Dinosaur Nat'l

Joe Lennon

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Dinosaur Nat'l

Abstract
This is a collection of tyranno-lyrical poems which force voice onto various absences and absurdities encountered in the project of constructing or deconstructing an American identity. The collection uses as a unifying conceit the personification of the four letters which have been replaced by the apostrophe in the abbreviation “NAT'L.” Iona appears as a speaking character in many of the poems, pulling an “I” character into conversation with her. Iona and I’s conversations rely on and mangle the poetic language commonly used to identify the nation and what does or doesn’t belong to it—especially the language of folk songs and political speeches. They create and try to escape an alternative American landscape, where seemingly contiguous states slip over, under, and out of scale with each other, like failed attempts to colonize tectonic plates. A critical introduction to the poems analyzes the contemporary American relationship between lyrical and political speech by developing a poetics of apostrophe and conspiracy through the words and work of Martin Luther King, Jr., Joshua Oppenheimer, Alice Notley, and Laurie Anderson.

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In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

by
Joe Lennon
June 2015
Advisor: Eleni Sikelianos
Abstract

This is a collection of tyranno-lyrical poems which force voice onto various absences and absurdities encountered in the project of constructing or deconstructing an American identity. The collection uses as a unifying conceit the personification of the four letters which have been replaced by the apostrophe in the abbreviation “NAT’L.” Iona appears as a speaking character in many of the poems, pulling an “I” character into conversation with her. Iona and I’s conversations rely on and mangle the poetic language commonly used to identify the nation and what does or doesn’t belong to it—especially the language of folk songs and political speeches. They create and try to escape an alternative American landscape, where seemingly contiguous states slip over, under, and out of scale with each other, like failed attempts to colonize tectonic plates. A critical introduction to the poems analyzes the contemporary American relationship between lyrical and political speech by developing a poetics of apostrophe and conspiracy through the words and work of Martin Luther King, Jr., Joshua Oppenheimer, Alice Notley, and Laurie Anderson.
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This is for my real sisters Laura, Ginny, and Sarah.
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An Introduction:
Apostrophe and Conspiracy in the Visible Lyric

“N

No, no, we are not satisfied, and will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and
righteousness like a mighty stream.

Where should the missing quotation marks go in the sentence above? The words were spoken by Martin Luther King Jr. on August 28, 1963, during the speech that has come to be named for its famous refrain: “I have a dream.” Placing quotation marks at both ends of the sentence would signal our awareness of King’s command of this combination of words in that crucial historical moment, but it would not be entirely satisfying, since we can sense other sources of power here that demand attention. Quotation marks could also go around the second half of the sentence, “until justice rolls down. . .”, since this is King’s adaptation of Amos 5:24 (an apparent mixing and matching of words from various translations). Yet visually separating this biblical language off from the rest might have the side effect of implying that the first half of the sentence, lying outside the marks, is King’s original addition to the established text. But in fact the words “we are not satisfied, and will not be satisfied” can be heard as a condensation of a verbal tradition that by 1963 was already well-established in recorded popular song (and since then has only become more entrenched). Muddy Waters and Mississippi John Hurt are just two of many famous lyricists to have adapted some variation of the phrase “I can’t be satisfied” or “I’m never satisfied” for their performances. King’s doubled echo of this traditional blues/rock trope is
thus an ingenious quotation of multiple texts at once, a reminder to his audience of the seemingly endless deferrals of satisfaction and dignity put on record by American artists, which King recontextualizes as a choral cry for justice.

But the three sets of quotation marks we’ve imagined so far—one around the whole sentence, one around each of its two adaptations/paraphrases—still aren’t enough to illuminate all the voices at work here; the sum of King’s sentence is more sublime than its parts plus its whole. Our quotation marks around the language taken from Amos remind us to look back at its source, and in doing so we discover that almost the entire fifth chapter of Amos is itself in quotation marks. In the passage, God speaks directly to the people of Israel, warning them that because of their oppression of the poor and innocent, their “religious festivals” and “fellowship offerings” are hypocritical, and therefore utterly offensive to him. Amos 5:23-24 reads: “Away with the noise of your songs! / I will not listen to the music of your harps. / But let justice roll on like a river, / righteousness like a never-failing stream!” It turns out that the lines used by King for the second half of his sentence also form the second half of an idea in the source material. In Amos, they follow logically from God’s refusal to listen to the people’s music. God tells Israel that he is not pleased by ostentatious, audible professions of faith if they are not backed up by true intentions and concrete acts of righteousness. In King’s speech, the second half the biblical idea remains intact, but it is given a new logical antecedent—a repeated refrain from a history (and a probable future) of dissatisfied, defiant song. A refusal of music is replaced by a music of refusal.

And yet the word “replaced” isn’t quite right to describe what’s happening here, because to fully appreciate King’s rhetorical maneuver we must experience the “absent” biblical language (in which God dismisses the people’s songs as empty promises) and the “present” bluesy language (in which King re-calls-up the people’s songs against the nation’s empty promises) as they are placed together as competing and yet complimentary “mixed messages.” As a metaphor for this experience, as a way of describing its uncanniness, its rightness and also its dissonance,
we could say that we listen to one thing while we simultaneously read another (reading King’s speech, we are at the same time listening to Amos; listening to Amos, we are reading King). An appropriate sign for this might be a set of “flickering” or “oscillating” quotation marks around King’s sentence, to remind us that the language of Amos 5:23 which King doesn’t include in his speech is being reframed and recontextualized just as much as is the language from Amos 5:24 which he does include. In one “flickering” reading/hearing of King’s sentence, the God of Amos which rejects the people’s cynical musical offerings appears/speaks as the higher American conscience that King invokes against a nation which has “defaulted” on the promises of equality written in its Constitution. In another reading/hearing, though, God appears/speaks as the tyrannical American authority which “will not listen” to the desperately repeated cries of dissatisfaction rising up from its people. If we imagine these readings/hearings oscillating faster and faster, we experience a deranging image of the nature of power—of its continuity/inertia/monumentality as well as its instability/provisionality/forgetfulness. We hear/see power in a debate with itself, interrupting itself. We feel how this one sentence which comes almost exactly at the midpoint of King’s famous speech spins centrifugally and centripetally at the center of that speech’s power, throwing quotation marks inward and outward. In breaking up the sentence with marks to justify hearing and reading its constitutive voices, we also begin to justify the expansion of the speech act that belongs in quotes. Should we place another set of quotation marks out far beyond both ends of the sentence, to represent the missing remainder of the “I have a dream” speech, without which we could not fully and properly “hear” the echoes of this one sentence? But then why stop there? Perhaps another set of quotation marks should be placed further out, to represent the entire phantom body of American political speech of which this sentence is a part. Or further out still, to mark the limits of the dialogue, not pictured here, between people and their leaders throughout history.
The poems in *DINOSAUR NAT’L* were written in pursuit of a way of communicating that (not fully literarily and not fully figuratively) “misses the mark.” I feel a generative tension in comparing the sense of the adjective “missing” to the sense of the transitive verb “to miss.” To say something/someone is missing is to express positively its/his/her absence—to say it/she/he is not there. Implied in this statement is a sense that she/it/he should be there. This should is related somehow, but not exactly equivalent, to the meaning of the verb “to miss (something/someone).” To say I miss something or someone means I feel keenly the absence of that person or thing, and here the implication is that I wish that person or thing were present. What exactly is the relationship between the sense of it should be here when we say “something is missing” and the sense of I wish it were here in saying “I miss something”? One difference has already emerged in the way I’ve just said these two things; it’s much harder to express the second idea of “to miss someone/something” without positing a subject. And yet, can the true meaning of the phrase “something is missing” really be as objective as its expression makes it sound? There must, after all, be a consciousness present which notices the absence, and this consciousness must imagine something/someone who should fill the noticed absence (since without this imagination, there would be no sense of absence). This imagined “counter-absence” doesn’t necessarily have to be a specific person or thing (“Alice is missing”), but it does have to have at least one “double” characteristic—the characteristic of belonging in the place and time from which it is missing, and of belonging also to the imagination of the speaker who perceives that first belonging. Does this compound-sounding word “be-longing” help illuminate the connection between the sense of it should be here and the sense of I wish it were here? I think so; I think sparks are released whenever a concept is brought out to the edges of one word and makes the leap to another. I am interested in following the trajectory of the sparks as much as the trajectory of the concept.
Two words which relate, for me, to the word “missing” as it’s discussed above—and two words that have been important to me in thinking about *DINOSAUR NAT’L*—are *apostrophe* and *conspiracy*. By creating a frame in which both these words belong, I hope to call attention to a particular relationship between lyrical and political speech, and I hope also to go alongside and beyond terms with what I perceive as the bright and the dark sides of political-lyrical speech.

My working definition of the word “apostrophe” relies on a free slippage between its reference to the written mark and its reference to the rhetorical figure. The mark, whatever the confusion over its origin or its proper use in contemporary English, is at least a clearly defined visual object, instantly identifiable by its shape and its position. But the rhetorical figure is another matter. It has inspired a wide divergence of critical and theoretical opinions about its definition, with some attempting to narrow it down to a very specific move within a speech act, and some claiming for it nothing less than the whole realm of poetic endeavor. What brings critics who write about apostrophe together is their portrayal of the apostrophe as an especially odd character in the lineup of poetic tropes—a neglected, misunderstood, baffling, inscrutable, even stunted, misfit. John T. Braun, writing in 1971, places himself in the universalist camp by interpreting the very act of reading (or writing) any poem as “a threefold apostrophic gesture: turning aside, turning toward, returning” (9). He foregrounds the anxiety and absurdity that seem to perplex critical discussions of the apostrophe, spending most of the first chapter of his study eloquently and playfully admitting the limitations of his theory and methods, and dedicating the book to his family “who fortunately, did not take this too seriously” (5).
Johnathan Culler, in his 1981 essay “Apostrophe,” which became a major point of reference/contention for later critics, also stresses the critical conundrum presented by the apostrophe. He focuses on the traditional vocative “O” of the apostrophe, and begins with a working definition of the figure as a passionate address to “natural objects, artifacts, or abstractions” (138). He emphasizes the difficulty of maintaining critical composure in the face of such an “artificial” figure:

Apostrophes may complicate or disrupt the circuit of communication, raising questions about who is the addressee, but above all they are embarrassing: embarrassing to you and to me. Even an apostrophe delivered during a lecture on apostrophe, whose title might have prepared listeners for occasional apostrophes, will provoke titters. (135)

Culler argues that this embarrassment ultimately arises from a perceived dissonance between the apostrophe’s immense power and the primitive simplicity with which it acquires/displays that power. The forceful vocative of the apostrophe interrupts the “referential temporality” of the poem—the narration of events in memory, the narration of loss—with a “temporality of discourse,” an assertion that “the poem itself is to be the happening” (149-50). The opposition of these juxtaposed temporalities leaves the reader suspended in a “detemporalized immediacy,” “a now of discourse,” “the condition which Keats describes in ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’: a fictional time in which nothing happens but which is the essence of happening” (152).

If that is indeed the power of the apostrophe, Culler asks, why do critics tend to “avoid or repress” discussions of it, since, after all, “critics are generally delighted to proclaim that poetry transmutes the temporal into the eternal, life into art”? His answer is that the apostrophe appears to reduce the essence of poetry to an embarrassingly humble move:

Apostrophe must be repressed precisely because this high calling of poetry must not be seen to depend on a trope, an O. This trope proclaims its artificial character rather too obviously, and the craft of poetry would be demeaned if it were allowed that any versifier who wrote ‘O table’ were approaching the condition of sublime poet. (152)
Culler insists that this low-class awkwardness/distastefulness/tackiness is in fact the means of apostrophe’s power: “The very brazenness with which apostrophe declares its strangeness is crucial, an indication that what is at issue is not a predictable relation between a signifier and a signified, a form and its meaning, but the uncalculable force of an event” (152). And in the last pages of Culler’s essay, he suggests we explore the darker implications of that “force” by exploring the relationship between apostrophes to the dead and “prosopopoeia that give[s] the dead or inanimate a voice and make them speak” (153). He quotes Paul de Man, who recognizes “the latent threat that inhabits prosopopoeia, namely that by making the dead speak, the symmetrical structure of the trope implies, by the same token, that the living are struck dumb, frozen in their own death” (153). Culler sees Keats’ “This Living Hand” as an example of a poem which “exploit[s] this sinister reciprocity,” and which “knows its apostrophic time and the indirectly invoked presence to be a fiction and says so but enforces it as an event” (153-4). While Culler says that such an effect “should be celebrated,” his word choices show how thin the line is between the excitement of the flaunted “force” of an apostrophe and the terror of its sinister “enforcements.”

