

THEY SAID

A Multi-Genre Anthology of Contemporary Collaborative Writing

EDITORS SIMON EMUENCH DEAN RADER ASSISTANT EDITORS SALLY ASHTON JACKIE WHITE



Black
Lawrence
Press

CONTENTS

Introduction 1

POETRY

Kelli Russell Agodon and Martha Silano

I don't blame you 9
Field Transmission of Tulip Virus in Patriotic Colors 10
Jointly Responsible 12

Maureen Alsop and Hillary Gravendyk

Ballast 14

Maureen Alsop and Brenda Mann Hammack

The Corpse Is Not Exquisite (when it rots and, yet,
the skeleton inside) 16
The Corpse Is Not Exquisite (when it rots and, yet,
we do not look) 18
The Corpse Is Not Exquisite (At the old house we
mulch grey pachysandra & peony) 19

Maureen Alsop and Joshua Gottlieb-Miller

Heirloom, Stereograph 21
EIR 22
Song, Mary 23
0909_FAR_50 24

Maureen Alsop and Lissa Kiernan

Aphrodite's Thirst 26
Perhaps It Was a Clearing, 27
January Itinerary, Parenthesis 29

James Ardis and Maggie Woodward

Script Notes for *Nekromantik* 30

Cynthia Arrieu-King and Ariana-Sophia Kartsonis

Fox Shoots Hunter in Belarus 34
Windshelf 35

Amy Ash and Callista Buchen	
Building as Cradle	36
Flight as Conversation	37
Forest as Story	38
Devon Balwit and Jeff Whitney	
Letting Bones Speak	40
The Lighting Strike	41
Tom Barlow and Diane Kendig	
In 2005 We Find This Somonka We Sent By USPS in 1975	43
Molly Bendall and Gail Wronsky	
Crystal on a Rope	45
Eyes/Faux Leopard	46
Tokyo, My Poodle	47
Stars/Knots	48
Mary Biddinger and Jay Robinson	
The Czar declares it is too early	50
The Czar has nicknamed himself Frankie Machine	52
The Czar is a little worried	54
Kimberly Blaeser and Margaret Noodin	
Transformations: <i>Ziigwan</i>	56
Undocumented	57
Sarah Blake and Kimberly Quiogue Andrews	
The Sea Witch Moves to Land	59
The Sea Witch in Hearsay	60
The Sea Witch Takes a Walk	61
Why the Sea Witch Lives in Bones	62
The Sea Witch as a Figure of War	63
The Sea Witch Needs a Mortgage for the Land, If Not for the House of Bones	64
CL Bledsoe and Michael Gushue	
How to Lick a Thousand Stars	66
Kodachrome	67

John Bloomberg-Rissman and Anne Gorrick	
Sonnet 1 – My beauty sounds like itself	68
Sonnet 9 – He said, “I’m drinking the beautiful Scotch.”	69
Sonnet 29 – In contrast, Klee cut analytical trenches	70
Andrea Blythe and Laura Madeline Wiseman	
A Gathering of Baba Yagas	72
Traci Brimhall and Brynn Saito	
The Watchtower	75
The Library	76
The Cemetery	77
The Bridge	78
John F. Buckley and Martin Ott	
If Poets Had Conquered America	80
Michael Burkard, Erin Mullikin, and David Wojciechowski	
What We Found in the Woods	82
Elizabeth-Jane Burnett and Tony Lopez	
Sea Holly	84
Tina Carlson, Stella Reed, and Katherine Seluja	
Leda’s Petition to Lilith	93
Dear Leda	95
Anders Carlson-Wee and Kai Carlson-Wee	
Dynamite	97
Sleep	99
To the Rail Cop at Rathdrum	100
Minnesota Roads	102
The Raft	103
Brittany Cavallaro and Rebecca Hazelton	
Not, Friends, His Worst Idea	104
In Us We Trust	106
Travis Cebula and Sarah Suzor	
from “Last Call”	109

