and silently as I could, I would watch the shower – for the top of someone’s head bobbing over the curtain, or for a faint ruffling in the curtain itself, signs of a brushed elbow or a sharp exhalation.

Given the stories of others’ childhood fears, I want to say I was afraid of someone else standing in my sanctuary, fracturing my security, but I know that is not quite right. Finding another behind the curtain – a boogeyman, monster, a shadow with teeth – would have frightened me, but no more. In watching the shower for any signs of life, I was watching for something else.

- 4 -

In my frozen moments I was watching, I think, for myself. What was I afraid would happen? That I would see myself from the outside, from a vantage I was not allowed to have, an axis I could not move along but so desperately wanted to find, even once. That breaking into that myth of a dimension would strip the real ones of their worth; that filling the void I saw only in my peripheral vision and heard in frequencies I could almost discern would take the mattering from material space. That I would see that the other was quite like me, that he spoke the same alien tongue and had stopped chattering long before a threat had appeared.

Of course, it is never as simple as pulling back a curtain, or as girding with solid uprights and crossbeam the ladder you want to climb – *where?* To a tower you may have only imagined or have already built and, perhaps, already destroyed, an architecture that you are always in or never, an extension of yourself that you are not authorized to see. The imaginary lines that Euclid drafted the world on, the ones that tell

us where to put walls and where windows, the ones
along which we travel at indeterminate velocity.

And the strangest part is that I cannot remember
stepping out of the shower.

ISOLATED - HIM |

Caily Grube, University of Pittsburgh

I know nothing about Montana
except plucked steel
 maybe
a pocket
 of sterile sky spooning
 some field.

Montana. Montana and quarantined
 steel strings— and
 sky and—
 Hay,
pluck and pick it
how you like it.

and into this microphone
finger pluck
 a high school class of thirteen
for Reverend Hay,

for whom ‘this record
is made
possible’

and on grooves
and ribs of vinyl,
I carry Hay—untinged—
out of isolate field and sky
to
lay under
the needle
of a living room—
to talk in stringed steel
tongue
to talk in “American Primitive” or
of Missoula, Montana
to fill a mingled apartment with
a piece of big
sky seculsion.

Calavera |
Melinda Dubbs, Indiana University

Go north with the gringos because that’s salvation.
They have real grass compared
to this shit dirt that coats these dirty clay houses,
coats we sweep off tombstones, squatting
on our hams, mouth full of sugar skulls melting on
our tongues like communion. We rub
the petals of marygolds and photos like rosary
beads, inhaling hot breath behind skull masks,
waiting for angelitos. But I pray for the damned
living niños instead:

Cuerpos prostrated in ditches, bloated
with maggots burrowed
in piquetes. Heads impaled
on fence poles, traffic lights, balanced on stone
walls, beaded
between pillars on a highway overpass, eyes bursting,
hanging by vessels buried

in the back of their carnal cavities. Limp jaws,
 a slack spinal cord jostles
 as each car that drives by. Bodies propped
 against a wall, hugging and leaning
 like children, their naked toes stiffened
 towards the heavens, a bright poster board
 taped to their chests, written with a fat Sharpie:

“La divina justica”

throat |

Natalie Somerville, University of Pittsburgh

the lizard in my stomach tries to crawl up my throat,
 but I swallow
 and say, “shh. I need you.”

in punta gorda, uncle paul grew an orange tree.
 he had his army boots by the front door
 even though he retired from the military
 fifty-three years ago.
 “I’m letting them dry.”

when he died, he had left me a statue
 of the virgin mary
 that he bought in slovakia
 and a tea pot from korea.
 he put the piano in my name
 and left my sister with nothing.

so I told her that the piano

was for her.
uncle paul was lonely
in his family of nine
and he made grilled cheese.

I visited punta gorda
to play the piano with him.
we swam with lizards.
it took me two years to save
enough money to fly down for a visit.

we picked oranges
and sat on pavement while sharing
them with the birds.
his military boots,
that went through trenches of korea,
are outside drying

and the blessed mother
sleeps in my desk drawer.

—“shhh, I told you I need you.”

Petra |

Caitlyn Christensen, University of Pittsburgh

One day the inhabitants of a lakeside village woke to
find they no longer existed.

Their city had been cancelled. An official on the
wireless said, *“I hope you are not too disappointed. This
is the result of an inherent need for a certain amount of
economic growth.”*

After making the broadcast, the official waited to
receive her own notice of relocation. Pretending to
dust her shelf, she considered the most proper and
discreet way to cancel the lake. It would be difficult to
send away. Water resists its bonds.

