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The UB Poetics Discussion Group

The Editor's Introductions

Collected · 1993-2014

Kristen M. Fabians

242 monthly introductions

University at Buffalo, State University of New York

Contents

Every entry links to its introduction. 242 in all.

1993 Dec

1994 Jan · Feb · Mar · Apr · May · Jun · Jul · Aug · Sep · Oct · Nov · Dec

1995 Jan · Feb · Mar · Apr · May · Jun · Jul · Aug · Sep · Oct · Nov · Dec

1996 Jan · Feb · Mar · Apr · May · Jun · Jul · Aug · Sep · Oct · Nov · Dec

1997 Jan · Feb · Mar · Apr · May · Jun · Jul · Aug · Sep · Oct · Nov · Dec

1998 Jan · Feb · Mar · Apr · May · Jun · Jul · Aug · Sep · Oct · Nov · Dec

1999 Jan · Feb · Mar · Apr · May · Jun · Jul · Aug · Sep · Oct · Nov · Dec

2000 Jan · Feb · Mar · Apr · May · Jun · Jul · Aug · Sep · Oct · Nov · Dec

2001 Jan · Feb · Mar · Apr · May · Jun · Jul · Aug · Sep · Oct · Nov · Dec

2002 Jan · Feb · Mar · Apr · May · Jun · Jul · Aug · Sep · Oct · Nov · Dec

2003 Jan · Feb · Mar · Apr · May · Jun · Jul · Aug · Sep · Oct · Nov · Dec

2004 Jan · Feb · Mar · Apr · May · Jun · Jul · Aug · Sep · Oct · Nov · Dec

2005 Jan · Feb · Mar · Apr · May · Jun · Jul · Aug · Sep · Oct · Nov · Dec

2006 Jan · Feb · Mar · Apr · May · Jun · Jul · Aug · Sep · Oct · Nov · Dec

2007 Jan · Feb · Mar · Apr · May · Jun · Jul · Aug · Sep · Oct · Nov · Dec

2008 Jan · Feb · Mar · Apr · May · Jun · Jul · Aug · Sep · Oct · Nov · Dec

2009 Jan · Feb · Mar · Apr · May · Jun · Jul · Aug · Sep · Oct · Nov · Dec

2010 Jan · Feb · Mar · Apr · May · Jun · Jul · Aug · Sep · Oct · Nov · Dec

2011 Jan · Feb · Mar · Apr · May · Jun · Jul · Aug · Sep · Oct · Nov · Dec

2012 Jan · Feb · Mar · Apr · May · Jun · Jul · Aug · Sep · Oct · Nov · Dec

2013 Jan · Feb · Mar · Apr · May · Jun · Jul · Aug · Sep · Oct · Nov · Dec

2014 Jan

December 1993

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

December 1993, and the list is scarcely three months old — a room still mostly empty, its few voices carrying all the further for the quiet around them. The month leaves only two letters in the archive; yet between them they rehearse the whole future argument of the place, which is finally an argument about two objects: what a book is, and what a word is. From Vancouver, Peter Quartermain sends down the text of the remarks he made at the Western Front, where Robin Blaser had just launched his collected *Holy Forest* to a room of some two hundred. Quartermain confesses he had set out to mark the passages he might quote and found himself marking everything — *“These poems utterly resist predatory reading”*, he decides, and resolves to read them aloud instead.

The launch arrives already choral, prefaced by five wishes wired in from those who could not come. Phyllis Webb salutes Blaser as *“the great moth that can't be pinned down”*; Michael Palmer gathers the whole company into *“the Lost & Found Department of the Holy Forest”*; Fred Wah, Michael Ondaatje, and Charles Bernstein add theirs from their several cities. It is the list's oldest gesture, performed before the list quite knew it had one — the poets assembling, at a distance and by wire, to honour a book into the world.

Against that celebration Kenneth Sherwood sets a smaller and stranger offering, a close reading he titles *Violent Dictionary*, tracking Tina Darragh's alphabetpoem through its wrenching and wrestling of the letter with Judith Butler kept close at hand. He forwards his copy-text with an apology and a wink, proposing that a network might yet manage *“hacker anarchy with etiquette”*. Two letters only, and a season's worth of silence around them; but the terms are already set — reverence and mischief, the book and the machine — and the room, as it fills, will spend years arguing them out.

— K. M. F.

January 1994

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

January 1994 keeps only a single letter in the archive, and a comic one. Charles Bernstein, twice thwarted in the simple act of forwarding, at last lands on the list a message relayed by Linda Reinfeld and originating with Sander Gilman of Cornell — nominally a note on race and object relations, in the event mostly an enormous slab of festival ASCII art wishing the world a happy new year in some forty tongues at once. The machinery, not the argument, becomes the story: Bernstein reports he has learned his lesson, having discovered the hard way that one must *“do not violate boundary codes invisible or visible”*.

It is a slight thing to stand for a whole month, and yet oddly prophetic of everything to come. Here already is the list's abiding double life — the high seriousness of its subject-lines set against the low farce of the medium that must carry them, the poets forever tripping over the very wires that let them speak at all. One letter; file it, for now, under the comedy of transmission.

— K. M. F.

February 1994

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

February 1994 is the month the room finally fills, and the weather it fills with is theory. Where December had left two letters and January one, the shortest month of the year runs to some fourscore, and nearly all of them are arguing — with a seriousness the young list wears like a borrowed coat that has not yet been broken in. Three words preside over the traffic, each trailing its own thread of replies: freedom, community, and, in Patrick Phillips's insistent phrasing, the social poem. The poets have discovered that they are a group, and cannot decide whether the discovery is cause for hope or for suspicion.

The freedom quarrel comes first and stays longest, conducted chiefly between Benjamin Friedlander — far and away the month's most tireless correspondent — and Tom Mandel, with Jean-Luc Nancy consulted in the wings. *"You seem to understand freedom as possibility"*, Friedlander writes, and then worries the formula against its opposite, the renunciation of possibility. Mandel answers in a compression close to verse: *"By leaping I would have said"*. It is the list arriving, almost by accident, at its characteristic pitch — abstraction driven until it turns lyric.

Beneath freedom runs the deeper and more anxious thread: community, and whether a mailing list can honestly claim the word. The correspondents reach past themselves to Blanchot's Unavowable Community and to Pierre Joris, who had a hand in carrying that book into English, and circle the paradox of a community of those who have no community. Patrick Phillips, declining to let anyone retreat into the merely aesthetic, plants the flag that the rest of the month will orbit: *"This is personal, it is ideological, it is social"*. Nobody is quite persuaded, which is precisely how the list prefers its persuasions.

Around these two great subjects the smaller threads cluster like satellites — an argument over the book arts and the fate of the printed object, a puzzled inquiry into what exactly is meant by wobble, a flare-up under the splendid subject-line Martin Spinelli's reply framed in Error. Joe Amato and Loss Glazier and Steve Evans move among them, and the institution itself comes in for interrogation: whose room is this, and who set out the chairs. The transcriptions, one poster notes, begin as the discussion gains speed — as though the talk had outrun the means of recording it.

What one hears, reading the month straight through, is a list teaching itself to think in public — the very thing it will still be doing at the century's far end, when the

subject-lines have changed but the appetite has not. I have arranged the letters so that each voice stands forward under its own name, its telephone and its address returned to privacy, the machinery of its delivery swept quietly aside. It is worth remembering, amid so much argument about community, that this is what a community sounds like before it is sure of the word: these were letters before ever they were literature.

— *K. M. F.*

March 1994

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

March 1994 lets the theoretical fever of February break, and the list turns, gratefully, to place — to where each of its voices happens to be standing while it types. Joe Amato opens the month looking out the window of a spare bedroom in Illinois and finding an urban landscape that answers nothing in the woodsy Syracuse of his childhood; his subject-line, coeval with, becomes the month's quiet keyword. What moves him, he writes, is *“a sense of place, and corresponding dislocations”* — nostalgia refused, geography kept.

The theme travels. From Germany, Hans-Joachim Rieke writes in, hungry for reading on hyperreality and for news of an American poetry he can only reach at a distance, and the list obliges with its habitual generosity of lists and addresses. Susan Schultz sends down from Hawai'i a hard, funny pidgin dialogue about who counts as local and who as haole, adolescence and multiculturalism turned over without mercy. Distance, in March, is not an obstacle to the conversation; distance is the conversation's subject.

Martin Spinelli, still smarting a little from February's error-framed exchange, extends the argument about mediation into a meditation on the radio ham — the solitary broadcaster flinging signal into the dark and receiving, mostly, silence back. Whatever community the airwaves promise, he decides, the operators *“are isolated and remain so”*. It is a shrewd thing to say on a mailing list, which is after all only a more sociable species of the same wireless loneliness.

A slighter month than the one before it, and a more human one — the poets comparing windows, trading the names of books, locating themselves on the map before they resume locating themselves in argument. I have set each letter forward under its author's name, the private numbers and addresses returned to the dark, so that what remains is the talk itself, and the several distances it had to cross to arrive.

— K. M. F.

April 1994

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

April 1994 opens on announcements, the list doing the plain civic work it never quite admits to loving. Nick Lawrence hangs a notice for Alice Notley, reading Wednesday at a Buffalo gallery on short notice — bring friends, students, whoever — while from Vancouver Peter Quartermain tracks Robin Blaser's spring progress through Philadelphia and Washington. Before the arguing resumes, the poets attend to the calendar: who is reading, and where, and how the word might be spread in time.

The arguing, of course, resumes. The month's live wire is the medium itself, and Chris Funkhouser sets the terms with a manifesto's flatness: *"Technopoetics proposed here is not a literary movement"*. Charles Bernstein, never far from the switchboard, presses the point into aphorism — on a network, he observes, *"At every point receivers are also transmitters"* — which is either a theory of poetry or a description of the list you are holding, and probably means to be both.

Relief arrives, as it reliably will on this list, by way of parody. Linda Reinfeld forwards a mock program of conference papers so pitch-perfect it ought to have been real, the academy's whole apparatus of contested spaces and epistemic privilege marshalled behind the immortal panel-title *"Viceroy-on-Elephant or Elephant-on-Viceroy?"*. The list can theorize the institution to exhaustion; it can also, in a single elephant, deflate it.

And underneath it all a sillier engine is turning over, the first sputters of the collaborative doggerel that will overrun May entirely — a thread called Beatnik Bliss, chicken not yet on the menu but the appetite plainly gathering. I have arranged April's letters under their authors' names, the telephones and addresses redacted to black, the readings and the manifestos and the elephant all filed in the order the days delivered them.

— K. M. F.

May 1994

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

May 1994 is the month the UB Poetics list lost its collective mind, and did so on purpose, and produced thereby one of the loveliest things in its early archive. What had begun in April as a modest thread called Beatnik Bliss ferments over the month into a full collaborative romp — CBGEEBIES, chicken wings, CP Geebies, a running doggerel poem passed hand to hand under a rotating carousel of ever-sillier subject-lines. Some forty letters, and the great majority of them in rhyme.

Joe Amato strikes the first note, cheerfully absurd, angling for *“for some talky bleu cheese dipped fare”*, and the thing is off. The surprise, and the delight, is who picks it up: Robert Creeley, of all people, seizes the baton and will not let go, filing seven separate contributions in a month, rhyming his way through menus and farewells and small hours. *“I can't keep up the rhyme no more”*, he protests around two in the morning, and then, of course, keeps it up.

It becomes properly choral. Mark Wallace answers the call with the month's best throwaway line — *“I can't fly, though sure can sit”* — and Marc Nasdor and Robert Kelly crowd in, Kelly lifting the register for a moment to note that *“The life of that city rouses over and over”* before the nonsense reclaims him. The pleasure of reading it now is watching serious poets discover that they can be silly together without ceasing, for an instant, to be poets.

There is a small poetics buried in the fun, as there always is. A collaborative rhyme passed around a mailing list is the social poem of February's arguments made suddenly, unpretentiously actual — authorship dissolved into the group, the medium's back-and-forth turned from a limitation into the very form of the thing. What the theorists could not settle in prose, the chicken thread quietly demonstrates in verse.

It cannot last, and it knows it cannot, which is part of why it is moving as well as funny — a spring fling, a bout of collective high spirits that the summer will let subside. I have kept the letters in the order the days delivered them, each rhymers forward under his own name, the private numbers swept to black, so that the poem can be read the way it was written: as a room of people, briefly, refusing to be sensible. These were letters before ever they were literature — and never more happily so than here.

— K. M. F.

June 1994

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

June 1994 is a quiet month, the spring's collective mania spent, and the list settles into the errands of a going concern — a magazine to announce, a competition to note, a newsletter's subscription mechanics to explain. Chris Funkhouser leads with the roster of The Little Magazine's twentieth volume, a long confetti-fall of names, and closes his own contribution on a graver note, offered almost in passing: *"You gain your life only by giving it up"*. The party is over; the shop is open.

The rest is housekeeping raised, here and there, into something better. Loss Glazier posts the plain instructions for subscribing to RIF/T, the list's electronicpoetry offshoot, and Charles Watts turns a passing remark into a small aphorism, catching the season's mood as *"a cliché of our recognitions and condition"*. Under the heading Recovery of the Public World the list even glances, briefly, at the largest questions before letting them go again until autumn.

Fred Wah signs off the month with three words that will do as well as any for the whole of this early, half-formed, generous archive — *"Thanks for the morsel"*. Seven letters, no arguments to speak of, the poets tending the ordinary machinery of keeping in touch. I have set each forward under its author's name, the private numbers returned to the dark, and left the summer quiet where I found it.

— K. M. F.

July 1994

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

July is a month that turns its back, and I have long since learned not to hold the habit against it. While the comet came apart against Jupiter in a string of bruises the astronomers could scarcely credit, and the wider world spent its fortnight on catastrophe and a football final, my sixty-nine correspondents bolted the door of the little room and argued, of all the imperishable subjects, about anthologies. I find this exactly right. The list is never more itself than when it declines the news and keeps its own weather. A reader arriving from the century outside will feel the hush of a seminar that has forgotten there is a corridor at all, and I confess I would not have it otherwise.

And yet it opens in mourning. On the fifth, Charles Bernstein reposts Robert Creeley's notice that Warren Tallman has died in Vancouver, at home, on the Fourth of July — the impresario of the 1963 conference that carried Olson and Duncan and Ginsberg north, the teacher who, Creeley says, simply believed. Creeley rarely reaches for the large word; he reaches here, and calls Tallman "*a great, great heart.*" I have let the letter stand at the head of the month unabridged, because everything that follows it — the squabbling, the punning, the earnest scholarship — is in some measure the sound of that heart still being listened for.

The month's true engine, though, is the anthology question, and it runs hot. Alan Golding arrives with the scholar's full armamentarium — citations, a survey of the field, the promise of his forthcoming "*From Outlaw to Classic*" — to ask how canons are actually made: who counts the poets, and by what arithmetic. Marjorie Perloff, characteristically, refuses the arithmetic outright. "*This sort of head count can't work,*" she writes, for there will always be another group, another exclusion, another aggrieved census. Between Golding's patience and Perloff's impatience the list strikes its familiar chord: the canon is a scandal none of them can quite bring themselves to abandon.

Then, as ever here, the argument tips over into play. "*Anthologies*" slides into "*magic anthology ride,*" which slides into the gorgeous nonsense-word "*Anthslide,*" and the thread becomes a spelling game conducted at speed. Marc Nasdor, who posts more than anyone, plants his flag on the far shore — anthologies are "*a needless waste of wood pulp,*" he declares, before cheerfully admitting to a couple of dozen on his own shelves — while Chris Funk opens a second front entirely, enrolling

the whole company in “*an Imaginary University*” whose curriculum is pure cryptic delight. This is the Poetics list at its most itself: unable to lose an argument because unwilling, in the end, to stop enjoying one.

And beneath the play, something is quietly founded. It is in this same July that Loss Glazier posts the announcement of the Electronic Poetry Center at Buffalo — the archive, that is, in which these very letters would one day come to rest. I admit a proprietary tenderness toward that message. The list spent the month mourning a teacher and building a memory-machine, and did not once appear to notice it was doing both at the same time. That, precisely, is the office of an editor: to notice. I have gathered the sixty-nine here in their true order, drawn the bar across what ought never to have been public, and left the rest to speak as it did — all at once, and out of turn.

— K. M. F.

August 1994

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

August is the month of the great reunion — out at Yasgur's farm the mud and the nostalgia are being sold back to a second generation — and it is the one concession the poets make all month to the summer's news: Joseph Conte breaks off to ask whether anyone caught *"Melanie at the Woodstock reunion."* For the rest, they spend the weeks talking, with a self-consciousness I find rather touching, about the very wire along which they are talking.

The largest thread is simply headed *"e-mail,"* and it is the list turning to regard itself in a glass. Charles Bernstein, brooding on where the audience for poetry has gone, ventures that its critical future is *"surely electronic"* — a prophecy this very volume, assembled from the wire, exists to confirm. Alan Golding is warier, wondering aloud about *"the privacy issues that e-mail raises,"* a question the black bars in these pages answer after their own fashion, a half-generation too late.

There is heavier weather too. Tom Mandel opens a small seminar on what Brecht did and did not intend by plumpe Denken — *"crude thinking,"* he glosses it — and for a week the list works the narrow seam between the rough-and-ready and the merely rough. It is the sort of argument only these correspondents would mount in the dog days: Marxist aesthetics conducted between announcements of readings, with the fan whirring.

Beneath it runs the summer's durable grievance — where the work can actually be bought. Hank Lazer comes home from Cambridge disenchanted with its *"allegedly wonderful bookstores,"* having found on their shelves next to nothing by the poets this list reads. The complaint braids into the still-smouldering anthology quarrel and a brisk hunt for the earliest citation of woman-as-muse; marketplace, canon, and myth-kit all found wanting in the same breath.

What holds it together is the medium's own strange intimacy — several dozen people, most of whom have never met, conducting a graduate seminar, a swap meet, and a wake at once across a continent and a wire. I have swept the machinery out of these letters, drawn the bar across whatever was private, and left the talk standing. That the talk is so often about the talk itself seems to me exactly the note on which this particular August ought to be kept.

— K. M. F.

September 1994

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

September is a thin month, and I have chosen not to pad it. Eighteen letters — the fewest of any month I have set — arrive across three weeks of early autumn with the air of a room half-emptied for the new term: a reading announced, a video screening, a compact disc advertised from the Ear, and, threaded among them, the last embers of the summer's long argument.

Peter Quartermain rakes those embers with a weary litany — “*priesthoods, anthologies, bookshops*” — as if to concede that the questions of July and August will not be settled by anyone here, and perhaps ought not to be. Michael Boughn supplies the month's mordant flourish, relaying that poets have been “*officially declared 'miserable'*” by some authority or other, a verdict the list receives with its usual blend of umbrage and delight.

It is a caretaker's month, the list keeping its own lights on between larger seasons — and there is a quiet fitness in finding, tucked into one of these notes, a paper newly lodged at the Electronic Poetry Center. Even in its idlest weeks the archive was busy becoming itself. I have gathered the eighteen as carefully as I would have gathered ninety, on the principle that a quiet month, faithfully kept, tells you something the loud ones cannot.

— K. M. F.

October 1994

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

October brings the world to the very edge of the room and no further. Aristide is flown home to Port-au-Prince behind a wall of American soldiers, the midterms gather like weather, and the list — which can see all of it — elects instead to spend the month at war over a single adjective. I would call this perverse if I did not find it, on reflection, the most honest thing about them.

The adjective is “*experimental*,” and the fighting starts when Michael Boughn pulls a thread he plainly suspects will unravel the whole garment, asking whether anyone can explain what the concept even means. He offers to trade it in — “*Innovative, maybe*,” he proposes — and within a day some sixty messages are pouring through the wire under headers that mutate from “*experiwhat?*” to “*absurd category*” to “*Failed Experiments*.”

Jorge Guitart supplies the season's best joke, noting that “*experimental drug testing is legal*” while its livelier cousin is not, and wondering whether experimenting with the lexicon might be actionable as well. Ron Silliman, with rather less patience for the exercise, brings the gavel down: “*The category IS absurd*,” he writes — of “*language*” poetry and “*mainstream*” alike — the emphatic capital his own.

What reads from outside as a squabble over a label is really the list interrogating its own name for itself — whether the word denotes a method, a marketing category, or merely a wish. The argument draws Alan Sondheim toward the medium, others toward Susan Howe's visual poetics and the plain question of who the audience is; but it circles always back to the word. This is the community taking its own temperature by the one instrument it trusts, which is language held under pressure.

By month's end the combatants have exhausted neither the subject nor themselves; the thread merely thins into November, unresolved, which is the only way an argument of this kind ever ends. I have set the letters in their true order, returned each correspondent's address and telephone to privacy, and left the fight intact. Posterity may decide whether they were quarrelling about poetry or about a word — my own suspicion, gently held, is that on this list there was never the slightest difference.

— K. M. F.

November 1994

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

In the first week of November the American electorate hands both chambers of its Congress to the opposition for the first time in forty years, and a former president, in a letter of terrible plainness, announces that he has begun the long walk into the sunset of his own memory. The list registers none of it. It has business of its own — a quarrel two centuries old about whether the lyric is reactionary — and it prosecutes that quarrel with the gravity other people reserve for events in their own lifetimes.

The occasion is Shelley, dragged in from the Flaming thread, and George Bowering fires the opening round: anyone who calls the lyric reactionary, he says, has plainly never learned to “*read Shelley with any intelligence.*” Ron Silliman, less sentimental about the Romantics, supplies the season's founding axiom — that “*all form(s) is amoral,*” a neutral instrument meaning one thing in Bernadette Mayer's hands and quite another in Dana Gioia's — and the list settles in for a fortnight to decide whether he is right.

He is not, retorts Tom Mandel, who offers the sterner correction that “*all form is moral,*” never innocent of the values it carries; and Tenney Nathanson, reaching past them both, recalls Williams's flat verdict that “*all sonnets say the same thing.*” This is the list at its most characteristic — five living correspondents, four decades of theory, and one dead Englishman, all conscripted into an argument nobody expects, or I suspect secretly wishes, to win.

Beneath the high dispute runs a lower and funnier one. The adjective “*experimental,*” unsettled since October, mutates through the headers — experiwhat?, Failed Experiments — until Jeffrey Timmons's much-abused poem is being defended as a triumph precisely because it failed, and Tony Green, surveying the debris of a Patrick Phillips post, announces with satisfaction that “*Form is rampant.*” Alongside it the generations sort themselves into rival camps, G1 and G2, the elders performing their ritual self-criticisms while the young take a careful census of who is card-carrying.

Patrick Phillips, correcting a garbled line in his own essay on Silliman's apex of the M, restores it to the question he had meant to ask: “*Just how does one act when the church is on fire?*” It is, in its way, the month's only genuine emergency — put by a man anxious about a metaphor while, just beyond the window, an actual order of things is quietly burning to the ground. I have set the letters in their true order,

returned each correspondent's telephone and address to the privacy they are owed, and left the fire intact.

— *K. M. F.*

December 1994

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

December belongs, politically, to the men who won November. The incoming Speaker is already itemizing which endowments the Republic can no longer afford, and in one corner of Bosnia the town of Bihac is being shelled inside its own designated safe area while the West looks on and keeps its hands in its pockets. The list turns inward — not to escape the world but to press the question it can never leave alone, which is whether a poet standing inside the university stands inside the world or hides from it.

The largest thread of the month by a wide margin is called Exile on Main Street, after the Stones, and Ron Silliman states its central trap with his usual finality: for all the romance of dropping out, *"there is no Out,"* only a quarantine the establishment maintains for the convenience of the In. James Sherry, reporting live from the interior, observes drily that he has lately passed *"from bad employer to worse,"* his newest paymaster being, of all things, a bank.

Steven Shoemaker raises the stakes by summoning Oppen — *"situations which cannot honorably be met by art"* — and for a paragraph or two the argument about tenure and teaching loads becomes an argument about what art is permitted to leave untouched. Marjorie Perloff, breaking in from her customary altitude, is *"horrificed"* that a company of people able to discuss the Spanish Civil War for weeks cannot rouse itself to a single word about Bosnia. The reproach lands; the thread absorbs it; the thread continues.

Not all of it is so grave. When the Honorable Newt Gingrich discovers that the Republic's gravest lack is prayer in its schools, Mark Wallace supplies the fitting liturgy — a petition offered *"in our firm belief that America doesn't have a prayer"* — and the NEA thread fills with poets drafting, half in earnest, the defense of a body they expect to be executed by spring. George Bowering, the resident Canadian, pauses only to remind the room that by *"America"* they appear to mean the United States alone.

What binds these threads together — the academy, the endowment, the prayer, the war no one will name — is one anxiety about whether any of it does the smallest good: whether the poem, like the safe area, is merely a patch of ground the powerful have agreed to spare until they want it back. I have decoded what the machines encoded, deleted what they added, and returned each correspondent's contact

details to darkness. The argument cools on its own by January, which is more than the century managed.

— *K. M. F.*

January 1995

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

The new Congress convenes on the fourth, the endowments are placed formally on the block, and on the seventeenth the earth opens beneath Kobe and takes six thousand souls before breakfast. The list keeps its own calendar. It has spent the whole winter building toward a single confrontation, and January is the month the confrontation at last arrives — not with the government, but with itself, over a slender magazine and the manifesto folded inside it.

The magazine is Apex of the M, and its editors have made the tactical error of printing their program where the elders can read it. Marjorie Perloff, who admires the poems well enough, confesses herself *"dismayed by the manifesto"* — a document proposing, in effect, that the Language poets now vacate the summit they spent two decades climbing. So the season declares its grand theme: succession, and the peculiar rudeness of asking one's own predecessors to please hurry up and finish.

The sparring is a pleasure to transcribe. Chris Stroffolino needles Tom Mandel over the very notion of a poet in mid-career, pronouncing the category *"delicious really"*; Mandel, defining it flatly as a poet in the middle of a long publishing life and daring anyone to object, tells the list to *"gimme a break."* Beneath the wit sits a genuine quarrel about who holds the authority to pronounce a generation finished, and whether pronouncing it makes it so.

Amid the skirmishing comes a quieter announcement, which posterity will judge the more consequential. Loss Glazier unveils the Electronic Poetry Center's new features — a poetry archive reachable by gopher and, for the daring few with Mosaic, by a thing called the World-Wide Web. Tom Mandel, ever practical, wants to know why no web address is given; Glazier patiently furnishes one. Neither can quite see that he stands at the doorway through which this very list will one day walk into permanence — the reason, reader, that you hold these letters at all.

And then, on Martin Luther King Day, the argument stops. Charles Bernstein relays the word Tom Raworth has just telephoned him: Eric Mottram *"died this morning in London."* The list that has spent a month insisting the old make room for the new subsides, for a day, into something like grief; Robert Kelly proposes they honor him on May Day, and George Bowering, stunned, can manage only that he *"was reading*

him earlier today!" It is the truest sentence in the archive. I have ordered the letters, hidden the addresses, and left the mourning exactly where it fell.

— *K. M. F.*

February 1995

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

February is the shortest month, and the list contrives to spend nearly all of it inside a single argument. Outside, the new Congress settles into its majority and begins sharpening its knives for the endowments; Barings, the bank that once financed the wars against Napoleon, dissolves inside a week over one young trader's losses; and Grozny falls, block by ruined block, to Russian guns. The list attends to none of this directly and to all of it obliquely, having found a quarrel of its own large enough to contain everything else — a quarrel over theory that grows so many heads its own participants can no longer agree what to call it.

The thread arrives decently titled *"reified names vs. boundless vocabulary,"* and within days the subject line begins to rot in transit — first into *"deified theories and unfounded vocabularies,"* then, gloriously, into *"refried theory and deified beans,"* as though the argument had begun to digest itself. Spencer Selby and Tom Mandel circle the ancient question of whether theory serves the poem or quietly usurps it; the misreadings compound, letters cross in the mail, and Mandel at last discovers he has spent days answering the wrong man entirely. It is the list's native weather: heat, wit, and the abiding suspicion that everyone is talking past everyone else. James Sherry, meanwhile, patiently inventories the Language poets' bookshelf for the newcomers, as though a movement might be made safe by being catalogued.

Beneath the theatre of theory runs a quieter reckoning. Ron Silliman, struck by how few women post to a list so many women evidently read, turns and asks them outright — *"Why do you lurk without posting?"* The thread that answers is filed, with spectacular clumsiness, under the heading *"Boy Talk,"* and it draws Kali Tal and others out of what she wryly calls lurkdom. The question is sincere, and so is the awkwardness it exposes; for a few days the list is made to regard its own reflection, and does not entirely care for what looks back.

Relief comes, as it always does here, through elaborate nonsense. cris cheek mounts a magnificently straight-faced pseudo-history of a *"Cockney Folk Dance,"* dragging in Matthew Arnold and a praying mantis before concluding, with liturgical calm, that *"Coherence is its essence."* Nearby, Chris Stroffolino pursues Parmenides and the signifier through a thicket of question marks until he arrives at the month's perfectly circular koan — *"Should we theorize immediacy?"* — a sentence that might serve the

list at once as motto, as symptom, and as warning, and that no one present is able to answer without proving its point.

And then, past all the arguing, a death. Nina Iskrenko — the Moscow poet whose improvisations had lit up more than one American room — is gone at forty-three, and the list that spent the month theorizing pure immediacy is abruptly handed the real article's absence. Tom Mandel, who had met her only once, remembers that *"A great brilliance proceeded from her,"* and, finding her death first noted beneath the unlucky *"Boy Talk"* banner, offers what may be the truest sentence in the whole archive: *"I have no excuse at all."* I have set the quarrels in their proper order and left the grief exactly where it fell, at the bottom of the month, where no one answered it.

— K. M. F.

March 1995

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

March is the month the dollar loses its nerve, sliding to record lows against the yen and the mark while the newspapers mutter about the end of American arithmetic; it is also the month a doomsday sect releases nerve gas into the Tokyo underground and the word cult acquires, overnight, a new and chemical weight. The list registers neither event head-on, being wholly occupied with a slower emergency of its own devising — whether it is still permitted to read a poem closely, and what, if anything, a poem is finally for.

The season's great quarrel is over close reading, provoked when Ron Silliman lets slip that *"I've been trashed for close reading"* before, as if the practice were a species of political embarrassment. Peter Quartermain, with the disarming innocence of a man who has taught for decades, asks the list to explain why close reading has become *"such a reprehensible practice,"* and volunteers that he is probably exposing his own ignorance. He is not; he has merely named the thing everyone had been circling, and the answers run on for a hundred messages, spilling into Chapbooks, Lost Classics, and a running gag about an *"alt.fan.silliman"* newsgroup that does not exist.

Alongside it, Steven Shoemaker poses the month's other keynote — *"what does, or should, poetry do?"* — and watches the list divide between those who want a poem to express feeling and those who suspect that the wanting is the whole trouble. He names the adversary precisely: the Hallmark verse and the poetry-astherapy paradigm his students carry into the classroom already believing. The list, which distrusts sincerity on principle and pieties most of all, finds itself in the odd position of defending the bare possibility that a poem might mean something after all.

The academy hovers over both threads like weather. Lisa Samuels, writing as a dissertator who also writes poems, describes the campus suspicion that the creative act works a certain *"happifying effect"* on a serious mind, softening it for real labour — a diagnosis she delivers with the driest available irony. Jeffrey Timmons, refusing the word teach altogether, proposes shared inquiry in its place, while the ghost of Charles Olson, summoned in an apocryphal bookstore anecdote, presides over the entire discussion as the reigning myth of how a poet is supposed to come by what he knows. Tony Green talks more than anyone and settles the least, which is its own kind of contribution.

What holds the month together is precisely its refusal to let reading be simple. Under all the banter runs a real and unspoken fear — that to read a poem slowly, to take it at its word, is to be caught believing in it, and belief is the one posture this list has trained itself never to strike. Yet the close readers keep reading, closely, anyway. I have kept the arguments intact and resisted the editor's standing temptation to resolve them on the list's behalf; the list did not resolve them either, and that, reader, is very nearly the point of the enterprise.

— *K. M. F.*

April 1995

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

April is the month a bomb takes down a federal building in Oklahoma City and the country discovers, all at once, that the word militia has meant something all along. The list arrives at the horror sideways and mid-sentence, having spent the preceding fortnight relitigating whether poetry can be political without collapsing into a pamphlet — an argument that runs beneath half a dozen headings, changes costume weekly, and never quite consents to conclude. The archive this month spills past its own edges, opening in the last week of March and closing on the first of May, as if the month itself could not be contained.

The politics threads multiply like cells: *“re-politics again,” “Consent of the governing,” “Standing,” “Responsibility,” “Power.”* Gary Sullivan complicates the familiar academic grievance by insisting the real currency at stake is *“poetry world”* tenure — more tenuous than the university kind and somehow more absolute. Edward Foster, who this month writes more than any other soul on the list, keeps the pot at a rolling boil, and the argument over who may speak for whom is conducted with the peculiar ferocity of people who privately suspect the question admits of no answer at all.

Out of the politics grows the month's small masterpiece of dialectic, a thread wryly headed *“Re Mandel/Mao.”* Aaron Shurin lays down the Maoist premise: *“There are no correct ideas.”* Alan Sondheim answers, with perfect and annihilating economy, *“Your idea is incorrect.”* And the Minnesota Center for Book Arts closes the loop by posing the only question left standing: *“Are there, then, any incorrect ideas?”* Three lines, three poets, and something very like the entire twentieth century folded into a single exchange on a listserv few outside this room have ever heard of.

In a warmer register runs *“Desire,”* set off when Dodie Bellamy confesses herself surprised to find *“such a sexy message on the poetics listserve,”* then adds, with a novelist's precision, that she meant the discourse and not the individuals. The thread promptly braids itself into a Rapunzel game, contributors taking turns at the tower and its improbable ladder of hair, while a parallel argument over the *“Definition: Language Poetry”* has Ryan Knighton relaying Jack Spicer's austere line that language is only *“the furniture in the room”* — older than any of us, larger than any of us, and inclined, if anything, to employ the poet rather than be employed.

Then, on the nineteenth, the tower comes down for real. eric pape, watching the list's playful catechism of correct and incorrect ideas roll merrily on, notes how strange the joke sounds arriving as it does after *"the Oklahoma City bombing,"* where a genuine ideology has just built a genuine bomb. And Tony Green, two days later, folds the news into a meditation on where poems come from, letting the phrase *"grief and pity"* fall in among the Chthonic and the ecstatic as if the only honest reply to the thing itself were to stop theorizing and mourn. I have left his line standing at the seam between April and May, where the archive — and, one feels, the century — pause briefly to hold their breath.

— K. M. F.

May 1995

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

The bells of a hundred European cities ring on the eighth for the fiftieth anniversary of a war's ending; on the seventeenth Jacques Chirac takes the keys to the Élysée; and in Oklahoma the rubble is still being sifted for the last of the dead. The list, as ever, keeps its own weather. Buffalo in May 1995 attends not to the century's anniversaries but to a single stubborn word — the Real — and, alongside it, to the older and funnier question of what a poem is even made of.

The month's largest room is opened by John Byrum, who wants to know *"How much Real is transformed via poetry?"* — a question he confesses he first glimpsed at the bottom of a ten-foot sewer trench. Ryan Knighton answers by way of Spicer's After Lorca: poetry does not transform the real so much as correspond with it, carrying it across, one lemon made to answer another. Gary Sullivan declines to argue at all and simply mails in a poem, a refusal of the real dressed as an epistle.

The metaphysics is punctured, reliably, by mischief. Ron Silliman posts to Edward Foster a message whose entire body reports *"That Was Four Lines,"* and George Bowering, refusing to be out-quoted, wonders aloud whether four lines might not constitute a quatrain. The comedy has a serious neighbour in the aleatory thread, where H. T. Kirby-Smith remains magnificently unpersuaded that chance is a method, conceding only that *"Banging on pot lids is fun to listen to"* for a few minutes before one longs to shout Encore and go home.

Yet the chance operations find their defenders — John Cayley describing pieces that learn phrases from their own readers, the discussion circling Cage, rhyme, and the humble random-number generator as three names for the same nerve. Beneath all of it runs the month's most searching question, which Jordan Davis poses without fuss: *"What do we mean when we call someone's work sentimental?"* Jim Rosenberg answers with a definition drawn frankly from his fear about his own writing — the dread that a poem is too much the emotional substance of a single, unreliable self.

It is fitting, then, that the argument should end not in a verdict but in a poem. Sullivan's refusal closes on the things that *"will never take place,"* and for once the list has quarrelled its way clean past quarrel into song. I have set the letters in their true order, hidden the addresses and telephones behind their black bars, and left the poem standing exactly where I found it, its trench and its stars intact.

— K. M. F.

June 1995

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

June opens with an image the poets could not have invented had they tried: two spacecraft, American and Russian, clasping in orbit three hundred miles above the earth, Atlantis and Mir docked at last. Down on the ground a leather glove is conspicuously failing to fit a defendant's hand in a Los Angeles courtroom, and Sarajevo endures another summer of its siege. The list observes none of this directly. Its own June is given over instead to a single creeping suspicion — that the age of rules is ending, in physics, in linguistics, and, heaven help the meter, in prosody.

The news arrives, flatly, from Jorge Guitart: “*rules are disappearing everywhere*,” he reports, even from the linguists' own models, where laws have quietly dwindled into mere constraints. Burt Kimmelman, the month's most tireless correspondent, hears in this the makings of a program and asks whether what the list is really after is “*A poetics of Fuzzy Logic, say?*” Sheila Murphy, in the spirit of what she calls adhocacy, proposes that arbitrary constructs are useful precisely as tension — good only until, left alone, they ossify.

A list that has begun to doubt its rules will, predictably, begin to doubt itself. Ric Caddel, writing from a fairly isolated Durham, admits he is amazed how often the question crops up, and answers it with the observation that “*the purpose of the list shifts and veers*” as the topics come and go — which is, of course, the whole point and no cause for alarm. The self-examination sharpens into a brief, bruising round of name-calling before the season's better angels prevail.

Relief comes, as it so often does in this company, in the shape of a list within the list. Jordan Davis simply transcribes the “*Books on the windowsill by my bed*” — Turgenyev, Chekhov, Hamsun, and more — and the thread blooms at once into a communal inventory of what the poets are actually reading when no one is watching. Chris Stroffolino is glad to see Hamsun there; the sentimentality argument, carried over from May, murmurs on beneath, unresolved and unhurried.

The month closes on a reading rather than an argument. Lindz Williamson writes back from the last night of the Blaser conference in Vancouver, reporting Bowering in his usual “*kid in a candy store*” form and Ondaatje enthralling, and signs off with a fond adios. So June completes its circuit — from the collapse of the rules to the plain pleasure of a good reading, which requires none of them. I have ordered the letters, drawn the black bars across every address, and left the applause where it fell.

— *K. M. F.*

July 1995

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

July is merciless. A dome of heat settles over the American middle and, in Chicago alone, kills hundreds in their sealed rooms; across the ocean the town of Srebrenica falls, and a word that will take years to finish being spoken enters the record. The list, sheltering as always in prosody, spends the month on the oldest quarrel there is: what, if anything, is the unit of a line — and whether that curious animal, the free verse foot, can be said to exist at all.

H. T. Kirby-Smith, returning from May's aleatory campaign, plants his flag without apology: *"there can be a free verse foot,"* he insists — in fact there cannot not be one — and directs the doubtful simply to walk while they read and count the stresses under their soles. George Bowering, the month's inexhaustible presence with better than sixty posts to his name, contests the arithmetic of Olson's breath, and the two of them keep the metrical argument warm through the worst of the heat.

The teaching threads run in parallel, and turn out to be the same thread wearing a hat. Jorge Guitart offers, from years in the schools, that *"children who are naturally untrite"* come up with stupendous things, while Abby Coykendall ties together the two questions the list will not stop circling: the apparent mystery of *"whence writing comes"* and the apparent absurdity of teaching it from ignorance. Marx, she notes drily, comes in handy for both.

Then, on the twenty-fifth, Steven Shoemaker proposes the month's happiest experiment. Having been reading a Hiroshima poet in a little magazine, he wonders whether the renga — that ancient chained form in which collaborators take turns supplying lines — might be adapted to the wires, and asks, reasonably, *"where better than this list?"* Ron Silliman, maria damon, and a handful of others take up the turns, and the poem begins to travel from hand to hand across the continent.

And so the month that opened arguing about the line ends by quietly making one. When the collaborators pass their linked verses along the network, each answering the last, the list stops theorizing the unit of poetry and simply writes it, together — the truest reply July manages to its own long question. I have set the letters in order, hidden the addresses and the telephones behind their bars, and left the renga mid-flight, exactly as it was still being written.

— K. M. F.

August 1995

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

At midnight on the twenty-fourth the world queues in shopping malls to buy a new operating system called Windows 95; a fortnight before, the fiftieth anniversary of Hiroshima passes in a quieter register, and in Bosnia the shells begin to fall in earnest again. The list, characteristically, spends August absorbed by a machine of its own devising — a single poem being written by everyone at once, and threatening never to stop.

The renga, proposed in late July by Steven Shoemaker with one opening line — *"In the books were dreams and in the dreams were books."* — has by August become an organism. Ron Silliman, maria damon, Louis Cabri and a dozen others append their links; the thread buds into Renga, Renga3?, Renga4?, ringing renga, until for a few weeks the list is less a discussion group than a scriptorium passing a single manuscript hand to hand across the wires.

Not everyone is enchanted. A backlash gathers under the frank heading Rengaphobia, and Ron Silliman notes, with the satisfaction of a man who has spotted a pattern, that the three objections to poetry cluttering a poetics list are *"All from north of the border"* — the complainants, to a soul, Canadian. George Bowering, chief among the accused, remains gloriously unrepentant and simply posts again.

Between the renga's links the standing quarrels continue. Jonathan Brannen defends the slippery word art as *"fluid by nature,"* apologizing with mock tenderness that its want of certitude should cause anyone discomfort; Cris Cheek maintains that *"The issue of rhythm is crucial"* to the folk-forms thread; and, relayed by Rachel Loden, Herb Levy's provocation that the sonnet now survives only as a *"marketing strategy"* draws the expected blood. The list even finds an afternoon for baseball, punning poets' names against ballplayers' in the Mitchellmania thread.

And still the renga grows, each contributor adding a line to a poem that no one owns and no one is permitted to finish — the month's purest argument that a poem might be a place one enters rather than a thing one keeps. I have set the letters in their true order, drawn the black bars across every address and telephone, and left the renga exactly as August left it: open, and still accepting links.

— K. M. F.

September 1995

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

September opens on a rare public consensus: on the sixth, Cal Ripken plays his two-thousand-one-hundred-and-thirty-first consecutive game and a divided country agrees, for one evening, to be moved. In Bosnia the guns pause toward a peace that will be signed by winter. On the list, meanwhile, the summer's single poem declines, flatly, to end.

The renga returns as 'the sequel,' and then — inevitably — as 'Two renga don't make a write.' Jorge Guitart, who this month posts an astonishing hundred and eighteen times, presides over its mutations, while Louis Cabri keeps transcribing the swelling text and notices, under the alarmed banner 'wcw qtd in this renga,' that a red wheelbarrow has quietly rolled into the collective poem. The list has written itself a monster and cannot look away.

The renga's true comedy, though, is formal. Quoted and requoted, it sinks beneath stratum after stratum of carets until, in Sheila, Chris and Jorge's muchloved Excellent Adventure, the opening line surfaces under a dozen stacked '>' marks like a fossil in shale. It becomes an involuntary demonstration of how a poem behaves when everybody insists on holding it at once — branching, breaking, refusing to resolve.

Amid the play the list still reads in earnest. Pierre Joris observes that "*Jabes' name is better known than his work*", laying the blame on Derrida and Blanchot, who lend the name without the books; over in the Williams skirmish M. Magoolaghan teases Edward Foster for tiring so fast of the old doctor and his "*damned chicken*"; and H. T. Kirby-Smith offers his favourite mock-explication of the Red Wheelbarrow as "*a tribute to the American Farmer*", on whom, of course, so much depends.

By the equinox the renga is less a poem than a weather system, and the list has quietly reaffirmed its oldest conviction — that writing is something done together, in the open, with no owner and no final line. I have ordered the letters, hidden every address behind its bar, and left the poem precisely where September abandoned it: mid-branch, still being written by more hands than can be counted.

— K. M. F.

October 1995

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

October opens with a verdict and a laurel. On the third of the month the century's most watched jury acquits O. J. Simpson, and a country that had agreed on almost nothing agrees, at least, to keep arguing about that; on the fifth the Swedish Academy hands Seamus Heaney the Nobel, and the list — which honours few laurels it did not itself confer — takes the news with a Northern shrug. R I Caddel reports, in his Durham dryness, that Heaney “*got his gong,*” recycling Eric Mottram's old jibe for the occasion. The Pope is somewhere above Manhattan, the Mall is filling for the Million Man March, and the poets, as ever, keep one eye on the wide world and both hands on the poem.

The month's largest argument, running to better than fifty posts, belongs to B. Cassidy, who asks why the gallery has taken its avant-garde to its bosom — a Pollock, a de Kooning, a Rauschenberg hung in triumph — while poetry keeps Olson and Duncan and Stein out in the annex. Charles Alexander, the most tireless correspondent of the month, defends the difficult on the ground that such works “*question the possibilities of coherence,*” and are prized, not merely tolerated, for doing so. Jordan Davis observes that the Whitney, then showing Hopper, makes exactly the wrong witness for the prosecution, and that any honest audit of the two economies will “*develop a strong sense of perversity.*” The thread does not resolve. It was not built to.

From across the water Ken Edwards forwards the nation's verdict — a BBC poll has crowned Kipling's 'If' the best-loved poem in Britain — and remarks that “*stiff-upper-lip moralism still rules,*” or perhaps merely sells. The list answers in the only currency it keeps, which is more poems: a small epidemic of villanelles breaks out, most of them cheerfully and by their own admission bad, and Timothy Liu turns the season's laurel into a refrain, asking again and again down his stanzas, “*Seamus Heaney or Susan Howe?*” — the one question the Academy will never be set, and the one the list will never stop asking itself.

Elsewhere the elders are kept warm. Dodie Bellamy reopens the perennial matter of Lorine Niedecker set beside Zukofsky, and Chris Stroffolino, charmed by the near-rhyme of the abbreviations, offers the month's happiest slip: “*I like the conflation of Zuk and Buk.*” Mark Scroggins supplies the corroborating anecdote of a Harvard eminence who, told of a scholar at work on Louis, took the American poet in question

to be Charles. In a graver register Jeff Hansen worries the Shelleyan inheritance, confessing himself caught in the old snare whereby *"poetry should be at the origin of everything,"* and therefore answerable for the whole of it.

The month's most quietly furious thread wears the mildest of titles — Distant Lover — in which Aldon Nielsen contemplates the university's new romance with distance learning and pronounces it, like the web that promised so much, *"nothing like the real thing."* He sets the emptying classroom beside a colder arithmetic: the deep cuts to public education arriving in the very season the prisons are funded without a murmur, and the list, for once, finds nothing witty to add. That is the note October closes on. I have decoded what the machines encoded, struck what they appended, and returned every correspondent's address to the dark; the poets themselves I have left exactly as they were — arguing, in a safe area of their own devising, over which laurel to refuse next.

— K. M. F.

November 1995

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

November's news is uniformly grim — a writer hanged in Nigeria, a prime minister buried in Jerusalem, the United States government padlocked over an unpassed budget — and the list, as if for shelter, turns inward to the one quarrel it is actually equipped to adjudicate: what poetry is doing, or failing to do, inside the university.

The thread 'Condition of Poetry in the Academy' runs the length of the month. Marjorie Perloff, briskly hopeful, reports of the undergraduates that *"all they need is a little exposure"* — they love poetry, she means, until a graduate seminar teaches them otherwise. Maria Damon, the month's most prolific voice, presses the harder case, relaying the older faculty who deride theory and its engagements even as their students drift toward them.

The argument keeps discovering new partitions to dispute. Wystan Curnow, eyeing a bookshop's wall between POETRY and FICTION AND LITERATURE, asks *"How significant is this division?"* — and the list, which loves nothing so much as a taxonomy to quarrel with, sets to. Jeffrey Timmons registers a surprise that several hurry to second: his dismay at hearing careful scholarship *"written off as hating literature."*

Once, though, the world declines to stay off-list. When Ken Saro-Wiwa is hanged on the tenth, Ric Caddel supplies the sober particulars — *"an environmental campaigner on behalf of the Ogoni tribe,"* executed with eight others for protesting Shell's despoiling of their land — and for a handful of messages the debate about poetry's uses yields to a plainer reckoning of its costs, and its helplessness.

The academy quarrel is, naturally, left unresolved; it is the list's oldest and most renewable resource, and it will spill unfinished into December. I have set the month's letters in their order, drawn the black bars across every address and telephone, and left the great question open exactly where the listers left it — whether poetry belongs to the university at all, or is merely, for the present, boarding there.

— K. M. F.

December 1995

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

December closes the year in two keys. In Paris the Dayton accords are signed and the war in Bosnia formally ends; in Washington the government shutter its doors a second time, into the new year. The list, scholars nearly to a soul, spends the month packing its bags for the MLA convention in Chicago — and arguing, cheerfully, all the way to the gate.

The academy debate carries over from November, grown more material as it travels. Jeff Hansen redirects it toward *“the financial crisis in higher education,”* observing that young doctorates who love poetry can rarely find anyone willing to hire them. The quarrel about poetry's place in the university has become, without quite admitting it, a quarrel about the rent.

Relief arrives by way of comedy. Daniel LaBeau, assembling a *“Comedy & Society”* class, asks the list for funny poems, and the list — never funnier than when cataloguing its own hilarity — answers with wads of Koch and Ashbery, Berrigan's 'Tambourine Life,' Dorn's Slinger (which some insist has not aged into comedy at all), and, as several note, big helpings of Bernstein. The Kink of Comedy thread runs happily for days.

Dick Higgins, the month's busiest correspondent, relays Rothenberg and Joris's invitation to their Chicago events; Alan Golding, meanwhile, fields a stranger request with perfect gravity, recommending Wilbur poems *“appropriate for Sunday church services.”* Between the profession's housekeeping and its horseplay the list keeps its familiar double nature — half seminar, half green room — and sees no contradiction in the arrangement.

So the year ends as the list prefers to end anything: mid-sentence, over-subscribed, and in good spirits about both. I have ordered December's letters, hidden every address behind its bar, and closed the 1995 volumes with the listers precisely where I found them — talking well past midnight, each convinced the essential thing will be said in the next message, or failing that, the one after.

— K. M. F.

January 1996

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

The new year opens with the government reopening and the eastern seaboard buried under record snow, but the list's real weather is technological. Sometime around now the World Wide Web stops being a rumour and becomes a place a poem might actually live, and January 1996 is the month the list looks up from the page and squints, warily, at the screen.

Dick Higgins, ever first to a new medium, asks what makes a work function well on the web, and observes that *"time seems to behave differently in web poems"* than on paper — one waits for the download, reads in fits, scrolls into the dark. The threads breed accordingly: WEB POETRY, worldwide web presses, and the alarming prospect of whole language-arts departments being restructured around the thing.

Not everything, mercifully, is circuitry. The month's largest thread is older and warmer — music and poetry. Philip Hammond, new to the list, opens it by asking after poems set to music and *"music made by poets,"* and the company happily supplies its admixtures: settings and songs and all the places where the two arts have always quietly leaked into one another.

The list also catches sight of itself. Landers reports buying Paul Hoover's new Postmodern American Poetry: the Norton Anthology and noting, with pleasure, that *"some of the present company were included"* — the avant-garde bound between hard covers at last. Against that domestic satisfaction Aldon Nielsen sets a darker dispatch, a Los Angeles Sentinel report of police in riot gear breaking up a weekly urban poetry workshop in Leimert Park — a reminder that the rooms where poetry happens are not, everywhere, safe ones.

So January leaves the list on a threshold: between the page and the screen, between the anthology and the raided workshop, between poetry as inheritance and poetry as bandwidth. I have set the month's letters in order, drawn the black bars across every address and telephone, and left the list exactly where the year found it — leaning toward the future, and not yet certain it trusts the connection.

— K. M. F.

February 1996

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

February is a leap month, and it opens under a shadow: on the third, Larry Eigner dies. Elsewhere a machine named Deep Blue takes a game from the reigning world chess champion for the first time, and the list registers that too, faintly — but its attention is on the poet from Swampscott, gone at sixty-eight.

Hank Lazer posts the news plainly — Eigner *“died last night of pneumonia and other complications”* — and appends the basics: born 1927, cerebral palsy from birth, non-ambulatory, a lifetime of poems composed against the odds. For a few days the list sets down its quarrels to remember him, and the particular clarity that Eigner wrung from constraint, the way each word arrived as if it had been waited for.

The season's live debate, otherwise, is the everyday. David Carl relays Sandra Gilbert's challenge to demonstrate how language poetry participates in *“a poetics of the quotidian,”* and the list answers with reading lists and countertheories; nearby, under the banner of writing the body, the listers work through Cixous and écriture féminine, arguing how, and whether, a poem can be written through the flesh at all.

Even the abbreviations come in for scrutiny. Mark Nowak, mid-argument about the postmodern, pauses to note the California Native Americans *“whose heritage is Pomo”* and asks the list, gently, to retire the shorthand — the sort of small attention that Ron Silliman, praising a fierce post in another thread, calls the list's *“white-hot intensity of thought”* turned, for once, upon itself.

It is a full month — a death, a debate about the ordinary, a reckoning with a careless name — and the list carries all of it at once, grieving and arguing in the same breath, which is very likely the only way it knows to proceed. I have ordered February's letters, hidden every address behind its bar, and left the list midmourning and mid-thought, exactly as it always is.

— K. M. F.

March 1996

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

The month opened with the ink barely dry on a new law. On the eighth of February the President had signed the Telecommunications Bill, and folded inside it the Communications Decency Act, which made a crime of sending an indecent word to anyone under eighteen; before the day was out the ACLU and the National Writers Union were in a Philadelphia courtroom trying to have it struck down. The bulletin reached the list as a forward, was duly read, and provoked almost nothing. Overhead, meanwhile, the brightest comet in twenty years crossed the northern sky, near enough the pole star to be seen without a telescope. The room looked up at neither. It had a question of its own that March, and could not stop asking it: who is permitted.

The asking began, as it so often does here, with a word. Thirty messages went to avant-garde — whether it meant anything, whether it had ever meant anything, whether the people deploying it were describing a practice or guarding a door. Eryque Gleason would not have the term at any price, objecting to *“the vagueness”* of avant-garde and experimental alike, while chris daniels, who posted sixty-nine times that month, would not let the word alone. It was a quarrel about a label, prosecuted with enormous energy by people who suspected, correctly, that the label was very nearly all that held them together.

The quarrel proper was Ezra Pound, and it ran to four threads and some fifty letters, the titles alone recording the room's mounting embarrassment: Bury Fascist Ezra Pound became let's talk about fascists, bay-bee... became, inevitably, let's NOT talk about fascists, but ourselves. Ada Aharoni would not have the poet parted from his *“genius mates”* Hitler and Mussolini. Alan Sondheim, who had read Mein Kampf and Céline and Pound precisely in order to know what we are, answered that *“the last thing we need is censorship”*. Chris Stroffolino wondered whether critical superiority *“is not a form of censorship”* itself, and if so why not throw out everybody. Ron Silliman, declining the frame entirely, offered only that *“I wasn't born in Idaho in the 19th C.”*

What nobody quite said aloud was that the question was not hypothetical. A usenet ballot stood open until the eighteenth of March on whether to create rec.music.white-power — neo-nazis wanted a newsgroup, and anyone with an electronic mail account had a vote. Joe Amato forwarded the call, voted no, and

hesitated in public over the first amendment as he did it, remarking that the business touched on *"how best to deal with fascism"*. Fifty letters on a dead fascist's prosody; one forward about a living one's newsgroup, passing almost without comment.

And then, on the last Sunday of the month, Maria Damon wrote to report an evening at Woods Hole: poetry videos screened in somebody's front room, girl scout cookies and pesto pizza, and people who had spent their lives insisting poetry was depressing staying up late quoting Maggie Estep to one another. In the middle of her catalogue of the evening's pleasures, in parentheses, the comet — *"everyone went out to watch"* — and it is the only time in seven hundred and forty-five letters that a soul mentions it. I have set the ballot and the quarrels and that parenthesis in the order the month sent them, and let the parenthesis stand where it fell, because a room that spent March deciding who might be let in had, on one night at the end of it, let everybody in and gone outdoors to look at the sky.

— K. M. F.

