

Selected Poetry
(2017-2018)

Maya Miro Johnson

The Ghosts of New York Harbor

In A Way,

it is here that i and this country were born and it is here that we will die but

the harbor smelled nicer than I expected

(or perhaps my nose was bleeding with the unlearned memory of seasickness)

a smoggy sunset descended upon the water;
her grey-green robes billowed out as waves but
my great-grandmother felt skeptical, as her skirts
were so much the more easily ripped

and what did this tempestuous iron lady know about life in the shtetl on
the street in the ghetto-

-she was much smaller

in stature

than I expected;

an apple-eyed idol bobbing in the breeze with a stern, parochial gaze
yet somehow I felt that she was my mother whether I liked it or not

(such luck with mothers this family has)-

and later, in the stony depths of the city,
among the futurist pines and constructivist elms:

/the asphalt dripped with tar, and עלטער-בא בע , she thought it tasted like honey/

the summer-baked, winter-cracked cement

"would make a **fine** foundation for dreams", she supposed,

a dream from which no one could ever be woken by virtue of its iron gates and hellish hounds and chain-locked doors and guarded lunchrooms

and

what a sheen, from the outside, has this peacock-land!!

[like a beetle]

so that its fleshy gut would not ordinarily be suspected (by anyone but her) of course

for her blindness let her see the truth, though now and again a delusion might slip through,

refracted on

the golden-crested waves, a specter of home

a ghost of the past, a shadow of the future

I blinked my ears against the thrum of the DJ shouts and whistles and beats and ringtones we all
huddled close to see, a mass bedraggled for different reasons my concentration was not to be

broken as I contemplated my privilege underneath the sun from which I refused to protect my
eyes out of fear that I might miss some sad little wave from lady liberty

A nod of recognition

A vague salute to my plight to *remember* [In
the

midst

of *so many distractions*]

the sense of fear and exhilaration and relief

in one's bloodied mouth – what do teeth taste like, I've always wondered –

I noticed there were no seagulls, though their feathers litter the water;

I now suspect they have been relocated for the duration of our visit

But what an acrid haziness has come over me,

An embryonic warmth, generated by generations of dead bodies rising up elevators

80 flights

To the crematorium of dreams souls released fly out as pigeons, *dybbuks* inhabiting the
ambitions of young stars, singers, and sergeants

Roosting in the metropolitan opera house and the attic of the guggenheim

Hidden in the coughing, cemented maze a mural

Where

this smog-suffused sunset becomes my Sistine chapel

This was her stainedglasswindow- her first and last and only-

And her Madonna, a jaded matron wielding fire:

I have been anointed by the salt-water spray of her torch

It has set my mind ablaze, each potentiality of past a spark

99 years and more than 23 chromosomes later,

we extend out our right root from the edge of the gangplank (prepared to feel the magma-infused rattle of the sewers beneath our feet)

- disembarking, it's called-

And feel a yank

Backwards

sdrawkcab

Something will always hold her by the nape of the neck:

Perhaps? she was first plucked from the womb that way by some insensitive Polish doctor
onehundred27yearsagototheday

For me, instead: a twinge at the meeting of the shoulder blades,

like a loosened leash-

I was compelled to turn and look back at the scene which came before me in the darkening evening
and which will come after me on some brilliant, crowded morning: the only thing one should never
do when

saying

goodbye

And I, by the realization of the pearly bones that cling to the bottom of the sticky-slick
oil-sickened sea
Was stupefied

I set off on my greyhound stallion
Into not the sunset but the twilight, surrounded by iron-winged, steel-tinged trees
With the same sense of hopefulness that
mirka masha mary platov platoff rashinski roshinskaya
Would have dreamt of feeling
101yearsagototheday,

Also on a creaking boat

But

Alas!

how can I

or god be hopeful

when we already know

how it ends... ?

Illumination

Death is a woman
Neither young nor old

She waits,

Cat-like

On the plastic precipice of winter.

