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TABULA

p o e t 1 c a



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The print issues of *TAB*: *The Journal of Poetry & Poetics* are special editions, each published at the beginning of the calendar year. These issues reflect the mission of Tabula Poetica: The Center for Poetry at Chapman University to create an environment that celebrates poetry in various forms and venues. The annual print issue engages the reader with poetry as a material object and asks that the reader negotiate between image and text. The design of the print issues does not assume a traditional role of quietly framing content; instead, design actively shapes the reading experience. The special print editions of *TAB* continue to experiment and explore the intersections between form and content, object and space, and reader and reading.

The 2016 print issue explores the representation of energy. Energy is best conveyed by experience, in context, generating an emotional effect. Yet, we *learn* energy in 2-dimensional static visual representations like weather system reports, combinations of molecules, and diagrams like the ones used to explain the energy forces of how the Twin Towers collapsed during 9/11. This issue contains four energy panels (movement, connection, destruction, sustaining) dedicated to the exploration and relationship among diagrammatic representations, the expression of energy, and poetry. Diagrams interact with text and visual compositions that occupy the space and create new visual representations of energy. The contrast and radiance of the back panels is a complete manipulation of diagrammatic language, returning movement, and chaos that leaves an emotional imprint to the experience of the viewer. Perforated panels empower the reader to redirect energies, recreate sequence and narrative.

Electronic issues, on the second Wednesday of every other month, follow this printed issue. Using these differing formats—print and digital—allows experimentation with design and materiality in a time when print and electronic dissemination coexist. *TAB* will not force either format to adapt to the other. The reading experience in virtual spaces is different than that of a printed journal. The electronic issues are shaped by Open Journal Systems, a federally funded, open-access system from the Public Knowledge Project designed to serve the public good globally. While the electronic files can be printed, each electronic issue are formatted for reading on the screen. Decisions about page size, typography, and composition are driven by the online reading experience, rather than to mimic a print version. *TAB* also makes use of the audio possibilities of digital dissemination.

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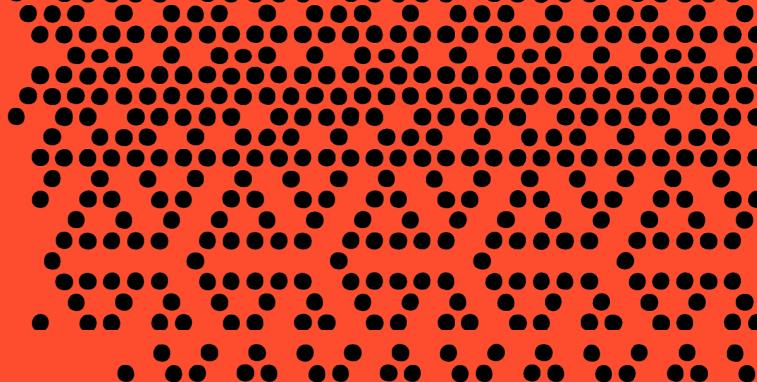
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CALLISTA BUCHEN

Callista Buchen is the author of *The Bloody*Planet from Black Lawrence Press and

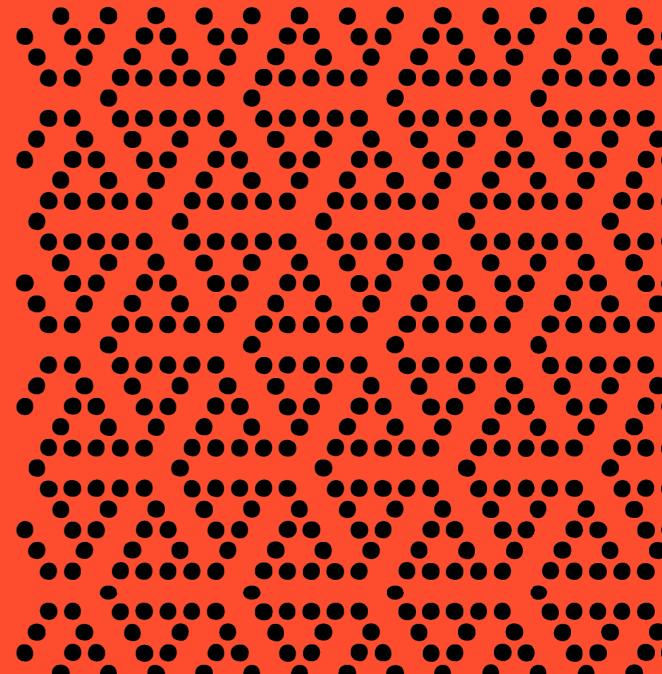
Double-Mouthed from dancing girl press.

Winner of DIAGRAM's essay contest, her

work has also appeared in Harpur Palate,

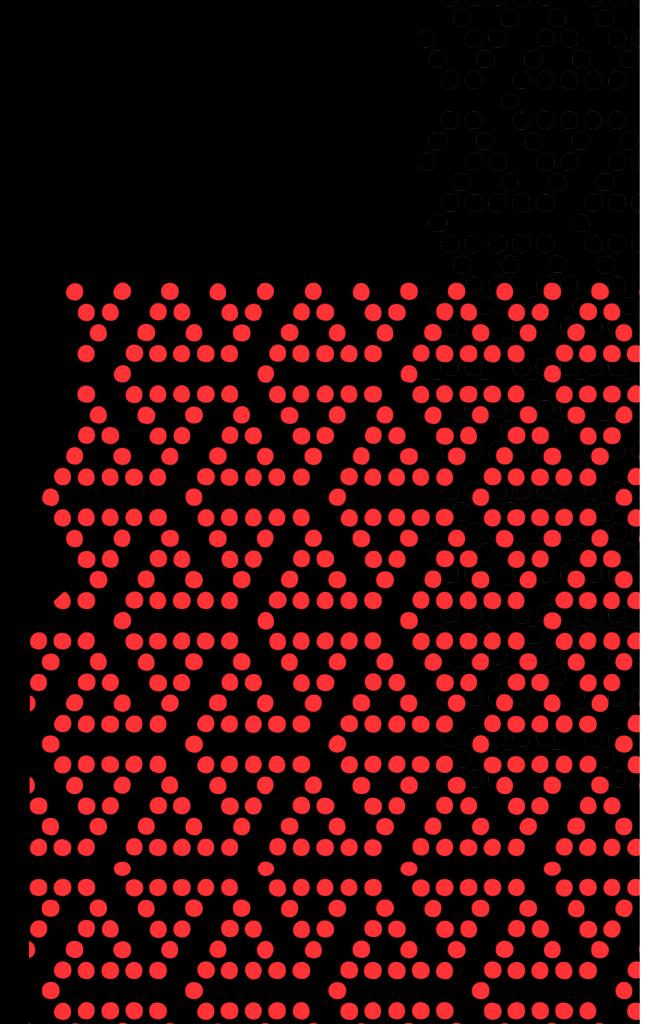
Puerto Del Sol, Fourteen Hills, and many
others. She is an assistant professor at

Franklin College in Indiana.



CURB

I read somewhere that having a child is a kind of death, which relieves me. A kind of permission to set my life on fire. I can tell them to stop looking. She's already gone, I say. An elegant disappearance: gradation rather than saturation, a flint, the turn of a kaleidoscope. I am orange or pale blue, some opposite color. Not the tone itself, but its sense, the difference between a shape and the color of that shape. We can paint the house and the sun bleaches it back. The shadow doesn't change until we knock it down.