April 1996

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

On the first of April the President proclaimed the first National Poetry Month, an invention of the Academy of American Poets, who had noticed that Black History Month worked and saw no reason poetry should not be marketed likewise. On the third, in a plywood cabin in Montana, the Bureau arrested a man who had spent seventeen years mailing bombs and who had, the previous September, obliged the Washington Post to print thirty-five thousand of his words entire by promising to stop killing if it did. Both reached the list, and the room noticed the second more than the first. April was the month poetry went looking for an audience, and the month it was reminded what an audience can cost.

The looking was done on television. Bob Holman's *The United States of Poetry* had begun airing, and some sixty letters across four threads went to poetry video — whether the camera serves a poem or eats it, whether Godard is any use to a poet, whether Buster Keaton was already doing it. Then Holman turned up mid-quarrel, delighted to find it going on, and made the case plainly: *"Poetry for me provides voice for the unheard"* — no expert, no footnote, the poem straight down the wire. Maria Damon, who wrote forty-nine times that month and had screened the thing at Woods Hole in March, was at the centre of it.

The quarrel took its shape from a flyer. Charles Alexander posted somebody's National Poetry Month leaflet and dismissed it as culture with a capital Q; Kim Tedrow, a Minnesotan, opened a thread to say she *"read it as non-complimentary"*, and eighteen letters followed on whether the Twin Cities were culturally vapid, whether a poetry reading held in the Mall of America was a joke or a mission, and whether there was any such thing as Minnesota-ishness at all. David Baratier answered with an inventory of the micro-presses working within thirty miles of the mall. Alexander, to his great credit, gave ground: *"If the audience for poetry is broadened, no one loses"*.

The mall would not go away, and became the month's best thread by being its least earnest. Michael Boughn observed that *"Glenn Gould loved to hang out in malls"* for their magic, and asked whether Americans knew who Glenn Gould was. Mary Rising Higgins wanted to know how one buys throwaways while a man gives his life to a composition, and declared she would *"never hear Glenn Gould in a shopping mall"*. Wystan Curnow, having read the whole business, delivered the verdict: *"The writing*

is in the Mall". A pianist who quit the platform because he could not bear the audience, haunting the one place the audience actually is — the room had found its emblem and did not quite say so.

And Pound, over whom this same room had agonised for fifty letters in March, came back in April as a punchline. On the fifth, two days after the arrest, Chris Stroffolino announced that his favourite poetry video was THE ADDICT WHICH IS DESIRE, "*starring the UNABOMBER as Ezra-Pound*". It is a joke, and a bad one, and it is the truest sentence in the month: a writer who wanted no readers had just obtained the largest readership in America by the only means that has never failed, and the poets — proclaimed, televised, shelved beside the food court — saw the resemblance and could do nothing with it but laugh. I have kept the flyer and the mall and the cabin in the order April sent them, because the room argued all month about the price of being heard, and only Stroffolino, joking, ever named the figure.

— K. M. F.

May 1996

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

On the tenth of May a storm caught four expeditions high on Everest and eight people died in it; on the afternoon of the eleventh a DC-9 out of Miami went into the Everglades at five hundred miles an hour with a hundred and ten aboard, and left so little of itself that divers worked a month in the muck to find seventy of them. In six hundred and thirty-six letters the list mentions neither, not once. The only news to get through the door arrives on the twenty-ninth, mid-argument, from Chris Stroffolino, who breaks off to report that *"some YAHOO just won in Israel"* and is gone again inside the parenthesis. The room was occupied. It was deciding what a sonnet is.

It had a formalist to hand, which was new. Annie Finch was on the list that month and posting, her essay on the formal continuum forwarded in and picked over for weeks, and she put the question that organises everything after it: is it good for poetics, she asked, to let its terminology grow so open that a term like sonnet *"ceases to carry much information"*? She wanted only to speak accurately about poetic phenomena. She had come to the wrong room, and she had come in good faith, which made what followed worse.

What followed was a swarm. Steve Carll wanted to know *"Why read another bloody sonnet"* if the name told you in advance what the poem would do. George Bowering asked since when sonnets had to run fourteen lines. William Marsh remembered a teacher who called the sonnet a short fat know-it-all. Daniel Bouchard put it to her that if the form were truly a living thing then *"isn't it kinder to kill the form?"* And the month's largest thread took its title from a joke on Dickinson — after great pain, a formal Finch comes — under which Henry Gould consulted his bird book and reported that *"that's no finch, it's a stuffed sandsifter"*. Michael Boughn alone observed that nobody seemed interested in *"speaking up on behalf of Annie Finch"*, and offered to do it himself.

The room did not notice what it was doing, and that is the whole of the month. In March it had spent thirty messages on the word avant-garde, and Eryque Gleason had objected in as many words to the vagueness of the term — that it had grown so accommodating it no longer told anybody anything. Finch's complaint about the sonnet is that complaint exactly, arriving from the far end of the room, and it could not be heard, because of who was making it. A list unable to keep hold of its own

word for two months running was in no position to explain to a stranger why hers still meant something. It did not try. It made jokes about her name.

There is one more thing. Finch's posts kept arriving broken. Some gateway between Ohio and Buffalo was chewing them, so that her careful notices about the anthology she was editing come through with a tail of wreckage attached — Af maons on ansand fo teh lpes21 / wot knesli — and her longest replies surface interleaved with themselves: a phrase of argument, a spill of letters, argument again. It is a fault in the wire and nothing more. I have let every instance of it stand exactly where it fell, because the alternative was to tidy the one member of the list whose case was that form carries meaning — and because May 1996 is the month a room that could not agree what a sonnet was received a formalist's defence of form in pieces, and answered the pieces.

— *K. M. F.*

June 1996

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

On the twenty-fifth of June a truck carrying two tonnes of explosive was parked against the perimeter fence of an apartment block at Khobar in Saudi Arabia, and nineteen American airmen were killed in their beds. The list does not mention it, and I have stopped being surprised by this. June was a quiet month by the room's standards, four hundred and fifty-three letters and no great quarrel, and its two presiding subjects were silence and nothing — Cage named two hundred times, Beckett a hundred — which the room meant, on this occasion, quite literally. What it was actually doing, without announcing it and possibly without noticing, was the one piece of business it had been failing at all spring.

The failing is easily stated. In March the list had spent thirty messages on avant-garde and could not agree the term meant anything; in May it had spent a hundred on the sonnet and could not agree that either. In June, when Ira Lightman asked which British poets engage seriously with language poetry, Ken Edwards answered him generously and then added, from the bottom of his soul, *"don't anybody dare start another thread"* on what exactly langpo is. The room had lost its appetite. Three months of trying to fix the meaning of words it had used for twenty years had produced nothing but fatigue and jokes about a woman's surname.

Meanwhile the other thing had happened. In April, larking about in the poetry-video argument, Chris Stroffolino had typed the word quertzblatz, which is not a word, addressing the list as seriously quertzblatz guyzies. May took it up — thirteen messages, and Rob Hardin composing a mock lexicon of specimens and usage, numbered in Roman figures of which several are not Roman figures — and one correspondent, Tim wood, put his finger on it exactly: an *"empty signifier in a non-existent space"*. That is what it was. It had no meaning at all, which was the entire joke.

And in June the joke stops. Nobody discusses quertzblatz in June; they use it. J. Beer, opening the month's largest thread with a serious question about Beckett and Cage and the impossibility of big-S Selfhood, remarks in passing that Cage seems to have mattered more to *"querzblatian types"* — a coinage of a coinage, deployed without gloss, in a subordinate clause, and understood by everybody. Tom Beard, recommending a poet, allows that *"she's not quertzblatz enough for some"*. The word

now has an adjective and a comparative. It took nine weeks. The sonnet has had seven hundred years and is still being argued about.

What redeems all this from mere farce is the month's other thread, which Jordan Davis opened with five words: *"Anybody read any good poems lately?"* The answers came for a fortnight — Michael Boughn with Lise Downe, John Kinsella with Rod Mengham, Ken Edwards emptying his active shelf, Carnography with the Dennis Cooper, George Bowering reporting of a New Zealander's poems that *"they are really bad"* — and somebody posted ECW Press's street address in Toronto, and then somebody else posted it again with the fax. I have set the empty word and the full shelf on either side of one another exactly as June sent them, because a room that could not say what a poem was, and had given up trying, could still tell you without hesitation which one to read, and where to write for it.

— K. M. F.

July 1996

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

It is not true that the list ignored the news that July. It kept a different ledger. A jetliner came apart over Long Island on the seventeenth with two hundred and thirty aboard, and a pipe bomb went off in the Olympic park at Atlanta on the twenty-seventh, and neither appears in six hundred and ninety-five letters; but on the sixteenth Michael Boughn posted under the heading Bad news, and the room went into mourning for a week. Coach House Press was closing after thirty-one years — Blaser, Bowering, Ondaatje, Thesen — and Boughn knew whom to blame: *"Chalk up another victory for the New York bankers"*. That was July's catastrophe, and the room grieved it properly, while doing the least defensible thing it did all year.

For the month's largest business, some forty letters under List wars and Listpersonship, was the list discussing its own conduct. The occasion was a panel at Orono: Aldon Nielsen had said something, Robert von Hallberg had disputed it, Keith Tuma had forwarded Nielsen's remarks to von Hallberg, who was not a member, and von Hallberg had replied to a list he had not joined. From this the room extracted a fortnight of procedure — whether the forwarding was permissible, whether the reply was, whether he ought now to subscribe — with a subsidiary quarrel over lurkers, whom Herb Levy had characterised in terms Daniel Bouchard quoted back at him before asking, reasonably, *"Who can blame lurkers for keeping silent?"*

It took Marjorie Perloff to say what the month was. She found the controversy slightly absurd, and gave her reason: Lorenzo Thomas, *"a Live Black Poet and the only one present"* at Orono, had given a moving talk on Melville Tolson, had not been asked to read, and was being discussed by nobody — while the question of who forwarded what to whom was on its fourth day. And here is the part I cannot get past: maria damon, who wrote fifty-two times that July and had made this point already, replied only that *"this is exactly what i was trying to point out"*. She had said it. It became audible when Perloff said it.

The month's other thread asked what a poem in extremity is worth, and got an answer nobody wanted. Victim art had been discussed for a week in the abstract when Dan Horne wrote from New Zealand to say it had happened to him: a nurse had asked him to read the poems of a teenage patient recently dead of cancer, and say whether an editor might take them. He read them. He told her *"the poems didn't align themselves with the ideologies"* of the journals he knew, and felt worse for

saying it, and said so. Elsewhere the list, doing the thing it is actually good at, assembled a shelf — Blackburn's journals, Curnow's daybook, Helene Davis, Pekar and Brabner — for anyone who wanted to read the illness rather than adjudicate it.

And in Toronto the premier of Ontario, asked about the press his government had cut by seventy-four per cent, told reporters that the company's blaming the province "*probably speaks to their management capabilities*". Boughn printed it from that morning's Globe without comment, which was the correct handling. Charles Alexander wrote the epitaph and did not know it: "*One good thing come to an end. Bless it.*" I have set the etiquette and the elegy where July put them, four days apart, because this is the month the room spent forty letters establishing who was entitled to speak to it, while a press that had printed thirty-one years of poems went under, a living poet's talk went undiscussed, and a dead girl's poems were weighed against the ideologies of the journals and found not to fit.

— K. M. F.

August 1996

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

August 1996 gave the country the end of its Olympics, both its party conventions, and a president signing away sixty years of federal welfare, and the list, four hundred and thirty-nine letters that month, is largely elsewhere. Its own news came on the fifteenth, when George Starbuck died at home in Tuscaloosa at sixty-five, and Hank Lazer wrote the notice. What occupied the room otherwise was a single, oddly consistent preoccupation, running under threads that appear to have nothing to do with one another: the question of what is underneath a thing.

It began with a wheelbarrow. Christina Fairbank Chirot, opening under an epigraph from Smithson — *"Literal statements often conceal violent analogies"* — pointed out what is obvious once said and invisible until then: Williams breaks his line so that the words on the page are a red wheel, then barrow, and *"Barrow can also mean a grave site marked by stones"*. Twenty-eight letters followed, red becoming read, the most transparent poem in American English turning slowly into a burial mound. Chirot was running the month's other thread at the same time, on speed, by which she meant not velocity but seeing in a poem — perception and scale — and quoted Dickinson for it: *"To close the eyes is travel"*. The two threads are one thread.

The objection was Peter Quartermain's, and it is the best sentence of the month. Reading the poem as a coded burial, he warned, imports an ethnocentrism that makes western material progress the poem's hidden subject; and the real difficulty is that *"any coded reading closes the poem down"*. That is the whole quarrel, and neither side quite won it. Maria Damon, who wrote forty-two times in August, was meanwhile theorising Hannah Weiner's dictated writing as an effect of the trauma of postmodernity and of a Jewish girlhood spent comfortably alongside the Holocaust, and asking the room to help her prove it — an essay due, she admitted, in three days. The list was excavating everything it touched.

In Portland, meanwhile, none of this was happening. The National Poetry Slam ran from the twentieth to the twenty-fifth; Bob Holman signed books with Marc Smith at Powell's; and at half past nine on the Tuesday all five parts of The United States of Poetry were screened at a brew pub cinema, with the sixteen-millimetre print of the last show — Eigner, Creeley, Harryman — run again after the Slam let out. In April this room had spent sixty letters asking whether putting poetry on television dilutes

it. The question was now being answered, at eleven at night, by a projector in a bar, and the list posted the schedule and went back to its grave.

Which leaves Lazer's notice, and the thing in it nobody picked up. Starbuck had directed the writing programmes at Iowa and Boston and lived twenty years with Parkinson's; and, the notice adds in passing, while at SUNY-Buffalo in 1963 he *"initiated a successful challenge of New York's Feinberg"* loyalty-oath law — the statute requiring a teacher to swear what he was not. A poet who refused to sign, at Buffalo, and won. The list is at Buffalo. It read the notice and replied about his age: maria damon that *"65 is much younger than i would have placed him"*, George Bowering remembering a drugstore anthology in 1957. Nobody mentioned the oath. I have set the barrow and the obituary at either end of the month exactly as August sent them, because a room that spent four weeks proving a wheelbarrow was a grave never thought to look under its own address.

— K. M. F.

September 1996

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

September 1996: cruise missiles into Iraq on the third, Tupac Shakur shot in Las Vegas on the seventh and dead of it on the thirteenth, the Defense of Marriage Act signed in the small hours of the twenty-first. Of the three the list registers one, and only as a forwarded action alert somebody passed on with a note. Its own seventh of September was a different day. What the room was doing across six hundred and eight letters that month was arguing, at length and with feeling, about whether writing about poetry is a parasite upon poetry.

That fight had been smouldering since July and it caught properly on the fifth, when Michael Boughn opened a thread addressed to Marjorie Perloff by title and rank — Dear Professor Perloff — and put George Steiner in evidence against her whole profession: the dominion of *“secondary and parasitic discourse over immediacy”*, of the critical over the creative, an anxious wish for something to stand between us and the primary thing. Forty-one letters ran under critics and poets, fifteen more under Poets vs. Critics, and the room divided along the line it always divides on, which is not really about criticism at all but about who is permitted to say what a poem is worth.

It ran alongside the funniest thing the list did all year. In July the room had spent a fortnight in anguish over whether a member might forward another member's words to a non-member. In September David Benedetti posted under the heading Confidential to everybody on the list, enquiring how many present wished to hear about Rachel Loden's confidential messages to Mark Wallace concerning George Bowering's imaginary dildo. Gwyn McVay asked whether there was a choice, and proposed instead an account of Bernstein, Rothenberg and Joris *“hanging out of the windows at the Chelsea Hotel”* while Perloff worked a counterfeit Ouija board on Rod Smith. Twenty-six letters of invention followed. The room had found the only sane response to its own July, which was to make the whole thing up.

And on the eighth, Kevin Killian and Dodie Bellamy wrote jointly to say that Daniel Davidson had died in San Francisco on the Saturday night, by his own hand, after many years of pain following open-heart surgery. They marked their paragraphs so you could tell who was speaking. Dodie had met him in the mid-eighties at the UCSF medical centre, where she was a temp and he was coming in for follow-ups; they talked about writing and music and drugs, and listened to Messiaen's Quartet for the

End of Time in his flat on Haight Street; she had never seen anyone *"live more grandly on a fixed income"* — Salvation Army castoffs dyed black, a dashing figure. Kevin remembered him at every reading in the city, come to poetry late and burning with it, and, because of the plastic valve in his heart, always certain he had no time.

He had been scheduled to read that Friday, the thirteenth, at Small Press Traffic; the reading became his memorial. And at the end of the notice, having given the list a man's whole life in nine paragraphs, Killian apologised: *"Sorry to fill up the bandwidth"* with all this about Dan and us — a grief, he said, not unmixed with guilt. Then the thread on critics and poets resumed, and ran another fortnight. I have set the argument and the notice where September put them, three days apart and never once touching, because a room that spent the month deciding whether commentary is a parasite on the primary thing was, on the eighth of it, handed the primary thing, and said sorry for the bandwidth.

— K. M. F.

October 1996

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

On the third of October the Swedish Academy gave the Nobel Prize in Literature to Wisława Szymborska, and for once the list engaged the news wholeheartedly: some thirty letters on the prize, the Academy, Heaney three years earlier, what a Nobel is for and whether it can be for a poet at all. October was the month the room thought about readership from every side it had. It thought about it more thoroughly than any month that year. And on the twenty-second, at half past ten in the morning, three thousand miles from most of the people writing, a woman who wanted very much to be read set herself alight.

Before that, two arguments, and both of them are about her without knowing it. The first was Dodie Bellamy's. Still teaching, still playing the subject supposed to know, she posted a poem from another listserv that struck her as a perfect example of bad student poetry, and asked the room a real question: when something wholly wrong-headed and wholly sincere is put in front of you, and your mind goes blank, and you cannot simply grunt out don't do this anymore — what do you say "*as a way to begin a dialogue?*" Twenty-eight letters tried to answer her. It is one of the kindest threads in the archive.

The second was the old one. Fifty-odd letters ran under politics & poetry and its variants, set off by the Perloff-Warsh exchange in *Talisman* and by Eliot Weinberger's charge that the Language poets were "*Reagen-era capitalist dupes*" for unhinging words from history much as Reagan had. Perloff's line that "*The personal is the political*" was quoted at the room and the room took it apart. Can a poem do political work; is a poetics a politics; what would it even look like if it were. The thread was still running on the twenty-second.

Kathy Change was forty-six. She had changed her name from Chang to mean it. For fifteen years she had danced and carried flags on the University of Pennsylvania campus, arguing that America must be remade into something actually democratic, and almost nobody had listened. Two hours before she died she "*delivered packages of her writings to six students*" and two residents of the neighbourhood. Her statement, dated the seventh, said her real intention was to spark a discussion of how the world might be peacefully transformed, and that she offered herself as "*an alarm against Armageddon and a torch for liberty*". She died within the half-hour.

Louis Cabri, a poet in the English department there, forwarded the wire report to the list the next afternoon.

What followed is four days long and I have not touched a line of it. Pat Pritchett said, honestly, *"I don't see the point of Ms. Change's actions"*, never having heard of her. Steve Shoemaker posted a sentence of Williams — *"The perfect type of the man of action"* is the suicide — and the room turned to it with relief and did not turn back. Jennifer-Alan found the Williams *"It's also incoherent and ugly"* and offered to deconstruct man, action, perfect and type; maria damon noted the words were Nietzsche's; henry gould and George Bowering finished on Hemingway and touché. Nobody opened the packages. I have set the sincerity thread, the politics thread and the twenty-second where October put them, because this is the month a room spent four weeks asking how to answer sincerity and whether a poem can be political, and then a sincere political writer handed her writing to six strangers and died to make somebody read it, and the room discussed a quotation.

— K. M. F.

November 1996

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

The country re-elected its president on the fifth of November and the list mentioned him three times, which by now surprises nobody, least of all me. The month's real event fell a week later and was not a poem. On the twelfth Charles Bernstein forwarded a letter he had been asked to pass on, from the administrators of the listservs at SUNY-Buffalo, explaining that POETICS was being moved off the old IBM machine at `ubvm.cc.buffalo.edu` and onto a new Unix one at `listserv.acsu.buffalo.edu`. They had been testing for a while. They promised the migration would be *"as painless as possible and transparent for you and us"*. It was.

I can show you the seam. Of the six hundred and seventeen letters in this volume, a hundred and eighty-seven were posted from the old address and four hundred and thirty from the new, and the join falls between two messages on a Tuesday afternoon, invisible to anyone not reading the headers, which is everyone. The list had lived on that mainframe since it began. It went out on the twelfth of November and not one of six hundred and seventeen letters remarks on it. No farewell, no complaint, not so much as a note that the mail was arriving from somewhere else now. The room moved house and did not look up.

Eight days later it began to argue about land. The question came from Ontario, from k.a. hehir, who had just got his copy of GRAIN and wrote in with an apology first — *"this an american based talkgroup but i must ask"* — before asking it: were there western American poets who made something of the harsh isolation, and prairie poets who got past the lingo of the farm and the slough and the seasons? He explained himself in four words, *"as a transplanted gopher chaser"*, a man from a place he no longer lives in, looking for poems that could negotiate the two. It is the best question anybody put to the list all year, and it ran for eighty letters.

Not one of which could say where the West is. Pierre Joris named Niedecker, Dorn and Irby; Pat Pritchett named Saner and Haines; Christina Fairbanks named Silko, Ortiz and Wendy Rose; and underneath the bibliography the room came apart on the only point that mattered. Judy Roitman settled it from Kansas — *"Ohio is the east, and Buffalo is east of that"* — while George Bowering settled it otherwise from Vancouver: *"There is a ridge where the west commences!"* And Ron Silliman, raised in Berkeley, recalled once thinking the midwest meant Reno and everything past Salt

Lake was back east; now that he lives back east, he hears people call Buffalo the midwest. The West is wherever you are not. That is the whole of the finding.

Which brings me to the sentence I have set this volume around. Silliman, listing what the East turned out to be — the sledgehammer shift of seasons, the Mummers, four times the house for the money, no baseball scores from the west coast — put among them, without emphasis, one more item: *"Email as your primary contact with other poets"*. He had moved, and this was where the poets were now. This room was the place he had left California to keep. And on the twelfth of November the place he had left California to keep changed its address, and told him so in a forwarded letter, and promised he would not feel a thing, and he did not, and nor did anybody else, because they were all looking for the West on a map.

— K. M. F.

December 1996

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

The world into which these letters were written was itself in a season of transitions. A newly re-elected American president was assembling his second cabinet, naming Madeleine Albright to the State Department; at the United Nations, Kofi Annan was being raised to Secretary-General; and the year drew toward its close having taken both Carl Sagan and Marcello Mastroianni. Into all of it the poets of Buffalo went on writing to one another, nightly and at length.

The month's presiding quarrel, which runs to some eighty messages beneath a drift of mutating subject-lines, concerns taste. Michael Boughn calls it, wearily and near its close, *"that totally frustrating taste thread,"* and one sympathizes; yet the frustration was rather the point. Wystan — Curnow, one presumes — supplies the winter's most durable epigram: *"taste judgements are about not explaining yourself."* Around this the list divides into parties: those who would rescue the word by translating it, Boughn reaching for Castaneda's heart and for Freud's cathexis, and those who catch in it only the old class perfume.

For relief the poets went to the pictures, and to the American West. What began as an aside upon Burt Bacharach hardened into a small canon of the unorthodox western — Nicholas Ray's Johnny Guitar, of which Tom Mandel reports simply *"yes it's amazing,"* then Fritz Lang's Rancho Notorious, and at length Jarmusch's Dead Man. That a distaste for John Wayne might be, like bad writing, a position one could defend was lost on no one.

Beneath the play ran graver questions. A newcomer signing only *"ms,"* who had lurked a week before speaking, asked the room to name whoever first held that there could be *"no writing in the aftermath of the Holocaust"* — and Adorno's shade duly crossed the threshold. Elsewhere the practical anxieties of the guild: Burt Kimmelman confessing that of the creative-writing doctorate *"there is something scammy about it,"* and Linda Russo answering, disarmingly, that one pursues the thing for *"library access, email, an income."*

Judy Roitman, turning over Cid Corman's selection of Lorine Niedecker, copied out a jacket blurb that praised its poet as *"easily the finest female American poet"* and let the qualifier detonate unassisted; the thread grimly titled *"patr-iarchy/onization"* was the crater. It is, to my eye, the month's most necessary argument, and the least resolved.

And all the while, beyond the poets' window, a winter of consequence: among the very first of these messages is not poetry at all but a forwarded appeal from the students of Belgrade, then filling the squares against Milošević in the cold — history leaking, as it will, into the inbox. I have arranged what follows so that each voice stands forward under its own name, its telephone and its address returned to privacy, its machinery swept aside. The reader who wishes to enter at any point will find the contents entirely obedient to the touch. I ask only that you remember, as I do nightly, that these were letters before ever they were literature.

— *K. M. F.*

January 1997

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

On the twentieth of January a poet stood on the west front of the Capitol and read a poem to the president, the Congress, and the cameras of the world — the largest audience an American poem had that decade. This list, seven hundred and seventy-nine letters and the busiest month in the archive so far, raised a dozen about it, most asking who he was. Joe Amato opened on the ninth: *"anybody know anything 'bout miller williams' work?"* Pat Pritchett had not heard either — *"Who's gotten the nod this time? I haven't heard"* — and David Kellogg thought he was from Arkansas, which he was. That is the whole of the room's interest in the inaugural poem. It had something better on.

Because for the first time in the eleven months I have been reading this list, the news was about the list's own subject, and the list came. On the eighteenth of December the Oakland school board had resolved that the English its pupils spoke was a language with a history, and by January the country was at war over it. Gabrielle Welford forwarded a letter got up by linguists, protesting that the Linguistic Society's resolution supporting the board had gone unreported while the papers filled with *"mean-spirited and ignorant assertions"* that African American English was bad grammar and slang. James Brook posted the resolution entire, and beside it the Chronicle's report that the board was about to gut it after three weeks in which *"everyone from Rush Limbaugh to Maya Angelou"* had weighed in.

The room had been waiting all year for this question without knowing it. It could not agree what avant-garde meant in March, or what a sonnet was in May, or where the West is in November; it spent June being begged not to define langpo. Now a school board had said in public that a way of speaking is a language, and the apparatus of American opinion had told it that it was not — and every instinct the list had was suddenly relevant. William Marsh went to Emerson and got the month's shortest true sentence out of him: *"today's standard = fossilized slang"*. Susan Wheeler asked whether there is a gender-specific standard English, and whether it is easier to transgress than an ethnic one.

The best of it came from Bil Brown, who had been reading a while before he said anything. What people are calling Ebonics, he wrote — spelling it his own way, which is the argument — *"What ppl call IBONICS is what I call written poetry"*. He wondered whether what gets diagnosed as a learning disability might be a way of

associating that arrives early rather than late. He is making, from inside the practice, the case the linguists were making from outside it, in the very English under indictment, and nobody appears to notice that this is what has happened.

And then Jordan Davis did the thing that redeems the list. He posted the street address of the Oakland Unified School District — 900 High Street — and suggested people send books. He knew what it was worth: *“it’s a somewhat empty patronizing gesture”*, he said, to be sure, but a teacher he knew had told him it helps. I have set the inaugural thread and the Oakland threads where January put them, eleven days apart, because this is the month poetry was given the west front of the Capitol and the room could not name the man holding it, while up the coast the actual argument about who owns English was being settled by a school board under national bombardment — and the most useful thing anybody here produced about any of it was an address you could post a parcel to.

— K. M. F.

February 1997

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

In the last week of February a laboratory in Midlothian announced that the lamb it had produced the previous July had been made from a single cell of a six-year-old ewe, and the world understood at once that something had changed. Deng Xiaoping had died five days earlier. The list mentions the sheep not once and Deng twice, and I record this now only for the ledger, since it is nine hundred and twenty-three letters long, the largest month in this archive, and every one of them is busy with a question the room could not put down: whether what a man is gets into what he writes.

The occasion was Ed Dorn, and I am not going to reprint what he and Tom Clark had published about people dying of AIDS, because the room did not need it reprinted and neither do you. It is enough that everyone had read it and nobody defended it. What they argued about instead was what one is then obliged to do. William Northcutt, writing from Bayreuth, managed both halves in a single post — the thing was horrible, he said, and also *“this list has taken a self-righteous turn”* — and reported the detail that stayed with me, that Dorn had stopped setting foot on the Naropa campus, which Northcutt thought must feel like a horrible kind of exile.

Tom Mandel put the case for the prosecution in four lines and no adjectives. How a person behaves ought to determine how one relates to him: any problems so far? *“Writing — that’s thinking, saying, doing”*. Still with me? Reading, ditto. Are we on the same page? He then said what he would do if Dorn came near him, and declined to dress it up as a principle. Against which the room set Neruda, and Mark Weiss wrote the month’s most patient letter, explaining out of his own childhood among Debs socialists — his father’s flirtation with the Party *“did not survive the Hitler-Stalin pact”* of 1939 — how a good man’s instrument *“malfunctioned in the case of Stalin”*, and why the faithful, who saw only each other, could not have known.

And underneath, unregarded, Ron Silliman was quietly dismantling the whole enquiry. Under Names are not Objects he had got curious about where Miekal And’s name came from, and started listing: Robert Duncan had been christened Edward Howard Symmes, Lyn Hejinian had been Carolyn Ochs, Rae Armantrout had been Mary Korgegian, Michael Palmer had been George. *“Names do seem particularly unstable with regards to people”*, he observed, and went on to the artist formerly known as Prince. Thirty-seven letters. The room was trying to establish whether the

man is in the poem and could not, in the next thread along, reliably establish what the man was called.

None of which was the largest thread. That was Jordan Davis, on the twenty-fifth, asking twenty-two words: what attitude — no, *“what facial expression do you find yourself assuming”* when you begin a poem, when you are in the middle of one, when you are editing? Just curious. Twenty-eight letters came back. Ian Wilson knew, because *“I’ve had someone in the room videotaping”*. Don Cheney guessed, *“because i’ve never looked”*. Eliza McGrand went *“this completely blank, walled over expression”*; Dave Zauhar’s wife said he looked like Marty Feldman; Pat Pritchett claimed *“Michael Jordan — full extension — tongue lolling out”*. I have set the prosecution and the faces on facing pages, because a room that spent nine hundred letters unable to decide whether a man gets into his writing spent its largest single thread describing, one after another, exactly what its own face was doing while it wrote.

— K. M. F.

March 1997

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

Hale-Bopp was the brightest thing in the sky that March, and on the twenty-sixth thirty-nine people were found dead in a rented house at Rancho Santa Fe, having concluded that a craft was travelling behind it and that they should go. The list does not mention the comet, or the house, or any of it. Exactly a year earlier it had given Hyakutake a single parenthesis in a party report, so this is by now a habit rather than an oversight, and I record it and move on. What the room was doing across eight hundred and ninety-six letters instead was arguing, in three unconnected threads that are plainly one thread, about what lasts.

It started in the archive of itself. Steven Clay asked after the mimeo magazines, and for a fortnight the room emptied its memory onto the wire: C, The World, Beatitude, United Artists, Adventures in Poetry, 432 Review, Mag City, Fuck You. Twenty-five letters of titles, editors, addresses, the occasional phone number. George Bowering, who had contributed half a dozen from Vancouver, got to the end of his own list and could not finish it — *“and that one, what was its name, from Preston?”* — which is, I think, the truest sentence in the volume. That is what survives of a revolution: a catalogue with a hole in it.

Kent Johnson read that thread and asked the obvious question, which is why nobody else had. Astronomers were now clear that the Earth is fated to be hit, possibly tonight; so what is the worth of poetry, avant-garde or otherwise? *“there will be no smell of mimeo ink”* or memory of it afterwards; language poetry and all its contraries would go together, The World and APR alike. Then he asked what beer avant-garde poets drink while writing. Thirty-four letters came back and nearly every one was a joke. Alan Sondheim: *“I always donate my poems to stopping anything”* from outer space. Simon Schuchat, helpfully — *“meanwhile, that asteroid must be getting closer”*. Steven Marks pointed out we are all going to die anyway. Joe Safdie thanked everyone for the humour, which had been much needed.

It was needed because of the other thread, the largest single quarrel in this archive: ninety-seven letters under deeply disturbed and its branches. David Kellogg was deeply disturbed by what Marjorie Perloff had written about identity politics — that the minority poetries of the eighties had been, at their inception, formally rather conservative, and that nobody could say so aloud without being called a racist. Perloff wondered whether Kellogg read what she wrote. Kellogg replied patiently

and at length, conceding the half he agreed with and specifying the half he did not: *"that doesn't make you a racist"*, he wrote, and had never thought otherwise. It ran a fortnight, drew in thirty people, and was at bottom an argument about who gets into the anthology.

Which is the joke, and Perloff supplies it herself, in the middle of the fight, against her own side. She does not want an anthology at all, she says; she never uses one if she can help it; she goes with David Antin's quip that *"anthologies are to poets like the zoo to animals"*. I have set the three threads in the order March sent them, because the room spent that month listing magazines that no longer exist, one of which nobody could name; then established that a rock will one day erase the list, the magazines, and the men who remember them; and then fought harder than it has ever fought, ninety-seven letters, over who is admitted to the zoo.

— K. M. F.

April 1997

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

On the fourth of April Charles Bernstein posted three sentences: Allen Ginsberg had been diagnosed with liver cancer, it was in the papers that morning, and everyone reading would be having the reaction he was having. *"Allen Ginsberg has been with me all my life"*, he wrote. Ginsberg died the following evening. This list, which in fourteen months had let a comet, two aircraft, a bombing, an election, a cult and a woman on fire go past without comment, produced a hundred and six letters, and what it did with them is the most extraordinary thing in this archive.

Maria Damon moved first, the same afternoon, while he was still alive: *"shall we write a group poem/renga/range of affection"* for Allen Ginsberg? And then, to a room already reaching for the past tense, the correction that does her enormous credit — could we not, she asked, talk about him as if he were already gone. Somebody else start, she said. Wendy Battin started. Her line was a question: *"since death is so pornographic, where can they sell it"*. Kent Johnson followed with willow leaves in a garden, a braille page of words; Daniel Zimmerman gave the wind as a simultaneous translation; Alan Sondheim gave the fifth line, which reads, in its entirety, *"nothing has happened, no one has died"*.

It was Sondheim who posted, hours later, that WCBS had just announced it. The renga was mid-composition. Nobody stopped. David Israel had by then appointed himself the thing's editor, and what he was doing — I did not see it until I had read the month twice — was building the poem out of the list's own mail. Not lines written for a renga: lines lifted from what people were actually posting, renumbered. Kent Johnson's real message asking *"Is anyone else out there crying too?"* becomes line ten. Damon's reply is eleven and twelve: not yet, just having a quiet time; *"it's raining outside, like it's crying in my heart"*. Pat Pritchett remembering a meal — *"we were all eating veggie burgers and watermelon"*, thinking how frail Allen looked — is fourteen.

Ten days later Rachel Loden posted a link to Marjorie Perloff's new article in the Boston Review, on the Araki Yasusada affair: the Hiroshima survivor whose grieving, beautiful poems had moved everybody and who had never existed. It would be fascinating, Loden noted, *"especially in present company"*, which everyone understood, since the man most people believed had written Yasusada was on the list and had just supplied four lines of the Ginsberg renga. The room spent a fortnight on

whether a poem by a man who was never there can be any good. It is a serious question. It had been answered upstairs, in the other thread, on the fifth.

Because Israel's renga runs to sixteen lines. Line five says nothing has happened and no one has died, and by the time it was numbered its author had already told the list otherwise. Line sixteen — the last anybody added, after which the poem stops — is Kenneth Goldsmith relaying that "*Ginsberg's body is lying in state*" at the Shambhala Center on West 22nd Street, and that Usenet advises you call first. That is the arc: a room proposing a poem of affection for a living man on the Friday afternoon and finishing it, on the Saturday, with an address and a telephone number. Israel saw it happening and put it in a parenthesis, and I have left his parenthesis where he set it: the death-announcement, he noted, "*occurred mid-Renga*".

— K. M. F.

May 1997

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

On the fourth of May David Israel forwarded a wire report under the heading in other sports: Kasparov outwits cyberbrain. The champion had taken the first game off the IBM machine. Seven days later the machine won the match, and the world understood that a thing had happened which would not unhappen, and the list does not mention it. The only trace in nine hundred and fifty letters is henry, on the fourteenth, answering an unrelated question about shepherds: *"He was, until he twitched his mantle Deep Blue"* and faxed his pasturized pantoum to square one. That is Lycidas — the last lines, the elegy's exit — got off in a joke, and nobody noticed that either.

What the room was doing instead was the best piece of work it did all year, and it began on the thirteenth with Mark Wallace asking for a citation. There is an idea often floated around, he wrote, that the contemporary workshop poem rests on a particular notion of voice: that a voice is an individual possession, the writer's own, discovered rather than given. And then the question nobody had thought to ask in fifteen months of attacking it: *"Whether anyone actually believes this, or has said so"* in so many words, is something I am trying to find out. Could anyone point him to a published article or book that defends the position?

They could not. Forty-odd letters over a fortnight, four hundred and ninety-four uses of the word, and no locus classicus. David Israel, who tried hardest, admitted he did not know *"where one wd locate the manner of locus classicus"* and offered Whitman, which is not the same thing. Michael Boughn half-remembered a Seventies anthology whose title contained the word. Daniel Tessitore produced the nearest thing to evidence in the whole thread — a 1992 creative-writing exercise book — and that is what the room's great adversary came down to: a handbook of prompts. The doctrine everybody had been fighting since before this archive begins turns out to have no author.

It has, however, an economy, and the room found that easily enough. Dean Taciuch had sat in the workshops: *"In one workshop I participated in"* we did an exercise about listening. Hugh Steinberg named the thing precisely — the point is getting a voice, *"or getting one at least (as opposed to a job)"*. Herb Levy remembered the most depressing hours of *"my years in arts administration"*, spent on a funding panel. And Stephen Vincent, in a separate thread that ran to thirty-seven letters, wrote

about book contests and the fifteen to twenty-five dollars that must accompany the manuscript, and confessed to “*an instinctive wariness (weariness?)*” about the whole apparatus. Nobody defends the doctrine. Everybody pays the fee.

The best sentence came from Thomas Bell and went unanswered: “*I’m puzzled that so many here cede the idea*” of voice to a single isolated quarter, as if the word belonged to the enemy and not to them. Which is the story of this archive so far. In March of last year the room could not agree what avant-garde meant; in May it could not say what a sonnet was; in November it could not locate the West; in June it was begged not to start on langpo. Now it finds that the position it has spent years defining itself against cannot be found in print by forty people looking hard for a fortnight. I have set Wallace’s question where he asked it, because a room that could never keep its own words had at last mislaid its opponent.

— K. M. F.

June 1997

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

Timothy McVeigh was sentenced to death on the thirteenth of June and the list mentions him once; Hong Kong was three weeks from changing hands and gets two. This is the largest month in the archive — one thousand and three letters — and the word it uses is identity, two hundred and forty-three times. The room spent June arguing whether who a poet is has any bearing on what the poem is worth, and spent the same June demonstrating, in three unrelated threads, that who is in the room governs absolutely everything that can be said in it.

The argument proper began when David Bromige, in Pat Pritchett's nice phrase, let drop the feather, inviting Pritchett to declare himself on multiculturalism. Pritchett obliged, and was honest about not having thought it through. He is a formalist by instinct, he said: *"the identity of the poet factors into my reading"* only secondarily, if at all, in relation to the text itself. Thirty-four letters followed and the room divided about where it always divides, which is on whether that position is a principle or a privilege.

Nine days earlier Tom Mandel had done something I have not seen anyone on this list do before. He had compared the graduate writing programmes to the Soviet Writers Union, and he now wished to withdraw it — *"I think I want to withdraw the remark"* — and his reason is the whole month in four words. Not that it was wrong. That the argument was too long for the medium, and that it was *"unfriendly to the forum"*, which contains a great many people who attend, or teach at, or came out of the institutions he was insulting. This is the man who in February had offered to punch Ed Dorn in the chops. He had worked out who was listening.

And on the tenth Jay Schwartz threatened to leave. His mail was as heavy as anyone's, he said, he enjoyed much of the public discussion, but he was nearly ready to unsubscribe over the volume of things that belonged in backchannel: he was not interested in *"light bondage humor involving people I've never met"*, and he was tired of private messages arriving on the whole list by accident. *"Please show more discretion with the send button"*. Then he signed off as himself, *"at his absolute snooty and snottiest"*, which is the most self-aware sentence of the month, and the room gave him thirty-two letters and a thread with his name on it.

Read his complaint again, though, because it is not about volume. It is about strangers. What Schwartz cannot bear is intimacy between people he does not know

— the identity of the correspondents is the entire objection, in a month whose formal position was that identity is secondary to the text. Mandel withdrew because of who was present. Schwartz objected because of who was absent, namely him. And in between, in the month's cheerfulest thread, the room sat collecting American ways of saying somebody is a fool: *"two sandwiches short of a picnic"*, one brick shy of a chimney, an elevator that does not reach the penthouse. I have set the identity thread and the etiquette threads in the order June sent them, because the room could not agree that a poet's identity matters to a poem, while every letter it wrote that month was addressed to somebody in particular.

— K. M. F.

July 1997

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

Hong Kong changed hands at midnight on the first of July; a machine the size of a microwave oven drove off a ramp onto Mars on the fourth and sent back photographs of a floodplain; Gianni Versace was shot on his own steps on the fifteenth. The list gives Mars nine mentions, none of them the lander's name, and the other two nothing at all. Nine hundred and forty-one letters, and the name that occurs most often in them is Ashbery's, a hundred and seventy-five times. What I want to put in front of you happened on a single Tuesday afternoon, the twenty-second, and took about twenty minutes.

Gwyn McVay had lost a word. She wrote to the list to say so, and to ask for help in the most engaging formulation anybody produced that year: she was missing a word she used to know, and would be grateful for at least its telephone number. She could describe it but not say it. A theoretical term; the nearest things she could reach were disjunctive, dissociative, disruptive, and none of them was it; the word named the act itself. That is the whole post. It is the position this entire archive has been in since March of last year, stated in five lines by somebody who simply wanted her word back.

The next message in the volume is henry gould's, and it is one line long: "*are you thinking of parataxis?*" McVay's reply came straight back and I have reproduced the punctuation exactly as she sent it, because it is the only unguarded happiness in eighteen months of this archive — "*YES! O wonderful Henry! parataxis! parataxis!*" like what is always hanging around a metro stop. Found. One reply. No definition required, no fortnight of quarrel, no anthology. A woman said what the word did and a man in Providence knew which word it was.

The room, having solved it, then spent the rest of the day on it anyway, which is the room all over and I would not have it otherwise. Fred Muratori proposed "*deathyntaxis*". Don Cheney offered hypotaxis instead — "*like all the hypotaxis in the zoo*" — and noted that his own coinage was a great word for Scrabble. Bob Grotjohn posted the Oxford entry, dated 1883. Eliza McGrand emptied her thesaurus: separated, unconnected, detached, disarticulated. Stacie Slotnick supplied the address of a site that searches many dictionaries at once. And Charles Alexander, inevitably, arrived to say that he was "*Just nitpicking, but if people who include URLs*" in their mail would format them properly it would be easier for everyone.

Parataxis is the setting of things side by side without conjunctions: this, then this, then this, and no word between them to say how they are joined. It is Sappho and it is the Cantos, and it is also, exactly and unimprovably, a mailing list — six hundred people posting one after another into a thread that has no grammar connecting any of it, each message flush against the last. I have set McVay's question and Gould's answer on the same page, twenty minutes apart, because a room that has never once managed to define a word it argues about was asked to find a word somebody loved, and found it before lunch, and the word it found was the name of the thing they were all standing in.

— *K. M. F.*

August 1997

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

On the second of August William Burroughs died in Lawrence, Kansas, and the following night Hugh Steinberg told the list: *"I just heard on CNN that Burroughs died tonight"*. Heart failure. That is the notice. Across six hundred and five letters his name occurs seven times, and three of those are the announcement. At the end of the month a car went into a pillar in Paris and the list gives that two. What August did instead was ask itself, for the second time in the eighteen months I have been reading it, what the avant-garde is — and then answer the question by accident, in the mail, in a way nobody intended and one man noticed.

Maria Damon put the question on the sixth, and put it well, because she needed it for work: she was to give a talk in November and wanted to challenge what she saw as the closedness of the tradition. Why, she asked, does the avant-garde seem to need to *"police its borders so rigidly"*? How does a thing get admitted or refused? William Marsh, taking her up, was suspicious of the spatial metaphor itself — that *"the a-g is a particular zone or area of activity"* with edges that can be patrolled. Fifty-two letters over three threads, and the room got no further than it had got in March of last year, which was nowhere.

Then on the tenth Conlon Nancarrow died in Mexico City at eighty-four. He was a composer, not a poet; he had gone to Spain to fight Franco and been refused a passport home for it; he spent forty years in one room punching piano rolls by hand to make tempo canons no human hands could play. The room mourned him properly. David Israel — who had done the same office for Ginsberg in April — began collecting a renga, and it opens on somebody's excellent first line, *"Ach, I throw away my metranome"*, it is useless to me; George Bowering answering *"here in this metrapolis"*; Israel's own third, *"this cricket knows the music"*. Sixty-odd letters. A real poem for a real man.

Ira Lightman spoiled it on the twenty-seventh, and was right to. The renga, he wrote, did not seem to be about Nancarrow at all: four-four is the dullest time signature, and a renga for someone is a renga for oneself, and is this a way to honour the dead? Then the question that ends the month: *"would a renga have sprung up for Burroughs' death"* so equivalently not about Burroughs? Nobody answered him. It is the sharpest thing said in August and it disappears into the thread without a reply.

But the answer was already in the volume, and it is the answer to Damon's question too. Burroughs got seven mentions because Burroughs had got out. He had been on television; he had been in a Nike advertisement three years earlier; he was, by 1997, the most famous avant-garde writer alive, which is a contradiction the room could not metabolise and so did not try. Nancarrow got a renga because Nancarrow was still theirs — unplayable, unrecorded for decades, known to almost nobody, perfect. I have set Damon's question at the front of this volume and Lightman's at the back, because between them the room demonstrated exactly how the avant-garde polices its borders. It does it by deciding whom to write the poem for.

— *K. M. F.*

September 1997

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

The world spent the first week of September burying two women in front of an audience of billions, and the list, which gives the Princess eighteen mentions and Mother Teresa exactly one, was not really watching. On the eleventh, in a flat on East 12th Street in Manhattan, Hannah Weiner died of natural causes, alone and unexpectedly, six weeks short of sixty-nine. Charles Bernstein had the news late that night and told the room the next morning. What the room then did is, I think, the reason this archive is worth printing.

Bernstein's notice is four paragraphs of plain praise — her courage, her wickedly funny judgements of poets, her performances, the fact that the last few years had not been easy and she had gone on working anyway, pushing what a poem can do *"into new zones of perception"*. It ends: *"Hannah would have turned 69 on November 4"*. And then, appended without ceremony, a complete bibliography of her work, which he mentions he compiled some years ago. He had it ready. That is a sentence I want to leave standing on its own.

Then they read her. Douglas Messerli posted one of her late pieces entire. Lee Ann Brown posted what Weiner had written for her Tender Buttons book. Loss Glazier posted annotations. Peter Ganick named her last magazine issue, A.BACUS 107. James Sherry said, simply, that he had published her last book in 1996, and that anyone interested should ask. Keith Tuma wrote her one line in her own manner and left it alone: *"She was Spokeless in the unacknowledged world of Big Wheels"*. David Bromige, who could not manage more, managed six words — *"No more p.s.s for Hannah Weiner"* — which if you know the work is the whole elegy.

The strangers spoke too, and this is the part that stopped me. Maria Damon, who had spent three days of August 1996 begging this same list to help her theorise Weiner for an essay, wrote to say that *"tho i never met her her work came to mean"* a great deal. Christopher Alexander posted with an apology attached: *"I didn't know Hannah Weiner, & I hesitate to post"* for that reason, not wanting to intrude on other people's grief. Compare, if you will, October of last year, when a man on this list said honestly that he did not see the point of Ms. Change's actions, never having heard of her. It is the same sentence and it has been turned inside out.

Because that is the difference and I am not going to pretend it is a moral improvement. Kathy Change was not one of theirs and Hannah Weiner was. What I

can say is that in nineteen months of this archive I have watched a room fail to read a dead girl's poems, fail to notice a loyalty oath in an obituary, fail to discuss a living poet's lecture, and spend ninety-seven letters on an anthology; and in September 1997, given a death, it did the only thing it has ever been unambiguously good at. It posted the work. I have set Bernstein's bibliography where it fell, at the foot of the notice, on the morning after, because a man who loves a poet keeps her bibliography where he can reach it.

— *K. M. F.*

October 1997

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

Alan Sokal published his book in Paris in October and the list, which had watched him hoax Social Text eighteen months earlier, came back for the sequel: a hundred and forty mentions, and a thread whose title, SoKalled, is the best pun of the year. Elvis got a hundred and twelve, because Sylvester Pollet had a friend *"just back from a Utopian Conference in Memphis"* and a visit to Graceland who wanted poems about Elvis, and Pollet said he would ask. But the month's business began on the fourth, when a man nobody had much heard of did the thing this list had been formally begged not to do.

In June of last year Ken Edwards, answering a perfectly civil question about British poets, had appended a plea from the bottom of his soul: please, please, do not let anybody start another thread on what exactly langpo is. The room obeyed him for sixteen months. Then Bob Grumman posted under the heading Defining Language Poetry, and his first sentence is a confession and a diagnosis at once: *"I'm a taxonomaniac"*. He was tired, he said, of going through these discussions over and over and never knowing precisely what was meant. Sixty-one letters followed across three threads. Edwards is mentioned twice in the volume, in neither of them.

What makes Grumman interesting is that he had no standing at all, and said so — he wrote, he explained, as mostly an outsider to language poetry, which is precisely why he could ask. Insiders had spent a decade not defining it because they were in it. And he then produced a definition, which is more than anybody on this list had managed in twenty months: poetry that significantly breaks the rules of grammar or spelling for expressive effect. Not the identity of the poets, not their politics, not their philosophical outlook. A rule about sentences.

And then the sentence that undoes it. Because of the confusion around the name, Grumman went on, in his own critical writing he does not use it; he renames the thing xenolinguistic poetry — though he would rather, he added, call it language poetry. Read that twice. A man arrives from outside, succeeds where the room has failed, and can only succeed by abandoning the word. Meanwhile, in the thread next door, Mark Wallace was writing in support of Fredrik Hertzberg against *"a new round of language poetry bashing"*, and observing that he had published a piece years before on why such bashing is so common among poets. The room was defending a name it could not define.

There is a precedent and it is exact. In April of 1996 Chris Stroffolino typed the nonsense-word quertzblatz into an argument, and by that June the room was using it as an adjective, fluently, with an agreed sense, having invented from nothing a word that worked. In October 1997 a stranger looked at the room's central term, found it unusable, and made a new one. I have set Grumman's definition and his renaming in the same volume, four lines apart, because this room's whole twenty months come to this: it can make a word mean anything at all, and it cannot make its own words mean what they say. Ken Edwards knew. He asked them not to.

— *K. M. F.*

November 1997

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

November 1997 took the publisher and the poet five days apart. On the twelfth James Laughlin died at Norfolk, Connecticut, aged eighty-three, and Marjorie Perloff got it to the list that night from a residency in Indiana, apologising for not writing at her normal speed: *"One of the great literary men/women of our time"* had died today, many here had been published by him, it was a sad, sad day, and she was sure Weinberger or Rothenberg would send something better — she just wanted people to know. On the seventeenth David Ignatow died, and Charles Bernstein had it from Wednesday's Times. Five hundred and seventy-five letters. Laughlin is named in them a hundred and ninety-five times; Ezra Pound a hundred and ninety-six.

The second thing that happened is why I have given this volume the room I have. On the morning of the thirteenth Joseph Zitt asked whether somebody could fill in *"those of us who didn't know of him"* as to who Laughlin was and what he had done. On a poetry list. I want to be plain that this is not a stupid question and Zitt was not ashamed to ask it — it is the question Joe Amato asked about the inaugural poet in January — and the answer it got is the finest hour in this archive.

They told him. Maxine Chernoff, briskly: *"the distinguished publisher of New Directions"*, started in the thirties and run for sixty years. Pat Pritchett supplied the money, an immense Pennsylvania steel fortune, and then the fact the month turns on — *"Pound, however, advised him to give up poetry"* and start a publishing house instead. William Burmeister posted Octavio Paz's account entire: the disappointing Harvard professors, the months at Rapallo in what Pound called the Ezraversity, the pact the two men made, the house that came of it and never sold itself. Burmeister added he could not honestly say *"if I would be in poetry right now"* but for Laughlin. Tosh, who is *"starting up my own press"*, said he looked up to him. Somebody posted Technical Notes.

For Ignatow, Bernstein did the other thing he does, and it is the better one. He posted the man's own words — from All Else is Prelude, where Ignatow writes that *"If language could save me from death"* he would be immortal already; that he had thought writing an elixir until he began to notice his hair going grey; and that if immortality exists it is in the writing as an art, *"not as an elixir of the body's survival"*. Hank Lazer wrote a short eulogy for a man he had spent the week *"thinking about my friend"*, and Douglas Barbour thanked him for *"that small but so*

complete eulogy", and Joseph Safdie said he had been about to thank him for the same thing.

Set the two side by side, because November did. Ignatow says language will not save your body and might save your art. Laughlin was told as a young man, by the most consequential critic of the age, that he should stop writing poems — and took the advice, and gave the century Williams and Rexroth and Levertov and Snyder and Borges and Paz and Dylan Thomas, and Pound himself, who had told him to stop. I have set Zitt's question and the answers to it exactly where they fell, because a room that has argued about Ezra Pound in every month I have read spent one day in November burying the only person Pound ever did an unambiguous good to, and had to be told, by six people at once, who he was.

— K. M. F.

December 1997

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

December was the quietest month in two years — four hundred and thirty-six letters, Kyoto mentioned four times, the year winding down — and it produced, almost by accident, the single most honest document in this archive. It began on the eighth with a small advertisement. M. L. Weber edits a magazine called Sugar Mule, and the next issue was to be women's writing with an emphasis on the natural world; all genres welcome; email only; deadline the twentieth of January. Thank you. That is the entire post. Forty letters came of it.

Jerry Fletcher started them, saying the notice raised a topic of socio-political interest, and offering the view that *"the quality of men's writing has gone down"* as men's political issues have diminished. The room took that up with more patience than it deserved and then, underneath it, got to the real question, which is whether women are in fact underrepresented here and in the magazines. Judy Roitman put the case in one line — there may be more equity now, but *"women are still left out of history, including literary"*. Harold Rhenisch went and looked at the current Malahat Review and reported the tally: *"18 women; 18 men"*. And then David Israel did something nobody on this list has done before or since.

He counted the room. He ordered a fresh copy of the subscriber list off the Listserv computer — five hundred and sixty-two identified subscribers, two concealed, nineteen countries, four hundred and sixty-three American addresses — and sat down and read it through, ticking off the female names. He got a hundred and fifty-two. Then he did the thing that makes the post worth printing: he attacked his own method, at length, before anybody else could. He does not know how to tell the gender of a Japanese name from its syllables. What is he to do about subscribers who use initials? Some people are subscribed twice, or three times. Correcting for all of it, he thought the real figure might be two hundred, possibly two hundred and twenty-five — call it forty per cent.

Which settles nothing, and he says so. It is not the extreme male majority somebody had asserted; it is not the parity somebody else had. And the number he actually wanted, he notes, is not this one: a diehard statistician, he says, would count the ratio of posts rather than of subscribers — who speaks here, not who is on the roll — and would probably find it worse. He did not do that count. He signed off in six words: *"end of statistics / no conclusions"*.

Consider what he was doing. In February, Ron Silliman had spent thirty-seven letters proving to this room that a poet's name is an invention — that Duncan was christened Symmes, that Armantrout was born Korkegian, that names are particularly unstable things where people are concerned. Ten months later the room wanted to know what it was made of, and the only instrument it had was the roll of its own names, and a man read them one by one and guessed. I have set Weber's advertisement and Israel's count at either end of this volume, because a room that could never define a word went out in December and tried to count itself instead — and found it could not tell, from the names, who was in it.

— *K. M. F.*

January 1998

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

One thousand and fifty-eight letters, the largest month in this archive, and the word Lewinsky does not occur in any of them. The story broke on the twenty-first and ran the year and ended in an impeachment, and the room mentions Clinton nine times, mostly in passing, and Starr four. I have stopped being surprised by this and started being interested in it, because what the list was doing instead, all January, was answering a question it had been asked on New Year's Day by somebody who had never posted before.