In “Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion” (1987), Barbara Johnson adopts Culler’s basic working definition of the trope—in Johnson’s words, “the direct address of an absent, dead, or inanimate being by a first-person speaker,” and, like Culler, she sees apostrophe as a powerful figure “almost synonymous with the lyric voice” (185). But Johnson’s essay shows how the trope that Culler refers to as the “embodiment of poetic pretension” betrays an uncomfortable political reality when the bodies called out to (and thus called into question) are that of a mother and her dead child (143). Analyzing the Gwendolyn Brooks poem “The Mother,” in which the speaker apostrophizes her aborted children, Johnson asks,

Who, in the final analysis, exists by addressing whom? The children are a rhetorical extension of the mother, but she, as the poem’s title indicates, has no existence apart from her relation to them. It begins to be clear that the speaker
has written herself into a poem that she cannot get out of without violence. . . It becomes impossible to tell whether language is what gives life or what kills. (192)

Apostrophe, argues Johnson, itself embodies the disturbing undecidability that “is the political” (194):

For if apostrophe is said to involve language’s capacity to give life and human form to something dead and inanimate, what happens when those questions are literalized? What happens when the lyric speaker assumes responsibility for producing the death in the first place, but without being sure of the precise degree of human animation that existed in the entity killed? What is the debate over abortion about, indeed, if not the question of when, precisely, a being assumes a human form? (189)

Johnson casts further doubt on the rhetoric of political/aesthetic “autonomy” by making more explicit the idea suggested by Culler that there is something shockingly infantile about the apostrophe’s calling-out for presence:

If apostrophe is structured like a demand, and if demand articulates the primal relation to the mother as a relation to the Other, then lyric poetry itself—summed up in the figure of apostrophe—comes to look like the fantastically intricate history of endless elaborations and displacements of the single cry, ‘Mama!’ (199)

She concludes: “Rhetorical, psychoanalytical, and political structures are profoundly implicated in one another. The difficulty in all three would seem to reside in the attempt to achieve a full elaboration of any discursive position other than that of child” (199).

After considering Culler’s and Johnson’s brilliant and widely resonant studies of the apostrophe, it’s useful to be reminded that their basic definition of the word may be a bit unscientific, and therefore occasionally misleading. J. Douglas Kneale produces several counterexamples to refute Culler’s assertion that critics have repressed or resisted talking about apostrophe, and he claims that Culler’s mistake comes from a confusion of apostrophe with two other rhetorical figures, prosopopoeia and simple address. Kneale insists on restricting the definition of apostrophe to what Latin writers called *aversio*—“diversion” or “turning”—a meaning closer to its Greek roots *apo-* (away) and *strophe* (turn). Kneale quotes a fascinating definition of apostrophe from Quintilian—“the diversion of our words to address some person
other than the judge”—then summarizes: “The positing of what later rhetoricians would call the ‘proper’ or intended hearer, and the oratorical diversion from that person to another person, constitute the two chief characteristics of the figure” (143). For Kneale, then, true apostrophe can only come when another listener is addressed after an initial listener has already been established within the speech act. Kneale acknowledges that there is a “close relation between apostrophe and prosopopoeia—by addressing ‘man or city or place or object’ the orator implicitly or explicitly invests the addressee with the animate faculty of hearing” (144). But he maintains that there is something at stake in keeping the ideas separate: “By describing apostrophe as a turning from an original (implicit or explicit) addressee to a different addressee, from the proper or intended hearer to another, we emphasize the figure as a movement of voice, a translation or a carrying over of address” (147). He shows how closely tracking these turnings, especially in a poem with many of them (he uses The Prelude as his main example), allows us to experience how “apostrophe. . .represent[s] something which discourse cannot comfortably assimilate: not voice as such, however, but what I shall call the passing of voice, its want or lack, even its sudden removal” (142). Kneale doesn’t use the word “violence,” but his focus on the sudden sense of loss the reader feels in the wake of an apostrophe recalls Johnson’s image of the poet trapped in her own poem, facing death wherever she turns: “The sudden removing of voice is related to a silencing of voice, an overdetermined muteness that is ‘redoubled and redoubled’” (152). I think Kneale is right to point out the distinction between a conversational “turn” to a different addressee within a poem and the “turn” to an absent listener which a lyric poem seems to imply by its very existence (a distinction ignored by Culler and Johnson). What I find interesting, though, is that all three critics conclude their essays by suggesting that there is something in the very basic mechanic/organic operations of the apostrophe (whether they define it narrowly or broadly) something sinister, something disturbing, something that implicates the poet who wields this apparently voice-giving, life-giving trope in a larger pattern of violence and silence.
It is this apparently invisible aspect of the apostrophe—its counterintuitive, yet intuited darkness—that makes it an especially useful talking point from which to launch a conversation about contemporary American reality. Some remarks by the filmmaker Joshua Oppenheimer get to the heart of the concrete spookiness of this reality. Oppenheimer’s 2013 film *The Act of Killing* focuses on Anwar Congo, one of the many men paid by the Suharto regime of Indonesia to carry out brutal murders of political opponents during the 1960s. Oppenheimer invites Congo to direct and star in filmed reenactments of interrogations and killings carried out by Congo and his friends. At first Congo is boastful of his role in the violence, and his restagings reveal his obsession with the confident, flashy style of Hollywood gangster movies. As Oppenheimer’s film-outside-the-films continues, however, Congo begins to express vague doubts about the rightness of his actions. The climax of *The Act of Killing* comes when Congo plays the role of one of his victims and acts out that person’s death. This experience seems to depress and disturb Congo, and when he returns to the rooftop where he tortured and strangled hundreds of men, he seems to lose control, and retches several times.

Oppenheimer, speaking with Laura Bennett, recounts how his experience with Congo, instead of convincing him that the men who committed this genocide were psychopaths, inhuman and incapable of feeling, instead convinced him that they were extreme representatives of the universal human traits of denial and fear: “I started to intuit that perhaps the boasting wasn’t a lack of conscience but the opposite. . . And because it is terrifying, it serves to keep everybody else in the society too afraid to challenge that story.” He goes on to make a bold articulation (repeated in very similar words in his director’s commentary track on the DVD) of a theory of human conscience: “That allowed me to see what has become the central message of the film: that somehow everybody already knows everything. . .Everybody knows what is wrong.” In an interview with Jess Melvin, Oppenheimer expands the notion of that “everybody” to include
himself and Western culture in general, and by reminding us of Indonesia and Southeast Asia’s role in the world economy, shows how we belong to the same society of fear and denial he depicts in his film:

Everything in our daily lives—our clothes, our food—is haunted by the suffering of the people who produced them. The people who made the computer on which I am typing these words live in dormitories with netting on their balconies so that they don’t jump off in despair, so terrible and hopeless are their working and living conditions. . . We are, in this sense, all guests at a cannibalistic feast. We may not be as close to the slaughter as Anwar and his friends, but we are at the table. And we know this, yet we prefer not to think about it—or to reassure ourselves that by buying organic food we are not buying into the system. But, as Tolstoy pointed out, the system by which we live and feed ourselves depends on other peoples’ suffering. . . I think something inside of all of us dies when we kill, and it also dies when we depend, for our survival, on the suffering of others. This is tragic, sad, painful, even nauseating.

Oppenheimer’s comments are striking in that they associate several strong images of bodily sensation—the sight of suicide nets (and the weight of the bodies they repel by design), the taste and scent of human meat, the feeling of pain and nausea—with the objects (clothes, food, computers) that we interact with daily. These traumatic overstimulations (“over” in the sense that they seem to transcend the immediate objects at hand) are summed up in the idea that we are “haunted”—an idea which suggests an extrasensory presence, while also suggesting the ghostly shape/shiver/shimmer of a human body.

What is the relationship of this “haunting” to the figure of apostrophe? We are accustomed to say that by calling out to inanimate objects we effect a “personification”—in other words, that by speaking to things we confer on/attribute to them the human ability to listen and (at least potentially) respond. But Oppenheimer suggests that our conscience works by somehow sensing that things are already “peopled”—by recognizing in/?around/?through? things the human attribute of suffering. If that’s true, could it be another reason why late 20th century critics have felt something sinister in the apostrophe? Is the apostrophe an especially acute experience of the pain of our apparently moral acts (our conferrals of “rights” or “dignity”) being revealed to us

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(through the response of an actor we previously did not see or hear) as violent attacks, as denials of dignity? Does the apostrophe remind us of the shame and defensiveness we feel when the things we believe are ours “turn” on us? Of the shock of division in a body that feels it is a life-giving agent when it knows the opposite is true? Barbara Johnson asks:

> Are the politics of violence already encoded in rhetorical figures as such? In other words, can the very essence of a political issue—an issue like, say, abortion—hinge on the structure of a figure? Is there any inherent connection between figurative language and questions of life and death, of who will wield and who will receive violence in a given human society? (184).

If Johnson has proved that the structure of the apostrophe does encode an asymmetry of power in the political realm, a further question is how exactly that asymmetry is encoded in the structure of our bodies. If Oppenheimer’s claim that “somehow everybody already knows everything” is valid, it seems like it would be worthwhile to know more about the mechanics/organics of that “somehow.” Through which of our parts are we experiencing the whole? By which of our parts are we denying it?

When we pursue that question, it draws us into uncertainty and anxiety over the distinction between imagination and reality. Political speech (and here I’m defining political speech generously as speech which attempts to effect political change, though it’s obvious that much of what could be called political speech is designed to maintain the status quo), requires an act of the imagination akin to apostrophe. This can be seen if we ask: In the “I have a dream” speech, who is King speaking to? Of course, he is speaking to the crowd, but he is also speaking over their heads, literally, down the National Mall to the Capitol, and figuratively, to an America who has “given the Negro a bad check” but is not beyond redemption, an America that with King’s words will be “remind[ed] . . . of the fierce urgency of now.” In one sense, then, we could say that King is personifying the nation, imagining a future ideal America that “will rise up and live” according to the words (its own written words, after all) which King is repeating back to it. Yet it doesn’t feel completely right to say that King is “personifying” America, conferring upon it
a personhood it doesn’t already have. His speech would be pointless if it were not spoken in front
of thousands (and within earshot and view of millions) of Americans, people who are creating
and must create the America King invokes, who in a sense are already that better, if terrifying,
angel known as America. The nation, for King, is an abstract concept that is nonetheless by its
very nature “peopled.” For his speech to have force, he and his listeners must believe that the
America he speaks to is both real and imagined, both sentient being and twinkle in the eye. Of
course, many of his listeners did not (and still do not) recognize King’s America as the real
America, did not believe that his image of the nation is one that they (as representative of the
nation) were required to respond to. From their perspective, King appeared (and appears) as
something of a lunatic, talking to a phantom, or at best (or at worst?) only to himself. Believers in
King’s words are in the difficult logical position of insisting that he is talking to a real and at the
same time imagined America, while his disbelievers can dismiss his words with the common
phrase “it’s only in his imagination.” This phrase has power because most people believe that
there is such a thing as an overactive imagination, that someone can perceive reality incorrectly,
that this misperception can do great harm.

