Aperçus
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If There's A Prison in Your Mind, May the Bars Be The Same Color as the Sky, 2012
Mixed Media: Photomontage, Digital Painting, Acrylics & Watercolor
Wendy Barker

After the Shooting in Tucson

How we stared from our cushioned room
at the breaking news, crowd gunned down
by a Safeway. Catalinas’ brown-purple crags a backdrop
as the TV blared about the bullet through
a congresswoman’s skull. Over and over her name,
Gabrielle Giffords. And then, that night, as
President Obama’s voice urged us to act with good will,
quoting from Arnold’s “Dover Beach,”
I quivered with the electric rush I’d felt as a girl when Daddy
read Keats to us after dinner, his tattered
high-school anthology in one hand, a long-ashed cigarette
in the other. The sight of those mountains,
the sound of a poem out loud, and I was thrown back
to the first year I taught, not far from
the Catalinas, when Sally, Lizbeth, and Gwen lingered
after school and we read Eliot together,
puzzling over his “muttering retreats,” wondering about
that “overwhelming question.” Words
tantalizing as those of cummings. Who were “anyone”
and “noone” anyhow? But little did we know
as we sounded those luscious syllables, on the Salt River
Pima-Maricopa Reservation only
a mile away, kids younger than our little sisters were pulled
from their homes and crowded into
dorms at the Indian School in Phoenix where matrons
shaved their heads and showered them
in kerosene, stripped away their names, dressed them in
new ones like “Bobby” and “Susan.” Where
songs of the saguaro, the dove, names of grandmothers,
mountains, the river were erased. Replaced
with electric clock alarms. How does anyone vanish
into noone? And how many mass shootings
in our country since outside that Safeway Gabby
Gifford’s brain was shot through? Before
he died, I asked to record my father’s voice, his voice
I couldn’t bear to lose. “Fled is that music . . .
Do I wake or sleep?” he’d murmur, as I sat upright,
breathless in my chair. “Ah love, let us be
true / To one another,” Obama continued. To think that,
once, I’d believed we were learning how.
In the Galápagos

Though Melville called these islands
  a pile of “Cinders dumped here and there”
  with “a wailing spirit,” I don’t want ashes
of his morbid mental state to smother
  my memory of bobbing in a fiberglass
  panga where at first I saw only the garua,
the strato-cumulus hovering over tips
  of volcanoes, mist that drapes the rocks
  in a whitened haze, so I wasn’t even sure
we’d reached a place that’s real. It all
  shifted, the way for an instant we’d
  see a whale’s flukes, a tail flashing above
the ocean, and gone. Then, straight
  ahead, splatters of bird droppings
  like paint streaks on stone, but the paint
moved, the rocks teeming with
  white-feathered, blue-footed boobies,
  their beaks and outsize feet a brighter
blue than any sky I’ve ever seen
  as we anchored off Isla Fernandina
  and hiked a hummocky field of ropey
pahoehoe lava, when I almost tripped
  on a rock-black tail, no, hundreds upon
  hundreds of iguanas warming like soft-
bellied dollops of stone, the only
  sound besides our whispering the hiss
  of brine spewed through their nostrils,
salt-caked, white as the guano
  under them. And beyond, palo santo
  trees, holy sticks so laced with lichen
their whiteness shimmered at noon
    as if by moonlight. Not Melville’s end
    of the world, but a beginning, air so fresh
I felt I’d grown new lungs. When
        I walked on Isla Isabella’s sand alongside
        a Great Blue Heron, and sat down to rest
in the midst of a dozen nursing
        sea lions, I didn’t spot any of the creatures
        our kind have carried with us, the rats
pigs, dogs, cats that eat the eggs
    of the giant tortoises. I remember
        that, while exploring Chatham Island,
Darwin noted he’d met an “immense
    Turpin” and was mesmerized. But
        did he know, in the years surrounding
his voyage, crews like his—and
        Melville’s—hauled off thousands
        of those tortoises, stacked them flipped
on their backs in the ship’s hold,
        where they survived for months
        without food? I keep thinking of the flightless
cormorant—steady on her nest
    of marine grass and algae over
        rock, on an island where nothing has
ever been mined, hammered, or
    soldered, where the lava hasn’t
        been crumbled to pebbles—who sits
within a circle of her own
    shit, above a cloud-gray chick,
        and one still whole, unbroken egg.
On Small Talk: After Amichai

Three or four in a room, and one at the window,
   staring beyond the glass. But what of those huddled
beneath the ceiling fan, nattering about
   grandchildren’s adorable toddles, aphids on roses,
and the new deli opened only half a mile
   away? Maybe they need this mutual prattle to keep
from dwelling on the brother who last month
   shot himself in the forehead, the niece gang-raped
a week ago by frat boys, or the son’s friend’s
   ribs and skull cracked just yesterday by the white cop
who smashed him to the ground for selling
   a few joints. And what of the woman in the back
room, sorting old sweaters, her favorite cousin
   shot to death by a Neo-Nazi at a Jewish Community
Center in Kansas? Who is the one standing
   by the window, and who are those drifting toward
the sofa, needing a cushion, the softness
   of feathers ripped from a scalded, living goose?
Piotr Florezyk

Poor Translation

“Le Pain Quotidien”—a tasty bit
picked up on a morning jog through Westwood.

My daughter was born in the hospital up the street—

how much joy
how much pain
should I still feel?

Weeks later I’ve forsworn all carbs, including my favorite:
a sourdough baguette with burnt crust.