Her kingdom is a microscopic
Liturgy of names condensed into
a
Single moment of light,
Which fades like a teardrop
From the pockmarked visage of time
With a

Wh

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Ing

Sound

Feline, the unknowable moment crawls away,
out of grasp and silent on its six paws.

only when embers are too tired
To warn of apocalyptic rains
do they emit a soft frequency
Of moth-eaten dust, observable
From deep space;

the sunset exposes
their secret chants only on the 7th minute of a 7th day of a 7th year,

but their songs fill the radio waves with constant unheard sermons.

death twitches her nose
(she smells the tendrils of music which thread through the universe soundlessly)

but remains perfectly still

Akhmatova

Her rib cage quivers like knocking sticks

Cradled as if a babe in vasilisa's arms

Tinder wood pulsating dangerously close to
the

Putrid embers of her dying heart

A dove becomes a
raven

In the twisted inkwells of your eyes

My son has not come home yet

The four of us were young once, And
thought about Socrates and steel

They sat in cigar smoke

Which curled and pounced upon itself like a restless kitten in the
harbor (A fog really)

Around a card table

and forged their words upon the anvil of rip-roarious
youth

she was a lioness

a helmet-crowned lioness who breathed in smog and

inside

her,

typhoid lungs worked to convert carbon to ice

oh osip and boris!

she could freeze their consciences with a bolt borrowed from the laboratories of Colorado and
Menlo Park across the seas

and Maria

who did so love to sip and swish her words in Sappho's wine,

my nunnish harlotry did temper

in the winter of Berlin's
hour,
in the memory of starvation

wallowing, gluttoning

my concave city hollowed out like a fat
pumpkin

A jack-o'-lantern on all-hallow's-eve,

though nothing hallowed remained, all holy now but hollow

No bodies hung like strange fruit from late-night street lamps but instead drooped and withered on the ground like fallen leaves for months and as those-who-were-once-gardeners stooped to sweep the sidewalks

We wondered if this was not retribution for the plague

the past was not a ghost but a reveler's
companion
it dangled before her

and

(my ancestors predicted my name long before I knew it)

I almost choked today when I read the news

That so many years had past

And still her son was not returned

An inexorable fear of cedar boxes

Began to possess her mind, to ensconce my life,

A rigor mortis set in:

all I could think about were the ashy candles in my heart being the remnants Of

our child

and so

We wrote

And wrote and wrote of injustice and a thousand million corpses and folly, our folly, and prisons and-

!!The glory of the steel which had come upon us [with such a vengeance
weknewnotwhatwehadwishedfor]!!

Remembering those smoke-filled fire-lit days of embittered naivete
now the world is milkmaid gray or did you notice

And I sang and sang

Chanting his name outside the deafened doors

“All hail to the great train of progress which carries in its foul belly the bones of your children!”

(Anna- she never knew what was best for her:

once, on a verdant, coughed-up day in Christopol, I told Dmitri this and twenty years later I
received his concurrence in the form of a string quartet)

Yes, she always valued men in her stomach above bread but
music in her
mouth above words

They did so soar

And my kite was lost that day:

Summer 1901, I was 12

But she always brought it back to me, grandmere
Russia,

Though she always seemed to forget that I was not her son, nor anyone's fool

Her oven-braised cookies had the smell of punishment without reason

Winter 1949

A merciful ignorance occurred:

that crumb-flecked mustache... a memory slip was his form of kindness

(and if the mustache should frown, one knows there will be a certain kind of shouted laughter
echoing through the Saint Petersburg halls in the thin, viscously tenuous hours of the morning, like a
recollection of past frolics, fermented and spoiled)

but here the bristled lips turned upwards

And he crucified my son in place of I

F O U R

times

for which

I will always be resented;

to no avail I sang and danced like a lark in lipstick

(?why won't you know that, son my darling only, how can you not know that?)