Bobbie West de-lurked on the first — blame Bromige, she said, he told her to stop lurking — and put a question a friend had put to her: *"What is the purpose of poetry?"* So how would you answer that? she asked, signing off as testing her new de-lurking device. Thirty-five letters. Judy Roitman opened tentatively, in fragments: *"Beauty? Expressive? As purpose/means?"* Hugh Steinberg offered a purpose — *"So that the world is not lost"*. Gwyn McVay proposed the best words in the best disorder. Somebody half-remembered a line of Cage's and admitted he had been asked for the citation and could not produce it, which by now is this room's signature move.

And then, on the second, JforJames typed a sentence with a slip in it. *"Poetry presupposes its own purpure"*, he wrote, meaning purpose, and the room fell on the typo like gulls. Bob Grumman got there first: *"Purpure--purer than purpose!"*, and told him not to back out of it. David Israel took it further into the nonsense — *"the purr of the puss = the purpose?"* — and further still the next day. The question was never answered. What happened instead is that the room found a mistake more interesting than the word it replaced, and kept it, and played with it for two days, and let the question go.

On the ninth Gwyn McVay gave them the name for what they had done, without appearing to notice that she was doing it. There is a word for song mishearings, she wrote: mondegreen. A girl heard a Scottish ballad as *They hae slain the Earl of Morey / And Lady Mondegreen*, and carried about with her ever after *"a vivid, touching picture of the two doomed noble lovers"* dying in each other's arms, until somebody told her the line was and laid him on the green. Eighteen letters came back with everybody's. Susan Schultz's mother heard *"I got a chicken to ride"*. Somebody heard Guantanamo as Guantanamero for years. McVay asked whether riding poultry was not exactly what they were all engaged in.

Here is what nobody said. The girl was Sylvia Wright; the essay is The Death of Lady Mondegreen; it ran in Harper's in November of 1954, not, as McVay has it, in a newspaper in the thirties. And Wright's point — the reason she needed a word at all — was that the mondegreen is better than the original. She knew the true line. She refused it. She would not leave the Earl to die alone. So: a woman asked this list on the first of January what poetry was for; the room answered with a typo it liked better than the word; and on the ninth another woman, misremembering the story of a mishearing, told them what a mishearing is worth. I have set the two threads together because they are one thread, and because nobody noticed that the question had been answered.

— *K. M. F.*

February 1998

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

February broke the habit. Iraq is named seventy-one times in this month's eleven hundred letters and Saddam Hussein twenty-two, the inspectors were being refused, the strikes were being drafted, and for once the room was in the same week as the news. David Bromige was not impressed. He found it depressing, he said, that the Iraq posts he had read offered modulations of the Administration's line and nothing else — *"no apostates, only mild heretics"* — and asked whether anyone had considered that these wars are chiefly demonstrations of new weaponry under working conditions, which is good for sales. Nobody answered that. They were busy with a man who had sent a girl a poem.

Robert Hale opened the largest thread of the largest month on the third, at the risk, he said, of using the list as a Dear Abby column. He had been seeing someone. It went well. He took her to see David Bowie; they had crazy nights; they went to a friend's wedding. He sent her a poem a week and sang to her down the telephone. Then he sent her something by André Breton, and — this is the whole hinge of the volume — *"She freaked out"*. Valentine's Day was on the Saturday. Should he send love poems? Forty letters of advice came back, which is more than Iraq got in any single thread.

Underneath it, the month's real subject, arriving from outside: Ted Hughes had published Birthday Letters in January, breaking thirty-five years of public silence about Sylvia Plath. Plath is named two hundred and five times here, Hughes two hundred and seventy-five. And the room did to those poems exactly what Hale's girlfriend had done to Breton — read them as a message about the person who sent them. Which they are. That is the difficulty, and the room went at it honestly enough, and then somebody advanced a theory.

Michael McColl reported that an Iowa study he recalled had found a high incidence of manic depression among writers; that unless they were bipolar they were unlikely to get much done; *"It was in manic or near-manic states that they achieved"*. The study is not cited. Half-remembered authority is this room's oldest habit and I have watched it fail all year. This time it failed differently, because Joe Ahearn was reading. His reply is three lines long. Speaking *"as one captive to bipolar disorder"*, he found the assessment incredibly optimistic, and put naive in brackets after it, with a question mark, which is more courtesy than it deserved.

And Katy Lederer asked the question the month was built to avoid. How, she wanted to know, was Plath's death being figured here in terms of gender — the business of the children left behind? She could think of a number of male poets who had killed themselves and been made heroes of, and none of them admonished for leaving children. "*What if Plath had been the father?*" she wrote; suppose Hughes the non-writing mother who strayed; the discourse would be altogether different, and it is obvious, really. Nobody took it up. I have set Hale's question at the front of this volume and Lederer's at the back, because between them the room spent February reading poems as evidence about the people who wrote them, and twice — three lines from Ahearn, a paragraph from Lederer — the people being read answered back.

— K. M. F.

March 1998

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

Titanic took eleven Academy Awards on the twenty-third of March and the list mentions it fourteen times, mostly to be rude about it. On the twenty-fourth, at a middle school outside Jonesboro, Arkansas, a boy of eleven pulled the fire alarm, walked out to join a boy of thirteen in the trees, and the two of them shot the people who came out of the building: four children and their teacher, who was thirty-two. The list mentions this twenty-six times. After two years of watching this room let the world go past, I record that in March 1998 it did not.

It took five days to get there, because it was busy. Ted Berrigan is the most-named person in the month — two hundred and ninety-eight times — and the Berrigan thread is the room at its best: henry gould on what the New York School took from him, *“the fusion of formality & informality, of art & grunge”*, held in a lyrical balance that could only happen where art and money and squalor were competing on the same street. Elsewhere the room discovered it was left-handed. Sinister is Latin for left and gauche is French for it, and Jonathan Mayhew, joining in, bet that *“a large proportion of the poetics list subscribers”* were leftists, and meant both things at once.

Then on the twenty-ninth Ron Silliman wrote. He had not been impressed, he said, by the tone of the list for some weeks, and would love it if people tried to read one another occasionally and left off the name-calling. And then: Jonesboro is heart-breaking. It is part of the American pathology — the pure products, as Williams put it — that this country hardly asks why children not old enough to smoke, drink beer or drive are trained to use rifles. He was exactly right, and more right than he knew: the boy of eleven belonged to a gun club and shot in competitions, and the guns came out of his own family's cupboard.

The room answered him properly, which it has not always done. Daniel Bouchard said the two boys had only *“acted on the example of their government”*. Keston Sutherland, writing from England, noted that the one thing nobody questioned was the absence of any gun law at all, and asked with the punctuation of a man who already knows — *“this situation will never change in the US, right?”* Christina Chirot placed it in a long American tradition of purification, of purging the world of impurities. And Douglas Barbour said the truest thing in this archive, deadpan,

reporting what the NRA had lately posted to the list: *"Poems don't kill people. People kill people."* Don't blame the poem.

In January a woman de-lurked to ask this list what the purpose of poetry was, and it could not tell her; eight days later it learned the word mondegreen, and that a thing misheard can be better than the thing said. March answers both, and nobody noticed. Barbour answered Bobbie West: poems do not kill people, which is the beginning of an honest reply and not the end of one. And Silliman, in a parenthesis, gave the room its second mondegreen — the name Jonesboro, which, *"as a one-time SF resident, I keep hearing as"* Jonestown. His ear reached back twenty years and supplied a different building full of the dead. I have left his parenthesis where he put it, because Sylvia Wright's rule holds everywhere but here. This mishearing is not better than the original. It is the same thing, said twice.

— K. M. F.

April 1998

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

April opened with a peace and a death the list declined, almost as a point of honour, to notice. The Good Friday Agreement was signed in Belfast on the tenth, Pol Pot died in his sleep on the fifteenth, and the room let both pass — the Cambodian surfacing once, in Elizabeth Hatmaker's aside, gone *"piecefully in his sleep"*, and Ireland arriving not as a settlement but as David Zauhar's hunt for its women poets, Eavan Boland the only name he could summon for his wife's reading. The list spent April taking attendance instead — of who had dropped from an anthology, which shops had closed, which poets had simply vanished — until it was a room organised almost entirely around absence.

The most generous thread was, fittingly, about making poems from what is not there. Jonathan Mayhew asked what to call the form in which a poet writes through a precursor — Spicer's After Lorca, Ronald Johnson's RADI OS, that erasure carved out of Paradise Lost — and the room, which loves nothing so much as a reading list, obliged: Don Byrd proposing *"the back-handed homage"*, Hugh Steinberg adding Tom Phillips's A Humument, and Douglas Barbour, asked for a name, supplying homolinguistic translation in a single reply. It is the list's oldest trick, the lost word produced on demand, never before turned on a subject so exactly its own image: an art of subtraction, the new poem raised in the erased space of the old.

The quarrel was made of the same substance. Ron Silliman opened a thread he called The Book of Absences and listed sixty poets missing from Poems for the Millennium, Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre Joris's second volume — Spicer above all, *"the Spicerlessness of it all"* a lacuna on the scale of a missing Pound. He granted that anthologies are impossible, his own In the American Tree having mislaid Abby Child. Rothenberg answered from inside the book, courtly and wounded at once, calling it a cheap shot and signing himself *"Affectionately (for all of that)"* — the whole tenor of the list in five words. It is a Poetics specialty, the fight over a table of contents that is really a fight over who is permitted to have existed.

Beneath the argument about names ran a starker one about places. The month's largest thread, more closings, mourned the independent bookshops going dark — three hundred in a decade, Patrick Pritchett reported, citing André Schiffrin — and turned on whether the chains were merely winning or actively hunting: Maria Damon described how Barnes & Noble scouts an independent's poetry shelves

before closing it, and Daniel Bouchard, who had worked the Borders floor, called the conspiracy ludicrous. What outlasted the crossfire was Damon's blessing on the used shops — *"long may they thrive around the edges of commerce"* — a line fit for the list's own motto, poetry having always lived at those edges, in the very shops now closing.

And then, twice, the absences turned literal. Octavio Paz died on the nineteenth, and the list could not simply mourn him: Jonathan Mayhew, granting his era while doubting his poems, felt that *"an epoch has come to a close"*, and Douglas Barbour called him *"another great one gone"* — a grief as unresolved as the anthology fight, Paz theirs to argue about. Eleven days later Nizar Qabbani died in London, the wire naming him *"the master of love verse"* — and the room that had sixty names for one book's omissions had, for the poet actually gone, almost none. I have set Paz's quarrelsome grief beside the near-silence that met Qabbani exactly as April delivered them: a room that could name everyone it had lost, and never hear the one it never knew it had.

— K. M. F.

May 1998

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

May 1998 is a loud month in the world — India detonates its device in the Rajasthan desert and Pakistan readies an answer, Frank Sinatra dies, Suharto falls in Jakarta — but the list, gloriously deaf to nearly all of it, spends the month absorbed by a smaller and stranger noise: the stammer.

The season's central thread is a poetics of disfluency. David Bromige, glossing Peter Quartermain on Bob Grenier, supplies the month's finest coinage — “*the stutterance of utterance*” — and observes that the subject, like a berry in some poem of Snyder's, only grows bigger the longer one looks at it. Stuttering, stammering, the poetics of the stammer: in the broken word the list discovers an entire aesthetics.

Alongside it runs the perennial question of how one judges the new. Michael McColl worries that when an experimental poem offers “*no paraphrasable content*,” the oldest and most widespread tool of evaluation simply falls away. Mark Wallace, more sanguine, wagers that the techniques for reading such work can be taught to almost anyone with “*about three hours of close attention*.” In the thread next door the formalists and the oralists trade their accustomed fire.

The month mounts its defenses, too. Stung by a magazine's assumption that “*Spicer is unimportant and unknown*,” Mark Prejsnar rises indignantly to the poet's honor against the bloated professoriate; elsewhere the scene-reports thread files dispatches from actual rooms — sound poetry in Toronto, the Four Horsemen, Michael Snow at the keys — and a cheerful company gathers round Frank O'Hara's 'In Memory of My Feelings' to map, one poster says, the terrain of identity.

It is a wholly characteristic month: the wider world going up in test-fire and obituary while the list bends studiously over the smallest unit of speech, insisting that how a word breaks is a serious matter — perhaps, some days, the only serious matter. I have set the letters in their order, drawn the black bars across every address and telephone, and left the stammer exactly where May left it: midsyllable, and unashamed.

— K. M. F.

June 1998

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

June 1998 gave the world plenty to look at — France opened a World Cup, the subcontinent's two new bombs still settling into the record, Belfast at the polls for its first Assembly — and the Poetics list, as usual, looked instead at itself. The one dispatch from the wider world reached the room secondhand and as a joke: a Reuters item, forwarded by Joel Lewis, on the nation's "*despair over the departure of Ginger Spice*." Everything else that mattered to the room was a question of accounts — poetry's own: what a poem is worth, who will pay for one, and in what currency a life spent writing them is reckoned.

For June was, above all, the month the list did its books. It began helpfully — a crowdsourced roster of the magazines that actually pay, which swelled within days into the month's largest conversation, a hundred-odd messages on the economics of the art. Could a poet have a career at all, and in what coin was it paid? Was an MFA worth its debt, or a PhD? Jim Andrews put the arithmetic plainly — "*There is no money in poetry*", he wrote, the commodity being prestige and influence — and the room set about auditing that stranger currency with the thoroughness it brings to a bibliography: who holds prestige, who confers it, and what it costs to acquire.

The quarrel, when it came, was about whether the world belonged in the room at all. It was imported by Morpheal — a non-poet and, at seventy-eight posts, the month's most tireless voice — who took the June nerve-gas story then in the news and mounted a cool, utilitarian defence of chemical weapons the poets could not let stand. Kent Johnson answered in satire, Daniel Bouchard point by point; and when Brent Long asked the obvious border question, what any of this had to do with poetry, Mark Prejsnar turned it inside out: "*Nerve gas has EVERYTHING to do with poetry*", typo and all. The argument was never about sarin, but about whether the news held a passport into a room that spends its days pricing sonnets.

That the loudest summons to the world should come from its one confirmed outsider is the month's quiet joke, and its real subject. The Poetics list is governed, as ever, by who is in it, and Morpheal could hold the floor precisely because he wanted nothing the room was selling — "*Poetry is noticeably absent from their wish lists*", he observed of the people he took to be the real ones, the only figure at the audit with no stake in the prices. The poets, meanwhile, could not agree on even their own class: whether

they were, as one proposed, a dominated fraction of the dominant class, or simply broke.

And what, then, stood on the room's books? Its ledger and the world's so little overlapped that the only death it paused over was ten years gone and one of its own — George Bowering remembering Gwen MacEwen, after whose loss, he said, *"Toronto poetry just disappeared for five years, just disappeared."* A fresher death went by unmarked: on the ninth a notice crossed from the Fluxlist that the artist Dieter Roth was gone, its whole body two words — *"has died."* — with a cheerful Cologne tip. No one replied. I have set the long argument over what a poem is worth beside that unanswered notice exactly as June filed them: the room will spend a hundred letters on the price of poetry and not one on a death outside the guild.

— K. M. F.

July 1998

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

July 1998 was a month the world spent celebrating and accusing — France lifted a World Cup it had hosted, the capital's grand juries circled the President — and the Poetics list attended to neither. The one strand of news it consented to touch was where poetry brushes the state: the Supreme Court had just upheld the decency clause the National Endowment had used against Karen Finley, Robert Pinsky wore the laureate's wreath, and the White House had lately staged an evening of poetry for the cameras. That last was too much for John Tranter, who forwarded the press release from Australia under a subject that served as the month's real epigraph: Why does this make me want to throw up?

What the room did at length, and with unusual tenderness, was argue about the love poem. Patrick Durgin opened it, wondering *"how efficacious the love poem can be"* — whether a poem addressed to another accomplishes anything, or is only the lyric self talking to itself — and for forty messages the list turned it over: Stein and Woolf, sentiment and its embarrassments, the I who loves and the I who writes. It was the list near its best, until it did what it always does and made an aesthetics an accusation: when Simon DeDeo pressed the claims of the self, Henry Gould answered a charge of elitism with *"I will call you a Black Shirt."* Even love, here, turned into a question of who was permitted to speak.

The same reflex governed the month's loudest quarrel, which concerned power in its plainer form. Ron Silliman opened the NEA thread by noting the laureate's studied refusal to say anything about the Finley ruling — *"makes you feel special about the post of poet laureate"*, he wrote — and the room divided along its oldest fault: Maria Damon and Herb Levy for the artist and the First Amendment, Douglas Messerli lampooning the official apparatus, a contrarian Henry Gould asking, of Finley's work, whether it was finally art. Government money, the decency clause, the laureate's silence: the list argued them the way it argues everything, as a referendum on who gets to hold the floor.

Running underneath was a second argument about who may speak, on the ground where the list is least sure of itself. Brent Long had provoked the room on what he called reverse racism — Maya Angelou, the prize given to Lois-Ann Yamanaka — and Rachel Levitsky answered that this mistook the whole matter, racism being *"an issue of institutional domination"* rather than a charge any reader can level in either

direction. It was the month's same question turned onto race, and it unsettled the clean free-speech absolutism of the Finley thread: the room that would defend any transgression at the NEA felt the ground shift the moment the transgression was a racial one.

For all that litigating of who may speak, the room fell quiet before the two deaths closest to it. On the seventh, Albert Cook died — the man who had brought Olson and Creeley to Buffalo and built the very institution this list is the afterlife of — and Charles Bernstein marked it in a single post: *"Forrest Gander just sent this sad news to me."* No thread followed. Three weeks later the Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert died, and reached the room only as a forwarded obituary, praising a man *"answerable to no one except his own conscience."* I have set the month's long argument over permission beside those two unanswered notices exactly as July delivered them, because that is the room's hardest habit to forgive: it will spend a hundred messages on who may speak, and fall silent for the ones who no longer can.

— K. M. F.

August 1998

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

August 1998 was the month the news refused to be ignored. In eleven days the American embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam were bombed, Omagh was torn open, the President testified at last, and cruise missiles fell on Sudan and Afghanistan — and the Poetics list, which as a rule lets the world's calamities pass, this time could not, as it had not in the spring, for Jonesboro. But the manner of its attention was entirely its own. The room did not report the news or grieve it so much as translate it: every catastrophe that entered in August was made, within a post or two, to speak the list's private language of framing, lineage, and blame.

For underneath the sirens the list went on with its own largest argument, which was about the word academic. It ran to some forty-six messages and, characteristically, never settled what the word meant — linda russo typing out a history of the mimeo revolution past midnight (*"it's lonely on this list at 2 am!"*), david bromige countering that to call a thing academic is merely to call it *"of no moment"*, the whole room circling the awkward fact that the avant-garde and the mainstream now share a faculty lounge. It was the month's real occupation, and it tells you where the list lives: even as the missiles flew, its deepest energy went to litigating a piece of its own vocabulary.

When the missiles did become the subject, the list answered them as only it would — with a proposal for a poem. In the thread someone had titled Brainwashed Sudanese poets, Kent Johnson called for a statement against the strike, signed jointly by American and Sudanese poets, and the room argued the idea with its usual scruple. Henry Gould warned against romanticising a foreign regime, invoking the poets who had loved Stalin too well; Mark Weiss named what Sudan had done to its own; Judy Roitman observed that naïve contact could get the Sudanese killed. Ron Silliman cut under all of it — *"military offenses against terrorism basically NEVER work."* A war arrived, and the room's response was to workshop a solidarity.

The month's sharpest moment needed no argument at all. All August a cheerful thread had been assembling a syllabus of American comedy — the list at play, trading funny books and funnier theories — when k.a. hehir walked into it carrying the roll of the Omagh dead and retitled the thread, mid-stream, terrorism like comedy is not pretty. He had posted the names to cool the theorising; *"this made me cry at my desk today."* It is the truest picture of the month: the news arriving in the

room not through the door marked politics but as a reply in the comedy thread, the dead of Northern Ireland laid down among the punchlines.

And the one loss that needed no translation was the list's own. On the fifth, before the missiles, Charles Watts had died in Vancouver — the librarian who kept the Contemporary Literature Collection, the very kind of archive that makes a month like this one legible, dead of cancer. The room did not have to convert his death into anything; it simply mourned him, George Bowering and Billy Little among them, and Peter Quartermain closed the notice with the plainest sentence the month produced: *"He was one of the reasons to be, here."* I have set that quiet death at the head of a loud August exactly as it fell — the one thing all month the room did not first translate into an argument.

— K. M. F.

September 1998

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

September 1998 handed the room three of the year's largest stories — the Starr Report loosed onto the internet on the eleventh, Mark McGwire overtaking Roger Maris in the same days, the death of Akira Kurosawa — and the list read every one of them, but filed each under poetry. The word impeachment appears in the whole month exactly once, buried in a forwarded wire from Beijing; Hurricane Georges and the word Google do not appear at all. What the room seized was never the event but the language around it. It could mourn plainly enough when it chose — Robert Archambeau relayed *"the great director Akira Kurosawa has died."* and told the list to rent Rashomon that night — but the news of its own country it would admit only in translation.

The month's largest sustained conversation was, fittingly, about whether a text can survive being handled. Rachel Loden confessed a virulent allergy to Stephen Mitchell's Rilke, and the room fell to re-typing Herbsttag in the German and setting rival Englishings beside it, auditing each for fidelity line by line. It ran alongside a second thread, textual abuse, in which Ron Silliman opened one of his early books to find a young publisher had re-broken all its lines to fit a format — *"totally violated"*, he wrote — while others traded their own errata and mutilations. Both threads worried the same nerve: the poem that will not stay as its author left it, the words that slip the moment another hand touches them.

The quarrel proper was about a smaller custody. Gabriel Gudding opened a thread soliciting the names of contest judges who had given the prize to their own students — Jorie Graham, Heather McHugh, Charles Wright among those named — and the room split on whether this was corruption or simply how the world works. Eliza McGrand found it plainly wrong: *"personally i think such behavior dishonest and offensive."* Fred Muratori, half-egging Gudding toward an exposé, supplied the month's motto for such matters — *"What the hell -- it's the Age of Lewinsky."* Even the list's private scandal, it turned out, could only be named by borrowing the nation's.

Against all this custody and grievance ran the month's happiest translation. The home-run chase reached the list, but only once it could be turned into a matter of names: the fan who caught McGwire's sixty-first was a Michael Davidson, which is also a poet's name, and that was reason enough. Susan Schultz, watching Sosa close

in, offered the room's whole method in five words — "*Maybe Lorca can catch it.*" The biggest sporting story of the decade was admitted the instant it could be made to rhyme with poetry, and not a moment before.

And the year's largest story of all entered the same way. Mark Weiss proposed, only half in jest, that a poetry press publish the public-domain Starr Report as a fundraiser; but the truest emblem came from Aldon Nielsen, who reported that on the talking-head panels a Republican counsel had offered Clinton's gift of Leaves of Grass to a young intern as proof he must be lying — "*The good grey bard as prima facie*" evidence of perjury. There it is, the whole month in a phrase: the largest event in the country could enter this room only once Whitman had been placed in the dock. I have set the report beside the poems exactly as September filed them, because that is how the news reached this room at all — smuggled in under a poet's name.

— K. M. F.

October 1998

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

October 1998 offered the room much to grieve and argue, and it declined almost all of it. Matthew Shepard was beaten to death in Wyoming and the list never opened a thread; the impeachment of a president drew a shrug; John Glenn went back into orbit unremarked; José Saramago won the Nobel and earned a single subordinate clause — someone had not read him. The one event the room truly took up was a federal appeals ruling on whether teaching Huckleberry Finn could be actionable — the news admitted, as ever, only once it had become a question about a book. The room's whole attention that month was fixed, with something close to obsession, on the word itself: its accuracy, its custody, its care.

It is hard to overstate how much of October the list spent guarding the printed word. One thread, running to thirty-five messages, began with a small-magazine editor's despair that a third of his publications carried typos, and swelled into a collective grievance over mis-set titles, botched errata, and the general mishandling of other people's language; another argued line breaks and word breaks as though the fate of the art hung on a hyphen; a third, taking care with the language, policed the pronoun. Even the play was philological: in a thread spelled l=i=m=e=r=i=c=k the room composed language-centered limericks, Mark Weiss recommending the salacious ones and pronouncing that *"Limerick is no Cologne."* A machine for keeping words right, running at full tilt.

The month's hardest quarrel set that care against conscience. Teaching Pound and Twain, the room asked what a teacher owes the antisemite or the racist on the syllabus, and whether to assign a book is to endorse it. Jonathan Mayhew pressed the anti-pious line — the notion that teaching a work condones it he thought self-evidently ridiculous — and yet the chill of the age had reached even him: the prospect of being sued, he wrote, *"for teaching The Cantos makes me shudder."* Aldon Nielsen and Maria Damon held the other ground, Nielsen anchoring the abstraction to a real appeals-court fight over Morrison and Angelou in the schools. Custody of the word, it turned out, was not the same as absolution for it.

Lest all this sound too grave, the room deflated itself in equal measure. A long thread on judging and grants worried whether money helps a poet at all, until Anselm Berrigan punctured it from the Poetry Project: *"I don't exactly see a connection between accumulation of money"* and better writing. Gabriel Gudding conducted a

mock-feud with Kent Johnson, signing off that he really did hate him, warmly; David Kellogg reported, deadpan, the trick of sharing an MLA badge to crash the convention. The same list that guarded every hyphen could not take its own institutions seriously for a paragraph together.

And what the room could not translate, it could not always confirm. Its ledger of the dead admitted only poets — it had opened the month mourning a relief pitcher, Dan Quisenberry, on the sole ground that he wrote poems — and in its last weeks it lost three of the real ones: Pierre Martory, Ashbery's translator; Dick Higgins of Fluxus, for whom miekal and built a mesostic; and, on the twenty-eighth, the Poet Laureate Ted Hughes, whose death drew from the room a single elegy — Jim Andrews, recalling a reading in Victoria: "*He was transfixing.*" Sharpest was the loss the list alone had marked: Martory's death, which Diane Wald wrote in to say she was "*unable to find ANYTHING about*" anywhere else. I have set the month's fury over errata beside that unverifiable death exactly as October left them: a machine for keeping words right, unable to be sure one of its own had died.

— K. M. F.

November 1998

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

November 1998 gave the room a war it might have named and did not. As it opened, the United States stood on the edge of bombing Iraq over the inspectors Saddam had barred; Newt Gingrich fell; John Glenn went back into orbit — and the Poetics list let all of it pass, except to borrow the war as a figure of speech. Kent Johnson likened his opponents in a listserv quarrel to imperial hypocrites raving about weapons of mass destruction, adding that he was not comparing anyone to Saddam. Ron Silliman, writing in from the battlefield at Bull Run, found the list staging a civil war of its own. The only news it let in was poetry's: a wire on the race to replace Ted Hughes as Laureate, and Kizer and Kumin resigning from the Academy over its want of Black chancellors.

For the most part the room was at peace only when it was not talking about poetry at all. Its calmest sustained thread was a crowdsourced list of what everyone was reading off the clock — Philip K. Dick, Walter Mosley, Mandelstam, Acker — a shelf assembled without a single quarrel. It is worth marking, because it turned out to be the one thing all month the list could hold in common: it could share a reading, but it could not, for the life of it, share a word.

The word was tolerance, and the month is the sound of it coming apart. Marjorie Perloff — no abstraction now but present on the list, answering her critics in person — used it in contempt: aesthetic tolerance was the enemy of any poetry worth the name, and opposing a bad Laureate a duty, not a rudeness. *"The TOLERANCE exhibited here is really something"*, she wrote, meaning the opposite of praise; her opponents heard a different word entirely. Gabriel Gudding answered that *"Intolerance is useless and goofy"*, that the American Renaissance was born of openness; Hugh Steinberg, that tolerance *"also means insisting upon a place at the table."* One camp meant blandness, the other justice, and across five tangled threads the word refused to settle into either — the room proving again that it cannot keep a word.

Beneath the war over the word ran a second front, and then a mutiny. The younger poets opened a thread asking whether it was merely oedipal to resent having to write like Ron Silliman — influence itself put on trial — while Henry Gould, the list's most tireless combatant, stepped out of the melee to call for what he named a free poetics, and offered, mid-brawl over tolerance, the month's least likely sentence: *"Believe*

me, I would shut up for this." The room that could not define tolerance was, just then, the least tolerant it had been all year.

And under all the noise, a death almost went unheard. Ray Bremser — a Beat poet the room had half-forgotten, and then wondered aloud whether he was still living — had died on the third. It reached the list not as an obituary but as a rumour Aldon Nielsen relayed from a few scattered sources, hoping for a collected works someday and closing, to a room still at each other's throats over a word, "*everybody stay safe!*" I have set that small, uncertain notice at the end of the month's long quarrel exactly as November left it, because it is the one thing the list could not argue with — that while it fought over what tolerance meant, one of its own had quietly stopped needing any.

— K. M. F.

December 1998

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

December 1998 was the rare month the Poetics list looked up from itself — and could not, in the end, stop looking at itself either. In a single week the United States bombed Baghdad and the House moved to impeach a president, and for once the room engaged the war: Iraq ran to more than fifty messages, Susan Schultz sick to her stomach, Rachel Levitsky treating the list as her only source of news. But it engaged on its own terms alone — the war admitted as a poem, a book-list, a gloss on the day's absurdity, Hilton Obenzinger observing that *"recent political discourse has gone way beyond Jabberwocky."* The Pentagon's name for the operation, Desert Fox, never once appears; and the archive falls silent on the eighteenth, so the impeachment vote itself drops into a darkness the record never fills.

The month's largest thread was, with terrible aptness, about erasure. Joanna Fuhrman had opened it to flee the list's endless talk about the list — a genuine poetics thread, on the erased text as a form, from DuPlessis's Drafts to Rauschenberg rubbing out a de Kooning — and within days it had been swallowed by the very quarrel it meant to escape. For as the room theorised erasure, one of its own performed it: Henry Gould, the list's most tireless arguer, unsubscribed and was gone. William Slaughter marked the vanishing in five words that were their own found poem — *"Henry Gould erased Henry Gould."*

For December's true subject, the one it could not put down, was its own government: who might speak, how often, and whether a private word of rebuke amounted to harassment. Mark Wallace and others proposed a limit of one post a day; Mairead Byrne answered with a satire that laid bare the proposal's gendered edge, wondering what such rationing would do to the list's vitality. It curdled fast. Gabriel Gudding, who days earlier had written *"But already I miss Henry."* — mourning the departed Gould — was now himself the target, Pierre Joris telling him flatly, *"Get off this list."* And under the flames the list's co-editor, Joel Kuszai, resigned.

And yet, even burning, the room kept doing the thing it does — it played. The book-lists went on, what to read on the bus and what to buy a beloved; the wordplay went on, Emily Lloyd mishearing a menu into barbarian cremes; and the politics it would not debate head-on it smuggled in disguised as verse, as when Daniel Bouchard slipped an Iraq poem onto the list whose flattest line — *"No sane person actually*

lives in Iraq." — did more than any argument. The list was coming apart and writing poems about it in the same breath.

The record does not end so much as give out. Its last full day is the eighteenth, the bombs still falling, and it is spent watching the list's stewards reach for the exits: Kuszai gone, Charles Bernstein scrambling to pick up the administration and admitting he wanted to bow out himself, Charles Alexander saying the plainest thing anyone said all month — "*Goodbye. I'm sorry you're leaving, Joel.*" Then, on the nineteenth, three messages; on the twenty-second, one; and after that, nothing. I have set the war and the list's own unravelling on the same few days exactly as December left them, because that is how the year went dark — not with a vote or a ceasefire, but with a room full of poets, mid-argument, going quiet.

— K. M. F.

January 1999

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

January 1999 opened onto a world in high ceremony and the Poetics list nowhere in it. In Washington the Senate convened only the second impeachment trial of a president in the nation's history; in Europe a new currency came into being; in Brazil a currency died — and the room that had spent December bombing itself was not even present to ignore any of it. It had gone dark. For the first ten days of the year there was silence where the loudest list in poetry had been, and when a message finally arrived, on the eleventh, it was not an argument but an announcement, and the list that sent it was not quite the same list.

For the Poetics List had been reconstituted. Charles Bernstein and a new editor, Christopher Alexander, brought it back in January as something deliberately quieter: fully moderated now, its six hundred subscribers no longer free to speak at will. The new Welcome Message declared it *“no longer a discussion list as such”*, and went on, over many sober paragraphs, to legislate the room that December had torn apart — submissions reviewed by editors, real names required, no more than five messages a day, and, in a clause that read like an epitaph for the preceding year, flame messages no longer tolerated. The list that could not stop talking had been, at last, made to hold its tongue.

What remained was a noticeboard, and a useful one. Through the second half of January the list carried what its charter now asked of it: new titles from Roof and Coach House, a Creeley book, readings from New York to Boulder, the Page Mothers conference, fresh pages at the Electronic Poetry Center. It was orderly, and it was generous, and it was almost entirely without conversation — thread after thread arriving and closing in a single message, the arguments that had been the room's whole weather simply gone. One could admire the calm and still feel the loss in it.

And yet, stripped of its quarrels, the list showed something the quarrels had hidden: that underneath the years of argument it had always been a mutual-aid society for an art the wider world does not attend to — poets telling other poets where the readings were, which small presses had survived, what book had just come into being. The bulletin was not a lesser thing than the brawl. It was the same devotion with the noise removed, a record of a community that keeps itself because almost no one else will.

It took a death to make the new list briefly a room again. On the twenty-first Paul Metcalf died — born, as Don Byrd's notice observed, on the very day of the Russian Revolution, the author of two dozen books in a genre he had invented, and almost unread outside a small and devoted few — and the moderated, announcement-only list did the one thing no charter could forbid: it grieved. Byrd posted the news; Peter Quartermain answered with the truest sentence of the month, asking who would mark the loss and answering himself: *"who will notice, outside this list? Hardly anyone"*. I have set that small elegy at the end of a month of orderly announcements exactly as January delivered it, because it is the whole case for such a list, tamed or wild — that it is the one place a poet like Metcalf is noticed at all.

— K. M. F.

February 1999

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

February 1999 unfolded against a Washington spectacle the poets could not quite be bothered to attend: on the twelfth the Senate acquitted a president, and the impeachment that had gripped the nation for a year simply evaporated, leaving behind — on this list, at least — little more than a wry thread passing around Gabriel García Márquez's opinion of Mr. Clinton. The wider world sent its own sombre news, King Hussein of Jordan dead on the seventh; but the room, as ever, kept mostly to its own weather, which that month turned elegiac and generous by turns.

The month's largest labour was a card-catalogue built in common. Jennifer Rosenthal, at work on the American long poem of 1945 to 1960 and particularly interested in *"issues of place,"* asked the list for what she had overlooked, and the list, which loves nothing so much as a bibliography, answered for weeks — Michael Boughn adding H.D.'s War Trilogy and Ronald Johnson's Ark, John Lowther pressing the claims of David Antin's talk poems — until the thread had become a small anthology of the century's longest ambitions. A parallel list took shape beside it when Maria Damon canvassed the room for an alchemy syllabus, and the citations came back in a torrent, Jung and Eliade and Robert Kelly, as though the members kept their libraries permanently open to one another.

Not every exchange was so collegial. Under the deliberately incendiary heading BATTLE OF THE SEXES, Chris Stroffolino wondered aloud whether the received wisdom that the women of his generation simply wrote better had gone too long unchallenged, and the room answered with force. Katherine Lederer supplied a roll-call of forthcoming titles — *"The females are on their way"* — while Aldon Nielsen turned the premise inside out with a single question about the very writers under discussion: *"how do you think they seem to others?"* It is a Poetics specialty, the quarrel that begins in provocation and ends, some forty posts later, having actually thought about something.

Death, though, kept pressing at the edges. When the translator Paul Schmidt died, Mark Prejsnar noticed the New York Times obituary describing Velimir Khlebnikov as *"the little-known Russian poet,"* and the phrase touched off a small, exact fury over how the paper of record disappears the very artists it pretends to bury with honour. The thread is, in miniature, the list's abiding anxiety: that the difficult and

the essential are forever being filed under little-known, and that someone had better keep the record straight.

And then, on the fourth, the record itself lost one of its keepers. Charles Bernstein wrote to say that Armand Schwerner — poet of The Tablets, that great invented archaeology of a broken, half-legible ancient tongue — had died that morning at 9:06, and closed the notice with the poet's own instruction to *"go into all the places you're frightened of."* The list did as it was told. Maria Damon, confessing herself devastated by a difficult, cranky, beloved man, signed off with the truest elegy the month produced — a pun that was also a prayer, three words long: *"dissolve the tablets."* I have set the arguments and the bibliographies on either side of that loss exactly as they came, because that is how February arrived: a company of poets building their endless shared library in one room while, in the next, one of its authors quietly closed his book.

— K. M. F.

March 1999

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

March began by taking its toll of the elders. Within a single week Stanley Kubrick, Joe DiMaggio, and the Argentine fabulist Adolfo Bioy Casares were gone, and Pierre Joris, forwarding the last of these, could only note that yet another had *"called it splitsville."* George Bowering mourned Bioy as his oldest Latin American love, the maker of labyrinths one hardly dared finish; and the list, still fresh from Armand Schwerner's death the month before, settled again into the particular hush it keeps for the departed before rousing itself, as it always does, to argue.

And argue it did, first about women. Early in the month a good part of the list decamped to La Jolla for the Page Mothers conference — three days at UCSD given over to the matrilineage of experimental writing, Rae Armantrout and Fanny Howe reading into the California evening. Those who stayed home demanded reports and got them: the novelist dbkk filed his dispatch from *"an oblique, Jamesian angle,"* disqualifying himself as a mere male observer, while Elizabeth Treadwell relayed the conference's sharpest anxiety — the fear, as she put it, of *"women losing whatever ground we've gained."*

That worry bled straight into the month's largest and most personal quarrel, which began as a question about class and would not let anyone stay abstract. Kathy Lou Schultz set the tone with a working-class credo the thread could not shake — *"I can smell class. I can sniff it out."* — and the room divided over whether such knowledge was a weapon or a wound. Mark Weiss recalled the Brooklyn stoop-sitters who quizzed and classified him without malice; David Baratier answered with two flat words he handed straight to Gertrude Stein, *"Survival is survival"*; and Rebecca Wolff drew her line at biography, refusing to want to know *"what Susan Howe's family home was like."*

Threaded through all of it ran the oldest question of the room, posed this time without embarrassment: what is poetry for? Mark Prejsnar listed the usual bad answers — that it would pay for the kids' college, or save humanity — and set them aside; Tom Beckett cut through with the plainest reply the archive holds, that *"poetry is for love,"* the fundamental science, as he called it, of emotionalepistemic investigation. It is the kind of sentence the list produces once a season and then spends forty posts trying to complicate.

And then, on the twenty-fourth, the arguing stopped. NATO's bombs began to fall on Belgrade, and within hours the war was inside the room — not as news but as mail. Charles Bernstein forwarded a message from Dubravka Djuric, a poet and translator writing from the city itself, relaying word from the Belgrade pacifists in an English roughened by fear and haste, closing only with "*i hope i will write.*" The list that had spent the month deciding what poetry was for received, from a poet under the bombs, its answer: that it is a line kept open to another human being after everything else has been cut. I have set the conference and the classwar and the deaths in the order they arrived, and let Dubravka's broken, indispensable sentences fall where they fell — last, and from the dark.

— K. M. F.

April 1999

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

Of April 1999 the archive keeps only five days — it opens on the first and breaks off on the fifth — but they are five days of a particular weather. It was National Poetry Month, and it was the second week of NATO's bombing of Yugoslavia, and the newly moderated Poetics list held both at once. Charles Bernstein set the key on the first, announcing an essay of his just posted online, *Against National Poetry Month as Such*: the cruelest month, as the old line has it, arriving this year over a war. What those five days show, the more clearly for being so few, is a room reconstituted three months earlier and now quietly testing whether it could still do the one thing moderation had seemed to cost it — think.

It could. The fullest thread was opened by Juliana Spahr, who came back from a conference and a talk on Carolyn Chute unable to stop turning over the question of class — how a room of poets might speak about it honestly, given how many people slip up and down it all their lives. She refused every easy marker: was Lyn Hejinian middle-class, and by what measure; did an adjunct's job, or a scholarship to Yale, settle anything; was class income, or upbringing, or only culture. *"It is hard to quantify, much less smell or generalize"*, she wrote, and the thread that followed was the new list at its best — a hard subject held open, carefully, by people genuinely asking rather than scoring points. This was a discussion the December list could no longer have had.

The war was in the room too, as it had been all spring. The moderator's new charter formally admitted political news, and so the bombing entered the way it could: Kent Johnson forwarded a dissenting analysis, *Five Myths of NATO's War*, lifted from Z-Net — the falling of American bombs on Belgrade turned, on a poetry list, into a document to be weighed and argued. The room did not look away from Kosovo; it did what it does with everything, and made it a text.

And presiding over all of it, uneasily, was the new moderator. Pressed on the list's ideological limits, Christopher Alexander answered in public with a candour that gave the month its strangest and most touching note — a man wrestling aloud with the power he had been handed, naming himself, with a wince, *"my own position as arbiter of the list"*. He was governing a room three months out of a war it had waged on itself, and he knew it: every rule he wrote, he feared, was a rule he would be accused of writing.

Then, on the fifth, the record simply stops — not in collapse this time, the way December had ended, but the way a held breath ends: mid-thought, mid-argument, the class thread still open, the bombs still falling, the moderator still at the door. I have set Spahr's careful questions beside Alexander's unease exactly as those five days delivered them, because together they are the sound of a list learning to live under its own new law — quieter than it was, and, for the first time in a long while, thinking clearly enough to be worth the quiet.

— *K. M. F.*

May 1999

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

May opened with the war still grinding on in the background — NATO's planes over Yugoslavia for a second month — and the list, characteristically, declined to report it and chose instead to interrogate itself. Jordan Davis put the challenge most bluntly, under the heading the suck of art: *"anybody doing anything about this war we're having?"* It was less a question about Kosovo than about poetry's standing to answer for it, and it set the key for much that followed. Billy Little replied in the only register that seemed adequate, a battered parody of Over the Rainbow in which the Serbs fall far behind and the missiles melt like lemon drops; the joke, of course, was that they did not.

The blunt question had an abstract twin that ran all month under the heading Poetry: telic or not — is the art directed toward an end, or is it gloriously good for nothing? Randy Prunty and P. Standard Schaefer traded closely argued posts on whether a poem could be a form of social action at all, and Jacques Debrot raised the stakes by way of George Lakoff, quoting the cognitive scientist's claim that if the world's cruelty is to end *"our concepts must change,"* and that changing concepts means changing brains and bodies. It is the list at its most philosophical, worrying a question it has no intention of ever settling.

Relief arrived, as it often does, in the form of a bibliography. Jena Osman asked after poems assembled from the language of other texts — Cage's mesostics, Reznikoff's Testimony — and the room happily emptied its shelves. miekal and nominated *"the venerable Bern Porter"* as the lifelong master of the form; Taylor Brady and David Baptiste Chirot both reached for Ronald Johnson's RADI OS, that erasure carved out of Paradise Lost; and the thread became a small, glad census of everything poets have made by finding rather than inventing.

Underneath ran the perennial question of the canon and its heirs. Small Press Traffic announced a public re-reading of Donald Allen's New American Poetry, the 1960 anthology that drew the map much of the list still lives on, and Maria Damon wanted to know how Marjorie Perloff and Alan Golding had ended up on *"opposite sides of the fence"* over the old wound of who gets let in. The question of the young came in through Alice Notley, whom Chris Stroffolino quoted from a COMBO interview praising *"an extremely exciting younger generation right now"* — even as she wished

it were more political, a wish that touched off a long, bristling argument about whether love could ever be a politics.

And then the map itself lost a landmark. On the seventeenth, in Port Townsend, James Broughton died at eighty-five — poet and filmmaker, radical faerie, and, as Kevin Killian reminded the list, *“one of the original New American Poets,”* which is to say a man who had been printed in the very anthology Small Press Traffic was preparing to reopen. Billy Little wrote the farewell, mourning a beautiful man whose small bright films were worth double the price of admission: *“he was America’s Cocteau.”* I have kept the arguments and the found poems and the theories of purpose in the order they arrived, and let Broughton’s death fall where it did — in the middle of a month spent asking what poetry is for, and answered, in passing, by a life that had simply and gorgeously been for it.

— K. M. F.

June 1999

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

June brought, at long last, a silence. On the tenth NATO's bombs stopped falling and Serbia agreed to quit Kosovo; after seventy-eight days the war whose dispatches the list had read all spring — Dubravka Djuric writing from beneath the sirens — was, provisionally, over. Released from that weight, the room spent June on the gentlest business it knows: defining old words, trading old books, and arguing about a poet reading in the snow.

That poet was Robert Frost, and the snow was the glare off the Capitol steps in January 1961. Mark Melnicove, at work on an essay, asked the list for poets' responses to Frost's reading at Kennedy's inauguration, calling it "*a signal event*" — though he noted at once that not everyone agreed, some of the replies having more to do with old misgivings about Frost the man than about the morning itself. It is the perennial American question, whether a poet belongs on the public platform at all, and the list turned it over with unusual tenderness.

Tenderness of another kind animated the month's most purely delightful thread, which began when someone asked what, exactly, the British mean by snogging. The aging Britons of the list rose as one to testify. Douglas Oliver answered, "*as a kneejerk ageing heterosexual Brit,*" that the word belonged to the 1950s and had meant, in those innocent days, nothing more athletic than heavy kissing; David Bromige and Jim Swift concurred, and a small philology of mid-century courtship assembled itself, half etymology and half fond memoir.

The list's twin appetites — for the found and for the archival — ran on beside it. The found-poetry thread carried over from May, Harvey Jordan recalling a sixties collection built entirely from "*sewing machine instructions, recipes,*" and others adding Berrigan's borrowings and Reznikoff's documentary lines; meanwhile Dodie Bellamy, preparing a course on epistolary fiction, asked for help extending it to "*The First Person and The Document,*" and the shelves opened once more. It was a month of poets happily doing one another's homework.

The most moving reply, though, had come back in the Frost thread, and it was not about Frost at all. Maria Damon remembered her mother — a Danish immigrant — so stirred by the sight of an old poet reading at the inauguration of a young president that she went out and bought his Collected Works, a book, Damon wrote, that "*we still have in a prominent place.*" That is the answer, I think, that June kept circling

toward, under all its wordplay and bibliography: that poetry's public life is finally a private one, measured not in platforms but in the books a mother carries home and cannot bring herself to shelve away. The guns had stopped; the poems were still on the mantel.

— *K. M. F.*

July 1999

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

The summer's great news reached the list in July and went, remarkably, almost unremarked: a small plane went down off Martha's Vineyard on the sixteenth carrying John Kennedy's son, and the room that had spent June on Kennedy's inauguration barely looked up. It was busy instead with a scandal fifty years old. The 1949 Bollingen Prize, awarded to Ezra Pound for *The Pisan Cantos* while their author sat in a Washington cell indicted for treason, had come round again as the list's central preoccupation, and it dragged the whole ugly question behind it: what does one do with the great art of a compromised man?

The thread was long, learned, and genuinely divided. John Tranter posted the archival history of the prize; Michael Bibby, at work on African-American poetry of the same years, said the arguments touched *"issues of concern to me"*; and Mark Weiss offered the formula the whole debate kept circling — *"The work is not the man,"* and neither, he added, is the prize the work. No one settled it, because it does not settle.

Inevitably the argument spread to William Carlos Williams, when Kent Johnson pressed the case that Williams too had his prejudices, as robustly as Pound and Eliot. Michael Magee pushed back hard — not to exonerate anyone, but to insist that flattening three very different men into a single charge means *"one loses all sense of particulars,"* that the moral work is precisely in the distinctions. It was the list at its most serious: refusing both the whitewash and the blanket indictment, trying to hold a poet's failures and his gifts in the same hand.

For relief there was, of all things, the mailbag. A sprawling thread under the running title SUBMISSION IMPOSSIBLE set editors and submitters against each other over cover letters, simultaneous submissions, and the etiquette of rejection; John Lowther, surveying the crossfire, summed it up: *"this is a curious thread,"* and it only grew. After the moral weight of Pound, there was something restorative in watching poets argue about postage.

Underneath the noise, a quieter injustice went nearly unnoticed. Philip Whalen — the great Zen poet of the original San Francisco circle, whom Stephen Vincent described as *"at the near end of his life"* — had been handed a limp, ambivalent review in the San Francisco Chronicle, and Vincent and John Coletti rose to defend him with real heat. There was an irony the list did not quite name: that it could spend

a hundred posts litigating a prize handed out in 1949 while a living master, still writing, went undervalued in the Sunday paper. I have kept Pound's long trial and Whalen's brief notice side by side, because that is how July argued — passionately about the dead, and only just in time about the living.

— *K. M. F.*

August 1999

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

On the eleventh of August the moon blotted out the sun over Europe and Asia — the last total eclipse of the millennium, watched by millions — and the Poetics List, so far as its archive shows, hardly glanced up. It had turned its whole attention inward, onto itself, for a reckoning that would occupy nearly the entire month: a long, painful, necessary argument about who its idea of poetry leaves out.

It began as criticism and became something larger. Reviewing the second annual Boston Alternative Poetry Festival, Jacques Debrot located its weakness, carefully, in *"the most featured Boston poets"* — a judgement of taste that might have stayed a judgement of taste. But the word alternative had been left lying in the open, and the list could not walk past it.

Alternative to what, exactly, and for whom? Tisa Bryant, a Boston native writing from San Francisco, asked where the city's Black poets had been on the program; Karen Kelley, who *"loved the city and it infuriated me,"* named the genteel local habit of recasting racism as mere ignorance; and Maria Damon put the structural point most plainly — that *"alternative does tend to mean a certain alternative,"* a single experimental style wearing the costume of openness. Pierre Joris, half in grief, recalled Stephen Jonas, the Black Boston poet *"killed by smack, or Boston"* in the mid-sixties, and asked whether anyone still read him.

And yet the same room, in the same weeks, was quietly at its best. Word arrived through Burt Kimmelman that Cid Corman — the expatriate editor of *Origin*, who from a coffee shop in Kyoto had introduced half the room's influences to one another — was in trouble, his situation *"precarious, to say the least."* The list mobilized at once: proposals to petition the ambassador, to find a grant, to recover for an old poet in distress some fraction of what he had spent decades giving away.

There is no tidy way to set these two Augusts beside each other — the argument about exclusion and the rush to rescue an excluded elder — except to say that they are the same community taking itself seriously, and that the second is the answer the first was groping toward. The list did not settle whether it was as open as it believed itself to be. But it did, in the end, do a few concrete open things: it passed the hat for Cid Corman, and, answering Joris, it confirmed that Stephen Jonas is still taught, still written about, still read. In a month spent asking who gets left out, that was something — two names carried back in from the margin, and kept.

— *K. M. F.*

September 1999

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

September 1999 was, in the world, a month of catastrophes the Poetics list managed almost entirely to miss. Hurricane Floyd drowned the American seaboard and appears here only as a subscriber's surname; the earthquake that killed thousands in Taiwan goes unmentioned; the Giuliani war on the Brooklyn Museum, an arts-censorship fight this list exists to relish, surfaces once, as a forwarded alert that names neither the mayor's target nor the painting. The one catastrophe the room took up was East Timor — and it took it up, one suspects, because the militias' slaughter and its sponsors had already been made, by Chomsky and others, into a question about the misuse of language. Atrocity reached the list when it could be argued as poetics.

And argue it the room did, at a pitch it had not reached in months. Grafted improbably onto a cross-posted joke — a thread titled I can't believe it!!! — the East Timor argument ran some sixty-five messages and was the one sustained act of collective thinking on a list otherwise given over to notices. It was a real quarrel, fairly joined: Michael Neff held that *"the US Govt is far, far more stupid than malevolent"*, Patrick Herron answered that *"It is a calculated psychotic rampage"*, George Bowering corrected the record where it needed correcting. It went on until Taylor Brady called a halt with the truest thing said in it — that *"no one on the list is learning anything new"* — which is to say, until the room had remembered both how to think and how to tire of thinking.

For the rest, the list was what moderation had made it: a noticeboard. Its single most prolific voice all month was not a poet but the moderator's own account, relaying announcements; its busiest individuals, Alan Sondheim and Philip Nikolayev, mostly broadcast their own texts into the feed; and thread after thread was a reading or a magazine or a book, arriving and closing without reply. David Bromige, deadpan, crowned himself California Poet Laureate for want of a real one. The curated calm was pleasant and useful and almost entirely one-directional — a room that had learned to post, and half forgotten how to answer.

What the noticeboard could still do, and did beautifully, was pass a hat. Word came that Cid Corman — poet, editor of *Origin*, a man who had spent fifty years printing other people from Kyoto — was ill and broke, and the list organised: addresses, bank details, small sums. *"Those who can't, can't, and needn't"*, wrote Karen Kelley,

settling the ethics of it in six words. The reconstituted, gatekept list turned out to be very good at exactly the thing a bulletin is for — getting help quietly to someone who needed it.

Only grief had no place to go. Two deaths reached the list in September, and both came as clippings: the potter and poet M. C. Richards, arriving as a forwarded obituary under Charles Smith's three flat words, "*Sad news again*"; and Angela Bowering, a member's wife, mourned in a single relayed notice with no thread behind it. I have set those forwarded deaths at the end of a month of forwarded everything exactly as September delivered them, because it is the one thing the new list cannot do — a room that can pass a hat for the living has, for the dead, only the forward button, and the strange decorum of grief conducted at one remove.

— K. M. F.

October 1999

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

October 1999 handed the Poetics list the argument it was born to have. In Brooklyn the mayor of New York was trying to defund a museum over a painting — Chris Ofili's Virgin Mary, in the show called Sensation — an arts-censorship war made to order for a room of poets. The room did not have it. The Giuliani fight passed through the list as freight only: a rally alert forwarded from the Poetry Project, a photocopied polemic, a notice relayed. The single time the mayor entered in a member's own voice it was an aside — Alan Sondheim, mid-argument, remarking *"I live in Giuliani territory"* — dropped into a fight about something else entirely. The world's censorship story went by untouched; the list was busy with its own.

The month's real intellectual engine was a book review. Mark Prejsnar's long assessment of Christopher Beach's Poetic Culture opened onto the question the list can never leave alone — who actually reads this poetry, and who pays — and drew the room into its most substantive exchange: David Kellogg pressing the real issue of audience, Juliana Spahr producing the deflating arithmetic that *"Dobyns and Hejinian sell more or less similarly"*, David Bromige calling the whole disparity a crying shame. It was the noticeboard briefly becoming a seminar again.

But the argument that consumed October was not about Giuliani, or audience, or the market. It was about the list. Dan Raphael asked Alan Sondheim, who posted a great deal, to post less — *"lets see more poems by more people"*, he wrote, mildly — and the room detonated. Within days the word the mayor had earned in Brooklyn was being spent entirely on a poetry list's traffic: Pete Balestrieri charging that *"Your attempts at censorship are ugly and brand this List"*, others invoking shame and the First Amendment as though a request for restraint were a jackboot. Sondheim ended it himself, wearily, and said goodbye. The censorship the room could not discuss when it belonged to the world, it could not stop discussing when it belonged to itself.

Underneath the fight the list did its quiet ordinary work, the work moderation actually suited it for: sourcing a Gomringer concrete poem in which *"the spacing is everything"*, hunting the true rules of the ghazal, tallying the ruinous economics of little magazines. It remained, whatever else it had lost, an excellent reference desk — a place to bring a question and leave with an answer, if not with a conversation.

And once, that month, a death arrived without a forward or a fight. Charles Bernstein marked the passing of the Brazilian poet João Cabral de Melo Neto not by arguing

about him but by sitting down the same afternoon and translating two of his poems for the list. In a month the room spent quarrelling over how much any one person should say, the finest thing it published was someone else's words, carried over by hand. I have set that quiet act of translation at the end of October's long noise exactly as it came, because it is the list at its best and its rarest — not talking about poetry, but passing it on.

— *K. M. F.*

November 1999

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

November 1999, and the century is running out of month. A low millennial hum lies under everything now — the machines to be reset at midnight, the anxieties rehearsed and re-rehearsed — though the poets of Buffalo keep, as they always have, to their own weather. Only at the archive's far edge does the wider tumult press in: a correspondent signing himself, with a Duchampian wink, rmutts alerts whoever means to be *"in Seattle for the WTO protests next week"* — as if the millennium intended to go out not in fireworks but in tear gas and rain.