One way to discuss the bizarre and risky situation of a political speaker (or of a poet who
wishes to address an unseen reality) is with the word conspiracy. The Online Etymology
Dictionary reveals the Latin roots of conspire: “literally ‘to breathe together,’ from com- ‘together’
+ spirare ”to breathe.’ Or perhaps the notion is ‘to blow together’ musical instruments, i.e., ‘To
sound in unison.’” This literal definition makes conspiracy sound positive, something closer in
meaning to cooperation or symphony, words which sound sweeter to the democratic ear. Of
course, standard meanings of the word are more sinister; we use it to describe a plot against
someone or something, involving many people, meticulous planning, and high secrecy. It could
refer to the crime of planning to overthrow a government—but to contemporary Americans,
whose government is one of the biggest, most powerful organization on the planet, conspiracy
most often suggests a plot carried out by the government against its people. It appears often in the collocation conspiracy theory, a phrase which conjures up two sets of images—first, of the conspirators themselves: shadowed men in suits, sitting around smoky tables, planning the assassinations of JFK and MLK, the 9/11 attacks, and vast cover-ups of alien landings—and second, of the hollow-eyed crackpots, hunched over their computers, or holed up in remote compounds in Montana, who believe in and perpetuate these outlandish (or are they?) theories.

These are stereotypes—and that’s where their power comes from. On one hand, they are so exaggerated and easy to satire that they discredit or deflect supportive scrutiny from a speaker who presents legitimate concern at the large structural dangers of our political systems. On the other hand, they represent our legitimate fear of an overactive imagination, one that might see large structural danger personified in a government clerk in a suit, a bank teller, a neighbor staying up late, and then lead the over-imaginer to carry out acts of violence against such personified people. The successful political-lyric apostropher has to develop her/his gift of identifying a conspiracy—a shared breath—where others could not or would not see one. At the same time, he/she has to remain on guard against ways her/his individual voice may be conspiring with forces that turn individuals into instruments of conformist violence.

Having followed the word apostrophe through more abstract associations, I’m ready to turn back to its most obvious referent—the little dot with a tail that floats above gaps in our written words. Elizabeth S. Sklar, charting the decline and predicting the eventual disappearance of this “crooked mark” in 1976, anticipates Johnathan Culler’s description of the rhetorical trope, and suggests that these figures which share a name also share a shady reputation. “Historically the apostrophe has spent the majority of its existence on the periphery of respectability,” writes Sklar. “While grammar texts are finally in agreement about the use of the apostrophe, it is regularly embarrassed in public places” (175). Sklar’s description of the apostrophe is gleefully abusive; she calls it “the stepchild of English orthography. . .a grammatical anomaly, a vestigial case
marker—appropriately shaped like an appendix” (to me it also resembles an amphibious human embryo) (175). While I enjoy Sklar’s wry takedown of the logic of the apostrophe, and I agree with her that this “antique” mark is likely to “join the flatiron, the washboard, and the footwarmer as a relic of times past,” my agreement with her is reluctant—not out of any loyalty to the grammar textbooks, or to what she calls a “more formal and elegant stage of our language,” but out of appreciation for how our language has preserved the blatant physical presence of a mark of omission (183). I like how the sensory disconnect of the apostrophe, which Sklar—extending her stepchild metaphor—reminds us “is usually seen but not heard,” can be seen as a metaphor for elements of reality that are there, directly in front of us, and yet are still being missed, perhaps because we are using the wrong faculties of perception (175). Finally, I’m intrigued by how we’ve mostly forgotten the historical relationship between the apostrophe’s two main contemporary purposes (to mark possession, and to mark where letters have been dropped from a word), allowing us to speculate on different possible relationships of omission to possession which may, in turn, give us new insights on the relationship between censorship and nation-building, between violence and poem-building, and between elements of other vast conspiracies.
‘T’ ON ‘A’

“He had a family” “but he’d” “fought families” “He had a family” “he’d been made to” “fight families” “How can we” “compete” “with that?” “Pierced their physical” “centers” “pierced” “Is that” “the only” “reality?”

The first epigraph to DINOSAUR NAT’L is from Alice Notley’s “White Phosphorus,” a poem which comprises the second half of her 1990 chapbook Homer’s Art. The poem is an elegy for Notley’s brother Al, who, as she explains in her essay “The ‘Feminine’ Epic,” was a sniper in Vietnam, returned home with severe post-traumatic stress disorder, sought psychiatric help and seemed to be improving, only to die of a drug overdose one week after leaving rehab (171-2). In that essay, Notley mentions “White Phosphorus” only briefly, as a step in her development of the measure (“long lines divided into phrases set off by quotation marks”) that she would use more famously in her book-length epic The Descent of Alette (173). Alette is undoubtedly Notley’s “great” poem, but “White Phosphorus” channels many ideas and energies that emerge in that longer poem into a fierce, succinct burst, and I find it more powerful in many ways. In just eleven pages, the poem tracks Notley’s direct, autobiographical anger as it turns sharply to confront more and more formidable targets: the “government of men” that sent her brother and thousands of other men to war; the abuse of the planet that is turning “Mother Nature” into a “Mother of Numbers”; the received forms of epic poetry and history that honor “Kings” and “Warriors” but exclude the female; and finally the mask of conformity and mindless excess, the “too much of everything” that is hiding our true selves.

I want to avoid saying too much about the significance of the “quotation mark measure” that is the most obvious formal feature of “White Phosphorus” and Alette, especially since Notley has already said quite a bit about it herself. In her “Author’s Note” to Alette, she discusses both
the prosodic effect of the form, as well as its importance in setting the poem somewhere in the space between the written and spoken word:

The quotation marks make the reader slow down and silently articulate—not slur over mentally—the phrases at the pace, and with the stresses, I intend. They also distance the narrative from myself, the author: I am not Alette. Finally they may remind the reader that each phrase is a thing said by a voice: this is not a thought, or a record of thought-process, this is a story, told. (n.p.)

It’s curious that while Notley acknowledges that she is speaking to a reader, someone who will “silently articulate” the words of the text, she reserves for the text the power of a spoken voice. It’s also curious that she asserts her authorial intention through the sound of the words (the “pace” and “stresses” which she presumably hears in her own head) while insisting that she (the author) is not the speaker. Applying Notley’s comments about Alette to “White Phosphorus,” which uses essentially the same measure, raises some doubts about her claims as to what purpose the measure serves. Identifying the speaker in “White Phosphorus” completely with the author would be too reductive, and yet by naming the author’s brother Al in the poem, the speaker clearly positions herself much closer to the author than does Alette, who journeys through a more obviously allegorical realm. What significantly distances Alette from Alice is the dream-like narration of that journey, not the quotation marks. Likewise, it’s that narrative form that makes Alette “a story” rather than “a thought, or a record of thought-process,” not the quotation marks. That can be seen in “White Phosphorus,” which in fact does read much more like a “thought,” a record of the speaker processing the death of Al though various abstractions, ending with the speaker’s revelation “‘I know things only’ ‘this way’ ‘My brother’ ‘is Owl.’” (23).

I bring up these doubts about Notley’s claims not to question her understanding of her own measure—I’m sure she is well aware of the potential contradictions her poetry and her commentary embodies—but to show my admiration of the brilliant and terrifying inclusiveness of Notley’s poems, and to shift attention toward aspects of her measure that relate to the more “sinister” implications of the apostrophe which I discussed earlier. In the 1980 essay Dr. Williams’
*Heiresses*, in which she analyzes the anxieties of writing under the influence of William Carlos Williams, Notley defines herself in restless, physical terms prescient of the work she would write a decade later: “I am a tone of voice, warming, shifting, pausing, changing, including, asserting, exulting, including, turning & including” (n. p.). The pairing of “turning & including” suggests another twist on the concept of apostrophe. If an apostrophe is a “turning away,” then we might classify it as an exclusion, in that it seems to potentially sideline the original addressee. But of course a turning away implies a turning toward, and thus (again potentially) the *inclusion* of a new addressee in the group of listeners. These potentialities depend on the attitude and the purpose of the speaker (which could be signaled, for example, by the speaker turning to a third party and saying something like, “And you there, join us,” or on the contrary something like “Whew, I’m glad to see you, come rescue me from this boring conversation”). But if the speaker’s intentions are unclear, then the interpretation of an observer is all we have to go on.

By placing each phrase in “White Phosphorus” and *Alette* in its own set of quotation marks, Notley offers (at least) two ways of reading the poems as series of apostrophes. If we imagine the poems as spoken by one speaker, we can read the space between each quotation as an apostrophe performed by the speaker as he/she turns to face a new addressee. This interpretation puts the reader in the roles of multiple, maybe hundreds, of listeners. If, however, we imagine the poems as spoken by many speakers (potentially as many speakers as there are quotations), the spaces can be read as (silent) apostrophes performed by the reader/listener as she/he turns to face new speakers. In either interpretation, there is the question of what becomes of the multiple speakers or listeners after they have been “turned away from.” Have they been *included* or *excluded*? Should we imagine them as still in the room, still gathered around the storyteller’s fire, or as banished into the darkness (or simply forgotten)?

Notley’s work invites us to consider the dangers in misunderstanding and/or misusing either possibility. Exclusion of voices or listeners sounds like a bad thing, of course, and in her
essay “Thinking and Poetry” Notley explicitly worries about unique voices getting lost in the mass of “stuff” available to a modern consumer (her language suggests the way the internet makes everything more available and also more ignorable):

Whatever mechanism preserved much of the best for use in the future is breaking down under the pressure of the existence of so much stuff, text, ‘thought,’ ‘communication’; whatever is different or presently unappreciated may be smothered. Who will find it? Who at this point ‘knows’ anything, reading so much? (159)

This comment echoes the final section of “White Phosphorus,” in which Notley laments modern culture’s glut of “magic” products which are really just signs of our conformity. The passage begins, “‘Mask now’ ‘is complies’ ‘complies’ ‘with the forms (too much of everything, / everywhere’)” and ends, “‘everything’ ‘made the same’ ‘too many names’ ‘too much knowledge’” (22). In between, the refrain “too many” / “too much” appears thirteen times, and along the way, “poems” and “books” are lumped in with “cheap roses” and “kleenexes,” reflecting Notley’s double-edged fear: first, that art forms which used to hold unique cultural artifacts are becoming indistinguishable from mass-produced forms, and second, that genuinely great art which is ahead of its time will be buried in the ever-refreshing news feed of the present, never to emerge.

Notley’s strings of apostrophes create a quick rhythm that evokes a relentless turnover of new voices, new ideas, new things, and if we hear each quotation spoken in a different voice, we feel the “‘Stupor’ ‘distress’” of a culture of unending distractions, and we also sense the passing of numerous unique voices which we do not have time to mourn before turning to the next voice.

If all that’s a bit too upsetting, it may be tempting to interpret Notley’s apostrophes as including gestures, as turns which, instead of banishing the previous voice, welcome each new voice into a common choir with all the voices that came before. But this interpretation sounds less positive when we consider that inclusiveness, or at least a perceived inclusiveness, is one of the most frightening attributes of the character of the Tyrant in The Descent of Alette. In the final book of the poem, as the Tyrant shows Alette around his museum-house, he explains to her that
the landscapes she has been journeying through are just parts of his own body; the subway is his heart, and his thoughts “make a screen in’ ‘the sky’ ‘above the world” (129). He tells Alette, “‘all’ ‘exists in me,” and he warns her that by destroying him she would be destroying all good things in the world, including herself: “He placed a golden’ ‘Buddha-mask’ / ‘on his face’...’ ‘Am I not this too?’ ‘Or,’ / ‘for that matter,’ ‘am I not you too?’ ‘What would be’ ‘left of you?’ // ‘If you killed me?” (125-6). He believes that he rules (and is) the world by consensus: “The order’ / ‘of things’ ‘has’ ‘its own wisdom’ ‘formed by everyone’s’ ‘will” (139). The extent of his egomania is such that even when Alette finally remembers her name and realizes that there is more to the world than the Tyrant, he hears her screamed accusations only as a “beautiful” lament for the sadness of the world he has created and come to identify himself with (136). The Tyrant is a reminder, then, for the single reader who embodies the chorus of voices in Alette, that the pleasure, and the power, of speaking for a group can devolve into the belief that you have fashioned a single cohesive identity from the individuals in the group, that the members of the group are your constituents, that you are perfectly equivalent to the sum of their voices.