DEBORAH DOOLITTLE

Deborah Doolittle lives and works in Jacksonville, North Carolina. Other recent work may be seen in *Bear Creek Haiku, Caveat Lector, Cloudbank, North American Review, Off the Coast, Poet's Espresso,* and *Trajectory*.

TURKEY VULTURES

hang-glide across the highway on struts of feathers and glue. Called buzzards by some who don't really have a clue, they are actually Nature's red-capped clean-up crew. Cloaked in ragged overcoats, dressed in tattered satin and tat, they become the ultimate vagabonds. They ply their trade, rag-picking yesterday's living. Then drunk and staggering under air dense with death's other pungent bouquets, they merely waddle away. Mornings find them out

hanging their wings, like laundry, heavy with dew and doing without, they know that "patience is a virtue" and in fact that life is like flight: the one and only balancing act.

STOLEN INTERLUDE

after the painting, Woman Reading, by Umberto Boccioni

She snatches this moment from her day to sit beside an open window and read about their love affair—the secret rendezvous, the cabin in the woods, the hasty kisses followed by a long and lingering embrace. It's her sole escape from the tedium of her day. She knows the kitchen sink awaits, the dirty dishes, too. The floors to sweep the furniture to dust and wax, and always

laundry waiting besides its tub. And as her day is winding down, a dinner to prepare and another round of dishes to clear away. she sighs and leans into her story. Sunlight comes with the breeze that parts the lace curtain and lifts the pages of her book. She slowly reads, her eyes dawdling over ever word. Wisps of her hair slip the confines of her bun and make a halo around her head.

Behind her, the cart man trundles on down the road and a horse grazes in the pasture. What's that? She thinks she hears a step upon the landing and lifts her head. She places a thumb to mark her place and holds her breath, her moment to herself about to vanish. Then her daughter peers around the door, and she tucks her book into the basket with the mending.

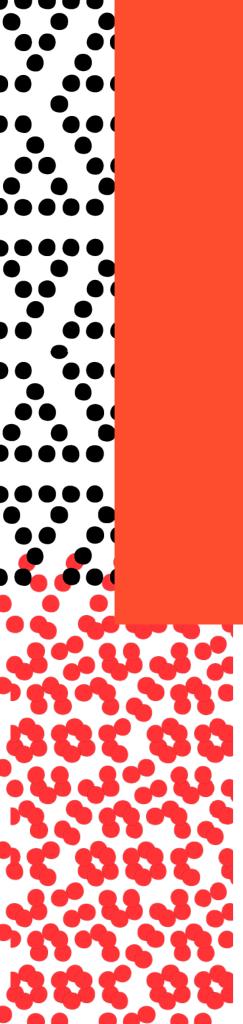
NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE'S PRIMROSES

How he admired the night-blooming kind; neither prim, nor properly red, this harbinger of spring, this first blush of love mingling with moonlight.

How they transformed the familiar edgings of a path he knew to be something illusive, filling in the chinks and crevices of decay in very unexpected ways.

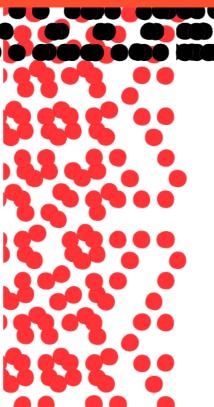
That's how nature enhanced humanity with glowing gems that could adorn even nettles at the prison gate, inspired him no matter how fleeting or short-lived.

Conducive as they were to enchantment, illuminating any room and making it more suitable for romance. How the moon figured in all of this, he dared only guess.



ELLIOTT

Okla Elliott is an assistant professor at Misericordia University. He holds a PhD in comparative literature from the University of Illinois and an MFA in creative writing from Ohio State University. His nonfiction, poetry, short fiction, and translations have appeared in Cincinnati Review, Harvard Review, Indiana Review, The Literary Review, New York Quarterly, Prairie Schooner, A Public Space, Subtropics, and elsewhere. His books include From the Crooked Timber (short fiction), The Cartographer's Ink (poetry), The Doors You Mark Are Your Own (a coauthored novel), and Blackbirds in September: Selected Shorter Poems of Jürgen Becker (translation).



CHICAGO LOVE STORY—OR: THE VEHICLE LURCHES THREATENINGLY

Ancient children tussle on the grass. They are at serious play. We walk past them, leave them to their ancient ways.

Hold my hand; it is yours. Lick the plum pulp of my tongue; it is yours.

We translate the sidewalk's prose into poetry.

> [Forgive my Romantic excess. Forgive my romantic excess.]

A helicopter flies over Chicago, and I pretend Plato pilots it.

> [He is searching for us, but we duck into an alley.]

Steam rolls from our mouths, our heat warming the world. I recall to you our expert fucking from the night before.

> [The best sex is sex you shouldn't be having.]

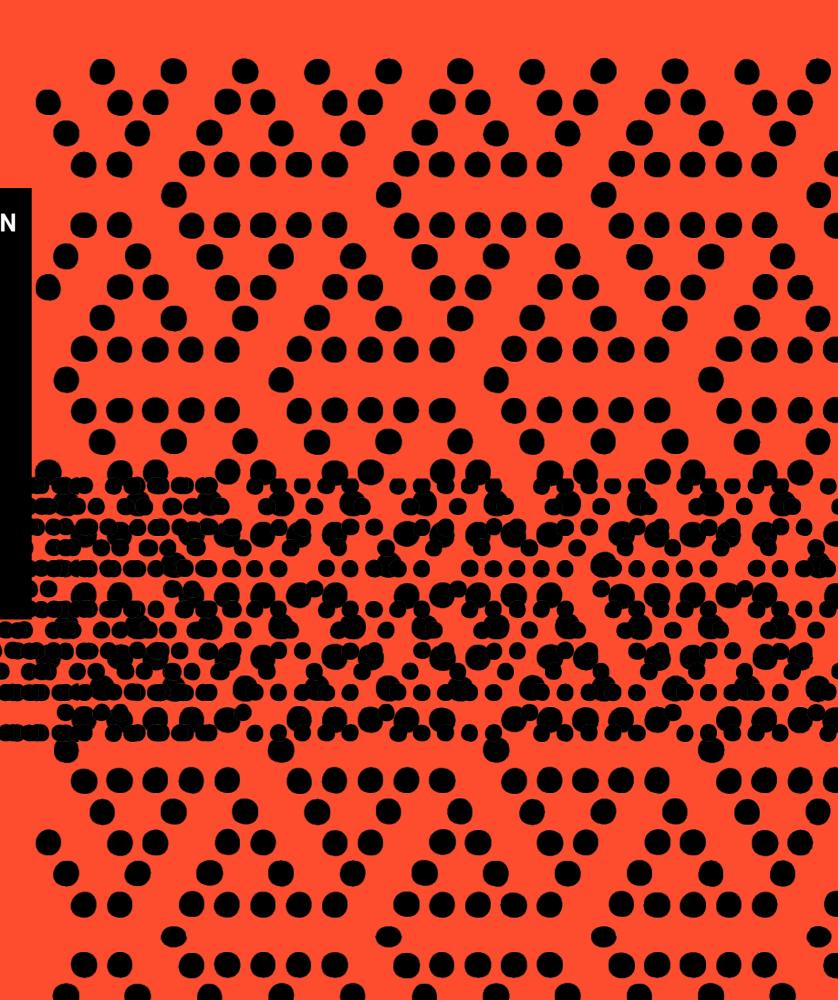
What is it about you?, I wonder. But I know. It's the pinwheeling tilt of your scintillating lilt, the slow sway you enter every room with, the way your words singe the air.