Christopher Citro and Dustin Nightingale	
And Me With Only a Bottle Opener in My Pocket	116
Staring Out a Window Echoing the Actual Moon	117
I Fear We Have Made a Terrible Mistake	118
Ben Clark and GennaRose Nethercott	
from “Dear Fox, Dear Barn”	120
Brian Clements and Maureen Seaton	
Your Love is Gone	126
Cathryn Cofell and Karla Huston	
I Cling To	129
Mackenzie Cole and Tony Ruzicka	
Memory	131
Mackenzie Cole and Alicia Mountain	
When You Horse Around, How Do You Horse?	133
Tide Pull	134
Michael Collins and Annie Kim	
Ghosts	136
Beginnings	137
Juliet Cook and j/j hastain	
How Do Sticky Legs Have Meaning?	139
James Cummins and David Lehman	
...And Turning for Home, It Was Secretariat!	141
Kristina Marie Darling and John Gallaher	
The Practice	144
A History of the Pastoral	145
Kristina Marie Darling and Carol Guess	
3-Tiered Steamer	146
Silk Flowers, Trussed	147
{Cups and Saucers}	148
Crocheted Tissue Box Holder	149
Jon Davis and Dana Levin	
A Still Fog. A Flat Sea.	150

Matthew DeMarco and Faizan Syed	
In Vacuo	156
Story of the Young Spriggan	159
Kendra DeColo and Tyler Mills	
What to Wear to Report Your Stalker to HR	162
Poem with a Million-Dollar Budget	165
Challenge in TV Yellow	169
Cat Dixon and Trent Walters	
from “The Searchers: A Poetry Suite”	172
Natalie Diaz and Ada Limón	
Cargo	178
Eastbound, Soon	180
Sometimes I Think My Body Leaves a Shape in the Air	182
Isn’t the Air Also a Body, Moving?	184
Tyler Flynn Dorholt and Joe Milazzo	
from “Tropopause” II. [It was not what we wanted to meddle with]	187
Denise Duhamel and Maureen Seaton	
Floridada	191
Exquisite Politics	193
Interview with a Comic Strip Diva	194
Caprice	196
Alicia Elkort and Jennifer Givhan	
Aunt Lucy Packs a Suitcase	199
Why Death? Why Mud?	201
invention of the (shrinking/growing) myth or how I learned to shift & shift again	202
A Small Metamorphosis or The Power of Seeing	203
One by One	204
Chiyuma Elliott and Michael Peterson	
Please please follow me	205
Kate Hanson Foster and Paul Marion	
Star Grace	206

Elisa Gabbert and Kathleen Rooney	
The One about the Dog	208
The One about the Unheimlich	209
The One about the Incongruity Theory of Humor	210
John Gallaher and G.C. Waldrep	
Your Father on the Train of Ghosts	211
Your Lover, Later	213
Ideal Boating Conditions	215
The City Experiment	217
Ross Gay and Aimee Nezhukumatathil	
from “Lace & Pyrite: Letters from Two Gardens”	
Summer 2011	219
Autumn	221
Benjamin Goluboff and Mark Luebbers	
Bill Evans Solos Alone	224
Bill Evans is Arrested for Heroin Possession at JFK	225
After the Death of Scott LaFaro	226
Carol Guess and Daniela Olszewska	
The Passenger Seat of Your Car, Barreling Down Lakeshore Drive	228
The Other Centralia	229
Hypochondriac Ex-Nurse	231
Vinyl-Scented Nostalgia Candle	232
Your Bedroom, Which Used to Be a Utility Closet	233
Shrode Heil	
Multiple Choice	235
We are dealing with your request	237
Derek Henderson and Derek Pollard	
from <i>Inconsequentia</i>	239
Jeannie Hoag and Kyle McCord	
Someone Tonight is Knitting	244
Self Seen as Art 5	246
Leslie E. Hoffman and Pushpa MacFarlane	
Fire-Born	248

Grant Holly and Rachel Neff	
Lost	250
Ron Horning and David Lehman	
The Greeks	251
Amorak Huey and W. Todd Kaneko	
Slash Throws His Guitar into the Lake	257
Megan Kaminski and Bonnie Roy	
from “Seven to December”	
Dear Bonnie dear nine a.m.	258
Say I wake to pigeon’s groan	259
It’s hot here too and perfect morning	260
Dear Megan, slept in a city	261
Megan Kaminski and Anne K. Yoder	
from “Sigil and Sigh”	
Refracted Light. Web in the Corner	262
[Auroleus Phillipus Theostraus	
Bombastus von Hohenheim]	263
Persis Karim and Dean LaTray	
How Many Blues?	264
Ariana-Sophia Kartsonis and Stephanie Rogers	
Reading Anne Boleyn’s Lips	266
Rope Ladder Rant for All of Yous	268
Mary Kasimor and Susan Lewis	
held, for example	272
David Lehman and William Wadsworth	
Falstaff	274
Rae Liberto and Molly Thornton	
no	276
My Country Is a Party	278
Sarah Lilius and Jennifer MacBain-Stephens	
from “The Women Under the Ocean”	
#1	280