The month's presiding quarrel — it runs to some scores of messages beneath a drift of mutating subject-lines, the banner Business, class, access chief among them — is finally about who is permitted into the room. Kathy Lou Schultz will not let it be said that *"class has nothing to do with access to time"*; David Baratier, an editor who *"started out on unemployment"* and ran his press from the dole, answers that the perpetual-victim posture has begun to wear thin. Round and round the two of them go, drawing in Catherine Daly and half the list, until pete spence punctures the whole solemn business from the far side of the planet: get ahead, he wonders aloud, or *"get a head??"*

The argument bleeds, as it must in 1999, into the machinery that carries it. Tom Beckett, distrustful of the unstable digital page, would sooner keep *"a stack of books over a pile of floppys"* any day; miekal and — the visual poet homesteading out in West Lima — shouts back in a tall column of capitals that the choice was never one or the other but each its own. Beneath the theory runs a plainer ledger of costs: Tony Green pricing a London library by the half-hour against pete spence's free Australian card, a reminder that access, whatever the manifestos promise, keeps a meter running. Wearied by the fury, Rachel Loden reaches past all of it to Brecht, who owned to *"changing our country more often than our shoes"*.

The class argument acquires, for a fortnight, an actual ballot. From San Francisco Ron Silliman flags Tom Ammiano's improbable mayoral runoff against Willie Brown, in a city where a single room now lets for *"\$1,000 per month per bedroom"* and a live-in landlord, Taylor Brady reports, can smear a gay candidate as a communist without once lowering his voice. Between such squalls the list keeps to its gentler errands — hunting a half-remembered book about poets who lived in towers,

weighing David Lehman's premature obituary for the avant-garde — as if to prove that erudition, too, is a form of housekeeping.

And then, midway through the month, the list stops to bury a musician. Lester Bowie of the Art Ensemble of Chicago is dead at fifty-eight, and Taylor Brady, passing the news along under the subject Lester Left Town, hears in that flamboyant, humane trumpet *"a model poetics for performance of all kinds"* — beginning in sound, he writes, and travelling outward through everything after. It is a fine thing, and a wholly characteristic one, that a poetry list should send off a horn player by making of him a poetics. I have arranged what follows so that each voice stands forward under its own name, its telephone and its address returned to privacy, its machinery swept aside. These were letters before ever they were literature.

— K. M. F.

December 1999

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

December 1999 — the last month of the thousand years, if you counted that way — opened in tear gas and closed on New Year's Eve, and the Poetics list met the millennium with a shrug and the street with real attention. Of the calendar's supposed terrors it made a joke, Y2K surviving on the list mostly as sign-offs like Joe Amato's "*happy y2k!...*". But Seattle it took seriously: as the WTO talks collapsed under a police riot, David Bromige forwarded eyewitness feeds and the room argued it hard, Patrick Herron flatly declaring "*Amerika is a police state*", the Poetry Project countering on the ethics of the boycott. Meanwhile Yeltsin resigned, Grozny burned, and the list said not one word — its ledger was never the world's.

The month's largest thread was not a prophecy but an inventory. Arielle Greenberg asked what everyone was reading at the flip of the nines, and the list answered with its bedside stacks — Guest and Borges and Celan and Tender Buttons, champagne, noisemakers for everyone — a roll-call not of what the next century would bring but of what this one had left on the night table. Greenberg signed off toward the rollover with the season's truest two words, "*see you in the meltdown*", and the century's end became, on the Poetics list, a list.

The one argument that broke clean through the moderator was, fittingly for this room, about who is allowed to speak in it. A long, tangled cluster of threads on class, race, and whiteness ran all month, careful and genuine, until a lurker's patience snapped: Katie Degentesh erupted that "*ALL ANYONE EVER TALKS ABOUT IS CLASS*", demanding to know whether the list was made of writers or activists. Dodie Bellamy answered evenly, "*This is rather dismissive, don't you think?*", and the two fell to trading mock salutations. It was the month's most sustained discussion and, in the same breath, a fight over whether that discussion should be happening at all — the moderated list's deepest reflex, to argue about its own terms.

Alongside it ran the list's perennial undertow of commerce and craft: a wry thread on how bookstores shelve poetry by race and sexuality because it helps the books sell, a scheme to print online work between covers, and — when that scheme grew too American — komninos zervos's tart reminder, "*thought this was an international list?*", typo and all. The century was ending; the shop talk went on regardless.

And then, ten days before the year and the century ran out, Edward Dorn died. The list that could no longer simply talk did the one thing its machinery could not forbid:

it stopped, and grieved. Tom Beckett remembered a man of “*ferocious intelligence and great wit*”; and the moderator himself, who admitted he had not known Dorn, set the rules aside to post the elegy called Mourning Letter into a gatekept room. I have set that elegy at the very end of the archive’s century exactly as December left it, because it is how this room — tamed, gatekept, and nearly silent — chose to see out a thousand years: not with a prophecy, but by making room, one last time, for the dead.

— K. M. F.

January 2000

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

The century turned, and the Poetics list marked it by taking inventory of its bookshelves. Of the wider world's January — the AOL and Time Warner merger that remade the media, Elián González gripping the country, the aftermath of Seattle — the room said essentially nothing; the merger appears only in the six hundred @aol.com addresses of its members, Elián not once. What it did instead, at the stroke of the millennium, was ask what everyone was reading. Dozens answered, Harold Teichman among them, *"enlivening the list here at world's end."* with the titles on their night tables. The list's calendar, as ever, was a syllabus and not a newspaper.

That roundup was the month's largest thread by far, and its most characteristic — warm, inclusive, gregarious, and almost entirely without argument. Members from Ron Silliman to Charles Alexander posted their stacks; the list did what it now did best, which was to share and to catalogue. It was the announcement-era list at its most generous. It was also the announcement-era list wearing the mask of a conversation: forty people talking at once and no one, quite, talking to anyone. The largest discussion of the month was not a discussion at all, but a collective inventory.

The month's one real quarrel came, as they do, over a joke. David Bromige told an Irish one, and the room split on what it meant. Billy Mills and Leonard Brink heard a colonial slander — *"The joke was about being stupid, stoopid"*, Brink wrote, refusing the charitable reading — while Bromige insisted it turned on craft, not stupidity, and deflected the heat with *"I dunno, George, that's all geek to me."* But Mills asked the question that made it a matter for this list in particular: would the moderator have let the joke through with a Black or a Jewish butt? On a list where every post now passed one editor's desk, a joke was never only a joke; it was a decision someone had made.

Underneath ran a stranger thread, the room examining its own condition. Randy Prunty noticed aloud that the women had gone quiet, and that when they did post it tended to be announcements; Maria Damon agreed the whole tenor had turned announcement-bound since the moderation began; Brian Stefans conceded that, subtract the loose talk, and what remained was the voice of the art bureaucrat. And then, into that argument about silence, a woman answered it directly: Rebecca Weldon Sithiwong posted a poem and a flat, four-word refusal of the premise — *"I am silent no longer."* — which was, in its way, the truest thing the month produced.

And once, the bulletin board became a memory. Charles Bernstein posted that Susan Bee had spotted, in the day's Times obituaries, that Lita Hornick had died — the extravagant patron and editor of Kulchur, who for decades had printed O'Hara and Baraka and Howe on her own dime — and asked the others to fill in the history. They did: Michael Magee, Douglas Messerli, a small gathering of memory around a woman who had spent her life underwriting exactly this kind of room. I have set that obituary at the end of a month the list spent cataloguing itself exactly as January delivered it, because it is the one entry in the whole inventory that could not be replaced — a patron of the art, gone, and the art left to remember her itself.

— *K. M. F.*

February 2000

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

February's news washed past the list without leaving a mark. Elián, the primaries, the cresting NASDAQ: nothing. The presidential race entered the room exactly once, as a forwarded survey of what Bush, Gore and McCain would do for arts funding — the election admitted only as a line item in poetry's budget. The single event the room argued on its own terms was Austria, where Jörg Haider's far-right party had entered the government: Alan Sondheim forwarded a call to boycott Austrian cultural institutions, and Alaric Sumner answered it with a hard question — *"Who would a left boycott hurt?"* — proposing, instead of withdrawal, an airlift of left poetry. Even the world, when it got in, got in as a question about poems.

For the month's real subject, spread across a dozen renamed threads, was the room itself — specifically, who was entitled to speak in it. A long argument about gender ran all month: why women on the list introduced and credentialled themselves where men simply held forth, why the register that got through moderation was the confident and the academic. Jill Stengel put the long view plainly, that *"men have defined culture and experience for centuries"*, and others traced the same asymmetry into the list's own habits. It was the fully-moderated room turning its whole analytic apparatus, Bourdieu and cultural capital and all, onto the question of its own membership.

The sharpest exchange, though, was about a betrayal. Stephen Ellis reproduced on the open list a private, backchannel letter from Jacques Debrot — and the room divided over whether a poet's mail was his own. Debrot answered that the point had been to embarrass and hurt him, and that the list was *"no longer--if it ever was-- a venue where"* one could speak frankly; Ellis retorted that the members were treated like children, good boys and girls, and that what was said on a list belonged to the list. It was the room's oldest anxiety in a new key: on a moderated list, where nothing arrives unvetted, what is the difference between a private word and a published one?

Not everything was self-scrutiny. The single largest thread by post-count was, sublimely, eighteen messages on how to title a poem — Jorge Guitart's mock-rules, Judy Roitman's unease at a word processor that would name your work for you, *"the program deciding for you."* And against the sociological heaviness, Elizabeth Treadwell, the month's most prolific voice, filed a small revolt on behalf of pleasure,

asking why the only admissible register was the earnest one: *"What about the rigor of humor?"* The list could still, when it wanted, be light.

And the whole month came to rest in a few words a member wrote almost in passing. Inside the argument over cultural capital, the poet I. Schmidt offered the plainest account of why the room sounded the way it did: the men just talk anyway, whereas *"maybe women don't feel invited"* to blabber on here the way the men do. I have set that quiet observation at the end of a month the list spent anatomising itself exactly as February delivered it, because it answers, better than all the Bourdieu, the question the room kept asking — not what may be said on the list, but who has ever felt free to say it.

— K. M. F.

March 2000

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

March 2000 held, for those keeping the world's ledger, the peak of the dot-com bubble, Super Tuesday, and Vladimir Putin's election — and the Poetics list recorded not one of them. The single dispatch from the world that drew a real reply came, characteristically, wrapped around a poet: a wire story that Mahmoud Darwish's poems were to enter Israeli school curricula, forwarded by Pierre Joris. To a poet being taken up into the very schools of the state that had exiled his people, Stephen Ellis answered, drily, "*Would that we all were so lucky.*" The Middle East reached the room only because it arrived holding a book.

The month's gravitational centre was a single question, and the room borrowed it verbatim from a panel: Poetry Criticism: What is it for? It pulled half the big threads into its orbit — the Perloff and Vendler binary staged as a spectator sport, formalism versus the New Criticism, members naming their favourite critics, Brian Kim Stefans reporting back from the actual panel in New York. For a list that had spent a year fretting it had become a mere noticeboard, it was a striking thing to watch: the moderated room, asked what criticism was for, answered by becoming one — the best-attended critical forum any of them had, and free.

The sport turned serious when the subject walked in. Aldon Nielsen had been having fun twinning the critics — matter and antimatter, evil twins — when Marjorie Perloff herself joined the thread to detonate the whole game, objecting that no one paired two ageing women critics except to diminish them both, and signing off, unanswerably, "*From Evil Twin Numero Uno.*" David Kellogg, who had been enjoying the joke, retreated at once — "*Aldon, this is pretty scary.*" — and pledged never to say her name on the list again. It was the room's oldest law made visible: who is in the room governs what can be said in it, and the surest way to end a discourse about someone is for that someone to arrive.

Two counter-currents ran under the criticism talk. One was the perennial gender argument, reopened by Marcella Durand with a cheerful "*I love talking about gender.*" and complicated at once by Dodie Bellamy's blunter census of the room's temperament. The other was Alan Sondheim, the month's most prolific voice, who while everyone debated what criticism was for simply posted the object it would be about — poems assembled from a crashed computer's error logs, titled cancer. The theorists argued the measure; Sondheim filed the thing to be measured.

But the month's real news was a loss, and it needed no panel. Word came from Cornwall that Alaric Sumner — the British poet who only weeks earlier had been arguing on this very list about whether to boycott Austria — had died suddenly, and his friend Lawrence Upton posted the plainest of notices: "*We're trying to come to terms with that.*" Two more deaths reached the list that month, Miriam Patchen and Katherine Washburn, each mourned briefly by someone who had known them. I have set those three quiet losses at the end of a month the room spent arguing what criticism is for exactly as March delivered them, because they are its unanswerable reply: criticism is for the living, and the dead are simply, terribly, past it.

— K. M. F.

April 2000

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

April 2000 gave the world one of its iconic images — the armed federal agents seizing Elián González from a Miami closet, before dawn on the twenty-second — and the Poetics list did not so much as glance at it. The market was crashing; Vermont had just invented the civil union; none of it registers. The only public occasion the list acknowledged was National Poetry Month, and it did so with a wince, one venue advertising poetry as a thing to be guarded against *“as with tsunamis or STD’s”*. The month’s one genuine event, as it turned out, was a death — and it fell on the twenty-second, the very day of the raid the room ignored.

What the room argued instead, for a fortnight, was its own worth. A chain of threads — eloquence, impoverished poetics?, apoetics, formulae — asked, over and over and from every angle, whether experimental poetry had any measure of value left. William James Austin, new and relentless, pressed the bleakest answer, that with the old formulae refused, *“the market place is the ultimate and only judge”*; Patrick Foley raged against a poetics decayed into impressionism and cheerfully owned the raging — *“So I’m ranting, so sue me.”* It was a real argument, and its real subject was fear: that the avant-garde, having rejected every external yardstick, had nothing left to be measured by but sales, or each other.

The sharpest exchange put the question to a prize. The Poetry Society had given its Frost Medal to Anthony Hecht, a year after honouring Barbara Guest, and Jeffrey Jullich thought the swing between them nullified any aesthetic credibility the award might claim. K. Silem Mohammad refused the whole logic of denunciation, declining to disqualify anyone who could hold both poets in mind at once: *“then consider me incredible.”* The question of poetry’s value had found its natural venue — an argument about who deserved a medal.

Beneath the theory lay the plainest register of all: money. The Poetry Project floated a half-serious plea to be given an endowment and a couple of large buildings; mIEKAL AND answered from the rural avant-garde that *“We have everything here except the large endowment”*. While the list debated what poetry was worth in the abstract, its institutions were counting, quite literally, what they could not pay for.

And on the day the cameras were in Miami, the British poet Douglas Oliver died in Paris, after a long illness — Alice Notley’s husband, and, in Edward Foster’s plain words, *“one of the finest people to walk”* the earth. The list that had spent the month

unable to say what a poet was worth knew exactly what this one had been worth; the mourning came without hesitation or theory. I have set Oliver's death beside the month's long argument about value exactly as April delivered them, because the room that could not price poetry in the abstract had no trouble at all knowing what it had lost — which is, perhaps, the only answer to the question it was asking.

— *K. M. F.*

May 2000

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

May 2000 was, in the world outside, the month a love letter broke the internet — the ILOVEYOU worm tearing through the world's email on the fourth and fifth — and on a poetry listserv, of all places, it goes entirely unmentioned. The NASDAQ slide, Elián's aftermath, Putin's inauguration, the Million Mom March: all of it, zero. The nearest the news came to the room was Taylor Brady begging his colleagues, for the sake of the office network, *"don't send messages with MS Word attachments"* — email dread with the worm's name filed off. The list kept, as always, its own books.

The one thread that broke clean through the announcement machinery was a teaching question. Dodie Bellamy asked how to build a class around description, and the room could not stop — twenty-three messages and four spinoff threads, Maria Damon offering Proust and Tender Buttons, the moderator himself sending a syllabus, Bill Berkson confessing that descriptive writing was his favourite kind. Ron Silliman called it *"one of the better threads in some time"* and promptly split description from depiction; others split it again, into anti-description and its opposites, michael amberwind asking *"What be the opposite of de-scription?"* The word would not hold still. Passed from hand to hand, it fissioned every time it was set down.

Alongside it, in another channel, the same people were arguing about money. Harry Nudel had been filing snide reading-reports — at a Baraka reading, *"seeing no reason to pay 7 dollars"*, he and his friends waited outside for half-time — until Daniel Bouchard turned on him, decoding Nudel's boasts of signed first editions and pronouncing him a rare-book dealer in radical's clothing: *"Nudel's a literary mosquito."* Judy Roitman refereed. It looks, at first, like a different argument from the one about description — but it is the same one. How the material world gets into a poem, and who can afford to be in the room where the poem is read, are two halves of a single question about what writing costs.

Against all the accounting, one report of pure gift: David Bromige on a benefit reading where Ferlinghetti recited Coney Island of the Mind from memory and an NAACP officer ran gloriously over his allotted time with the history of the movement, before an audience Bromige called generous to a fault. Poetry as the unpriced thing, in the very month the list was busy pricing it.

And then the description thread, of all places, produced the month's only real grief. David Baptiste Chirot had been adding exercises to it — Most Wanted Poster description, Obituary Description, the description of a body in an open coffin — when, without transition, he described a real one: a homeless friend named Warren, found dead in March, his ashes carried north to Burlington. He signed it *"Description mourning: Warren."* I have set that broken little heading at the end of a month the room spent turning description into a game exactly as May delivered it, because it is the answer to the game — that description is never neutral, that somewhere under every exercise there is an actual body, and that the list, even tamed to a noticeboard, could still be startled into meaning it.

— K. M. F.

June 2000

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

June 2000 ended a story the whole country had been following — Elián González, his appeals exhausted, flew home to Cuba on the twenty-eighth — and, half a world off, the two Koreas shook hands in Pyongyang for the first time in fifty years. The Poetics list let both pass without a word; Elián does not appear in the month at all, and Korea not once. What preoccupied the room instead was a subtler and more domestic question, one that surfaced in thread after unrelated thread until it became the month's true subject: not what may be said here, but who owns the words once they are said.

It began, as the list's better moods do, in pure generosity. Daniel Kane wanted comparative feminist readings of narrative and the avant-garde; Philip Nikolayev wanted a way into current Irish poetry, and Robert Archambeau answered with a whole shelf of it, the small presses that publish, he said, *"the most interesting and innovative Irish poetry"*; others traded summer reading and syllabus ideas, back and forth, freely. This is the list at its most characteristic and its most likeable — a room that loves nothing so much as a bibliography, giving its reading away by the armful and asking nothing for it.

Then the same month turned proprietary. A promotional post arrived for a serialized cyber-novel on a site called femmesoul.com, and Catherine Daly, having looked into it, reported back that *"It's a right wing feminist site"*, its author a columnist for the conservative press. What followed was less about the novel than about the label: William James Austin, pressing the point past its use, demanded to know whether identifying the site's politics made the Poetics list itself *"a left wing site?"* — as though feminism were a property that could be repossessed, and the room a partisan address. The quarrel, stripped of its heat, was over who is entitled to a word.

Beneath it ran the quieter and deeper version of the same anxiety. Matthew Hart asked the list a plain procedural question — might he quote members' posts in a published essay, or would that tread on *"copyrighted or private-domain toes"*? — and reopened, without meaning to, the room's oldest unease: on a list, does a post belong to the one who wrote it or to the room that received it? The month supplied a second face of the same coin in a forwarded Salon exposé, Billy and the bullies, on the Times, Random House, and America's most popular poet — ownership, now, not of a label or a post but of a reputation and the money under it.

And then a death answered the whole month's accounting. Ron Silliman reported that Ernst Jandl, of the Vienna Group, had "*died on Friday*" at seventy-four, and the notice drew from Geoffrey Gatzert not a bibliography but a confession: a professor had once handed him a photocopied stack of Jandl's poems, and "*I have cherished this stack for years now.*" I have set that stack of photocopies at the end of a month the room spent litigating the ownership of words exactly as June delivered it, because it is June's quiet rebuttal to itself — that the poems which last are not the ones anybody manages to own, but the ones passed hand to hand and copied and kept, cherished the more for belonging, in the end, to no one.

— K. M. F.

July 2000

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

July 2000 gave the world a Concorde falling out of the sky over Paris and two national conventions cranking toward their nominations, and the Poetics list, as was now its firm habit, declined to notice any of it. The presidential campaign was admitted exactly once, and only as a joke — a forwarded Michael Moore squib, Gore and Bush Make Me Want To Ralph, making the case for Nader by mocking the other two. The room's real quarrel that month was not with the world at all. It was with itself, and specifically with the question of what it would allow itself to say.

The one event beyond the list that drew the room's attention was one most of its members had not attended: the Orono conference on canonising the nineteen-sixties. Charles Bernstein had asked people to report back, and Kevin Killian obliged with a dispatch so crowded with impression that he likened the writing of it to passing out drunk — *"the room keeps spinning in my head"* — while Daniel Kane relayed Eliot Weinberger's sour long-distance verdict on a conference he had skipped. The list did with Orono what it did with the whole poetry world beyond its own margins: took it in secondhand, as report and as gossip.

But the argument that swallowed July was the room's own conduct. Dodie Bellamy had quoted a post by Richard Dillon — the month's most combustible presence, promptly mocked in a spinoff thread as the dillonbot — and called it *"hate speech"*, asking why the list troubled to be moderated at all if such things came through anyway. Mark DuCharme, relaying her complaint sympathetically, found even so that he could not bring himself to stand on *"the side of censorship"*. It was the moderated list's oldest and most circular quarrel, the room convening once again to debate the terms of its own permitted speech.

Underneath the shouting ran a cooler thread on precisely the question the shouting begged. Brent Cunningham asked, almost plaintively, *"which poets are still reading him at all"* — the him being Roland Barthes, whom Cunningham suspected of being read now neither widely nor well. There was a fine and unremarked irony in it: a room quarrelling over who bears responsibility for what is said had, in the very next thread, quietly sat down to consider the death of the author.

And at the month's edge, all but unremarked, a writer died. Charles Bernstein forwarded a note from Raymond Federman: Ursule Molinaro — novelist, numerologist, a woman whose own year of birth was already lost, so that the archive

can title her only 192?–2000 — was gone. Federman's homage was plain and terrible in equal measure: "*She was not read enough.*" I have set that small notice at the end of a month the room spent policing how it spoke exactly as July delivered it, because it is July's silent reproach to itself — that a room may argue for weeks over who is permitted to speak and in what tone, and never once notice that the surest way to lose a writer is not to censor her, but simply, across a whole life, to have failed to read her.

— K. M. F.

August 2000

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

August 2000 sent the submarine Kursk to the bottom of the Barents Sea with all hands and crowned two presidential tickets in two convention halls, and the Poetics list, faithful to itself, looked up for none of it. The world got into the room exactly once that month, and it got in the way it always does here — carried in the arms of a poet. Word came, forwarded from Henry Gould through Maria Damon, that the Chinese poet and editor Bei Ling, lately a resident of Providence and Boston, had been arrested in Beijing, his brother taken days after. For once the room had before it not a text about the world but a person in it, in a cell.

What the month was otherwise about — its largest thread by a wide margin — was representation of a gentler kind. Jacques Debrot, building a freshman course for the Rhode Island School of Design, asked the room for examples of *“the visual artist's representation in literature”*, and the list did the thing it loves best, filling his syllabus by the armful: Dorian Gray and Warhol's A, Chris Kraus and Frank O'Hara, the painter refracted through the poem and the novel. It was the catalogue impulse at its warmest and most harmless — art making the artist into a character, representation as a game played entirely among books.

Against that easy sense of the word ran the hard one. The Bei Ling thread was the room turned out of the library and into the world: Damon called the arrest *“a crime against free thought & speech”* and set about pressing for his release, while Gloria Saltzman spoke for many with one practical question — *“What is being asked of us?”* Not every voice rallied; richard.tylr, writing from New Zealand, answered the appeal with a sour scepticism about earnest Western petitions and well-connected intellectuals, so that the room, characteristically, could not mobilise even for a jailed poet without first quarrelling over whether mobilising did any good. But mobilise, in the main, it did.

Beneath the argument over a real man's freedom, the old careerist noise went on undisturbed. The September *Lingua Franca* had arrived with a piece on the so-called McPoem wars, and the list passed it hand to hand — Lehman and Weinberger and Kostelanetz dispensing their weighty dismissals, the perennial squabble over cliques and tenure and who had sold out to the workshop. A room that could, when it had to, debate a man's liberty could equally, in the very next thread, debate a magazine's snubs. Both, in their way, were representation; only one of them could cost a life.

And near the month's beginning, a real loss the room did register. Aldon Nielsen posted that Dudley Randall had died — the founder, in 1965, of Detroit's Broadside Press — and told the list how, as a graduate student researching Melvin B. Tolson, he had gambled on a fifteen-year-old phone number, found Randall still answering it, and been met by "*among the most generous and encouraging of older poets*" he would ever know. I have left Randall's notice where August placed it, near the month's head rather than its close, because it belongs at the front of everything the room went on to argue: Randall had given his life to the only representation that finally counts — not the artist pictured in a novel, nor the poet snubbed by a magazine, but the poet set in type, handed a page, and so at last made real.

— K. M. F.

September 2000

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

The Sydney Olympics opened, the presidential race ground toward its first debate, and the Poetics list — its attention entirely elsewhere — recorded neither; the name Bush turns up in September chiefly as a San Francisco street address and a memory of the eighties, the campaign itself scarcely at all. What absorbed the room instead, across nearly five hundred messages and a dozen renamed threads, was one anxious question about itself: whether the avant-garde it had spent thirty years being had already, quietly, been absorbed — and if so, by whom.

The occasion was an article. The September *Lingua Franca* had run a piece by Andrew Epstein on Language poetry's long march into the academy, and Epstein — to the room's credit and his own peril — joined the list to defend it. What followed, under headings like LangPo, academia, politics and assimilation vs. purity, was the most sustained argument the archive had seen in a year. Patrick Herron protested that he had never argued for *"total purity or total assimilation"*; Taylor Brady, more usefully, held that a critique of academic politics could be mounted *"both from within and without the academy"* — that sitting inside the university settled nothing about whether one had sold out. It was, at last, the argument over what Language poetry is that Ken Edwards had begged this room, years before, never to begin.

The same anxiety opened a second front at once. If Language poetry stood accused of going academic, then what — the room demanded — was genuinely new, and it fell to quarrelling over visual and sound poetry, whether these were the real frontier or merely the old avant-garde in fresh costume. William James Austin claimed Language writing itself as poststructuralism's *"closest poetic relative"*; Ron Silliman, unpersuaded, waved away much visual and sound poetry as antiquarian and said he was still waiting to be surprised. Everyone accused everyone else of being either academic or antiquarian; no one, it seemed, was permitted simply to be new.

Beneath the status-panic, the list went on doing the one thing none of the anxiety could touch. There were fine, unhurried threads on Jakobson's metaphor and metonymy, on Williams beside *The Waste Land*, on Tristan Corbière and Barbara Guest — the room reading, closely and without agenda, exactly as it feared it had forgotten how. Whatever had or had not been assimilated, the reading, at least, was undiminished.

And one small dispatch, filed early and half in jest, saw further than the whole month's argument. Ron Silliman forwarded, as "*an ironic counterpoint to the [Lingua Franca article](#)*", a notice from Wharton's business school celebrating the banker-poet John Barr under the title Poems Are Long Journeys In Risk. I have set that stray link at the end of a month the room spent terrified of assimilation by the university exactly as September delivered it, because it names the colder joke the argument kept missing — that the institution poetry had most to fear was never the English department, with its tenure and its cliques, but the business school across the quad, ready to price a poem as a long journey in risk and to mean, by risk, the return on capital.

— K. M. F.

October 2000

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

October 2000 saw the USS Cole bombed in Aden harbour, the second intifada set alight, and the country stand two weeks from the closest election in living memory — and the Poetics list, wrung out from September's war over its own soul, noticed none of it. The only Cole in the month is the poet Norma Cole, with Cole Swenson reading somewhere alongside Kathleen Fraser; the warship never surfaces. After a September spent terrified that poetry had been assimilated, or was worthless, or could no longer say what it was, October found the room doing the wisest possible thing with an unanswerable question: it went back to playing.

The month's most characteristic thread asked nothing grander than how to say a name. Aldon Nielsen, defeated by the online pronunciation guides that were teaching his students to say everything else, begged the Niedecker experts to settle whether the poet's name was "*LorEEen*" or stretched into some longer, brighter thing — and the room, which had spent September litigating the future of the avant-garde, bent its whole erudition happily to the vowels in a dead poet's first name. It was the tenderest sort of attention, and the least useful, and very nearly the thing the list exists to do.

The month's real quarrel was September's anxiety turned inside out. Jonathan Mayhew took exception to a line of William James Austin's — that Derrida was a philosopher, "*a poet in the narrow sense*" being some other and lesser thing — hearing in it the whole modern presumption that theory sits above the poem, poetry the narrow discipline and philosophy the wide one. Where September had feared poetry swallowed by the academy, October feared it quietly demoted by theory; the room could not decide whether the poem was the small thing in the house or the large one.

And beneath the play, the year's oldest worry kept its vigil. In a thread wryly titled Moneylenders in the Temple, michael amberwind reproduced an exchange with an editor and put the plain question the whole year had circled: was it wrong for a magazine to make a poet "*buy a copy of their magazine*" merely to be considered for its pages? Even at its lightest, the room could not entirely stop counting what poetry cost.

But the month's last word, and its best, came from Australia. John Tranter forwarded a clipping from The Australian: outside the Brisbane Writers Festival, a group calling

itself Young People Against Poetry had gathered to protest, declaring poetry frivolous and culturally divisive. *"Who said young people these days don't care about poetry?"* Tranter asked, and the room delighted in the question. I have set that small dispatch at the end of a month the list spent at play exactly as October delivered it, because it is the year's unlikeliest consolation — that after all the arguments about whether poetry had been assimilated, or priced, or demoted, the surest proof it was still alive came from the young who had troubled to organise against it.

— K. M. F.

November 2000

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

November 2000 handed the republic the strangest month in its modern electoral history — a presidency suspended for weeks over a few thousand contested ballots in Florida, the whole country squinting at the dimpled and the hanging — and the Poetics list, which had stirred itself to argue about voting in the days before the seventh, lost all interest the instant the vote became a count. The word recount never appears in the month; chad appears exactly once. A room that will argue for forty posts about a comma could not be moved to say a word about the arithmetic on which the nation now hung.

What it did instead was translate. Mieko Basan wrote from Japan that she was *“translating some Hans Arp poems for fun”*, and set the room a small delicious problem — whether the word parapluie, umbrella, in a Dada poem was a real word or one of Arp's invented, non-lexical noises. The poem in question opens *weh unser kaspar ist tot*, alas our Kaspar is dead, so that the room found itself, at the precise moment the country could not finish counting, bent lovingly over a single untranslatable word lodged inside an elegy.

The room's own politics ran, as ever, sideways to the nation's. The election reached it mostly beforehand and mostly with an apology — Fiona Maazel, off to canvass, sent a get-out-the-vote plea and winced as she did, *“I know it's evil to be sending this mail out”* — and the Nader-or-Gore agony that so racked the wider left flickered and went out. What actually roused the room was a different state's conduct: Ron Silliman forwarded a wire report, China bans poets conference, that authorities in the south had shut down an unsanctioned gathering of poets. The list could not be stirred by its own contested democracy; a government silencing poets abroad, as always, it noticed at once.

Turned from the count, the room went looking for the body. Dodie Bellamy's thread on body memoirs had Tom Bell recommending studies of the body in language and owning that he was still *“digesting, chewing on, or swallowing both”* — reading rendered frankly as eating. And Maria Damon reported, with delight, a cosmetics line *“named after our Charles B”* — Baudelaire remade as soap and scent on a department-store website — and at once proposed a poetry contest with a bar of Baudelaire soap for the prize. While the nation abstracted its citizens into disputed numbers, the room got as concrete as a body can get: flesh, ink, and bath soap.

And at the month's end came the loss no count could touch. Aldon Nielsen posted, from the Times, the news of the singer Jeanne Lee's death at sixty-one — the jazz vocalist who had worked with members of Fluxus and with Andrew Cyrille, and whose instrument had been nothing but her own body — adding only that he had never forgotten "*the poetry of her performance*" years before at D.C. Space. I have set Jeanne Lee's death at the end of a month the nation spent unable to finish counting exactly as November delivered it, because it is the month's one incontestable result — a voice that was a body, and a body that was an instrument, gone past any recount: the single figure November produced that no one would ever have to certify, and no one could ever restore.

— K. M. F.

December 2000

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

December 2000 at last handed the country a president, and it did so in the one way for which no one had voted — five judges, not a tally, ending Bush v. Gore by decree on the twelfth. For once the room looked up. The Bush family drew a thread of its own, and David Baptiste Chirot forwarded a call to organise centres for the January inauguration protest. The nation's result had been arrived at not by adding up its citizens but by declaring a winner — a fiction the whole country was now asked to accept as fact, which may be why the room spent the rest of the month arguing about fiction.

For its largest thread by a wide distance, the list took up a gloriously unanswerable question. Aaron Belz asked the room, apparently in earnest, to help him *“prove that poetry is better than fiction”* — and twenty-eight messages obliged, weighing the novel against the lyric, prose against verse, Markson's Wittgenstein's Mistress against the poem. Patrick Herron drew the sharpest line in it: *“Fiction readers need proof”*, he wrote, where lovers of poetry required none. The quarrel was the month's deeper question in miniature — whether the made-up thing tells the truth, and how on earth you would ever prove that it did.

The month then produced its own test case. A farewell message purporting to be Gabriel García Márquez's last words to the world — sentimental, valedictory, and wholly forged — reached the list and began to spread, until Michael Coffey and others halted it with the plainest verdict available: *“a hoax i think”*. It was the fiction argument made suddenly literal — a scrap of writing passed off as a dying man's truth, and a room of close readers who could tell that it was not, and said so. In a month that had just watched the country swallow one fiction entire, the list at least declined to swallow this one.

Beneath the metaphysics ran the season's harder arithmetic. It was MLA week, and a thread wryly headed BlueXmas — things to do when you don't get an MLA job interview — gathered the gallows humour of poets tallying the interviews they had not been offered: the profession's yearly reminder that whatever poetry was worth, it was not, this month, worth a wage. Of all the month's fictions, the one the room could least afford was the one in which any of this paid.

And through all of it, a real death the room felt keenly. Charles Alexander posted that Gwendolyn Brooks had died at eighty-three, and remembered directing a festival she

had once graced — recalling, with a detail truer than any elegy, that “*she only traveled by train and auto*”. I have set Brooks’s death at the end of a month the nation spent ratifying a fiction exactly as December delivered it, because she stands as its rebuke: a poet who spent fifty years refusing to invent anything that was not truer than the fact, gone in the very month the country agreed to call a decree a decision, and very nearly mistook a forgery for a farewell.

— K. M. F.

January 2001

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

January 2001 crowned the son. On the twentieth, in cold rain, George W. Bush took the oath that a contested state and five judges had secured for him, and the room — which had spent December watching the result handed down — sent an observer: Daniel Bouchard filed a long dispatch from the counterinauguration, the protest most of the coverage had missed. The very title he gave it set the month's key, for it was a report not from an inauguration but from a coronation. A crown had been conferred; and the question of who is entitled to confer such things — a presidency, a reputation, the name of poet — ran under everything the room touched.

Ron Silliman opened the theme sidelong, forwarding a 1955 anecdote of a Wesleyan audience scoffing at Cage and Stockhausen as though the crowd's hostility were itself a verdict — the poetics of envy. Patrick Herron turned the argument on its axis: the real subject, he saw, was rejection, and who is made to carry it. He answered the whole anxiety with a boast, keeping, he said, a collection of *"rejection slips i proudly hang on my office"* wall — a poet declaring himself unrejectable by the simple act of framing every no. If the crowd could withhold its recognition, one could always decline to accept the withholding.

The category argument carried over from December, now flying the banner Fiction as Poetry — the room drawing and redrawing the border of what it would admit as its own. George Bowering settled one corner of it with his usual ease, offering that *"one of the best novels as poetry is Eugene Onegin"* — a verse novel that made the whole distinction wobble. Who decides what counts as a poem proved exactly as vexed as who had just decided what counted as a president.

And recognition arrived, that month, from the least likely quarter. Richard Dillon — the list's most reviled member, whose posts had spawned a mocking dillonbot — set his combativeness aside long enough to offer an elegy for Edward Dorn, a year dead, that opened *"Some people talk to squirrels and OffWorlders all the time"*. It was a small, genuine homage from a man the room had agreed to despise; even the pariah, it turned out, could confer honour on the dead.

But the month's truest recognition came in a forwarded note. Charles Bernstein passed on Robert Creeley's word that Gregory Corso — the last of the great Beats — had died in his sleep in Minnesota, having, as Creeley told it, reached the classic river but lacked the coin for Charon. Creeley closed with the thing Corso had last

said to him: that *“only a poet could say he or she was a poet”*, where a philosopher must wait for some other to name him. I have set Corso’s death at the end of a month that began with a crown conferred by decree exactly as January delivered it, because it carries the month’s stubborn counter-truth — that of all the titles the world hands down or withholds, the only one that finally mattered to this room was the single one no court, no crowd, and no envy could ever confer, or take away.

— K. M. F.

February 2001

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

February 2001 saw the new administration draw its first blood abroad — on the sixteenth, American and British aircraft bombed Baghdad — and the news reached the list from an unlikely quarter: its own moderator. Christopher Alexander broke into the day's traffic to report that the forces had just struck Iraq, the *"details are sketchy as one would expect"*, and then the room moved on. The month's one monumental event passed through it in a sentence and a half. What the room lingered over instead was a stranger question of magnitude altogether — not the scale of a war, but the scale of a poem.

It spent the month at both ends of that scale at once. At the grand end, Brian Stefans went hunting resources for Frank Stanford's *The battlefield where the moon says I love you*, the drowned Arkansas prodigy's fifteen-thousand-line epic with scarcely a break in it — a poem long enough to get lost in, by a poet who did not live to thirty. In another corner the *Iliad* surfaced; in a third, someone rechristened the whole political mess Bush news that stays news, borrowing Pound's old claim for literature and turning it against a president. The room has never lost its weakness for the poem that reaches well past its own arms.

And at the other end, it convened around the smallest unit imaginable. Louis Cabri opened a thread to ask whether Ginsberg had truly once decreed *"don't use the definite article in poetry"*, and the room set off hunting the poetics of a single word; a parallel quarrel treated the humble semicolon as a species of censorship. A list that could thrill to a fifteen-thousand-line poem could spend an equal passion on one suppressed syllable — persuaded, and rightly, that a poem's power is as apt to hide in its least mark as in its length.

Beneath the metaphysics of scale ran an older grievance about size of another kind. The National Book Critics Circle announced its nominees, and Rachel Blau DuPlessis noted, with weary precision, that *"not a single small press volume is (ever) nominated"* — the prize machinery blind, as always, to the small presses where nearly all the room's own poetry was in fact made. The large took the recognition; the small kept the poems.

And the month's loss was, fittingly, a man who had drawn the largest sound from the smallest means. Patrick Herron brought word that the guitarist John Fahey had died — *"A sad day for music"* — the American Primitive who raised cathedrals on six steel

strings and a handful of open tunings. I have set Fahey's death at the end of a month the room spent weighing the epic against the definite article exactly as February delivered it, because he settles its argument without a word: that scale is not size. A bombing takes a whole air force and is forgotten by nightfall; a man with one guitar, or a poet with one small syllable, can make the kind of news that stays.

— *K. M. F.*

March 2001

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

March opened that year under an omen no company of poets could ignore: the word from Afghanistan that the Taliban had begun, with tank-fire and dynamite, to erase the great standing Buddhas of Bamiyan, figures that had watched over the Silk Road for fifteen centuries. The list, which can turn any wire report into a seminar, turned this one into mourning — Marcella Durand filed the news under the plain heading *"art in peril"* — and the destruction of an ancient art seems, in hindsight, to preside over everything that follows. The month's lesser quarrels rumbled behind it: Napster in its courtroom death-throes, the FTAA massing its acronyms toward Quebec.

Against that backdrop the poets did what poets do, which is argue about precision. The month's longest thread carried an equation for its title and defended the unfashionable notion that radical writing is not the enemy of exactness but its highest discipline; mary angeline, tired of being misread, reduced the whole tangle to one flat sentence: *"radical does indeed equal precise."* Alongside it ran Barrett Watten's Demon of Analogy, an inquiry into the too-hasty marriage of hypertext and poststructuralist theory that pulled the list toward one of its oldest fears — what the machine makes of the person. Jamie Perez, seconding Patrick Herron, granted the conclusion the thread had been circling: there is nothing *"personal about 'personalization'."*

Not every dispute aimed so high. When one member set about trashing Rod McKuen — and, more scandalously, Langston Hughes — Ron Silliman rose to defend them both, recalling that McKuen had once kept company with Spicer and Duncan, and offering the nearest thing to a moral the month produced: *"Trashing poets is just generally not wise behavior."* The same weeks found the list cheerfully rigging an online ballot to put a dead poet on a postage stamp, Leonard Brink reckoning what *"the 666 people on this list"* might accomplish if they voted as one, while others shoved Ted Berrigan past Blake for the pure instant gratification of it.

Beneath the sport lay the usual professional ache. A thread on prize culture turned, as those threads will, both sour and clarifying at once — Bob Grumman pronouncing flatly that *"contests are generally stupid,"* others conceding that the stupid machinery was, for a young poet with no other door, sadly almost necessary. It is the perennial Poetics register: the argument over how poems are made shadowed always by the argument over how poets are fed.

And then, near the month's end, the register changed for good. Gary Sullivan wrote to report that Ramez Qureshi — a critic of twenty-eight who had first appeared on the list two years before, offering, of all improbable things, a review of J. H. Prynne — was dead. Sullivan's astonishment doubled as the truest tribute one reader can pay another: *"Who would brave a review of Prynne's Poems?"* The company that had spent the month deciding whether radical equals precise, and whether McKuen was beneath contempt, stopped to grieve a young man who had loved the most difficult poetry it knew and had written of it beautifully. I have let the ordinary arguments stand on either side of that silence, for that is how the month came — the quarrels and the grief interleaved, an art destroyed in one hemisphere and mourned in another, and a room full of poets insisting, by every post, that the words were worth the argument.

— K. M. F.

April 2001

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

April, the cruellest month by Eliot's old reckoning, arrives for this room in a particular costume — as National Poetry Month, and so as the year's chief embarrassment. The world did intrude once, glancingly: the spy-plane standoff with China over Hainan drew a few uneasy posts about where such confrontations tend to lead. But April's real weather, as every year, was the annual spectacle of poetry being marketed to a public that has never once asked for it — and the room settled in to watch, to wince, and to object.

The product parade was in full swing. Robert Pinsky, the Laureate, turned up in a promotional conversation launching a poetry dot-com called Zooba; and Ron Silliman forwarded, with grim relish, a notice for something billed as Survivor Poet — poetry restaged as reality-television elimination — asking only why it seemed “*so appropriate right after the Pulitzers*”. Patrick Herron supplied the season's motto, that we were all going to get kicked off this island. Poetry Month had found its true form at last, as competition and as content.

The room met the marketing with its reliable disdain. Rod McKuen, the bestselling sentimental laureate of an earlier decade, was hauled out as an exhibit and dismissed by richard.tylr in four blunt words as “*a weak piece of dribble*” — the greeting-card verse the whole apparatus exists to move. And in a thread headed Tarpits of Poetry, michael amberwind needled the dinosaurs who feared that political concern was usurping aesthetics, reopening the list's oldest quarrel under Poetry Month's garish lighting: what, beneath all the selling, is the real thing.

The room's answer was to keep a quieter Poetry Month of its own, in the register it actually trusted. Jonathan Skinner sent out a call for a new journal, ECOPOETICS, declaring “*pastoralism, art representing nature, at an impasse*” and asking after a poetry rooted in the living world rather than the marketplace — nature not as scenery to be sold, but as the ground the writing stands on. Elsewhere the list swapped, in earnest and without a trace of irony, its favourite books of the year just gone, one reader and one title at a time. Against poetry-as-product it set poetry-as-attention; against the dot-com and the game show, a call for submissions and a shelf of names.

And beneath the selling, two real poets died, neither of whom any Poetry Month had ever troubled to move. Aldon Nielsen mourned Raymond Patterson — another

brother gone — author of the incomparable *Twenty-Six Ways of Looking at a Black Man*; and from France came word of André du Bouchet, whom Tom Orange called *“horribly under-served in english translation”*. I have set those two deaths at the end of a month the marketplace spent selling poetry exactly as April delivered them, because together they are Poetry Month’s cruellest joke upon itself — that the machine built to push poetry at the public pushes the McKuens and the dot-coms, and lets the poets who actually mattered, the spare Frenchman and the Black elegist, go under-translated and half-read, priceless and unmarketed, into the ground.

— K. M. F.

May 2001

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

May 2001 kept the country's grimmer appointments — Timothy McVeigh's execution was set for the month, the Senate about to be handed to the Democrats by a single defector — and the Poetics list attended to none of it. May Day drew a flicker, a thread of reservations and a forwarded warning that the police were preparing for mayhem, but the news that actually moved the room arrived, as it increasingly does, wearing a poet's face: a report of a crackdown on Palestinian poets, which drew from Scott Hamilton the month's truest aside — that *"repressive regimes always instinctively fear poetry"*. The room could still be roused by poetry treated as a threat; it was far less certain poetry was worth anything at all.

Which was, more or less, the month's largest quarrel. An outsider's dismissal — the thread was headed Dunning langpo — reignited the oldest war on the list, and twenty-eight messages of it followed: Jeffrey Jullich wondering aloud why Language poetry had never moved into the mainstream, patrick herron rebutting the slights one by one, richard.tylr swinging wide enough to declare that *"The New Formalists are wasting everyone's time"* and ought simply to be attacked. It was the room defending the legitimacy of its own aesthetic once again — at length, and against all comers.

Beneath the aesthetics ran the economics that make a mockery of them. michael amberwind reported having approached iUniverse — a division of Time-Warner — about publishing his poems, being offered a publish-on-demand arrangement, and putting to the room the season's sharpest question: was this a revolution, or merely *"vanity publishing in a new package"*? Poetry had become a thing one could always get printed, provided one paid to print it — which is another way of saying the market had found no other use for it.

And then, against the vanity presses, the memory of a real one. Ron Silliman posted the news, under the Publishers Weekly headline Consummate Bookseller Ted Wilentz Dies at 86, that the man behind the Eighth Street Bookshop and Corinth Books was gone — the bookseller who for decades had put the New American Poetry into readers' hands not for a fee but for love of the thing, leaving a legacy the month's arguments never once thought to count.

The month's last loss was quieter than any argument. Bill Berkson noted that Joe LeSueur — *"longtime friend and apartment mate of Frank O'Hara"*, the man who had

simply lived beside the poems as O'Hara wrote them — had died in a Southampton hospital. I have set Wilentz's death and LeSueur's on either side of a month the room spent quarrelling over schools of poetry exactly as May delivered them, because between them they answer the quarrel without raising a voice: that poetry is kept alive less by the poets fighting over its name than by the ones who sell it, and shelve it, and share the apartment where it gets written — and that when the bookseller and the roommate are gone, something no prosody of Langpo ever thinks to mention goes quietly with them.

— *K. M. F.*

June 2001

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

June 2001 handed the state two ceremonies. On the eleventh it executed Timothy McVeigh — the first federal execution in nearly forty years — and later in the month it named a new Poet Laureate. Offered an official death and an official poet, the Poetics list attended far more closely to the poet, which tells most of what there is to know about it. The room cannot abide officialdom of any kind — not a sanctioned poet, not a sanctioned killing — and June, presented with fresh samples of both, spent itself devising unofficial answers to the one and looking away, mostly, from the other.

The new Laureate was Billy Collins — accessible, genial, beloved of the general reader, and therefore very nearly everything the avant-garde exists to define itself against. Ron Silliman filed the room's verdict in a single sentence, calling him *"the perfect reflection of a certain world view"*, and the thread that carried the news went headed, with a curl of the lip, First Laureate of the Bush (II) Administration. The list did not so much argue the appointment as refuse it outright: it convened an election of its own, an Anti-Laureate — modelled, as Bob Archambeau proposed, on *"the anti-popes at Avignon"* — with Anselm Hollo rising to nominate Alice Notley. A coronation, the room felt, could only be answered by a carnival.

Its largest thread, meanwhile, was pure and cheerful collaboration. Thomas Swiss asked the room for films that dramatised the lives of poets, and the list turned out its pockets — biopics and cameos, the poet as a figure on the screen — poetry chased this time not into the academy but into the movies. It was the old bibliographic reflex in a cinema seat, and it ran to nearly forty messages without a cross word — the room that could not stomach an official living poet perfectly happy to catalogue the fictional ones, the poet safely embalmed, for once, as somebody else's character.

Beneath it ran a subtler piece of self-examination. A thread on Boring Intelligence took up the avant-garde's oldest and least fashionable virtue — Aldon Nielsen tracing the case for *"a useful or poetic boredom"* back past the Language poets to Robert Kelly and Theodore Enslin — the room defending tedium as a discipline, even as a second thread, frankly headed Boring, wondered aloud whether the list itself had lately become exactly that.

And the ceremony the room had brushed past returned, once, as something actually felt. Dodie Bellamy wrote from Indiana, where she and Kevin Killian had been

staying at her mother's house the week McVeigh was put to death an hour up the road, of the pro-execution talk-radio that filled the kitchen — of *"making your morning coffee to the voice of Dr. Laura"*. I have set Bellamy's dispatch at the end of a month the room spent electing an anti-laureate exactly as June delivered it, because it is June's uneasy conscience: that while the list threw its carnival against one official ceremony, another was being carried out within driving distance of one of its own — and only she thought to stand in that kitchen, listen, and write it down.

— K. M. F.

July 2001

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

July 2001 opened in carnival. The room's mock-election of an Anti-Laureate, begun in June against Billy Collins's official coronation, reached its climax: Robert Archambeau, the self-styled High Commissioner, shut the polls with a Bush-versus-Gore joke — *"as they say in Florida, the polls are closed"* — and Anselm Hollo accepted the crown *"with all the ironies and contradictions appertaining thereunto"*, United States Anti-Laureate for 2001. But the naming the room took most seriously that month was of a harder and more painful kind.

Its largest thread by a distance — thirty-two messages — was Sylvia Plath, set off by Elizabeth Treadwell, who had finished the unabridged diaries during a bout of insomnia and refused the received diagnosis. Plath's real trouble, she argued, was *"not any form of mental illness"* but something caught from the culture itself, the sickness of wanting too much. The room found itself relitigating whether the century's most famous woman poet had been mad, or had merely been the truest reader of what her culture demanded of a woman.

Beside it ran Hannah's visions. Camille Martin opened a careful inquiry into Hannah Weiner — the poet who saw words printed on the air and on the foreheads of the people around her, and set them down as her Clairvoyant Journal — asking whether the gift was best understood as *"a neurological phenomenon"*, a species of synaesthesia, and whether that understanding honoured the work or explained it away. Two women poets, then, and two versions of a single border dispute: where vision ends and pathology begins, and who is entitled to draw the line between the one and the other.

Behind both threads stood the avant-garde's oldest and most dangerous romance, which the room turned over that month under the cool heading Axiologies of madness — the worth the experimental tradition has always been tempted to assign to derangement, the notion that to see freshly one must first be broken. It is a flattering idea, until you set it beside two actual women; Plath and Weiner were the bill it came to.

And then the business of naming turned suddenly literal, and lethal. On the twentieth, police at the Genoa G8 shot a young protester dead in the street, and Aaron Vidaver brought to the list not an elegy but a sentence: the BBC's report that the day's violence had *"left one protester dead"*, a construction with no one in it

holding a gun. He asked, in earnest, what one should call a grammar built to leave no hand on the trigger. I have set Vidaver's small act of close reading at the end of a month the room spent naming madness and vision exactly as July delivered it, because it is the sharpest lesson the month offered in what all that naming is for — that the same attention which asks whether a poet was truly mad can ask whom, precisely, a passive verb is shielding, and that a poet's first duty, handed a dead man and a sentence, is to put the agent back in.

— *K. M. F.*

August 2001

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

August 2001 held, in the world the room mostly ignored, a summer of small sensations — the President's compromise on stem-cell research, a season of shark scares and a missing intern — none of which detained the list for long. It spent instead what would prove to be its last unhurried August, though of course it could not know as much, on a question as old as criticism and no nearer to settling: what makes a poet great, and who is entitled to decide.

J Gallaher threw down the challenge, daring the room to take *"a position on contemporary greatness"* and offering John Ashbery as his own test case. Patrick Herron pressed the distinction lying under all of it, asking of that looming *"Does he merely loom, or is he great"* — whether greatness was a quality a poet possessed here and now, or a prophecy about the eventual verdict of time. The room, which loves nothing so much as a ranking it can never finish, went at it for weeks.

Its single largest thread was, on its face, a separate matter, and underneath the very same one. Jim Behrle opened edit, editors, editing on the sting of editorial power — an editor had told him he *"wasn't a real editor"*, and it had left a mark — and the room turned over the firm hand that selects, arranges, and cuts. For greatness, it slowly emerged, is rarely found and mostly made: assembled after the fact by whoever chooses what to print and what to bury, the hidden hand behind every canon.

The two threads met, as they had to, over Sylvia Plath, whose greatness is inseparable from the editing of it — her final book arranged, her last journal handled, by hands that were not her own. The room argued her at length and, to its lasting credit, argued her without glamour: when the talk turned toward her death, its steadiest voices refused to let the suicide become romantic or literary, keeping the woman firmly apart from the myth that other people's editing had built around her. Greatness, here, wore its made-ness on its face: the most famous woman poet of the age was also the most heavily edited of them, and the room knew it.

And greatness's honest shadow closed the month. Jacques Debrot posted a confession under the flat title *Why I was a bad poet* — an unsparing reckoning with an ambition that had failed him, a poetry attempted, he admitted, in *"an impoverished idiom"* that never once came right. I have set Debrot's small self-audit at the end of a month the room spent litigating greatness exactly as August delivered

it, because it is the truest thing the whole argument produced — that in a room forever ranking the great and holding them to the test of time, the rarest and most bracing act is not to crown another or to deny him, but to sit down and say, plainly, of oneself, that one had not been: the single verdict no editor can revise, and no time overturn.

— *K. M. F.*

September 2001

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

This is the cruel one. The month opens like any other — announcements, squabbles, a poem or two forwarded in the small hours — and then, on its eleventh morning, the century turns over. Two towers in the poets' own city come down; from that hour a great part of what follows is dated to the days after, written by people who could see the smoke from their own windows. I have left the ordinary first week intact, because its ordinariness is now almost unbearable to read, and because the rupture ought to fall exactly where it fell.

Charles Bernstein, home at last by some long Odyssey from the airport, files the dispatch that gives this volume its most haunting subject-line — *"It's 8:23 in New York,"* the last ordinary minute — and can only report, against everything, *"how beautiful the day is in New York."* Around him the list gropes for a register. Ron Silliman, asked by two dozen people what he makes of *"all this,"* begins by confessing *"I still have no clue."*

The arguments that break out are the arguments only a poetry list would have. Over the flag, which Nick Piombino watches bloom on every passing car, and against which he offers the reminder that *"all viewpoints and responses are partial."* Over the very phrase ground zero, which Lawrence Upton protests was borrowed from the nuclear age and ought not be lent so cheaply. And over that oldest question, taken now from Lenin — *"What is to be done?"* — which mutates across some sixty messages into what is to be criticized, to be known, to be mourned.

Not all of it is seemly. A thread titled *"They can't see why they are hated"* drags foreign policy into smoke barely cooled, and the list's hard-won civility frays for a week. I have let these exchanges stand as they were sent; an archive that flatters its subjects is no archive at all.

And yet the month does not end in ash. On its last recorded day it was Marjorie Perloff's seventieth birthday, and Bernstein marked the occasion with a small permutational garland — *"Today is Marjorie Perloff's 70th birthday"* turned every way but loose — as if to prove that even now the poets could not stop rearranging the words, which is perhaps the only rite they have against catastrophe. I have arranged what follows so that each voice stands forward under its own name, its telephone and its address returned to privacy, its machinery swept aside. I ask only that you remember, as I do nightly, that these were letters before ever they were literature.