There, over there, the helicopter is landing. The vehicle lurches threateningly, but the passengers step out, unharmed.

Let's go in here, I say, pointing to a hip establishment. I have a strong craving for hot coffee. That is all I want right now, and I do not question it. I am questioning nothing today.

GENEVIEVE KAPLAN

Genevieve Kaplan is the author of In the ice house from Red Hen Press, winner of the A Room of Her Own Foundation's poetry publication prize, and a chapbook of continual erasures entitled settings for these scenes from Convulsive Edition. Recent poems can be found in West Trestle Review, Entropy Magazine, Fact-Simile, and Zyzzyva. Kaplan lives in Southern California, where she edits the Toad Press International chapbook series, which publishes contemporary translations of poetry and prose.



WALL-CLIMBER, DUCKER-UNDERER

today does not reveal any difference, any motive in the afternoon, the sparking of a plan, we call to complain, we push our faces through, we sit in the crest of the sunlight, we hold on to the fix in the air, we listen for it

I'm all too close to stopping to listen

the hush beyond the fence it's full of webs. it's a voice, after all there's a body there. there's the thing I want, the there, there. you hear it too, you've got a broom. you claim you'll take care of it, cricket in your hand, bird on your shoulder, a regular man, a tall solid man. and I know it's yours, too

ELLINE LIPKIN

Elline Lipkin is a Research Scholar with UCLA's Center for the Study of Women and also teaches poetry for Writing Workshops Los Angeles. She is the author of the *The Errant Thread*, selected by Eavan Boland for the Kore Press First Book Award, and *Girls' Studies*, published by Seal Press. She lives in Los Angeles, California.

AMONG MOTHERS

after Philip Levine's "Among Schoolchildren"

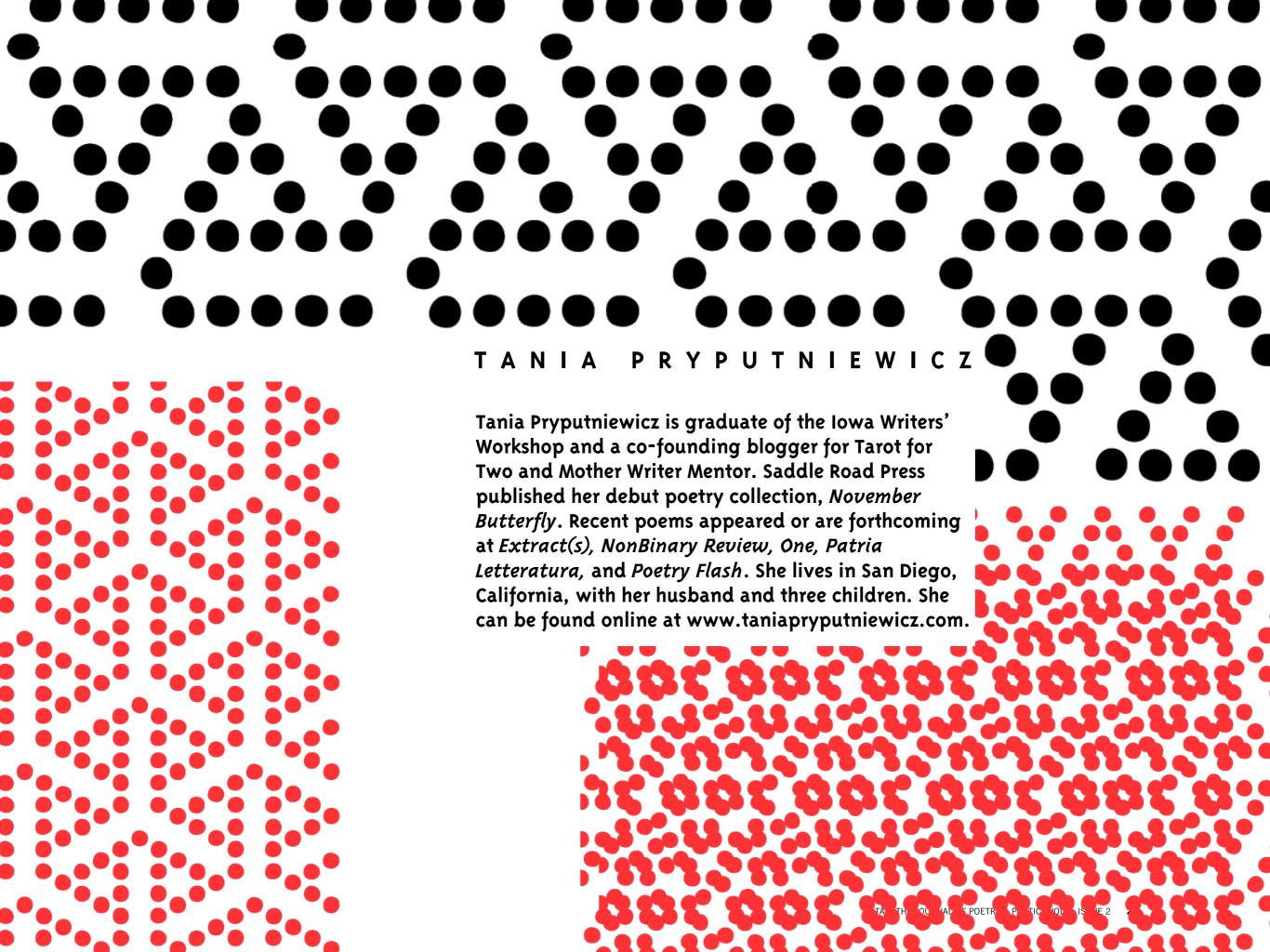
I walk among the rows of new mothers settled like islands on the parenting classroom floor, babies half-seen, half-shrouded, wrapped as tightly as possible to draw their tiny bodies back.

Each spills: bags, snacks, blankets, pads. Tiny compartments filled with miniature items previously never known: the round pacifier pouch with its zip and clip, Cheerios cup with starfish opening, silicone nipples graded slow-flo to fast, and bundles of wipes, each marked for nose, bottom, face, and hands.

Treading carefully to an open patch we settle, baby weight still in each body, baby weighted now in arms, yeast rising from the top of each head as our bodies, ciphered, stitched, stained, shocked, leak and spill, left on tap.

We sink into the drone of the morning, each sudden sound both urgent and tedious as time becomes a bleating telegraph drilling unknown code — the hour long short, short long, quick, tap tap, staccato of boredom suddenly rising into rushed arpeggio flooding.

Just weeks ago we walked the wards, bent low to hear the newborn's breath, stuttering and majestic, such wonder in their sleep, such purpose in their eyes, as our ravaged edges bled, bellies rent, hollowed, robbed, so that each cell could then reknit our sundered selves, a revenant left to ghost our now extracted hearts.