Sarah Maclay and Holaday Mason	
from “The ‘She’ Series: A Venice Correspondence”	
She sees the obsidian. . .	282
And I imagined her lying there. . .	284
Kevin McLellan and Derek Pollard	
The Sky as Vault	286
Erin Mullikin and David Wojciechowski	
Dear 2012	288
Isobel O’Hare and Sarah Lyn Rogers	
This is not my beautiful hell	290
Christine Pacyk and Virginia Smith Rice	
Now, Within Reach (Which Will Bind Me)	292
The Internet Confirms How They Broke	
Down the Door	293
Above the Frost Line (A Full, Clear Glass)	295
Derek Pollard and Shannon Salter	
A Flower in Joshua’s Arms	297
Ethel Rackin and Elizabeth Savage	
Silent e	301
Andrea Rogers and Paige Sullivan	
from “Duets”	
Etiology	305
Mother Lessons	308
Philip Schaefer and Jeff Whitney	
Pagan Era	311
Boiled Noise	313
Tantrum Party	315
Martha Silano and Molly Tenenbaum	
Like a Small Wooden Doll, Three Wooden	
Balls Stacked Up	317
My Father’s Body, Laid in the Grave	319
Wikipoesis	
[the body’s politic]	320
[We took to each other.]	321

FICTION

- Nin Andrews and Mary Beth Shaffer**
Sleeping Beauty 325
- Tina Jenkins Bell, Janice Tuck Lively, and Felicia Madlock**
Looking for the Good Boy Yummy 327
- Elizabeth J. Colen and Carol Guess**
True Ash 336
- Dana Diehl and Melissa Goodrich**
The Classroom Beneath Our Classroom 341
- Bryan Furuness, Sarah Layden, Andrew Scott, and
Matthew Simmons**
Tempus Fugitive 348
- Carol Guess and Kelly Magee**
With Killer Bees 359
- Ron Horning and David Lehman**
from *Land of Opportunity* 365
-
- ## CREATIVE NONFICTION
- Anne-Marie Akin and Laura Jones**
Southlandia 375
- Jennifer Atkinson and Gillian Parrish**
Dream Test: A Renga of Devotion 383
- Elizabeth K. Brown, Luther Hughes, Caroline Kessler,
Ryan Masters, Gabe Montesanti, and Sylvia Sukop**
Of Breath: After Montaigne 391
- Page Delano, Ellen Geist, and Katt Lissard**
Loving Mao 398
- Jacqueline Doyle and Stephen D. Gutierrez**
Imaginary Friends 407
- Denise Duhamel and Julie Marie Wade**
13 Superstitions 415
- Tracy Jane Gregory and Susan Gregory**
Mother-Daughter Bonding: An Exploration of Stupid 420

Meghan McClure and Michael Schmeltzer from "A Single Throat Opens"	424
Brenda Miller and Julie Marie Wade Heat Index	431
CROSS GENRE	
Amy Sayre Baptista and Carlo Matos Letters from <i>The Book of Tongues</i> or the Book of Inês de Castro	443
Andrea Blancas Beltran and Melissa Matthewson first, dislocate	446
an occasion of rings	447
Mel Bosworth and Ryan Ridge from "Second Acts in American Lives"	
Sitcom Stars Storm the Beach	449
Recovery	449
Last Decade	450
What Goes Around	450
Justin Lawrence Daugherty and Jill Talbot On Leaving: A Conversation	452
Craig Foltz and Quintan Ana Wikswo The Heart Is An Organ Which Must Be Bled	455
The Brothers Grandbois Stool Pigeons	466
Mistake	467
Carla Harryman and Lyn Hejinian from "The Wide Road"	469
Tom Henthorne and Jonathan Silverman The Noise of Collaboration	480

Rebecca Hart Olander and Elizabeth Paul	
from “How the Letters Invent Us: A Correspondence”	
“Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also”	488
No Apologetic Adjuster	490
Of Mothers and Matisse, the Honey and the Bee	491
Of All Possible Forms	492
Justin Rovillos Monson and Leigh Sugar	
from “omnis cellula e cellula”	494
Contributors	499
Acknowledgments	524

INTRODUCTION

One story, many voices~

What is the appeal of creating a story or a poem in cahoots with another writer—or even a group of writers? Why would a writer abandon their own particular voice for a mutant expression they can't quite control? Perhaps the allure lies in the challenge of having a puzzle to solve. Or a conundrum to cause. A contest. A love fest. Surely there are as many reasons as there are practitioners. But for whatever reason, enthusiasm for collaborative writing is on the rise. Everybody's doing it. Or so it seems.