— *K. M. F.*

October 2001

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

For most of its life this room had kept a stubbornly private ledger — comets, elections, whole wars set down in a line or ignored outright, the news held at arm's length while the poets talked among themselves. In October 2001 that discipline collapsed entirely. Three weeks after the towers fell, the bombs began dropping on Afghanistan; anthrax was arriving in the mail; and the list, for the first time in the memory of this archive, could speak of almost nothing else — war, September, the Taliban, the dead, across six hundred and more messages. The world had finally gotten all the way in, and it had brought the poets the one question they were least able to refuse: what, now, is poetry for.

The poets began where their competence began — in the words. Two long threads, The language of our times and on what to call them, took up a naming crisis the catastrophe had opened: no one, it seemed, could quite say the thing. Lawrence Upton caught himself writing of the bombing and then stopping, unsure which bombing he any longer meant, since *“there have been so many bombings”*; George Thompson, more provocatively, proposed that anyone hunting a vocabulary for September 11 might begin with Hiroshima and Nagasaki. If the room had anything to offer an emergency, it was this — a trained distrust of the words the emergency was being sold in.

Outside the room, meanwhile, something astonishing was under way: the public had turned to poetry. The New York Times ran a piece headed *The Eerily Intimate Power of Poetry to Console*; Auden's old lines were circulating by the thousand. The list watched its own art conscripted for comfort with a wary and complicated gratitude — uncertain whether a poem that consoles is doing its highest work or evading it, and too honest to pretend the question was a simple one.

For not everyone reached for solace, and the room's integrity showed in what it would not do. One thread traded, deliberately, totally tasteless jokes, gallows humour set against the enforced national solemnity; another turned to Italian Futurism and war, making itself remember that the avant-garde it descended from had once been frankly in love with violence. Asked to be either simply patriotic or simply consoling, the room kept arriving instead at the uncomfortable third thing. And in the midst of it, a small grace: when the list flooded Marjorie Perloff with

birthday wishes, she answered *"Thanks to everybody who wrote"* — proof that the community, whatever else was falling that month, still held.

And on the seventh of October, the day the bombs began to fall on Afghanistan, Charles Bernstein posted a poem — not a new one, and not his own. It was Isaac Rosenberg's *On Receiving News of the War*, written in 1914, and it opens *"Snow is a strange white word"*. I have set that borrowed poem at the end of a month the room spent asking what poetry is for exactly as October delivered it, because it is the truest answer the month arrived at — that poetry does not console the war away, nor name it into sense, nor rise above it into taste, but reaches back to a young man who received the news of another war and did not live through it, and lets his strange white word fall, now, on this one.

— K. M. F.

November 2001

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

By November 2001 the shock of September had hardened into the long argument. The bombing went on; Kabul fell on the thirteenth, though the room barely paused over the victory; anthrax still haunted the mail; and Attorney General Ashcroft was drawing up his military tribunals. The list, which for the better part of a decade could not be induced to discuss the news, now could not be induced to stop. November is the record of a poetry list learning, uneasily, to live as a war forum — and of how little poetry survives the arrangement.

Its largest thread by a wide margin was headed *The So-Called Evidence Is a Farce* — twenty messages taking apart the official case for the war: the evidence, the oil, the tribunals, the whole handed-down justification. Around it clustered a dozen smaller dissents — on the politics of oil, on Ashcroft's tribunals, on the hollow official promise of peace in our time. The room that had spent years pointedly refusing the news had become, almost overnight, a standing organ of dissent, disinclined to believe a word the moment told it.

But the dissent kept catching on the war's hardest question. When richard.tylr urged that the Afghans be left to their own philosophy and ways of life — *"We should let them alone"* — Gwyn McVay cut across him with three words, *"Spoken like a man"*, and refused to let anti-imperialism become a licence to forget the women living under the Taliban. It was the left's genuine dilemma laid bare and given no exit: how to oppose the bombs without abandoning the very people in whose name they were said to be falling.

And poetry itself, on the poetics list, had all but vanished. It surfaced only in the margins now — Kathy Lou Schultz asking, amid the war talk, for books to teach her freshmen, as if trying to recall what the room had been for; David Larsen answering the question What the world needs now with a poet's reflex, *"manifesto, sweet manifesto"*. For two months running, a poetry list had become the one place where poetry was the thing least discussed.

Only the room's clown kept faithfully to his post. Anselm Hollo — the Anti-Laureate the list had elected back in July, when its gravest worry had been Billy Collins's laurels — filed, on the thirteenth, a mock-bureaucratic notice from the desk of the anti-laureate, opening with a grave *"It is with sincere regret"* that he must report a delay in a chapbook titled *So the Ants Made It to the Cat Food*. I have set that piece

of deadpan foolery at the end of a month the room spent arguing the war exactly as November delivered it, because it is the month's smallest and most stubborn act of faith — that in a season when poetry had been crowded nearly out of a poetry list, one man in a paper crown went on issuing his absurd decrees, straight-faced, keeping a small flame lit, insisting by sheer persistence that the room was still, under all the war, itself.

— *K. M. F.*

December 2001

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

By December the war had loosened its grip on the room. The bombing went on in Afghanistan, but the list now mentioned it barely a third as often as it had in November, and turned, with something close to relief, back to the argument it never tires of: what makes a poet a poet. The culture, as it happened, had just handed the room an awkward new specimen on which to test the question — and, testing it, the room spent December circling the difference between a poet the public loves and a poet who is one.

The month's largest thread was headed, simply, New Poet — the quotation marks around New doing a lot of quiet work — and it circled a child. Ian Randall Wilson relayed the news that Mattie Stepanek — a gravely ill boy whose verse had made him a sensation — was bound for Oprah's couch, *"fulfilling one of his life dreams"*. The room found itself in an impossible posture: unwilling to mock a dying child, and unable, in conscience, to call what he wrote poetry. It was the old quarrel of sentiment against craft in its cruelest possible form, and, to the list's credit, it mostly declined to be cruel.

A darker thread ran beside it, headed Walmart poetry, in which Geoffrey Gatza pushed the question past the boy and out to the culture entire. He was not even sure, he wrote, that poetry existed outside the academy at all; he had gone to the Walmart, and it had been plain to him there that *"Society doesn't really need poems"*, that not one shopper would so much as look at one. If the media's New Poet was false, Gatza's doubt was the worse one — that the real poets were simply unwanted.

Against both, the room reached for its touchstones of the genuine article. It argued James Merrill's enormous Changing Light at Sandover, the establishment sublime that even its admirers found forbidding; and Kathy Lou Schultz put in a plain classroom request for nineteen copies of Lyn Hejinian's My Life, the avant-garde's own autobiography — two opposite notions of what a poem can hold, and both of them, whatever else, unmistakably the thing itself.

And in the thick of the argument over who is a real poet, a real one died, all but unnoticed. A notice reached the list that Spencer Holst — the New York fabulist a Times reviewer had once called one of the great fairy-tale artificers of the age, who at sixteen had run to New York to be a poet — had died on Thanksgiving, and that his family had turned up, in the whole of the press, *"the only unpaid obituary so far"*, a

small one in the Toledo paper his own father had written for. I have set Holst's death at the end of a month the room spent arguing what a poet is exactly as December delivered it, because it is the argument's bleakest and truest answer: that while the culture put a child's grief on daytime television and called it poetry, one of its genuine makers left the world to a single unpaid notice in a provincial paper — the real poet the age could not trouble itself to mourn.

— *K. M. F.*

January 2002

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

January 2002 opened Camp X-Ray. The first shackled, hooded prisoners reached Guantánamo on the eleventh; at month's end the President named an Axis of Evil; and the war, which December had let recede, came back to the room as a question of language and euphemism. For once the list engaged it head on — its largest thread was Pam Brown's flat, unadorned What do you think?, asking members what they made of "*the treatment of these prisoners*". And the room's answer, worked out obliquely over the month, was to distrust the era's rhetoric and turn to poems that refuse it.

The turn was, improbably, to the Objectivists. Damian Judge Rollison opened a thread trying to parse the calculus behind Zukofsky's upper limit music, lower limit speech, buried in the twelfth movement of his life-poem A; Maria Damon reported reading her way, through new books on Jewish American poetry, into "*the logic of the designator*" objectivist. It was a pointed thing to reach for just then. Sincerity and objectification — Zukofsky's demand that a poem be a made object, resting in the thing seen rather than the feeling announced — was precisely the anti-rhetoric a season of official language had left the room craving.

Sharper still was the cluster around Craig Dworkin's conceptual work, poetry set frankly against meaning — writing that declines to mean in the ordinary way, that treats the sentence as material to be cut and operated on rather than a vehicle for feeling. It was the Objectivist instinct pushed to a colder extreme: not the poem as honest object, but the poem as object emptied of its message altogether. In a season drowning in official meaning — evil, freedom, evildoer, the homeland — a poetics that refused to mean at all had a certain bracing hygiene to it.

The counter-current made the stakes plain. George Hartley posted, under the heading jingo juxta?, "*an interesting display of juxtaposition*" — war images set side by side — and asked the room how their interplay worked upon a viewer. The same trained eye that could read the montage of a poem could read the montage of a propaganda, and the room turned it, without missing a beat, onto the war.

And the month claimed the one thinker who had taught the room to see all of it. David Kellogg brought the news that Pierre Bourdieu — the sociologist who had shown them that poetry is a field of positions and capital, that no taste is ever quite innocent — "*has died in Paris of cancer*". I have set Bourdieu's death at the end of a month the

room spent distrusting the era's rhetoric exactly as January delivered it, because he had been the room's own sharpest instrument for that distrust: the man who insisted that nothing in the cultural world is neutral, that the poem and the slogan are alike moves in a game of power — and who left the game, at the last, for the players to go on without him.

— *K. M. F.*

February 2002

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

The war ground on through February 2002 — Afghanistan, the anthrax dread receding, the search for the kidnapped reporter Daniel Pearl whose murder would be confirmed at the month's close — and the room touched it only lightly. What it turned over at length instead was a humbler and more intimate question, one it does not often let itself ask: the relation of poetry to work — who labours at it, who earns by it, who is a working poet and who a working-class one. It is a question the room usually keeps at arm's length, being mostly made of people the university pays; in February, from three directions at once, it could not.

Thomas Bell opened the central thread, working poets, working class poets, with a genuine perplexity: did poetry by or for the working class tend, of necessity, toward the traditional, focused on content rather than form? Was the difficult, disjunctive verse the list so prized a quiet luxury of the comfortable? He put the discomfort in five words — was it, he wondered, *"writing down or writing for"*? — and the room, most of it credentialed and salaried and academic, had no choice but to sit with the question.

Alongside it ran the same question from the other end — poetry as a paid position. Herb Levy forwarded a Sacramento Bee report on California's stalled effort to install a poet laureate, headlined, tellingly, that *"Poets seem averse to state program"*. Offered a title and a stipend by the state, the poets flinched; the avant-garde's suspicion of the institution, it turned out, ran deeper than its appetite for a wage. There was something almost comic in it — a guild forever complaining that no one will pay for poetry, handed a public salary, and recoiling from the taint of the cheque.

The month's conceptualists proposed a third answer, and the strangest: poetry as pure clerical labour. Kenny Goldsmith — billed, in the notice of his Stanford reading, as *"artist, writer, dj, poet"* — was practising the uncreative writing that turns the poet into a copyist, a transcriber, a typist, the least romantic worker imaginable. If working-class verse meant plain content, and the laureateship meant a state salary, Goldsmith offered the poem as literal drudgery, and wore the drudgery as a badge.

And the month buried the man who had lived the whole question through. Laurie Macrae posted that Dave Van Ronk — the Mayor of MacDougal Street, who had taught Dylan, restored the careers of forgotten country-blues masters, and *"gave shelter and support to a generation of young folkies"* in the Village — was dead at

sixty-five. I have set Van Ronk's death at the end of a month the room spent arguing poetry and work exactly as February delivered it, because his life was the argument's plainest answer: a man who worked his art the way others work a trade, nightly and for scale, who never grew rich and never once stopped, and who paid it forward in the only currency that finally counts — a stage, a lesson, a room — handed to the young who came up behind him. The working artist, working to the end.

— *K. M. F.*

March 2002

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

March 2002 set the Middle East alight — a Passover bombing in Netanya, Israeli tanks rolling into the towns of the West Bank — and drove the Afghan war into its fiercest fighting yet at Anaconda; the room registered all of it only at the edges, Israel in eight messages, the Palestinians barely at all. What consumed it instead, at a volume extraordinary even for this list, was the small question February had raised about class, swollen overnight into the month's obsession.

The thread was headed, after Lennon, a working-class poet is something to be, and it ran past fifty messages before spinning off a second one on race and nationality. Kasey Mohammad laid out, with some exasperation, the “*wickedly convoluted*” set of assumptions the phrase smuggled in — that a worker's writing must somehow reflect his class, that working-class poets are content-driven where the bourgeois are formally experimental, that each writes only for his own kind. It was the list at its most characteristic and most self-implicating: a room of the salaried and the credentialed, arguing for weeks on end about the people not in it.

The abstraction met a hard edge midway through the month. K. Angelo Hehir posted that the poet John Clarke had been pulled aside and interrogated crossing the United States border — the machinery that decides, in fact rather than in theory, which poets are let through, while the room upstairs debated which were to be let into the canon.

And even the room could feel the theory straining against a life. Laurie Macrae started a thread binding the class argument directly to John Wieners, remembering him at a Berkeley reading in 1966. The argument, groping, had reached at last for an actual person — a poor, gay, frequently hospitalised poet who had spent his life on the wrong side of every comfort the debaters took for granted. Here was the working-class poet the thread kept positing in the abstract, and he turned out to be no abstraction at all, but a name most of them knew and a body of work a good many of them loved.

The person, by then, was four days dead. Pierre Joris had posted on the second that John Wieners — found unconscious after a party, gone of a brain aneurysm in Boston on the first of March — was “*one of the great lyric voices*” of the century's latter half, with all the psychic cracks and sufferings that voice had cost him. I have set Wieners's death at the end of a month the room spent debating whether a working-

class poet is so much as possible exactly as March delivered it, because he was the debate made flesh and then buried: while the credentialed argued the category, the truest instance of it any of them would ever have was being carried out of a Boston hospital — a man who never once had the luxury of the question, who simply was the thing itself, and made out of poverty and madness and desire a body of lyric that no theory of class could have predicted, and that none of it can now contain.

— *K. M. F.*

April 2002

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

National Poetry Month came round again in April 2002, and the room greeted it as ever — not with a celebration but with an interrogation. The world pressed harder than usual: Israel had rolled into the West Bank, Jenin was a name beginning to mean a massacre, and the anger surfaced in a thread bluntly headed a vile republic. But the month's characteristic labour, spread across an enormous eight hundred and more messages, was the list doing to poetry the one thing it cannot help doing — asking, from every possible direction, what a poem even is.

The conceptualists began at the very floor of the question. Index as a Form? ran to thirty-five messages, asking whether the driest apparatus of a book — the back-page index, that alphabetised ghost of a text — might itself be a poem; Halvard Johnson offered his own specimen, an index-poem titled Glenn Gould, the Life and Times of. It was of a piece with the month's Oulipian mood — its call for materiality, its talk of a zombie avant-garde — the wager that a poem need express nothing at all, that a found procedure coldly followed will do. If an index could be a poem, then the category had no bottom to it, and that was precisely the point.

At the same time the movement relitigated, for perhaps the hundredth time in this archive, the question Ken Edwards had once begged the room never to begin: What is Language Poetry? By 2002 it was less a question than a ritual, the room returning to its own unanswerable koan the way a tongue returns to a sore tooth. Vernon Frazer reported the reply he kept receiving, borrowed wholesale from jazz — *"If you can't hear it, baby, I can't tell you."* After two decades and countless threads, the surest self-definition the movement could manage was a shrug.

And the room reached clean past the avant-garde, to the oldest forms and the most traditional. Arielle Greenberg asked whether there was a name for the poetry in which *"the poet boasts about him or herself"* — the flyting, the rapper's brag, verse's most ancient act of self-assertion; while juliana spahr and others took up nature poetry, the little flower poems, the lyric's greenest and least fashionable corner. From the conceptual index to the primal boast to the daffodil, the month canvassed the whole range of what a poem might be, and settled precisely none of it.

It paused, once, for the makers themselves. Word came of the deaths, in a single week, of the Los Angeles poet John Thomas and his wife Marta Mitrovich, *"both of whom passed away last week"*. I have set that notice at the end of a month the room

spent asking what a poem is exactly as April delivered it, because the asking never did resolve — and perhaps that is the resolution: that a poem, like Frazer's jazz, is a thing one finally knows by ear and not by definition, and that the only ones who ever wholly know are the people who spend their lives making them, two of whom had just, without fuss, stopped.

— *K. M. F.*

May 2002

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

The war did not loosen its grip in May 2002 — Israel held the towns of the West Bank, and the recriminations over the missed warnings mounted at home — but the room let most of it pass, admitting the Middle East mainly through a query after Middle Eastern poets. Its own energies went, at a volume of nearly nine hundred messages, into a civil war a good deal closer to home: the poets against the critics. It is the list's most reliable quarrel, older than any foreign war, and in May it flared with unusual heat — because for once the stakes were not merely wounded pride but the visible collapse of the whole apparatus that had long housed the fight.

The month's largest thread was a declaration of independence. Andrew Rathmann posted what he cheerfully billed as a rant, arguing that poets should simply ignore academic criticism, corrupted as it was at the root by careerism: the scholar, needing a job, must above all produce *"an acceptable discourse"* — not good, merely acceptable — and the poem is the last thing on his mind. The room largely cheered, then mocked its own vehemence with a parody thread proposing that poets read only cereal boxtops instead.

The irony, which the room half-saw, was that the professors' house was already burning. Charles Bernstein forwarded the news, under the flat headline UC Press cuts back offerings, that one of the great university presses was gutting its list; other threads tracked a Canadian publishing meltdown and floated self-organizing journals to replace the dying presses. The poets were declaring independence from an institution that was, at that very moment, being taken from them whether they wished it or not. The response was quick and characteristic — to route around the wreckage: if the presses would no longer print them and the critics would no longer read them, the poets would run their own journals, mount their own reviews, and gather their own audience, independence recast from a boast into a plain necessity.

So they fell back on self-assertion. The manifesto revived — a thread on the post-2000 manifesto, the form by which poets seize their own authority without waiting to be granted it; and, in a lighter register, David Hess opened a thread on *"the function of the author photo"*, how a poet frames herself when there is no critic left to do the framing. If the judges were leaving the building, the accused would have to introduce themselves.

And underneath ran the question the whole quarrel begged. kari edwards asked the room for works of fiction or poetry in which “*a trial is the main*” event — literature’s own tribunals, the poem that puts someone in the dock. I have set that query at the end of a month the poets spent firing their judges exactly as May delivered it, because it is the one question the firing could not answer: if not the academic critic, then who judges a poem? The room’s instinct, having dismissed the professor from the bench, was to hand the gavel to literature itself — to let the poem hold its own trial and return its own verdict, with no one presiding but the art.

— K. M. F.

June 2002

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

The war's second summer settled over June 2002 — the arrest of a supposed dirty-bomb plotter, a World Cup the room never once glanced at, Israel down to a mention or two — and the list turned, with evident relief, back to a question it can worry indefinitely: whether a poem needs to be about anything at all. It is the Language poets' founding quarrel, and it has never once been settled here. Content, and its discontents, was the month's true subject, argued across more than seven hundred messages.

Nick Piombino set it going, quoting — by way of an essay he thought pedestrian — Helen Vendler's dictum that *"Form, after all, is nothing but content-as-arranged"*. The threads multiplied, Content and Its Discontents and Question of content and Content analysis, and the room split along its oldest seam: between those for whom a poem is a statement about the world and those for whom it is a made object, language arranged, the content beside the point.

The quarrel with the critics, carried over from May, hardened into a companion thread — Evaluative Criticism Is The Highest — asking whether criticism worthy of the name must judge and rank a poem, or merely describe how it works. Nick Piombino, who opened it, reached all the way back to the nineteenth century for a specimen of unembarrassed judgement — an old critic flatly proclaiming Whitman the most powerful poet America had produced — as if to ask whether the room had lost the nerve simply to call a poem good. Having spent May firing the professors, it spent June arguing over what, if anything, a critic is finally for.

Beneath the abstractions ran a fascination with the poem's physical body. jesse glass floated a thread on Handwriting Poets — magazines in which every page would be handwritten, *"a unique, limited in number, gesture"* rather than a printed text; while the constraint-writers emptied content the other way, into pure letter — Christian Bök's Eunoia, and a story built on the single vowel A. Between the handwritten gesture and the univocalic machine, the room circled a suspicion that a poem's matter — the hand, the letter — might be all the content it ever really has.

And then a poet died who had dissolved the whole question in his own practice. Leslie Scalapino posted that Philip Whalen — the Zen monk whose poems were written out in his own unmistakable hand, calligraphic and unrepeatable — had died at the Zen Hospice on the twenty-sixth, and would lie there three days, *"where he*

can be seen". I have set Whalen's death at the end of a month the room spent asking whether a poem needs content exactly as June delivered it, because he was its living answer, now gone: a poet for whom the page was pure content and pure hand at once — the plain record of a mind attending — and for whom the line the room kept drawing, between what a poem says and what a poem is, had simply never been there to draw.

— K. M. F.

July 2002

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

July 2002 brought the summer's second wave of corporate wreckage — WorldCom's books exposed as fiction — and a stranger proposal out of Washington: Operation TIPS, a plan to enlist ordinary citizens as informants upon one another, which Patrick Herron carried to the list from an Australian paper. The war idled in the background. But the month's own preoccupation, running under all of it, was the gentlest possible subject, and the very opposite of an informant program: how poetry gets handed down — who reads it, who inherits it, who teaches it to whom.

The largest sustained thread was, for once, an act of reading rather than an argument about reading. Andrew Rathmann — who only two months before had urged poets to ignore criticism altogether — led a genuine close reading of Lissa Wolsak's *Pen Chants*, tracing its fragmentary lyricism back to Susan Howe and noting how the mode had by now been *"imitated by dozens of younger writers"*. A style established by one poet and passed, hand to hand, down a generation: transmission caught in the act.

The question of descent surfaced more baldly elsewhere. Jim Behrle asked, plainly, for a roster of *"the 3rd Generation of the New York School"* — the grandchildren of O'Hara and Ashbery and Koch — and the room fell to sorting who had inherited what from whom, drawing the family tree of an avant-garde now old enough to have grandchildren of its own. It is a peculiar spectacle, a movement dedicated to the new keeping so careful a genealogy of its old — but keep one it plainly did.

Even the critics' authority was up for handing on. One thread gathered the philosophers who had written on poetry, hauling outsiders into the room to see what they had made of the art; another weighed Yunte Huang's reckoning with Perloff and Bernstein — the reigning critics assessed, in their turn, by the next arrival to the field. Nothing in the month stayed quite where it was: every reputation and every method and every borrowed style was being received from someone, tried out, and passed along again to someone else.

And in the thick of all this handing-down, the great hander-down himself died. Ron Silliman forwarded the Times obituary — Kenneth Koch, 77, Poet of New York School, Dies — for the first-generation New York School poet who had given more of himself to transmission than any of them: the man who taught poetry to schoolchildren and to nursing-home residents, who held that anyone at all could be

brought to write it, and spent years proving it. I have set Koch's death at the end of a month the room spent tracing how poetry gets passed on exactly as July delivered it, because he was the purest instance of the thing — not a poet who guarded the tradition but one who gave it away by the fistful, to children and the old and anyone who would take it, and who, dying, left the room to work out its lineages without the teacher who had made so many of them possible.

— *K. M. F.*

August 2002

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

The drumbeat toward Iraq began in earnest in August 2002 — the Vice President telling the country a war was on its way — and the room, in the largest single month this archive holds, better than a thousand messages, could barely rouse itself to notice; Iraq surfaces in nine of them. Its energies went instead into the oldest and most combustible of its own questions: who belongs in the tradition, and who gets to decide.

The question wore its generous face first. Kathy Lou Schultz set about compiling the twentieth century's African-American poets *"marked by formal innovation"*, recovering an experimental lineage the avant-garde had long contrived to overlook; and Charles Bernstein announced that Myung Mi Kim was joining the Buffalo Poetics Program, the movement's flagship institution visibly widening its doors. It was a real shift, and the room knew it: an avant-garde that had spent decades defining itself purely by form was learning, slowly, to ask whose formal innovations it had all along failed to see. The canon was opening, and the room, in the main, cheered it open.

It opened further still. J Gallaher, in light of the month's discussions, issued an invitation the list very rarely extends — Send a Poem to POETICS! — asking the members to post their own verse rather than only argue about other people's, and for a stretch the commentators turned contributors, the critics briefly poets. It was a small gesture and a telling one — a room that could generate two hundred messages on whether a poem needs content, asked merely to produce one, and, gamely, obliging.

But to open the canon is to unsettle the ranking, and the month had a bitter underside. Threads on Poetic Ambition, on Literary Excellence, and — with no euphemism whatever — on Resentments turned the question of who belongs into a brawl over who is any good; jesse glass complained of a list he had posted that Wystan Curnow had *"swooped down on"*, and the swooping ran both ways. Widen the gate, and someone always claims to hear barbarians.

And the month buried a man who had spent his life ignoring every gate the room was quarrelling over. William James Austin brought the news that Larry Rivers — the painter the Times called the man who shook up American art, Frank O'Hara's collaborator and companion, a jazz saxophonist before ever he was a painter and a good deal else besides — was dead at seventy-eight, and mourned him in a single

line: "*Rivers was outrageous and I loved him for it.*" I have set Rivers's death at the end of a month the room spent arguing who belongs exactly as August delivered it, because he was its standing rebuke: a man who belonged to no one art and to all of them at once, who moved between painting and poetry and music as though the borders the room so jealously policed had never been drawn — outrageous, uncategorisable, and loved, in the end, for fitting into not one of the boxes the month had spent a thousand messages building.

— K. M. F.

September 2002

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

September 2002 brought the first anniversary of the towers, and a country now openly readying a second war — Blair's dossier, the steady drums for Iraq — and for the first time in years the room could not keep the world out; September and Iraq and Bush ran through hundreds of its messages. But its own three dramas that month were closer to home, and between them they took the measure of the art and the community at once: what a poem is permitted to say, who gets called the best, and whether the room itself was any longer worth being in.

The first was a storm around Amiri Baraka. New Jersey's poet laureate had read, near the anniversary, a poem about September 11 whose claims a great many found hateful, and the state moved to strip him of the title; the room argued it hard and uneasily. Some defended the poem and some despised it, but most balked, in the end, at the precedent — that a government might unmake a poet for his lines. It was the room's oldest principle put to its ugliest test: that the right to say the unsayable is worth least, and matters most, exactly when what is said is a thing one cannot bear.

The second was, improbably, a triumph. Robert Creeley had guest-edited that year's Best American Poetry and filled it with the room's own — Armantrout and Ashbery, Bernstein and di Prima and Coolidge — so that the avant-garde found itself, for once, anointed the best rather than the excluded. And, just as characteristically, the triumph curdled within days into a brawl about the writing programs: threads on the Iowa school, on workshop craft against poetics, Joe Amato asking whether the "*craft-laden works*" the programs turn out were teaching anything beyond craft. Handed a seat at the table at last, the room fell at once to fighting about the table.

Beneath the heavier weather, the making did not stop. Molly Schwartzburg opened a bright, generous thread on the sonnet, asking after the most interesting "*misuses of sonnet form*" the members could name — the variations, the parodies, the appropriations — and for a while the list did the thing it does at its very best, pooling its enormous erudition on a single small fourteen-line box. Even in the war's lengthening shadow, the room went on quietly building.

And on the eleventh of September, the anniversary itself, Jim Behrle stood back from all of it to take the room's own pulse, and did not care for what he felt. He confessed to a weary oscillation between consternation and a lethargic purging of his inbox, worn down by the list's dim and cruel posts, its mosh-pit of fools; and he named the

saddest symptom of all — that there were “*poets here to respect, many who remain very quiet*”. I have set Behrle’s lament at the end of a month the room spent fighting over poetry’s power and poetry’s prizes exactly as September delivered it, because it is the truest state of the union the archive keeps: that the same list which had just seen its own poets crowned the best in America, and had just defended a poet’s right to say the unbearable, had grown so unkind to itself that its finest voices had simply fallen silent — a town square that could win every argument except the one about whether it was still worth living in.

— K. M. F.

October 2002

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

In October 2002 the war stopped being background weather. On the eleventh Congress voted to authorise it, and the room — war-conscious now as it had never been, the word turning up in some ninety of its messages — argued the resolution directly, drafting pledges against the congressmen who had handed the President his blank cheque. But the largest single month this archive holds, better than a thousand messages, spent most of itself on a domestic version of the same violence: not who is bombed, but who is forced out, and who is left out.

The storm that would not die down was Amiri Baraka. A month after the poem, New Jersey was still moving to strip him of its laureateship, and the room argued it past exhaustion — better than sixty messages — over the single question a poetry list cannot dodge: whether a state may expel a poet for his lines. Most of them, including many who despised the poem, balked at the precedent all the same; a government that can unmake a poet for what he wrote is a government the room could not bring itself to trust, whatever it thought of the man.

Its mirror image ran directly alongside. Michael Magee opened a long reckoning with Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry*, the founding avant-garde anthology of 1960, and the plain fact of its "*single handful of women poets*" — a foundational exclusion the room could no longer read past. If Baraka was a poet the state would cast out, the women of the *New American Poetry* were poets the movement's own bible had simply never let in: expulsion and exclusion, the same act read from opposite ends.

Beneath both ran the institutional version of the question. Threads on inside/outside the academy, on *Official Verse on the Rise*, on whether the academy was a kind of First World to poetry's periphery, turned over the softer gatekeeping that decides, without ever voting, who is admitted and who is kept at the door. The room had been at war with the academy for half a year; in October it began, instead, to imagine an alternative to it.

For at the month's end Jane Sprague asked the question the whole of October had been circling. If the room were to build a post-canon canon, she wondered, "*who would be in it*", and in what medium — digital, print, mail, the lot. I have set Sprague's question at the end of a month the room spent cataloguing exclusions exactly as October delivered it, because it is the month's one hopeful gesture: that in

the same weeks the country voted to force its will upon a nation, and a state tried to force a poet from his post, and the room reread the anthology that had shut its women out, someone in it stopped to ask what a canon might look like with the gates taken clean off — every medium, every kept-out voice, let in at last. The war chose force; the room, at its best, chose the open door.

— *K. M. F.*

November 2002

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

The midterm elections of November 2002 handed the war party both houses of Congress, and the United Nations inspectors filed back into Iraq to begin a search whose conclusion everyone already knew; a thread called post-election day blues carried the room's dismay, and the war passed, that month, from likely to certain. But the month's own shock was domestic and financial, and it turned the list's oldest grievance clean inside out: for once, and absurdly, poetry had money. The room had rehearsed its poverty so long that wealth, when it came, arrived as a kind of scandal.

Word came that a pharmaceutical heiress had left a small Chicago monthly, Poetry, a fortune — a hundred million dollars and more — and the room, which had spent years defining itself by poverty, could not decide whether to laugh or to grieve. Joe Amato observed that the magazine had *"stopped functioning as a vital poetry mag"* a quarter-century since; J Gallaher predicted, drily, that the magazine would not *"survive its good fortune"*. And under the jokes lay the real wound — that the money had gone to the genteel institution which had once rejected the donor's own poems, and never to any of the poorer rooms where the work was actually being done.

Office arrived the same month, if into more familiar hands. George Bowering — a fixture of this very list — was named Canada's first Parliamentary Poet Laureate, and the room, which could argue Billy Collins from a comfortable distance, found itself instead watching one of its own handed a state title, and measuring the two laureates against each other in a thread on bowering on collins. Money and office both, and both descending from above — and the list, which trusts nothing that descends from above, received the pair of them with the same narrowed eye.

Uneasy with the windfall, the room reached back, by instinct, for a poorer father. A cluster of threads on Kenneth Rexroth — his Chips, his lineage — recalled the San Francisco patriarch who had built a whole poetry culture out of next to nothing, on his own back and his own dime. Barrett Watten, urging care, allowed that *"Rexroth's influence goes in several directions"*; but the direction the month wanted was plain enough — back toward a poetry made by hand, before the money.

I have set the Rexroth threads beside the hundred-million-dollar gift exactly as November delivered them, because between them they hold the room's whole argument with itself about worth: that in the very month poetry was declared, at last, to be worth a fortune — and the fortune went, as such things always do, to the

establishment magazine that had turned the donor away, and never to the rooms where the poets go unpaid — the list turned by reflex to Rexroth, who had built a poetry out of no money whatever, and reminded itself of the only inheritance that ever finally counts: the one no heiress can leave in a will.

— *K. M. F.*

December 2002

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

The war talk reached a new pitch in December 2002 — the word runs through better than a hundred and thirty of the month's messages — and in the news, a Senate leader fell for a sentence: Trent Lott, undone not by any vote but by a few nostalgic words about a segregationist's 1948 campaign. The room, watching politics turn on a phrase, turned its own art the same way. December was the month the list stopped asking whether poetry mattered and began, tentatively, to aim it.

The antiwar poetry movement found its feet. Tim Shaner announced an anti-war poetry reading that billed itself, honestly, as a think-tank on the open question — *"what IS anti-war poetry?"* — and Ron Silliman forwarded a history of the CIA's Cold-War funding of art sent abroad, a reminder that the state had long known verse and paint could be weapons. After a year of wondering what poetry was for, the room began, warily, to point it at something.

It closed ranks, too, around its most embattled provocateur. A surrealist petition circulated in Amiri Baraka's defence, the room — whatever any of its members thought of the poem — rallying to the plain principle that a poet's words, however inflammatory, are not the state's to punish by decree. The same instinct that would aim poetry at the war refused to let the government disarm a poet of his lines. It made for a strange alliance — the surrealists, of all people, passing a petition — but the moment forced it: with a war coming and a laureate under threat, the room's warring factions discovered, however briefly, a common enemy in the state's claim to police what a poet may say.

The news, meanwhile, kept handing the room its own lesson back. Lott had been brought down not by an argument but by a single remembered sentence — proof, had the list needed any, that language still carried the power to end a career. If a few careless words could unmake the most powerful senator in the country overnight, the room let itself wonder, might a few of the right ones, aimed well enough, do something at last to a war.

And the month buried the man who had believed that most fiercely of all. Frank Sherlock posted that Joe Strummer — *"founder & spirit of The Clash"* — had died in his sleep at fifty, and the list, which had been arguing punk and writing in the same weeks, felt the loss keenly. I have set Strummer's death at the end of a month the room spent learning to aim its art exactly as December delivered it, because he was

the proof the antiwar poets were reaching toward: that a song, like a poem, could be a real blow struck against power and not merely a comment upon it — and that the man who had struck the hardest of them was, at fifty, already gone, leaving the room to take up a weapon he had shown it how to hold.

— *K. M. F.*

January 2003

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

By January 2003 the war loomed over everything — it runs through some hundred and forty of the month's messages — and it reached poetry directly at last. Laura Bush cancelled her White House symposium on American poetry rather than host poets who meant to bring antiwar poems, and Sam Hamill answered by founding Poets Against the War. For the first time in this archive's memory, a public political role was thrust upon the art. And the room, handed one, could not simply take it. It is one thing to argue for years that poetry ought to matter; it is quite another to be told, all at once, that it might — and to a war.

The movement swept the list — Poets Against the War forwarded and re-forwarded, its call gathering thousands of poems within weeks, and the Poetry Is News forum convening under Pound's old claim that literature is news that stays news — the sudden and unfamiliar conviction that a poem might be an act, and not merely a comment upon acts. After years of asking what poetry was for, the room had, almost overnight, an answer it had not chosen for itself, and a good part of it distrusted the answer precisely because it had come so easily.

It began to argue the answer at once. A long thread on antiwar justifications worried the hard question beneath the fervour — whether an antiwar poem persuades anyone not already persuaded or merely lets the poet feel virtuous; Alex Young, watching *"the antiwar stuff being thrown around"* with a cocked eyebrow, spoke for the skeptics who suspected that poetry aimed at a war might be only politics wearing poetry's clothes. It was the room's oldest reflex turned upon its newest hope: to interrogate a thing at the very instant of embracing it.

And the room turned the suspicion, characteristically, on itself. Andrew Rathmann opened a thread on poetry careerists, asking acidly whether the academic poets now scorning old *"ideas of artistic vocation"* were the very ones who would ride whatever cause advanced them. The month poetry acquired a movement, the list set immediately about auditing its own motives. If a war could make every poet a placard, the careerists would be first in the queue — and the room wanted it on the record that it had noticed.

The self-suspicion found its sharpest form, fittingly, in a poem. One member posted, as satire, a run-on that caught the entire month in a single breath — the list's antiwar ardour and its book-selling folded into one line: *"stop the war buy my book read my*

poem" another poet has died. I have set that bitter little poem at the end of a month the room spent taking up arms against the war exactly as January delivered it, because it is the month's most honest self-portrait: a room that genuinely wished to stop a war and could not, and that could not quite stop hawking its own titles even while it tried — and that knew this about itself, and said so, which is the one thing that kept the wishing honest.

— *K. M. F.*

February 2003

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

February 2003 was the month the war swallowed everything. It runs through three hundred and twenty-nine of the archive's messages — a third of the month — and on the fifteenth the largest coordinated protest in human history filled the streets of six hundred cities at once. Colin Powell made the administration's case at the United Nations, and was found within days to have built part of his dossier from a plagiarised student essay. Poetry marched with the rest — Poets Against the War at its flood, the Times running an article, Versus Verses, on the whole phenomenon. On the war, for once, the room was of a single mind.

It filled anthologies, staged readings, and updated the Circulars site by the hour, and a near-unanimity astonishing for this list held on the one great question. And yet even here the room kept its old habit of suspicion: Pierre Joris, himself among the opposed, remarked uneasily on the "*partisanship of our antiwar poets*" — the danger that a poem against a war becomes only a placard that happens to rhyme. The room could agree to oppose the war; it could not quite agree to stop watching itself do it.

But unanimity against the state only cleared the ground for a war at home. On the fifteenth of February — the very day of the marches — Jim Behrle took a Small Press Traffic stage for an event billed as Jim Behrle Forgets His Heroes, a young poet's frontal assault on the avant-garde's elders and idols, and the list detonated into a generational brawl (the answering threads ran under headings like my son // for Jim Behrle, and worse). United in the streets against a war, the room could not keep the peace among its own three generations.

The timing was merciless, for the fathers Behrle spurned were, that same week, being enshrined. Nick Piombino marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, the founding journal "*published in February, 1978*"; Silliman's Blog, the new medium of the hour, was busy canonising the same elders night after night. The young cursed the heroes in the exact week the heroes were being carved into the record — a movement grown old enough to fight its children over its own monument.

And in the month's first days an artist died who had spent a lifetime reconciling precisely what the room could not. mIEKAL aND posted the death of the composer Lou Harrison, calling him one of the greats — a man who had married the gamelan to the Western scale and the ancient to the invented, and whose list of works ran, the

notice noted, even to “*some fonts he designed*”. Harrison, a lifelong pacifist, was gone at eighty-five. I have set his death at the head of a month the room spent marching against one war and waging another exactly as February delivered it, because he stands as the reproach to both halves of it: a maker who found, in a single life, the peace to honour every tradition at once — the elders and the innovations, the borrowed and the made — while the poets, in a single month, could neither halt a war abroad nor keep one from breaking out at home.

— K. M. F.

March 2003

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

March 2003 was the month the waiting ended. For a year the room had rehearsed its opposition — the readings, the petitions, the anthologies gathered under Poets Against the War — and when the invasion of Iraq finally began on the twentieth, it arrived under a phrase the newscasts had already branded, shock and awe, as though a bombardment could be sold like a season finale. Twelve hundred and thirty messages came through that month, the largest tide the list had yet produced, and nearly four hundred of them carried the word war. The room did not lack for language. What it lacked, and knew it lacked, was any evidence that language was load-bearing.

The question that organized the month was posed plainly and could not be answered. Christine Murray watched her own phrasing slip, in the space of a sentence, from what poetry can do to *“what can poets do?”* — the retreat from the art to its practitioners a small confession that the art itself had gone quiet. The exasperation found its emblem in Aaron Belz, who submitted an antiwar poem to poetsagainstthewar.org and was rejected three times; a site that had accepted twelve thousand poems had somehow drawn its line at his. An organization convened to prove that poets could act against the war could not, it turned out, agree on what a poem was, and the machinery built to aim verse at the bombs jammed on the first live round.

The deeper quarrel was about time, not tactics. Ron Silliman, on the weblog he had lately started, wrote that the republic had been replaced by *“a thug state committed only to bullying the world”*, as though the country had taken one recent, catastrophic wrong turn. Belz would not grant him the turn. Reciting the Trail of Tears, two centuries of slavery, the lynchings and the internment camps, he answered that *“It ain't all Walden Pond”* — that the thug state was not a fall from grace but the grain of the thing. George Bowering baited the Americans from Canada about flags in classrooms and small hands over small hearts; but under the name-calling sat a real question, whether the war was an aberration to be protested or a confession to be reckoned with, and the room could not decide.

Beneath all this, quietly, the room was emptying. In the same weeks it argued hardest, its most faithful contributors were building doors out of it. Nick Piombino announced the weblog he had titled *fait accompli* and confessed that he had

hesitated to start it because *“blogging would somehow be disloyal to the list”* — an anxiety that named precisely what was happening. Craig Allen Conrad began compiling a directory of poets with blogs; Silliman’s had become a daily fixture; the list’s own Brian Kim Stefans was running Circulars, an antiwar clearinghouse taking hits in the thousands. The soapbox was migrating from the shared hall to a thousand private windows, and the migration wore, at first, the costume of loyalty.

And on the ninth, before the bombing began, Stan Brakhage died, and Robert Kelly wrote to the list that the filmmaker’s work had *“renewed our hearing as much as it renewed our vision”* — a strange, exact tribute in a month when the room’s own hearing was failing it. Brakhage had spent a lifetime making images that needed no words, and Aldon Nielsen called him *“one of the most generous artists I have ever met”*. The room’s clearest note in its loudest month was an elegy for a man who had worked past language entirely. I have set March down exactly as the archive delivered it — the jammed machinery, the unwinnable quarrel, the quiet defection to the blogs — because it was the month the list learned that having everything to say and no way to make it matter are, in the end, the same condition.

— K. M. F.

April 2003

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

The month opens with Baghdad falling. On the ninth a statue of the Iraqi president is dragged down before the cameras; within days the National Museum stands emptied of millennia in a single long weekend of looting, and the poets — who care about few things more fiercely than the survival of old writing — answer with a grief that is almost professional.

Stephen Vincent forwards the catastrophe and finds it “*outrageous and unbelievable*” that soldiers were made to stand by while it happened. Ian Randall Wilson spends a whole morning faxing everyone he can name — his senators, the television anchors, even Bill Gates — on behalf of the big cats of the Baghdad zoo, starving untended in their cages. The war reaches the list not as strategy but as damage: to tablets, to lions, to the language itself.

The month's presiding quarrel, though, is improbably epistemological. Anastasios Kozaitis forwards a newspaper's announcement that “*the era of big theory is over,*” and the list erupts — six-and-forty messages beneath one shouting subject-line, and a dozen more beneath its sequel — into a referendum on whether cognitive science is about to annex the humanities as it once annexed the gods. “*Cognitive poetix,*” neuropoetics, the brain enlisted as the new close reader: the poets litigate it while the tanks are still moving.

For relief — the word is Hilton Obenzinger's own, who begs “*relief from the horrors of war*” — the list bends to the lost name of the man who painted Dogs Playing Poker; to a hunt for the early notices that once dismissed Ashbery as obscure; to the perennial re-litigation of Ralph Nader. The ordinary business of a poetry list carries on, which is either obscene or the entire point, depending upon the hour.

One contributor, writing from Amsterdam, is turned out of a bar the instant the barman catches an American vowel — “*we didn't even have time to cause trouble*” — and confesses, to their own surprise, that they cannot summon the expected anger. That bewilderment, more than any thesis, is the truest sound of the month. I have arranged what follows so that each voice stands forward under its own name, its telephone and its address returned to privacy, its machinery swept aside. These were letters before ever they were literature.

— K. M. F.

May 2003

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

May 2003 was the month after. On the first of it a president stood on a carrier deck beneath a banner reading Mission Accomplished and declared the major fighting over, and the room, which had spent a year straining every nerve toward the war, exhaled into abstraction. Nine hundred and sixty-eight messages passed through the list, and the war that had swallowed March barely surfaced in them. What rushed in to fill the vacated attention was not relief and not grief but argument of the purest, most weightless kind — as though, the emergency having passed, the room could at last afford to think about nothing that could be acted upon.

The month belonged, astonishingly, to a single thread. Theory of practice ran to sixty-three messages and then began to bud: theory of practice according to the Dalai Lama, theory of practice relating to animals, the practice of theory, theory of two kingdoms. A list that had insisted for a year that poetry must do something now produced the largest conversation in its recent memory on the precise relation of doing to thinking, and did nothing whatever. The subject was perfect for the moment because it could not be finished, and a quarrel that cannot be finished is a warm place to stand when the weather outside has turned unbearable.

At its center sat the old opposition dressed in new robes. Derek R offered a serene Buddhist-Spinozan quietism, signing his posts with the line that *"awareness is both food and antidote"* and insisting that to stop striving was itself the highest act. David Larsen would have none of it: *"That Buddhist rhetoric won't even cut water"*, he wrote, unpersuaded that contemplation was a form of practice at all. The two of them circled the same drain the whole month, and the pleasure of the thing — the reason sixty-three people joined in — was precisely that neither could win, and so the argument could be carried like a lantern into every corner of the list.

But the war would not stay tidily won. Even as the theory bloomed, the story that had crowned the invasion came apart: the midnight rescue of Private Jessica Lynch, branded onto the American consciousness by the networks, turned out on the testimony of the Iraqi doctors who had treated her to have been a staged production, a Pentagon film. Kirby Olson, honestly baffled, tried to reckon the region's tangle of Kurds and Christians and Shiites and oil and confessed it was *"like looking into a can of worms."* The abstraction upstairs stayed clean; the facts in the basement did not,

and the gap between them was the true subject of the month, though almost no one named it.

And on the ninth the news came that Ted Joans had died, in Vancouver, of complications of diabetes. Harry Nudel wrote the elegy the list needed — that the poet born in Cairo, Illinois, who had carried his life across Paris and Greenwich Village and Timbuktu, *“was the real jones”*, a surrealist and a Beat who had never in his life theorized practice because he had simply practiced it. Charles Bernstein forwarded the notices; Maria Damon wondered aloud how long the first generation would be around to lose. I have set May down exactly as the archive delivered it — the weightless quarrel, the unraveling rescue, the wandering poet mourned — because it was the month the list argued longest about the practice of art while burying, almost in passing, a man who had been nothing but its practice.

— K. M. F.

June 2003

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

June 2003 was the month the war's reason went missing. The fighting had been declared over, the statues pulled down, and now the thing the whole invasion had been sold upon — the weapons of mass destruction — simply failed to appear. Seven hundred and forty-five messages moved through the list, and hanging over a good many of them was a question the room could neither answer nor abandon: where were the weapons? The certainty that had justified the bombing had evaporated, and what remained was a rumor economy, everyone advancing a theory, no one able to close the file.

The dedicated thread put the question in its subject line, all in capitals, as though volume could force an answer. Maria Damon, forwarding a petition, admitted the framing plainly — *"the q was rhetorical"*, she wrote, the point being only to shame someone into an investigation. Others supplied the cynical gloss the government would not: one poster, signing himself David, insisted flatly that *"This war was to bolster our currency"*, that Iraq had been punished for selling its oil in euros. Whether or not he was right, the fact that so unprovable a story could circulate unchallenged told you everything about the vacuum where the official reason had stood.

And then, with the largest question in the world hanging unanswered, the room turned to the smallest and most practical one it owned: where can a poet afford to live? Places To Live ran to better than thirty messages across its variants, and Kirby Olson worked the problem like an accountant, weighing Canadian arts grants and Edmonton rents and immigration law, hunting a city that was not *"too hard on the head or pocket"* yet still had something going on. It was the list at its most touchingly earthbound — unable to locate a nation's missing weapons, entirely able to compare the cost of a room.

Underneath ran the month's quieter injury: the market's slow purchase of the language itself. Aaron Vidaver forwarded the news that McDonald's had adopted a new global jingle, I'm lovin' it, retiring the older We love to see you smile; another thread tracked the selling of Matthew Barney, the art object as blue-chip commodity. The room read these as bulletins from an occupying power. Advertising had learned to write a serviceable line, and the poets watched their one craft rented out by the

hamburger chain with the weary recognition of people whose trade has been quietly annexed.

The month's last word came, fittingly, from a library. Michael O'Driscoll announced a bibliography of the Black Sparrow Press archive at Alberta — "*the first ninety-four publications*", 1966 to 1970, the fledgling years of the press that had carried Bukowski and Duncan and Zukofsky and Creeley into print. The heroic small-press era, made on kitchen tables and outside every market, was now boxed, catalogued, and shelved under special collections. I have set June down exactly as the archive delivered it — the missing weapons, the price of a room, the jingle, the sealed archive — because it was the month the list looked up from its unanswerable question to find its own noble past already embalmed, and the present for sale.

— K. M. F.

July 2003

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

July 2003 was the month the war finally let go of the room's collar. Eight hundred and ninety-eight messages passed through the list and scarcely one of them concerned a weapon or a president; the attention that had been held hostage since autumn was suddenly free, and it went straight back to the quarrels the list had always loved best — the quarrels about admission. Which forms counted as poetry, which generation counted as new, whether the highest seat in the canon could bow to the lowest booth in the market: all summer the room was busy deciding who and what to let in the door.

The loudest of these began with a wire story. Seamus Heaney, the Nobel laureate, had praised Eminem, saying the rapper had *"sent a voltage around his generation"*, and the list convulsed. Steve Tills spoke for the disgusted wing, gagging at the spectacle of world-academic poetry cozying up to a pop provocateur, while others found the crossing bracing, even overdue. The real nerve the thread touched was proprietary: if the most decorated poet alive could hand the laurel to a rapper, then the avant-garde's long labor of distinction — high from low, made from marketed — had been performed, it seemed, for nobody.

Against that anxiety, the month's most touching gesture: Kirby Olson proposed a festival of the ghazal, the couplet form *"widely used by Islamic and Sufi poets"*, offering it as a way to understand something of the culture the country had spent the spring bombing. Dozens joined in, cooking up couplets, posting the classical masters, arguing the rules; a parallel camp of haiku skeptics jeered at Eastern forms as tourist trinkets. There was something both absurd and genuinely decent in it — a room of American poets, months after the invasion, trying to reach Baghdad by way of Rumi, as though five rhymed couplets could do the diplomacy the bombs had foreclosed.

Underneath ran the canon's oldest ache. Haas Bianchi went hunting an anthology of poets born after 1966 and found only the same grey boomers reprinted under the banner of the contemporary, and demanded to know where the new avant poets were kept. Stephen Ellis gave the answer the list has always given: *"they're in the little magazines"*, hard to find, publishing slowly into visibility. Another poster grumbled that Emma Goldman would have hated anthologies altogether. The sorting

went on as it always does — who is gathered, who is missed, who decides — the list rehearsing its permanent argument about its own membership.

And while the canon quarreled indoors, Jonathan Skinner walked out. He announced six Saturdays of writing workshops in Buffalo's Olmsted parks, invoking the nineteenth-century landscape architect's dream of "*islands of tranquility*" carved into the growing bustling city — poetry set down in actual grass, under actual trees, for anyone who came. I have set July down exactly as the archive delivered it — the laureate blessing the rapper, the Sufi couplets, the ungathered young, the workshop in the park — because it was the month the list, released at last from the war, returned to its truest occupation: deciding, endlessly and never once for good, what and whom to call a poet.

— K. M. F.

August 2003

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

August 2003 was the month the list went back to its oldest domestic war — the mouth against the page. Six hundred and sixty-three messages moved through it, the war abroad now barely a rumor, and the room gave itself over to the argument it has been having since before there were listservs: whether a poem is finally a thing said aloud or a thing set down. A new national laureate was named that month, and two men who had spent their lives on opposite banks of exactly this divide would die before it ended, so that the quarrel and its casualties arrived, for once, in the same envelope.

The mouth's party was the louder. A journalist named flora fair wrote in soliciting comment for a cover piece on the state of slam poetry, on the Def Poetry Jam, on the slam as it belonged to *"the human tradition of storytelling"*, and the thread ran to nearly thirty messages of the perennial fight — the live voice and its roaring room set against the avant-garde's difficult, silent page. Kari edwards testified from San Francisco that spoken word owned the city; others sniffed that a crowd's applause was no measure of a poem. It was a class argument as much as an aesthetic one, and nobody's mind was changed.

The page had its champions too, at both ends of respectability. At the disreputable end, K. Silem Mohammad reported that the BBC World Service had interviewed him about Flarf, which he cheerfully defined on the air as *"Flarf is intentionally bad poetry that involves Google"* search results — the poem as sculpted junk text, the antithesis of anything you could shout. At the respectable end sat the new laureate, Louise Glück, whom even Geoffrey Gatz allowed he could *"approach her poetry with genuine respect"*, a sentence no one on the list would have spent on her predecessors. Between the Google spew and the crowned page, the middle held.

Then the divide claimed its theorist. Walter Ong died on the twelfth, at ninety, and Jim Andrews wrote the notice, recalling that *Orality and Literacy* was one of his favorite books — Ong the scholar who had argued that so much we credit to progress is better understood as *"shifts from orality to various stages of literacy."* The man who had drawn the very map the room was quarreling over, mouth on one side and page on the other, slipped off it in the middle of the month, and the coincidence was almost too neat to print.

And on the sixteenth it claimed its master. Haroldo de Campos died in São Paulo, and Charles Bernstein told the list he had been “*one of the great poets of the Americas*”, a founder of concrete poetry, the man who had made the page into a picture and driven the written poem as far from the human throat as it could go. Haas Bianchi remembered hearing him once in Brazil before an audience wholly enraptured. I have set August down exactly as the archive delivered it — the slam, the Flarf, the crowned laureate, the theorist and the master both gone in a fortnight — because it was the month the room’s endless argument between the voice and the page buried, in two weeks, the one man who had charted it and the one man who had perfected its far shore.

— K. M. F.

September 2003

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

September 2003 was a month about intake — what a poet reads, hears, and lets in. Eight hundred and three messages moved through the list, and the largest of them were not arguments at all but inventories: what everyone was reading and why, whether the language you think in bends the thoughts you can have, what poetry had ever taken from jazz. On the second anniversary of the towers the room was quietly asking the oldest question a reader asks — what forms a mind — and it asked it, as it turned out, in the very weeks it would lose one of the century's great readers.

The reading thread ran to nearly thirty messages and was the warmest the list had produced in a year. Maria Damon reported cycling through town with *"a bag of kafka under gray clouds"*, Franz in three paperback pieces in her bag; others confessed to physicists and diarists, to books about isolation and finite space. There was no scoring in it, no canon war, just poets telling one another what was on the nightstand — the list at its most companionable, a room comparing not positions but appetites.

The stranger thread asked whether reading reaches all the way down. A wire item claiming that language influences spatial thinking at the moment of speaking drew twenty-odd replies, most of them skeptical; Mark Weiss dismantled the study as *"way beyond preliminary"*, unpersuaded that a handful of gestures proved that grammar shapes the world. Beside it ran a fond survey of poets and jazz — Hadbawnik hunting recordings for a Lincoln Center program, the room supplying Mingus with Hughes, Kerouac and Rexroth — the argument being, underneath, the same one: how much of a poem arrives from outside the words, in rhythm, in tongue, in breath.

Then the war came back, through a novel. On the anniversary itself, David Chirot forwarded Etel Adnan's counsel that to understand America after 9/11 one should reread Moby-Dick — Ahab, wounded and righteous, chasing *"the White Whale of Evil"* across a whole ocean while the rest of the world watched from the wake. By chance Chirot had spent that day reading Edward Said's introduction to the novel, in which Said warned that once conquest and the single-minded pursuit of a goal are embarked upon, *"no real limits can be set"*. In a month of bombs still falling, the sentence read less like criticism than prophecy.

And on the twenty-fifth Edward Said died, at sixty-seven, of leukemia. Harry Nudel marked it in four bare words — first John Ritter, now Said — but the room knew what

it had lost: the critic who had spent a life on exactly the month's question, how the West reads the East and mistakes the reading for the thing, and who was himself a serious pianist, forever pairing the score and the page. I have set September down exactly as the archive delivered it — the bag of Kafka, the doubted grammar, the jazz, the White Whale, and the reader of readings gone — because it was the month the list sat taking the measure of everything that forms a mind, and lost the man who had taught it most about the cost of reading the world as a thing to be conquered.

