

UNSUNG MASTERS SERIES READING

Poets You've Never Heard of

Introduced by Poets You May Know!

December 4, 2020 @ 8pm Eastern/5pm Pacific time

ZOOM INFO:

<https://lesley.zoom.us/j/92367331327?pwd=M3AvcWdSNm9NcHhGNy9mWHZEWXNkZz09>

Meeting ID: 923 6733 1327 / Passcode: 708986

Readers:

Kazim Ali, reading Shreela Ray

Sharon Bryan, reading Gwen Head

Martha Collins, reading Joseph DeRoche

Graham Foust, reading Alvin Feinman

Rigoberto Gonzalez, reading Angela de Hoyos

Charles O. Hartman, reading Wendy Battin

Paisley Rekdal, reading Jean Garrigue

Crystal Williams, reading June Jordan

Kazim Ali on **Shreela Ray**

Shreela Ray was born in Orissa province (now called Odisha) in India in 1942. Born into a mixed Hindu and Christian Indian family, she spent her early childhood in England and India and then moved to the United States for college in 1960, attending the Iowa Writers Workshop to receive an MFA in Creative Writing, and later attended the Bread Loaf Conference. She developed relationships with many of the leading luminaries of the time who recognized her talent, among them W.H. Auden, Robert Frost, John Berryman, William Meredith, Isabella Gardner, Galway Kinnell, and Leslie Fielder and John Logan, with whom she studied at the University of Buffalo; Logan later wrote the introduction to the one and only volume of poems she published during her lifetime, *Night Conversations With None Other* (Dust Books, 1977).

Ray eventually married and settled in Western New York, where she also became part of the burgeoning poetry scene then centered around Al Poulin and the Brockport Writers Forum in Rochester, NY. She began publishing her work in national venues, including *Poetry*, around the mid 1960s. Ray's work was noted for its urbane and cosmopolitan phrasing, dark wit and the multiple lineages from which it drew—as much from a contemporary Indian lineage that might include Kamala Das and Eunice De Souza as a more global Anglophone approach to the lyric favored by Seamus Heaney, Derek Walcott, or Kathleen Raine. And yet at the same time Ray's poetry felt fully “American,” conversational, funny and tender with the brash bravado of second-generation New York School.

letter home

As the outward signs of winter leave us  
the purple crocus springs up  
in the neighbors yard and on the pavement  
pieces of broken beds and picture  
frames lie in a heap.

Your life is marked  
with no lesser executions:  
heat, rain, ice,  
births and broken wrists,  
deaths imagined and not imagined.

From time to time  
let me hear from you.  
“In June I shall sit for the examinations  
There is talk of marriage in December.”

But if word of me arrives during  
the rain and the rivers turn gray,  
I send my bitter angel to guide  
you. Let your letter say,  
“We have lost the records of your birth  
and departure. Nobody  
misses you in Bhubaneswar.”

A Miniature for Hemant Kumar

The March snow is with us  
between the two stalled maples.  
Its rude white silence glitters.

I will not come to terms.

I back up.  
The glass behind me breaks:  
ropes of red onions scatter on the floor,  
but I never take my eyes off  
and retreat.

Your pure voice, Hemant Kumar,  
that once could drug my peevish self  
and make me move  
once in the sunlight  
once in the evening  
like a dancer—  
keens for an alien.

Hai Babu,  
I should care  
if the sun warms the fields and Radha's feet,  
or that spring comes again to Kashi and Brindaban.

Night in April

The voice of the April wind addresses  
the unmarriagable awake  
in the real sleep of the body.  
The windows are open  
and the sleepy violets of the blood  
stir towards the dark outside;  
that final nakedness  
in the silhouettes of doorways  
and branches ascending and descending.  
To stay would mean for always  
I would remain to weigh and measure.

Let your breath enflame a second  
marriage for that end. As for me  
there is some other livelihood  
when the essences of things call me 'sister'!

Before I draw back my wings and fall  
into the keel of birdlike flowers  
by god I will make a garden of this place.

*Epithalamion*

The slightest brush of wings  
sets the spirit humming,  
swarming with stars.  
When Orion unbuckles his belt  
and rains the stars upon my head  
there is no business wanting the dead.

The cyclamen of the year is under snow;  
filament and another—ash.  
Snow is ash,  
woman and child,  
ash is ash...  
things I have touched.

How greedily they devour the blackness  
and are devoured.  
They never cry or grow absurd.  
Your gold bangle brands the nape of my neck.

I am disturbed...  
Is that blackness light?  
have you forgotten you were snow-haired at birth?  
I turn to salt and ash.

Armies of flies settle  
upon the cut melon of our summer  
to taste the red and sweet of our trouble  
with satisfaction.

I have loved—it is true,  
but it was nothing.  
That you are gone is true  
but it does not matter.

Besides, you would not like the taste of my mouth.  
It tastes too much of nettles and indignation.

This is the hardest of all,  
that we cannot choose to sacrifice  
where the Law has decided.

Hour of Darkness, Hour of Light

We have talked late into the night.

The fire is an old man  
and the lamp on the street  
has burnt out.

I beg you before I leave,  
if you have more wine,  
serve it now;  
if you have more to say,  
say it quickly and be cunning,  
even a little immoral—  
shine a knife in my eyes and ask,  
“Do you mean it? How does it feel?”

Or  
trouble my high bed with kings and tell me  
that saints with spinning wheels  
shall visit me.