God
better
remember

what I told him that October day, when I watched the scalpel
getting passed from hand to hand.
Fire Season

Mid-morning, mid-June.
The sound of
saws and shears
outside our windows.
The tree-huggers—
the new breed paid by the hour
in cash rather than birdsong
and view—
have arrived. “More
light,”
the neighbors
have demanded—
that’s why they’re here,
swinging from the crowns
of the myrtles,
with no rain
to stop them.
Soon they’ll tower
over the rooftops.
“Snip, snip”—
our condos go up in value.
I’ve always voted
for “More shade,”
to tell you the truth—
the unruly constellation
of dead leaves
on glass.
Celeste Goyer

Dinner Rolls

kneading bread gives you time to think
to feel the grenades
the stones
wrapped blankets with burdens

line them up on the wooden board
make them as identical as you can
give each one a thumbprint
and its own folded face
pressed just a little flat against the
silence of the kitchen

branch shadows wag in a green windowframe

you’ll be ready for it with this row
of golden bombs rising to a crust

kneading bread gives you time to think
stones wrapped in blankets
rows of grenades

lead them to a wooden table
please do as much as you can
give each one a thumbprint
and its own folded face
pressed just a little flat
eyes closed
it’s time for soft silent things
that grow

leaflets passing through
a green windowframe
you are ready for them
In-Flight Meals

I believe if I spill my milk enough times my mother will tell the story again, how she tried to back out on her wedding day, and mother said, “That’s nice, dear. Now put your dress on.”

Our volatile Dad’s made of polyester, creases built-in at the airplane factory. Obsidian buttons hold his face on tight, make cold fire we all duck from during dinners. We ordered a cotton Dad, but they won’t come into style for another ten years. He’s better off in his buzzing box that hangs in the sky, turning dials, talking code, hands on the stick between his legs.

Mom’s a volunteer chemist here on loan from Corning, where glass lids are born. She’s white, soft, folded carefully in many pieces, each piece with its own French name that we kiss.
I learned young how to wash my dishes remnants not taken to too kindly in my family more focus on the whole the present moment you see I was loved very much in my family this is not an admission of anything I was loved I learned my chores

I drank full glasses of pure white milk my plate partitioned into sections so food would not touch I was a particular one I never wanted the broccoli to touch the beef but when my fork tasted of applesauce as I ate the mac and cheese I rejoiced in a small unexpected pleasure it was mine

alone those pleasures those remnants you see I wanted secrets I learned to love the sink because my father did he would come in straight from the farm red earth or grease still on his jeans and begin the dishes it was my mother who did the laundry but we all knew

how hot water could transform a thing it was precious I would wash my dish clean in the kitchen sink it was yellow deep it was facing the desert and its secrets once when I was small enough to be washed in that sink I watched a mesquite get hit by lightning twenty feet from me

my small hairs my small body charged up but something made me sit there still my mother screamed the tree broke in two pieces on fire I was pulled from that sink still dripping that electric water that risk there was barely a storm that was what she said barely a storm she would never

wash her baby with danger like that later the tree was rooted out chopped up presumably burned though I don’t know the complete story after that
The lion of the body
is its undoing: whatever
power possessed him
in youth objects
now, as if within
his thinning skin
lies an animal.
The work is never done.

(My father’s body
like a recovered memory.)

He falls. The table catches
him by the face,
reverberates.
He falls. Face it: nothing
catches him, not even
his own body.

Hands to brick—more
bloodied spots to clean.

The line of the body
does not break
as I thought it would,
as if I had considered
the breaking at all
before this.
Talking to Strangers

How a voice from a stranger surprises the sound coming from a throat
unknown, unworldly sudden noise, or
a break in silence (as my own voice is always there)
(if I hear my voice as a noise at all that is)

A deserted platform the boy asks a question and I must remove my headphones
to hear he tells me his good news and I respond
that’s good good for you good to hear good the salve
of conversations between strangers his voice the tool
of connection he’s seeking something but I don’t want him
to follow me onto the train as he does all I want is out
of the conversation I’m not really having
his voice something volatile pleading something I’ve wanted to soothe
though I can’t name where I’ve learned every interaction with a stranger
is something to fear a man and a woman talking

My father says I lost the thread of that thought I hear my voice remind him
of his place a chapter mark in the narration he has taken up
these last months his voice the reassurance of his life all the good
he has done my father talks and talks and I learn how
a voice can swallow all the space
my instinct is to say quiet make space for someone else
in this conversation
but that is the instinct he’s railing against the silence threatens
to command him back

eventually unprompted the boy on the train did fall quiet
American Football
   a Triptych

I.

No one tells you the most blunt, 
brutal edge of degenerative diseases:

the long stretches of boredom, 
conversations of loved ones

who are often avoiding 
the very fact of death,

or acknowledging it over 
and over again, too much,

and there’s nothing to change it. 
Televisions are also now found in hospital rooms.
II.

My father won’t have to face us, listening to the football announcer
tell detailed descriptions of the exact visual representations
of green fields, men in blue and yellow against the men in red and black.

Everything is in HD. I still cannot follow the rules of football. Never have, and now,
with the added technological advancements—a graphic swooping in to show
it is the 2nd, with 10 yards (in yellow)—I don’t have to; I can carry on
with the vague sense that the ball needs to move one way up the field, where
players will or will not score, and then back down the field, where it begins again.

I do worry I am not being kind enough to America’s pastime. I worry I am unkind
to my father. I often, forgetfully, leave the room with two minutes to go.
III.

A person working for the broadcasting company, somewhere, probably New York, built

the graphic that glides onto the screen. Someone else added the soft swooping

sound to accompany it. In the hospital, the newest technology is to route

the television’s speakers into the same remote which lifts the bed and calls the nurse.

Sounds and voices can be easily muted this way, and two televisions with different programs

can be on in one room.

I love television.

Before this, I liked to imagine that a whole day spent in bed watching television would be heaven.

I can understand now how it might grow tiresome, how appealing it might be to call the nurse

instead of changing the channel. The voices in the rooms next door,

and their assorted machinery’s hum, call out through the night. He doesn’t sleep.

That’s what my father can speak of in the morning, when I raise his chin

softly towards the light, that morning light streaming in from the window, to shave his face.