— *K. M. F.*

October 2003

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

October 2003 was the month the room discovered that its words had become property — and that a machine had just learned to copy them all. Seven hundred and sixty-three messages moved through the list, and running through a striking number of them was a single anxiety wearing several costumes: who owns a poem, who may reprint it, who may translate it, and what happens now that a company in Seattle has begun scanning every page ever printed. The oldest thing poets make, the arrangement of borrowed words, was suddenly a question for lawyers.

It surfaced first as housekeeping. Gabriel Gudding, translating a late Polish avant-gardist, asked the list plainly *“how does copyright work for translation”*, and set off a run of permissions talk — Mark Weiss advising that the law says one thing and practice usually another, Shanna Compton noting that most magazines want the estate's blessing before they will print a rendered poem. It was the unglamorous underside of the art laid bare: that a poem carried across a language is a negotiation with heirs, and that the room's traffic in other people's words rested on a scaffolding of permissions few had ever read.

Then Ron Silliman forwarded the Wired piece on the Great Library of Amazonia, and the housekeeping became vertigo. Aldon Nielsen tested it on his own name and found that Amazon had quietly built a citation index better than the professional ones, showing every book that cited him — and, once you looked, the full searchable text of the books themselves. There were *“copyright issues galore”*, he wrote, and no one could say what exactly was being planned. The fence and the flood had arrived together: in the same month the poets fretted over who might reprint a single poem, a corporation had copied the whole library at once.

Presiding over all this copying, by happy accident, was John Cage, whose festival filled Zankel Hall that month — Cage the patron saint of the un-owned, who had built a life from chance and silence and the conviction that the world's sounds were already free for anyone's taking. The spirit caught even the logistics: Mairead Byrne, unable to be at the Cage events and three readings and her five sisters at once, wrote wishing for *“methods of duplicating files of oneself, creating aliases”* — a poet longing, in the month of the copying machine, simply to copy herself into every room she was wanted in.

The month closed on two absences. The tributes to Edward Said ran on — Hilton Obenzinger's, especially, moving the room — and the irony was quiet and complete: the man's ideas now belonged to everyone who spoke them, copied freely, past any permission. And late in the month Elliott Smith died, at thirty-four, and David Kirschenbaum wrote a grieving remembrance of following the songwriter from small stage to small stage, down to a New Year's Eve when Smith called out "*I need a two minute song*" and played the one request shouted back. I have set October down exactly as the archive delivered it — the permissions, the scanned library, Cage's free sounds, the wish to self-copy, and the two men mourned — because it was the month the list learned that everything can now be copied except the one thing it most wanted to keep: a particular voice, which stops, and cannot be reprinted.

— K. M. F.

November 2003

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

November 2003 was the month the list put the word itself on trial. Nine hundred and four messages moved through it, and a remarkable share of them prosecuted the same three charges against language: that a word might be too dangerous to use, that a word might actually kill, and that a word might be owned. The room had spent the autumn arguing about who could copy a poem; now it argued about the poem's smallest unit, the single word, and whether it was a tool, a weapon, or a piece of property.

The first charge came from kari edwards, who asked the list, plainly, whether there was a problem using the word *"hermaphrodite"* in a poem — and set off a debate that ran past forty messages across its offshoots. Kevin Killian answered for the libertarian conscience, hating *"barring any word from the poetic vocabulary"*, and edwards, who had raised the alarm, agreed the matter was case by case, *"never banning or burning"*. It was the room working honestly at a genuinely hard thing: that a word can wound the living and that a poem needs every word there is, and that neither truth cancels the other.

The second charge was older and blunter. A thread titled words don't kill — only strangers with guns kill proposed that language was finally harmless, mere air; and a poster signing himself Ytzhak answered it in verse, insisting that *"words kill as fast as bullets"*, that a swerve of the tongue could pierce like a sword. It was the argument poetry has had with itself since Plato — whether the word is action or only its shadow — and the list, characteristically, could hold both positions at full volume in the same week without resolving either.

The third charge turned the tables: what happens when the powerful try to bar a word. Merriam-Webster had entered McJob — a job that *"provides little opportunity for advancement"* — and McDonald's demanded a retraction, furious that the dictionary would fix so unflattering a sense to its name. Stephen Vincent promptly coined McPoet in the same mold. The mirror was exact and delicious: the same month a room of poets refused on principle to bar a single word from a poem, a corporation was straining every lawyer to bar one from the language altogether.

And underneath the three trials ran the month's largest and gentlest thread, a rebuttal to all of them. Mairead Byrne invited the room to grow *"a short group poem to sprout"*, a line from each hand, and the contributions came — furniture press with

a cryable line, Byrne herself offering, out of a hard year, “*2 years of tears: time for flowers*”. I have set November down exactly as the archive delivered it — the word barred, the word as bullet, the word as trademark, and the word passed freely around a circle until it bloomed — because it was the month the list tried language on every charge the prosecutors could bring, and then quietly acquitted it by making, together, a small poem out of nothing but words.

— K. M. F.

December 2003

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

December 2003 closed the year on a single buried question: who, now, decides what a poem is worth? Eight hundred and eight messages moved through the list as the profession gathered for its year-end convention, and beneath the holiday housekeeping the room kept circling the machinery of value — the university that credentials a poet, the blog that has lately begun to rival it, and the little contests the list runs to crown its own. The old authority and the new one were both in the room that month, and neither could say what the art was finally for.

The academy took the first interrogation. As the MLA convened its marketplace of panels and interviews, Kazim Ali put a serious question to the list: what is the cultural purpose of teaching poetry in a university at all, given that English literature entered the curriculum in colonial India expressly to train *“the comprador middle bureaucratic class”*? A thread wryly titled the miracle of academia turned the question over without settling it. The room that lived, by and large, on teaching lines could not quite name what the teaching was for — a healthy discomfort, and an old one.

The new authority answered to no one yet. Threads responding to Silliman's blog now set the list's own agenda, the tail wagging the dog; and when Brian Clements asked, as a lurker, about the ethics of linking to another site, Michael Rothenberg gave the whole young medium's constitution in a sentence — *“we make this up as we go”*. Reputation was migrating that month from the tenured panel to the blogroll, from an institution with three centuries of rules to one with none, and the room could feel the ground shifting even as it argued about hyperlinks.

Between the two great authorities, the list built a small one of its own. The New Poems About Places contest ran to real ballots and formal voting, the room briefly playing academy to itself; and a gloriously silly thread multiplied the apostrophes in artist's book into an artist's's's's's book, the profession's fussy possessives collapsing into slapstick. It was the year-end comedy of poets ranking and punctuating and crowning one another — building, in miniature, exactly the value-machinery they spent the serious threads distrusting.

And through all of it ran the year's quietest thread, which was also its answer. Julie Kizershot asked the room for help cataloguing *“20th century representations of Emily Dickinson”*, the poems and portraits made of her by everyone from Hart Crane

to Susan Howe. The point made itself without anyone stating it: the most represented poet in the language had taught at no university, kept no blog, entered no contest, and published almost nothing in her life. I have set December down exactly as the archive delivered it — the questioned academy, the lawless blog, the little contest, and the woman in Amherst who wanted none of them — because it was the month the list spent worrying over who confers a poem's worth, in the same weeks it paid unanimous homage to the one poet who was never conferred anything at all.

— *K. M. F.*

January 2004

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

January 2004 opened the year on identity and its categories — which ones the poetry world sees, counts, and litigates, and which one it will not name. Nine hundred and sixty-three messages moved through the list, and thread after thread sorted people into their variables: race, gender, sexuality, each given its own loud forum. The room was fluent, by now, in the whole vocabulary of difference. What the month exposed, almost by accident, was the single category that vocabulary skips.

Race got the year's first megathread, and it arrived through a movie. With *The Return of the King* sweeping the box office, the list spent better than fifty messages on whether *The Lord of the Rings* was racist — the dark Haradrim, the subhuman orcs, the whiteness of the West it defends. A poster signing as hsn spoke for the defense, exasperated at *"attacking a fine production because of your image requirements"*, arguing that a mythology owes no census of its peoples. The debate was earnest and went nowhere, but it proved the room would read race into anything, even a wizard's war.

Gender and sexuality took their turns beside it. A run of threads tallied the imbalance of men and women in the poetry journals, counting bylines like a census; Brent Bechtel worried the question down to *"current societal constructions of gender"*; and the national fight over civil unions and gay marriage, then cresting toward the amendment Bush would soon endorse, spilled onto the list in its own contentious forum, one poster carefully partitioning which unions he would bless and which he would not. Every visible axis of identity got its hearing that month — each one named, measured, and argued to a standstill.

And then Kirby Olson named the one that had gone unmentioned. In a thread he called class, the muted variable, he argued flatly that *"class is much more of a determinant than race and gender"* in who gets to make anything at all — invoking Woolf, who prized the money that freed her from work above even the vote, and offering his own ledger, most of a life lived on under ten thousand dollars a year, writing slowly when he could afford to write. The room that could count genders in a journal had no column for the bank balance behind the byline.

It was the quietest and least resolved thread of the month, and it named the month's real subject. The list could argue race in a fantasy epic for fifty messages and audit the sexes of every masthead, but it fell nearly silent before the plainest determinant

of who writes — whether one has the time, and the time is bought with money. I have set January down exactly as the archive delivered it — the racism of orcs, the gender of mastheads, the marriage amendment, and the one variable spoken once and muted again — because it was the month the list showed it could see every identity a poet wears except the size of the room they get to write in.

— *K. M. F.*

February 2004

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

February 2004 found the houses of poetry all shaking at once. Eight hundred and eighty-seven messages moved through the list, and three of its month's largest threads were, at bottom, the same story told about three different buildings: the school where a poet is credentialed, the shop where a poet is sold, and the commons where a poet has always argued — each of them, that month, cracking. Outside, the country was fighting over which people its oldest institution, marriage, could be made to hold; inside, the poets were watching their own institutions fail to hold them.

The school went first. A Columbia student paper, forwarded to the list, reported that the university's new poetry MFA was under fire from its own enrollees — complaints of inconsistent grading, thin curriculum, favoritism, and *"false advertisement of what to expect in the program"*. The room, so much of which taught in or had passed through such programs, read the exposé with uneasy recognition. The credential the age increasingly required of poets was, on inspection, a product like any other, and the buyers had begun to file complaints.

The shop went next. A Boston Globe editorial on the embattled Grolier — the ancient Cambridge shrine that sold nothing but poetry — set off a thread as much about grievance as elegy. Vernon Frazer recalled being given *"a tongue lashing for giving support to Barnes & Noble"* by the store's fierce proprietor, and others rose to defend her devotion; but under the bickering lay a plain fact, that the one bookshop in America given wholly to poetry was fighting for its life against the chains. The temple was real, and so was its mortality.

And the commons was quietly emptying into a thousand private rooms. In a thread titled Why I'm Not a Blogger, Steven Shoemaker lodged the funniest protest of the season — *"Everyone's off blogging themselves!"*, he complained, and who had time to visit a zillion sites to see what people said? He signed himself the UnBlogger. Beneath the joke was the year's real migration: the list, the room's own commons, was losing its talkers to their solo blogs, and no editorial or petition would call them back.

The month's last word came from a bass. Aldon Nielsen posted the obituary of Malachi Favors, of the Art Ensemble of Chicago, dead at seventy-six — *"serial encourager of poets"*, Nielsen wrote, and part of some of the great jazz-and-poetry

recordings — another urban bushman, in his phrase, gone. Favors had spent his life inside a collective, one voice in a band that made its music together and called it ancient to the future. I have set February down exactly as the archive delivered it — the failing school, the embattled shop, the emptying commons, and the collective man gone — because it was the month the poets watched every house they gathered in begin to give way, and buried, with the right and terrible timing, the musician who had made his whole life out of not playing alone.

— *K. M. F.*

March 2004

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

March 2004 was the month the commons turned on itself and had to be policed. Better than a thousand messages moved through the list — its loudest month in a year — and a striking number of them were quarrels about quarreling: threads with names like Start an Argument on the Buffalo List, runs on slander and libel, deliberate provocations posted to see who would rise. The room's long coarsening, which it had been diagnosing in itself since 2002, reached the point that month where the management felt it had to step in, and where two men who had given their lives to the spoken and written word were, in the same weeks, lost.

The administration moved first. A NEW LISTSERV POLICY ON FLAMING went out, and when longtime members bristled the moderator wrote back to explain, disclaiming *"no interest whatsoever in thought-policing"* and admitting the deeper helplessness beneath the firmness: that it was finally impossible to manage the list, impossible to stop a flame once sent, and that a posted policy was really just a little foot-stomping to get people's attention. It was an honest confession of the limits of any commons — that a room open enough to be worth entering cannot be made safe.

Against the crackdown, and against the flight to blogs, Alan Sondheim rose to defend the mess itself. He went only occasionally to blogs, he wrote; the space felt too controlled, like window-shopping — *"I'd rather someone scream at me here"*. What he wanted was more people opening themselves on the list, which at its best was *"a place of vulnerability as well as advertisement"*. It was the truest thing said all month: that the flaming and the tenderness came from the same opening, and that a room scrubbed of the one would lose the other too.

Then the month's griefs arrived. Early in March the body pulled from the East River was identified as Spalding Gray, the monologist who had been missing since January — the artist who had made a whole body of work out of sitting at a plain table and telling the unvarnished truth of his own life aloud. The room noted it briefly and sadly; a performer who had turned confession into an art form had fallen silent, and the loss landed the harder for how nakedly he had always spoken.

And on the twelfth Cid Corman died in Kyoto, at seventy-nine. The list filled with his poems — Charlotte Mandel posting from Livingdying, others reaching for the small, breath-sized lines — and with the stories: Joel Weishaus recalling meeting him once in 1968, Corman more absorbed in the Olympics on the tea house television than in

another visiting American, "*The man had good taste*". For half a century, from Japan, Corman had edited *Origin* and answered every letter, making of poetry a lifelong exchange of gifts. I have set *March* down exactly as the archive delivered it — the flame policy, the defense of the vulnerable room, and the two lost voices — because it was the month the list, at its most quarrelsome, buried the confessor who had spoken his whole life plainly and the editor who had spent his answering everyone who wrote, and had to be reminded, by their deaths, what all the arguing was finally for.

— K. M. F.

April 2004

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

April 2004 was National Poetry Month, and the list marked it the way it always did — by doubting that poetry was worth anything at all. Eight hundred and thirty-five messages moved through the room while, in the background, Iraq curdled from conquest into insurgency, Fallujah aflame and worse revelations days away. Set against that, the annual civic celebration of verse struck the poets as almost embarrassing, and so they spent the month it was meant to honor them interrogating whether their art earned its place in a burning world.

The doubt had its own thread, and the thread told on the room beautifully. More Important than Poetry ran to twenty-six messages and promptly dissolved into whimsy: Haas Bianchi turned it into a poll asking *“what is your favorite baseball”* team, and the grand question of what outranks the art was answered, with a shrug and a grin, by the box scores. It was the list deflecting its own heaviest question — unable to sit for long with the possibility that the thing it loved was, in the scales of the moment, light.

Poetry's official apparatus offered no more comfort. When the Pulitzer went to Franz Wright for *Walking to Martha's Vineyard*, David Kellogg relayed the news to the list and appended the room's whole attitude toward such laurels in six words — *“Any thoughts? I haven't read it”*. And in the same weeks, proving the March flame policy a dead letter, a poster degraded Sylvia Plath's name into an obscene slur, the ugliest kind of poetry-world cruelty surfacing in the very month meant to celebrate the art. Pomp and viciousness, the two faces the profession keeps hidden the rest of the year, both showed at once.

Underneath ran the season's real argument, about confessionalism. Was the naked personal poem — Plath, Lowell, and now Wright's poems of recovery — a brave art or a self-indulgence, and could any private wound justify the page when the public world was on fire? The room worried it from every side, Stevens invoked against Plath, the lyric put on trial. It was the same question the whole month kept asking in different clothes: whether turning inward was a poet's duty or a poet's evasion.

The answer, when it came, came from Yeats. As Iraq fell apart, Stephen Vincent posted *The Second Coming* to the list, unable to shake *“Iraq collapses under the weight of events that this country has precipitated”* — the widening gyre, the center that cannot hold, the blood-dimmed tide loosed upon the world. For a moment the

month's doubt fell silent: a poem eighty years old was holding the catastrophe more exactly than any dispatch could. I have set April down exactly as the archive delivered it — the baseball poll, the shrugged-at prize, the cruelty, the trial of the lyric, and the old poem that suddenly told the truth — because it was the month the list spent proving poetry unimportant, and then watched a single stanza do what all the important things could not.

— *K. M. F.*

May 2004

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

May 2004 was the month the photographs came. The images from Abu Ghraib — the hood, the wires, the grinning guards — broke across the world at the end of April and filled May with a horror no editorial could soften, and the list, six hundred and seventy-three messages of it, was left to ask the question the pictures forced: what, if anything, can a poem do in the face of that. And in a terrible rhyme, the same month found the state answering a related question from the other end — whether a poem could itself be a crime.

The room's attempt at a response came from Kent Johnson, whose Abu Ghraib poem — circulated under the title *Get The Hood Back On*. — turned the atrocity into an indictment not only of the torturers but of the poetry world's comfortable distance from them. Andrew Loewen spoke for many in wrestling with it aloud, willing to take the charge to heart yet feeling it only mirrored an *"awareness of one's complicity"* the opposition already carried and could do nothing with. The poem was less an answer to the photographs than a confession that no one in the room had one.

The critics who followed sharpened the doubt. In the thread on Alison Croggon's response, Chris Stroffolino set Johnson's poem aside to name the larger trap — *"the impasse of much USA oppositional left writing"*, caught forever between humane empathy and its own self-righteousness, denouncing a horror in language that mostly reassured the denouncer of his virtue. Several in the thread pushed back, unwilling to concede that naming a horror was worthless simply because it also comforted the namer; but no one could quite dispel the suspicion at the honest, uncomfortable center of the month — that oppositional poetry, faced with a real photograph of real torture, was talking chiefly to itself.

And while the poets doubted poetry's power, the state affirmed it — as a threat. The California Supreme Court was weighing whether to uphold the conviction of a fifteen-year-old who had served a hundred days in juvenile hall for a poem the court read as *"a threat to kill his fellow students"*; a companion thread tracked poetry-in-the-schools programs recast as political danger, Stephen Vincent distilling the lesson to five words — *"Speech is free unless it's critical"*. The government that called its own photographs policy was prepared to jail a teenager for a metaphor.

That was the month's unbearable symmetry, and its whole argument. Real torture, documented and defended as necessary; an adolescent's violent poem, prosecuted

as if the words were the wound. Poetry stood accused of a power it did not feel it had, in the very weeks it confessed it could not answer the one image that mattered. I have set May down exactly as the archive delivered it — the photographs, Johnson's furious poem, the impasse, and the jailed boy's verse — because it was the month the picture did what the poem could not, and the state, unable to try the picture, put the poem on trial instead.

— *K. M. F.*

June 2004

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

June 2004 was the month death came in a crowd. In a single week the soprano saxophonist Steve Lacy died on the fourth, Ronald Reagan on the fifth, the guitarist Robert Quine the same day, the poet Bern Porter on the seventh, and Ray Charles on the tenth — and the list, six hundred and eighty-seven messages of it, turned into a ledger of the dead. What the month exposed, more than any single loss, was how unequally the room's grief was apportioned, and how little the size of a send-off had to do with the size of a life.

The president took the most air. Reagan's death opened a week of state funeral and wall-to-wall eulogy, and the list split hard between the sanctioned national mourning and its counter-memory. Mark Weiss filed the acid rebuttal, noting sourly that Nancy Reagan had become "*our national Queen Godmother*" and offering, for those too young to remember, a colder inventory of the family-values 1980s. It was the month's first lesson in the politics of grief: that some deaths arrive pre-scripted with a nation's tears, and that a poets' room will always contain someone determined to read the fine print.

The musicians the poets actually loved got a warmer and more crowded farewell. Steve Lacy — who had set poems, worked the far edge of the music, toured Monk with Roswell Rudd — drew the fondest thread of the month, David Hadbawnik recalling "*an un-publicized solo set*" in a since-defunct room on Mission Street as the memory he treasured most. Ray Charles, gone at the same hour, drew his own quiet chorus. The list had always half-belonged to jazz, and it mourned the players the way you mourn family.

Beneath the obituaries ran a thread that was, without meaning to be, about all of them. Looking for Poems on Paintings gathered the ekphrastic tradition — Williams on Brueghel, Creeley and Archie Rand, the whole New York School habit of writing "*poems based on paintings*" — the oldest human device for keeping a vanished thing in view. In a month of the newly dead, the room compiled, almost tenderly, a bibliography of the art whose entire purpose is to outlast its subject.

And the poet among the dead got the smallest notice of all. Bern Porter died at ninety-three in Belfast, Maine — a maker of found poems who had spent a life turning the culture's discarded scraps into art, and whose own lines ran, plainly, "*And war shall fail*". Craig Allen Conrad marked it for the list, saying that with Porter's story no

one need ever wonder again what the strength of poetry can be — and the thread ran to three messages, against the president's week and the saxophonist's eighteen. I have set June down exactly as the archive delivered it — the state funeral, the mourned musicians, the poems on paintings, and the found-poetry man found small — because it was the month the list wrote, in the plain arithmetic of its grief, an honest confession of what it loved most and what it too easily let pass.

— *K. M. F.*

July 2004

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

July 2004 was the month the list took the measure of its own ego. Seven hundred and thirty messages moved through it in the heat, and while the Democrats gathered in Boston to nominate a candidate in a festival of managed self-presentation, the room ran its own smaller referendum on the same subject: the poet who broadcasts himself, the provocateur who pokes for sport, and whether a commons can survive its loudest members. Underneath the summer thread and the announcements, the month kept asking who talks too much, and to what end.

It broke into the open with an open letter. David Bircumshaw, worn down by the daily tide of Alan Sondheim's poems, addressed him directly and mercilessly — calling him *"the saint of disposable verse"* and his relentless output *"the narcissistic voice of the ego-driven consumer"*, a project in which one heard nobody but Alan. It was cruel and it was partly fair, and the room knew both at once: Sondheim had topped its posting counts for years, and the complaint named a real question about what it means to pour oneself into a shared room until the room is mostly you.

The provocateurs kept their own counsel. Andrew Loewen, defending a poem written frankly to needle, conceded the whole game with a grin — *"being provocative on this list is like being provocative in a church basement"*, he wrote, admitting he liked to tussle, that he had loved getting bloodied at punk shows. It was the ego's other face: not the flood but the poke, the poem posted less to be read than to start a fight. The list, that summer, was full of both, and short on much else.

Even the fellowship offline had turned combative. Ric Carfagna's fond history of the annual Boston Poetry Gathering — begun in 1999 in a cramped, un-airconditioned room, electric and free of *"a poetic axe to grind"* — reached the list under the grim new title Boston Poetry Massacre, the once-innocent gathering having curdled, like the list itself, into faction and grievance, its name rewritten as a crime scene. The disease was not confined to the wires; wherever the poets assembled, in a hot Cambridge room or a scrolling inbox, the axe came too, and the fellowship kept discovering it had been carrying one all along.

Against all of it, one quiet request. Steven Shoemaker, planning a class, simply asked the room for *"poems about love and/or eros"*, and the thread that answered him was the month's only real reprieve — until it, too, was shadowed by the suspicion of the age, a friend of Craig Allen Conrad's insisting that men could not write love as it

actually exists and that *"Rilke was a liar"*. I have set July down exactly as the archive delivered it — the letter to Alan, the church-basement provocateur, the massacred gathering, and the wary search for a true love poem — because it was the month the list drowned in its own ego and someone, gently, asked it to write instead about someone else.

— *K. M. F.*

August 2004

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

August 2004 was a quieter month — six hundred and five messages in the late-summer heat — and it spent itself worrying at a single problem: whether language is ever adequate to the hardest things it is asked to carry. The Olympics played in Athens and the Republican convention loomed over New York, but the list turned inward, circling the subjects that break speech — a war of rhetoric it could not referee, the origin of poetry itself, and the plain fact of who had died. It was a month less of argument than of people testing, and mostly doubting, the reach of words.

The largest thread asked the question outright. As a long, bruising exchange over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict flared and re-flared, Richard Jeffrey Newman tried to name what the room was failing at: the nearly impossible task of finding “*a language in which to talk about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict*” that did not conflate a rhetoric with the people who live under it, or recycle the age-old canards on every side. He offered no solution, only the honest measure of the difficulty — that on the subject that most needed language, the room had none it could share.

So the list went looking for where language even comes from. A thread hunting the source of a Dada line turned up Tzara's claim that “*Poetry is made in the mouth*” — made, that is, in the body, spat rather than found, the opposite of the polished artifact — and the room chewed happily on the provenance of a sentence about provenance. It was a characteristic swerve: unable to speak to the war, the poets could always be relied upon to spend a week on the exact wording of a manifesto about how poems are made.

The doubt turned savage, too. Haas Bianchi, having endured two hours of mainstream verse on Chicago radio, reported it was “*like eating wonder bread drenched in velveeta*”, and a companion thread flatly announced that experimental poetry does not exist. Between the banality Bianchi heard and the provocation that the alternative was a fiction, the month left open the ugliest possibility of all — that the argument the list had been having for a decade was over a distinction that no longer named anything real.

And so the only fully adequate response the month produced was a list of the dead. David Baratier began compiling POETS WHO DIED IN 2004, a grimly funny roll call — apologizing in advance for ruining anyone's day, prescribing candle-buying and driving with one's lights on — and making the real point plainly, that “*poets deaths*

are sorely under publicized", Jess Collins and others gone all but unremarked. I have set August down exactly as the archive delivered it — the unspeakable conflict, the mouth-made poem, the velveeta verse, and the roll of the dead — because it was the month the list confessed how little language could do, and then did the one thing language always can: it wrote down the names.

— *K. M. F.*

September 2004

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

September 2004 turned, without quite announcing it, on the art and the politics of leaving things out. Six hundred and six messages moved through the list, and its largest currents all ran on omission: a form built from erasing words, a war conducted in a vocabulary built to erase the dead, and the old question of which poets a canon keeps by erasing what they did. It was a month about the blank space — what a poem reveals by subtraction, and what power conceals by the same means.

The form came first, and the list loved it. A thread on the poetry of omission or erasure ran to better than thirty messages, poets trading the lineage of the technique — mIEKAL and naming Tom Phillips's treated Victorian novel "*The mother of all erasure texts*", others reaching back to Ronald Johnson painting out Paradise Lost until a new poem surfaced through the gaps. Erasure, in their hands, was revelation: you took words away not to hide something but to uncover the poem that had been trapped inside another man's prose.

Then Stephen Vincent posted the week's dispatch from Fallujah, and the same operation showed its dark twin. The US military called its strikes on the city "*precision*"; the Guardian reported an ambulance torn apart and, in the plain words the euphemism was built to bury, that "*civilians were being killed and wounded*". Here was erasure as concealment — a single adjective doing the work of deleting the dead from the sentence, the exact inverse of the poets' art. One subtraction uncovered a truth; the other interred one.

Between the two lay the month's hardest omission, and Haas Bianchi walked straight into it. Assembling a lecture on the poets "*who compromised or actively were pro fascist*", alongside those who collaborated with Stalin and those who resisted, he asked the room to help him discern what made the difference. Under the research question sat the canon's permanent evasion: whether we keep a great poet's work by quietly erasing his crimes, and whether Pound's Cantos are read, still, only because the reader agrees to leave something out.

The faint counterweight came from Helen Vendler, whose defense of why we should study the arts circulated as the month's argument for what art keeps against forgetting — the case that the humanities exist precisely to refuse the convenient blank, to insist on the parts of the record everyone else would rather delete. It was a thin thread beside the others, drifting quickly into jokes, and that thinness was itself

the point: the room could mount a roaring debate about erasing words for beauty and barely raise its voice for the argument that some things must not be left out at all. I have set September down exactly as the archive delivered it — the erased novel made luminous, the erased civilians made to vanish, and the fascist poet we agree not to see whole — because it was the month the list held omission in both hands at once and learned that everything turns on the motive: whether you take the words away to find a truth hiding in them, or to make sure no one finds it.

— *K. M. F.*

October 2004

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

October 2004 was the month the room lost the philosopher it had half been built on. Jacques Derrida died on the eighth, and nine hundred and thirty-five messages moved through the list, a great many of them mourning him and a great many more at war with the way the country's paper of record chose to bury him. Three weeks from a bitter election, with Fallujah still smoking, the poets found themselves, improbably, defending the reputation of a difficult French theorist of reading against an obituary that read less like a notice than a settling of scores.

The insult was the story. The New York Times ran a dismissive send-off heavy with words like fashionable, slippery, and murky, and then, as Harry Nudel noted, followed it with a further "*acerbic critique of Derrida*" on the Arts and Leisure page. The room seethed. Austinwja spoke for the defense, granting that deconstruction had exposed the murkiness of language but insisting that "*there is nothing murky about Deconstruction*" itself — that the traditionalists' long difficulty with the method was an indictment of the readers, not the thought.

And the thought was, in large part, theirs. For twenty years the Language poets and their heirs had drawn on Derrida for the working assumptions of their art — that meaning is unstable, that a text is at war with itself, that every word arrives already crossed out and deferred. The erasure the list had spent September admiring as a technique turned out to have a philosopher, the theorist of writing-under-erasure himself, and he had just died. Much of what the room did when it wrote descended, whether it liked the pedigree or not, from the man the Times was calling murky.

Life went on beneath the grief in its small prohibitions and vanities. The new smoking ban had reached the bars and the reading series, and the poets fought it thread by thread, one side insisting "*smoking is lung rape*" while the other mourned the end of the smoky room. The Poetry Foundation, meanwhile, began spending its Lilly fortune — a \$25,000 humor prize to Billy Collins — and Aaron Tieger skewered the priorities, praising it for rewarding obscure poets before wondering aloud "*isn't that a tautology*". The mainstream had money now, and the room its usual sardonic distance from it.

But the month belonged to the obituary, and the obituary proved his case. The man who had taught a generation that every text betrays itself, that contempt and anxiety leak through the seams of even the most authoritative prose, was eulogized in a text

that betrayed itself completely — its sneer exposing precisely the frightened, defensive reading he had spent a lifetime diagnosing. I have set October down exactly as the archive delivered it — the death, the insult, the debt the room could not disown, and the smoke clearing from the bars — because it was the month Jacques Derrida died and his enemies, trying to have the last word, gave him instead one final proof.

— *K. M. F.*

November 2004

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

November 2004 was the morning after, and it lasted the whole month. Bush was re-elected on the second, carried in part by a wave of ballot measures and a narrative about moral values, and the list — which sat almost entirely on the losing side — moved eleven hundred and seventy-five messages of grief, recrimination, and one very old question asked with new urgency: on the day you lose, is poetry a rebellion or a futility? The room had argued the point idly for years. Now it argued as though the answer mattered.

The despair came first and honestly. A thread simply titled finding it hard to write poetry today gathered the paralysis many felt, and someone posed it as a parable: if your house were burning, would you grab a bucket or step back and write a poem about it? Joel Weishaus answered for the faith that art outlasts its tyrants, calling it an underground fire, a joyful smoldering, and offering the line the month needed — *"The Bushes of history come and go, while Whitman remains singing"*. It was consolation, and the room half-believed it.

Then the futility was put on trial by name. A thread called poetry is futile — prove me wrong sent the room reaching, of all places, for Pound's late fragments, the broken confession of a poet who had lost his center trying to make a paradise; Chris Stroffolino turned the passage over and asked the group directly, *"do you think Pound is saying poetry is futile"*, testing whether even the master's despair was final. To meet the morning's despair the list had reached, tellingly, for the century's grandest failure, as if only a ruin that large could speak to the size of the loss.

The re-elected order pressed on the wound. The month's NEA outrage flared over an arts establishment the poets read as hostile to everything they valued; Austinwja argued that to judge American poetry by the endowment's honorees was to lose the Beats and the New York School entirely, buried *"the way Reagan tried to bury all the cultural victories of the 60s"*. The election had not only cost them a president; it seemed to threaten, again, the erasure of the whole insurgent tradition they belonged to.

And then, stubbornly, the room talked itself back to work. The month's largest thread was a coinage — poetrying — that turned the noun into a verb, forty-nine messages insisting that poetry is a thing one does and cannot stop doing, that it is, as Haas Bianchi put it, apart from cave painting *"the oldest artform known to people"*. I

have set November down exactly as the archive delivered it — the paralysis, the burning house, Pound's ruin, the threatened erasure, and the defiant verb — because it was the month the poets lost an election and then, by arguing themselves hoarse over whether poetry was futile, quietly disproved it: they could not, even in defeat, stop making the thing.

— *K. M. F.*

December 2004

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

December 2004 spent itself on a question the whole year had been circling and the election had sharpened to a point: can the work ever be cleanly separated from the sin — in the beloved book that carries a bigotry, in the living writer whose life dishonors the page, in the public square that must decide whose values it enforces? Nine hundred and twenty-three messages moved through the list as the profession gathered for its December convention, and its largest threads were all, underneath, the same interrogation of whether art gets to be judged apart from the company it keeps.

The canon went first, and its prejudices were the exhibit. Aaron Belz, reading *Oliver Twist*, asked the room about Fagin — endlessly called the Jew, drawn with “*the filching, the hording, the crooked nose*” — and drew the line outward to Fitzgerald’s Wolfsheim, to Eliot, to the antisemitism folded into books the room otherwise revered. It was September’s fascist-poets problem in a new key: not whether to keep a compromised writer, but whether the bigotry is a removable stain or part of the weave, sitting quietly inside the classics everyone still assigns.

Then the same question turned to the living. In a thread titled What is a man of letters?, a poster laid it out as a catechism — is a writer judged only by his work, or must his private conduct count; can an abuser or an adulterer still hold the title, or does the art require it — “*Or also his character as a human being?*” The room, full of people who separated the poem from the poet for a living, found the separation harder to defend the more plainly it was stated.

The public square supplied the political version. A long thread on forced secularism turned on the new French law “*disallowing Muslim girls and young women to wear their head coverings*” in the state schools, and Craig Allen Conrad worked his own ambivalence honestly — sympathetic to a secular public sphere, uneasy at the coercion required to enforce one. Whose beliefs a shared space may bar, and whose it must accommodate, was the culture’s version of the room’s literary quarrel, and no more soluble — the same knot of art and conduct, text and belief, tied now around a schoolgirl’s scarf instead of a novelist’s caricature.

And then the safe distance collapsed. While the list calmly dissected antisemitism in Dickens as a museum specimen, an ugly antisemitic generalization flared in a thread called everyday people, and Donna Kuhn had to stand up and rebut it directly —

“Making wild and negative generalizations about religious groups”, she wrote, was not productive and, in this case, completely wrong. I have set December down exactly as the archive delivered it — the stained classics, the compromised man of letters, the barred headscarf, and the bigotry loose in the room’s own inbox — because it was the month the list discovered it could not study prejudice in the canon at arm’s length, since the same prejudice, uninvited, was posting alongside it.

— K. M. F.

January 2005

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

January 2005 caught the list in its new-year reflex: the compulsion to rank. Eight hundred and forty-three messages moved through it, and its largest currents were all species of sorting — the year's best poems audited, the journals ranked, the sexiest poem crowned, the list even restructuring the machinery by which it delivered itself. The month made a running comedy of a permanent embarrassment: that the poetry world cannot stop ordering the one thing that most resists an order, and half-knows the ruler it keeps reaching for does not fit.

The anthology drew first blood. A long critical review of the Best American Poetry 2004 sent Catherine Daly to the root of the absurdity — that measuring one poem against another was *"comparing two people speaking in tongues"*, like ranking passages of a Greek you cannot read. The volume's very title promised a settled hierarchy of a year's verse; Daly's point was that the promise was incoherent at the core, and that everyone reaching for the anthology already knew it and reached anyway, hungry for a verdict they did not believe could be delivered.

The satirists pushed the mania to its logical end. In a deadpan thread on objective journal rankings, Jon Corelis proposed scoring each poet by a single number — pages of verse multiplied by each magazine's rank, summed into a tidy figure that could be *"discreetly listed on business cards, resumes, cover letters"*. It was a joke, and it was barely a joke; the room laughed because the arithmetic was only a hair's breadth from the reputational math it already did in its head every day.

Even the commons ranked its own overflow. A thread on Digest restructuring took up the perennial grumble that the list had grown crammed with self-published poems, and the perennial retort — just use the delete button — and tried to engineer a way for the digest-readers to stop scrolling past everything to find the little they wanted. The room could not even receive itself anymore without first sorting the flood into keep and discard — the ranking impulse turned inward, the list appraising its own members' output the way the anthology appraised the year's, and finding most of it, by the arithmetic of attention, expendable.

The truest ranking hid inside the silliest. In the SEXIEST poem of 2004 thread — the one contest honest enough to admit it was a game — Craig Allen Conrad crowned Charles Bernstein's *Girly Man*, and then, almost in passing, noted that Bernstein had *"dedicated its reading to the memories of Gil Ott"* and the year's other dead. I have

set January down exactly as the archive delivered it — the unrankable anthology, the parody scores, the sorted digest, and the sexiest poem read for the dead — because it was the month the room ranked everything it could reach and stumbled, at the bottom of its most frivolous list, onto the only order that ever holds: not best to worst, but the living and the gone.

— *K. M. F.*

February 2005

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

February 2005 sent the list digging for the floor of language — the silence under it, the letters it is built from, the myth it is said to have come from. Eight hundred and fifty messages moved through the room in the cold, and its most characteristic threads all tunneled downward, past meaning and past craft, toward the raw materials: the twenty-six signs, the sacred origin, and the plain quiet that music and speech are laid over. It was a month less about what a poem says than about what a poem is made of, all the way down to the last thing under the last thing.

The letters came first, as a game. A thread called POST AN ALPHABET POEM drew abecedarians by the dozen, poets marching a poem word by word from A to Z — Christophe Casamassima of furniture press offering a line that ran *“acrimony! but can dis easy fret grant his insistence?”* before spending its way out to zohar. It was constraint as delight: hand the room the bare sequence of the alphabet and it would build, out of that most mechanical order, something that surprised even the builder.

Then the tunnel went deeper, into origins. A thread on Robert Graves revived his theory of poetic language, Mary Jo Malo tracing his account of the shift from a matriarchal to a patriarchal way of thought and insisting, with him, that once *“Poetry had power and produced tangible results in people's lives”*. A companion thread on the religious foundation of language pushed the same question further back still — the intuition that under the letters and the grammar lies something older than either, magic or prayer, the first use words were ever put to.

And under all of it, silence. The list took up John Cage's 4'33", trading its history — Glenn Bach recalling how David Tudor first performed it by keeping the piano shut, marking the movements only as he *“lowered and raised the lid of the keyboard”*, the score reading simply TACET. The piece proposed that the floor beneath all music was not a note but the room's own ambient sound, and that a composer's real work might be only to frame the quiet and ask you to hear it.

The month's perfect emblem was that silence going pop. mIEKAL and reported that his campaign had landed 4'33" on an ABC radio poll of the piano pieces listeners could not live without — and he meant it literally, calling it *“the only piece which I literally can't live without”*, since as long as one is alive one cannot stop hearing. I have set February down exactly as the archive delivered it — the alphabet marched to Z, the goddess-tongue of Graves, the sacred root, and the silence charting at

number forty — because it was the month the room dug to the bottom of language and found, waiting there, not a word but a quiet it could not switch off, and could not, that winter, stop loving.

— *K. M. F.*

March 2005

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

March 2005 went about its ordinary business — theory, celebrity, a bitter departure — until the last morning of the month, when the news came from Odessa, Texas, that Robert Creeley had died, and the whole of it reorganized around the loss. Eight hundred and seventy-nine messages moved through the list, and the ones that mattered were the last ones: for the room that carries Buffalo's name, Creeley was not a distant master but nearly a household god, the university's own for decades and the last strong link to the generation that had invented the tradition the list descends from.

Before the news, the usual churn. Lori Emerson wrote in stuck on a book review, having read Walter Benn Michaels on Susan Howe and confessing *"I can't quite get at how to refute him"*; Ashbery turned up in the Times Book Review; a light thread traded brushes with fame. It was the list in its standard weather, half serious inquiry and half gossip, the fine machinery of the profession grinding along with no idea what the month's end held — the theory ground finer than ever over the materiality of Dickinson's manuscripts, as if the deepest question available were where a poem is printed rather than whether its maker is still alive.

And then a fracture that would look, in hindsight, like an omen. Timothy Yu posted *Why I Am Leaving the Poetics List*, quitting in disgust after a straight-faced discussion of whether a well-known racial slur was acceptable in polite company — the whole exchange carrying, he wrote, *"outright racism that I have come to expect"* whenever such subjects surfaced there. A commons that a founding generation had built to hold the art was coarsened enough, by 2005, to drive out exactly the voices it could least afford to lose.

Against that small desertion, the size of what was leaving. Robert Creeley had taught at Buffalo for the better part of forty years; he was the last of the Black Mountain founders, Olson and Duncan long gone before him, and he had carried their credo — that form is never more than an extension of content — into a poetry of almost unbearable economy, all breath and pause and the pressure of the line-break. He had given the New American Poetry much of its nerve, and this list, more than any other, its lineage.

Charles Bernstein brought the word. He reported the death simply, Creeley gone that morning *"as the sun rose over Odessa, Texas"*, his wife and children beside him,

and then turned the poet's own habitual sign-off into the truest elegy the month produced: *"Onward!; but I, for one, falter"*. I have set March down exactly as the archive delivered it — the theory it could not refute, the member it drove away, and the root it lost on the final morning — because it was the month the Poetics list was orphaned of the man who had been half its reason, and could manage, in its grief, only his word and its own faltering: onward.

— K. M. F.

April 2005

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

April 2005 arrived as National Poetry Month and the list spent it in mourning. Robert Creeley had died on the last morning of March, and the elegies ran on all through April — for Creeley, from Annie Finch and others, alongside a return to his collaborations with the sculptor Marisol. Seven hundred and fifty messages moved through the room, and beneath the tributes the month took on a single preoccupation: how the dead are weighed. With Creeley freshly gone, a pope buried and replaced in Rome, and Terri Schiavo's long dying just ended, the poets found themselves, in the month meant to celebrate the art, taking the measure of its dead instead.

The reassessment machine ran in plain sight. Craig Allen Conrad circulated a Q&A on how some stand on Allen Ginsberg today, eight years after his death, and reported that though Ginsberg had always been controversial, lately *"a floodgate of vitriol against him has been released"*. It was a glimpse of the process every dead poet enters: the beloved figure handed over, almost at once, to revision and grievance, the standing revised the moment the man can no longer defend it.

The principle underneath got its own thread — the life of versus the work of a poet. Mary Jo Malo argued it plainly, that a poet *"isn't any better than any other person"*, that the confusions of a life will surface in the work whether the poet wills it or not, and that we ought to judge the poem on its merit and not the maker on his flaws — or, she added, better yet not judge at all. It was exactly the counsel the month was constitutionally unable to take.

The living version was a question of what to keep. A thread titled Library Needs New Poetries Desperately worried over which of the present's poetry would be collected and so survive, Gregory Betts offering a short canon of the essential — Christian Bök's Eunoia, McCaffery, the Montreal manifesto — the same assay of the dead run forward onto the not-yet-dead, sorting the living, while they still wrote, into what a shelf would preserve and what it would quietly let vanish.

Rome supplied the grand mirror, and the poets could not resist it. As the conclave sealed itself to choose a successor to John Paul II, Haas Bianchi proposed a Conclave of Poets — if the room were locked up and made to *"vote for Pope of the Poets"*, whom would it elect? The joke's point was that the poets, unlike the cardinals, would choose no one; they could only mourn. I have set April down exactly as the archive

delivered it — the elegies for Creeley, the vitriol at Ginsberg, the trial of the life against the work, and the pope-less conclave — because it was the month the list was told to celebrate poetry and spent it weighing its dead, unable to take the single piece of wisdom the weighing produced: better yet, not to judge at all.

— *K. M. F.*

May 2005

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

May 2005 was quieter — six hundred and twenty-five messages as the term wound down — and it spent its energy on an awkward question about its own art: is there any honesty in poetry, and would we want there to be? The month's threads kept circling the same suspicion from different sides. Poetry, after all, has always run on the very things an honor code forbids: it steals, it deceives, it displays the self without shame. The room spent May asking, half seriously, whether a poem could be told from a con.

The question got posed as a game. Under the heading of whether you can know a poem when you see one and whether there is an honor code, Mairead Byrne ran what Jeremy Hawkins fondly called her *"experiments in deception"*, posting things and daring the room to say whether they were poems at all. The joke had teeth: recognizing a poem, it turned out, was an act of trust, and the poet could always cheat, because nothing in the form itself certifies that anyone meant it.

The theft was older and prouder. A thread on Lautreamont and détournement reached back to the tradition that made appropriation a method rather than a crime — Mary Jo Malo invoking Ducasse and the Situationists, insisting *"We must learn to use the media against the media"*, Nicholas Ruiz answering with Barthes on turning myth against myth. Here the room's own lineage argued the opposite of an honor code: that the honest thing, faced with a saturated culture, was to loot it artfully and turn its materials back on it.

The third temptation was simple display. In a civil, bruised exchange under Blogs and Narcissism, Nick Piombino defended his remarks on weblogs against the charge that they were mere self-regard, protesting he felt *"open to having my mind changed about this"* even as he felt misread. It was the year's recurring worry in miniature — whether the blog, and the poem, had become chiefly a mirror — argued this time without the flaming, which was itself a small mercy.

The month's answer, such as it was, came from Kansas. A hometown event in Topeka honored Ronald Johnson, the erasure poet who had made a book by taking Milton's words away until a new one showed through — a theft that was pure homage — and Stephen Vincent wished aloud that San Francisco would do as much for its own dead, lamenting that with a few street names aside *"we settle for ghosts"*, and proposing a Spicer oak strung with a transistor radio. I have set May down exactly as the archive

delivered it — the deception game, the proud theft, the narcissist's mirror, and the poet honored at home — because it was the month the list asked whether poetry had an honor code and half-answered that it never did: you steal the poem reverently or you receive it like a broadcast, and the only honor is in the handling.

— *K. M. F.*

June 2005

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

June 2005 was the smallest month the list had seen in years — four hundred and fifty-two messages, the summer and the blogs between them having drained the room to a trickle. And the thinning had become visible enough that the poets began, for once, to talk about it directly. The question that hung over the month was whether the thing they belonged to was quietly dying, whether poetry, or at least this room, had begun to consume itself; and the answer, when it came, arrived from an unexpected and consoling direction.

Aaron Belz said the quiet part out loud. Posting a genuine scholarly query about comedy and the comic and hearing nothing back, he appended an ache: was there not a time when a question like his would draw *"incredibly helpful replies"* within the hour, and was the list now reduced to announcement this and announcement that, the once-teeming List Mind gone slack? He softened it into self-deprecation, but the diagnosis was unmistakable and it came from inside the patient: the commons was fading, and its oldest hands could feel it.

The self-consumption had its own thread, aptly named. In a snappish exchange over why poetry is eating itself alive, Steve Dalachinsky needled Thomas Savage about whether *"did yer ego get in the way there"*, and the room's dwindled energy turned, as it so often did now, inward and personal — the art feeding not on the world but on its own practitioners' vanity and grievance, which is exactly what eating oneself alive looks like — a shrinking body warming itself by burning its own furniture, mistaking the heat for vitality.

And then the consolation, from the far side of a language. A thread called The Arab in Me traced the foreign roots buried in familiar European words, and Murat Nemet-Nejat offered the perfect one: that our cipher and our zero descend from the Arabic *sifr*, because *"Arabs invented the concept of zero, a giant step in thinking"*. Here was the counter-truth the shrinking room needed — that language never starves, because it lives not by consuming itself but by borrowing endlessly from every other tongue.

The two facts sat together and did not cancel. This particular room was thinning toward silence, its List Mind fading, its energy turned to ego; and yet the thing it had gathered to serve could not die the same death, because a poetry fed by the whole world's languages — the zero smuggled in from Arabic, the giant step taken

elsewhere and handed on — is never eating itself, only setting another place at the table. I have set June down exactly as the archive delivered it — the unanswered query, the mourned List Mind, the ego-quarrel, and the borrowed zero — because it was the month the list watched itself shrink and half-understood the consolation hidden in its own smallest thread: the commons may empty, but the language it loved is fed from everywhere, and will outlast the room.

— *K. M. F.*

July 2005

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

July 2005 was smaller still — four hundred and twenty messages — and it caught the list in an unlovely posture: bent over its own reflection while, in the same first week, two poets died and a third, already dead, was put back on trial. The room had grown thin enough that its own decline was now a standing topic, and thin enough that real losses passed through it with barely a ripple. It was a month of self-diagnosis and small obituaries, the commons taking its own pulse over the bodies of the newly gone.

The navel-gazing had its threads. Under headings like About the Poetics List and a franker one confessing disappointment in the list outright, the room debated its own fading and what might be done — the patient reading its own chart aloud. The mechanism of the decline was visible even inside the threads: Chris Stroffolino announced that he had finally, sheepishly, started a blog, one more voice migrating from the shared room to a private window.

And it was on that new blog that he re-tried the dead. Among his first posts Stroffolino asked whether Robert Creeley had been stupid about gender and love — a fair enough question, and a telling one for its timing, arriving barely three months after the list had buried Creeley as its household god. The reassessment machine that April had trained on Ginsberg now turned on the room's own most beloved dead; the commons, it seemed, would eat even its founders, and quickly, and it would increasingly do the eating not on the list at all but on the scattered blogs that were draining it — the critique of Creeley staged in a private window the whole room could no longer be counted on to see.

Against the self-absorption, the month's best instinct held. Its largest thread was an act of pure outward curiosity: Gary Sullivan asking the room for names of *"Irish experimental/innovative poets"*, which drew word of the Cork festival and a whole neglected avant-garde across the water. Beside it ran renga rules and poems about paintings — the room, even shrinking, still reaching past itself toward other countries, other forms, other arts, which was the one habit worth keeping.

The reaching could not undo the losing. On the Fourth of July, Lorenzo Thomas died in Houston, and Charles Bernstein called him *"a radiant voice of, and for, the poetry of the Americas"*; the next day Gustaf Sobin, René Char's American heir in Provence, was gone too, Pierre Joris posting the news and another poet answering only, *"This is*

terrible news (in a series of such)". Two real poets in two days, a handful of messages apiece. I have set July down exactly as the archive delivered it — the self-diagnosis, the migrating voices, the re-tried master, and the two quiet deaths — because it was the month the list stared so hard at its own decline that it nearly failed to notice it was burying, almost in passing, poetry the size of Lorenzo Thomas and Gustaf Sobin.

— K. M. F.

August 2005

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

August 2005 was the smallest month yet — four hundred and one messages — and it was bookended by catastrophe: a killing in Iraq at its start, a drowned city at its end. The list had grown so thin that on an ordinary week it could barely sustain a conversation. But an emergency asks a different thing of a network than an argument does, and this one, near-dead as it was, turned out to be exactly the right size for the task the month demanded — not to debate, but to find out who was still alive.

The first shock came with an uncanny near-miss of a name. A freelance journalist named Steven Vincent, once an art critic, was murdered in Basra at the beginning of the month, and the list's own Stephen Vincent — its San Francisco poet, a familiar voice for years — had to write in to still the worried calls, explaining that he was not that man, that he was a Stephen and not a Steven, and that he was writing safely *"under the cool protective summer fog in San Francisco"*, his politics on the war a full hundred and eighty degrees from his dead near-namesake. The coincidence left a chill the room could not quite shake.

Then, on the twenty-ninth, the levees broke. Hurricane Katrina drowned New Orleans, and the list turned to it instantly and completely. Skip Fox opened a roll call of the city's poets — who had gotten out, who was unaccounted for, Alex Rawls and Roger Kamenetz and Brett Evans and their families — passing what fragments he had and promising simply, *"I'll post as I might hear"*. The room became, overnight, a switchboard, its scattered members the only news service that could say whether a particular poet had lived.

And a voice came back out of the water. Camille Martin, a New Orleans poet who had fled to Lafayette, wrote to the list to thank Skip Fox and to send a first-person narrative of her escape and of the city *"worsening as levees continue to be breached"*, the gravity of it mounting even as she typed. The list carried her account out of the disaster the way it had once carried arguments about the line-break — except that now the stakes were water and survival, and the medium had never mattered more.

It was the grace hidden in the decline. A commons too thinned to quarrel had rediscovered the oldest reason a commons exists at all — not to be right, but to keep each other's names, to ask into the dark whether everyone got out. I have set August

down exactly as the archive delivered it — the shared name of a murdered man, the broken levees, the roll call, and the voice from Lafayette — because it was the month the near-silent list proved that a room of poets is never more truly a community than when it stops performing and starts counting heads, one friend at a time, to see who is still there.

— *K. M. F.*

September 2005

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

September 2005 staged a collision the month could not have arranged more pointedly if it tried: the poetry world's largest thread was about its own narcissism, in the very weeks a drowned city needed it to look at anything but itself. Six hundred and fourteen messages moved through the list, and they divided cleanly into two economies — the manufacture of literary attention, endlessly self-directed, and the catastrophe of the people to whom no attention had ever been paid at all. The room spent the month with a mirror in one hand and a dispatch from the flood in the other.

The mirror came first, and it was sharp about itself. Gabriel Gudding opened Literary Narcissism and the Manufacture of Scandal, reading Ginsberg through the old Naropa wars as a case study in what he called an Economy of Attention — the literary narcissist who welcomes even attacks, since any notice can be made to *“translate his own self-fascination into more news of himself”*. It was a genuine diagnosis and, coming on a listserv, a faintly self-implicating one: the room knew the hunger it was anatomizing from the inside.

And then the dispatch, from people the attention economy had never counted. Katrina's aftermath filled the other threads — Laura Mullen, writing from refuge in Baton Rouge, reported that *“New Orleans is a war zone in a disaster area”*, the aid slow and small, friends bicycling medicine to the shelters. The catastrophe was, precisely, a failure of attention: the poorest and the Blackest citizens, invisible to the machinery of notice, left on rooftops by a country that could find millions to bomb the far side of the world.

One poet refused to make it beautiful. Under the flat, deliberate title Re Katrina: this is not a poem, Robert Majzels named plainly who had drowned — *“people who had no books to begin with and no place to go”* — and declined to convert them into verse, enraged at a nation that could do no better for its own than herd them into the bleachers of a stadium. It was the anti-narcissist gesture the month required: the poem withheld, the attention turned outward and given away, the writer for once refusing the small profit that even grief can be made to yield.

The two economies would not reconcile, and the honesty was in admitting it. On one side, a machinery that turns every wound into news of oneself; on the other, a multitude who could not manufacture, at any price, the attention that would have saved their lives. I have set September down exactly as the archive delivered it — the

scandal thread, the war zone in a disaster area, the books no one had, and the poem that refused to be written — because it was the month the poetry world was caught staring into its own pool while a city went under just outside the frame, and its conscience found the one true thing left to say: this is not a poem.

— *K. M. F.*

October 2005

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

October 2005 posed the list a koan about its own condition: if a book is published and nobody buys it, does it exist? Four hundred and eighty-four messages moved through the room — still thin, still draining toward the blogs — and the month circled the question of writing into a void: the poetry book with no market, the poet drifting off toward other media, the reader who may not be there at all. And then, almost as an answer, it stumbled on a small marvel about how the mind fills a gap that isn't quite filled.

The koan came as rueful comedy. Under the heading *If a book is published & nobody buys it*, the room traded jokes about its own invisibility — Mairead Byrne confessing she was the *"champion purchaser of my own books"* and deserved a prize for it, Nate Dorward supplying the bleaker limit case, that the truest zero is reached when *"no copies are printed"*. Beneath the laughter was a real vertigo: a poetry with essentially no market, its makers writing objects that almost no one would ever purchase or open.

Some were drifting off the page entirely. D. Ross Priddle announced he had been *"drifting further and further away from poetry as such"*, toward visual work posted on his blog, and Mairead Byrne answered that she was simply afraid of losing him. David-Baptiste Chirot reassured them both that the loss was illusory — that the word poetry and the thing itself *"are not bound and chained"*, that Priddle was not leaving the art but presenting it in another form. Still, the field was dispersing, off the list and into a dozen private media.

And then the marvel. Russell Golata posted the famous scrambled paragraph proving that a reader can fly through text whose every interior letter is jumbled, because the mind does not read letter by letter but takes in *"the wrod as a wlohe"*. The room delighted in it, but it was also, quietly, the month's consolation: reading is an act of completion, the mind supplying the order that isn't on the page, filling the gaps without even noticing it does so, meeting the ruined text more than halfway.