Yet he always suffers so in visitation of the sins upon the son simply for being under
the sun-

Oh, how we all wept, through the belched smoke of our merciless ignorance

We had tried so hard, too

Hard,

and our hearts had become the same:

Fire becomes ashes became cold and brittle rain

Which mark our faces with a certain kind of gothic mascara

how she longed for the days where all her pen need write about was love and its decadent laws and tortures:

The days of her father's disappointments and her husband's disappearances

Further back-----to the days of her lost kites and tree stumps

But it's no use-

Among us the dead

The living slip like ghosts Like

ships sailing quietly along the Neva

Unassuming demons

Watched by stoic, wind-swept mothers,

Somewhere...

out in...

...no-man's

land...

1. *Raskolnikov in confession*

A confessional stands tall, weighted down with secrets and abuses, crafty, insipid, incipient delights and pesky, pecuniary dramas, torrid and lurid affairs of the body, trivial aches of conscience, itches that cannot be scratched in silence or in traffic; it stands tall, forcibly yet not rigidly, spine wrung from the milk-sopped, vinegar-stained motions of the rack; pressed like grapes into a drunken statue, it stands tall; in the house of god, it stands tall (but not too tall).

Through the slats I can see only two grey eyes, though perhaps there could be more; and through the cognitive power of displacement, so far known to exist only in us humans, the most destructive of all apish creatures, I can imagine that a body contains those eyes. Yes, I can see it now, I can picture hands, scurrying like rapid grasshoppers to find that holy grail of purpose contained so comfortingly in a pocket. I can see the feet, tapping un-sanctified rhythms absentmindedly along a thigh, aged and purple from atrophy. I can perhaps hear the whistle of a chipped tooth, the rustle of an eyebrow as it arches in the suppression of a thought. I can feel these things as if they were projected on the inside of my mind; the teleprompter of my retina predicts what this uncertainty of a diaphragm will cause this assumption of a tongue to contort this presupposition of a lip into saying.

I can feel this presence. I could even paint it. But I can't prove it exists.

Always, it is there, always this confessor eating up my sins like sweetcakes, always the future is there and its thereness is unbearable, just as the absentness of the past is a sugary torture.

This priestly presence is horrified, I can tell, by the things I'm saying, but I no longer seem to have control over the present dimension, only the undiscovered ones. And he (for now I can detect the scent of testosterone floating through the air like a virus) must understand, "must" in the strongest sense of the word; it is his job, after all, punishable by damnation, to understand, to nod his hypothetical head, onion-shaped, and exhale words of forgiveness to shepherds who have eaten their sheep. Ah, his intangibility is so real you can taste it in your sweat, for guilt is contained in all the salt of the world, and in the skin cells that may drip onto your tongue unwittingly in a moment of precipitous work. But this playful struggle with the world sours fast. Our opponent is the wasteland of meat and bone which surrounds us constantly (and by us, I mean the real us, trapped deep inside a nebulous ribcage) and with which we are locked in a mortal race to the casket, before the last will-o-the-wisp disappears and the key is found and we're all tucked into bed like good little children for the longest nap, before the final wrong number is dialed, before our runaway-bride consciousness is permanently wedded by rope to our body which seeps away, melts away, fast away into the dust. Only natural things happen after death.

"oh, how terrible it would be to live in a world where one could do nothing unnatural," I remark, and the grey eyes, though unblinking, darken despite the lateness of the hour. "Do pardon me if I extemporize, but-" (I laugh) "in vain we wonder what this world of silent promises and polite decay contains, for Mercury's travelers are a notoriously untalkative bunch, having exchanged their throats- and not eyes, as is commonly thought- for knowledge."

He thinks me crazy or ambitious or possibly both, the figure with whom I share this upright, cedar, godly box.

See, I know all this, but I can't prove it.

Just like I know my confessing companion exists yet cannot prove it, just like I know I exist despite there being evidence to the contrary.