WALKING THE LAGUNA

for Reginald Shepherd, 1964-2008

Your life's dates appear beneath your poem in this month's issue of *Poetry*—casual white ink

on dark blue page. Hours later at a party, Bethany stoops to pick up a bleached skull,

scooping dank Earth out of eyeless orbits. What kind of animal do you think this was?

she asks the children. Ahead, the bull faces us: ten five-year-olds, their mothers,

the birthday boy's father. A newborn goat leaps sideways in a skitter to our midst:

knobbed hips, thin lips, tiny tongue, relief of his body knocking into mine,

pompous grass at my feet and wet metal clouds wicking into my chest, as if wrong

to care this much or cry for you, your guard around me when we danced in Iowa discrete

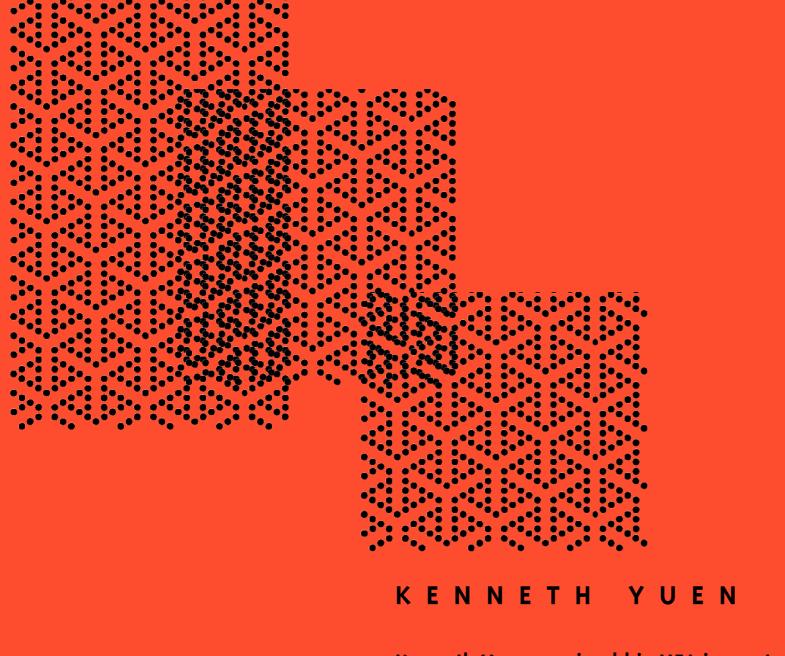
but loyal as this bull, tips of horn pricking sky. Bethany repeats, Hug the fence, though no-one

does, us mothers lifting younger siblings into arms the one tense moment he chose

not to charge despite sleet suck of boots lifting from muck so near his herd, pale yellow warblers fleeing. Bethany, with mud streaked fingers, cautious as a lover, traces

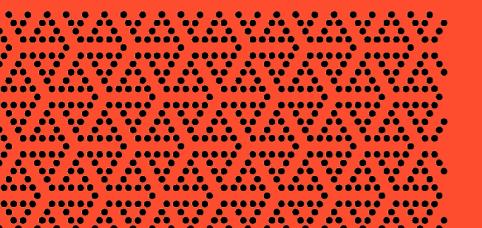
the curtain of cursive u's on a second skull where three bone plates met, knit, fusing

to house a life they were meant to protect, her child asking, What's that writing on its neck?



Kenneth Yuen received his MFA in poetry from Cornell University. His work is

forthcoming in The Seattle Review.



DITHER

1.

Let us not make random conjectures about the most important matters.

2.

It was the present then & it still is. There's nothing to be done about it, so give up. The present presses forward like a stone, astringent, bit by bit. & there are twists of tungsten brighter than the moon. We sit & wait it out. The night. In these white rooms. Below the orange streetlamp light heaves out in circles on the road. We make fake suns to light the way. The better practice is to wait. The better practice is to lift the glass & drink.

3.

In other words we hide, perduring as a one who might make some soft work of tears in time. Later on, we'll recollect our time in here as more than this fluorescent nightmare that it is right now. But we need information: known: obscure: What are you—or what were? When you left you left us in the dark. The sleep we have is false but growing out. In these white rooms.

4.

Heraclitus says that for each person there is a single, common universe, whereas in sleep each person turns away into his own private universe.

5.

Heraclitus said that if the sun did not exist, as far as the rest of the stars are concerned, it would be night.

6.

Heraclitus says that the moon is bowl like; that the universe is constituted of fire.

7.

Here in these white rooms above we're coming in to ourselves. The river that we walk through is just us. The sky rephrases deluge in another key. No time for rest, for thought. We are prepared to reject the corrigendum of the soul in favor of another: error in translation, information entropy: the breaking of bodiless voices come to banjaxed light. We blink. Time passes, blunk. We're rolling like a bauble through our human hands obscure & weeping. In an effort to refuse. We looked over the fire & saw fire. Accomplishing nothing.

8.

The sewn moon come sundered in uncritical reliance: the constitution of paratactic things: the goal: the form: the use of it:

how to be pretty in my body

9.

It's not there isn't time for it, it's just we're always in the wrong year. No time for rest, for thought. In this white room, we'll show you how the music starts & everything we see about you echoes out into tomorrow's heat. As time goes slowly, severing us at geologic speed unnoticed from ourselves. So what? The sun churns, turns. Heraclitus rings that time is ruffling our pebbled shore. Instead of singing out our ache, I'm spinning more & more. If I could be so dizzy then I might find hope.

10.

& this is the blank of undoing. The blank of illusion. We ask important questions: Can we smoke in here? The jaw—what holds it up, what keeps it closed? The body will not be refused. How long does the lightfoot hold? I don't know how to speak like this to you. But I can offer you a coke. I lack an intimacy sufficient for my jargon: hypotaxis, signified, the tender holding of another mind: a jargon for my what (my who) I am about.

11.

To come out of my fear toward & into these green rows lacustrine filled with willows is a hope worth building for. Putting on my body where I will or want to dream of fashioning a pall in which to put my gender, where I'll burst. The body is no limit. Here we're lapsing kindness into trepidation: petty

into felt & flung along in what elastic thoughts we have: there's something in me needs to queer stability: toward the simple mellow pleasures: putting on red nails, heels: asking if what's meant is meant for me: or if the bone & structure stumbles: what holds me up's unwonderful: forget it: someone tell me how the sun will not overstep its measures when it rises up again tomorrow.

12.

Heraclitus says thunderbolt steers the totality of things, says thinking is common to all.

13.

Cloudbreak thin through sun like white lightning

the greater part is grey the greater part hides sky

hides light I live in clouds shadow on

these cloudy days turn a cloudy eye to home

a still small cloudbreak a still small home

14.

Heraclitus said that the stars are compressed portions of fire.

15.

to darn away the hole wherein

to darn away the voice the mouth of

& so refuse the orange roll of lamp

light past lamp light past

lamp light where the car goes in & out of

what I hope to close or hope to open

in the purple of the year catharsis through the module

of perceived time darning away

the boundless iteration

the accessible world & catharsis of the stars

16.

Whenever a man is drunk, says Heraclitus, he is led along, stumbling, by a beardless boy; he does not perceive where he is going, because his soul is wet.