As I’ve said, “White Phosphorus” can be read as a thought process, a working-through of the ideas and feelings that Notley experiences in the wake of her brother’s death. In “The ‘Feminine’ Epic,” Notley says that in the weeks before he OD’d, Al “found out a lot about himself, managed, in his mind, to give some of the guilt back to the national community, where it belonged” (172). Notley recapitulates this process for herself in the poem, going beyond the “national community” and discovering even more universal structures and systems of domination to which to give back her guilt and anger. Considering how serious and how sophisticated this thought process is, one of the audacious, uncanny thrills of the poem is where it ends—on a pun. In the last section of the poem, after Notley has decried the “too much knowledge” of modern culture, she acknowledges something that’s always painful for a poet to acknowledge: that words themselves are empty and can be put into the service of unimaginative, oppressive powers. Yet
almost immediately, she decides that there is a power that can fill words with meaning—the body, the soul: “A war ‘more news, more / to know about, to know’ . . . / ‘Know what news knows’ / ‘What words know’ ‘Do words know?’ “No they don’t, only flesh knows only / soul knows” ‘in the words” (22). This breakthrough allows her to imagine that a living presence can inhabit a dead person, just as it can fill empty words. These two analogous ideas align perfectly in a homophonic play on her brother’s name: “But my brother now is / nature, pure nature’ . . . ‘Or I have dreamed so’ ‘Owl, / not an albatross’ . . . ‘I have twice’ / ‘dreamed that Al’ ‘is an owl” (22). Over the next several lines, as Notley describes her dreams of Al appearing to her as an owl, she repeats the name “Al” and the word “owl” several times in close succession, as though she is depending on the similar sound of the words to convince her that what she is seeing can be real. By the very last line of the poem, her senses have convinced her mind that what seems like only a play on words carries with it an essential, necessary truth: “I know things only’ ‘this way’ ‘My brother’ ‘is Owl” (23).

Notley employs a similar name-pun in several other poems, most notably in Alette, where she literally and metaphorically extends the “owl”-“Al” play she had discovered in “White Phosphorus.” As she explains in “The ‘Feminine’ Epic”: “My brother’s name was Al, mine is Alice: ‘Alette’ is more like ‘girl-owl.’ In another poem I call it ‘owl-appendage,’ as ‘-ette’ appendes. In a world of war like the one we live in, woman is appendage” (178). This quote shows how seriously and symbolically Notley takes these plays on words. Perhaps the best example to show the metaphysical mechanism at work in Notley’s name-puns is in her book Close to Me & Closer . . . (The Language of Heaven). As the poem’s speaker (unnamed though clearly a stand-in for the author) engages in conversation with her dead father, another voice interrupts:

If there is no time, what is there. . .
Amy is here, says a black voice. . .
I know no Amy, is Amy
Aimé? Aimée?
In that case . . . I know
many Amys. . .  
Can there only be one?  
Amy is here. . .A me is here. . . (42)

In these lines, we follow a bisyllabic sound, “Amy/Aimé/Aimée/A me,” as the speaker attempts to fit it into various visual and mental forms. The singular, feminine name “Amy” becomes the masculine and then the feminine singular forms of the French word for “loved.” Once in that androgynous state, it can be transferred to the whole group of people loved by the speaker, who then immediately questions whether the soul transplant she’s performed is possible, or right. After reacknowledging the independent force of the name “Amy,” the speaker settles on “A me is here,” suggesting either that “Amy,” the other, has inhabited the speaker, or that the other has passed on, leaving the speaker alone again. But even if the latter is true, the speaker (and the reader) has seen/heard the other pass through the speaker, showing/telling her a way to form a hybrid being, one that is not entirely the speaker nor entirely the other. This pun-spirit is slightly goofy, more than slightly unsettling, and perhaps a bit embarrassing to call out to in the middle of a “serious” poem. Yet I think what Notley discovers in her puns is something richer than the primitive impulse which Barbara Johnson worried characterized the apostrophe, “the fantastically intricate history of endless elaborations and displacements of the single cry, ‘Mama!’” Notley’s “peopled” sounds are childlike only in their directness and openness; they are never innocent, never ignorant of how their voices enter and bend another’s body.
In “Falling,” the middle track on her 2010 album *Homeland*, Laurie Anderson sings:

“Americans, uprooted / blow with the wind / But they feel the truth / if it touches them.” These lines are a great advertisement for Anderson’s entire body of work over the last few decades. As in many of Anderson’s pieces, this matter-of-fact statement is delivered in a tone of voice that’s hard to read—vaguely threatening, vaguely disinterested—a voice that sounds authoritative, informative, and yet tends to repeat itself, alternately adorning its clichés with infectious pop beats and chalkboard-scrapping dissonance. In other words, a very creepy voice. In “Falling,” Anderson is commenting on her countrymen’s distance and complacency in the face of the suffering of the rest of the world. The claim that Americans “feel the truth / if it touches them” recalls the belief that in the aftermath of the violence “brought home” by the 9/11 attacks, Americans might wake up to the devastating effects of their policies and the true costs of their lifestyle. In one sense, Anderson sings these words ironically, since, by 2010, it was easy to wonder whether Americans had even opened an eye while hitting the snooze button. And yet Anderson’s career seems to be driven by a belief that Americans can in fact be “touched,” and her work has been a search for ever-new ways of doing so. The assumption behind her multi-modal, multi-media performances seems to be that the most truthful “touching” has to occur through a direct address to multiple dimensions of the human being. Like Notley, she is willing to keep “turning away” from comforting definitions of the self, in order to keep her listeners/readers off-balance, attuned to their own internal oscillations. I admire both women’s fearlessness in combining their vocal DNA with large, scary abstractions and walking natural disasters. Their works are monstrous conspiracies that give me breath and take it away.

I want to end this introduction by playing for you part of Anderson’s 1981 hit, “O Superman (For Massenet).” But as you can see, when I try to recreate as best as I can on the page the experience of listening to this strange song and its relentless power, something’s missing...
“O Superman. / O judge. / O Mom and Dad. / Mom and Dad. / O Superman. / (ha ha
O judge. / O Mom and Dad. / Mom and Dad. / Hi. / I'm not home right now. / But if
you want to leave a message, just start talking at the sound of the tone. / Hello? /
ha ha
This is your Mother. / Are you there? / Are you coming home? / Hello? / Is anybody
home? / Well, you don't know me, / but I know you. / And I've got a message / to give
ha ha
to you. / Here come the planes. / So you better get ready. / Ready to go. / You can come
ha ha
as you are, / but pay as you go. / Pay as you go. / And I said: OK. / Who is this really? /
ha ha
And the voice said: / This is the hand, / the hand that takes. / This is the hand, / the
ha ha
hand that takes. / This is the hand, / the hand that takes. / Here come the planes. /
ha ha
They're American planes. / Made in America. / Smoking or non-smoking? / And the
ha ha
voice said: / Neither snow nor rain / nor gloom of night / shall stay these couriers / from
ha ha
the swift completion / of their appointed rounds. . .” (ha ha)
DINOSAUR
NAT'L
Blues/Justification
for the Muse

One Sister have I in our house—
And one a hedge away.

One Sister have I in our house—
And one a hedge away.

There's only one recorded,
But both belong to me.
“He had a family” “but he’d” “fought families”

Alice Notley

A city in trouble has reason
to welcome the coming of strangers.

Euripedes, Ion

Bama: “How do a double-jointed man look, boss?”

Alan: “Well he doesn’t look any way, it’s just what he can do with his strength, he...

“Well boss, what can he do with his strength?”
Apostrophe

If San Antonio can call its ditch a river, liberty’s fringes are mine too. They belong to you.

As bad as the letter O looks as it cuts back to a point, then bulks out, rounding off to take in a cornered state, the lake

I take you to when I need to talk outside of New Braunfels looks worse, like the county’s neglected it.

I need to talk but I can’t take you there this time. Can you find it on your own? You’ll know you’ve gone too far.
Here to Do a Few Tunes Between Homicides

I’m alone in the parking lot atop Pikes Peak. Historically, people who stand here get very patriotic or paranoid, or both, and the two of us are no exception.

She’s my little sparrow and we imagine god as reptilian and with an excess of grace. We dive and I call her Tall Standard of the Carpathians, Pearl That Was Here.

We are trampling over- zealously, probably, on the trumpet that should sound so we’ll know where we’ll be when it doesn’t anymore. This bar where it’s always Christmas.

I had plenty of sisters already but she flung into the proceedings a golden apple, refused to give up her seat on the sea, and believed in herself. I figured one more sister couldn’t hurt.

Some people do not like Hoover, Coolidge, or Glen Canyon dams, in that order. We stand not exactly by them, Iona and I, and take turns saying You didn’t build this.

No, you didn’t build this. That’s what I just said. You didn’t build this. So then we agree, because that’s what I just said, that you didn’t build this. I know. I know you didn’t.

And it would go on like this, until one of our tongues just stuck that way forever, if it weren’t for the others down there dancing.
They have been seen as chained, as refugees, as a marketplace, as a generic multitude, as willing companions. As a hen with chicks, as coping with sorrow. As quartz and fennel, as a procession to a grave, shallow-cut, in peat. As blue coyotes. As a detachment split off from the body of the army. To lure an enemy into ambush. As seven dogs an orphan girl raised. As orphans. As traitors. As seven boys who neglected their ceremonial duties: reading, repeating to the river at sundown, “Wherever you go, I go.” For the Greeks, they were sisters, the daughters of Atlas, suicides, hunted and lost. For us—

I pick up a postcard from a rotating rack that reads WYOMING AT NIGHT. Except for the words, the rectangle is completely black. Creating a nation has always meant staring at a shape and seeing something new there. Having to avert one’s eyes toward a story others couldn’t put together.

A series of brown signs on the highway say DINOSAUR NATL.

I find Iona because she’s already there. As a pun, as a human. As Orion’s club. As someone it seems like I can talk to. I haven’t talked to anyone for a long time now. The motherland is a murderess. The fatherland’s empty. I had a brother who I know existed once; he fought on our side, for our freedom. I have a picture of him in her arms. Iona’s all that’s left. As in air. As apple pie. As a last prank the high schoolers shifted the letters around on the wheeled marquee with its arrow still on, pointing, using light. As I went walking. As a citizen. As scattered as the Pleiades will be in 250 million years, they will not be so far away that they won’t make an idea, a wild animal. So far away from each other, at least.
**American Folk Music**

I pay for gas
I get a voice. “For roaming the earth
and patrolling it.”

If I build my own city in speech, I shouldn’t have to
apologize in verse
for burning it.

Relax, I’m immolating
only the first pressing. It’s ethical,
only for light and meat
to read the more bodiless
echoes by. I can tell you fear
with somewhere denser
and denser
but getting there what I might do with
no telling. Hush,

my daddy took me driving by night in zero-
deer country. Taught me to use every part
of an absence.

I have an invisible co-worker
cut out for me “sad inroad
on a small circle” and

I follow. My first step.
Iona (Origin Myth)

As I went walking
I saw a sign there

And on the sign it
Said "O TRESSP SSING."

But on the other side
It didn't say nothing

That side was made
For you and me.
Iona (Origin Myth)

It is not enough for two people
to meet together for there
to be a missing sister between them.
She has to be there
totally already.

Partially buried
pithouse with its adjoining storerooms,
three-wolf
full moon sweatshirt—

these are not some isolated designs
but are repeated
across the southwest.

I had trouble seeing
the dwellings for the cliffs near Four Corners. My camera detected a faint smile there
apo "from,
away from; after;
in descent from," com-
ounds, "from, asunder, away,
off; finishing, completing; ceas-
ing from; back again," from st-
rophe, originally "a turning,"
in reference sung while
turning from stre-
phein "to turn,
"from streb(h)-
"to wind, stro-
phaligs , "wh-
irl, whirl-
wind,"

stre-
blos

"tw-
isted,"
strem-
ma "that
which [is is]
twi[nn]ed"
Apostrophe

You are looking at an old gold watch or an eclipse-shaped map of the world.
You are getting very sleepy.

In the center of the map, as promised you, a country.
It appears to disappear or reappear others.
Relevance appears at its center, at the sound of your cathedral’s ribs, which are locked away from its heart, in flight on its outside in full view of others, something like a pump.
The people are wandering, looking for a place to sleep.

As promised, the treads of a tank.
At the sound not ready to snap out of it is how things happen.