She thought the lake was luckier than her constituents.
It would have no memory.

A place cannot recall itself; it needs an inhabitant to
remember. And the gods who lived in the lake were
no longer accepting tokens of worship. The official
feigned a yawn. She thought perhaps she would

rename the lake, and recall the word, which made it.
At first the villagers were not sure whether their disappearance was a good or bad thing. Then someone said that of course it was good, now they would be remembered for the vanishing.

The Column |
Julian Day Cooney, University of Pittsburgh

Ocean currents, weather patterns, accumulating sediments and glacial layering, one hundred-ringed tree trunks, the degradation of acetylcholine into its components after tetanic contractions of muscles—these are not pedestals, but columns we construct from borrowed stone from the quarry laborers; we take from the pile—they are powdered white from the limestone dust and don't bother to wash it off anymore (it has already begun sinking into the pores of their skins, calcifying their body hair, drying up their eyes until blinking is pain and they keep them closed). Build bottom up, scratch in the façade after you reach the roof. Repeat the process; plant another column next to your first—make sure it matches, make sure your parents' heads clear the overhang between. We are made to fight gravity. We spackle, we chisel back what is tearing us down. The roof is flat and puddles after the rain, the drops on the window were the only

way we knew it was still going; I listened to your beat
-ing and thought of you in a hospital bed and not having
completed the project; I listened for a cracking, a sign.
Thickness is not it. Density is not it. Height is not it.
We built it in the middle of ruins and I have to walk
through them everyday, I have to step over corpses
on the way to our body. I accidentally stepped on a form
-icary of an anthill the other day on the way and I coll
-ected the exposed larvae out of their nurseries—they
stuck together with a natural adhesive—and spread
them uniformly in the mortar between two new stones
at the top of the column. The stones stuck (this is what
worth is; additional adhesion; the Great Wall is filled
with the skeletons of its builders). The cold front has
turned around and is coming back: we must chain our
-selves to the column and put our body heat to use.
This is not getting any shorter. We built it in the middle
of ruins and we know what will happen. We know how
time works, we know that more neural activity leads
to a slower perception of reality—we built in a lead bat
-tery at the base (we can now charge ourselves again
so long as we connect positive to positive, negative to

negative). Cracks keep being born and I calcify them
with paste and spit into inflexible, reinforced fossils
of the unbroken original. The top looks Ionic, the bottom
resembles Doric, but I haven't seen the foundations
in years and I know this from the stories we tell each
other. I built this to be at the top and I'm not coming
down—hand over hand, but the lime dust rises
with us and we are coughing and looking like a quarry.

Another Brown Poem |

Melissa Dias-Mandoly, University of Pittsburgh

i.

H&M online models are only
human in the face – their
bodies entirely CG,
colored with pixels, black
model’s hip juts just
as the white

it does not matter what
color the skeleton is
if it is always covered—
it does not
matter that there is even
a skeleton underneath

ii.

Diamond: derived from Greek *adâmas*,

meaning “proper,” “unbreakable,” and
“untamed.”

“Black” diamonds are not

truly black,

but rather contain numerous dark inclusions

that give the gems their dark appearance.

Colored diamonds

contain impurities

or structural defects

that cause the coloration,

while pure or nearly pure diamonds

are transparent and colorless.

v.

the joke goes, *now*
i can say i've been with
an Indian girl

Freud: *the energy*
that would have been
used to repress
hostile feelings
can be released in laughter

but no one agrees with Freud
nowadays, anyway

vi.

in some practices, female circumcision is considered
a cleansing of the male body parts.

according to Amnesty International:
some groups believe that

a woman's clitoris is dangerous,
and if it touches a man's penis, he will die.

vii.

i do not know how to excise
myself from the thought anymore
than i do the thought
from your brain.

products of mutilation
heal faster than the factors—
i am softest after being
broken into.

he came to fix the steamer at the tea house /
the first time we met |

Savonna Johnson, University of Pittsburgh

when pickin
thru his tools

I asked,
“what’s yr
job title?”

He sd,
“A man.”

I told him
Kyoto cherry rose
smelled
real girly

He sd,
“that’s sexist.”