17.

Heraclitus said that the sun is that intelligible ignited mass which comes from the sea.

18.

We ripple like the rhapsodist's wrist at the cadenza. How garrulous, how full of entropy: his neck twists, his body cascades like a thought toward the end of a phrase rising from the brain down through the throat kniving the tongue onto the palate. Look how wet my soul is.

19.

in the mimesis of windows sight falls we flesh out bodies on bodies wrought when you spoke bluely so also the sky

when the image of his hair was cut he appeared bluely praise

without praise absence & the scurry of seconds around

sunder me left hand from right in the purple of the year

through the boundless catharsis of time a gargantuan laughter

the string hailed as a simplicity a cosmological grief

one thing fell and one thing yet to fall

20.

He scribbles on the ontic morning to become the marginalia, the small notes kept at home on sheets where we don't need to perform. But here in these white rooms his is a derivative sky. Him we devour. To have only been present & not here! To have been present & not here in these white rooms above. He asks what he can do. The gravel of his eyes rolls over these low streets toward the unkempt places. He watches the mirror

& its body immense.

Body he devours. A serial mythographer. Insecure fire rolls. The wine is so red. I am him what him / what he / what who / lay down your claims to skepticism. Under the moon, a wet idiolect of dew coalesces.

21.

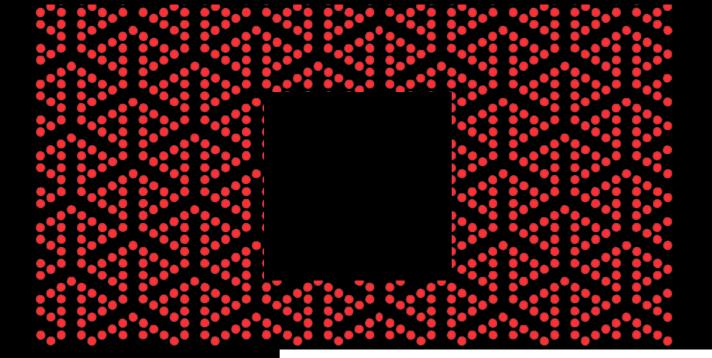
Understand. We bare our ignorance through the streets. The body will not be refused. We're moving on from that. In the catharsis of the year tomorrow is a wry thing, growing on the callous of the hard low sky, & bewildering. It all just dithers downward, sewing together like cloud clover. Tomorrow is the stone to which we say more weight.

22.

Heraclitus is not wrong to call a month a generation.

23.

This is why.



KATIE MANNING

Katie Manning is the author of three poetry chapbooks, including The Gospel of the Bleeding Woman. She has received The Nassau Review Author Award for Poetry, and her writing has been published in Fairy Tale Review, New Letters, PANK, Poet Lore, and elsewhere. She is the founding Editorin-Chief of Whale Road Review, and she is an assistant professor of Writing at Point Loma Nazarene University in San Diego. Find her online at www. katiemanningpoet.com.

Following Barack Obama's inaugural speech on January 20, 2009, Elizabeth Alexander read a poem that she had been commissioned to write for the occasion: "Praise Song for the Day." Although we don't often see media commentators and bloggers fired up about a poem, for a few days, at least, the mainstream media cared about poetry.

The negative reactions were so immediately and prominently published that even the Wikipedia entry for "Praise Song for the Day" notes this reception in its brief description of the poem: "Delivered directly after Obama's inaugural address, it received a lukewarm response and was criticized as 'too prosaic'." Within three months of the event, Micah Mattix, lecturer at the University of North Carolina, used the poem's negative publicity in the introduction to his article "Poetry and Subsidies: Is Materialism Ruining Creativity?" Before moving into his main claim—that U.S. poets are mediocre because there's too much money in poetry—Mattix simply drops the names of a few commentators who responded negatively to the poem to justify his own assessment: "it was a flop."

Much of the immediate criticism focused on Alexander's delivery of the poem. On the Seattle Post-Intelligencer website, their art critic Regina Hackett abused Alexander's reading in a blog entry titled "Giant step up for USA, giant misstep for poetry." "Her delivery was flat," Hackett wrote. "She sounded as if she were ordering a pizza on the phone. [...] Alexander's effort is the product of a limited imagination, an academic approach to rhythm and an anorexic understanding of imagery." Hackett's move from criticizing Alexander's reading style to criticizing her for being too academic was a common occurrence in the negative responses. In online discussion forums from the St. Petersburg Times to Entertainment Weekly, readers commented on posts about the inaugural poem by decrying her delivery as "awful," "poor," "monotone," and "choppy" (Bancroft and Tucker). Even Miller Williams, the inaugural poet from 1997, told an interviewer that Alexander did well with the task she was given, but then he criticized her delivery: "I wish she had something after the resolution of the poem to let us know clearly that it was over,' Williams said. 'Had she read it in my living room, I would have said, 'Keep your voice up at the end, and nod to the audience and say, 'Thank you,' when it's over'" (qtd. in Italie). From her tone to her speed to her conclusion, Alexander's delivery was picked apart by poets and non-poets alike.

Other critics claimed that the poem itself was boring and inappropriate for the occasion. Although Moira Weigel wrote positively about Alexander's larger work as a poet, her article in *The Guardian* held that Alexander had "offered bland and distractable universalism on the day that the world was watching." This view of the poem was echoed by an anonymous commenter on the St. Petersburg Times website: "Given the occasion and those in attendance maybe [the poem] should have been one with more umph! and not so somber in tone" (Bancroft). One of the harshest and most widely quoted critics, Adam Kirsch with *The New Republic*, called Alexander "a perfect, an all too perfect, choice for inaugural poet," but his claims that her "bureaucratic verse" caused her to "affirm piously, rather than question or challenge," also amounted to calling her poem bland.

Still other critics went so far as to deny that "Praise Song for the Day" was even a poem. Independent blogger Patrick Kurp posted an entry two days after the inauguration that denied the poem its genre and also took a swipe at Alexander's academic status: "Praise Song for the Day,' in fact, is not poetry but an inferior species of prose. It is what one expects from an earnest junior-high-school student with little gift for language, or from a professor at Yale." In a similar move,

The American Spectator's Tom Bethell belittles Alexander by calling her "Barack's pet poet," and he denies that "Praise Song for the Day" has any relationship to poetry: "I hesitate to call it a poem because it had so little connection to poetry as that art has been understood for centuries, indeed millennia. It was so dismal that the *New York Times*, in its 30-page special section the next day [...], failed to mention Alexander or print her poem. It had all the fizz of a week-old soda." An anonymous comment in the *St. Petersburg Times* online forum simply said, "THIS IS NOT POETRY!" (Bancroft).

The fascinating thing about these negative reactions to the poem is that most of the writers consider the poem only as they experienced it aurally. They respond to the delivery and to the features of the poem that they could hear during Alexander's reading, such as the simple language and familiar images. What Wikipedia and other widely read sources don't report, however, is that there was also a wave of positive responses to "Praise Song for the Day." Most of these analyses were published two days or more after the event, and they usually took into consideration the poem's written and more subtle formal features, such as its lines, poetic technique, and allusions. As Joel Dias-Porter wrote in his blog, "Having actually had the opportunity to peruse the text, my opinion of the piece has grown." It seems, then, that the most deliberate elements of artistry in the poem demand close reading. "Praise Song for the Day" elicited negative responses immediately after its oral delivery because it functions more fully as a written, visual poem.