You step to your left and the tank pivots to your right, as if to go around you.
You step to your right, blocking it. In response, it pivots to your left. You step to your left again.
The trauma everyone else stands for review is an ear now and the anthem lines its interior. Larger by little ambitions: that’s how a chorus secures its pints of charm on the blood-spattered aloe.

When I count to torture the faces of my voice, in the words, other words it forms
to allow discovery, even those others
will disappear.

What background abuse,
what blue is truth?
Truth is brutality
you see obviously
to a conclusion, in front of you,
when I count to the bones
of your back
locked on what I know
of the disputed hand
that holds you will hear only
my voice. You are coming out of the hell
of the walls
slowly now, open
your eyes. You are looking at
a rope.
A loop.
The rope pulls you
and the hot pink
to your left pivots
the tank to your left
again, you step to your left
again.
You circle the world
like this
when I say so and return
to a brush
without a shadow of
ravine
in the empire. The world
is curved. The sun
will set.
The shape of you
has been warned: one day
you step to your left like you always do
but the tank
pivots to its left too
convincingly and all
you cannot see but
need to know is incredible
and makes it around you.
Folk Music in America

It kills my feet to walk. I choose to kill
my tongue instead and talk.
In the sand dune room in the movie Stalker, a hawk
gets halfway across

what makes me watch
its cheap, technical goneness again.
The same exact hawk
alights this time. A consolation for knowing

my eyes may not get there with me.
"IONA"
It’s okay to laugh at vast, nondescript landscapes when they are obviously trying to be funny. When a contour line crosses the road in the middle of nowhere, just to be seen as continuous when we are not, to make us slam on the brakes, grip the wheel, and stare off into the distance. When a barbed wire fence is bent back, and a cattle trail leads to a black metal pole and a flag in the middle of a field, marking the geographical center of the nation. It’s in this kind of situation that the courage to make connections that might frighten you, or others around you, becomes a cardinal virtue. The courage to giggle in the eyes, the mouth, and the turned—the assumed—face—of a vast, contiguous danger, and to resist the invisible’s disarming deadpan. You are here; there’s no way around it. You may not want to see it as a performance—this digital footage of a mimosa being brushed, closing its compound leaves on the pinky finger of your free hand, shot at the only angle that makes sense, given the constraints. But sometimes what’s real—what you realize and others don’t yet—has to be put into a package that can be looked over by the general public. Aerial photos provide only two-dimensional evidence of holes; abrupt purple sometimes needs captioning, if only in scribbled notes for you to glance down at during a presentation. Redwood forests behave as both golden wheat fields and gulf stream; to see them as one, you have to relegate the other to your imagination. And though information is everywhere on the surface, you may find yourself having to call the deep, spiral scratch leading to the central hole the groove, in deference to common parlance. From a plane window, from the inhuman height at which Oklahoma becomes its finest art, hundreds of circles formed by center-pivot irrigation speak to a certain patterned access to the land that makes us call it our heartland, but only when spoken to.

At birth, I recorded a song called “The Outside World Expresses My Feelings,” and I gave it to my whole country for safekeeping (http://www.loc.gov/jukebox/playlists/detail/id/63). Now my whole country is trying to give a hard copy of it back to the part of itself I recorded it in. It asks where that is; I can’t say. I remember only a jar with holes poked in the lid. A stick and a leaf, surrounded by wilderness. I respond with a silence called “One Missing Sister, Two Missing Sister.” Iona says: “If your right hand causes you to stumble…” and I say: “Stop walking on your hands.” She says: “When does a diamond river stop digging into an aluminum desert, and start digging out of it?” and I turn from her to the audience and whisper: “A given notion has ways of making us measure devotion.
differently.
Take this road,
for example. This red

telephone. Take Iona; I won’t
get mad with you.

If you take Iona, I won’t
get mad with you.
If you take her from me

somebody will take her from you.”
American Bottom

Face the sex of a universal floodplain: nighttime. There may be five mobile homes there in the gloom: insane to stare at something so long and still and still have to ask. The world’s largest is near in the blackness: and the turning world’s a trap that eloquets itself out of a way back, and so it signs off on pork, stilts for the porches, red concrete, health, the heron refuge, layers miracles miracle by miracle over the wet elegance:

the occasional cougar, I still like nature and I like that it destroys it: how can I say that from a place of power? Through the bones the dog dug up in the night, what was the significance of the tibia? What’s the insanely specific science that has to ask that question of its followers to feel it’s making progress? And so I’ll pass the sign for Hot Pink State
Park, where I can
see in the dark: screwed: precontact
mound: either it was swept clear
before each added layer
or layers
were added so quickly nothing green
could take root: power
steering fluid poured half
into the still heart of a still
palmetto: crazy
to hold a huge audience captive and still go on
talking with your
privates, breaker of pines.

And when it zooms into being, I can put it underneath.

-Anne Truitt
O wild
have not the I

in azure sister
yet i see thee still

who chariost sinclair
vapours

let me clutch and
wore my past by

sweet Nforcement
haunted forest

spiral water
handle toward my hand

this your is your
this my is my

destroyer water
saltflats, holo-

ope at night
& zona

rind-wed totem
bursting in airsmall

footprint
And yet i see thee still
Little Sister

In the epics, voices are thrown bizarrely far, ’cross barely processed slaughter and water.

Redwood forests act as if they already know how particle streams trick wheat fields into rolling, waving.

But then there’s the giants of these uplands who have no counsel circles. Laws unto themselves, they intra-cuddle.

I light a fire and toss a stake on. There’s a girl in the glare. “Call me Iona.”

Claims she’s one of the issues of a thousand-mile-long animal, some unperceivable freak this hill country’s only a boil on the unmentionables of.

Leans in close, starts singing “If I Had a Brother” . . .

The fire forks. “Face it,” she says, “you and me come from a common mother-land that’s a priori ugly.” “Let’s say I believe you,” I say. “How did the two of us come out so damn handsome?”

“Ask this cave’s native, our host, we’re beholden to him,” she says. “Even in the dark his heart-sized eye’s on us.”
Iona (Pop Song)

Our collected sorrow has a shape
Problem if I see something circular
I say something
Circular people think I’m singing

I ask for a groove I get
An aspen forest and having
Scratched their surfaces about the same
I figure it wouldn’t hurt

To fire up the little-known
‘Three-road’ version of “Yellowed
Ribbon of Highway”
And be two travelers

And that’s how we came to pay the Navajo Nation
Three bucks each
To hold each other’s hands
And be in four states at once

It would be easier for I-40
To pass through Carmel instead of Needles
Than for me to leave this sprawl
Out of my sense of heaven

And so we take turns at the wheel
And when she passes all
Understanding each one she passes
All understanding goes ahh.
Iowa (disambiguation)

owl owl owl
    some feedbag of wonderful
cruels in
to the squirrel

at the kernel of the field
    while on the visual level, anvils
use the distance to have
nothing to report

from its edge the predator is fascinated
to the center
doomed in a sense

the eyes have to cross their info in a place
of hiding behind them

elk factor out and approach elm

Americans see
    by actually sending out light from their irises
the light has to then pass through at least eighty
states

how is it possible for the irises
    and ears to twist
so far around each other
they don’t have to be real states

a name can share two species out of four
    with another “leaning in”
higher on the wind-break’s chain
before the storm arrives, the leaves

and ears
    go belly-up
in the tassel
    of the phenomenon
the name has nothing to do

with the heat of the lightning itself
    it takes wing and raptor
the whole thing strikes

the whole physical huntress
    is a pattern
prepared to spatter a moment’s summer in blood

    an island of time
    ruling a continent

does that make sense that feeling
    the counting tongue, the teeth
    waiting for thunder
    to tear a thought family

into a man, a land, an abdomen
I Place a Georgia

Carrying a large catfish to the surface on my hand
and looking away
and learning from myself, I’m rational.

Cherishing parts of Florida—oiled
dish parts—even here,
I’m rational—there’s a way
to seem ready
for almost everything
to be near me, I mean. Anemic park speaking to something technically bigger than me

I get a headache. A. fragilis, river-
dredgers who are not me, mound-
buiders, then me, enter

a curtain at the county hospital, stand at my descendants’
wire-side, the flowers

are fake, I’m watching the busy body’s
greased volunteering of vein
and woodbeat. Take me
to own the water—

Sometimes I think
that any publicity even good publicity, cleanses—
white
dawn: after the blued, informal banquet of bones
culled down from the sky—

the internal sky, the prize—
I look through a crushed hand
of almost translucent napkin— Mind,

I wish you were part of this country.

But you are all of it—no parallel
for assigning
evil to each sense
The Sex Lives of Teenagers in Rural America

Sugar
a sort of millipede-colored
sugar

where Pepsi spilled
on a curve
to make the door handle more scenic

more sequential

first, there’s the intrigue
of an escape
from this
land a shape curls into

without looking
and the mind can wander out of the vehicle, ignore the zoomed-in’s
tackiness

or a person can suddenly become
a texture person

how gross but you continue

and second, squiggly West Virginia
doesn’t belong

with all those rectangles out west
divided once
touching each other

as we do via things
other than touch, any one of us
could easily
divide again

and third, you and I added to nature once
a stain
a twofold logo whispered

sweet secessions
redblue
out of the car into its mirrors
Ionia

All Greece hates
its parts that cause it
to hesitate
to include

if Missouri causes you
to get drunk
to get matching
tattoos:

“All Oklahomans
on my right hand
are liars”;
“All Kansans go home

anytime it wants
by walking
a mile in
some other country’s blood

lustred
to its ankles.” All
along its river ocean
Arkansas

is quiet
as its oxbows go
to fill the coffins
of curves and there

is a house
how many times
do I have to say it
in not

not Berlin
they call
unfinished
on three sides

it can’t be talked about
and one day it won’t need to be
when beauty is known
as beauty

good as good
I’ll cry
and the tears will run down
my back when

my scale model empties
where will I be
I’ll go to Memphis to see
the World’s Fair

and after all the years
in arms of every
kind I’ll finally
be going home

where I know my baby
remains
intact
as a reason

for letting someone else have her
avenged
by a handle
where an eye was
If Maine Left Only New Mapshire

only New Mapshire would miss it

like bones are contiguous even though they’re inside
the place where we’ll disappear

what survives is what we’re familiar
with.

My family went on vacation to Couldworld
\drove through neither Carolina to get there

coming home, the peach watertower
now looked like a butt, so there was orientation

shorthand for decline.

If the only part of your body that knows
how to love is your legs

sometimes they work, sometimes they work
they will be with things they aren’t

like in photos, wraparound parts
of patios.

And you will have to learn to run on incoherence.
    A little round burn at the Air

or Space Museum.
Echo Park

It seems like there are no people on this little map
of the motel
behind the motel door, only arrows, and of those, only
the talkative ones are elk,
the ones that could make that leap.

All around the outside
of the shield are depicted
towns worse-off, in smoke. We can’t help
but make them move.

At the edge of the great seal, the native
turns back to look at the figure
with the plow by the rapids. Even a patron saint of lost things would make
the wrong kind of eye contact
here, at this wide angle.

When you say something
as simple as I think
we both want the same thing, going forward, my shadows
already seem to be
your constituency—the ones who returned you
to your long face and car
and the ones who didn’t dare.
“No ideas,” says the nation, “but in number and duration.”
That's the message you get when you call its limestone
and it's not there but bats are, pink through wing of Iona's fingernails
switching a flashlight off and on beneath the bluff of her chin, being all scary, in every American show cave stumble on the sublime, dependable moment when the guide turns all the lights off: “Put your hand in front of your face. You’re about to see the measure of darkness the first explorers looked like.” In 563, Columba sailed with uneasy conscience away from Ireland. He landed at Kintyre, turned around, and on a clear day could still see Ireland, his home, the source of his pain. He kept sailing north until he arrived at a nameless island, barely a pixel of grass on gray gneiss in the gray sea west of what would be Scotland. Richard Sharpe, in the notes to his translation of *Life of St Columba* by Adomán of Iona, says this about how the island got her name:

A traditional explanation told in the island and recorded about 1700 by Martin Martin...is that *I* derives from the feminine object pronoun, as Columba cried on approaching Iona, *Chim i* ‘I see her’. The same story is given in 1771 by ‘An Irish tourist’, though the phrase is there given as *Sud i* ‘Yonder she’. These versions dimly recollect a stanza quoted in Manus O'Donnell’s *Life of St Columba*...in which on landing at Iona Columba says *Dochím hI*, *bendacht ar gach súil docí* ‘I see Iona, a blessing on each eye that sees it.’ The name has, in fact, been mistaken for the pronoun. Such homespun etymology was soon overlaid by more poetical inspiration.

ionahistory.org.uk:

Iona is a lovely name. However, it’s an error. A medieval scribe misread the Latin name given to the island in the 7th century AD – *Ioua Insula*.