That, and the score of last night’s game, which I remind him we all watched.
On the Third Day

Were the Junipers Syrian then? Who knows. But they curled their heavy limbs over the pond exactly when we needed them. We were white and cream without our clothes to protect us and the rocks sprouted green, ivy falling from every impenetrable place—stone, mold or even the rank breath of middle age, and the birds called as they flew away from the tangles of our hair as we dipped our heads under, every barrier removed, even earrings, even chains, and the water was as soft as dawn. It was dawn. The green had creeped into the spring, into the budding Junipers who ruled below the sky as we seeped into the deep of it. I slipped past fish and frogs and melted into a flash of algae. I photosynthesized. I kissed my mouth open to the green and I sprouted.
Wayward Flier

October nights and a flock of cranes,
the clutter and murmur of their travel
with nowhere to settle,
not sand, not pebble, not the petal
of wings folded around a young one—
the worry of foxes who already
are darkening to match the hills’
deep decay of rain, a dun shade
of dusk almost unseen. Where is grace
then, leaden, unknown-- and why?
You say maybe you weren’t ready,
but neither was I, and I,
like all abandoned and wayward fliers,
can only look back
at the way your black body held me
to the earth, sure that fear wasn’t enough
to know in which direction the sun set,
the quiver of a bird lost on your palm,
or to see how they swoop in and out
of my poems where they perch sometimes,
just long enough to catch their breath.
Watch as I fly away from every compass,
toward the sun’s sweet heat
and a world blurred from brown to blue,
unleashed to the question: what
became of me without you,
deflocked and spread, as lost as a faded star
or a moon still uneven and crouched
somewhere in the sun’s backdrop?
When I visit my father he always says,

*Let’s go to Bob’s and get a senior burger;*

and on the way there we always pass
the bikini espresso shack where
the barista, always in nothing but a thong,
is working her big silver Cimbali—
bounding used grounds from the filters,
wiping milk foam off the rods.

My father always tells me to slow down
so he can get a look at the barista
and I’m always surprised he doesn’t mind
my knowing he wants to see.

Once we pass, he always tells me
what lane to get into, to swing wide
to avoid hitting the curb, and park
in the handicapped because, as always,
he didn’t bring his cane.

When our burgers arrive,

he always tells me the story of Hot Cups,
the bikini shack that blew up.

It was a cold January morning.
The near-naked barista was firing up
the space heater that kept her tiny kiosk warm.

There was a flash.
The shack burst into flames.
The barista jumped out the window
but she didn’t get out with her life.
Single mom, two kids—
that shack was going to be her salvation,
the obituary said.

*You never know about a person,*
my father always says at the end of the story.

We finish our senior burgers,
figure the tip,
get back on the road.
The Living Will Always Leave You.
The Dead Stay With You Forever.

It’s harder than you’d think to die
even for us mortals
asking god stopping meds not eating
not even losing the will to live
always gets you there.
Autologous systems know no better
than to carry on until they don’t.
I’ve been asleep most of my life
walking naked through brambles
gnawing mold off berries remembering
Amazonian fishermen I saw in a film
who cradled their catch in their arms
held it close to the breast
humming a soft tune
until the fish died
smiling as the fish tried to escape—
as gills grasped at air
unable to find oxygen.
My father has been dead six months.

Even a popup blocker can’t stop
time-to-reorder notices
for Men’s Size M flannel pajamas,
a fresh pair of scuffs.
Have you forgotten something?
Megan Peak

Compilation of Splendors Upon Leaving the Fertility Clinic

It all compounded into a single, flickering beat: August rain spilling through the gutter,

flurry of deep pink blooms loosened from crape myrtles. Fat tubas marching

like roosters through a school parking lot. Small splendors. A child in a toucan dress,

lips red from a cherry ice pop. Eggs frying on a steel griddle. When was the wind

ever this long, this gentle? Or the river with its wading birds, it’s secret pebbles.

There’s the old woman contemplating avocados, palming the fruit like precious jade. And the doctor snapping on gloves, hopeful, gripping his wand as the screen flutters on. Then the search: like a mother trying to find the right spot to start peeling an orange. Then astonishment, silver dreams, the slight quiver of life beneath a quiet street.

All the snow having melted from my dark self, the space I carved out for newness after woe.

The way the world drops sweet blossoms like letters at our feet, singing: Look,

look how we try again each year,
how we return after a season of cold.
At night I drift down corridors like a moon-high moth, 
Bang my head against the glass where you sleep— a fever 
Crib. You’re light as a rabbit, chest a charm of hummingbirds 
Darting in time with machines. Lights above you burn blue 
Electric while women prick your feet, thread lines thinner than 
Fishing wire up your arm, fill you with bags of sugar and blood. 
Golden milk. They tend to you in ways I cannot. I’m not sure 
How to mother, given only my body, a grief this fraught, grief so 
Interior they had to cut it out, lay it flat on the table, 
Jostle it back to life. Every time I hear you whimper, 
Kitten-soft, milk floods as if I’m meant to feed a whole 
Litter, as if the body knows when to empty, when to brim over. 
More and more, I circle your crib like a wolf, teeth bared, 
Neck fur raised. No one dreams of this. They dream 
Of trumpets, bellies big and sweating. They dream of labor, 
Push and pull of breath, that first sharp scream, anything but 
Quiet and cold. These days we hold on to anything gentle: 
Red birds on the windowsill outside your room, warm 
Sponge baths, skin-to-skin for an hour or two. I never thought 
To be a mother would mean nursing a beauty as 
Unbearable as you. I sit and rock as women return with 
Vitals and stats, their usual spiel—they’re 
Watching this and monitoring that, but a hundred thousand 
X-rays can’t show me more than what I already know: 
You, your fierce heart, swift as a new spring doe. Your breath, 
Zephyr sweet on my neck as we wait for the birds, red and bold.
Stan Rubin

*I Know Everything*

I know the way the planets revolve
when I project the sky map
on the ceiling of the room
we used to share

and how our cat still roams shadows as if
she is the true owner of space.

Cassiopeia looks like the center of the universe,
but I know she isn’t.

I know her husband was once a King
and they’re the only couple amid the constellations.

They chained their lovely daughter to a rock,
but the gods were not appeased.

I know that it requires
more cunning than I have
to coax the blind cat
from under the bed.