Speak to me of fellowship and the love of God.  
Anything. Anything.  
Sustain my hand.  
Light this page.

Sharon Bryan on **Gwen Head**

Gwen Head was a precocious only child raised on literature, art, and classical music. Her mother was from a wealthy family in Texas and her father was a journalist for the *Times Picayune* in New Orleans. I met her when I moved to Seattle in 1978, and we became good friends.

Gwen's first two books of poems, *Special Effects*, in 1976, and *The Ten Thousandth Night*, in 1979, were both published in the Pitt Poetry series. Her third book, *Frequencies*, was published in 1992 by the University of Utah Press, and included new poems along with selections from those first two books. Her fourth and last book, *Fire Shadows*, was published by LSU Press in 2001. She died in March of 2019.

Gwen was also a publisher. In 1979, she founded Dragon Gate Books, which she ran out of her Port Townsend home. The press published 20 volumes of poetry and short fiction between then and 1987, including work by Laura Jensen, Linda Gregerson, Richard Blessing, and David Rivard, among others. Gwen had help and advice from Scott Walker, the founder of Gray Wolf Press, and from Tree Swenson, the co-founder of Copper Canyon.



EARTHWORM

Beneath root-tip stalactites  
past ossuaries of pebbles  
through the thin enlacing veins  
of subterranean rivulets fine as human hair

he has tunneled  
to blunder in a straight sprawl  
across blind concrete, a snapped  
drawspan blocking fully half a square

or a leaky pink garden hose  
layered with tape at the middle,  
humped folds of red skin  
wound like a loincloth over the plum-colored gonads.

Streamlined at both ends, double-engined  
charged with the energy of canceled reversals  
he plunges due east toward wet grass  
the slowest possible orient express

and the most adamant, his colors the stony  
salmon, ochre, and rose  
of the legendary city of Petra  
whose very name bespeaks rock.

The tense and dilatory motion  
of his spring-loaded anatomy  
is fraught, too, with the tardy elasticity of rock  
collected and releasing  
along faults made explicit  
by unfolding deformity.

Yet still I have not told how he moves:  
no whiplash meanders, no sinuous indirections  
for him, but rather a straightforward two-phase telescoping:  
a wrinkled and tightening hunch into himself  
then a blunt, bunched thrust, his smug unthwartable

snout persistent and gross  
as a thumb in the soup. And yet  
in his leisured digestion of distances  
peristalsis becomes dance

while he goes on and on, confiding, tireless  
endlessly extruding himself into the future.

SESTINA: SERAPHIM

Consider the technical difficulties of the sestina.  
 Consider the practical difficulty of Seraphim.  
 For years I've waiting for the right idea,  
 one with a mystically perfect division in six  
 clean segments. I doubted that it would come to me, ever.  
 Now it has, I see the world in a new light.

Indeed I see the world itself *as* light:  
 workaday bodies tremulous with a Sistine  
 splendor of form and color, which may be the Seraphim  
 agitating invisible wings, or the idea  
 of wings, between us and the ruddy facts of six p.m.  
 and autumn and leaves that we will never

know green again, cocooned for a instant, forever,  
 in a pulsating membrane of celestial light.  
 But back to the practical difficulties of the sestina.  
 Its crabbed, tedious form demands seraphic  
 patience of reader and writer alike. Ideas  
 cram and harden beneath its belligerent insect

carapace, setting innocent truths at sixes  
 and sevens. What honest poet ever  
 felt anything but dismay to see the delight-  
 ful flesh of the visible world lashed to the sestina's  
 hacked, procrustean form? Not even Seraphim  
 can mend the strewn, unsalvageable ideas

in its demented wake. And to salvage the idea  
 of Seraphim themselves, we must not ask how six  
 of anything, paired or tripleted, can ever  
 function at all—but see them in the light  
 of impossibilities (like troikas or sestinas)  
 blessed, rarely, by some inner benevolence. Seraphim

(take it on faith) can fly *and* hover. Seraphim  
 soar closest to the flame of pure Idea.  
 In the celestial hierarchy (nine, not six  
 Orders) they have the ear of God forever.  
 Their wings are fiery cataracts of light,  
 laving even the cloddish feet of the sestina.

Behold now the earth-bound, limping, six-fold, seraphic  
 Idea of the Sestina aloft in light,  
 silly and deathless, amen, forever and ever.

Martha Collins on **Joseph DeRoche**

Joseph DeRoche (1938-2013) was a professor of creative writing and literature at Northeastern University for many years. During his lifetime he published poems in periodicals, as well as a chapbook called *Ceremonial Entries*. A posthumous collection of his poems, *Ceremonial Entries*, edited by Kevin Gallaher and Martha Collins, was published by Cervena Barva Press in 2019.

Bestiary: Giraffe

I want to be a giraffe  
So I can see farther than anybody  
And eat leaves  
Off the tops of the most elaborate trees.  
Someone told me those are sweetest.  
I would be greedy beyond belief  
And no one could care  
For even in the middle of famine  
Giraffes don't eat their friends  
As lions do  
But browse in the pastures of green trees,  
Great tottering monuments.  
And the lions know  
How even with my head in the air  
I could be brought low.  
So with my huge long legs  
And luck  
I could gallop away,  
Although if cornered at last  
I, of all the animals,  
Would not bow down to my enemies.  
Giraffes aren't built that way.