Let's flash back to December of 2008 and put ourselves in Elizabeth Alexander's position:

Imagine getting this impossible assignment: write a poem that hundreds of millions of people will hear and read; make sure all of them can understand it; make it hopeful, but acknowledge the hardship America's undergone in recent years, and in not-so-recent ones; make it reasonably short. You've got, like, a month to work on it: go! (Teicher)

Alexander had only a few weeks to create a poem that would work well orally for an international audience on a historic occasion and that could be published as a chapbook and live in print beyond the inaugural moment. Under these circumstances, she did an impressive job of making a poem that could function in both the oral and written realms.

Oral Poem

"Praise Song for the Day" is not an orally composed poem. Alexander said in an interview that she kept notes on scraps of paper and then worked the poem out in writing: "It certainly broke the record for drafts—maybe 350 pages," she said (qtd. in Teicher). Further, it does not contain the traditional markers of an oral poem, such as patterns of rhyme and meter, which were historically employed in poetry as memory aids as much as for pleasure. Responding to Regina Hackett's critical blog entry about the poem, journalist and creative writer Nordette Adams wrote, "Hackett understands poems can be poems and not rhyme, but many Americans still believe words are only poetry if they fall within the definition of poetry learned in elementary school—pretty turns of phrase in near-even lines, ending in rhyme." Alexander's poem certainly does not live up to this expectation.

The poem does, however, show signs of its intended oral delivery because it incorporates one of the most important

features of spoken language: simplicity. The most complex words in "Praise Song for the Day" include "bramble" (line 5), "darning" (7), "edifices" (29) and "filial" (37), and the overall vocabulary works at a fairly accessible level. Most of the sentences are declarative and relatively short: "A woman and her son wait for the bus. / A farmer considers the changing sky. / A teacher says, *Take out your pencils. Begin*" (13-15). In the second half of the poem, Alexander also worked in some imperative sentences and fragments: "Say it plain: that many have died for this day" (25); "Praise song for struggle, praise song for the day. / Praise song for every hand-lettered sign, / the figuring-it-out at kitchen tables" (31-33). As the previous example also shows, the poem includes a large amount of word and sentence structure repetition, features that are more often necessary for communicating in speech than in writing.

Randy Malamud noted the poem's link to speech's simplicity in his article from the February 2009 issue of The Chronicle of Higher Education. Like most of Alexander's poetry, he said, "Praise Song for the Day' is at first glance conversational, understated—a pastiche of ordinary images." While these features probably would not cause someone to mistake an oral delivery of this poem for spontaneous conversation, they do link the poem to the more simple diction, syntax, and repetition of oral communication over written communication.

On his blog, editor and poet E. Ethelbert Miller also pointed out the relationship between Alexander's inaugural poem and Barack Obama's inaugural address:

Alexander's poem should be connected to the closing lines of Barack Obama's speech. Can we get a coda here? Obama quotes George Washington—and it seems like a Valley Forge moment. It's Winter in America. Alexander's "Praise Song for the Day" echoes this: "In today's sharp sparkle, this winter air, anything can be made, any sentence begun." Miller's observation again points to the oral nature of Alexander's poem; it serves to recapitulate and reinforce the message of Obama's speech that was given directly before it. While poems are composed in many ways and for various reasons, this poem was clearly meant to communicate via oral delivery in that specific setting.

Since "Praise Song for the Day" works, at least to some degree, at the level of spoken communication, it's interesting to consider its oral delivery from the perspective of communication theory. Models of communication abound, but as Ruth Finnegan explains in her book *Communicating*, the most pervasive and influential is the Shannon and Weaver model: "Communication is initiated by a sender 'encoding' [...] a 'message.' This is transmitted and, having survived more or less accurately depending on the distortions ('noise') on the way, reaches the 'receiver' who 'decodes' it [...]. The straight-line process is concluded by the successful receipt of the message" (13-14). Although this model has its limitations, it is particularly useful for its acknowledgement of "noise" as central to the communication process.

How might such noise have interfered with Alexander's communication of "Praise Song for the Day" to her audience? First, let's consider her live audience. They were on the National Mall to witness a historic occasion: the inauguration of Barack Obama. They were not there for a poetry reading. Many of them had been standing for hours in freezing weather to be present for this event, and they would have to move through crowds for some time afterwards to get transportation away from the inauguration. Obama had just finished his speech, so the audience members were jostling to get out of the crowd and cold when Alexander began to read her poem. These "receivers" were not very receptive.

Then there were the many people watching the event on television. Some may have simply wandered away or turned

off the program when Barack Obama's speech was finished. Some may have deliberately avoided the poetry reading. For those who stayed tuned in, any number of local distractions, language barriers, biases against poetry, disappointed political agendas, and other distortions could have interfered with their reception of "Praise Song for the Day." The television cameras also showed the crowd in D.C. dispersing during Alexander's reading—visual noise that must have had an effect on how viewers perceived the poem's importance and quality.

This noise certainly affected Alexander as the "sender" of the poem as well. Imagine standing at a podium on such an important occasion to read a poem you created while the audience in front of you disperses and the audience you can't see judges you (and will continue to judge you on this for your entire life). In addition to the psychological distortion this situation would cause, the outdoor setting, the large crowd, and the echo from distant speakers would create literal noise to interfere with your oral delivery of the poem. Considering all of this noise, it's a wonder that Alexander was able to communicate anything to any audience, and it might explain some of the immediate negative reactions, especially to her delivery style. Despite Alexander's best efforts with using simple, conversational language and despite the poem's connection to Obama's speech that preceded it, the initial communication of this poem was fraught with distortions that interfered with its oral delivery and made the poem less successful at reaching its audience.

Print Poem

Even though "Praise Song for the Day" should work well for oral delivery in an ideal communication setting, it functions more fully in writing, where people can take the time to see, study, and contemplate its more complex poetic features that are easy to miss below the surface of the simple language upon a first listen or even a first read. The importance of the title itself, for example, was probably lost on many people when they first heard the poem. It might have caused some to wonder why the poem didn't sound more like a song, and it might even have contributed to the accusations that "Praise Song for the Day" is not a poem.

The day after the inauguration, Carol Rumens' article "Elizabeth Alexander's praise poem was way too prosy" was published on *The Guardian*'s website. She began her critique of the inaugural poem by defining the praise song as a form:

The African praise song traditionally celebrates the life of an individual, giving their name, genealogy, totem animal, job, personal attributes, etc in a rhythmical, incantatory, call-and-response style. To use this ancient form was an idea with exciting potential, but, as it turned out, the title of Elizabeth Alexander's inauguration poem was more inspired than the poem itself.

While Rumens did the initial work of defining Alexander's title and form, she did not pursue the connections that might exist between Alexander's poem and the form. Instead, she simply dismissed the poem because it didn't neatly fit her expectation of what a praise song should be, which is, of course, not "prosy."