I know a fistful of stars can’t buy
a dime’s worth of happiness.

I know the gods are never satisfied
though they take what they want.

If I don’t know everything,
what is there to know?
Thermostat

Turn down the thermostat, it’s hot here, my mother says. She is sitting in a wheelchair near the window.

The thermostat is a white plastic box on the wall. It has a small digital screen, two buttons the shape of a triangle—plus and minus, a dial with tiny indentations, and the on-off switch. It doesn’t work. The nursing home has central heating, but you cannot control it from the bedrooms.

Are you my son or my grandson? How old are you? Are you my son, the one that lives far away, in that faraway country? Why don’t you want to have children? she asks me.

It has been snowing all morning. Just stopped. Look at the snow, she says, so clean.

I am reading a brochure the doctor left earlier. Brain cells lose their ability to communicate with one another. Two abnormal structures called plaques and tangles are prime suspects in damaging and killing nerve cells.

Let’s go outside, my mother says. The park across from her window is covered with fresh snow. We cannot go outside, Mother, in this weather, I tell her. At least open the window. I cannot breathe, she says.

Plaques are deposits of a protein fragment called beta-amyloid that build up in the spaces between nerve cells. Tangles are twisted fibers of another protein called tau that build up inside cells.

Take your children to the park. Play with them, she tells me. Snow is wasted when you don’t have children.

Open the window, my mother says. I want to feel the cold. I don’t think we can do that. You may get sick, I say.

Who cares if I die today or tomorrow? Open the window, she says. Just for fifteen seconds, I say. Hope they don’t see us.

I take the bed’s comforter and swaddle my mother, wheelchair and all, like a cocoon. Fifteen seconds, I say.
I open the window. The cool air enters the room, like a giant, like an ice river. *Fifteen seconds*, I say. And we count together, whispering, and I close the window.
On a Silver Tray

The world has become heavy, I tell my doctor.
A door’s handle, a page in a book,
an empty glass.

I want you to see this, she says.
She points at the black and white image
on her computer screen.

She wears a wedding band but I don’t want to know
anything about her. I don’t want her to have a husband,
children, parents, siblings.

This is your spine, she says. From C-1 to L-5. Do you see these spots?
Yes, I say. What are they?
Sadness, she says.

Are you sure? I ask.
It’s a clear case, she says. The location,
the shape, the density.

Same patients present transparent sadness. We call it
Type Zero. Very difficult to diagnose, even using a dye for contrast.
Yours is translucent. Type 1.

And, it’s shaped like pellets. You see? Very common in Type 1.
Type 2, the opaque sadness, is shaped like filaments that run
alongside the muscle fibers.

Type 1 stays close to the spine. May cause weakness,
trembling, paresthesia, night sweats,
sexual dysfunction.

There is also Type 3. It’s web-shaped, settles around the neck.
Patients describe it as having a bridle around the throat.
Produces speech impediments, sometimes muteness.

The last identified sadness is called Inner Type, she says.
It generates in the amygdala. It looks like a rain
of electrical spores that can reach any part of the body.

Does the Type 1 explain my symptoms? I ask.
We can’t be sure, she says. We are still in the early stages
of research. But sadness explains many things.

What should I do? I ask.
Some patients try to rest more and calm down.
But sometimes they fall into hypersomnia, she says.
Balance is everything, she adds. Some patients cry. Some play sports because of dopamine release. Some listen to music. Bach, most of all.

I don’t like sports, I say. But I like Bach. What do you do with your sadness, I ask. I just keep plowing, she says.

Will I improve? I ask. You will, she says. But there is no cure for sadness. It stays with you, always.

What about the future sadness? I ask. We will cross that bridge when we get there. Do you pray, meditate? she asks.

Not really, I say. How can the body function with all this sadness? I ask. Nobody knows, she says. But some scientists theorize that the body wouldn’t be able to function without sadness. Just a hypothesis.

Do you think we could survive a lifelong load of sadness delivered in a single day? I ask. She plays with her wedding band. Imagine all your sadness, at once on a silver tray, I say. All at once, on a silver tray, she says, like the head of John the Baptist.
Risk for the Sake of Beauty: 
An Interview with Laura Maher

Laura Maher is the author of the chapbook, Sleep Water (Dancing Girl Press, 2017). Her work has appeared in The Common, Crazyhorse, The Collagist, New Ohio Review, and Third Coast. She is the recipient of awards from the Spring Creek Project, Arizona Commission on the Arts, Vermont Studio Center, and the Academy of American Poets. Maher holds a Master of Arts from the University of Texas at Austin and a Master of Fine Arts from Warren Wilson College. She lives and writes in Tucson, Arizona.

LH: “Every desert poem needs a stark image, a figure in crisp shadow,/ something slow-moving, dried-up, just on the edge of living/ and dying, a husk of something recognizable.” These lines begin the poem “Root”—a poem that serves as a kind of multivalent guide on not only how to write a poem set in the desert, but also how to truly see the landscape’s abundance. The poem also seems to be a meditation on being, a reminder that the desert is also a state of consciousness. I’d like to let this poem serve as a “root” for the rest of our conversation about your chapbook, Sleep Water.

Can you start by telling us a little about what it was like to grow up in the Sonoran desert of Arizona? How do you think your poetic sensibilities were influenced by this specific climate?

LM: I never thought it strange, growing up here. I think my childhood maybe just had more instances of pulling cactus thorns from my limbs than other people’s childhoods!

Just like any place, there was the natural rhythm of the seasons—except that summers were spent indoors in the heat of the day and spent outside at night. (All that did was spark a love of the night sky and less fear of the dark, I think.) Growing up in the desert also just gave me a really keen awareness about skincare regimens. (Sunscreen during the day and rosehip oil at night!)