A Little Song for Sainte Mary of Egypt

She was Cairo's golden whore,  
An endless and revolving door.  
    You know the kind.  
    They'll steal you blind  
If passion weren't a one-night stand,  
The kind who'll lend a helping hand  
    And only charge a modest fee.  
    For nothing good is ever free.  
Sainte Mary of Egypt, pray for me.

Well, she thought she'd take a little trip.  
She'd cruised so much, she thought a ship  
    Would give her rest.  
    She was thrice blessed.  
The Captain, First and Second Mate  
And all the crew became her freight.  
    She sailed to holy,  
    Happy ground by sea.  
Sainte Mary of Egypt, pray for me.

When they cheered her off the boat,  
She started her holiday all afloat,  
    Two inches off the ground,  
    Her name renowned.  
A thousand hearts would not forget.  
But in the Holy Land hard-edged regret  
    Pushed her back invisibly:  
    *That* special cup of tea.  
Sainte Mary of Egypt, pray for me.

All of a sudden, she thought of love,  
The thing she knew, God knows, most of,  
    The last poor trick  
    Where hearts will stick—  
And the ground moved up to kiss her feet,  
Her prostituted loves went sweet.  
    She spun by one degree,  
    Shook off idolatry.  
Sainte Mary of Egypt, pray for me.

Mary understood how she could skate  
Clear cross where most folk love or hate.  
    She let her hair grow long,  
    Became a hermit for a song.  
Dressed in her hair like a little bird,

She perched without a word  
    Upon God's tree.  
    They let her be.  
Sainte Mary of Egypt, pray for me.

I sing you her song because of this:  
As there are many ways to kiss  
    Or ways to hit  
    Or take the bit  
Between our teeth, some of us will say  
Her first life, or her last's the better way.  
    What's that to you or me?  
    In spirit or in body  
    She loved most liberally.  
Sainte Mary of Egypt, pray for me.

Saint Aelred's Dance

They raised him up to serve his king.  
     They taught him wit.  
     They made him fit  
 To serve in everything,  
 To conquer with a glance  
 The fickleness of chance.  
     In song, in dance,  
     In *gai musique*,  
 He learned to step, to kick,  
 To turn, to bow, to trick  
 His courtly partners into grace.  
     His handsome face  
     Illuminated space.  
     Love, in a word,  
     Became his god.  
 Aelred danced before his Lord.

Good servant that he always was,  
     He gave his all.  
     He had a call  
 To give great matters pause.  
 And he loved men.  
 It follows, then,  
     He drew to bed  
     The prince and bred  
 With him, instead  
 Of kin, the art of love  
 And all the wonders of  
     The flesh made word.  
     A love-struck god,  
 Aelred danced before his lord.

And danced, and danced, and giddily advanced.  
     His loving grew  
     And not a few  
 Entered his heart, and were entranced.  
     And loved him more.  
     And Aelred saw,  
 Not that love will go away,  
 Merely that it will not stay  
 And grows and grows each royal day  
     And pilgriming abroad  
     May hunt out God.  
 That lovers dance before the Lord.

Thus Aelred hungered for the grace  
    That never stayed  
    At rest, and prayed  
    To spin forever in a dancing place.  
    It's not from sin  
    He entered in  
An abbey on an English hill  
And taught us tenderly how will  
Will bind with love, but to fulfill  
    His self. And God  
    Took him as he  
    Was and had to be,  
    Most happily,  
Into his courtly, regal peace,  
To please the saints and without cease  
    Intoxicate the narrow way.  
    Divinely gay,  
    His dance, his pay  
    For room and board,  
Saint Aelred dances for the Lord.

*(all poems from Ceremonial Entries [Cervena Barva, 2019])*



Graham Foust on **Alvin Feinman**

Alvin Feinman was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1929. Educated at Brooklyn College, the University of Chicago, and Yale University, he wrote and edited documentary films in New York City before taking a position at Bennington College, where he taught writing and literature from 1969 until 1994. (Along with more than twenty other teachers, Feinman was dismissed from Bennington following the college's restructuring, which included doing away with their tenure system.)

His first book, *Preambles and Other Poems*, was published by Oxford University Press in 1964 and was re-released in an expanded edition, called simply *Poems*, by Princeton University Press in 1990. A posthumous collection, *Corrupted into Song: The Complete Poems of Alvin Feinman*, was published by Princeton in 2008 and remains in print. Edited by Feinman's widow, the literary critic Deborah Dorfman, this volume contains all of his published and unpublished poetry, as well as essays by Harold Bloom and James Geary.

Feinman died in Vermont in 2008. His last words were "I'm past tense." A fond remembrance by the late poet Reginald Shephard, who was one of Feinman's students at Bennington, can be found at the Poetry Foundation's website:

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2008/07/in-memorial-alvin-feinman-1929-2008>

Summer, Afternoon

This this will it always be, and why  
To ever argue for: here walking  
In its life, or sprawled, or loitering  
Down shallow valleys of the lawn:  
The trees that are there  
The pigeon bobbing through  
Its fallowgray ellipse of ground—  
The comfort of this ground  
Is physical: the sun  
Goes through your shirt like liniment,

The tilting

Child in fact now finding  
Its first step, the blue balloon, the string  
Of ducks drawn through the pond,  
The twined twain, the air that hears  
The day's gamegame, and where

Up through the cross-rack oak  
Deep gladed lofts of leaf, green  
Overtaking green and light and green  
Array and hold  
Their silent chord,  
To where the vergemost  
Quibble at clear nothing—there  
Is not a purer ledge of opening; nothing  
Here is not enough to be without  
All need to ever argue for.