Not that there's anything particularly new to communal narrative from an historical perspective. From what we know, the origins of storytelling began in the collaborative milieu of oral tradition when the collective knowledge that formed a culture's identity was memorized and performed. Within orality, many voices shaped a common story, a mythos passed from generation to generation. Story making was participatory, enacted through song and dance, the members embodying and partaking in the narrative together, individual identities submerged in a communal experience.

With the advent of writing, orality gradually faded, over time relinquishing narrative as public song and performance to the silences of solitary scribe and to paper. Written works could be signed, sealed with wax, their authority established, even assigned some value. Words became permanent things to be owned that could be transferred across space and time versus words as notes in a shared aural experience, inseparable from communal exchange and the transient moment.

Evolving writing technologies continue to shape our writing practices and our ideas about what literature is. The printing press led to the need for the copyright, the right to make copies of a printed work for distribution and profit, further locating story-making as the work of an individual, if not a gifted, writer, one who not only creates but who necessarily protects their authorship—the creative process—and subsequent rights to their work from plagiarism. And while it might surprise a

Western reader to realize that the concept of plagiarism, of “stealing” words from another owner, isn’t universally held across cultures, the idea decisively shapes our Western, capitalist literary tradition. It’s what the publishing industry depends on, making current-day literary collaboration a somewhat transgressive act.

And yet it can be argued that the collaborative enterprise never really left us. In 2015, *Salon* ran an article on Gavin Kovite and Christopher Robinson’s collaborative novel, *War of the Encyclopaedists*, in which the authors suggest that collaboration is a natural form of writing—we already edit each other’s work, we make suggestions, we write in the margins, we alter wording—we are all already collaborating. And of course most writers recognize and revere the thought that our writing is to some extent in conversation with all of the storytellers who have come before us, one begun before pen and paper.

Collaborative writing as an intentional pursuit came into wide practice in Western literature in the late nineteenth century under the Surrealists’ influence and then again as postmodern experiment mid-century. For instance, a collaborative sonnet form, the *bouts-rimés*, supposedly begun as early as 1648, was made popular in 1864 when Alexandre Dumas issued an invitation to numerous French poets to create sonnets by using a provided set of rhymes. When this collaborative sonnet call was sent out, hundreds of writers responded, and Dumas published the poems in 1865. But the Surrealists gained greater notoriety. A special issue of collaboration, *Ralentir Travaux (Slow Under Construction)* is a famous surrealist collection of collaborative poems by André Breton, Renè Char and Paul Eluard written as an *exquisite corpse* and published in 1930. *Locus Solus* was a literary journal named after the 1914 French novel by Raymond Roussel, and edited by John Ashbery (Issue 3/4), Kenneth Koch (Issue 2), and James Schuyler (Issue 1 and 5). The late Harry Matthews published the magazine in France. *Locus Solus II* is the collaborative issue edited by Koch in 1962.

Other cultures have long practiced a collaborative approach to writing. One lesser-known tradition is the dialogic and animist orality that inform Native American literature. Kenneth Lincoln calls this “dialogic oratory” in which any given text is never really the words of one individual human writer but a fusion of the language of the land and a “reciprocal tribalism among plant, animal, spirit, and human” (xv, xviii-ix, 3).¹ Miwok-Pomo Greg Sarris further includes listeners as collaborators

1. Lincoln, Kenneth. *Sing with the Heart of a Bear: Fusions of Native and American Poetry, 1890-1999*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.

such that with each retelling, the story itself is remade.² Anishinaabe poet Kimberly Blaeser—whose collaborations with her tribal colleague, Margaret Noodin, appear in this volume—notes that an “intricate weaving of Native traditions and consciousness with individual experiences and identities” means that their poetry carries—collaborates with—not only a pan-Indian legacy but also functions as “a response to perceived expectations of Native American literature” (414-15).³