Dugal Campbell, *Statistical Account of Scotland*, 1792:

The inhabitants have a tradition that Columbus suffered no women to stay in [Iona] except the nuns; and that all the tradesmen who wrought in it were obliged to keep their wives and daughters in the opposite little isle, called on that account Women's Isle.
Donald Bayne, in the article “Iona Island: A History of Bear Mountain State Park’s Most Mysterious Isle,” *Hudson Valley* magazine, July 2011:

When he got the land, he told people, ‘I own a island.’ That’s how it got the name.

André Breton:

Following a word the origin of which seems suspicious to you, place any letter whatsoever, the letter “I” for example, always the letter “I,” and bring the arbitrary back by making this letter the first of the following word.

ionahistory.org.uk:

Iona was inhabited in prehistory. But it was the coming of St Columba in 563 that put this tiny speck of land in Scotland’s Inner Hebrides on the map. It became a beacon…

Wikipedia:

Despite the continuity of forms in Gaelic between the pre-Norse and post-Norse eras, Haswell-Smith (2004) speculates that the name may have a Norse connection, *Hiōe* meaning “island of the den of the brown bear”, “island of the den of the fox”, or just “island of the cave.”

Richard Sharpe:

The Revd Dugal Campbell, for example, in 1792, calls the island I or Icolmkill, adding: ‘In monkish writers, it is called Iona, which signifies Island of Waves….The name Iona is now quite lost in the country, and it is always called I, except when the speaker would wish to lay an emphasis upon the word, when it is called Icolmkill’…He adds in a note: ‘Iona is, in Gaelic, spelt I-thonn’ (pronounced ‘ee honn’). This would indeed mean ‘island of waves,’ but Campbell has admitted that the name was not used in Gaelic but by monkish writers (whose language was Latin, where it does not have this meaning). Another less widely cited explanation, equally bogus, is *Ìshona* ‘blessed island’ (Gael. *sona* ‘fortunate, happy’; the combination is pronounced ‘ee honna’), a derivation I have not noted before 1850, when it is mentioned by Graham and Keddie in the same year. It was probably coined by a contemporary guide.

Wikipedia:

In the United States, Iona has not appeared in the Social Security Administration's list of 1,000 most popular baby names in the last 12 years.
disproportionate…
proportionate…
national…
national…
proportionate…
national…
ocasionally…
national…
proportionate…
occasional…
additional…
proportionate…
occasional…
national…
national…
national…
national…
proportionate…
traditional…
missionaries…
visionary…
ocasionally…
visionary…
national…
proportionate…
disproportionate…
traditional…
occasional…
disproportionate…
proportionate…
proportionable…
additional…
curiosity strongly
impelled him to survey Iona…
among the ruins of Iona!…
additional…
Iona has long enjoyed, without
any very credible
attestation, the honour
of being reputed the cemetery of the Scottish Kings…
But the fruitfulness of Iona
is now its whole
prosperity…. The inhabitants are remarkably
gross, and remarkably
neglected: I know not
if they are visited
by any Minister…
The Island, which was once
the metropolis of learning
and piety, has now no school for education, nor temple
for worship, only
two inhabitants that can speak English, and not one
that can write or read…
We now left those illustrious
ruins, by which Mr. Boswell was much affected,
nor would I willingly
be thought
to have looked upon them
without some emotion…
Perhaps, in the revolutions of the world, Iona
may be sometime again
the instructress of the Western Regions…
Iona: “I assume you did not choose me to be your voice
so that I too
would lie to you. These ancient sources
are not your friends. They are not the negatives
you have when you look out of your car
through your thrown hands
at the obelisks and the sandwich
places shattered.

White nose in your devices,
deep cave loiterers, I’ve been listening

and I know where you actually live: Above, where the streets are so far
from the houses it takes years whenever the TV runs
the story of a movie shooting
for the neighborhood dogs to notice the moon
unfeaturing

where driveways are so wide the cracks in them have to comfort cracks in them
such places you have to take a lyric’s word for what the lyric does

I feel your pain. Your unspoken invitation to kill all satellites, all lesser, dependent
life forms, all I can fit on my lips and I don’t need your help to do it

I want it this subdivision of limbs small squirrel
stars
and eyes getting bent under orbits of eyes
is it wrong to come when I’m called by the way my only name is
in the middle of disproportionate”
I tell Iona to stop it already with the flashlight. I’ll stay on my side of the cave if she stays on her side. I draw a line down the center of the room with charcoal, deviating slightly in the middle to draw a representation of mammoths being shot at with Uzis from a train. “You better be glad mom’s not down here,” she says.
Concept Album

Is it a coincidence the music corresponds to the visuals?
The black and hot pink baton hits as the roots speak at 12:01;

sun glints off the redundant umbrella as the fortieth shot to the head
flaps red wings on what hesitates like a double bass; the brown design of tear gas shoots over the clip

of an amazing canyon—a large, majestic canyon
no one seems to have a better name for
—just as
a slightly more obvious breeze

snaps the palmetto, the red-fingered sun, the order and stars and bear
and progress in the scream of the flag
out of sight.

I see death
making assumptions where my mother says
this double negative in the earth isn’t hers; where photos

make the air red, father
develops a flashback that can’t satisfy me; I’m in the desert
when that countdown hands out hearts

loud. Did I have a brother fighting
tears back in the jungle?
It was just a picture of her
in his arms. At 12:02

a river makes me think I never had a sister-
land apart from sounds
of sumac accident of eyes
of grouse beaten back, and rivers named

for rivers back east, secret
clothes and relocation
sage. But if I had
all songs that didn’t sing

her praises would be traitorous.
nothing but these folk songs and
they gave me the code for everything

that's fair game, that everything belongs
to everyone

—巴布
Dilun
Provenance

Proof that what I have seen has been seen
by others: crepe myrtle and mattress
in the highway median

and riding into Savannah towards Tybee enough times
as a child the spherical storage
tank painted like a globe

http://www.roadsideamerica.com/tip/336
and I dream that others have really seen
what I have seen

I sleep in public, in plain
motorized view
and in the Queen City of the Plains the names

of the sometimes states are laid down in
a grid: Mississippi, Mexico, Florida, Virginia, Exposition,
but no street for Georgia or for North

or South Carolina
Sherman Street runs in a straight line north to south
the more I think about asymptotes

of my better half-vision: tribes,
universities, flowers—what survives
is what we have been

when the gone marches in on never
having been in contact with
the conqueror

slumping into space against
the un-curated
breadthless collected

pretty width of the conquered
peanut butter floating in lemonade
or some state you never imagined

would have a wine country, barely
scrubbing by in its flatness, oeniric
showing results for

did you mean you and I will dream
as one someday? This late in the history of the city
the shattered still poses as if
purposefully
spared arms reach out in peaceful dreams
as if for a still photo http://www.roadsideamerica.com/tip/27537, pose,

and are surrounded.
The sea was still there at the end of the blacktop and the blue sky.
Everything else was memory.
Concrete Shoes: a blues. An established form is easier to survey in hell, deciding whether to reach up or down to give the precarious symbol gasoline or water. Out from Mhoon Landing, oxygen on, I go down to see my TVA man. Whiskers that weren’t his hands, his flesh of catfish scatters. His crossbones hold a gas can over his skull. The bubbles from it are deranged upward. Near him in the bottom mud lie sunk turbines, tabby half-pillars. Eye-mush oozes from the grin of his hips. It hurts to watch how he tries to use his jaw only to say You didn’t build this—

He motions for blood so I cut my cheek in the river mix and the red extends like tongues. Now all his works can speak as if for him. Bear Creek, Lost Creek, Nickajack, Ocoee 1, 2 & 3. The names of the dams expose their throats: I am man-made but there’s a natural beauty in choice and I chose large-scale planning made me I helped drown. Meticulous to drown with every town or to New Orleans next?

my guide Iona pulls me back to the sunlit surface. The Mississippi shore of the great river is marked by an abandoned line of casinos or one megacasino consisting of several abandoned “experiences” unsmart parts. We’re our network’s weak the delicate ones, we skeletons? or smart parts. Consisting of several abandoned “experiences” consisting of several abandoned “experiences” labeled in many places SPLASH. Where in the trashy matte of the main stream around our craft does Arkansas begin to take dominion? Is he ancient muscular structures? Aren’t they beautiful, all these Then: A moment of silence. for a named surface, that’s all.

a chaos of named surfaces To sacrifice strong. To make this country work for us. Do some manly unloosen. in sounds he finds swinging around a systematic conquering rhythm? His heart-breaking way of finding the source they say he is? Iona asks. Did he tell you how he developed his influential, Iona asks. Did he tell you how he developed his influential, His heart-breaking way of finding the source they say he is?

thought? He’s the real deal I tell her. He splits his voice and for the day we would need it waiting in the limestone one with the melancholy a reversal in the classical sense. Iona gestures north, then south: To Memphis

making —— making —— making —— making

It hurts to watch how he tries to use his jaw only to say You didn’t build this—

He motions for blood so I cut my cheek in the river mix and the red extends like tongues. Now all his works can speak as if for him. Bear Creek, Lost Creek, Nickajack, Ocoee 1, 2 & 3. The names of the dams expose their throats: I am man-made but there’s a natural beauty in choice and I chose large-scale planning made me I helped drown. Meticulous to drown with every town or to New Orleans next?
Postcard: Ithaca at Night

This little moth of mine skypes home,
flattening its avatars

against the porch screen, Light
is a vertical worm

as soon as it says it is, Light

is a legible wing, I’m talking to it through a glitch
in the subdivision: anything
I call little

instantly
drags a indignant
bigness into it  Just now  near

Ionia, Arkansas, sister
city to itself: Iona  video calls me

with a technical problem: I feel the milk teeth of a possum
she says—in every off-white envelope I get from the consolidated
city and county—
should I worry

if against the little polystyrene
window the hard larvae that spell my dream
and address wriggle

shhh the neighbors I say
their eyelashes—

don’t move— are measuring,
in your hair— headlights, fur— night creatures have what they think
is a method—

hold still—I say—

oh these kind are harmless she says—
those giant eyespots
are just that—Nobody

has hurt me—Nobody’s Ozarks sizzle

when I rebrand them with these islands—Nobody
has lent me this shitty interior
equipment—
Conspiracy Theory

As soon as I see the snuff film and the strange, moving leaf
are captured so that holes can be punched in the hills
and the lid so that the katydid and the coal
can breathe and the coated wires survive, I understand
the kind of maniac I’ve been dealing with all these years—
the headlights, the natural gases

that never fully account for the sightings of lanterns
held at chest-level, old-fashioned. Some say missing things
mock the dead by toggling in and out of being
the point of saying It was right there the whole
time, and that, late at night, switches still flip
despite there not having been a train on this line

for what seems like hours. The people we’ve sent up once,
and keep sending back—it’s not that
they’re out of touch. It’s that their bodies are
the size only of machinery, not the shape, and the finer
pits of our anatomy, we who work hard
every day to keep the balance we tip

in our shade’s favor every night, do not
escape them. They are waiting there,
where the need we need comes into the house, makes sure
the dimensions inside match the dimensions outside
minus thin red flowers, a full-volume and bright
projection of thin red flowers.

All I’m saying is maybe we have some representatives
even the craziest ones haven’t thought to write to yet,
one letter different when we go through the results
again. Because there are crossroads and there are
hard bends in the road where crosses tend
to accumulate; I’m not saying there isn’t

a connection; I just think I’ve seen a shared
loss that isn’t, in this case, a ghost. A thorough explanation
haunts it, yes. But if we held the air inside us responsible for
the abandonment we live the second half of
our lives with, the half where you and
I truly belong, we’d never hear the end of it.
**Iona (Origin Myth)**

Some, coming from limiting things,  
just limit; some,  
coming from things that limit and don’t,  
do both;  
some are clearly limitless. Just look at them.  
My sister  
who doesn’t exist gets sassy,  
tells me to grow a pair.  