“Yes, the world is a suspension:” I continue, uncaring that my confessor has fled, presumably into the arms of authority, a fatal mistake. “A suspension of disbelief, of narrative action, of time, of possibility, of potentiality, of even space itself. Because, if you close your eyes, even this wooden construct (a box standing tall, special delivery, in the house of god) becomes one with the scented, amniotic air into which all that is solid melts. Now who’s confessing to whom? Take your god, for he tried to take me and he failed.”

The box is set ablaze and I am entombed, the truth clutched to my chest.

2. a letter from a family man

she held the letter. where others saw words, she saw images. where others saw congratulations, she saw the flash of fangs. possibly lightning. where other saw small talk, she saw denial, or perhaps calculations. where others would have seen a family, she saw ghosts who were held together only by the nearness of their unmarked burial plots. where others may have perceived the personable, if trite, exchange of amicable pleasantries, she encountered the twin spectres of doubt and suspicion in taut embrace, brothers known up and down the block for their violence. in a panic, she reached for the letter opener, thinking of where her sleeves met her wrists, but recovered her wits quick enough to be miserable, to lose them slowly, consistently, with the dignity of a controlled decay, but hiding the urgency of a spreading infection. still, the questions nagged her like her infants: what did he know from those old-country chicken scratches, the bastard, what could he know from those photographs of a chubby, smiling problem? !ohgodohlordgotoyveyizmir! the illogic of it twisted and writhed in her guts like a serpent on the chopping block, being lynched from the sky. how could he not remember, not recognize what he knew he had done, or did not know he had done, or why he had done it despite knowing, or not knowing, all those very, very many-few years ago? she did not know but somehow comprehended, and the ghosts on her shoulders sighed.

3. scene

I looked over at you, perturbed by my invisibility to your elusive, Cheshire eyes. I’m slowly realizing the diminishing returns of my efforts to reach the future. Each moment that pulls me towards you also wrenches you away, casually, and you willing, unknowing. Yet here we are, were, together in a moment of time, suspended- for me, but perhaps not for you- in a kaleidoscopic vantage point of possible futures, each more heartbroken than the last. Insectoid shards, they came and danced before my eyes. I came to see their refractedness in this minute of atonement. A crowd is gathering outside- they came to find out who the murderer is, what will happen next. And you- what did you come for?

***Narrative dispatch, recording the actions of the wedding party surrounding the marriage of the
dish to the spoon
[an anthropomorphization]***

source: The Standard Operas (12th edition) by George P. Upton (1897), entry on La Sonnambula

Word was brought out in the same year in Paris and London,
taken from a vaudeville.

The scene is in love with the state of affairs,
on the day before the wedding.

(The village next appears
upon the scene)

Incognito, pretty compliments quarrel with the disturber of mind.

Subject to fits of somnambulism, mistaken for a ghost,
the information quietly retires to his chamber.

A playful scene seeks shelter in a closet,
leaves the apartment.

The malicious room thoughtlessly leaves her handkerchief.

The spot declares that she is guilty and leaves her.

The unfortunate situation throws his hand from the window.

A frail bridge yields and threatens in safety,
descends to the ground,
and walks;
amid the jubilant songs of innocence,
the discovery pronounces her [the bridge] faithless.

Such is the simple story
of youth:
between jealous[ies], humor.

Thanatology

Here we are

At the end of time

A quartet is playing in the corner

I find myself searching in the fog for clarity

And instead finding a nametag.

“welcome. You are--- “

“and I am-----”

I glance down

My name writ in some alien language fog extends like Hebrew

I can't remember my name- yet let I chant the world's history

Without me/meaning

Insensible

Tonguing double time

This place is everywhere and nowhere

Osiris grins greenly, sternly drooping those full lips

The realization that

Suddenly There are mirrors everywhere

My name is-

Distant...?

Just light

Gone

Forever?

I am one with geography

Neurology

Buoyant movement

Toxicology

Agathology and ponerology

martyrology

An Acyrologist Am

I?