Backyard, Hoboken, Summer

The sun beating on his brain  
And a cat slouching on the woodpile  
And flies nauseous with heat

He holds three eternal parameters  
The habit of his eye repeats  
The shapes he reifies

Let the silence silence its own ache

There is nothing but the plenum of a small red brain

The flies fall suppurant among the sticks  
The cat prepares for life

As though the moveable could move  
Even the impossible recedes

As though within the clot of brain  
Were space or sun to make a world

Snow

Now sudden, or again, this easy  
Quieter. You will know its fall  
And what it lies on,  
All, sign, metal, tar  
One long and skeletal reductum

As, but warm, this side the pane  
You purchase sense for.  
But the gods give down  
Chill unities, the pulver of an under-  
Lying argument, assuager

Of nothing nameable: you know  
The light snow holds and what  
Its bodyable shape  
Subdues, the gutter of all things  
A virgin unision; and how

The glass that frames this waste  
Of contour lames to blur  
The baffled figure  
To the drift that scurries through  
—Blear hazarder. More bold,

The discrepant mind will break  
The centrum of its loss, now  
Sudden and again,  
Mistake its signature, as though  
Snow were its poem out of snow.

Rigoberto Gonzalez on **Angela De Hoyos**

Angela De Hoyos (1940-2009) was born in Coahuila, Mexico. When De Hoyos was three-years old, her family moved to San Antonio, where she began to write poetry in high school. In the 1960s, De Hoyos became heavily influenced by the Chicano movement and created poems on sociopolitical themes, receiving invitations to recite her poems at different centers throughout the Southwest. She founded (with her husband) M&A Editions, which published other Chicano authors, particularly Chicana poets from Texas at the beginning of their literary careers, like Carmen Tafolla and Evangelina Vigil-Piñón. Her own publications include: *Arise, Chicano! And Other Poems* (1975), *Chicano Poems for the Barrio* (1975), *Selecciones* (1976), and *Woman, Woman* (1985). *The Selected Poems of Angela de Hoyos* was published in 2014 by Arte-Público Press.

La Siniestra

What do you pray for  
when you pray, gatita,  
up in your attic room  
like a monk alone?  
  
“I pray that the left claw  
you call a hand  
will turn  
into a rose.”

Let's Just Say That...

I have friends-enemies  
and... enemy friends  
galore. The former  
I respect;  
the latter  
I abhor.

Below Zero

No se puede traducir el aullido del viento: you can only feel it piercing your skinny bones through last year's coat papel de china	[One can't translate] [the howling of the wind]     [tissue thin paper]
--	---

walking to work from deep in the barrio una mañana de tantas bajo cero.	[one morning of many] [below zero]
--	---------------------------------------

*from* La gran ciudad

[The Great City]

And every day the price of hope goes up. Every day in the bleak pit the sun casts a thinner shadow (algún día nos olvidará por completo). [one day it will forget us completely] Hijito, ¿nos comemos hoy esta fiesta de pan o lo dejamos para mañana?	[Dearest son, should we eat today [this party of a bread] [or should we save it for tomorrow]
--	---

I Have No Dreams

I have no dreams save those you gave to me;  
though you gave graftings, I did not complain,  
for sweet was life with you, and always it will be  
when I am with you. Now, each dream brings pain  
and wounds me to the core; oh, I was dumb  
to give you all my verses, fling my pride  
away, go running each time you said, "Come."  
Yes, you may laugh, while I my tears I hide,  
and play the part of one who does not care  
(to fool no one but my poor self, indeed).  
Oh, life without you has been bleak and bare  
and without joy, for all it may be freed  
from giving; life now is but black despair,  
but I've found someone new to love—so there!

Charles O. Hartman on **Wendy Battin**

Wendy Battin was born in Wilmington, Delaware, on May 27, 1953. She went to Cornell for her undergraduate work, studied creative writing at Arizona, held two fellowships at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, and took her M.A. at the University of Washington in 1981. She had been publishing poems since before college, and in 1982 won the *Nation/Discovery* Award. In 1984, her first book, *In the Solar Wind*, was published by Doubleday for the National Poetry Series. She and Charles Hartman married in 1996, and traveled several times to Greece. Her second and final book, *Little Apocalypse*, received the Ashland Poetry Press's Snyder Publication Award and came out in 1997. She taught at MIT, Smith College, Connecticut College, and at College Year in Athens. She died in Mystic, Connecticut, on December 21, 2015, while at work on another book, *Far Good*.



Wendy Battin  
*Little Apocalypse*

Mondrian's Forest

*in memory of Greg Levey, d. February 18, 1991*

1. February 19, 1991

Every car drones a radio,  
every shop keeps the TV on.

The smart bombs are thinking their way  
into Baghdad, on video grids, in primary colors,

and yesterday in the middle of Amherst, a man  
drenched himself in gasoline and lit a match.

Next to the body bagged on the Commons,  
*Peace* on a sheet of cardboard, and his

driver's license, safe, and the old oaks  
safe, only the grass charred.