My poetic sensibilities were certainly informed by this landscape and climate. Most people will call upon the starkness of the desert as its key quality—so little alive, so little shade, so little water—but in reality, a desert is alive with as much as any other place, but usually on a different scale. People have been living here for thousands of years, and many of the traditional practices—collecting fruit from saguaros, grinding mesquite beans into flour, irrigation practices and water harvesting, making adobe bricks from mud—are still part of how people consciously live here. Plants and animals also have to rely on each other in the desert is pretty direct way—the bats that migrate through this desert time their flight with the flowering of the saguaro blooms, which open just for a few days. This nectar sustains their thousands of miles of flight—and like with many symbiotic ecological relationships, it’s a scientist’s guess which came first. A young saguaro cactus will only survive the intense sun of this desert if it grows under the shade of a mesquite tree for its first ten years or so (these mesquite groves are therefore called a nursery).
It is not easy to grow in the desert, yet, there is such abundance and life when you turn your attention to seeing it. This is the sense that I try to bring to poetry—that every word is reliant upon what is around it, that you must take risks in order to make something beautiful, that a poem can hold secrets and can live multiple lives. I think a made thing—be it poem or desert plant—must be constructed in order to sustain life in extraordinary circumstances.

**LH:** Are there any lessons you’ve learned by living in the desert that apply directly or indirectly to writing? In what ways has the desert been a mentor for aesthetics or any part of your writing practice?

**LM:** Yes, absolutely. The most important lesson is patience. I am a slow writer and reviser; I often will sit with ideas for weeks before committing them to paper, much less publishing them. The desert is a place that grows slowly, but blooms quickly. This is how I want my work to come into the world too.

**LH:** “Root” and other poems in the collection deftly address the ineffability of the desert’s expanses, its mystique, and starkness, and there is also a recognition throughout the collection of memory’s inability to properly recollect what’s been seen and experienced. And yet, the beauty is in the trying. The beauty is in the scratching of memory, testing the substance of it, uncovering layers. I also think that your recognition of ineffability and the inadequacy of memory are partly what keep your poems from becoming nostalgic. In your poem, “Into the Night,” the speaker says:

*The conversation*
*is spoken into an empty*
*room; the other side,*
*another empty room, so far*

*it could be another life.*

*The conversation*
*is spoken into*
*a tin can—it is*
*echoing, is refrain*

*and verse, it is metallic*

*and altogether godlike.*
*It isn't true, most*

*of it anyway, because*
*memory is often*

*a lie, or a half-truth*

*we tell to go on believing...*
Can you talk about how memory functions in *Sleep Water*? What advice do you have for poets who want to write about their hometowns but avoid creating a nostalgic and therefore less genuine portrayal of a place and time?

LM: Memory has become a routine theme in my work, despite not directly paying attention to the fact that I was writing about memories again and again. Maybe it’s just that I seemed to think that memories were static, created narratives when I was younger, and then with time—as it is with many people—my connection to my past and my experiences changed. My heartbreaks, my successes, those important milestones are understood differently or even forgotten. Add in other people’s remembrances and memories, and that territory becomes even stranger.

I remember once when I was a kid, my uncle, my dad’s older brother, came to Arizona for a visit. He lived in Pennsylvania, near my father’s hometown, but he and my dad had lived most of their adult lives across the country from each other. They spent the trip sharing stories, recounting different narratives of the same experience from their childhoods, and many that they each remarked upon that they had forgotten except for the triggered memory from their brother. At the time, I was young—8 or 9—and I remember thinking how strange it was that these adults could have forgotten pivotal childhood experiences and that I knew that wouldn’t be true for my brother and me when we got older. But guess what? The stories that I remember, that my brother remembers, are different and wild, and make me realize how easily ruptured our sense of self and the world can be. This is the place for poetry to explore, especially because memories shift, language and meaning constantly change, and so does our relationship to the world.

“I remember once when I was a kid, my uncle, my dad’s older brother, came to Arizona for a visit. He lived in Pennsylvania, near my father’s hometown, but he and my dad had lived most of their adult lives across the country from each other. They spent the trip sharing stories, recounting different narratives of the same experience from their childhoods, and many that they each remarked upon that they had forgotten except for the triggered memory from their brother. At the time, I was young—8 or 9—and I remember thinking how strange it was that these adults could have forgotten pivotal childhood experiences and that I knew that wouldn’t be true for my brother and me when we got older. But guess what? The stories that I remember, that my brother remembers, are different and wild, and make me realize how easily ruptured our sense of self and the world can be. This is the place for poetry to explore, especially because memories shift, language and meaning constantly change, and so does our relationship to the world.”

Of course, I say all this, and I also have this deep need to express just how important I believe an objective reality is, particularly at this time in the world. This is why I love poetry: that it is a place for play and risk as much as it is a place to understand difficult truths. Poetry teaches me to reflect on what I believe, to test what I take for granted, and to understand where and why these ideas have appeared.

LH: I’d like to end on this: many of the poems in this collection center around romantic relationships. I think it would be interesting to hear your thoughts on how memory and longing function in *Sleep Water* but in regards to romantic relationships. It’s difficult to avoid nostalgia when it comes to past relationships, and maybe even more difficult to avoid resentment and blame. Your work doesn’t give in to what I would call “those lesser emotions” despite revisiting past loves, past heartbreaks. What are your views on stance in poetry? Is it something you are aware of while you are writing or is it something you address during revision?

LM: I like your word *stance*, because it calls attention to just how much control a writer has in forming the position of the speaker, the objects, the construction of memory, and those informed truths. I like to play with this stance in revision, sure, but I think it most often comes fully formed in a poem from the beginning. Nostalgia is an interesting emotion because I think it colors so much of my thinking about the past, whether I want it to or not.
Little good can come from it and I can recognize it as misleading, yet it is also an oddly satisfying indulgence to try and color a past experience with new light. Mentioning the lesser emotions is important too, because it is hard to get away from how I may be perceived as a woman in the world. Romantic relationships—where I have most clearly confronted intimacy, risk, and reward in my interpersonal life—come to the page because writing a poem is an intimate, risky, rewarding act too. I am critical of my love poems, because I am aware that my stance as a female-identified person in body and on the page is more easily discredited. There's no objective reason for this to be true except that I have carried it, and a lot of my writing begins because there are things I simply don't want to carry around anymore.
writing obsessions are generally on different subjects, these circumstances are nearly impossible to ignore. So, these concerns enter my work, but it is very new for me, which makes the subject matter both difficult and exciting to navigate.