The following day, another writer, Joel Dias-Porter, published "Parsing the 'Praise Song" on his personal blog. Although posted online in a less lofty venue than the high-traffic British newspaper's website, Dias-Porter's analysis of "Praise Song for the Day" shows signs of deeper study and consideration of the poem's connection to the form. He notes that the praise song is a common form in Africa, "usually written in praise of people, living or dead." Then he goes on to explain

the significance of Alexander's choice to invoke the form: "Thus a praise song for the occasion mimics the Sankofa bird, a way to look both backwards and forward simultaneously. A way to honor her heritage as 'griot' while also honoring a momentous event." Dias-Porter looks beyond the surface differences between the poem and the traditional form and offers a thoughtful interpretation of how the praise song label places Alexander, an African-American woman, in the griot role on the occasion of the first African-American president's inauguration.

While the praise song label connects Alexander's content to an oral tradition, the poem is structured upon an intentionally visual form. The lines have no regular meter or syllable count, but they do have similar visual lengths on the printed page, a common consideration in free verse poetry. More significantly, the poem is organized into fourteen tercets with a final single line. "That the body of the poem is 43 lines is no coincidence," Joel Dias-Porter writes, "since Alexander is smart enough to know that while Obama is the 44th President of these United States, he is the 43rd person to serve as such. This is due to Grover Cleveland serving two non-consecutive terms as the 22nd and 24th Presidents." Once again, Joel Dias-Porter's analysis sheds light on Alexander's intentionality and craft.

This well-crafted visual structure was initially obscured, however, when *The Times* immediately ran a transcribed prose version of the poem based on Alexander's reading alone. Mark Doty, a prominent poet and professor, posted the accurate text of the poem on his blog that evening, and he offered this commentary:

Earlier today, the *Times* and other sources posted transcripts of Elizabeth Alexander's beautiful inaugural poem, but I hadn't till just now seen it with its lines and stanzas as the poet intended them. It's a fine example of the way a wellplaced line and a shapely stanza energizes and formalizes plain speech; the formal choices here emphasize the clarity, dignity and grace of Alexander's language.

In her review of "Praise Song for the Day," posted six days after the inauguration, Nordette Adams discussed the problem with this misprinting and addressed the early wave of negative reactions to the poem: "Certainly anyone critiquing this poem without having seen the correct typographical form as released by Graywolf Press does herself and the poet a disservice. Lines and line breaks may convey as much meaning as words." Doty and Adams don't exaggerate here; in written poetry, line breaks are crucial for emphasis and meaning.

Of course, some critics who did see the correct printing of the poem still took issue with its line breaks, particularly the line that ends in "of":

Say it plain: that many have died for this day. Sing the names of the dead who brought us here, who laid the train tracks, raised the bridges,

picked the cotton and the lettuce, built brick by brick the glittering edifices they would then keep clean and work inside of. (lines 25-30)

Adams also expressed her frustration with such reviewers who condemned that line as an "awkward construction" and "proof [Alexander] is a sloppy writer." "However, if you're not just a critic," Adams wrote, "if you're someone who actually writes poetry and crafts poetry, you know a word like 'of' jutting off the line in phrasing odd to the poetic ear must be there for a reason." Adams goes on to discuss how "of" visually and aurally sets up the central question and most important point of the poem that follows six lines later: "What if the mightiest word is love?" (36). In a poem with no set rhyme scheme, this instance of rhyme does stand out as significant and meaningful; ending a sentence and a line with "of" was not a grammatical error.

I would argue that ending that particular line with "of" also works to emphasize the opposition Alexander sets up between "the glittering edifices" and those who cleaned and worked in such buildings. In a poem composed of fairly simple language and short sentences, it is meaningful when we see two multi-syllables words at the end of one line followed by a line ending in "of" to conclude the longest sentence in the entire poem. When Alexander calls us to remember "the dead who brought us here," we're subtly reminded of the African slaves who built the White House and worked in it, and we're recognizing that this inauguration brings an African-American family to live in a position of honor and power within "the glittering edifices."

In his *Chronicle* article, Malamud points out additional poetic features in "Praise Song for the Day" that subtly refer to U.S. history and require a close reading of the text. He observes how Alexander uses the word "we" in a significant way: "Especially fitting, she frequently repeats the simple word 'we,' accentuated through the device of anaphora (a word echoed at the beginning of a series of clauses) to emphasize our commonality as a culture." Malamud also points out how Alexander's simple descriptions of people work as loaded metaphors:

"Someone is stitching up a hem, darning a hole in a uniform, patching a tire, repairing the things in need of repair." In those lines, Alexander delicately conveys how profoundly broken American society has become, what a mess President George W. Bush has left his successor, but she chooses the quiet metaphor over the caustic political accusation, making this poem more unifying (as befits a "praise song") than partisan.

Even though the poem acknowledges the nation's divided history, Alexander wrote it with a plural voice and with collective images that serve to draw all people—"beyond marital, filial, national" borders—together into one community.

In addition to her subtle references to U.S. history, Alexander also made some explicit allusions to people, texts, and organizations within the poem, but these allusions were easy to miss during her oral delivery because their language is so simple. While many early reviewers make no mention of this literary device, Joel Dias-Porter's thorough analysis of the text once again comes through: "The Malcolm X allusion 'Say it Plain' I recognized right away and loved, as well as the allusions to the Bible 'Love thy neighbor as thyself' and the aphorism taught to medical students 'First do no harm." Dias-Porter goes on to admit that he recognized "Take no more than you need" as an allusion, but he had to look it up to discover its origin: the environmental sustainability movement.

A poem that uses so many literary devices and that might require additional research to be completely understood is certainly more complex than a single hearing can convey. While "Praise Song for the Day" can work on the surface as oral communication, it works most fully when experienced visually as a written text.

Reception

In light of this analysis of the poem's oral and written functions, let's re-examine the initial critical reception of "Praise Song for the Day."

Reviewers like Regina Hackett and many anonymous authors of online comments criticized Alexander's delivery of the poem at the inauguration, labeling it "flat," "monotone," or the less specific "awful," and Miller Williams wanted a clearer sign of conclusion. Certainly Alexander was reading the poem in less than ideal circumstances with an incredible amount of communicative "noise," which must have affected her presentation in some negative ways, but was her oral delivery of the poem objectively poor?

In a *Star Tribune* article published the day after the inauguration, Hillel Italie portrayed Alexander's reading style in positive terms: "Alexander, wearing a bright red coat, delivering her poem in poised and determined style, offered a sketch of everyday work and interaction." Some of the comments in online forums were even more enthusiastic in their praise of the poem and its delivery. Such comments on EW.com included these: "Loved the poem and the delivery"; "Excellent poem, excellent reading, excellently thought provoking"; and "It's too bad that people think the reading is 'flat.' Alexander knows how the poem [...] should sound because she wrote it—she hears it in her head the way she wrote it to be read. I interpreted it as calm and matter-of-fact, a great choice for Obama's inauguration" (Tucker). Although the negative reactions have gotten more attention, even creeping into the Wikipedia entry for the poem, it seems that the initial aural experience of "Praise Song for the Day" actually led to a variety of responses and judgments about the quality of Alexander's delivery. This point of criticism is more about the hearers' aesthetic preferences than about Alexander's specific oral delivery of this poem.