What am I

?

I recall a life a body a soul

But not specifics; people walk about with blank, censored labels hovering over their heads

I want to reach out,

Call,

Yell

Their names

Which bite my tongue like rat-mites as they travel forward,

Then stop as lemmings do in contemplation of their fate

There is a feeling of a blacklist in the air

Though prismatic light echoes inside my eyeballs

Ohgod if this is life then let me die and if this death what then

If truth were a woman

Perhaps we are all entombed in the final, fatal womb

And the last opiate is the consolation of this plastic nametag

Attached to my spine

Which I cannot read

Yet will always know

Symphony of a Thousand Whispers

D major

Is what I feel when a stray sunbeam brushes across my back,

Not quite a kahlo stroke but still not a monet,

Stoking a humid shiver in the ember-like, umbral heart,

A sigh,

A breath,

A pause,

A convulsion of air calmed,

Chaos brought into order,

And then distributed back into chaos by a nebular wisp which Briefly
might lattice the blue shingles of the sky.

A nearby rose, barely new, newly born,

Suggests a modulation to B minor.

But a lark's distant trumpeting insists that a cadence is yet to come.

Had I Lived

Had I lived I would not have

remembered to be grateful,

would have never learned the meaning of gracefulness,

during the long, limping, somnambular TripToTheMoon through a meteorite-lanced horizon,

or alternately during the descent down the stairs in the bleary way of a decaffeinated morning, stripped

of cocoa and

sunshine, pleasure and dignity

but,

Supposing so-

that I (and here an obviousness for those of you unwilling to follow my gist, tilt my slant, surmount my Tibetan point, calculate the exact distance between my roguish tongue and the lay of reality) had not, in fact, hit-the-road-Jack-and-not-come-back, so unexpectedly thrust into the role of "hobo jim's crazy hitchhiking cousin no.2", with witty hat, shoes, and all extraneously meaningful items of detritus

-

then a second condition emerges, not yawning but lipping

2) (that we must [honor + obey] Newton's laws/ 4 everything=its opposite → IFF no loneliness allowed to explicate, exponentialize² existence here, *dummodo* $\sum_{k=0}^n \binom{n}{k} x^k a^{n-k}$ (in this dogmatic playground with swing set \int so oddly $(\nu-1)$ rhythmic and precise \leftrightarrow life is but a poxy recess $-\pi$ suffering from arrhythmia of the dot)) QED *à la* ∞ :

Supposing so,

I would not have forgotten the stove's static blueness,

somehow, perhaps

by catching the whiff of lighter fluid on the breeze, placing it on the spectrum of fair to plain to goshgollyit'sagreatday.

but instead:

only the smell of grimy green success, like a sweat which chalks the fingers and

infects the nails, contaminates the scent of things

like a crop plane (**scene from childhood no. 1**: a technicolor box of TV trembles),

scatters chemicals like ice picks in the brain

)scene from postmortem no. 1:

under my eyelashes what do I see at night

worms(

And further,

Supposing so:

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Ƶould that I had not lived alone:

despotic clock faces leered,

companionship enough

to tell

of big-ben-swing-step-double-time-jumpin-jive

dance hall madness,

flurries of neon,

and restless sheep in android dreams;

my sockets scorched

yet I lived in the dark,

made firefly queen

by all the almost-nothings that, sweetened into poison,

shocked the fear of lightning and failure into this covering humanoid

(scene from childhood no. 2 tree, purple sleet, mommy)

who pretended that her cave did not reek of tumid coughing

sounding with the resonance of tuberculosis and saxophones;

who mocked the dead with her reenactments of disappearance and stageplay-funerals,

striking with palm trees against the snow castles of mortal inevitability, yet timidly begging admittance;

who wished against wishing yet succumbed to succulents all times but one

The brief candle burned brightly,

just as I was warned,

like a rocket eating its tail,

but **here**)*scene from postmortem no. 2: the sense of place divided by a square root is not rational.*

discuss(there is this light, sans retina-

subsequently inescapable-

(scene from childhood no. 3 Lear eats his eyeballs)

but by this cancerously starry lamplight I can read

for millennia

the oracles must have been reverse wayfarers,

high on life

after death

at very least...