To your second question, I would answer yes, poets do have that obligation; I wouldn’t say every poet does, because a poet has to be true to his or her or they own preoccupations and language, but those who are given to approach these subjects through the opportunity afforded by syntax and music and language. The true strength of the poet is to pay attention, to see and frame in language that which others cannot see or choose to ignore. To call us to terms with ourselves. If James Baldwin is correct, and I believe he is, it is one of the ways of showing love.

Hmmm... poets who are addressing recent injustices in their work? Cortney Lamar Charleston is writing great poems dealing with police brutality and injustice particularly in neighborhoods of Chicago. Kamilah Aisha Moon is another poet whose most recent collection engages recent injustices effectively. Robin Coste Lewis continually challenges how we encounter the Black female body among other things. I also think John Murillo is writing excellent poems that speak to our current political and literary climate. This is difficult, haha. I like a lot a people.

LH: Let me tell you what I love most about Scale, Nathan. The speaker isn’t jaded. Without ever verging into sentimentality, the speaker actually shows emotions and admits hurt. I find so much of what’s being published these days to be purposefully austere and unwilling to admit vulnerability to both sorrow and joy. But the speaker of Scale always returns to love. One of the best examples is “Love Elegy in the Chinese Garden, with Koi.” The speaker identifies with the koi in the pond who continue to kiss a boy’s palms even after his palms are emptied of the food pellets:

Because who hasn’t done that—
loved so intently even after everything
has gone? Loved something that has washed
its hands of you?

Here is one of many instances of the poet confronting himself, to borrow your language from a previous answer. Here is real emotional honesty. This is probably a tough question, but do you have any advice for poets who would like to imbue their work with more honesty without falling into sentimentality? How does one develop a sense for where the line is? Do you think that a certain amount of restraint actually makes the emotional response in the reader all the more possible?

NM: Thank you for saying such kind things regarding my work; I’m super pleased to hear these qualities of the collection’s speaker are so evident in your reading. When I began writing these poems, not thinking about a book of any sort, I wasn’t really sure what I was doing; I knew I needed to write a particular—my—narrative, but that was all I knew. You ask a tough question indeed, but a good one. One of the things that makes a poem like “Love Elegy in the Chinese Garden with Koi” work is the juxtaposing of lyrical diction and imagery with more colloquial diction. Without the instances of colloquial diction (i.e., “But who am I kidding,” “So dumb”), the poem could have easily devolved into sentimentality; those instances, I believe undercut the sentiment and provide the poem with a sense of counterpoise or counterbalance, something to tug against the poem’s structure. Counterbalance, I think, is key to infusing work with more honesty while resisting sentimentality, though it’s challenging to determine where that line is—it likely fluctuates from poem to poem.

I like that you use the word “restraint” because I like to think of my poems in that way—as restrained. It’s the difference between a poem that explicitly states, “Look at me! Look at this awful thing that happened to me!” and one in which the speaker’s imagination betrays him or her or them. I think that triggers an emotional response from the reader, translating the image, which reside in the reader, as opposed to the poem’s details, which only reside on the page.
LH: Some people feel a bit of a letdown after the first book comes out. What are you working on now? And more importantly, what does life look like outside of writing? What buoys you and gives you joy?

NM: Currently, I’m working on a few craft essays and also trying to write new poems; I don’t know what those poems’ intentions are just yet, but I hope they decide to play together. It’s difficult, after having a book, to trick the mind out of thinking of each new poem you write in the context of a larger project. I try, but it’s hard. Outside of writing, I’m preparing to start a great Visiting Professor of Creative Writing and African American Literary Arts position at Hampshire College this fall. So, I have syllabi to write. I’m also preparing a master lecture on Ellen Bryant Voigt’s *Headwaters* I’ll present at St. Joseph’s College early November. What buoys me? Gives me joy? Aside from poems, good food and wine gives me great joy. Cooking gives me joy, as does a great cocktail. My wonderful partner, J.J. Starr, a tremendous poet in her own right, definitely buoys me. We recently went ring shopping. Of all things, she anchors me... brings me the most joy.

You can read a selection of Nathan’s poetry here: https://www.nathanmcclain.com/publications
Megan Peak received her M.F.A. in Poetry from Ohio State University, where she was former Poetry Editor at The Journal. Her first book of poetry, Girldom, won the 2018 Perugia Press Prize from Perugia Press, 2019 The John A. Robertson Award for Best First Book of Poetry from the Texas Institute of Letters, and was named a 2019 Eric Hoffer Book Award Finalist. She lives in Fort Worth, TX with her son, Auden.

LH: Can you talk about what it was like to write intimate poems about family members and also what it has been like now that Girldom has been published? I think about your poem, “What I Don't Tell My Mother about Ohio,” and the piercing first few lines:

Daughters tell lies. We are lovelier this way. So I say: the snow sprawls softly in the morning. And my mother believes me...

MP: Well, I think family is almost always fair game for most writers, but that never makes it easy or comfortable when writing, reading, or publishing these kinds of poems and stories. Luckily, I have a pretty wonderful family who has always supported my writing, so I never felt like I couldn't write intimately and truthfully about experiences that involved them.

LH: And how does poetry help us tell truths we couldn't tell before—help us tell the truth to ourselves and to others?

MP: The container of the blank page. The specific image. The musicality and pace. The intentionality of each word and line break. I believe the elements of poetry give us a path, or many paths, to truth by allowing us the opportunity to meander through the mystery, line by line, image by image, until a truth, the truth, many truths are unveiled.

LH: Your poems are teeming with life from the underbrush: beetles, bees, cicadae, ghost crabs, flowers, roots, nettle. The speaker and the flora and fauna of the poem seem to house one another, inseparable and yet sometimes antagonistic, indicative of both struggle and rebirth. Where did you grow up and how did the region influence the way you viewed the world, the body, and beyond?