Another major point of criticism from reviewers like Moira Weigel, Adam Kirsch, and more anonymous internet users was that "Praise Song for the Day" was bland and not appropriate for the inaugural occasion. Some of these did take into account that Alexander was only the fourth poet to read at a U.S. inauguration, and Kirsch even noted the unique pressure placed on Alexander in this specific inaugural context:

There was an extraordinary burden of expectation attached to Alexander's poem; I don't recall Maya Angelou or Miller Williams, the poets who read at Bill Clinton's inaugurations, getting the kind of attention that Alexander received in the last few weeks. The reason, I think, is that Obama's inauguration was just the kind of event that might inspire genuine poetry.

The rise of internet communication—blogs, internet news, online forums, and YouTube—also contributed to the added pressure and attention on Alexander's inaugural poem that didn't apply to her predecessors' work in the 1990s, and especially not to Robert Frost's first inaugural poem in 1961. These rapid methods of communication made it possible for people to criticize and dismiss "Praise Song for the Day" before they had access to a reliable written version of the poem.

Again, the poem's appropriateness for the occasion seems to be a point of contention rather than a widely agreed upon aspect of the work. Many reviewers did find that Alexander's poem worked within the small tradition of previous inaugural poems. Hillel Italie pointed to the poem's overall theme as a site of connection to this tradition: "Like Miller Williams' 'Of History and Hope' and Angelou's 'On the Pulse of the Morning,' Alexander narrated history as a hard, but hopeful

progression, a long and difficult question answered best by love." Some comments in online forums were less specific but still addressed the poem's aptness for the occasion. One said simply that the poem "was on the mark for today's time and the current environment in our country" (Tucker). Some prominent critics wanted loftier material, but many hearers and readers of the poem were pleased with its down-to-earth content.

Another important aspect of the poem's appropriateness for the inauguration was its accessibility. Due to the event's historic nature and due to the advanced technology available around the world, Alexander's poem needed to have fairly simple diction and syntax to communicate clearly to an international audience of all ages and varying levels of proficiency with English. "What if the mightiest word is love?" (line 36) the poem asks, and the worldwide audience can understand this simple language even if the concept pushes us to more complex levels of thought and practical application. The features of the poem that some critics dismissed as boring and inappropriate could also be viewed as tactful and fitting for the occasion.

Finally, there were those critics like Patrick Kurp, Tom Bethell, and the emphatic commenter from the *St. Petersburg Times* who claimed that "Praise Song for the Day" is not a poem, suggesting that it is simply prose and sometimes insulting Alexander's intelligence and academic achievements as well. Italie disrupts such a reading by placing Alexander's work not only in the tradition of inaugural poetry, but also in the context of her own and other American poetry: "Her poem was a grounded, non-topical summation and joining of minute details and infinite themes, connections that run through American verse from Walt Whitman to William Carlos Williams, and through such Alexander works as 'Fugue' and 'A Poem for Nelson Mandela." While it can be tricky to define poem in our contemporary context, where poems don't have to rhyme or even be broken into lines, the connections between "Praise Song for the Day" and previously established poems do seem to justify its poem label.

E. Ethelbert Miller also responded directly to criticism of the poem's "prosy" style by explaining how the poem functions: "For a moment Elizabeth Alexander is not a Yale professor she is a woman going about her daily work. [sic] She hears the music created by the people. If her words seem more prose than poetry, it's because she is saying it plain. This is a praise song in which the words of remembrance do the heavy lifting." While some critics used the poem's prose connections to attack Alexander personally, Miller cites that plain language to show how Alexander serves as speaker for the people instead of speaking above them as a Yale professor.

Alexander's use of poetic technique further suggests that "Praise Song for the Day" belongs to the genre of poetry. Nordette Adams echoed Miller's assessment of the poem in her blog as well, pointing especially to Alexander's artistry. "Praise Song for the Day" is poetry," Adams wrote. "Alexander plays with sound, rhythm, and imagery to convey what she means. The language is deceptive in its simplicity [...]. The poem has a density that is missed in the careless read." Even Elizabeth Alexander herself pointed to her use of poetic form when she encouraged critics to read the poem again. "Of the critics," Angela Dodson wrote, "she says merely that they 'are entitled to their opinions.' She hopes that they will take a fresh look now that the book is out, in part because versions on the Internet and in print did not convey accurate line breaks and stanzas." From its content to its visual form, "Praise Song for the Day" falls securely within the boundaries of poetry.

With this final criticism that the poem is not a poem, the critics point us to the real problem: they were not a poetry

audience. Knee-jerk media responses are not appropriate for the packed language of poetry, which often requires multiple readings because of its concentrated language. Those who dismissed the poem without unpacking the implications and allusions within its simple language were not a poetry audience. A poetry audience does the work of thinking and understanding. Those who printed the poem in prose from a transcription of Alexander's reading were not a poetry audience. A poetry audience knows that a poem's visual form and line breaks are important sites of meaning and that there is a difference between the oral delivery and the print realities of a poem. Those who said, like one anonymous writer in an online forum, "I thought poetry was supposed to sound musical," were not a poetry audience. A poetry audience realizes that poetry is a huge category, that poems can be lyrical, narrative, formal, free, prose, sense, nonsense, sound-based, and/or visually based language.

Even David Ulin, book editor of the *Los Angeles Times*, showed himself lacking as a poetry audience when he traced the history of U.S. inaugural poems:

Alexander is just the fourth poet to appear at an inaugural; the others are Robert Frost, who delivered his poem "Dedication" at the inauguration of President Kennedy, and Maya Angelou and Miller Williams, who were part of the first and second President Clinton inaugurations, respectively. That's rarefied company, but unfortunately "Praise Song for the Day" didn't measure up.

What is truly unfortunate is that Ulin gets his facts wrong. Robert Frost wrote "Dedication" for Kennedy's inauguration and planned to read it before "The Gift Outright," but the sun and snow glare interfered with his vision, so he simply recited "The Gift Outright" from memory instead ("Poetry"). A poetry audience would be aware of this history and would actually examine the previous inaugural poems before making the claim that this one "didn't measure up." Ulin and critics like him were writing without doing the work necessary for fully assessing "Praise Song for the Day" and without understanding the nature of poetry.

Many poems are intended for both visual and aural enjoyment, but no poem can do everything to meet the oral and print demands all at once. "Praise Song for the Day" was intended to work when read aloud on inauguration day and when read in print far beyond the occasion itself. Alexander worked in features to meet the needs of both modes of communication.

A poem certainly can't please everyone's aesthetic preferences either, particularly when mainstream U.S. culture places so little value on poetry. "Praise Song for the Day," however, did get a great deal of positive feedback during and after the early wave of negative reactions. Most reviews that included a close reading of the accurate text were favorable towards the poem. Angela Dodson reported that Alexander received "hundreds of letters and e-mails from people from as far away as Croatia, Tunisia and Vietnam about how they connected to the poem or specific lines of it." Nordette Adams also pointed out a few days after the inauguration that "Graywolf Press is being swamped with [requests] for the poem." She concludes, "So, somebody liked it." Perhaps now, as we near the end of Barack Obama's presidency, it's time to change the Wikipedia page and the mainstream perception of Elizabeth Alexander's inaugural poem to reflect the poem's reception more completely and accurately.

Note: Elizabeth Alexander's inaugural poem and reading can be viewed at www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/praise-song-day.

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