/ soon after

never just the tip

I thought

“so safe,”

He sd.

slight

the hairs

white

just below

the lip

sure as

the bites

after

certain kisses

Prove |

Eugene Palovcak, Temple University

When the world wants to prove you wrong
it will do so by dipping the trees in snow
and catching them in the sunlight. All gets
scattered by the lenses of joy: the
ridges and the fields, the lakes and the quarries,
the flocks of geese and the insular commuters.
Time will paint itself on everything, every second
a stroke of brush. Stand back and look at the work.

You will be tired and teetering towards a
depressive episode but you won't be able to find
the words of derision in the cold, still library
of dawn.

When the world wants to prove you wrong
you will see the angels at work behind the scenes
through the cracks in your life.

Étude For J—— B—— |
Liz McLaughlin, University of Pittsburgh

I see your ghost in the supermarket

years after you should have died
your half-cowheart crushes from the gravity of
the situation.

We don't cry at your funeral. We are fists—
clenching.

You become
shadowed
again,

citystreet and alleyed,
not walking among
the living,
pinprick
eyes constant
on the search,
you become
the score.

For a while you are good even if at first you are ashamed
– twenty-seven, an oldman without teeth – but this
is your second life, and at somepoint in sometime
you have to be thankful to someone somewhere
for that one. And you are.
You do. You love life and are grateful for what you are
given until you realize that everything is gonna be turkey
sandwiches and cherrycolas, turkey sandwiches
and cherrycolas, day-in and day-out.

J—— B——.

But before they replace your heart with beast
they pull out every single last one of your teeth—

don't knock you out put you down don't take any
chances that there might be some good left if
there is still any bad.

You don't speak, don't eat, don't use your tongue or
teeth at all for anything.

Faith |
Abbigail Baklys, University of Pittsburgh

for Emily

Have you ever seen God?

I was brown jumpers etched in plaid,
scratched with blue fingernails of thread:
all fit and form.

I was each station of the cross
genuflecting beneath
the new crucifix imported from Italy—
Jesus's face sunken in serene agony;
this is love, because
love is annihilation.

I was raw knees on the blacktop—
patches of strawberry skin
shredding into kneelers

Have you ever seen God?

I was an abandoned penance.
Dad pushed Mom through plaster—
the crash a prayer screamed
between walls

Gabe refused antidepressants,
carved his wrists
with a screwdriver

Sam couldn't confess
her broken fast—
fingers baptized in her throat.
Green bathtub speckled with spaghetti

Lord, I am not worthy

Have you ever seen God?

In the woods
once.

visual art







Cityscape | Mike Rosenthal, University of Pittsburgh



Fountain Boy | Jonno Rattman, New York University



Collage | Mackenzie Ondek, University of Pittsburgh



Untitled | Jamie Novak, University of Pittsburgh



staff contributions

**It is so much harder to be a poet now:
Hoa Nguyen's *As Long As Trees Last*
(Wave Books, 2012) |**

Alicia Salvadeo, University of Pittsburgh

In “Rage Sonnet,” the second poem of Hoa Nguyen’s *As Long As Trees Last*, Pound and Olson tell the poet in a dream that “It is/so much harder to be a poet now.”

Is this a subconscious admission of defeat, encumbered by the inherited directive to “make it new;” of the difficulty of being heard in an overwhelming global sea of voices, or of being worth hearing? Is this a discouragement, an excuse, a commentary on a fraught present moment (emphasis on the “now”)? This anxiety plagues many young poets, I think, myself included; saying it is “so much harder to be a poet” to some is tantamount to saying *It is so much harder to live*. But is it harder to live in the twenty-first century? And if it is, how to cope: as poet, as citizen, as human, as animal? Is this dream of poet-giants conversing in Washington D.C.—where Pound was committed to St. Elizabeth’s

Hospital in 1946, and where Nguyen grew up after immigrating from Vietnam—a galvanizing wake-up call?

Olson wrote that an American “is a complex of occasions,/themselves a geometry/of spatial nature.” While we can take issue with this equation, put forth in *The Maximus Poems*, for its summary of the human nexus as a strictly American experience, there are few better ways to illustrate the poem population of *As Long As Trees Last*, composed by a distinctively American poet who is acutely aware of the geography leaning in on the self. Nguyen measures the individual within the bounds of history, contemporary mainstream culture, and social interactions grafted onto the body’s surrounding environment. She sees geography as more than the surrounding land’s features and contours; her survey encompasses the exchange between nature and its inhabitants, particularly the consequences of human activity:

Here we have high flowers a lilac in the nose
“the zeroes— taught us— phosphorus”

and so stripped the leaves to none

“Agent Orange Poem” is just one example of Nguyen’s reckoning with human recklessness, here as it manifested during the Vietnam War in the herbicidal warfare of “Operation Ranch Hand.” “We doom in nation rooms,” she writes, placing the ordinary citizen at a seemingly safe distance, at which the scale of total destruction becomes visible. What a difference “being outside” of it makes, that our “eyes can see brightly/ across great distance” to discern the irreversible aftermath; and yet they remain blind to the process of devastation in the foreground. Perhaps we can shirk off responsibility when the injury is out of our hands, committed by an out-of-touch power structure, or a preceding generation; but Nguyen’s poems collapse the space between these distant, large-scale offenses and our own heedless contributions—however individually minuscule—to the environment’s decline, from the exploitation of land in favor of industry to overpopulation. However, her intention seems not only to recognize what has been lost or damaged; this is

not a collection preoccupied with nostalgia for a more golden age. Instead, these poems are alert and rife with forethought. Nguyen poses productive and meaningful alternatives—underlining the individual’s responsibility for herself and for others, as in motherhood—to a tradition of detachment and mass consumption:

the most toxic concentration basin
a former buffalo wallow

My soil: alluvial
the fertile where my mother birthed

The cab driver saying
I should have more children [...]

Empress: watch out to not get pregnant
and your carbon footprint

Despite the book’s grappling with bleak environmental and political forecasts, an ongoing history of warfare, global patriarchal power structures, and personal anxiety over the failure of writing, Nguyen refuses to resign, but instead allows geography—or “earth writing,” from *gē* (‘earth’) + *-graphia* (‘writing’)—to take over, to realize

the possibility of reparation. “So obvious feather on a heart pen... I mix these pieces seeing inside &/outside... Maybe have to become that bird/one dropped-wing injury... I think/she’s things out of us.” Birds recur throughout *As Long As Trees Last* as visible markers of the speaker’s emotional state: an invocation of Dickinson’s hope, as in Nguyen’s almost homiletic “Soul Poem,” but at other times a symbol of hopelessness, as when they make apparent ecological decline when “washing up in numbers” or as “bird-kill” along the highway: “It is the bird-hurt you feel.”

Nguyen opens the collection with an epigraph by Pound: “Can you enter the great acorn of light?” What follows in Canto 116 is the poet’s recognition of his failure: “But the beauty is not the madness/Tho’ my errors and wrecks lie about me./And I am not a demigod,/I cannot make it cohere.” “I’m not dead yet,” writes Nguyen toward the collection’s beginning, enacting both the poet’s and the planet’s resolution to survive despite the odds; and yet toward the end, the poet is still “Cursed by a lip lick/Words you say/to portray the to-be-now/

They say you cannot be/are named Crazy.” The poet might deem his or her work as a failure, but this does not spell the end of poetry’s vital attempt to understand and respond to its surroundings. Cassandra’s curse never convinced her to shut out the world in her own reclusion or suicide. Neither did it convince her to shut up, despite her audience’s doomed misunderstanding or refusal to believe, regardless of the warning signs. What was required then—of the poet, of the citizen, of the human being—is required now, to listen:

Intelligent bee glances buzzing

to say Let me out The fake
lights confuse us
confuses the source

Worker bee buzzed my neck
directly me not turning off
lamps fast enough

Please
just open the door
to the sun

I can’t help but again remember Olson and his affirmation of polis, when in “Unused Baby” the wasp whispers that “This place/we are in is a place.” Like Maximus, Nguyen compels us to yield in order to change—both by relenting in our active assaults, passive habits, and tendency to not listen closely enough, and by striving toward a productive and sustainable environment, one that refuses “Past tense sentences.” Over the course of *As Long As Trees Last*, Nguyen turns what seems to be a near-impossibility of writing poetry “now” into a generative spring. It is harder to be a poet, but only because it is harder to listen over increasing figures of national debt, our endless cars glugging 24/7, and Charlie Sheen on the television screen. It is harder to confront increasingly poisoned air, soils, and waters, accumulating waste, and deepening financial inequality. However, none of this suggests that our deafness and blindness is irreversible. “It’s not a time to run/I wear soft shoes/and it took a long time/to walk here.” The river spirit Io was “changed/into a cow,” pestered to insanity by an insect (recall Plato’s gadfly, whose purpose was “to sting people

and whip them into a fury, all in the service of truth”) until she reached a new shore, “and then restored.” Nguyen strikes a balance between an inescapable pessimism and a surprising but necessary optimism, with the possibilities of poetry positioned as a fulcrum.