MP: I grew up in the country in a small town west of Dallas / Fort Worth, Texas. We lived right next to a huge ranch, so we'd wake up to roosters crowing, peacocks and guinea hens strutting in our front yard, horses kicking
"I realized that while there’s pain in the world, there’s just as much, if not more, tenderness to counter it. The lens of the natural world allowed me to make tangible some of the experiences about which I found difficult to write."

I think what I witnessed in nature rang so true to me as I grew older. I realized that while there’s pain in the world, there’s just as much, if not more, tenderness to counter it. The lens of the natural world allowed me to make tangible some of the experiences about which I found difficult to write.

LH: I’d like to hear your thoughts on writing about violence. There are poems in the world that are about the speaker perpetrating violence on another, poems of witnessing violence, poems where the speaker is the victim of violence. I think some might agree that there are also poems that feel like a violence, or perhaps a trespass, is being done to the reader in that the poems are gratuitous in their violence. What, do you feel, makes a poem about violence successful? Does the poem also require something else? Resilience? Redemption? Something else? Are there any poets that you feel write particularly well on the subject of violence?

MP: Writing about violence is tough, in my opinion, and I don’t know if there is a “right” answer as to how to write successfully about it. I only know what I’ve read and what has moved me and how the poems in *Girldom* tackle violence on the page.

When writing some of these poems in *Girldom*, I approached them like a photographer adjusting her lens. I wanted to get it just right—the appropriate focus, the right amount of light, contrast, etc. —which sounds exploitative; however, this disassociation, this out-of-body phenomenon was my experience of sexual assault. So, I didn’t really want to focus on the act of violence itself, rather the way in which the world continues to go—the moon goes on shining, the river still runs, the dawn rises steadily. These poems remind me that there are violent moments and tender ones, times when we are fragile and others when we are resilient, and for me, that reminder is what makes these pieces successful.

Beth Bachmann comes to mind and her book Temper. Tarfia Faizullah as well. Jessica Lynn Suchon is brilliant, and I can’t wait to get my hands on her new book.

LH: Can you tell us the story behind the arresting cover art for *Girldom*?

MP: I was lucky enough to collaborate with a former partner on the cover, so the process of creating the image was extremely intimate, and I had a lot of say throughout. We focused a great deal on duality since the book tackles the multifaceted nature of female experiences. For example, color choice was very deliberate—the dark background, the lighter tones of the girl’s body, the pale pink and blue. Then there’s the juxtaposition of sharp and soft lines—the strong font, the jutting jaw and neck, the blurred torso, the fading head of the girl. All the elements speak in some way to the book’s main themes of violence and tenderness, the dark and the light of any experience.

LH: Having written about sexual violence in an age where more women and people of all genders are telling their stories and seeking community in this way, how has your life changed since the publication of *Girldom*? What has been the general response from your community, your readers, the people you know? How has telling your own truth and hearing from others effected your own reflection/processing of the past?
MP: Obviously, the collection is timely because of the #MeToo movement, but I was writing these poems before I knew about that movement, before there was a social platform or hashtag to promote awareness about sexual violence and assault. So, I wouldn’t say my life has changed significantly since the publication of Girldom or because of the publication of these poems; however, I have received many messages on social media from sexual assault survivors who have found the book and connected with it in some way. I have met people at readings who have come up and told me they’d been trying to write about their experiences with assault, and that hearing me read certain poems gave them the courage, inspiration, permission to return to the page.

This has been the most rewarding and exciting part about Girldom’s release—connecting with others and hearing their stories. I mean that’s what it’s all about, isn’t it? Coming together and creating community through poetry, experiences, art.

LH: In the final poem of the book, “The Room Below This Room,” the last lines blossomed in my throat when I read them out loud:

But what I need becomes
what I am: a line of women
with raised flags. I think: I’ve room
for love. They pour out the window.
I think: not a door but a window.

What I feel from these lines is hope, but not a hope that entirely relies on the goodness or fortitude of others. A hope that comes from within—a recognition that who I want to be I already am. There is room for love if I say that there is...if I declare it. In times that feel oppressively dark, who or what is carrying the light? How much of the responsibility to make change falls on the self, and how much falls on the shoulders of the collective? And tell me, dear poet, what role does the writer play in the changes to be made in 2019?

MP: That’s such a beautiful reading of this poem. You know, this poem came out of workshop with Brenda Hillman. She put our entire class into a meditative trance, and I think the poem reflects the togetherness of the room—how we were all silent and walking through this landscape she created—and yet how completely alone we were during the exercise.

In my experience, I have had to carry the light myself, but often finding that inner light, that inner hope, was fostered or sparked by others around me. So, to answer your question, I think real, substantial change needs both—the collective and the self. I recall another line from this poem:

I call for stairs and some unroll.
I think: if there is one door but
the things I could do with two.

We could easily change these lines to answer your question: if there is one light but / the things I could do with two. Or three or four.
Writers, artists, and storytellers are essential in promoting change. We always have been, even if it’s in hindsight. We are the light-bearers, the culture-keepers; we are the ones to hold up the mirrors and the lanterns to illuminate the world.

**LH:** What kind of poetry and/or prose would you like to see more of in 2019 and beyond? What kind of writing should get more attention and why?

**MP:** Goodness, that’s a big question. I think, in terms of the literary realm, we are making progress in the support and advocacy of those voices that are often underrepresented; however, there’s always room for more writers of color, more women, more LGBTQ voices, more writers with disabilities on our shelves, in our literary magazines, in our classrooms, and on our minds.