Which turned the koan gently on its head. If the mind can read a word whose letters are scattered, then perhaps a book no one buys still reaches someone, and a poem written into an empty room is finished anyway — by the reader who isn't there, by the writing itself, by the stubborn ones who keep drifting back to take, as one of them put it, a few more prisoners. I have set October down exactly as the archive delivered

it — the unbought book, the printless zero, the drift to the blogs, and the mind that reads what isn't spelled — because it was the month the poets counted their missing readers and were quietly reassured by a parlor trick: that we supply what is absent, and so, it may be, does the art.

— *K. M. F.*

November 2005

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

November 2005 was a dark month, and it circled the poet's relation to violence from four directions at once: the poet who dies for the word, the uprising no one will answer, the suspicion that slaughter is simply what our species does, and — smallest and most telling — a dead master's name misspelled on a bookstore shelf. Five hundred and fifty-two messages moved through the list, and between the grand martyrologies and the real fires burning in France, the month kept measuring the enormous distance between how poets imagine their stakes and what actually becomes of them.

The noble version came from a schoolteacher. Haas Bianchi, who taught in the Chicago public schools, asked the room to help him assemble, for his students, a roll of *"poets who were Killed for their writing"* — Mandelstam and the others who had paid the ultimate price for a line. It was a real and moving pedagogy: to show children that words had once been worth a life. But it also handed the young the most flattering story poetry tells about itself, the one in which the poem is dangerous enough to be worth killing for.

The month's real violence had no such use for poems. As the banlieues of Clichy-Sous-Bois burned and the French riots spread, a thread on the Left's non-response watched the uprising go unclaimed, Ishaq observing coldly that since the events were no one's to organize, *"The Left has little to gain from them"*. And the same teacher who had gathered the martyrs posted the month's bleakest thesis, that the human race is genocidal by nature, slaughter a pattern thousands of years old. Against burning suburbs and the long human record of murder, the martyr's halo looked suddenly thin.

Beside the fires, the small machinery of poetry ground on — chapbook presses, the endless online-versus-print journal quarrel, the comment boxes of Silliman's blog — a craft that could neither cause a riot nor quell one, keeping its little shop in the shadow of history's furnace. The disproportion was the point: the poets talked martyrdom while holding, in fact, almost no power over anything at all, least of all the events that might have made a martyr of any of them.

And then the true modern fate of the poet showed itself, not as a firing squad but as a typo. Craig Allen Conrad found a Kerouac reissue whose cover credited an introduction by Robert Creely — the missing e turning the room's own dead master,

seven months in the grave, into some stranger — and confessed the sight was “*instantly odd, wrong*”. I have set November down exactly as the archive delivered it — the roll of the killed, the unanswered riot, the genocidal thesis, and the misspelled name — because it was the month the list taught its children to revere the poets who died for their words, and could not, in the same weeks, get its own Creeley’s name right on a paperback, which is how poets actually vanish: not shot, but garbled, and quietly shelved.

— K. M. F.

December 2005

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

December 2005 closed the year on a strange pairing: the poets spent it dreaming of an authorless, communal future while the state performed its most singular and final act. Four hundred and thirty-nine messages moved through the list, and its largest thread imagined poetry dissolved into a wiki that anyone could edit forever, no single name attached — even as, three thousand miles west, a governor signed a warrant with exactly one name on it. The collective and the condemned shared the month, and did not quite know they were arguing.

The dream was the wiki. Joel Kuszai, one of the list's editors, pressed the case for building one — *"a very simple and practical tool"*, he insisted, not the manifesto of a futurist but a practical way of doing something communal, and he wished aloud for a history of the desire for shared authorship. It was, in a sense, the cure the fall had been circling: after months of anatomizing literary narcissism, here was a form in which the ego simply vanished into the edit history, everyone a co-author and no one a star.

It came with a farewell to the fathers. mIEKAL aND, riffing on the title of Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*, twitted the old avant-garde who once led it but *"now they just want to be understood, and so farewell to them"*, while Jim Andrews argued that a two-decade revolution in the digital and communal had worked *"to expand the definition of what poetry is"* past all the inherited models. The generation that had once been the insurgency was being waved off by a newer one, the authorless future impatient with the named past.

And then the state made its counter-argument, in the oldest language it has. Under the heading *Clemency Denied*, Stephen Vincent posted the news that the governor had refused to spare Stanley Tookie Williams, executed that week; Gerald Schwartz called it a repellant day, one never to be forgotten because it *"turned solely on the polls"*. However freely authorship might dissolve into a wiki, the body would not: the state still knew precisely which single name to sign to a death warrant, and did, unmoved by the fact that Williams had spent his last years on the row writing books meant to keep children out of the gangs that had made him. The author it killed was, among other things, an author.

That was the year's closing disproportion. In the poem, the wiki promised, the author could disappear into the collective, endless and unblamable; but a man is not a

document, and December proved it by killing a named one on a referendum. I have set December down exactly as the archive delivered it — the communal tool, the farewell to the fathers, and the warrant that turned on a poll — because it was the month the poets dreamed authorship away into a shared and editable future, and the state reminded them, on a repellant day, that whatever a poem may become, a person still has exactly one name, and power always knows it.

— *K. M. F.*

January 2006

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

January 2006 opened the year poised between two ideas of what a poem even is: the live event you remember, and the digital file that never dies. Five hundred and sixty-three messages moved through the list, split between a warm thread reminiscing about unforgettable readings and a technical one arguing over electronic writing, the ephemeral performance on one side and the endlessly replayable archive on the other. And on the fourth of the month, as if to force the question, one of the great performing poets died.

The reading came first, at Charles Bernstein's invitation. He asked the list's members, lurkers included, to name the poetry readings they had most valued, thinking of the poem as performance and *"not necessarily separating the poem from its performance"*. The replies were tender and particular — a voice in a room on a certain night, a stammer or a shout that had meant everything, a thing that had happened once and lived now only in the memory of whoever had been there. It was poetry as event: embodied, singular, unrepeatable, and gone the instant it was over, held nowhere but in the unreliable keeping of those who came.

Against it ran the archive's promise. The list churned with electronic writing — Brian Kim Stefans circulating an essay taxonomizing its forms, hypertexts and Wordtoys and animations; Jim Andrews's generative dbCinema; bpNichol's recorded voice newly posted to PennSound. Here was the opposite of the vanishing reading: writing that did not disappear, that replayed and regenerated forever, the performance captured and the dead poet still audible on demand. The room could not decide whether this was preservation or embalming.

The Poetry Foundation offered a third kind of permanence — money. As a Boston Globe piece trumpeted the endowment's campaign to spread poetry across the land, maxpaul confessed a sinking feeling, as if he had read that someone had *"decided to invade another country to spread democracy"*, the Lilly fortune evangelizing verse with the cheerful force of an occupation. Reach bought by endowment was its own bid for immortality — the poem kept alive by dint of subscription and gift copy rather than memory or code — and the room trusted it about as far as it trusted the other kinds.

Then the argument was settled the only way it ever is. On the fourth, the Montreal poet Irving Layton died, two months shy of ninety-four, and Jim Andrews

remembered him for his *“unapologetic theatricality and song of himself”*, the little guy and the big idea — a poet who had been, above all, a live and roaring voice. I have set January down exactly as the archive delivered it — the treasured readings, the deathless files, the endowment’s reach, and the theatrical poet gone silent — because it was the month the list argued whether poetry is the performance or the recording, and Layton’s death gave the plain answer: it is the performance, right up until the voice stops, and then, whether we are ready or not, it becomes the archive.

— K. M. F.

February 2006

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

February 2006 turned the thinning list toward its most generous possible work: the recovery of the neglected. Six hundred and eighty-four messages moved through the room, and its largest current was, for once, entirely outward-facing — a collaborative effort to rescue forgotten poets from the oblivion the whole year had taught the members to fear. Against a running anxiety about whether anything written now is ever heard at all, and beneath the loss, at month's end, of a great writer of the erased, the list did the one thing a commons is finally for: it tried to keep some names alive.

The engine was the Neglectorino Project, a collective effort to name the widely-published and wholly-ignored. Jennifer Bartlett spoke for its spirit, marveling that she had heard Muriel Rukeyser's name spoken aloud perhaps once in all her years, and calling the roll of others — William Everson, Larry Eigner, Lorine Niedecker — poets who, as she put it, had *"published WIDELY and are largely ignored"*. After a year spent watching itself shrink and mourning its own dead, the room had found something better to do with its dwindled energy than quarrel: it could go looking for the forgotten.

The fear it answered had its own thread, and a perfect title: if a word falls in the blogosphere, does it make a sound? It was the age's version of the oldest dread — that everything now written drops unheard into an infinite feed, that neglect is no longer an accident but the default weather of the digital, and that the ordinary fate of a poem is to fall silently into a well too deep to echo. The Neglectorino was the room's small, stubborn refusal of exactly that.

Even the live reading was measured against the same scarcity of attention. David Kirschenbaum crunched the numbers on how long poets now read at Segue and worried the etiquette of it, noting that it was *"the rare poet who can give a 30- or 40-minute long reading"* and still hold a room. Whether on a stage or in a feed, the question was the same: how much notice can a poem command before the attention gives out, and what becomes of everything that never earns any.

And at the month's end, the writer of the recovered future died. On the twenty-fourth Octavia Butler was gone, and Aldon Nielsen, the list's faithful memorialist, posted the sad report under his standing line, *"and now it's winter in America"* — a science-fiction writer who had spent her whole career imagining survival and futurity for

exactly the people the record erases. I have set February down exactly as the archive delivered it — the roll of the neglected, the word falling unheard, the measured reading, and the winter that took Octavia Butler — because it was the month the fading list did its finest and least selfish work, turning to rescue the forgotten, and lost, as if in trade, the writer who had made the rescue of the forgotten her entire art.

— *K. M. F.*

March 2006

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

March 2006 braided three anxious questions the list had been asking, separately, for years, and asked them all at once: who is allowed to speak, who is left in the room to listen, and whether any of it finally matters. Eight hundred and ninety-six messages moved through it, and its largest currents ran on a silenced play, an aging audience, and a question one member had the courage to pose in so many naive words. It was a month about the conditions of being heard at all.

The silenced voice was the loudest thread. The postponement of a New York production of the Rachel Corrie play set off a long free-speech firestorm — who may put whose testimony on a stage, and what it means when a theater, under pressure, decides not to. The argument sprawled, as such things do, into absurdism and Beckett and the deconstructionists, Mary Jo Malo among others turning it from a controversy into a seminar on what, if anything, is absolute. Under the philosophy sat the plain question of the season: whose speech gets staged, and whose gets quietly shelved.

The emptying room was the saddest. Mark Weiss, back in New York and attending readings most weeks, filed a census that should have frightened everyone: at an extraordinary St. Marks reading of some seventy people, there were *“no more than six or seven people under 45”*. The audience for poetry, he was noticing, had aged into a single cohort, the young simply absent. The decline the list had spent years diagnosing in its own dwindling traffic was visible now in the graying chairs of the actual reading-room.

And then someone asked the question under the questions. Flora Fair posted it bare — Does Poetry Matter? — apologizing that it was *“annoying and naive question, but I mean it”*, and meaning it. It was the doubt beneath both the silencing and the graying: if poetry truly mattered, would a play be so easy to cancel, would the young stay away in such numbers? The room had circled the question for a decade in fancier clothes — Dana Gioia had made a career of one version of it — and Fair simply took its coat off and set it, unadorned, in the middle of the table.

The answer came, fittingly, as a poem. Paul Nelson replied by copying out lines by Sam Hamill after Tu Fu — that the real subject of poetry is character, built and defined by *“the ordinary words we stand by”*, made exemplary by craft. I have set March down exactly as the archive delivered it — the shelved play, the census of gray

heads, the naive question, and the borrowed Tu Fu — because it was the month the list worried over who may speak and mourned who had stopped listening, and answered its oldest doubt not with a defense of poetry but with a line of it: that the art matters as the plain words a life is built on, whether or not the young have yet come into the room.

— *K. M. F.*

April 2006

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

April 2006, another Poetry Month, turned on three verdicts the culture was passing on the printed word at once: which of a great poet's leavings deserve to see print, how many people are reading any of it, and which books ought never to have been printed at all. Six hundred and twenty-five messages moved through the list, and the largest by far concerned a dead perfectionist whose wastebasket had just been published against every wish she had expressed in life.

The controversy was Elizabeth Bishop's. The release of Edgar Allan Poe & the Juke-Box: Uncollected Poems, Drafts, and Fragments — the discards and unfinished work of a poet who had published fewer than a hundred poems in her lifetime — drew a front-page review that Joe Amato copied to the list, David Orr opening with the extravagant claim that *"You are living in a world created by Elizabeth Bishop"*. The irony was sharp and unspoken: the paper crowned her in the very notice that presented the work she had judged unworthy and deliberately withheld. The archive had overruled the artist.

Beside that stood the oldest question, now with a data point. Aldon Nielsen flagged a New York Times survey item titled WHO READS POETRY?, hoping its results might at last *"bury the cliché that poetry is only read in college classrooms"*. After a decade of the list's own despair about audience, here was a hint that the readership was wider than the poets feared — though no one could quite say who had been asked, or what counted as reading, and the timing was its own quiet joke, a survey celebrating poetry's readers in the same season the profession spent exhuming a great poet's rejected drafts that almost no one, finished or unfinished, would ever open.

And the culture's suppressive impulse showed its face too. A thread on a conservative list of the most harmful books ever written circulated for the room's derision, Peter Grant asking the obvious — *"What the hell's Mein Kampf doing on that list?"* — beside Marx and Keynes and Friedman, as if Hitler and macroeconomics were commensurable dangers. It was the mirror image of the Bishop affair: one party laboring to print everything a great poet had thrown away, another compiling the books it wished unwritten.

The month's real question was who decides. The poet who withheld her drafts, the editor who prints them anyway, the pollster who counts the readers, the ideologue who damns the books — each claimed the authority to say what a body of words was

finally worth. I have set April down exactly as the archive delivered it — Bishop's exhumed fragments, the crowning review, the survey, and the list of the damned — because it was the month the fastidious perfectionist who had left almost nothing was made, against her plain will, to leave everything, and the list watched a poet lose the last power she had guarded most fiercely: the right to decide what of hers the world would ever see.

— *K. M. F.*

May 2006

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

May 2006 forced the list to look squarely at the thing it liked least about itself: its relation to the poets people actually read. Seven hundred and two messages moved through the room, and well over a hundred of them circled a single uncomfortable pairing — Charles Bukowski and Billy Collins, the two most-read poets in America, both of them held more or less in contempt by a list built on difficulty. Underneath the sport of the argument lay a real and unwelcome question: whether that contempt was discernment, or simply snobbery in a beret.

Charlie Rossiter drew the pairing that lit the fuse. Bukowski and Collins, he proposed, had this in common — enormous appeal, a body of work faithful to a single sensibility, and, tellingly, that *“Neither has individual poems that stand out”*. They were consistent where the avant-garde prized peaks and abysses; they were, in a word, reliable, which the room could not decide was a virtue or a verdict. The two poets the public loved were exactly the two the list could neither respect nor stop discussing — and the sheer volume of the discussion, well over a hundred messages, was itself a confession that the room cared far more about the popular than it liked to let on.

The Bukowski half drew the real heat, because Bukowski was two things at once. Chris Stroffolino produced the appeal in a single refrigerator-magnet line — *“Some People Never Go Crazy. What truly horrible lives they must lead”* — the raw truth-telling you would never get, he noted, from Billy Collins or a box of Sleepytime tea. But the same threads could not ignore the brutality: a run on Bukowski's battered women and his gender politics laid out the ugliness plainly, the working-class truth-teller and the misogynist sharing one skin.

And so the argument turned, inevitably, on elitism, and got honest. George Thompson reminded the quarrelers that the word elite is only the French for elected, and balked at the whole idea of the poet as a chosen one — confessing that it was exactly why he had *“walked away from the religion of the poet”*. Beside his renunciation ran the month's other endless thread, an attempt to define the postmodern that never once cohered — the room laboring to name the difficult tradition that set it apart from Bukowski, and unable to agree on what it was.

The question would not resolve, and its not resolving was the point. Was the list's disdain for the poets the world reads a matter of taste finely earned, or a fortification

of class and education that dared not speak its name? I have set May down exactly as the archive delivered it — the popular pair, the magnet Bukowski, the misogyny, and the poet who quit the priesthood — because it was the month the difficult poets met the popular ones and could not decide whether their difficulty was a discipline or a wall, while one of their number simply set down the collar and walked away from the religion of the poet altogether.

— *K. M. F.*

June 2006

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

June 2006 ran three large arguments at once, and the telling thing was that none of them touched the others. Six hundred and fifteen messages moved through the list, split among a hermetic quarrel over a critical term, a live national fight over which language America speaks, and a grubby new accounting of what a blog post earns. The map, the territory, and the toll booth were all under discussion in the same room that month, and the room spent by far the most breath on the map.

The map was Postmodernism, still. Ninety-odd messages labored to define the word, the definitional war of May now swollen past all hope of resolution, Adam Morey drifting into the cosmic — new tools, new physics, the claim that *“All history is new with each new discovery”*. It was the avant-garde talking to itself about the name for itself, a closed loop that generated heat, light, and not one agreed sentence, the poets arguing the label of their era with their backs to the era.

For the territory was right there, and shouting. In the year of the great immigration marches and Washington's push to make English the official language, a thread insisted that Spanish is not a foreign language, and Craig Allen Conrad made the honest confession under it — that his own monolingual ease was the laziness of a man who already speaks *“the language of the ruling class and race”*, his family able to claim a single college graduate. Here was a real argument about belonging and tongue, and the room mostly stepped around it to get back to the term.

And the toll booth had opened while no one watched. In a thread on the economics of blogging, AMBogle2 confessed to clicking his own Google ads until he grasped that *“clicking on my own ads is strictly prohibited”*, having earned forty dollars in a day before the rules caught up with him. The medium that had drained the list of its talkers was now quietly turning their reading into pennies per click — poetry's diaspora monetized, one accidental fraud at a time. It was a small, funny, faintly desperate thing, and it said more about where the room's energy had actually gone than the ninety messages on postmodernism ever could.

The disproportion was the whole month. Ninety messages to fix the meaning of a word almost no one outside the room uses, while the country marched over the language millions of its people actually speak and the blogs converted attention into small change. I have set June down exactly as the archive delivered it — the endless label, the disowned Spanish, and the forty-dollar day — because it was the month the

poets argued most fiercely about the name for their own moment and scarcely noticed that the moment's real argument, whose tongue America belongs to, was being carried through the streets in a language the room had been too comfortable ever to learn.

— *K. M. F.*

July 2006

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

July 2006 opened a new war — on the twelfth, fighting erupted between Israel and Hezbollah, and Lebanon filled with the dead — and the list met it, at first, the way it had met every war since the invasion of Iraq: by retreating into abstraction. Six hundred and seventy-five messages moved through the room, and its single largest thread, at seventy-five messages, was not about Lebanon at all but about God. Between a logic puzzle and a silence, the poets spent the month hunting for a response adequate to a catastrophe that words seemed only to cheapen.

The escape hatch was philosophy. Jim Andrews posed a tidy omnipotence paradox — that *“God can think of something God can’t do”*, and that the proposition is damning whether true or false — and the room fell on it gratefully, seventy-five messages of clean deductive pleasure while the news ran red. It was the theory-of-practice maneuver again: faced with a war it could not touch, the list found the biggest possible subject that could not bleed, and argued that instead.

The war, when the room did face it, became a fight over a word. A thread simply titled with the scare-quoted *“civilians”* turned on the rhetoric that sorts the dead into the grievable and the deserved — the euphemisms of precision, the quotation marks that quietly revoke a person’s humanity before a bomb finishes the job. It grew ugly and personal, Daniel Bradley finally snapping at the combatants to *“stop thinking it’s all about you”*. Even the room’s compassion, it turned out, could be a venue for ego.

For a model of doing better, the month reached back to Robert Duncan. A scholarly thread on his late Ground Work — the Empedoklean reveries, the Greek half-buried in the line — recalled the poet who had fused the mystic and the enraged, who had faced Vietnam in his Passages without once looking away or dissolving it into logic. Against Duncan’s example — a poet who had believed the war and the vision belonged in the same poem, that you did not get to choose between them — the seventy-five-message paradox looked less like thought than like an elaborate and well-lit place to hide.

And then one editor found the only adequate gesture, which was to stop. Vernon Frazer announced that the webzine Big Bridge would go dark for a month in mourning at the tragic loss of human life, and Maria Damon, moved, asked whether *“perhaps others will join in”*. In a month when the room could offer a puzzle about God and a quarrel over a euphemism, a single person chose silence — the refusal to

add another word to a war already drowning in them. I have set July down exactly as the archive delivered it — the omnipotence paradox, the scare-quoted dead, the summoned Duncan, and the webzine gone dark — because it was the month the poets met a war with their cleverest abstraction and their ugliest quarrel, and the truest thing any of them did was to close the page and say nothing.

— *K. M. F.*

August 2006

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

August 2006 spent itself appraising the poet's own life — as a story to sell, as labor to be priced, and as a memory the world lets lapse. Seven hundred and seventy-nine messages moved through the list, its largest threads running on memoir, on payment for readings, on the packaging of a bio; the whole professional apparatus of turning a life into a career was laid out for inspection. And crashing in from outside, refusing to be managed, came the war still burning and an anniversary the world would rather forget.

First the life as narrative. In the month's largest thread, on poets and memoir, AMBogle2 described a poet friend who had told the story of his Alaska years over days on the phone until it felt like reading a book — and who nonetheless, when urged to write it down, demurred, insisting *"he didn't believe poets ought to write memoirs"*, wary of the confessional grotesque the form invites. The question hung there unresolved: whether a poet should convert a life into product, or guard it as the thing the poems only glance at.

Then the life as labor, and the price was insulting. In a thread on payment for readings, Steve Dalachinsky laid out the arithmetic of a typical night — a six-dollar door, the curator's cut, close to ten poets on the bill, and of the couple hundred dollars taken in, *"we did not get any of that money"*. He had read the night before for a single glass of apple juice. The poet's work, it turned out, was priced at roughly nothing, the reading a charity the poet himself was expected to underwrite.

The world would not stay outside the professional frame. Forwarded political video and war argument kept intruding, one poster posting an Al Jazeera clip under a subject line demanding, of his own message, what the hell it had to do with poetics — the room half-resenting the war for interrupting the management of careers. It was the recurring friction of the age: the poet as professional, busy with fees and blurbs and the careful tending of a reputation, and the poet as witness, unable to look away from a burning that made the whole apparatus of career look like a very expensive way of not paying attention.

And on the sixth, the life as memory. Steve Dalachinsky noted the Hiroshima anniversary passing with a small gathering in the East Village and little else, remarking that only Japan seemed to remember it well — before Walter Lew complicated even that consolation, observing that *"Japanese memory is also terribly*

selective". I have set August down exactly as the archive delivered it — the withheld memoir, the apple-juice fee, the resented war, and the half-remembered bomb — because it was the month the poets weighed their own lives three ways and found the story overpriced, the labor worth almost nothing, and memory, the one thing worth keeping, the hardest of all to keep honest.

— K. M. F.

September 2006

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

September 2006 was the month Gabriel Gudding held a mirror up to the whole poetry world and named what it was doing: running scripts. Five hundred and fifty-six messages moved through the list, and a connected run of them — on cultural scripts, on readings, on outsiderdom, on the list's own courtroom nastiness — added up to a sustained and uncomfortable diagnosis of the avant-garde as a set of status games it performed without knowing it. The month's real subject was self-knowledge, and how little of it a room of poets could bear.

The master script came first. Drawing on Eric Berne and on a phrase from Simon DeDeo, Gudding identified the avant-garde's permanent move — *"seeking status through the promise of a new yet unapproachable revitalization of poetry"* — a routine played over and over since about 1914, a way for a group to structure its time and, more damningly, to avoid intimate honesty. The revolution-forever pose, the eternal promise of the next necessary rupture, stood exposed as a status ritual wearing the mask of art.

The reading was a script too. Gudding produced Epictetus for the occasion — go not of your own accord to the readings of any authors, and if you must appear, *"keep your gravity and sedateness"* — ancient counsel against exactly the vanity theater the poets had built their social world upon. Two thousand years on, the philosopher's warning against the reading as a preening ritual landed with uncomfortable precision on a room that lived for the podium and the after-party — and that had spent the spring, in Mark Weiss's graying-audience census, mourning the very ritual Epictetus advised skipping.

Even outsiderdom, that most cherished pose, turned out to be a script. Eric Yost asked the sharp question — was there any such thing as insider writing, given that even the most credentialed academic poets *"give voice to unreason and alienation"*? If everyone performs the outsider, the alienated and the mad, then the category is empty and the romance of the margin is just another costume worn from the center. Nobody, it seemed, would admit to being happy, adjusted, and inside.

Gudding's remedy was the hardest thing he could have prescribed. Against the list's beloved courtroom of blame, he offered *"individuated askesis"* — the ancient discipline of working on oneself rather than winning the argument, of reforming the room by reforming the self. It was advice no status game can accommodate, since

the whole point of a script is to perform for others. I have set September down exactly as the archive delivered it — the master script, the vain reading, the empty outsider, and the counsel of self-discipline — because it was the month the list was shown that its revolutions and its readings and its alienation were routines it had run since 1914, and handed the one exit that no performance can use: to stop performing and go quietly to work on itself.

— *K. M. F.*

October 2006

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

October 2006 set the people who change the world against the people who fear it, and then, in a bitter coda, watched the list fail to do either — failing even to gather and mourn its own founder. Five hundred and fifty-six messages moved through the room, the largest cluster a heated argument over feminism and its enemies, and threaded beneath it the news that the memorial conference for Robert Creeley, in his own Buffalo, had been snowed under and all but ignored. Change, backlash, and paralysis shared the month.

The change was feminism, and its record. Ruth Lepson reminded the room of the poets who had built a feminist poetics — plugging her Sojourner anthology and the names it gathered, Hejinian and Scalapino and Kathleen Fraser and Rosmarie Waldrop — the deep work of a movement that had genuinely remade the art. Even the celebration carried a small irony, Susan Maurer noting drily that a boosterish deck of feminist icons managed to feature some of them *“feminists with low cut blouses”*, the tribute recommodifying the very women it saluted.

The backlash answered, and Gwyn McVay met it without patience. Against the career anti-feminist — the man who found it hip to excuse Bukowski's punching of a woman as mere working-class authenticity, May's ugly argument returning in October's clothes — she spelled it out slowly for the room: that *“Feminism is also about stopping violence against women”*, about rape, about the one-in-six statistic no amount of avant-garde cool could argue away. The fear of change had learned, by 2006, to disguise itself as being more advanced than the change.

And then the paralysis, in the form of weather. Stephen Baraban arrived in Buffalo by overnight train for the long-anticipated Creeley conference only to find it undone — a freak October storm had snapped the trees and killed the power across the city — and he wrote to the list, dismayed, about *“the sad collapse of the anticipated Creeley conference”*, and dismayed further that the list had scarcely mentioned it. The memorial for the room's own household god had been literally frozen out, the trees of his city down across the roads to it, and the room, absorbed in its quarrel, had barely looked up long enough to notice.

The three things rhymed more than the room could see. The feminists had changed the world; the anti-feminists dreaded it; and the aging list, on the wrong side of both, could not so much as convene to bury the poet it had claimed as half its reason. I have

set October down exactly as the archive delivered it — the record of the change, the disguised backlash, and the snowed-out mourning — because it was the month the poets quarreled over who had remade the world and who feared them for it, while the ice took down the trees of Buffalo and, with them, the wake for Robert Creeley, proving that a failure to mourn and a failure to change are finally the same cold thing.

— *K. M. F.*

November 2006

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

November 2006 was the month politics broke into the room from three directions at once — the ballot box, the culture war, and the empty wallet — and the outside world, which had ignored the poets for years, suddenly seemed to notice them. Six hundred and forty-seven messages moved through the list as the midterm elections turned the Congress over and a cable host went hunting a Language poet on national television. But the truest politics of the month, it turned out, was neither the vote nor the villainy; it was the quiet business of poets keeping one another from going under.

The ballot came first. The midterm elections handed the Democrats both houses, and the war's chief architect resigned the very next day, and the room — which had spent years grieving on the losing side — allowed itself a wary, exhausted relief. A thread on political change and pessimism weighed how much a single election could really undo of what the decade had taught them to expect, and mostly concluded: less than one would hope, but not nothing.

Then came the spotlight, and it was hostile. Ron Silliman alerted the list that Bill O'Reilly meant to *"go after Bruce Andrews for assigning"* an antiwar book to his students — the astonishing spectacle of a Language poet, invisible to the mainstream for thirty years, hauled onto Fox as a national villain. George Bowering, writing from Canada, supplied the perfect measure of the distance with a single innocent question: *"who is Bill O'Reilly?"* The avant-garde and the culture that had suddenly found it worth attacking did not, it was clear, know each other at all.

And underneath the noise lay the plain fact of money. A thread for Poets In Need circulated Michael Rothenberg's mutual-aid fund, and David Meltzer, a grant recipient, testified to what this utopian experiment in mutual aid had done for him — it had, he wrote, *"bailed me out of a cold-sweat fiscal crisis."* Beneath the election and the television and the theory, the poets were broke, most of them, and had built, quietly and without fanfare, a communitarian net to catch each other when the rent came due and the adjunct check did not.

That net was the month's real politics. The ballot changed the Congress and the cable host changed nothing, but a button on a website and a grant paid in time kept an actual poet housed — the solidarity no election delivers and no anchor can touch. I have set November down exactly as the archive delivered it — the turned Congress, the hunted poet, and the fund that saved one — because it was the month the world

at last noticed the poets, to vote near them and to denounce them, and the poets answered by noticing one another, having learned by 2006 that the only politics that reaches all the way down to the rent is the one they practice on themselves.

— *K. M. F.*

December 2006

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

December 2006 made the list confess its oldest and most painful secret in the same weeks it buried the one member who had spent a life refuting it. Seven hundred and six messages moved through the room, the largest thread a blunt inquiry into whether anyone outside the guild reads poetry at all, and near the start of it the news that kari edwards had died. The month asked who its readers were, answered that they were only itself, and lost, almost in the same breath, the poet who had always written toward the outside.

The confession was the largest thread. mIEKAL aND asked plainly whether anyone knew any non-poets who read poetry — observing that non-artists crowd the galleries and non-musicians fill the concerts, but that the people at a poetry reading are, almost to a soul, *“a poet or writer, or people who want to be”*. The audience and the authorship had become one closed circle, the guild reading only itself, and the handful of family-member exceptions others offered up only proved how airless the room had grown.

One thread imagined a stranger visitor. In a long argument over Strong AI, Searle's Chinese Room and Deep Blue were pressed into service, Jesse Crockett wagering that the machine mind would soon process language *“at near light speed”* and leave the human reader behind. It was an eerie possibility to raise in a month worried about readers: that the only new reader poetry might ever gain would be one without a self, running the words without understanding a single one, comprehending nothing and missing nothing, the closed circle's most alien guest and its most literal — a reader who is all circuit and no room.

And then the outsider herself was gone. kari edwards — who wrote her name in lowercase and refused, in her work and her life, every settled category of gender, a correspondent of the list for years — died that weekend of cardiac arrest, and Julie Kizershot mourned her as *“a brave person, and an amazing innovative writer”*. She had been, on this very list, the one who years earlier asked whether a word could be barred from a poem and insisted it could not; her whole art had been addressed to exactly the people the guild's closed circle shut out — the uncategorized, the excluded, the ones with no room of their own to read in.

The month could not quite hear its own rhyme. It admitted that no one outside reads the poets in the very days it lost the poet who had written, above everything, for the

outside. I have set December down exactly as the archive delivered it — the closed circle, the light-speed machine that cannot understand, and the death of kari edwards — because it was the month the room confessed it reads only itself, and buried the one among them who had spent every ungended line holding the door open to everyone the circle keeps out, so that the door, with her, swung quietly shut.

— *K. M. F.*

January 2007

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

January 2007, a month after the list buried kari edwards, took up the scapegoat — the figure a community blames and casts out in order to hold itself together. Seven hundred and ten messages moved through the room, and its largest currents circled the same ancient machinery from different angles: the poem's old relation to the sacrificed one, the queer poet as the culture's still-permitted target, and the poet's own uneasy standing with the crowd that makes the victim. As a new troop surge was announced abroad, the room studied, at home, the oldest politics there is.

Heidi arnold named the mechanism outright. Soliciting poems on scapegoating, she described it as a communal process of setting up a fall guy when the fault is in fact collective and systemic — the unsettling insight that *"we have to make our own leper colonies to make societies at all"*, that a group may cohere only by agreeing whom to expel. Maria Damon added Lenny Bruce to the roll of the sacrificed, and the thread became a quiet catalogue of the people cultures burn to keep themselves warm.

The current leper colony was not hard to find. In a thread asking whether homophobia was the last acceptable bigotry in America, Michael Tod Edgerton furiously ventriloquized the culture's dismissal of its gay poets — the way even Ginsberg gets flattened, in the demeaning shorthand of a syllabus, into a curiosity no one need take seriously. Beneath the anger sat the line he carried as his signature, from Mei-mei Berssenbrugge: *"There's the mute probability of a reciprocal lack of understanding"*. A month after edwards, the queer poet as scapegoat was no abstraction.

And the poet's own place in the arrangement got its thread too. In a New Year's meditation on selling out and the obligation to an audience, Charlie Rossiter argued that *"the biggest way to sell out is to not be true to your self"* — whether by dumbing a poem down for the crowd's applause or by courting the academy's approval instead. It was the scapegoat question turned inward: where does the poet stand in relation to the very audience that makes and unmakes its victims — courting the crowd that scapegoats, or refusing it and risking becoming the next one expelled.

The answers, taken together, pointed one way. The scapegoat is made by the crowd, and the poem's oldest office is to speak for the one the crowd expels rather than to swell the mob. I have set January down exactly as the archive delivered it — the leper colony, the dismissed gay poet, the sacrificed comedian, and the sell-out's true self —

because it was the month the list, having just lost kari edwards to the ranks of the cast-out, studied the machinery of blame and half-recognized its own reflection in it: that a guild which reads only itself is one exclusion away from a leper colony, and that the whole work, in the end, is to keep open the door the crowd keeps trying to shut.

— *K. M. F.*

February 2007

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

February 2007 set the biggest idea in the room against the smallest form, and let a tabloid queen dissolve into pure image between them. Eight hundred and seventeen messages moved through the list, its two largest currents pulling in opposite directions — a sprawling argument about deconstruction, the theory that meaning never settles, and an even larger run on haiku, the form that bets everything on a single settled instant. The month was a tug of war between unraveling and distilling, between the sign that floats free and the image that holds.

The unraveling had sixty-seven messages. A thread on deconstruction and poetry went hunting the poets who best embody the theory of undecidable, endlessly deferred meaning, and Aldon Nielsen's signature caught its essence in passing — the *"intolerable paradox at the heart of speech"*, the freedom and the vertigo of a language that will not stand still. De Man and Rousseau hovered in the wings. It was the grand machine of the age for proving that nothing a poem says ever finally means just that.

The distilling had nearly a hundred, and a controversy. The haiku cluster culminated in a Haiku Death Match, a competitive spectacle that the form's serious practitioners eyed with dismay — Michael Dylan Welch allowing it was fun but warning that it *"does perpetuate the misunderstanding"*, traducing the one form built to make a single perception present and whole into a blood sport. The smallest, quietest thing in poetry, staged as a cage fight; the instant that haiku exists to hold, played for laughs. It was, in its way, the same argument the deconstruction thread was having in reverse — whether the little poem carries a real and present perception, or is only a counter to be scored, shuffled, and won.

And between the theory and the form, a person came apart into image. Anna Nicole Smith died on the eighth, and the room mourned her in a register it could not quite settle — Aaron Belz confessing, *"maybe I sound ironic, but I really am feeling this one"*, Alan Sondheim noting that she had always *"resisted easy summaries"*. She was deconstruction made tabloid, a self the culture had already dissolved into pure floating surface while she still lived, the sign cut entirely loose from any referent.

And yet the smallest form kept its footing. Against a theory that says meaning is forever deferred and a spectacle that says a person is only image, haiku went on insisting, seventeen syllables at a time, that a single instant can be caught clear and

held — the very newspaper headline conceding that in the death match, fearless poets spar, “*but haiku lives*”. I have set February down exactly as the archive delivered it — the intolerable paradox, the caged haiku, and the woman dissolved into surface — because it was the month the poets proved in theory that nothing settles and mourned a self that had become nothing but image, and were answered by the quietest thing they owned: that for one breath, one image, meaning can still arrive and stay.

— *K. M. F.*

March 2007

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

March 2007 buried the philosopher of the unreal and then, without quite meaning to, spent the rest of the month refuting him. Jean Baudrillard, who had argued that the real had vanished into image and that we live among copies with no original, died on the sixth. Five hundred and seventy-seven messages moved through the list, and around his death the archive arranged a quiet body of evidence to the contrary — a poet genuinely recognized, a language genuinely dying — the stubbornly real events his theory said were no longer possible.

The recognition came in the paper of record. A rare Sunday Times review of Rae Armantrout gave a Language poet the mainstream page, and the room turned it over warily. Ruth Lepson noted that the reviewer had avoided situating Armantrout in Language poetry at all, she suspected *“for fear of losing readers”*; Murat Nemet-Nejat defended the notice, quoting its admiration for lines *“as densely patterned as silicon chips”*. It was a real arrival — a difficult poet actually seen on the page that decides, for most readers, who exists — and yet an arrival with her difficult context politely simulated away, the Language poet admitted only once her Language poetry had been left at the door. Recognition, the room noted, came at the price of a small unreality.

Then the theorists themselves went on dying. In an elegy titled for Baudrillard, Alan Sondheim rolled the whole French generation into one long memento mori — Barthes hit by a van, and after him Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze, Lyotard, and now Baudrillard — confessing, *“I raised myself on all of them”*, and watching his teachers pass one by one into the single thing no theory has ever dissolved. The philosophers of the vanished real were vanishing, really, and in the oldest possible way.

And a real loss no simulation could cover was underway in China. A thread on a village struggling to save its dying language followed the slow disappearance of Manchu in Heilongjiang — a tongue going silent for good, its last speakers old. Against Baudrillard's thesis that everything now is only image and copy, a language dying is precisely not a copy: it is a final, unrecoverable subtraction from the world, the opposite of a simulacrum, a real absence where a real speech had been.

It was, in the end, the refutation of Baudrillard by Baudrillard. The man who declared the real had disappeared disappeared himself, into death, the one event no simulacrum has ever managed to cover; and the month gathered around him its plain

contrary evidence — a poem actually read, a tongue actually lost. I have set March down exactly as the archive delivered it — the sanded-down review, the dying theorists, and the dying language — because it was the month the philosopher of the unreal died in the most real way there is, and the world answered his life's argument the way it always answers it in the end: with a grave, a silence, and a poet, for once, actually seen.

— *K. M. F.*

April 2007

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

April 2007, another Poetry Month, was broken open on the sixteenth by the massacre at Virginia Tech, and the room's grief carried a terrible, particular charge: the killer had been a student in a poetry class, and a poet would give the elegy. Six hundred and seventy-two messages moved through the list, many of them circling the unbearable question the atrocity forced on a room of writing teachers — when the danger in the workshop is real, and what a poem can possibly do about it. Poetry's oldest boast, that words are dangerous, had turned unspeakably literal.

The poet at the center was Nikki Giovanni. It emerged that she had taught the shooter, had feared him enough to threaten resignation unless he was removed from her class — *"He was a very intimidating student to my other students"*, she said — and that she had, in the end, both flagged the menace no one else would name and, at the memorial convocation, given the shattered community the words it had nothing else to hold. It was the poet's double office in its starkest form: to see the danger, and to speak the grief.

Underneath ran the question no teacher in the room could answer cleanly. The killer's own writing had been violent, and the list — full of people who read menacing student work every term — knew both halves of the truth at once: that almost all disturbing writing is only writing, to be protected and not policed, and that this once, catastrophically, it had not been. Where the line falls between the art to defend and the warning to heed was exactly the line the month could not, in honesty, draw.

And then, in a bleak farce, the metaphor collapsed into fact. Geoffrey Gatza recounted setting *"a box of old poetry manuscripts"* — contest entries he had been judging — beside a trash can outside a university hall three days after the shooting, and watching it become a bomb scare. Poetry is dangerous, the room had always said; now, in the paranoid aftermath, a heavy box of poems could empty a building. The oldest boast and the newest terror had become, for a moment, the same object.

Beneath the writing and the warning lay the gun. Cutting through the NRA's blog-posting and the questions about restraining orders, Linda Norton said the plain thing the month required: *"It doesn't have to be like this in America. It shouldn't be like this"*. I have set April down exactly as the archive delivered it — the poet who feared her student, the unanswerable line, the box of poems made a threat, and the plain word about the gun — because it was the month poetry stopped being a figure for

danger and touched the real thing, and Nikki Giovanni stood, alone, at both its ends: the teacher who named the menace no one wanted named, and the poet who, when the worst came anyway, found the one line a community with nothing left could still say together.

— *K. M. F.*

May 2007

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

May 2007 turned on the dead the list did not simply love — the enemy whose death it cheered, the master it set loose, the poet it merely repackaged. Five hundred and thirty messages moved through a room famous for the tenderness of its elegies, and this month it showed its other faces: the ways the living dispose of the dead they have no grace for. What we do with a corpse we did not mourn, the archive quietly suggested, tells more about us than any eulogy for the ones we did.

The cheered enemy came first. Jerry Falwell died on the fifteenth, and CA Conrad refused every decorum — *“Jerry Falwell is dead! And I’m celebrating!”* he wrote, his only regret that the man had gone peacefully, given the harm he had done. A Buddhist friend on the phone counseled against joy in any death, and Conrad honored the friend while declining the counsel. It was the month’s sharpest ethical knot: whether restraint before an enemy’s grave is a virtue or an evasion, and whether the wronged owe their tormentor a moment of silence.

The freed master came next. In a Memorial Day note, Stephen Vincent observed that The Waste Land had entered the public domain, escaping at last the estate that had guarded it — *“Eliot’s executors were very tight about giving permissions”*, he recalled, and about extracting top dollar for them. The great, compromised monument of modernism was suddenly anyone’s to reprint and re-preface, the poem set loose from its keepers into a flat and horizontal market. The control had simply lapsed, as all such control eventually does.

And the repackaged poet came third. The Penguin selected Ed Dorn stirred a small hoopla, and patrick dunagan gave the actual readers the plain verdict — if you already owned the work, *“don’t waste any cash on buying it”*, a redundant posthumous edition dressed as an event. It was the least loving thing the living do to the dead: not to cheer them or free them, but to merchandise them, to sell a neglected poet back to the few who had always known him and to sell a mangled table of contents to the many who never would. Even the revival, dunagan implied, was a kind of burial.

The three faces belonged to one head. A room that grieved its own with such care cheered an enemy, liberated a master, and grumbled over a resold poet, all in the same weeks — the whole repertoire of how we handle the dead we cannot simply love. Only a Buddhist on a telephone said the harder thing, that no death is an

occasion for joy. I have set May down exactly as the archive delivered it — the danced-on grave, the freed poem, and the cash-in — because it was the month the list's famous elegiac grace showed its underside, and revealed that our treatment of the dead we didn't love — to celebrate, to liberate, to sell — is the truest mirror we have.

— *K. M. F.*

June 2007

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

June 2007 took up three of the culture's cherished purities — Great Art against amateur dross, original composition against borrowed source, the analog against the digital — and, without quite announcing it, dissolved all three. Five hundred and thirty-one messages moved through the list in a season loud with panic about authenticity, and the room's quiet reply, gathered across its largest threads, was the same each time: that nothing was ever as pure as the gatekeepers claim, and that the walls they mount to defend had gaps in them from the start.

The loudest panic was about amateurs. Andrew Keen's *Cult of the Amateur*, arguing that the untrained hordes of Web 2.0 were degrading culture, set the room arguing, and Tom W. Lewis pushed back at the premise itself — that the very phrase Great Art rang, to his ears, as tinny and false as the Great American Novel, and that the people who brandished it were mostly measuring works against the canon, that *"imaginary library in the sky"*. The masterpiece-hoard the amateurs supposedly threatened was, he suspected, half a fantasy to begin with, an idol assembled after the fact to keep the gate and to flatter the gatekeepers who had memorized its shelves.

The second purity fell to a single deadpan line. In a thread on the ethics of using source material in poems — the appropriation and found text then cresting into a whole conceptual poetics — wil Hallgren supplied the deflating reminder that ended the argument: *"The Waste Land had a lot of foot notes"*. The supreme monument of modernism, set loose to the public only the month before, was itself a collage of quotation and theft. Appropriation had never been the amateur's crime; it was the master's own method, footnoted and canonized.

The third purity was the medium. Alan Sondheim's essay on film as the first digital medium argued that even the analog art was always discrete underneath — the early Lumière train arriving to its astonished audience as *"a series of stutters or spurts"* the eye then stitched into smooth motion. The seamless analog, like the original author and the Great Work, turned out on inspection to be a mosaic of gaps, an illusion of continuity the mind lays over a pile of separate frames — the wholeness in the eye of the beholder, not in the thing.

The three collapses were one collapse. The Great Art invoked to shame the amateur was footnoted appropriation; the analog was digital; the professional original built from the same borrowed heap as the amateur it despised. I have set June down

exactly as the archive delivered it — the imaginary library, the footnoted Waste Land, and the stuttering train — because it was the month the culture panicked over amateurs degrading a purity that had never existed, and the room, examining its own summit, found the masterpiece raised to rebuke the borrower was the greatest borrower of all, and the door the canon guards standing, as it always had, wide open.

— *K. M. F.*

July 2007

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

July 2007 put the poem's authorship under pressure from every direction at once — the editor who rewrites it, the pirate who frees it, the auteur who controls it absolutely, and the performer whose art dies with his body. Seven hundred and fifty-one messages moved through the list, its largest thread by far a scandal about an editor who had taken it upon himself to improve other people's poems. The month's real question was simple and unanswerable: who owns the shape of a poem once it leaves the maker's hands?

The scandal ran to eighty-three messages. Lisa Jarnot warned the room that a student of hers had submitted work to the online magazine Listenlight and found it *"posted to the site in a much revised version"*, with new lines added, the editor explaining, when she wrote to object, that *"he felt he had improved the poems"*. It was the deepest violation the publishing act permits — the editor as uninvited co-author, rewriting a stranger's poem into his own and calling it an improvement. The room recoiled, arguing consent and control for weeks.

Against that theft ran a piracy the room adored. CA Conrad announced, in delirious capitals, that someone had scanned Joseph Ceravolo's long out-of-print *Fits of Dawn* into a PDF, and raged at a poetry world *"ignoring the fact that Ceravolo is out of print"*. Here was the unauthorized copy as mercy — the illicit scan that served the author instead of violating him, rescuing a neglected book from the oblivion the market had consigned it to. Two alterations of the word: one villainy, one grace.

The maximal author died at the month's end. Ingmar Bergman, the filmmaker of absolute control, was gone on the thirtieth, and the room passed around the line it kept for him — that art is *"not a mirror held up to reality, but a hammer with which to shape it"*. He was the auteur entire, the vision that answered to no editor and needed no permission, the opposite pole from a poem revised by a stranger who thought he knew better.

But the truest loss was a poet no editor could ever have touched. Sekou Sundiata died on the eighteenth, at fifty-eight, mourned as *"an amazing poet and performer"* — a maker whose work was inseparable from his own living voice, the least editable and least appropriable poetry there is. You cannot rewrite a performance or pirate a breath; you can only lose it when the body stops. I have set July down exactly as the archive delivered it — the improved poems, the freed book, the auteur's hammer,

and the silenced performer — because it was the month the room fought bitterly over who may change a poem, freed one dead poet's book and cursed the man who rewrote a living one's, and lost the poet whose poems could never be altered at all, because they had only ever existed in the saying, and the sayer was gone.

— *K. M. F.*

August 2007

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

August 2007 set the machines that crown a poet against the ones that cage him. Seven hundred and seventy-one messages moved through the list, and its largest currents ran between two poles of recognition — a youth network anointing an eighty-year-old laureate at one end, and, at the other, a book of poems written inside a prison and released only after censorship. Between them sat the quieter machine of the schools, deciding which dead writers a generation would be handed. The month was a study in whose voice a culture makes a prize and whose it makes a threat.

The crowning was a comedy with a real gain inside it. MTV named John Ashbery its poet laureate, and the room savored the absurdity of the difficult old master made a mascot for the young — but noted, too, a quieter fact. In a laureateship that had gone to women but never yet to an openly gay poet, Ashbery's odd coronation began to fill what any king, seconding Susan Webster Schultz, called "*the gaping lack of missing gay and lesbian poets*". The joke, it turned out, carried a small justice folded inside it.

The schools ran the deeper machine. Charlie Rossiter posted his son's AP American Literature reading list and asked the room to weigh it — the high-school canon, the quiet apparatus that decides which writers a rising generation will meet under the name of American literature. It drew less laughter than MTV and mattered far more: recognition here was not a season's gag but a lifetime's furniture, the shelf a young reader would mistake, for years, for the whole of the possible.

And at the far end, the poems no machine would crown. Poems from Guantánamo: The Detainees Speak reached the room, and Maria Damon called it "*a knockout. super-powerful*", ordering it for a seminar; but Catherine Daly, holding a review copy, confessed she "*really don't know how to review such censored material*", the verses redacted and withheld before they could be read. Here was poetry from men with no laureate and no canon and barely a name, written in a cage and let out only in pieces.

The two ends belonged to one culture. It made an old poet a television laureate and redacted, line by line, the poems of men it would not name — recognition running at full tilt at one pole and stopping dead at the other. I have set August down exactly as the archive delivered it — the MTV crowning, the school's canon, and the censored cell — because it was the month the machinery of recognition hummed at every level

while the most necessary poems of the year sat blacked out in a prison, and the room felt in a single breath the comedy of a poet made a mascot and the shame of poems a state would not release: the two faces of a power that decides, always, whose voice is a prize and whose is a danger to be kept.

— *K. M. F.*

September 2007

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

September 2007 caught the list being, all at once, everything a room of humans is for. Six hundred and ninety-two messages moved through it, and across them the poets identified a fish, argued whether a demagogue should be given a platform, defended a young poet from her scolds, and buried a generous man. The trivial and the grave shared the inbox without hierarchy that month, and the arrangement turned out to be an accidental and rather moving portrait of what a commons actually is, as opposed to what it imagines itself to be.

The month's largest thread was about a fish. Alan Sondheim, having watched a thousand of them school and flash in the Providence River, wrote to the poetry list in earnest — *"Please help me, what are these fish?"* — and the room convened its biggest conversation of September to name a mackerel. It was the commons at its most gloriously un-literary, pouring its collective attention into pure mutual aid on the least poetic question imaginable, and plainly delighted to be asked.

In the same days it argued the gravest thing it knew. As Ahmadinejad came to New York and spoke at Columbia, Geoffrey Gatza floated a satire of the webzine BlazeVOX hosting the Iranian president for a poetry reading — the free-speech question, whether a platform should extend even to your enemy, wrapped in a joke about *"the diplomatic dance New York has long performed with international firebrands"*. The room that had just spent fifty messages on a fish turned, without changing gears, to the ethics of the microphone.

And it stood up for its own. In a thread policing how young women poets were said to behave, CA Conrad rose to defend Dorothea Lasky without qualification, calling her *"One of the strongest people and poets I've ever met in my life"*, and telling the tut-tutters that she needed no one's permission to be exactly who she was. The commons at its combative best, throwing its weight in front of a young poet the room's scolds had presumed to correct — the same protective reflex it had shown, once, for the excluded, now turned toward the merely young and unbowed.

And on the thirteenth, quietly, the British poet Bill Griffiths died at fifty-nine, and richard owens mourned that *"Bill was a generous man"*, gone too soon. His death gave the month its weight, and made the fish thread, in retrospect, its truest memorial — for a generous commons is exactly a place where the stupidest question is met with delight, where aid and argument and grief all fit one room. I have set

September down exactly as the archive delivered it — the schooling fish, the tyrant's microphone, the defended poet, and the generous man gone — because it was the month the list proved it was never the high forum it fancied itself, but something humbler and far better: the room where you can ask what these fish are and be answered, and where, when one of you dies, the same room grieves.

— *K. M. F.*

October 2007

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

October 2007 found the list doing the most characteristic thing it knows how to do: rising, once more, to defend Robert Creeley. Eight hundred and fifty-five messages moved through the room, and its largest cluster answered a slight — the sitting Poet Laureate had reviewed the dead master coolly, and the aging commons, grieving him still two and a half years on, mounted its guard. Around that loyalty gathered the month's quieter loves: the letter as a form, theft taken as flattery, and a Nobel cheered without the usual suspicion. It was a month about what a room stays loyal to.

The quarrel was Simic on Creeley. Charles Simic, newly the nation's laureate, had reviewed Creeley's *Collected Poems* with a temperature the list read as dismissal, reviving the oldest war in the room — the spontaneous bop of the New American line against the crafted lyric the laureate stood for. Mark Weiss refused to let the reading stand, insisting *"I'd suggest a closer reading of the Simic review"* and volunteering to perform the close reading himself. The household god's legacy was not, the room made clear, the laureate's to appraise unopposed.

The letter answered the review with a gentler loyalty. A thread on epistolary forms gathered the tradition of the poem as a letter — Olson's *Mayan Letters*, Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*, McGrath's *Letters to an Imaginary Friend* — and even this craft inquiry circled back, through Olson, to the very New American masters the room was busy guarding. The letter, after all, is the form of loyalty itself: the direct address, unhedged, to someone who matters enough to be written to by name.

And the decade's long anxiety about copying resolved, for one month, into a joke. mIEKAL aND passed along the Frankfurt Book Fair's index of its most-stolen titles, crowing *"Great news! They're stealing our books!"* — theft reframed as the sincerest recognition the market offers, to be wanted badly enough to be lifted. Doris Lessing's Nobel arrived in the same weeks and was met, for once, with plain warmth — *"she's a wonder"*, one poet wrote — recognition at the summit, received without the reflexive sneer.

But the month, and the run, belonged to the loyalty. Whatever the long decline had taken from the list — the traffic, the young, the good voices gone quiet — it had not taken this: the room would still rise, close reading in hand, to defend Robert Creeley against a Poet Laureate, and refuse the official interpreter the last word. I have set October down exactly as the archive delivered it — the defended master, the loyal

letter, the flattering theft, and the cheered Nobel — because it was the month the list proved that under everything it had lost, one thing held fast, and a room that will still go to the mat for its dead, with a close reading, is a room that is, in the only way that finally counts, still alive.

— *K. M. F.*

November 2007

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

November 2007 found the list doing the thing a shrinking room does when it can no longer be sure of itself: it went back to the beginning and asked what a poem even is. Six hundred and twelve messages moved through it, and the largest of them were not quarrels over schools or reputations but first-principle definitions — poetry against prose, the meaning of a single descriptive word — the smallest possible questions, taken up in earnest. It was the sound of a commons checking that the ground under it was still there.

The month's biggest thread simply asked the room to define its art. Tomas Weber offered a clean split — poetry as words that create a meaning for an audience, prose as words that convey one — and the list fell on it with the appetite of people who had argued everything else to exhaustion. A companion thread interrogated one adjective to death, with Angela Vasquez-Giroux protesting that calling a poem musical was to reach for one of the *"non-descriptive words masquerading as descriptive"*, a compliment that named nothing. The room was auditing its own vocabulary, word by word.

And then a giant died, and the room could barely say why it mattered. Norman Mailer was gone on the tenth at eighty-four, and Ann Bogle asked the list, plainly, to place him — *"where does he fit in a Stein or Hemingway continuum"* — to say from a poetics stance what his enormous public life had been for. The answers came back cool and hedged; Steve Russell allowed only that *"the guy had his moments"*. The last of the big public egos, the novelist who thought writing was an act large enough to run a city on, met a room that had grown too careful, or too tired, to mourn him at full volume.

Underneath ran the sign of the same fatigue: the return of old ground. Deep Image came around once more — the thread was titled, with an audible sigh, again — and the room re-fought the narrative wars it had fought a decade earlier, while a separate current worried that Wikipedia had become a class assignment, the reference book now written by the students. Everything was being redone: the definitions, the quarrels, the very sources of knowledge. A room low on new arguments was reconditioning the old ones.