Perhaps further afield but more familiar, a very early form of collaborative Chinese linked verse, *lián jù*, developed in the Qin Dynasty, 221 to 206 BC, is cited by various sources as a likely precursor to the still-practiced Japanese *renga*, a series of linked poems written between poets who follow a codified pattern of syllabic verses. Much like *haiku*, the *renga* has clearly established itself in American poetic practice. *They Said* features one such *renga* by poets Leslie E. Hoffman and Pushpa MacFarlane, as well as “renga essay”—a lyric essay written in “a renga-like mode of oblique linking” by Gillian Parrish and Jennifer Atkinson. You’ll also find an example of *somonka*, a pair of love letters composed using two *tankas*—five-line syllabic poems that have been a part of Japanese tradition for 1,000 years—in a formal epistolary exchange between Tom Barlow and Diane Kendig.

Another ancient Chinese practice of collaborative composition possibly familiar to western readers appears in “The Wang River Sequence” by renowned Tang dynasty poet Wang Wei, written back and forth between Wang Wei and his friend, poet Pei Di, using classical codified forms. *Chang-he*, literally “chanting and echoing in response,” is still practiced among Chinese contemporaries using less formal, vernacular structure often accompanied by drinking wine. According to Professor Balance Chow of San Jose State University, who confesses to having recently participated in one such prolonged poetic exchange at a party in Hong Kong using text messaging, such *chang-he*—oral and written—becomes part of the social experience, composed between participants “on the spot” to commemorate aspects of the event. As such, the practice continues the community-enriching functions of early orality while embracing contemporary writing technologies and language structure.

2. Sarris, Greg. essay “The Woman Who Loved a Snake: Orality in Mabel McKay’s Stories.” from *Nothing but the Truth: An Anthology of Native American Literature*. John L. Purdy and James Ruppert, eds. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 2011.

3. Blaeser, Kimberly. “The Possibilities of a Native Poetics.” from *Nothing but the Truth: An Anthology of Native American Literature*. John L. Purdy and James Ruppert, eds. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 2011.

It is the Western tradition, enthralled with the Romantic and democratic notions of the individual, that has missed out. In its embrace of singular authorship and the primacy of an “original,” distinct voice, Western literature abandons the unifying function of the shared voice, leaving it to ecclesiastical tradition and to song, but losing the generative community-building capacities of collaborative practice.

While contemporary stage and cinema continue to offer a type of communal experience of story, as do public readings and slams, it is perhaps our suddenly interconnected digital world with limitless communal forums for sharing news and narrative of all sorts that has taken intentional collaborative writing viral. As reading and sharing becomes once more communal and interactive, so too does creation. And while the rise of social media initially led to serious social isolation, and more so for writers who already work to a large degree isolated, these virtual platforms have ironically enabled new modes for connection and collaboration. Writers have found new writing relationships online, and we are reveling in the experience.

To collaborate is to abandon, if only for a while, the guise of the solitary writer. To surrender one’s authority, identity, one’s autonomy. Maybe collaboration provides some sort of relief. To experience, if for a brief time, creative partnership and for that time to be freed from the pressure of working alone within our hyper-competitive industry is to be revived at the core of who we are. We draw back to the primal, to the community of griots and poets, of minstrels and tricksters. We tell a story together.

Many stories, one voice~

They Said is an innovative collection of recent collaborative writing drawn from domestic and international writers. Our anthology includes poetry, fiction, cross-genre work, and creative nonfiction, each piece having more than one living writer as the primary author. While some works feature an alternating perspective, others are co-authored or group authored so that it is impossible to tell which of the named authors actually “wrote” or “created” any particular portion of the final text. Though we value works of *ekphrasis*, and works written “after” other pieces, as well as those written in essential conversation with dead authors, we’ve chosen to focus on the creative wrestling implied in living exchanges and what this give and take produces.

While *They Said* isn’t the first collaborative anthology, it has been a decade since the significant and comprehensive collaborative poetry anthology *Saints of Hys-*

teria: A Half-Century of Collaborative American Poetry (2007), edited by Denise Duhamel, Maureen Seaton, and David Trinidad, came into existence. As fans of their project, we felt that it was time to produce an anthology that would also include fiction, creative nonfiction, and cross-genre works to further highlight what's being created in this rapidly expanding field of collaborative writing.