**LH:** What lies ahead on the skyline for Megan Peak? What other projects, personal and public, are you engaged with?

**MP:** That’s a great question. 2018 was a big year for me. My son was born 3.5 months prematurely and had to stay almost that long in the NICU. *Girldom* made its debut in the world. My marriage fell apart. All to say, in 2019, I plan on enjoying my son, who is one year old, extending some grace to myself, and delving into new poems that explore the connections among motherhood, grief, joy, and the body.
Dearly Departed, 2017
Mixed Media Photomontage; Photography, Digital Painting, Watercolors, Acrylic
Wendy Barker’s sixth collection, *One Blackbird at a Time*, received the John Ciardi Prize for Poetry and was published by BkMk Press in 2015. Her fourth chapbook, *From the Moon, Earth Is Blue*, was published by Wings Press in 2015. Her poems have appeared in numerous journals and anthologies, including *The Best American Poetry 2013*. Recipient of NEA and Rockefeller fellowships among other awards, she teaches at the University of Texas at San Antonio.

Piotr Florczyk’s most recent books are *East & West*, a volume of poems, and several volumes of translations, including *I’m Half of Your Heart: Selected Poems* by Julian Kornhauser and *Building the Barricade* by Anna Świrszczyńska, which won the 2017 Found in Translation Award and the 2017 Harold Morton Landon Translation Award. A doctoral candidate at the University of Southern California, he is completing a volume of poems based on Holocaust testimonies entitled *From the Annals of Kraków*. www.piotrflorczyk.com

Born in Northampton, Massachusetts, Celeste Goyer has lived in California since age 11, mostly in remote towns of the Mojave and Great Basin Deserts. She edited *Mind in Motion* magazine, a literary quarterly, for fourteen years and currently works for an affordable housing nonprofit. She’s also a visual artist.

Liz Huston, a native of Los Angeles, California, may live in a place known for interesting characters, but it’s in Huston’s imagination where the truly unique characters exist. Entirely self taught, Huston’s work has evolved over two decades from a traditional film photography background into digital assemblage, photomontage, and currently into mixed media through combining acrylics, oil and watercolors with her digital works.

Huston is a full-time artist, owning and operating a gallery, dubbed her ‘studio shoppe’ in Downtown Los Angeles. Huston’s mixed media art is whimsical, surreal and dreamy, and her occult path informs this art in every way. In her symbolic visual works she creates an esoteric narrative that hints at a logic far beyond the average and mundane. In her art, she bridges the worlds; creating not just art, but medicine for the human spirit.

Huston was a featured photographer in Juxtapoz Magazine, the Parisian art magazine, “Hey!”, and was named one of the “Photographers You Should Know” by Rangefinder Magazine. Her artwork has appeared on a number of book and album covers. Huston has published several books, including Sacred~ New Orleans Funerary Grounds (2005), At the Threshold of Life (2008), The Motionless Dream (2010), This Breathing Body (2010-2018) and The Dreamkeepers Tarot (2018).

Laura Maher is the author of the chapbook, *Sleep Water* (Dancing Girl Press, 2017). Her work has appeared in *The Common, Crazyhorse, The Collagist, New Ohio Review*, and *Third Coast*. She is the recipient of awards from the Spring Creek Project, Arizona Commission on the Arts, Vermont Studio Center, and the Academy of American Poets. Maher holds a Master of Arts from the University of Texas at Austin and a Master of Fine Arts from Warren Wilson College. She lives and writes in Tucson, Arizona.
Rachel Neve-Midbar’s collection Salaam of Birds has won the 2018 Patricia Bibby First Book Award and will be published by Tebot Bach Press. She is also the author (under the name Heimowitz) of the chapbook, What the Light Reveals (Tebot Bach Press, 2014). Rachel’s work has appeared in Crab Orchard Review, Spillway, Prairie Schooner, The Georgia Review as well as other publications and anthologies. She was recently a finalist for the COR Richard Peterson Prize, winner of the Passenger Poetry Prize and she has been nominated for The Pushcart Prize. Rachel completed her MFA at Pacific University in 2015 and is currently a doctoral candidate at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles.

Jeanne-Marie Osterman is from Everett, Washington. She is the author of There’s a Hum (Finishing Line Press). A 2018 finalist for the Joy Harjo Poetry Award, her work has appeared in Bluestem, The Madison Review, SLAB, The Esthetic Apostle, and Cathexis Northwest, and will soon appear in Oregon State University’s 45th Parallel Magazine. Jeanne-Marie earned a BA from Gonzaga University and an MA in Linguistics from San Francisco State. She lives in New York City where she serves as Assistant Poetry Editor for Cagibi Literary Magazine.

Megan Peak received her M.F.A. in Poetry from Ohio State University, where she was former Poetry Editor at The Journal. Her first book of poetry, Girldom, won the 2018 Perugia Press Prize from Perugia Press, 2019 The John A. Robertson Award for Best First Book of Poetry from the Texas Institute of Letters, and was named a 2019 Eric Hoffer Book Award Finalist. She lives in Fort Worth, TX with her son, Auden.

Stan Sanvel Rubin’s work has appeared widely in magazines including Georgia Review, Poetry Northwest, Iowa Review, One, and most recently, The Shanghai Literary Review, Agni, the twenty-fifth anniversary issue of Atlanta Review (2019) and the anthology, For the Love of Orcas (2019). He received the 2018 Vi Gale award from Hubbub. His fourth full-length collection, There. Here, was published by Lost Horse Press. His third, Hidden Sequel, won the Barrow Street Poetry Book Prize. He lives on the northern Olympic Peninsula of Washington state.

Mariano Zaro is the author of four bilingual books of poetry. Most recently Tres letras/Three Letters (Walrus, Barcelona). His poems are included in anthologies and literary journals in USA, Mexico and Spain. He has translated American poets Philomene Long, Tony Barnstone and Sholeh Wolpé. His narrative received the 2004 Roanoke Review Short Fiction Prize and the 2018 Martha’s Vineyard Institute of Creative Writing Fiction Prize. Zaro hosts a series of video-interviews with prominent poets as part of the project Poetry.LA (www.Poetry.LA). Since 2016, he has served as a trustee of Beyond Baroque Literary Center (Venice, CA). He is a professor of Spanish at Rio Hondo Community College (Whittier, CA).