Already the papers have found  
neighbors willing to say that he'd *seemed depressed*,

someone to call him *isolated*.  
Nine Cambodian Buddhists come

down from Leverett in their saffron robes  
to pray. Two Veterans of Foreign Wars

heckle over the chants and the slow  
gong, a circle of voices on the block of lawn.

2. *Trees on the Gein, With Rising Moon* (1908)

When Mondrian began  
his world held rivers and trees, but not

the water's compliance and not  
the ash's stillness, for he was in them.

He stood five trees against a red sky;  
floated five more

in the mirror of the red river,  
all ten wringing their black trunks

into green.  
The trees on the water are breaking up,

breaking up, and still remain  
trees in the center of their dissolution.

The trees on the bank flame up inside  
their heavy outlines:

imagine a death in a man that pushes  
first here then there at the lively

pliable skin. The limbs  
distend, too full of ripening.

Thick oils eddy and ripple, a slick  
on the turbulence of things.

### 3. Bodhi

Today on the woods trail by Amethyst Brook,  
I prayed, *Kuan Yin*. Kuan Yin, enthroned

in the Asian Museum, enormous in limestone.  
*She who hears the cries of the world,*

her spine sheer as a bluff, and both hands open.  
I couldn't say if the polished eyes

were open or lidded. *In the new representation,*  
*reason takes first place,* wrote Mondrian,

his labor then to save the trees from the wind,  
to rescue his clean strict sight from the eyes

in his head, that saw only through blood.  
I'm not one for praying, but somehow the ice

breaking up, the meltwater surge  
of the brook gouged her name from my throat,

the way it gouges the bank out from under the trees  
and digs bare the root-weave. Not *she*

*who answers the cries, Kuan Yin. Not she who consoles.*  
Her body is still, is stone:

She who will not kindle and blaze  
when she hears a man burn.

Wendy Battin  
*Little Apocalypse*

Silver

All night the moon examined what the sun had made:  
wheatfields, hayfields, fields  
of poppies and the wind.

‘Take my silver,’ the moon said. ‘I have paid  
into the ocean’s pocket too long  
without return.’

The silver fell in the wind, and the wind picked it up briefly  
then dropped it. The poppies picked up the silver and promised  
the moon a harvest of dreams.

‘You’d promise the rain a gray hat,’ said the moon. ‘You’d  
promise the mountains a footstool.’  
The poppies nodded.

The wheat spilled the silver all through its tassels, pooled it  
and tasted, drank deep. ‘Thirsty,’ it whispered.  
‘I give you my thirst

and the chalky earth and the crackle of drought.’ And ‘Thirsty,’  
the hay said. ‘No, past thirst. I give you the woman  
scything me down,

ricking me up late in the field in your full false light.’ At that  
moment the woman looked up at the moon and thought,  
‘Cold mirror, release me.

Distance and silver dance with us always, partners not meeting,  
strangers not parting—Show me or leave me.’  
And thinking, sang. And singing, spent

her penny of future on brightness and longing.  
Then the moon, who had never before saved any thing,  
took the coin and moved on.

Paisley Rekdal on **Jean Garrigue**

“No Roots But in Water”

Jean Garrigue was born Gertrude Louise Garrigus in Evansville, Indiana, December 8, 1912, and died December 27, 1972 of Hodgkin’s disease. Over the course of her sixty-year life, she published 7 collections of poems and four collections of prose: one, a biographical study of Marianne Moore, one of her mentors. Other mentors included Delmore Schwartz and James Laughlin; on paper, her work appears influenced by Yeats, Eliot, Auden, Crane and Dylan Thomas. She edited a monthly information sheet for the USO, worked as a research editor for *Colliers*, and later taught, first at Bard, later at Queens, then the New School, the University of Connecticut and Smith, where she taught poetry courses. She won the usual raft of awards, including a Guggenheim and a National Institute of Arts and Letters grant, and was recognized in the 50’s and 60’s as one of America’s prominent, if not leading, poets.

And then, critically, it might be safe to say she disappeared.

There are of course glimmers. Kenneth Koch, in his address poem “To Living in the City,” mentions her:

James Laughlin  
published everyone  
while you and I  
met the poet Jean Garrigue  
in Sam Abramson’s bookstore  
which was I had been  
told the only place to buy  
Henry Miller’s  
Tropic of Cancer and  
she was very pretty  
wearing bright  
red lipstick  
a jacket, pants, and a tie.  
“Jean Garrigue! You’re  
the poet!” I said. And “That am I!”  
She knowingly  
replied. All right,  
Living in the City,  
I’m for you! I said . . .

Ashbery, in an interview with Garrigue’s most recent editor, JD McClatchy, recalls reading poems by her while still in prep school and being moved by their “surreal, dream-like quality” which he later found only in French poetry; thrilled, too, by her “strangeness that [he] empathized with.” But while such prominent members of the New York School may have known her work and been influenced by her, Garrigue herself could hardly be classified as writing New York School Poems. Neither a Confessional poet nor one interested in the abstract expressionism currently influencing postmodernism, Garrigue’s work appeared to move between her generation’s prevailing modes of

poetry, weaving together strands of romantic symbolism with surrealism, lyric autobiography and intellectual insight. Her poetry is, in that sense, unclassifiable to teachers eager to break poetry up into movements so as to satisfy historical requirements for literary periods. And yet, evidence of her contemporaries are everywhere in her work, tempered throughout by her own prevailing desire to make language go beyond the narrative forms of her poems: to make the reader as literally as possible enter into the world of her imagination. Whatever was personal about Garrigue's work was not meant to be anecdotal or, as in the work of Lowell or Plath, to reconstruct archetypal (and Freudian) narratives of familial loss or gender. Rather, Garrigue's symbols were primarily private, meant to invite the reader into her perception by, as McClatchy writes, "pushing [words] past their easy referential duties". Garrigue wasn't interested in recounting experience, but trying to reenact it.