We have ordered the offerings by genre, though such classifications can easily be contested. Therefore we simply let the authors assign their works themselves. Their choices and the process pieces they've written reveal the widening parameters of genre in contemporary writing. While we celebrate the transgressive tangos with traditional poetry forms offered here, such as the sonnet and sestina, as well as a variety of *exquisite corpse* and epistolary pieces, we also revel in the seeming abandon of innovative approaches that move us across the page, across genre, across identities.

In her introduction to *The Best American Poetry 2017*, guest editor and former US Poet Laureate Natasha Trethewey noted that "any anthology could serve as an autobiography of the mind of the anthologist." With four practicing writer-editors reviewing submissions for this collection, it is clear that the "mind" behind this anthology represents just as much a collaborative hive-mind as do the individual works.

All four editors have diverse histories with literary collaborations. Lead editors Simone Muench and Dean Rader have both collaborated with other authors for previous books and collaborated with each other for their 2017 collection, *Suture*, recently published by Black Lawrence Press, enlivening a traditional form through their process. They subsequently put together a panel on collaboration for the 2016 AWP conference. The panel was a huge success, so much so that some audience members suggested they put together an anthology of such writing to fill a major void.

While Dean and Simone had already been thinking along these lines, the audience's enthusiasm toward the possibilities of a collection of collaborative writing proved hard to ignore. Assistant editor Sally Ashton, who attended their panel, was one such enthusiast who jumped at the opportunity to work on the project having enjoyed her own collaborative forays with visual artists, musicians, and other writers. While assistant editor Jackie White has also collaborated with visual artists and musicians, most recently having a poem set to acoustics and dance, most of her collaborative writing has taken the form of translation and cento experimentation. We are each avid practitioners and enthusiastic supporters.

One story, many voices~

Writing with a partner isn't just about the process, about a shared experience, or even simply about the finished piece. To work collaboratively engenders a more playful approach to your personal practice once you return to it. Collaboration encourages greater risk-taking and deeper trust in the power of language to come through for us. It's exhilarating, revelatory, satisfying, and ultimately, just plain fun.

After all, from the amount of collaborative writing gathered here and what's continually being produced, writers, it seems, are having *lots* of fun. For readers, however, the appeal of some literary work can often be the "voice," and among the pieces in *They Said* are collaborations of correspondence, call and response, and linguistic *pas de deux*. What strikes us are the amazing ways in which differing minds are able to converge and negotiate terrains to create a seamless point of view which is neither one person or the other, but a new entity—a third voice that goes beyond the ancient melding of individual voices to create something original and unique.

The art of the collaboration lies in creating this voice, whether a singular voice from several or a conversation to which we're compelled to eavesdrop. Listen in. We hope, and suspect, our project will inspire new modes of collaborative creation, and maybe a round or two of *chang-be!*

—by Sally Ashton with contributions from Simone Muench, Dean Rader, and Jackie K. White

POETRY

Kelli Russell Agodon and Martha Silano

I DON'T BLAME YOU

for the toxins in the mango,
for the fireplace being less fire,

more ash, for the French-fry-begging gulls,
their ubiquitous laughter. Ashes that congregate

like coal dust on our country's black lung.
I want to tell you a story about a woman

who became a pond, but instead I'll hand you
an umbrella for your woes, for your worry

about the lack of snow in the mountains,
the mudslide in your soup, the funeral

for your child, water darkened by millions
of bodies—the aching Atlantic, the pleading Pacific—

this disjointed union like a broken kitchen plate.
Someone throws a mango at a wall. It's easy

to be angry at the uselessness of ruin,
but a broken ceramics piece is a stepping stone

mosaic. Though it may be overripe, though it may
need to be washed three times, don't throw away

the mango. When you've eaten every bite,
suck on the giant pit. *All clear, all clear* they insist,

hoping you won't notice the ash-gray sky.