As Long As Trees Last is Hoa Nguyen’s third book of poetry and is forthcoming from Wave Books (September 2012). Nguyen’s earlier works include Your Ancient See Through (Sub Press, 2002) and Hecate Lochia (Hot Whiskey Press, 2009), among numerous other chapbooks and booklets. She is the co-founder, with husband and poet Dale Smith, of the poetry and poetics journal Skanky Possum, and currently conducts a workshop on present contemporary poetry and practice from Toronto, ON.

**Untitled Poem to be Performed |
Peter Webb, University of Pittsburgh**

STAGE FRIGHTS

(preliminary problems)

Ashad
owtogs
od dee
fongers
figures
fingers.

Perform
preform
pre per
senterf
orcused
onforms.

Stun on
 stent a
 shush
 a stunt
 on stand
 tape shut.
 Is honest
 stee onset
 on steecan
 the set canwe
 behonestontheset?

A whole
 housebreaks
 on come
 comeand

Shad
 shadow
 pah play
 pay

first problem:

THE PREFORMER

Scene: ONCE...

Peforman

suh-er

morefans

preformed hands

sir perform as it is

preform as I say it

personal as claimed

as formed, premade

and practiced

and purchased

claims: something is given taken.

presented.

Repeat.

Hear: Perform,	Say: Preform,
purchase	present
personal	prefabricated
pertient	practiced
permanent, temporary	preserve, prevent

Repeated.

Performance. Performer.

say,

How's about that.

second problem:

THE AUDIENCE

Scene: Post-Performance.

CHORUS:

*something is wron here and I
don't know for sure but I suppose
you could give the object is not
done and do something like well I*

*bold the sun torye in case it st long
spend the half second on applica
-tion of a closetouch bonnersowhat
about the lasst parts said was good is
more of it AND YOU GOT tabaveit or-*

say,

I just thought-

CHORUS:

*thirsty! hungry! angry! revoltt,
revvalooshun! WAIWILLLEVY
YOU ON A BURNING PEERSO
HELP MEGOSSTOFTHE SPENTTT
YER TIME OF COURSE NOTHING
WILL COME AND IS IT AND IN NIT
ABOVE YOU WILL COME DOWN
OF NOTHING FROM NOTHING AND
DENTEN TEE EVEN OCEANOR WHH
W WASH HABLE NONSENSE CAME
NOTHING AMEN NOTHING ON ERTION-*

third problem:

THE SOLUTION

Scene: later.

say,

woah, now.

wake up.

repeat.

ask,

how do we go there?

find the magic shield.

ListenToTheShadow.

sb Story.

mab Momentum

The

Lesson:

The

Shadow is a mirror.

Learn:

Invisibility

the performer reflects.

The performer projects
performance.

say,

I get it.

fourth problem:

AND THUS:

THE SCREEN
OF
PERFORMER

Stories *** Shadows *** Mirrors
Smoke *** Movement*** Masks
Steel Machine***** Movie Stars
Shadow****Magic****Spectacle
Stock**Music**Motive**Sorrow
Magnetic****Staring****Mystery
Mastery**Satisfaction**Moment

Where The Shadow
Lies

And Where The
Hiding Spots

CHORUS:

Say grr! HA!
NO! BOO!
WOO. Aww
HAW! YOU!
PER-FORM-ER!
PER-FORM-ER!
PRA-FOR-MER!

Say,

Thank you

CHORUS

Yetsomethingismissing.

a crack.

CHORUS:

ISATRICK

“

AND IT WAS,

AND THEY SAW THE SCREEN FOR WHAT IT WAS
AND LO, PRAFORMER’S INVISIBILITY BECAME SEEN.

“

final problem:

WHATWASMISSING

“

PRAFORMER WAS CAST OUT
AND WANDERED THE WASTES
UNTIL INSPIRATION STRUCK AS
IT IS STRETCHED OVER A PIT

“

Say,

I was leaning towards

and almost fell...

themachineisbustedbutitwasworthsomethingonce.

arippedpagefliesthroughmyfingers

and it says:

Fig 1: When the shadow tugs the figure.

Say,

of course

Say, *sacrifice,*

As everything takes.

Say,

A moment is spent writing on the sleeve.

Seen Shadow Sameas Self.

Sincerity.

andthroughmyownfigures

Say,

lips lost loose slip

and The Shadow Pulls Back.

as the darkness pulls in.

CHORUS:

collision