Garrigue's poems are also beautifully musical and often baroque, in imagery, internal rhyme and in syntax. Here are the opening lines of the first poem that opens her *Selected Poems*, "From Venice Was That Afternoon":

From Venice was that afternoon  
 Though it was our land's canal we viewed.  
 There willows clove the bluish heat  
 By dropping leaf or two, gold green  
 And every tuft of hill beyond  
 Stood bright, distinct, as if preserved  
 By glass that sealed out light but not  
 Its gold or influence.  
 And floated on the speckled stream  
 A child of brilliant innocence  
 Where on the docks of green we stood  
 Naming it Love for its perfection.  
 This seemed to be...

And here the lines from one of her many long poems, "For the Fountains and Fountaineers of Villa D'Este"

Shield of the water and water wall,  
 Water roots, tentacles, bars,  
 spears of water and bolts,  
 I know nothing here but the sense  
 in this downflowing fall  
 of the wilderness of eternity.  
 And I am flailed to earth.  
 I am dank as a river god.  
 Scallop on scallop of the primeval flat water leaf  
 with no roots but in water, taking its substance from liquid,  
 coats me and jackets me over.  
 I am dense as lichen,  
 primordial as fern,  
 or, like the tree split at its base,  
 Covert for winter creatures and water-retreated life,  
 tip with my boughs very serpent green,

or in a grand spirit of play  
spurt water out of my nostrils.

What I love here is the shape-shifting quality of her verse, lines that sinuously twist and turn through sense, imagery, sound, taking the shape of Garrigue herself with it, so that she metamorphoses from poet-as-observer to poet-as-object, becomes the fountain, the water, the landscape round the fountain itself, all these things and still remaining the genius loci that presides over it all. Garrigue's late poems use syntax to its fullest extent, making the poems feel restless, taking her reader into image upon image so quickly she has no choice but to experience the poem first by sense, rather than reason. When Garrigue writes: "I know nothing here but the sense", she elevates sensual experience to the state of intellect, recalling the mandate of her Romantic forebears who valued spontaneity and imagination as the wellsprings of true art. And while Garrigue's narrators shapeshift, they do so by way of expanding the "I's consciousness rather than by fragmenting or questioning its possibility as a cohesive, authentic authority. Her use of and examination of authorial identity isn't like that of other modernist or postmodern poets who used collage and fragmentation to highlight the "I's psychic disintegration ; rather, Garrigue's poems employ a maximalist's engagement with language in order to expand the first person's consciousness, voraciously cataloguing the sensual world with which the author, increasingly, finds herself empathetically connected. Even Garrigue's language seems to disavow Modernist precepts to strip lines down to their essence, away from any Victorian "slither", cadenced—as Williams imagined them—according to American rhythms and speech patterns. In that sense, there is something very old-fashioned about Garrigue's poems—old-fashioned even at the time she was writing them—and may be one of the reasons for their current critical negation.

Interestingly, this old-fashioned quality to her poetry may have roots in her biography. Garrigue's decision to change her name from Gertrude to the androgynous Jean (I can't help but think about that tie Koch mentions she wore, and that deep red lipstick), to return Garrigue back to its French roots—even, it seems, changing the pronunciation from Garrick to Garreeque—suggests either a fear of appearing unsophisticated to the literary establishment or a conscious decision to link herself to Old World cultural narratives. Perhaps both. McClatchy, in his introduction to Garrigue's *Selected Poems*, suggests she was haunted by a fear of mediocrity, filled, as he writes, "with uncertainties and discontents" about the measure of her talent. Other poets too appeared to have noticed this, Moore and Schwartz in particular urging her to stop worrying and keep writing, Moore adding that she would also do well to "abandon her esthetic obsession with sex." Regardless, it appears Garrigue thirsted for fame and was dominated by a nervousness about her literary reputation, and perhaps this contributed to the intensely baroque style of her earlier writing, some of which—while beautifully cadenced—is so insistently "poetical" it's hard to read. For me, her best poems are the long ones which showcase her rhetorical strengths and leaven the essential density of her imagery. The one I'll end with is my favorite and, perhaps, her least "typical" though most accessible poem: "The Grand Canyon." At the time she wrote this poem, Garrigue was teaching on the West Coast, had fallen ill and, after her diagnosis of Hodgkin's, had decided to return to NY for treatment. "The Grand Canyon" was written during her long car-trip back east, a year before she would die from the disease. The poem is composed of only 4 sentences, but it is a massive compiling of fact and image in which the poet, confronted by her impending mortality and by the Sublimity of the canyon itself, attempts to enter into our ongoing historical narrative through a ritualistic recitation of the canyon's geologic layers. The recitation suggests that at least some part of the poet must remain in the world, will become part of it, her consciousness—like ours—neither

destroyed nor negated by the brute fact of the canyon's evolution, but woven into its ever-changing structure. Here is the poem.