Supposing ...

I'm elucidated now:

no more wonder,

known unknowns-

to use a tired, freckled old Eichmann of a phrase-

my tedious suppositions confined to the realm of diversion only;

no more must I posit for my daily bread,

the unanswerable questions answered.

yet the age of anxiety remains

quicksilver pools in the brain,

speed-skating its way in a halo around the circuitry of the mind

a cleft causes crashes

unnoticed...

... just as I am now

fetal, alone with my disillusionment.

what might have been

is so clear,

whereas what might be,

I see now,

was only what had already come before

*)scene from postmortem no. 3: I see now the living
at the supermarket, filling their carts with cocaine and moments(*

fun fact

(scene from childhood no. 4: my mother was in an accident ! while giving birth)

my head is filled with pronouns, articles, words beginning with Q,

no longer necessary;

I am a defunct,

a toy symphony, my notes all used up.

I understand only my own ignorance,

like that Cadillac I used to covet with its prime rustiness and

perfect ineptitude,

and this is the ultimate truth of a wooden box,

if you're curious to know:

a one-way ticket means no phone calls,

*)scene from postmortem no 4: Miranda had no rights, as it happens, when Caliban broke her spine
against a wall/I am too stunned by star implosions to think slowly(*

there is a telegraph, however!!

problem is, I don't know how to operate it :/

they say you can't learn once you're over 25

(scene from childhood no. 5: new dog old tricks)

"at play,

another bone gone today"

(god have I started keeping track?)

SCENE FROM POSTMORTEM NO. 4 ? 5 ?

now I can see the bats clearly as they

nibble down one quarter meal at a time, perch upon me
for a shit

then don their leather jackets and accelerate to a
fault

the days nearly disintegrated to a half million years' worth of seconds
I remember nothing of suffocation, having now become it:

Supposing so,
what should I do [at present time] but watch?
seeing as that's always what I've always done.
I have, after all, been given no instruction...

I Suppose
that I can only assume
that my goal is not to die-
(WaitNo, perhaps I am repeating myself)

so now I think only of poetry, as in

A tongueless Limerick:

here.
after.
wherever you may go!
remember to remember
else, before you know,
{poof}!
"abracadabra"
what might be is what there never was,
thy passions now unsuspecting snow
which like flaking skin
or acidic whim
floats calmly as a fractured balloon
to the earth
where it inters itself with a detonation

of course, I am

No Stein...

Ginsburg...

Hughes...

Sappho...

Basho...

you should know they don't await in the parting of the thunderhead;

they rust elsewhere

rest

is more idleness than anything

so the brain becomes things it is not

as the body di...sint..igr.....ate...s

leaving only

-the memory of could haves (as in "I could have won")

-and will dos ("Tomorrow, at the crack and crow of dawn, night just leaving behind her varmint and requiems")

-and have nots (as in she whom I pass in the sewers and secretly admire for her independence of sanity)

-and will nevers (scene from act 2: "*nooit, neen, nimmer*/I will never marry you")

-and nearlies

so many nearlies

had I not lived alone-

just Supposing so, just Supposing-

not smelling the sweat of discarded headbands taping over irreconcilable wounds

gaping like lion's maws into the sunset of death every day,

almost knowing its intimate rays

but yet not,

not yet;

still,

disquieted,

I always assumed the static electricity was percolating when it was truly plotting.

Unblissful in ignorance,

I lived.

but had I lived

(longer, more, at all)

what might I have learned?

what bliss might I have gained

that I have not been able to glean

in a box?

but on the other hand,

when you suppose instead that

life is a box

and death is a bin,

the only question remaining is,

which is emptier?