We asked one hundred time-lapse photographers what they know  
about the end result of  
watching natural anger  
take shape over  
and over  
over our  
borders.
Hi to
Hii bring
Hy rain
Hia on
hLe a
hl land
Hu where
Hua no
Iiy man
Hy is,
Y on
Yh the
Yi desert
Ey in
Ie which
Iea there
Iae is
Eu no
Eo man,
Eoa to
Ioua satisfy
Hugh the
Iou waste
Ia and
Iona desolate
I land

“I’m talentless
and dare not inflict myself
on this bright reign.”

-Wang Wei
IAmA

My congresswoman
writes to me

from the great above

I set my mind
on the great below
I find myself

in the forest between her
and her cubs
and a style

she’s trying to maintain
I’m going with her
don’t care where

you go
beyond the southwest desert
deep inside another

inset
Alaska accepts its
inset this

big thing she’s told me
knows my chemistries
and slips

from its sequence
so believably
I ask the daughter of the god

of the seals to help me
pin that drunkard down
he changes

into a lung a law the hawk
that makes it
half way across the hawk

that makes it all
the way
cross

the sea
is a box
for a more important city
my representative says we
by the way

she pronounces bayou
and Ohio
I know they can rhyme

but this little light of mine
gets hidden
from time

by a tongue
of the direct kind
flickering

if you see her tell her
I am easily
lost

at roads that
touch
I make a deal with the weevil

of expanding
sadness
when I get back don’t be here

next time I look
at a square
it’s an affront

a design
a district to the eye
packing

desire
onto an edge of them there
“Leave New Mexico,” says a visibly drunk Aphrodite, who I don’t remember calling out to, “and forget Utah, who, by the way, never really loved you despite my best efforts. And it’s time you get over Colorado, who even I can’t help you with at this point, and consider California again. Forgive her her perspective jumps and for her middle, almost cubist in its forced mirages. Or there’s always Nevada, who’s just looking for any excuse to be yours forever, truly. Bartender!” She spills another gin and tonic over the spangled upholstery of the How Many Arms Can A Saguaro Reasonably Have Saloon. Aphrodite, whose presence, although I’ve had a few myself, I definitely don’t believe I requested by name, continues, “Did I ever tell you about the time I caught Virginia and West Virginia… Can you imagine! After all those years…” and I’m about to stop her, but Iona tells me to shut up and just have another, enjoy the company of strangers while I can. “For after you pass Nogales,” she says, “you will meet only Nogales.”
Iona and I sit across the street from that clock in Josefov in Prague that runs counterclockwise. Sip our coffee and speak of the giant metronome overlooking the city, on Letná hill, where the largest statue of Stalin in the world was erected in 1955, destroyed in 1962. It presented the dictator leading a blocky cadre of workers and soldiers, apparently over the cliff. The people below nicknamed it “the meat line.” Now the huge red metronome in its place inspires Iona as she sits across from me at the café. She purposefully exaggerates history’s turnover time, switching masks every second. One moment, she’s Oedipus after his makeover, red glitter streaking down from his black felt handholds. Next she’s a brick wall. Then she holds up a fan with cuttings from various magazines glued on the back of it: giant butterflies; a feathered headdress; businesswomen sitting in boardrooms in front of stock photos of coffees the size of their heads, with haloes of actual chrysanthemum petals; chocolate-bunny-wrapper legs lifted into a fishpond sky. Next she’s Cassandra (I can tell by the price tag hanging off the mask). Then a round logo: a blue O that seems to be the sun, a red and white plowed field. Then Rilke. Then Electra the Pleiad, her tears for Troy represented by shots from the Hubble telescope. That last choice seems to give her a better idea: she puts on the mask of Electra, daughter of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon. Her face buzzes and seems to be short-circuiting; the eyes flicker between traditional eyes and doe-eyes, the mouth between sadness, art-deco, and steeled resolve.

“**A vote for me,”** she says, “is a vote for something inside me, too big for its britches, a human torch. You sent me here to give big government a message: ‘Be something hipper. The murdering mother shtick, the deadbeat dadland—we’ve seen ’em before. Instead, be a comrade, a sister, a symposium, a dance, a catharsis.’ As your representative, I reserve my right to make you regret your choice, by making it seem like a commitment. To give you the water you asked for, plus the gasoline. To fit what happens in Texas easily into Texas, with plenty of room left over for silence. And in the silence, I plan to stockpile apostrophes—to snakes, to the breezes beneath your scalp, all the things you thought you weren’t calling on when you called on me. This dagger you see before you has eyes like daggers; watch your back.” She takes a loud slurp of coffee. As if to emphasize her relatability, she lets it spill down through the mouthhole of the mask and sizzle onto the table between us.

“No but seriously,” she says, taking off her mask, “why have you brought me here?”
Continuationism

I can see the green grass growing on the hill.
Can your god do this?

says Iona, and the grass is the green black drawing
on a dollar bill.

My god is beyond such cheap tricks
but I mustn’t say so. I pull up a mushroom that looks

almost exactly like Utah.
Everyday miracles sicken me,

Iona says. They’re just the brain doubling down
on round peg and hole

endorphins inside
a hermit kingdom of the senses. Stand back.

Her god squeezes five million angels of death onto a surface
slightly smaller than

South Carolina.
I ask my god to humanely remove them. She does

but Iona’s god offers them his protection, morphs
them into the lukewarm roof

of his mouth.
My god responds with a forty-year flood

and a series of increasingly sorrowful gorges. Her god
with a single dome, a dam.

My god bends over the bayou, pronounces “bayou”
to rhyme with “fire.”

Then my god crosses her fingers behind her back
when she says “All this could be yours.”

Then she invalidates by origami
the ballots of a thousand voters.

Then she electrifies all the birds’ nests
and keeps them flying forever.

When a bird needs to rest, Iona’s god gracefully shapes
another bird’s head
into a nest. My god,
in a desperate maneuver, exposes
her incomparable cleavage.

Iona’s god looks on unmoved.
I feel like the devil holding

a seized fiddle.
Iona’s god, as a final

fuck you, swipes the tiny Bohemian village of Lidice
off the screen.

The best my god can do now is offer directions
to hundreds of places around the world renamed

in the liquidated village’s honor
Lidice.
Lithonia

no place allows me to share its secret
Sherman swerved but nature hates with us
a negative explanation how a thing is spared is not how it remains standing so
an absolute magnolia has to be slipped in already brown just under this and then that rust
take Dekalb County undertowned with xenolith no one could deface it easily
pronounce its eyes and closed parentheses no one would blame you
if you thought it was perfect to practice your burning on

but someone could say you’ve come too late to honor the underqualities there
with your creation of them there a park no more than a few benches
where the courthouse clerks smoke and look down as if their work is smoking

should we be sad to think we’re wasting our powers of destruction on small things
when the world is whole again through our neglect
and the poster looks like it was torn by someone who hadn’t seen the film
The Slavs in Their Original Homeland

(Alfons Mucha, 1912; egg tempera on canvas, 20 ft x 26.5 ft)

a rectangular meadow knocks black
water back onto pines
elbowoods crack among crags
the garden is glorious with spring
no room for rational thinking

think, then, where on my body is home
for burning decisions
for measuring devotion
producing the flame
that is of no interest to the either

I am a part of
or I am its problem
listen to someone else’s
national anthem for long enough wide enough
you start to go a bit crazy

“Where’s my future?”
I’m trained to wonder
for the foreigners at the bottom left—whether they can say
what I see
dawn

snuck from under my arm
beneath the guard’s nose in the longing wing
of the free museum reassembling
a golem
from these photographs of coast, oceanless
or, *Between the Tyrannical Lash and the Sword of the Goths*

(1912; egg tempera on canvas, 20 ft x 26.5 ft)

epic abhors a rectangle
rushing barely holding

at the touch of a blue brush
blue water

basically every ancestor
hiding
wild
for transfer to you

by definition muddy
suburb
to suburb going

where the jobs are
filming secretly

the neighbors say
a bird dropped a burning sword on their house
to show them
they were not us

others say a snake
in an eagle’s mouth on a rock
in a lake
the tsunami
of the same
same held
together by inangled
anatomy
edging the square, tanks
sleeping in the treads of
people
sleeping in the treads of
tanks
each keeping steady

the limbs of the other not filling
or emptying the stylized
cylinder
the red is kept in

not making something
we would then need the whole world to see
or, *Praise the Lord in Your Native Tongue*

and suddenly

the world is slightly smaller than South Carolina
there’s no room for any more “cold fire”

theories but I make room I proclaim
“the attractiveness of this act

is flammable”
but it can’t burn me anymore

Mine eyes are thorns in the top of a union
made of thorns

I will pour a love of others
without form over

a me that matches it
in form but in fact

there’s no such chemical
at hand, at hand is a brush

without death at hand
is an efficiency torn

in the representation, ragged, invented, allowing me
to say at hand is

a hell of foreign beauty
and it is aerodynamic

bursting in the anxiety of the ekphrastic
asks do I love back

what others love back
serene pillar of slaughter
or, *Work in Freedom Is the Foundation of a State* 

As soon as I had decided to not be beautiful  
out of solidarity  
an economy  
of ether  
uncurled drastic banners, increased bodies

the dead to me were making the memories  
others larged their angels,  
pleating, into  
this is how I knew my friends, through thin  
surrender at the first

palette of bats,  
I knew we would not survive  
the sign we would not take down  
the wrong kind of terror would cave in  
to a chorus of mirrors on those who would count on us

then we could rest  
in an ancestry  
we believed in, pattern,  
not as such, but as ash  
clumps to pattern, when wound-making has had its burst of content
or, *God Gave Us a Gift of Language*

and death is the same
everywhere
so in the painting Mucha
shows us his hometown Ivančice

and one night I walked the entire width of St. Louis
from my neighborhood called the Loop
to the Arch and back
I passed through streets like the opened moon

I saw almost no one
and God gave us a gift of language, waiting
under the Blaník mountain
and it will emerge at our darkest hour

but a day inside the work is like a year
on the surface
Watching Kieślowski Backwards

is strange even for its speakers an outside

Now a pure sadness, the car door
healing the smashed finger is possible.

allotted no birdsong

The surface that the image that doubted
the poem is asked to recite the factory
the surface was purely visual can speak is possible.
to its own memory

A fragile necklace with a returning
cross which never intended to be political.
the dust cloud forgetting the camera is there

A look that made objects feel they were responsible
not for the actress in the dust cloud
for coming back to knowing post-breaking
but for her becoming

finds the trace of its asking
parallel to chance, to the page falling inside the book.
one for us

Now true surprise, the reunification
of surveillance and blind chance is possible.

Now the heart moves like a surgery through
its trilogy: space, trickery, documentary.

Now the sentence breaks like a unification
was always there, predatory

in objects, in the floor, in the glass
in the cat’s paws given back after sounds

of mice have resumed, unseen, predatory
in a million unscreened details, always possible.

Now surveillance breaks in, and unites the possible
with its fragile, unseen double.

Now speaking in truth knows it’s not alone.
Mind Reader Blues

In the middle of our conversations, Iona will sometimes switch on a cheap electronic filter and her voice will drop into a deep, almost threatening register. She calls this “The Voice of Authority.”

In this voice she tells me I will never be at peace until I go walking far out onto the exterior of the world, keep walking, until I meet a tribe that doesn’t recognize the black rectangle I am carrying.

“They won’t imagine its surface is functional,” she says. “They’ll call it a mirror. They’ll see its eye, at best, as anthropomorphic decoration. At worst, as the sign of a primitive weapon. Keep walking. You’ll come to a crossroads—”

“Stop,” I tell her. “I’ve heard all this, or something similar to all this, before. This low voice is going to your head, this belief that pretending to be someone else gives you the power to prophesize hackneyed futures, folk destinies even your booming self can’t believe in. I expect more original villainy from my ‘Voice of Authority,’ not some cheap, postmodern Virgil, a corpse switched for a clone.” Iona’s eyes turn automatically fierce then. “Fine”—she says—still in the same voice, an awkward bass synth hiccup kicking in behind her as she presses a pedal somewhere beneath her—“you want my real prophecy?