The Grand Canyon

Where is the restaurant cat?  
 I am lonely under the fluorescent light  
 as a cook waddles in her smoky region visible through an open arch  
 and someone is pounding, pounding  
 whatever it is that is being pounded  
 and a waitress cracks with the cowboy lined up at the counter  
 lumberjacked, weathered and bony  
 intimates, I would guess, of the Canyon,  
 like the raven that flies, scouting above it,  
 of the hooked face and the almost flat sleek wings.

Where is my cat? I am lonely,  
 knocked out, stunned-sleepy,  
 knocked out by the terraced massed faces  
 of the brute Sublime,  
 color inflamed,  
 when I came to the edge and looked over:  
 violaceous, vermilion  
 great frontal reefs, buttes,  
 cliffs of rufous and ocher angles,  
 promontories, projections, jutments, outjuttings  
 and gnarled mirlitons, so it seemed,  
 twisting up out of depth beyond depth  
 gnarled like the juniper tree  
 rachitic with wind I hung on to  
 as the raven's wing, glassy in the light of its black,  
 slid over me

there at the edge of this maw, gash  
 deepest in the world that a river has made  
 through an unwarp in the earth's crust,  
 thickets of tens of thousands of gorges eaten out  
 by freezing and thawing, tempests, waterspouts,  
 squalls and falls of the river  
 with its boulders, pebbles, silt and sand sawing down

through the great cake of geologic time,  
 eight layers laid bare,  
 the total effect creating what geometrical effect  
 in a rocky silence so clear  
 a bird's voice, even a boy's  
 is spunged out, sucked up by this stillness  
 stinging, overpowering the ear,  
 pure condition of the original echoing soundlessness  
 this voluminous wrung resonance

welling up out of the handiwork  
of the demiurge wrestling down there  
in an infinity of imperceptible events  
some ten million years,

ages blanching to think of,  
taking the switchback trail,  
slipping and sliding,  
forever slantwise descending  
into new confrontations of parapets,  
chimneys, mantels, segments of angles,  
modelings of rock of slackness an accidental tensions  
combined with the effect of its weight—  
the total effect never total for never can you see it all, not even guess  
at mazes of the proliferation,  
and the river will not be visible  
except from a driven angle,  
the snaken twists of its rapids looking petrified, frozen  
from the distance of a deep mile:

somebody saying a mountain could be plucked up by its roots  
and dropped head-first down there and it wouldn't dam up the river  
so that the waters would run over

and that Washington Monument could be kept out of the rain  
under one overhanging of an otherwise vertical red wall

where the gold of the light on that chaos of creases nervously darts  
like the violet-green swallow stitching its leaps and arcs  
over the gliding raven,

over the camber of columns, tawny rotundas of ruins  
writhed, mottled, crested with shells,  
escarpments  
downbeaten by frost and rain,  
parallel rangings of  
rostrums, pulpits and lecterns,  
and the mad Tiberius arches groining  
cave holes on cave holes in the same wall of limestone, red  
from the ironstone drippings,

Aztec pyramidal temples rising in hundreds of steps  
to the summit of the seemed shrine  
curtained, girdled with snakes and necklaces of hearts,  
wet with sacrificial blood,

rusticated building blocks jutting out in warlike ramifications of forts,  
stockade the black frosted rock,

towers of the baldness mounting like obelisks,  
pyramidal forms from the sands of Egypt,  
crag vertiginous, cupolas, alcoves,  
amphitheatres, arenas, organ pipes, flutings,  
porches of rock, wedges of shadow in perforated rock,

and the gold of the light nervously darting  
on the Bright Angel shale, pink with long stripes,  
on the lavender blue of the Shinumo Quartzite,  
on the deeper rose of the Hakatai shale,  
on the blond Coconino sandstone  
riddled, it's said, with the trails of sea worms,  
on the grey Kaibab limestone  
with casts of shark teeth and horn coral imbedded

like the Hermit shale of the topmost formation  
with footprints of salamanders, insect wings four inches in length  
and even a dimple left by raindrop during some era of burning  
and hailstorm, torrent and drought,  
era on era stacked here,  
untold era on era,  
as the eye like a long-legged insect on a windowpane  
slithers and shudders up and down  
the banded and ribboned, ribbed the system of rock,  
into and out of shadows,  
chromatic world of what glitters like phantoms,  
corrugations of scaffoldings appointing to chill  
over the continuous surface,  
assemblies of aggregations  
sand-pocked and pitted,  
ridged, wind-serrated,  
tawny thresholds in the lying out there of the steeps,  
in the drinking up of the stillness  
pressed in by the gorged rock  
deepening in the light of the motes of beams  
under those clouds that like water lilies  
enclosed within them this silence received  
that they graze upon and are gone.

Crystal Williams on **June Jordan**

Jamaican American poet/essayist/activist/feminist/educator, June Jordan (1936-2002) was born in New York, NY, the daughter of immigrant parents. A prolific writer, the emphasis of her life's work might be said to be the illumination of oppressive ideologies and practices and the liberation of oppressed peoples. Her work is known for its political and social relevance as well as for its deep commitment to accessibility.