Kelli Russell Agodon and Martha Silano

FIELD TRANSMISSION OF TULIP VIRUS IN PATRIOTIC COLORS

Tell me a story with a tulip
included, a frilly red tulip
splattered with mud, a tulip
with certainty, a century
of long lines and not enough
food. It's easy to be hungry
for what we're serving, terrific
tulip leaning towards
a baby holding a tulip
bomb in a field of forgotten
veteran tulips, white blossoms
blooming in the dirt. Our flags forget
to be warm, become doors, tulips
the color of grieving, 300 million,
like icicle stems dropping
at our feet. Tulip as travel ban,
the flowers of so many
countries forbidden, restriction
of movement like a fenced-in field
of American Dreams. It's hard to miss
what you've never seen, the road
outside the park leading to a landscape
of springtime, tulips with sasquatch,
some bearish curiosity, some
staggering hairy beast mostly
out of focus, but moving
closer on a moonless and foggy
evening. We're all holding telescopes,
I mean tulips none of us need.
Tell me a story, you say,

but when I try to speak,
it only comes out in grunts,
so we neanderthal our way
through the tulip fields
of these United States, arms open,
sometimes trusting, knuckles dragging
along the frost-heavy ground.

Kelli Russell Agodon and Martha Silano

JOINTLY RESPONSIBLE

What does a gesture hold?
What of the body, its let and go?
What if you offer, instead of a house,

a housing project, a promise or a lie,
whether the alarm is armed, not knowing
by way of a gaze, a glance—the eyes severed

from status. I nod at the soldier because
I have no words, though I know I am more
than my Garamond, my Times New Roman.

When he died he died the way a leaf dies,
a birch leaf, how it sticks to the shoes
of all who pass by.

Like playing Clue,
Colonel Mustard with the rope
in the parlor. Miss Scarlet with the knife.

Sometimes I need my secret decoder
to know if you're grieving, to comprehend
the library of your pain, my losses tallied by wind.

What grows in the ice is null,
but the dirt adds up, the soot from the sky.
I know what a handshake returns. Tripping,

we pretend we are dancing.
Absolution, like absolute. Adding
the salty unknown, stirring toward a solution.

The soldier speaking quietly in the field.
The hand, we say, lend a hand, the part
standing in for the whole. Therefore, stars

and stripes, the men in blue,
a podcast of weeping, the YouTube
channel of wincing. Searchbox grief.

How can we judge time when time
reminds us of church bells? Who's gone
down a rabbit hole? *Wintry mix*. Crust you must

break through. She entered the house.
Fetched a plastic tub. Labeled it *March 4th*.
Filled it with snow. Simplicity of a woman holding the cold.

Kelli Russell Agodon and Martha Silano on their process:

I approached Kelli in early 2017 about trying our hands at writing collaborative poems together. She was enthusiastic, so the next time we got together to write I presented a prompt where I'd read one sentence of Wislawa Szymborska's poem "Questions You Ask Yourself," which appears in her book *MAP, Collected and Last Poems*, and then set a timer for two minutes and write off that sentence. We did this all the way through the poem, and then we went back to our respective writing desks and revised what we'd written. Then Kelli emailed me her lines, and I mixed them in with mine, cutting what didn't fit and rearranging as I saw fit. For the other two poems, "I don't blame you," and "Field Transmission of Tulip Virus in Patriotic Colors," Kelli devised a prompt called The Accordion Method. This method involved taking a piece of paper and writing for a minute or two (Kelli started), folding over (and thus hiding) all but the last line written, and passing the folded paper back and forth until we got to the bottom of the page. Then we unfolded the paper and Kelli took home to revise what would become "Field Transmission of Tulip Virus in Patriotic Colors," and I took home what would evolve into "I don't blame you."

Maureen Alsop and Hillary Gravendyk

BALLAST

In the veiled light, the chest is a shroud
 for what used to linger, powdered wing
 and circle of flames destination
mapped my understanding—
gaps at the waterfront where the ships slowed
to listen to the gulls' song bodies

O, this close to the sea
 The salt covers everything
 like a stuttering glass garden
 at the turn of winter

The women crouch in the sand
 wrestling shells from the insistent shoreline

My pocket flooded with charms
Dusk drawn dawn, moth hour—
venerated faces balance outside the window—

The day's failed confession
 A black stone on the tongue.

Maureen Alsop and Hillary Gravendyk on their process:

I sit up straight ask for space within her congenial grove. Before pain's absence moth's infected the gloam. Her vessel came, low twilight. No sea. No city. No man's sky. Starred with damage the body what was left to tell. A mirror shone a refused language, the last moon slipped. As to the dreaming craft lightened one moment then another left.

But if it troubles you this scratch across the eyelid, lark's skeletal procession. She wanders now in gladness the moss lit edge, fates resolute placebo where yesterday we carved statues for the gods.**

**this process piece was written in collaboration with Matteo Lexa