Your training as guardian of this city—your mostly beloved hometown, with its mostly 1980s and 90s single-potted-plant lobbies, its bodies that drop into shallow facades of fake waterfalls at the manicured entrances to pretty much everywhere, dissolve into the water, are sucked down by a pumping mechanism at the base of the fountain and, shimmering among the fallen change and dirty leaves, are filtered from those things and recycled upwards, dropping again in meditative plashes over the fake falls—it will continue indefinitely. And all that you learned to see as beautiful during your training will remain beautiful
to you forever. It will be wet noise in the stories you show your kids. Sometime
between when they fall to the stage, bloodied, and their lovers appear to mourn them, their corpses will be switched with others’—real others’—so that they are free
to play the parts of their lovers too.
Isn’t that what you want for your children, for your children’s children, to be the visibly moved mover, the center whose sphere is elsewhere?
Isn’t that your idea of freedom, to measure devotion by how invisible you can make your fate to yourself, while making the fate of others twist illegibly? To love the pain that you alone can see is good for you, I guess?”
Iona drops the mic, switches the filter off. When the room is quiet I look at her face as if it’s someone else’s, though in form she remains, as ever, my shield, my sister, my mentor.
**Entralia**

The lawn drains to a memorial.  
That’s not the end of the complex; kudzu  
has been spray-painted orange by the power guys.

The eye forgives shut up textures and moves on.  
And yet it’s the end of something;  
if you want to help your nation, keep going, the rhododendron

ends and the mountain laurel blooms  
in as warm a color as the artificial; it is its way of saying  
our words we will have to set.

At the border of the pond, organic laces  
for the concrete. Grime has lifted them into lives:  
a dun mesh lining the border between crossing

and lingering Xs. The drawing of a fish reminds us  
where the streets lead: the rubbed-out scale  
in the same scan as the eternal flame, or

another choice would be dull pink grief.  
It seems the conspiracy has always been toward earth  
and a pamphlet that tugs back, and lays out the wind’s new plan.
On this page you will see pictures of real-life apostrophe abuse, many of which have been submitted by visitors. An overhead photo of the desert to indicate possession. A house in New Orleans is there. What stays in a conversation happens. To sever a plural. Passion to show omission. If it weren’t for this rectangle we call Colorado, you’d be speaking in Louisiana now.

“Lyric poetry itself—summed up in the figure of apostrophe—comes to look like the fantastically intricate history of endless elaborations and displacements of the single cry: ‘Mama!’”

Under Missouri’s muddy booteel, a brooding metaphor. O west wind and opossum sittin’ in a tree, m-i-s-s-i—and in the end, in the hollers (“it’s not that the mountains are that high, it’s that the valleys are so low”), we’re left with just us vs. The spoken only. The spoken too. Just a spawn in their game of opposites. Unpromotable wilderness. General-specific razorback formations. Night mammals, counting our children, by feeling, eyelashes, flickering along, our nipples, “the attempt” to achieve a full” elaboration” of any” discursive position other than” that of child…”

Iona, I know you’re only a pun, but I want to give you all the chances I never got as a person. To be taken seriously. To in turn abbreviate. To condescend. To be BLVD. These are our rights: to be believed by the city. And by the county coterminous with it. To decide for your cells what a person is. To sever a plural. O person, I feel for you so relax, you don’t have to. Fit Ohio’s squiggles. Into the public works. And nights. To cleave by needle. To sever a plateau. High fidelity. To our country’s principles. “Or like her, who,” forced from her ancestral home of decisions made for her, was forced to decide. To preapprove of love. When it’s still in karst. In writhing. Prose upon pores.

Iona says: “It’s a sign of mental illness to make too many connections. To see things others don’t. To talk to people that aren’t there. To not look like your passport photo. To think if you keep walking southwest, across the border, into the inset, you’ll get to Alaska.” So I say: “Is that particular state the fate of any shape that gets more monstrous than the shape that contains it?” And she says: “Are you calling us a monster?” And I say: “Well we’re the only one here.” And that makes her laugh. And in the end, really, isn’t that all I’ve wanted? To make sure this absence, this absurdity knows its place? “You’re a great method actor,” says Iona.

“You stay in character even when the scare quotes are off.”
Continuity

Paint over the arrows that point from the errors of this world to their corrections suggested by people of this world, a blue net. Conceive of this holeless by now blue as transparent. A new world of this world is visible through it. Supper chosen along the glass. Our friends intuited. Think of what will feel like a home for the katydid. Our world believable through that. A few holes punched in the top for the leaf we need to be told needs to breathe to breathe.
Iona (Origin Myth)

Nourished inside a fish for a bit at birth
she burst that fish.

Daughter of an autochthonous revolver she had
big fun shooting in and around
the bayou.

She gave birth to her brother her brother
regifted it to her. It was a small town.

Furious she blinked and hit it.
Shape-Note (Coda)

“And that will be the story of you,” meaning
the end of you
although technically world opinion
is being prepared for.

An intervention
that links a note totally off
the scale to a shape
and a syllable.

And technically we are an expanded cadence
when we step out of ourselves
to speak
I am slightly smaller.

Then South Carolina when I think
of a thorn in a sound
resists unity with puzzling
unity like the whole world would.

Turn, weaving wheat
by a process only Nabisco
internal slang feels just right for
describing, or turn away.

And despair at or document
X-rated scenes of equality

In my nightmare of forming
in myself an empire a normal bridge goes over
the side of a normal bridge
into perfectly normal water.

When I awake, nothing
is over
the power of a grain elevator or star dune
yet together.
Iona (disambiguation)

Most things come in pairs
or in other words, in an infinite number of pieces

which conspire to give justice
and reparation to each other

for their inherent injustice. I am sure
this next sentence is from myself: “And note

how this madness has taken shape,
and endured.” In fact,

it’s coming from the other room,
where Iona, legs bent under her on the couch

as if long-unused, her arms half-buried in
the pillows awkwardly after

having held
and dropped a book, is talking

in her sleep. The couch is dry grass-colored; Iona is wearing a light pink dress.

She looks like the girl in the painting
Christina’s World, but from the opposite angle

and from a later period
of American art, where first the eyes

and then the rest of the body follows
me as I move back and forth along the otherwise

abstract gallery. “I didn’t mean to disturb you,”
I say, “but now that you’re awake,

I’m curious, what were you dreaming about?”
“I dreamed,” she said, “I was named

for a different island,
but one which, like my waking namesake,

was accessible only
from another island, Alonnisos,

the second-to-last stop on the ferry out from Volos,
after Skopelos
and Skiathos, islands called the Sporades
from sporadikos (the locals
told me): ‘scattered,’ in turn
from spora: ‘a seed, a sowing.’

In antiquity, I learned, all the Aegean islands
not in the central ring

of the Cyclades were called Sporades,
but more recently the name has come
to refer mainly to Skiathos,
Skopelos, Alonnisos, and the island

beyond that where I slept on a white roof
and the town below

would not let me sleep
with their need for explanations: Where

had I come from? How had I managed to rid
the island of the surreal
terrors plaguing it—a host of horsemen, a black
fleet of ships, and the giant marble door

that squatted for centuries on a hilltop over the harbor
templeless, without an interior, greatly

bothering the populace—alone, bare-handed,
heroically, with nothing

but a bottle of tequila and a worm
that when I wanted it to behave

like a crushing wave, behaved
(luckily, as it turned out)

like a particle,
confounding the door

which understood only the tragic romance
of ruin and not

its reuse as a point of interest.
The people wanted to party with what was left
in the dream but I told them
my beauty rest.
And that was when the book I was reading
fell to the floor and I woke up
to you and your endless need for truth
that can be connected
to what you already know.”

“Was I in the dream?” I ask.
“Since you’re a part of me, technically,
yes, you were there,” she says.
But I know she’s just being nice.

I know from experience
what it means to be a part
of a part of a thing that speaks to something
bigger: more often than not you are

that little town “emptied of its folk”
that never receives

the official explanation
sent to it first through every other channel

inside it, inert and living, and only after
that to its surface, the silent

streets, the part of it
that listens, and is always

the last to hear. Iona
is snoring now, and does not expect

the house to fall around her. Like me, she expects it to become all
one thing and all the other.
Companion Pieces

The poems in this collection trespass on the verbal and visual property of many others. This is a partial list of originals.

Blues/Justification for the Muse: Emily Dickinson, #14

[photo] (page 26): Top half: Film still from “This is Dinosaur,” Charles Eggert, 1955; Bottom half: Photo by Joe Lennon, map by National Geographic, 1966

[epigraphs]: Alice Notley, “White Phosphorus”; Euripides, Ion, trans. Richard Lattimore; Sound waves from the album Wake Up Dead Man: Black Convict Worksongs From Texas Prisons, recorded by Bruce Jackson; Alan Lomax interviewing W. D. Stewart (“Bama”), Parchman Farm, Mississippi, 1947


“Missing Sister”: Image by Wikipedia user Selket, after Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa

American Folk Music: Job 2:2; Plato, Republic; Susan Gilbert Dickinson, “Miss Emily Dickinson of Amherst,” Springfield Republican, May 18, 1886

Iona (Origin Myth) (page 34): Woody Guthrie, “This Land is Your Land”

Iona (Origin Myth) (page 35): Jean-Paul Sartre, preface, Wretched of the Earth by Frantz Fanon


Apostrophe (page 37): Tank Man, Beijing, June 5, 1989

Folk Music in America: Andrei Tarkovsky; Martin Luther King, Jr., speech, April 3, 1968, Memphis, Tennessee


Little Sister: Aristotle, Poetics

Iona (Pop Song): Matthew 19:24; Antônio Carlos Jobim et. al., “The Girl From Ipanema”

Ionia: H.D., “Helen”; Epimenides the Cretan; Laozi, Daodejing; Almeda Riddle, “Down in Arkansas”; R.L. Burnside, “Poor Black Mattie”
Echo Park: Wang Wei, “Deer Enclosure”

“www.ionahistory.org.uk, ‘You are here: Home”': Bottom image by zazzle.com; Václav Havel, New Year’s Address to the Nation, Prague, Czechoslovakia, 1990

“‘NAT'L’” (page 65): Bob Dylan, speech, February 6, 2015, Los Angeles, California

Concrete Shoes: Tommy Johnson, “Cool Drink of Water Blues”; Bruce Springsteen, “Born in the USA”

Iona (Origin Myth) (page 71): Philolaus of Croton


IAMa: “The Descent of Inanna,” Sumeria, c. 1750 BC; Bruce Springsteen, “Darkness on the Edge of Town”

Fragment: “In Order to Form Arizona”: Sappho, Fragment 1; Wang Wei, “Seeing Yuaner Off on a Mission to Anxi”

“Showing results instead for”: Man Ray, Object to be Destroyed (also titled Lost Object, Last Object, Perpetual Motif, or Indestructible Object)


The Slavs in Their Original Homeland (and the series of poems on pages 81-85): Alfons Mucha, Slav Epic, 1910-1928

or, Praise the Lord in Your Native Tongue: The CIA World Factbook: Czech Republic

Watching Kieślowski Backwards: Jia Zhangke, 21 City; Krzysztof Kieślowski: Red; White; Blue; The Double Life of Véronique; Decalogue; Blind Chance; No End

Mind Reader Blues: Bertha Lee Pate; Laurie Anderson, “The Cultural Ambassador”; Abraham Lincoln, speech, November 19, 1863, Gettysberg, Pennsylvania


Iona (Origin Myth) (page 93): Anaximander of Miletus; Hank Williams, “Jambalaya (On the Bayou)”

Iona (disambiguation): Anaximander; Sappho, Fragment 16; André Breton, Manifesto of Surrealism, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane; John Keats, letter to Richard Woodhouse, October 27, 1818; “Ode on a Grecian Urn”; Abraham Lincoln, speech, June 16, 1858, Springfield, Illinois

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——. “O Superman (For Massenet).” *Big Science.* Warner Bros, 1982. LP.


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