In an interview with *Alternative Radio*, she said the role of the poet in society is: “Always to be as honest as possible and to be as careful about the trust invested in you as you possibly can. Then the task of a poet of color, a black poet, as a people hated and despised, is to rally the spirit of your folks...I have to get myself together and figure out an angle, a perspective, that is an offering, that other folks can use to pick themselves up, to rally and to continue or, even better, to jump higher, to reach more extensively in solidarity with even more varieties of people to accomplish something. I feel that it's a spirit task.” ([Poetry Foundation](#))

Of Jordan, [Toni Morrison wrote](#): In political journalism that cuts like razors in essays that blast the darkness of confusion with relentless light; in poetry that looks as closely into lilac buds as into death's mouth ... [Jordan] has comforted, explained, described, wrestled with, taught and made us laugh out loud before we wept ... I am talking about a span of forty years of tireless activism coupled with and fueled by flawless art.<sup>[30]</sup>

And Thulani Davis wrote in the [Village Voice](#): “In a borough that has landmarks for the writers [Thomas Wolfe](#), [W. H. Auden](#), and [Henry Miller](#), to name just three, there ought to be a street in Bed-Stuy called June Jordan Place, and maybe a plaque reading, ‘A Poet and Soldier for Humanity Was Born Here.’”

And [Alice Walker wrote](#): Jordan makes us think of [Akhmatova](#), of [Neruda](#). She is among the bravest of us, the most outraged. She feels for all of us. She is the universal poet.<sup>[30]</sup>

Poem About My Rights

*for my sister, Susan Griffin and my comrade, Patricia Ann Murray.*

~ June Jordan, published in *Essence Magazine*, 1978

Even tonight and I need to take a walk and clear  
my head about this poem about why I can't  
go out without changing my clothes my shoes  
my body posture my gender identity my age  
my status as a woman alone in the evening/  
alone on the streets/alone not being the point/  
the point being that I can't do what I want  
to do with my own body because I am the wrong  
sex the wrong age the wrong skin and  
suppose it was not here in the city but down on the beach/  
or far into the woods and I wanted to go  
there by myself thinking about God/or thinking  
about children or thinking about the world/all of it  
disclosed by the stars and the silence:  
I could not go and I could not think and I could not  
stay there  
alone  
as I need to be  
alone because I can't do what I want to do with my own  
body and  
who in the hell set things up  
like this  
and in France they say if the guy penetrates  
but does not ejaculate then he did not rape me  
and if after stabbing him if after screams if  
after begging the bastard and if even after smashing  
a hammer to his head if even after that if he  
and his buddies fuck me after that  
then I consented and there was  
no rape because finally you understand finally  
they fucked me over because I was wrong I was  
wrong again to be me being me where I was/wrong  
to be who I am  
which is exactly like South Africa  
penetrating into Namibia penetrating into  
Angola and does that mean I mean how do you know if  
Pretoria ejaculates what will the evidence look like the  
proof of the monster jackboot ejaculation on Blackland  
and if  
after Namibia and if after Angola and if after Zimbabwe  
and if after all of my kinsmen and women resist even to

self-immolation of the villages and if after that  
we lose nevertheless what will the big boys say will they  
claim my consent:

Do You Follow Me: We are the wrong people of  
the wrong skin on the wrong continent and what  
in the hell is everybody being reasonable about  
and according to the *Times* this week  
back in 1966 the C.I.A. decided that they had this problem  
and the problem was a man named Nkrumah so they  
killed him and before that it was Patrice Lumumba  
and before that it was my father on the campus  
of my Ivy League school and my father afraid  
to walk into the cafeteria because he said he  
was wrong the wrong age the wrong skin the wrong  
gender identity and he was paying my tuition and  
before that

it was my father saying I was wrong saying that  
I should have been a boy because he wanted one/a  
boy and that I should have been lighter skinned and  
that I should have had straighter hair and that  
I should not be so boy crazy but instead I should  
just be one/a boy and before that

it was my mother pleading plastic surgery for  
my nose and braces for my teeth and telling me  
to let the books loose to let them loose in other  
words

I am very familiar with the problems of the C.I.A.  
and the problems of South Africa and the problems  
of Exxon Corporation and the problems of white  
America in general and the problems of the teachers  
and the preachers and the F.B.I. and the social  
workers and my particular Mom and Dad/I am very  
familiar with the problems because the problems  
turn out to be

me

I am the history of rape

I am the history of the rejection of who I am

I am the history of the terrorized incarceration of  
myself

I am the history of battery assault and limitless  
armies against whatever I want to do with my mind  
and my body and my soul and

whether it's about walking out at night

or whether it's about the love that I feel or

whether it's about the sanctity of my vagina or

the sanctity of my national boundaries

or the sanctity of my leaders or the sanctity

of each and every desire

that I know from my personal and idiosyncratic  
and indisputably single and singular heart  
I have been raped  
be-  
cause I have been wrong the wrong sex the wrong age  
the wrong skin the wrong nose the wrong hair the  
wrong need the wrong dream the wrong geographic  
the wrong sartorial I  
I have been the meaning of rape  
I have been the problem everyone seeks to  
eliminate by forced  
penetration with or without the evidence of slime and/  
but let this be unmistakable this poem  
is not consent I do not consent  
to my mother to my father to the teachers to  
the F.B.I. to South Africa to Bedford-Stuy  
to Park Avenue to American Airlines to the hardon  
idlers on the corners to the sneaky creeps in  
cars

*I am not wrong: Wrong is not my name*

My name is my own my own my own  
and I can't tell you who the hell set things up like this  
but I can tell you that from now on my resistance  
my simple and daily and nightly self-determination  
may very well cost you your life