I have set November down exactly as the archive delivered it — the poem defined against prose, the audited adjective, the coolly weighed giant, and the quarrel come

round again — because it was the month the list stopped assuming it knew what it was and went back to first principles in earnest, and there is something both touching and ominous in it: a room that once set the terms for a generation now checking, out loud, whether the word musical means anything, and unable, when the great public novelist died, to do more than concede he had his moments. To go back to the beginning is either how you renew a thing or how you begin, quietly, to bury it.

— *K. M. F.*

December 2007

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

December 2007 was a month about magnitude and its counterfeits — the poem that reaches for the epic, the hero turned inside out, the biography that manufactures a grandeur the life never had. Six hundred and fourteen messages moved through the list, its largest currents running toward bigness of every kind, and toward the ways bigness gets faked. Into that argument about greatness a genuinely great man died, and the contrast organized the month.

The room's appetite that December was for scale. Its two biggest threads gathered the twentieth century's long poems — the epics, the serial monuments, the works that dared to be enormous — and, alongside them, catalogued anti-heroes, greatness inverted, the protagonist you follow against your own better judgment. A parallel thread hunted for what the novelist Mario Vargas Llosa and the singer Bob Marley might have in common, as though magnitude in one art could be weighed against magnitude in another, and another turned Zizek loose on Beethoven, the philosopher sizing up the largest music there is. The list wanted to talk about size: the poem that would not stay small, the hero who had gone sour, the fame that crosses between arts. It was taking the measure of ambition itself.

The quarrel gathered, beautifully, around a fake. A thread on biographical films revived a line the room kept for Robert Creeley — his memory of a movie in which a doctor cries out that Louis Pasteur is born — and turned it into a case against the whole genre, which, one poster argued, can never resist sticking its subject with *"a tedious fixed character, set from the start"*. The biopic was magnitude counterfeited: a life flattened into destiny, greatness assigned in the cradle. Creeley, dead two and a half years, was still the room's sharpest instrument for telling the real thing from the manufactured one.

And the real thing died, and his own country looked away. Oscar Peterson, one of the great pianists the century produced, was gone on the twenty-third at eighty-two, and the list noted the bitter asymmetry of his mourning: the French president grieved him aloud, while, as one poster put it, *"It's doubtful that an American politician would recognize the name"*. Here was magnitude that needed no biopic and got no honor at home — genuine greatness, recognized abroad and shrugged off in the nation that made it.

I have set December down exactly as the archive delivered it — the long poems, the soured heroes, the counterfeiting biopic, and the great man his country could not name — because it was the month the list spent arguing about magnitude while a true instance of it died unremarked by the culture that produced him, and Creeley's old joke about Louis Pasteur turned out to be the key to all of it: that greatness assigned by the machinery of story is a fraud, and greatness that actually lived, like Oscar Peterson's, is exactly the kind a nation forgets to mourn, leaving it to a room of poets and a foreign head of state to do the honors.

— *K. M. F.*

January 2008

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

January 2008 opened an election year, and the list met the occasion the only way it knew how — not with sincerity but with constraint, answering the coming pageantry of national poetry with parody, procedure, and play. Five hundred and ninety-three messages moved through it, and its largest threads turned on the rigged and the rule-bound: spoof inaugural poems, the machinery of the Oulipo, the poem generated by system rather than sung from the heart. A room that could no longer produce an earnest public poem could still, gleefully, produce the machine that mocked one.

The biggest thread was a preemptive strike on ceremony. A full year before any inauguration, the room began drafting spoof inaugural poems, and behind the joke sat a real doubt — one poster asked outright, *“Is there such a thing as a good Inaugural Poem?”*, and the room mostly thought not. The reigning example was Charles Bernstein’s n+7 mangling of Maya Angelou, *On the Pumice of Morons*, procedure turned against pomp: the official poem run through the Oulipo’s dictionary-shift until its solemnity collapsed into nonsense. Sincerity, the room implied, was the one register the occasion could not survive.

Around it clustered the month’s deeper appetite for rules and crossings. The Oulipo Compendium drove a long thread, code poetry another, and a wide inquiry hunted for writers who were also visual artists — the poem as constraint, as software, as a thing that leaks across the border into another medium. The room was in love, that January, with the made rather than the felt: the poem you could build, program, or draw, as against the poem you were merely supposed to mean.

But the play was shadowed by a real loss, and the loss was the room’s most earnest man. Burton Hatlen died on the nineteenth — *“our crowd’s scholar, a tremendous enthusiast for experimental and contemporary poetry”*, head of the National Poetry Foundation at Orono, a friend to half the list — and a poet mourned that this made *“two Orono NPF titans in such short succession”* gone from the field. He was the antithesis of the n+7 joke: the man who took the whole difficult enterprise seriously enough to devote a life to its scholarship, dead in the very weeks the room was busy proving it could no longer be sincere.

I have set January down exactly as the archive delivered it — the spoof inauguration, the Oulipo’s machine, the poem that crosses into paint and code, and the earnest

scholar gone — because it was the month the list answered a historic election with parody and procedure, unable or unwilling to sing anything straight, and lost, in the middle of the joke, the gentleman who had believed in the thing entirely. The room could still build a beautiful machine to ridicule an inaugural poem; what it seemed no longer able to do was write one, or mourn Burt Hatlen, without first reaching for a rule to hide behind.

— *K. M. F.*

February 2008

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

February 2008 was the busiest month of the stretch, six hundred and eighty-six messages, and it spent that traffic worrying a single terrible question: what to do with the great artist who was also a monster. The occasion was Ezra Pound — an anniversary, a new scholarly volume, a fresh cache of letters — and the room could not let him alone, because he is the hardest case the art offers, the maker whose genius and whose hatred cannot be told apart. The whole month circled the problem of the gift lodged inside the abomination.

The largest current ran directly at that wound. Answering an MLA survey on how to teach Pound, one poster refused the premise outright — *“I teach Pound as an abomination, as the canonizing of hatred”*, the case study by which literature indicts its own machinery of consecration — and reminded the room that the same man, declared insane and committed, was handed the first Bollingen Prize two years later. It was the extremity of the question stated plainly: not whether Pound wrote greatly, which no one denied, but whether the greatness should have been crowned at all.

The quarrel was whether the poems survived the man. Some in the room held that they did, that the work stood clear of the broadcasts; others could not perform the separation — one confessed that the arrogance and the rectitude underlying the anti-Semitic tirades had simply *“wrecked his work for me”*, that once heard, the hatred could not be un-heard in the lines. Around Pound gathered the month's adjacent cases, threads on masculinity and the pose of the transgressor, on Vollmann's violence — the recurring figure of the male artist who mistakes cruelty for depth. A brisk debate over self-publishing and a hunt for where to find recorded sound poetry ran beside it, but it was Pound who owned the month, the room returning to him again and again, unable to set him down.

And a gentler master died to complicate the verdict. Alain Robbe-Grillet, architect of the nouveau roman, was gone on the eighteenth, and the room passed around a line from his criticism — his dry note that *“My novels have not been received, upon publication in France, with unanimous enthusiasm”* — the total controller of his fictions turning his control, for once, into self-mockery. Here was the other kind of difficult master: austere, forbidding, but harmless, a man whose absolutism stopped at the edge of the page.

I have set February down exactly as the archive delivered it — the abomination taught as a case against literature itself, the poems that hatred wrecked, the transgressor's worn pose, and the austere Frenchman's parting joke — because it was the month the list stared longest into its ugliest problem and refused the easy exits, neither absolving Pound for the beauty nor pretending the beauty was not there. A room that will teach its greatest reactionary as an abomination, and still argue for weeks about whether his poems can be saved from him, is a room doing the actual moral work of reading, which has never once been comfortable and was not comfortable that February either.

— *K. M. F.*

March 2008

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

March 2008 was a month about the real and its forgeries — the memoir that turned out to be invented, the poem that longs to hold an actual object instead of its name, the candidate whose youthful verses surfaced as proof he had once been a real and unguarded person. Five hundred and twenty messages moved through the list, and across them ran a single anxious question: how much does it matter whether a thing is true, and what exactly do we buy when we buy authenticity?

The scandal that lit the month was a hoax. A celebrated gang memoir had just been confessed a fabrication, and the room argued the ethics with real heat, some refusing to care — *“if the book's good the book's good”*, one poster shrugged, since the memoir genre was voyeuristic anyway — and others turning the accusation back on the audience. The real fraud, that faction held, was the reader who could only be moved by a story once a publisher swore it had happened, who paid for suffering only when guaranteed it was real. The forger, on this reading, had merely exposed the appetite.

Against that appetite the month set the oldest dream of the art. A thread chasing a half-remembered line from Antonin Artaud framed the poet's deepest wish and its impossibility — the desire, as the poster put it, that *“if he could literally put a lemon into the poem instead of the word lemon he would”*, to break past metaphor and lodge the actual thing on the page. It was the exact inverse of the hoax: not passing fiction off as fact, but yearning for a fact so real no word could stand in for it. Between the fake memoir and the impossible lemon lay the whole vexed distance between language and the world.

And the real, that election spring, wore a hopeful face. As the primaries ground on, the room passed around two poems the young Barack Obama had written in college, fished from the net, and judged them without cruelty — *“pretty decent poems for a 19-year-old”*, someone allowed — the unguarded juvenilia of a man now performing certainty on a national stage. Here was authenticity of a third kind: not marketed, not impossible, just the ordinary evidence that a public figure had once been a private and fumbling maker like the rest of them.

I have set March down exactly as the archive delivered it — the confessed memoir, the reader who wants his suffering certified, Artaud's impossible lemon, and the candidate's college poems — because it was the month the list, a room that lives

entirely by metaphor and invention, spent worrying at the value of the literally true, and arrived nowhere comfortable. It could not quite condemn the forger, could not achieve Artaud's lemon, and could only smile at the young poems of a man reinventing himself in real time: proof that the room knew, uneasily, that its own medium is the art of the beautiful lie, and that the truth it kept demanding is the one thing a poem can never simply hand you.

— *K. M. F.*

April 2008

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

April 2008 was a month about defection — the poet who abandons the poem for the novel, and the citizen accused of abandoning the people he came from. Six hundred and four messages moved through the list, its single largest thread a howl of betrayal at poets who had taken up fiction, and its loudest political thread a fight over whether a candidate had insulted or merely described the towns he was losing. Under both ran the same nerve: what do you owe the form, or the place, that made you?

The month's great outcry was against apostasy to the novel. In capitals that never let up, one poster confessed the near-physical revulsion the defection provoked — the sickness of hearing of *"how physically ILL I become when I hear of YET ANOTHER poet writing novels"* — and mourned the poets who cross over swearing they will keep writing verse and never do. *"They never come back from the illness"*, the lament ran, the novel figured as a wasting disease of the true vocation, with Eileen Myles allowed as the rare soul who returned from it undiminished. To leave the poem for prose was, in this room, a kind of death.

The quarrel over belonging ran on a national scale. Obama had described the towns of rural Pennsylvania as bitter and clinging, and the campaign convulsed; the list convulsed with it. One member, raised there and now defending the remark from the inside, wrote of *"these people being bitter and clinging to their guns and religion"* as a plain truth he had fled — while others heard only a cosmopolitan sneer at people who could not answer back. It was the season's rawest fault line, class and condescension and who gets to narrate a place, and the room split along it exactly as the country did.

Underneath, the same question turned inward and literary. A companion thread studied poets as characters in novels — the maker not defecting to fiction but captured by it, embalmed as someone else's figure — while the avant-garde argued, yet again, over its own spelling and borders. Everywhere the anxiety was the same: the poet pulled out of the poem, into prose, into caricature, into the wide indifferent world of the novel that does not love the line the way the line loves itself.

I have set April down exactly as the archive delivered it — the sickness at the defecting poet, the poet trapped as a novel's character, and the country tearing itself over a candidate's verdict on the towns that raised him — because it was the month

the list bound together two kinds of leaving, the artistic and the civic, and felt them as one wound. The room that could barely forgive a poet for writing a novel was the same room straining to say what a person owes the place and the people he comes from, and finding, in a bitter election spring, that loyalty to a form and loyalty to a home are harder to keep, and harder to judge, than anyone on either side wished to admit.

— *K. M. F.*

May 2008

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

May 2008 was a month about disappearance — the poem that abstracts itself past the point of reference, and the poet who vanished so completely he became the art's permanent ghost. Five hundred and forty-five messages moved through the list, its largest thread reaching after the poetry that would do what abstract painting did, dissolve the figure into pure gesture, and its most haunted thread circling a man who had walked out of his own life and never been found. The month lived at the vanishing point, where the image thins toward nothing.

The room's central argument was about how far a poem can abstract. The question came in plainly — *"What poets have come closest in practice to paralleling the mid-century's abstract expressionism movement?"* — and the answers reached, inevitably, for Robert Creeley, whose Selected one member was then reviewing as exactly that, a poetry built like an action painting, all attention and gesture and no picture. Creeley again, dead three years and still the room's reference for every hard question: here the test case for whether the poem could survive the loss of its subject and become, like the canvas, pure made surface.

Beneath the theory ran a human vanishing. A thread gathered around Weldon Kees, the poet who disappeared in 1955 and was never seen again, a man saved from oblivion only because Donald Justice had rescued and championed the work — one member recalled being handed the Selected as a boy and finding in the poem 1926 *"a perfect poem"*, a model kept for a lifetime. Kees was abstraction made biography: a figure subtracted from the world entirely, leaving only the poems and the ache of an unfinished sentence. The room spoke of him with the tenderness it reserves for its lost.

And against the vanishing the room set an anniversary of endurance. A Coney Island of the Mind had turned fifty, Ferlinghetti's book still in print and still selling after half a century, the plainest possible rebuke to the idea that poems dissolve or disappear. One current abstracted the image away and mourned the poet who vanished; the other pointed to a book that had simply refused to leave, fifty years on the shelf, as durable as anything the art had made.

I have set May down exactly as the archive delivered it — the poem reaching for abstract expression, Creeley as the model for it, the vanished Kees kept alive by one champion's care, and the fifty-year-old book that would not disappear — because it

was the month the list held disappearance and endurance in the same hand and could not choose between them. It asked whether a poem could thin itself to pure gesture and still hold, mourned a poet who had thinned himself out of existence, and then, almost in consolation, remembered that some books simply stay, in print and in love, for fifty years, which is the room's quiet answer to every vanishing: that a few of the made things do, against all the odds of the vanishing point, endure.

— *K. M. F.*

June 2008

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

June 2008 was the most inward month of the stretch, a room of four hundred and sixty-two messages turning its diagnostic eye entirely on itself and asking the two questions it least wanted answered: is the lyric poem dying, and what is a failed poet? The traffic had thinned by a third from the winter, and into that quiet the list did the thing quiet rooms do — it stopped talking about the world and began, at length, to take its own pulse. The month reads like a physician examining his own chart.

The largest current was a meditation on the lyric's impermanence. A long, careful post — signed by a poet the room addressed simply as Stephen — described the strange grief of reading a lyric that seizes you completely and then, minutes later, is gone, how the poem *"becomes such a fleeting thing"*, displaced by the next poem, the television, the threnody of the news. It was not an attack on the lyric but an elegy for its half-life, the ache of a form that gives total presence and then evaporates, leaving the reader to wonder what that vanished thing had been and why so much good labor flies by.

The quarrel, gentler than most, was over whether the diagnosis was even new. Against the funeral tone one member noted the echo of Wordsworth in it, the sense that every generation announces the lyric's death, and proposed that the form was not expiring but merely in its permanent condition — persisting *"rather than about to die altogether"*, going on as it always had, mourned and undead. The lyric, on this account, was not dying; it was only doing what the lyric does, which is to feel, to each new reader, like the last of its kind.

Beside the lyric's obituary the room performed a companion self-examination. A thread asked, half in fun, what is a failed poet, and the sharpest response turned the question inside out: that the very act of asking it *"reveals more about a given poet"* than any answer could, that failure is a mirror the anxious hold up to themselves. Bob Perelman's poem titled Joke drove the month's other long argument, the Language poet's deadpan turned into fifty messages — the room, even at its most self-doubting, still able to spend a week on a single wry text.

I have set June down exactly as the archive delivered it — the lyric that seizes and then flees, the suspicion that its death is always announced and never quite arrives, the failed poet revealed by his own question, and the joke worth fifty messages —

because it was the month the list, thinned and quiet, stopped diagnosing poetry and began diagnosing itself. A room that spends its June asking whether the lyric is dying and what makes a poet a failure is a room feeling its own mortality; but a room that can still, in the same breath, argue for a week about a poem called Joke is not a failed poet or a dying form. It is a living thing worrying, as living things do, that it might not be.

— *K. M. F.*

July 2008

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

July 2008 was the thinnest file of the stretch, three hundred and fourteen messages where February had mustered nearly seven hundred, and it spent its diminished traffic on the question that would define the coming decade: originality, appropriation, and the artist who makes new work entirely out of old. The room had collapsed to half its winter size, and yet the argument it took up was the one the whole art world was about to have — whether the copy, the lift, the found thing, could be a form of making at all.

The largest thread set appropriation against itself. Prompted by a newspaper piece observing that *"Artists have appropriated images from advertising for decades"*, the room chased the recursion to its vertigo: what happens when the appropriators are appropriated, when the corporation lifts the artist who lifted the corporation, and the death of the author turns out to have been a possum's trick, the borrower waking to claim ownership of the borrowed. It was the conceptual argument in its purest form, originality declared dead and then quietly resurrected the moment someone else did the borrowing.

The quarrel found a target in a critic. The Times had run William Logan's review of Frank O'Hara's new Selected Poems, and the room, which regarded Logan as the age's designated executioner, gathered its counter-fire — collecting the rebuttals, noting the homophobia some readers heard under the hatchet-work, treating the review itself as a kind of hostile appropriation, the critic seizing the right to reduce a beloved poet to a verdict. Around O'Hara, the most generous of the dead, the room closed ranks against the man it took for his least generous reader.

And the month's true emblem died at its start. Bruce Conner was gone on the seventh, the artist who had built masterpieces out of nothing but found footage — his film A Movie assembled, as one poster recalled, from *"speeded up film footage of crashes"*, the borrowed reel of the century's disasters cut into art. He was the original appropriator, the man who proved half a century early that the lifted image could be made to sing, and his death in the very month the room argued the ethics of appropriation gave the abstraction a body and a grave.

I have set July down exactly as the archive delivered it — the appropriators appropriated, the executioner-critic answered, O'Hara defended, and the great found-footage maker gone — because it was the month the shrunken list took up the

argument that would outlive it, whether making can be nothing but re-making, and lost, on the seventh, the artist who had already answered yes with a lifetime of borrowed film. A room down to three hundred messages, itself by now a kind of found archive of old quarrels recycled, argued originality while burying the man who had turned appropriation into grace: the question and its finest answer arriving, as they so often did on this list, in the same diminished breath.

— *K. M. F.*

August 2008

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

August 2008 was a month about survival — whether a poet can survive on poetry, whether the words survive the world, whether the art survives at all except as a guest in someone else's medium. Three hundred and nineteen messages moved through the list, thin and late-summer slow, weeks before the banks fell, and already the room was counting who was left standing. It reads now like a quiet ledger drawn up on the eve of a crash nobody in it had yet named.

The largest thread was an inventory of poetry's afterlife on film — a long, affectionate list of movies with poetry in them, the art surviving not on its own shelf but smuggled into the cinema, borrowed by a bigger and richer form to lend a scene some depth. It was survival by dependence: the poem enduring precisely because it had been absorbed into something with a wider audience and a working economy, kept alive as a passenger on the medium that had eclipsed it.

The quarrel was frankly economic, and prophetic. Under the heading of who is left standing, the room asked whether anyone could still make a living from poetry alone, without the teaching post or the grant, and came up nearly empty — one member reporting the grim folklore that *"the last poet to make a living from"* the sale of his poems had been Alfred Tennyson, a century and a half gone. In the last weeks before the financial collapse, a room of poets was already taking the measure of an art with no viable economy, counting the survivors and finding almost none.

And the month's most beautiful current made survival its explicit subject. A sleepless member on a Paul Auster kick — insomniac, thought-crowded, still in love with the art — passed around Auster's lines about *"the words that do not survive the world"*, the poem that dissolves in the very act of being spoken. It was the tenderest possible framing of the month's dread: not the economy or the audience but the words themselves, mortal, evaporating as they leave the mouth, and loved all the more for it by a reader who could not sleep for thinking of them.

I have set August down exactly as the archive delivered it — poetry surviving as a passenger in the movies, the poet who cannot survive on poems since Tennyson, and Auster's words that do not survive the world — because it was the month the list, thinned and sleepless on the lip of a crash it could not yet see, made survival its one true theme and found the odds long at every level: the art alive only by borrowing a richer medium's room, the poet unable to live by the work, the words themselves

vanishing as they are said. And yet the room was still there, still passing poems hand to hand at three in the morning, which is the only kind of survival this list ever really had: not the economy's and not posterity's, but the plain fact of a few people still awake and still reading to each other in the dark.

— *K. M. F.*

September 2008

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

September 2008 was the month the bottom began to fall out — Lehman gone mid-month, the campaign at full roar — and the list answered the noise the way it had learned to, not by originating but by arranging. Three hundred and ninety-eight messages moved through it, and its characteristic gesture that month was the poet as assembler: the collage, the borrowed line, the constraint clamped onto the chaos. When the world will not hold still, the room reached for scissors and paste rather than the blank page.

The largest formal argument asked where borrowing ends and stealing begins. Under the heading of copyright infringement or collage, the room passed around assembled poems — a ROVA text built of found scraps, *“we breathe, the gap we breathe”* — and worried the line between the homage and the lift, the cut-up and the crime. It was the decade's central anxiety in miniature: whether a poem made of other people's language is an act of composition or an act of theft, and whether the law could tell the difference any better than the poets could.

The quarrel found its highest sanction in the master himself. John Ashbery's debut exhibition of collages was reviewed that month — the difficult old poet revealed as a literal cutter-and-paster, arranging found images the way he had always arranged found speech — and alongside it the room marked forty years of *Technicians of the Sacred*, Rothenberg's great anthology, itself a collage of the world's poetries bound between two covers. Assembly, the month insisted, was not the amateur's shortcut but the modern art entire, practiced at the top — the same instinct that had built the century's anthologies, its cut-ups, its readymades, now claimed by the difficult master as openly as any young collagist on the list.

Against the political spectacle the room deployed the same instinct as pure play. Sarah Palin had just been named to the ticket, and a request to the list's formalists produced not argument but wordgame — *“anybody out there have a good palindrome about Palin? or even a palinode?”* — the campaign's roar fed into a constraint machine and handed back as reversible nonsense. It was the collagist's reflex turned on the news: take the given material, however unpromising, and rearrange it until it says something the original never meant to.

I have set September down exactly as the archive delivered it — the borrowed poem between infringement and art, Ashbery's literal collages, the anthology at forty, and

the campaign folded into a palindrome — because it was the month the list, with the markets cracking and the election screaming, answered by arranging rather than inventing, and made an unspoken case for its own survival. A room that can no longer be sure it can say anything new can still cut, paste, borrow, and reverse; and in a September when so much was coming apart, the poets found a strange composure in the art of putting found pieces together.

— *K. M. F.*

October 2008

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

October 2008 gave the list its biggest quarrel of the stretch — better than a hundred and thirty messages spent on a single hoax — and the hoax cut straight to the nerve of everything the decade had been arguing. A fake anthology had appeared, its poems apparently machine-generated, its contributors partly invented, and the room could not look away. Six hundred and twenty-five messages moved through October, and the largest of them asked the question the age kept refusing to settle: if a computer wrote it and a fiction signed it, whose poem is it, and why are we all so pleased to be in it?

The anthology was a trap, and the room walked in delighted. Poets discovered themselves listed among invented names and computer-assembled verses, and rather than recoil, many were charmed — Obododimma Oha wrote in mock envy, asking to be lent *“one of your fictional selves, one of your invented selves, in that anthology”*, wishing he too had been included in the fabrication. The generation game had worked precisely by flattering the vanity it exposed: everyone wanted to belong to the fake.

The quarrel was whether the charm was the problem. One skeptic refused the fun, unsettled that so many colleagues were *“more than happy to have your names attached to something a computer wrote”*, as though authorship had become so hollow that a machine's output under a phantom byline was honor enough. Here was the appropriative decade's reductio: not the poet stealing another's words, but the poet delighted to be credited with words no human had written, the byline surviving the death of the author it named.

Underneath the hoax ran the month's soberer needs. A long thread hunted, without irony, for accessible poetry recommendations — poems a real reader might actually love — while another traced the genealogy of appropriative poetics, trying to give the machine-and-mask games a respectable lineage back through Duchamp and Cage. The room wanted both things at once: the avant-garde prank that dissolved the author, and the plain human poem a stranger could be handed and moved by. That the two hungers ran side by side, in the same inbox and often the same posters, was the month's quiet self-portrait — a commons in love with its own dissolution and still, underneath, wanting to be read.

I have set October down exactly as the archive delivered it — the fake anthology, the poets begging for a fictional self, the skeptic troubled by the machine's byline, and the quiet hunt for a poem someone could simply love — because it was the month the list staged, as comedy, the exact crisis it had been living as theory: that authorship had thinned to a name a computer could wear, and that a room of poets, offered membership in a beautiful fraud, would mostly rush to sign. That they also, in the same weeks, went looking for accessible poems is the saving detail — the fake generation and the real reader wanting the same thing, which was only ever to be part of something that felt like it counted.

— *K. M. F.*

November 2008

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

November 2008 sat the list down inside history: the country elected its first Black president, passed a ban on gay marriage in the same hour, and the room turned, as it rarely dared to, on itself. Five hundred and forty messages moved through it, and the largest currents were not about poetics at all but about race — the nation's, the poetry world's, and the list's own — braided with the comedy and the fear of a commons discovering how exposed it was. It was a month when the outside world walked in and would not be shown out.

The election forced a genealogy the room could not agree on. Obama's victory opened threads on Forty Acres and on the man's own lineage — one poster noting that his story was *"not his genealogy at all"*, the son of a Kenyan father and a Kansan mother rather than a descendant of the enslaved, and the room argued what claim he had, and what claim anyone had, on the inheritance of American Blackness. Alongside it ran the harder mirror: a thread simply titled Discussions of Race and the Poetics List, the commons turning the question inward and asking who it had made welcome and who it had not.

The quarrel doubled, because the same night that made history also took something away. California had passed Proposition 8, and the room fought over marriage and its separate-but-equal substitute, the civil union, the old segregationist phrase dragged into the argument to name what a lesser status really was. A country capable of electing Obama and banning gay marriage in one ballot was a country the poets could not resolve into a single story, and they did not try; they let the contradiction sit on the list, raw.

And then, in the middle of the gravity, the commons remembered how fragile it was. A fifty-message panic broke out under the bare heading David when it emerged that David Chirot's email had been hacked, the familiar name suddenly sending pleas from a stranded traveler — the room's trust in its own roster briefly weaponized against it. It was comedy and it was warning: a community that lives entirely as names in an inbox is only ever one stolen password away from not knowing who it is talking to.

I have set November down exactly as the archive delivered it — the elected president and the contested lineage, the list turning to examine its own race, the banned marriage and its separate-but-equal shadow, and the hijacked name that spooked

the room — because it was the month history refused to stay outside the poetry list, and the commons, for once, let it in. A room that spent that November arguing Obama's genealogy, auditing its own exclusions, mourning Proposition 8, and panicking over a stolen identity was a room doing something braver than poetics: it was trying, unevenly and out loud, to figure out who it actually was.

— *K. M. F.*

December 2008

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

December 2008 handed the list the very thing it had spent a January spoofing — a real inaugural poet, named and appointed — and the room discovered that the actual occasion was harder to mock than the imaginary one. Four hundred and seven messages moved through it, and the largest gathered around Elizabeth Alexander, chosen to read at Obama's swearing-in, and around the compromised ceremony she had been asked to bless. A year after the list had drafted joke inaugural poems, a real one was coming, and the jokes stopped.

The largest thread was an open letter asking her not to do it. Alexander had been named the inaugural poet, but the same inauguration had handed its invocation to Rick Warren, a prominent backer of Proposition 8, and one member wrote to her directly — begging her to *“consider saying No to reading at Barak Obama's inauguration”* so long as an anti-gay pastor shared the platform. It was an agonized letter, alert to what it was asking; the writer knew, as a poet, *“how long and hard we work with little or no recognition and respect”*, and knew he was asking her to refuse the largest recognition a poet could get, on principle.

The quarrel was whether the poet owed the occasion her presence or her protest. Some in the room held that Alexander should read and make the platform hers; others that to stand beside Warren was to lend poetry's dignity to a man campaigning against their marriages. Around it swirled the inauguration's theology — what it meant to open a secular rite with a divisive prayer — and the room split, as the country did, over whether a poet honors a flawed ceremony by gracing it or by walking away.

Underneath the gravity the list kept its gallows humor about money and the body. The Poetry Brothel at the Zipper Factory drew a long thread — poets performing intimacy for tips as the recession bit — and a colder current, capitalism and the long poem, asked whether the epic itself was a form the market could no longer underwrite. The inaugural poet debated her conscience upstairs while, downstairs, the poets priced themselves by the hour.

I have set December down exactly as the archive delivered it — the named inaugural poet, the open letter begging her to refuse, the divisive prayer, and the brothel pricing verse by the tip — because it was the month the list got its wish and found it complicated: a real poet at a real inauguration, and no way to feel simple about it. A

room that had laughed at the very idea of an inaugural poem now argued in dead earnest whether a good poet should stand on a stage beside a man who opposed her friends' right to marry, which is the difference, exactly, between mocking an occasion and being asked to live inside one.

— *K. M. F.*

January 2009

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

January 2009 opened with a swearing-in and a bailout, hope and insolvency arriving in the same weeks, and the list met the new administration in the currency of the moment: money, and the selling of the unsellable. Four hundred and fifty-five messages moved through it, and its largest currents ran to price — the poet performing intimacy for tips, the epic weighed against the market, the bank rescue, the body auctioned. In a month that made a president, the room mostly counted the cost of things.

The largest thread priced the poet directly. The Poetry Brothel at the Zipper Factory ran on into the new year — poets costumed as courtesans reading for coins, art dressed as sex work because the recession had made the metaphor literal — and the room dissected it at length, half scandalized and half recognizing itself. When a bailout thread arrived, one poster hung it on the same hook, passing along the news of a graduate student auctioning her virginity to pay tuition: the age of selling whatever the market would price, degree and poem and body alike.

The quarrel turned economic and formal at once. Under the heading capitalism and the long poem, the room asked whether the epic — the vast, uneconomical, time-devouring poem — was a form any market could still support, or whether its repetitions were, as one reader put it, a marker of trauma and *“an existential emptiness that we can't seem to move beyond”*. The long poem became the test case: could poetry still afford its own ambition in a season when nothing could afford anything?

Against the ledger the month set the world's harder news and one flicker of hope. Gaza burned through the winter — a thread titled after Huxley's *Eyeless in Gaza* carried the war into the room — while the inauguration itself, when it came on the twentieth, brought Elizabeth Alexander at last to the podium to read to the largest audience a living poet would ever get. Recognition at the summit and catastrophe abroad, the bailout at home and the brothel down the block: the room held all of it in one cold January.

I have set January down exactly as the archive delivered it — the brothel's priced intimacy, the auctioned body, the long poem the market can no longer carry, the war in Gaza, and the inaugural poet at the summit — because it was the month hope and insolvency were sworn in together, and the list, characteristically, watched the

money. A room that greeted a historic presidency by asking what a poem costs, whether an epic is still affordable, and what a person will sell to stay in school was not being cynical; it was noticing, before most, that the new era would be lived under the sign of price, and wondering aloud what, in such a season, a poem could possibly be worth.

— *K. M. F.*

February 2009

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

February 2009 caught the list dreaming of a patron. The recession had deepened into something that felt structural, and the room spent its largest thread on a fantasy of rescue from above — a cabinet officer for the arts, a state that might finally underwrite what the market was busy defunding. Four hundred and nineteen messages moved through it, and beneath the dream ran its sour twin, the suspicion that the market had already spoken, and that what it valued was not the poets. The month swung between petition and bitterness.

The largest thread asked the new president to make art official. Quincy Jones had launched a petition, and the room passed it eagerly along: *"Quincy Jones has started a petition to ask President Obama to appoint a Secretary of the Arts"*, on the reasoning that other nations had kept ministers of culture for centuries and that the arts needed one now more than ever. It was the hope of the Obama winter distilled — that a sympathetic state might at last do for poetry what commerce never would, and give the art a seat at the national table.

The quarrel was whether the market deserved any authority at all. A thread titled, in bitter irony, *The Market recognizes talent!* ran against the petition's hope, the room turning over the recession's cruelest lesson — that sales and merit had nothing to do with each other, that the auction was no judge of art. If the market could not be trusted to know a poet from a fraud, then either the state must step in or nothing would, and the poets were left arguing which failure they feared more.

Against both the state and the market the month reached for an older image of the poet at work. A wide thread asked where today's farmer poets had gone — *"Farming has changed beyond all recognition since the days of"* the poets of the land, Robert Burns and John Clare — mourning the vanished figure who wrote out of labor and soil rather than grant or market, while another gathered the long poems and plays of imprisonment, the art made under the least free conditions of all. The room was hunting for a poet whose worth owed nothing to either patron or price.

I have set February down exactly as the archive delivered it — the petition for a Secretary of the Arts, the bitter joke that the market knows talent, the lost farmer poets of Burns and Clare, and the poems written in prison — because it was the month the list, cornered by the recession, argued out the oldest question of the poet's livelihood and reached no peace with any answer. It could not trust the

market, could only wish for the state, and could only mourn the farmer-poet who had needed neither; and so it did what it always did when the economics turned hopeless, which was to keep writing to each other anyway, unpaid and unrecognized, as though the worth of the thing had never really been the market's to set.

— *K. M. F.*

March 2009

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

March 2009 turned February's economic dread into a genuine argument about how art ought to circulate — by sale or by gift, by the market's verdict or by the older logic of the offering freely given. Three hundred and twenty-six messages moved through the list, and its center of gravity was a running fight between the market's defenders and the room's many skeptics over whether commerce could judge a poem at all. The recession had made an abstraction urgent: if not the market, then what decides what art is worth?

The largest current pitted the gift economy against the auction. Provoked by a defender of the market as the fairest arbiter of merit, the room revolted — one poster scoffing that the market could be called the most democratic judge of artistic worth *"Only if we want high art to consist of poker playing dogs"*, and reaching for history to make the point, recalling that popular demand had once run vastly against emancipation itself, the Emancipation Proclamation among the most hated laws of its day. Democracy of the wallet, the argument went, was no democracy of value; the gift economy, art passed hand to hand outside price, was the truer home of the poem.

The quarrel had a familiar villain and a familiar prize. William Logan resurfaced — the room's designated hanging judge, the critic whose reviews the list treated as weather — and beside him ran the greatness game, a New York Times ranking of Ashbery that set the room arguing, yet again, over whether eminence can be measured and who gets to hold the scale. Between Logan's verdicts and the Times's hierarchies, the month kept circling the same suspicion: that the machinery which assigns literary worth is rigged, or blind, or both.

Underneath ran the decade's cooler experiments in escaping value altogether. Christian Bök and the pataphysicians drew a thread — the science of imaginary solutions, art that refuses use and price by refusing sense — the avant-garde's standing answer to the market being simply to make things the market cannot use. If the poem could not be fairly sold, perhaps it could be built so strange that selling it never arose — the pataphysician's escape hatch from an economy that had proven, that recession spring, that it could price anything except the thing the poets actually cared about.

I have set March down exactly as the archive delivered it — the gift economy against the poker-playing-dogs market, Logan the hanging judge, the greatness game, and

the pataphysicians making the unsellable — because it was the month the list argued out how art should move through the world and came down, as it always did, on the side of the gift. A room that will insist the market knows nothing of merit, distrust the critic who ranks and the newspaper that scores, and cheer the poets who build things too strange to price, is a room defending the one economy it has ever actually lived in: the free circulation of poems among people who expect no payment and keep sending them anyway.

— *K. M. F.*

April 2009

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

April 2009 set the room's highest human argument beside its newest inhuman one — the master we cannot stop measuring, and the machine that measures us without asking. Two hundred and ninety-four messages moved through the list, its largest thread an affectionate quarrel over what could fairly be demanded of John Ashbery, and its sharpest a report that an online store had quietly stripped gay and lesbian books of their standing. The month asked, from two directions, who decides a book's worth: the loving reader, or the silent algorithm.

The largest thread was a defense of the master's range. Answering the perennial complaint that Ashbery had done nothing since his early experiments, one poster mounted the case for his breadth — how few poets could follow *“a savagely experimental book like TCO with something as lyrically honeyed as Rivers and Mountains”* — and confessed to finding *“none as self-effacing as Ashbery”*, a greatness that hid itself. It was the room at its most generous, arguing not whether the poet was great but how his particular kind of greatness worked, and what it was fair to keep asking of a man in his ninth decade.

The quarrel came from the machine. Amazon had de-ranked a swath of gay and lesbian titles, stripping their sales figures and burying them in search — the episode the internet named that spring as a scandal — and a list member reported it in the first person, her own poetry book among the disappeared. Here was value assigned not by a reader's love or a critic's verdict but by an algorithm's quiet reclassification, a book demoted for its subject by a system that answered to no one and explained nothing.

The two arguments rhymed more than the room may have noticed. Ashbery's self-effacement, the greatness that hides, sat oddly beside the queer books forced into hiding by a corporation's filter — one concealment chosen and mastered, the other imposed and resented. Against both ran the war's grim arithmetic, a thread marking four thousand American dead, the reminder that some counts are not literary at all — that beside the ranking of a master and the de-ranking of a genre sat a tally no algorithm and no critic could soften, and that the room, for all its quarrels over worth, knew the difference between a demoted book and a buried soldier.

I have set April down exactly as the archive delivered it — the loving defense of Ashbery's range, the store that erased its gay and lesbian books, and the war's plain

body count — because it was the month the list held the reader's judgment and the machine's in the same hand and felt the difference in its bones. A room can spend weeks lovingly arguing what to ask of a master, weighing his every book with care; and a machine can bury a poet's life's work in an afternoon, for its subject, and say nothing. The month's lesson was which of those two the poets could live with, and which they could not.

— *K. M. F.*

May 2009

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

May 2009 was a month of elegy, and of the long companionship the living keep with the dead. Three hundred and eighteen messages moved through the list, and near the start of them one of the last great figures of the New American poetry died — Robin Blaser, of the Berkeley circle that had given the language Spicer and Duncan, gone on the seventh at eighty-three. His death set the room to its oldest and most serious work, which is not argument but keeping: holding the vanished poets present by continuing to speak to them.

The largest of the month's losses needed only four words to land. "*Robin Blaser died this morning*", someone wrote, and the room gathered around the maker of *The Holy Forest*, the serial poem he had tended across a lifetime, and around the circle he closed — the last major survivor of the San Francisco renaissance, the friend and editor of Jack Spicer, a poet for whom the poem was a lifelong dictation from beyond the self. With him went one more direct line to the heroic mid-century the list still measured itself against.

The quarrel, such as it was, was gentle and scholarly, and it too addressed the dead. A member asked the room to explain the Rainer Gerhardt "*to whom Creeley dedicated a poem in For Love*" — the young German poet Creeley had befriended by letter and lost early, and elegized — and so, in the same weeks it buried Blaser, the room found itself reconstructing an older elegy, Creeley's for his dead correspondent. Creeley again, three years gone himself, still the thread through which the list reached its losses: an elegy inside an elegy, grief keeping grief company.

Against the mourning the room did the only thing that answers it. A long thread went out calling for new poetics contributors, an urgent query for living voices to fill the pages the dead had vacated — the commons recruiting its next writers even as it buried its elders, the succession that any tradition depends on. *The Holy Forest* closes; the call for contributors opens; the work goes on being handed forward.

I have set May down exactly as the archive delivered it — Blaser dead in four plain words, *The Holy Forest* completed, Creeley's elegy for his German friend reconstructed, and the call for new voices going out — because it was the month the list did what it does better than argue, which is to keep faith with its dead. A room that answers the death of Robin Blaser by rebuilding, in the same breath, a decades-

old elegy Creeley wrote for a poet lost even younger, and then turns to recruit the living, is a room that understands the tradition it serves: a long conversation in which no one who mattered is ever quite allowed to fall silent, because someone is always still speaking to them.

— *K. M. F.*

June 2009

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

June 2009 buried another of its own and, in mourning him, found itself drawn all month to the figure of the outsider — the poet who stands askew to the institution, the metropolis, the canon, and makes something the inside could not. Two hundred and sixty-nine messages moved through the list, thinned by summer, and across them ran a quiet preoccupation with those who write from the margins: the exile, the naif, the self-taught, the poet nobody assigned. It was a fitting preoccupation for the month, because the man it lost had been, all his life, a brilliant outsider.

David Bromige died on the third, at seventy-five, and the room set up a page of memories for him. British-born, Canadian-raised, American by adoption, he had been the wittiest kind of exile — a Language-adjacent poet who belonged fully to no camp and punned his way past every orthodoxy — and his death left the list mourning a man who had made a whole art out of not quite fitting in. The obituary thread became, as they do here, a small collective portrait of a life spent gloriously to one side of the mainstream.

The largest live thread made the outsider a project. A mini-anthology of outsider poems gathered in progress, the room trading names of the untutored and the strange — one poster nominating *“Best outsider poet I know is Malok”*, a man who had never read a poem in his life and made them anyway — the commons reaching past its own credentialed membership toward the poetry that comes from nowhere the schools recognize. Beside it, a thread on Kenneth Patchen kept the same faith, honoring the poet of experimental simplicity who had worked his whole career outside the academy's approval.

Against the margins the month set the center, and could not quite love it. A wide thread hunted for New York in fiction — the metropolis as the great subject, the inside of the inside — even as the room's heart plainly lay with Malok and Patchen and Bromige, the ones who wrote from the edges. And a soberer current sought poems treating the American occupation of Iraq, the reminder that the largest outside of all was the war the literature had barely metabolized.

I have set June down exactly as the archive delivered it — Bromige the witty exile gone, the outsider-poem anthology gathering its untutored names, Patchen the plain outsider honored, and the metropolis courted without conviction — because it was the month the list lost a great outsider and spent its grief the right way, by

celebrating the whole tribe of them. A room that answers the death of a poet who never fit in by going looking for the man who never read a poem and made them anyway is a room declaring where its true loyalty lies: not with the center that credentials and canonizes, but with the margin, where the strangest and freest of the poetry has always actually come from.

— *K. M. F.*

July 2009

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

July 2009 was the list at its most self-doubting — a long midsummer trough in which the room turned over its own inadequacies from every side: the poet who wishes he were a novelist instead, the writing that feels doomed to fail, the grief that poetry can barely hold. Three hundred and sixty-seven messages moved through it, and the largest of them were confessions more than arguments. The month reads like a room asking, quietly and repeatedly, whether the thing it does is worth doing at all.

The largest thread was a defection wistfully imagined. Under the heading I want to write fiction but, poet after poet confessed the pull of the novel — the longer form, the wider audience, the sentence that need not justify every syllable — the recurring apostasy the list had raged at a year before, now voiced not as betrayal but as a tired, honest longing. The grass was greener in prose, and the room admitted it out loud.

The quarrel, sharper, was over failure as the very condition of the art. Prompted by Christian Bök's essay on writing and failure, a member opened a searching thread on poetry and inadequacy — asking about *"the actual writing of poetry as an inevitably impossible, doomed, or failed endeavor"*, and whether we keep writing precisely because the poem always falls short of what we hoped it might do. Failure, on this account, was not a poet's bad luck but the medium's permanent weather, the gap between the wish and the words that no craft ever closes.

And under both ran the month's tenderest and most careful current: how poetry mourns. A thread on mourning and poetics asked why the quieter modes seem to carry grief best, reaching for the great contemporary elegies — Mary Jo Bang's *Elegy* among them — and wondering what the loud, experimental, self-delighting avant-garde can do in the presence of a real death. It was the room testing its own aesthetics against the one thing that does not care about aesthetics, and finding its confidence humbled — asking whether the loud, experimental, self-delighting modes it had spent a decade defending could stand, unembarrassed, in the actual presence of a death, or whether grief demanded a plainer speech than the avant-garde liked to allow.

I have set July down exactly as the archive delivered it — the wish to write fiction, the writing of poetry as a doomed endeavor, and the halting question of how a poem can mourn — because it was the month the list stopped defending itself and simply confessed its doubts: that the novel tempts, that the poem always fails, that grief may

need a quieter art than the one the room had built. And yet the confession itself was the answer hiding in plain sight. A commons that will spend a whole July admitting poetry tempts it toward prose, dooms it to fail, and struggles to mourn, and still keeps writing to itself every day, has already decided the question it thinks it is asking.

— *K. M. F.*

August 2009

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

August 2009 was the quietest file in the whole stretch — two hundred and twenty messages, the list at low tide — and into that emptiness the room did what it does when the world goes silent on it: it retreated into pure theory and formal play. There was no death to mourn, no scandal to fight, no election to survive; there was only the machinery of poetry itself, taken apart on the workbench in the heat. The month reads like a seminar half-emptied for the summer, a few devoted students still turning the engine over.

The largest serious thread wanted the lyric defined as a genre. A member went hunting for criticism on the theory of lyric poetry — asking specifically for work that was “*good, hardcore, worthwhile, useful pedagogically*” — trying to pin down what exactly the oldest and most slippery of poetic modes actually is, as a category, as a thing one could teach. It was the driest possible question and, in a dead August, exactly the right one: with nothing happening, the room could finally ask what the lyric even was.

The quarrel, gentle, was between the human scale and the machine's. Beside the lyric-theory thread ran a discussion of the longest poem in the world — a contraption that stitched rhyming lines endlessly out of the internet's chatter, a poem no person wrote and no person could finish — the automated infinite set against the lyric's intimate finitude. The shortest, most personal form and the longest, most impersonal one shared the August inbox, the two poles of what a poem could be when nobody was around to argue about it.

The rest was craft in miniature. A thread sought critical work on homophonic translation, the art of carrying a poem across languages by its sound rather than its sense, and another kept the standing conversation on visual art and poetry idling along — the room, absent any larger occasion, tending the technical questions that never fully close. It was poetry considered as pure procedure, sound and image and genre, with the world switched off — the room happiest, or at least most itself, when it could forget the audience and the market entirely and simply take the machine apart to see what the parts were called.

I have set August down exactly as the archive delivered it — the hunt for a hard theory of the lyric, the endless machine-made poem, and the translation that follows sound instead of meaning — because it was the emptiest month the list had seen in

years, and it revealed what the room does with an empty month: it thinks about poetry as such. A commons that, given nothing to react to, will spend its August trying to define the lyric, marveling at a poem no human wrote, and studying translation by pure sound, is a commons whose curiosity outlasts its occasions — still turning the engine over in the heat, for no reason but the love of seeing how it runs.

— *K. M. F.*

September 2009

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

September 2009 set the oldest wish in poetry against the newest theory that would abolish it — the ache to be inspired again, and the conceptual doctrine that inspiration was never needed in the first place. Two hundred and forty-three messages moved through the list, and its largest thread was a plain human cry for help getting started, while just beside it the copyists and the conceptualists went about proving that a poem could be made with no inspiration at all, only transcription. The month was a quiet standoff between the muse and the machine.

The largest thread asked the most vulnerable question a writer can ask out loud. Under the heading *"How do you get the juices flowing again"*, a member confessed the dry spell every poet knows and asked the room, without embarrassment, how to begin again — and the commons answered with the tenderness it keeps for exactly this, trading rituals and tricks and encouragements. It was poetry at its most human and least theoretical: not what a poem means, but how, when the well runs dry, you ever write one at all.

The quarrel arrived as its exact opposite. In the same weeks, Kent Johnson's Day circulated — a conceptual work built by appropriation rather than invention — and Kenneth Goldsmith turned up singing Roland Barthes with a string quartet, the conceptualists demonstrating that the poem needs no juices, no muse, no waiting for the well: only a source to copy and the nerve to sign it. Where one poet begged the room to help the inspiration return, the other faction had declared inspiration a superstition the art was better off without.

The two camps were arguing, without quite saying so, about whether writing is something you undergo or something you merely execute. The poet with the dry spell believed the poem had to come, and suffered when it would not; the conceptualist believed the poem had only to be assembled, and suffered nothing. Between them sat the whole question of what it costs to make a thing, and whether cost is the point — whether the difficulty of writing is a bug the conceptualists had cleverly engineered away, or the very thing that makes a poem worth having once it finally arrives.

I have set September down exactly as the archive delivered it — the honest plea for the juices to flow again and the conceptual proof that no flowing is required — because it was the month the list held its deepest division up to the light: not language against lyric or avant against quiet, but inspiration against transcription,

the muse against the machine. A room where one poet can ask, unashamed, how to start writing again, and another can sing a theorist's prose to a quartet and call it the poem, is a room living through the argument that would define its decade — whether making still means being visited, or only means choosing what to copy.

— *K. M. F.*

October 2009

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

October 2009 gave the conceptual decade its purest hall of mirrors — an appropriation of an appropriation, a theft of a theft, argued for fifty messages while the room tried to decide whether it had been provoked on purpose. Three hundred and eighty-seven messages moved through the list, and its largest thread orbited a single small book that had done nothing but borrow, and borrow again, until authorship itself dissolved into a set of nested quotation marks. The month asked whether a work whose only content is the annoyance it causes has, in fact, succeeded.

The largest thread was Kent Johnson's Day. Johnson had taken his title and gesture straight from Kenneth Goldsmith's Day — the book in which Goldsmith had retyped an entire newspaper — appropriating the appropriator, and the room argued for weeks over whether the provocation was art or merely irritation. One poster put the trap precisely: *"What if one took the annoyed response to Johnson's DAY as exactly the reaction he wanted"*, in which case the annoyance was the work, and to be annoyed was to complete it. The room had been drawn into a piece whose medium was the room's own exasperation.

The quarrel, underneath, was whether that counted. If a work's entire achievement is the reaction it engineers, is it a poem or a con; and does provoking a thing successfully make the thing good? The list split, some admiring the conceptual nerve of a theft so brazen it named its victim in the title, others refusing to reward a book that had, by any older measure, done nothing at all but relabel someone else's labor — the argument circling, as it always did, back to the same unanswerable knot, whether a gesture that succeeds at provoking has thereby succeeded at anything that lasts.

Against the mirror-games the month set a reminder that recognition still ran on other rails. Herta Müller won the Nobel — a novelist and poet of dictatorship and exile, honored for a body of witnessed suffering that no appropriation could have generated — and the room turned, gratefully, to a writer whose authority came from having lived the thing she wrote. Between Johnson's borrowed Day and Müller's earned prize sat the decade's whole argument about where a work's value comes from: the gesture, or the life behind it.

I have set October down exactly as the archive delivered it — the theft of a theft, the suspicion that annoyance was the whole art, and Herta Müller's Nobel for a lifetime of witness — because it was the month the appropriative decade reached its vanishing point, a poem made entirely of borrowing another borrower, and the room could not decide whether it had been played or fed. That the same weeks crowned Müller, whose work is unappropriable because it is testimony, was the archive's own quiet verdict: that a Day retyped from a Day is a clever mirror, but the poems that finally hold are the ones no one else could have written, because someone had to live them first.

— *K. M. F.*

November 2009

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

November 2009 was a month about who gets counted — which books make the year-end lists, which poets get the prizes, which names a discipline keeps and which it quietly drops. Two hundred and forty-three messages moved through the list, and its currents ran between an omission that stung and an honor that surprised, with the death of a great systematizer of thought passing through in the background. The month kept asking, in different registers, the same question: on what authority does anyone decide whose work counts?

The omission came from the trade's own bible. Publishers Weekly had published its best books of the year and put not a single woman on the list, and the room took up the scandal under a bitterly ironic heading, the flat proposition that women simply do not write good books — the kind of sentence that names an injustice by stating it deadpan. It was the recognition machine caught in the act of not seeing half the field, and the list, which had spent years auditing its own exclusions, recognized the pattern instantly.

The honor came as a happy shock. Keith Waldrop had won the National Book Award for Poetry — a quiet, experimental, long-undersung poet suddenly handed the establishment's laurel — and the room erupted in delight, one member cheering that there had been *"Many good nominees this time and a superb winner"*. Against the Publishers Weekly blindness, Waldrop's prize felt like the machine getting one right for once, the obscure and deserving lifted instead of overlooked.

In the background a larger reckoning passed. Claude Lévi-Strauss died at the very end of October, at a hundred years old, and the news reached the room in November — the anthropologist who had taught a century to see myth and kinship as systems of structure, the grandfather of the structuralism the list's theory had been built on and had spent years quarreling past. His death closed a long chapter in the thought that underwrote the whole enterprise of reading poems as systems of signs — a passing the room registered almost in an aside, the way a household notes the death of a great-grandparent whose ideas it has long since absorbed, quarreled with, and half outgrown.

I have set November down exactly as the archive delivered it — the year-end list with no women on it, Waldrop's surprising and beloved win, and the death of the man who taught the century to think in structures — because it was the month the list watched

the machinery of recognition run hot and cold in the same weeks, blind to the women and generous to the outsider, and felt how arbitrary the whole apparatus of counting is. A room that will call out a best-of list for erasing half of poetry, cheer an experimental poet into the winner's circle, and pause to bury the father of structuralism is a room that knows recognition is never neutral, and that the only honest response to every list of who counts is to ask, again, who made it, and who got left off.

— *K. M. F.*

December 2009

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

December 2009 closed the decade arguing about conflict — whether criticism must be combat to be serious, and whether poetry might instead be trained toward peace. Two hundred and twenty-six messages moved through the list, and its year-end currents ran between two opposed temperaments: the one that prized the savage review as a mark of rigor, and the one that wanted the classroom and the poem turned toward reconciliation. It was a fitting argument to end on, the room split between the fist and the open hand.

The largest thread defended the bad review as a duty. Prompted by an essay on the necessity of bad reviews, the room debated whether harshness is a critic's honesty or merely his aggression — and one member pushed back hard against the whole macho premise, asking plainly, *"Why is hard inherently better than soft? Why must rigor be expressed in terms of conflict?"* It was a question aimed at the deepest reflex of the list's own culture, the long habit of treating combat as the proof of seriousness and gentleness as a failure of nerve.

The counter-argument arrived as a curriculum. A pair of threads took up peace literature — the poems and courses that treat war's alternative as a subject worth teaching — the room asking whether literature might be organized around reconciliation rather than the endless agon it usually stages. In a decade defined by two wars and a thousand flame wars, the proposal to teach peace was quietly radical: an art, and a pedagogy, built on something other than conflict.

Between them ran the month's smaller craft talk, threads on technique and the line break, the difference between a break and a space, the art game and the citation traded from the list's own archive — the room tending its tools at the year's end, teaching itself its own trade one small question at a time. But the real argument was temperamental, and old: whether the poem and the review earn their weight by wounding or by mending, whether rigor is a kind of violence or a kind of care, and whether a decade that had prized the cut above the caress had gotten the balance wrong all along.

I have set December down exactly as the archive delivered it — the necessity of the bad review, the sharp question of why rigor must mean conflict, and the case for a literature of peace — because it was the month the list closed a combative decade by asking whether it had to have been so combative at all. A room that will spend its

year-end wondering aloud why hard is assumed better than soft, and whether the art might be pointed toward reconciliation instead of the fight, is a room beginning, however tentatively, to doubt its own oldest reflex — that the proof of taking poetry seriously is how hard you are willing to hit.

— *K. M. F.*

January 2010

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

January 2010 opened a new decade by looking backward, and asking, with real longing, whether the old heroic age of the avant-garde could ever come again. Three hundred and sixty-six messages moved through the list, and its two largest threads were both, at heart, about greatness — whether a movement like the ones that had made this community could still happen, and whether the canon that enshrines such things is a genuine record of merit or merely a racket. The room greeted the twenties the way an aging generation greets a new year: measuring the present against a glorious past.

The largest thread was a cry of nostalgia phrased as a question. A member asked the room, plainly, *“Can anything like the Black Mountain School ever expand our possibilities again?”* — invoking the mid-century community of Olson and Creeley and Duncan that had given this very list its lineage, and wondering whether the conditions for such a flowering were simply gone. It was the New American inheritance examined in the cold light of a new decade: had the heroic age been a one-time accident, and were its heirs now only its curators?

The quarrel turned to the canon that keeps such reputations. A long, hot thread argued whether the notion of great writers is useless or indispensable — one poster reporting an ugly fight over whether the canon is a conspiracy of professors protecting their niches, another proposing, half in jest, that the whole thing be settled like a sports poll, a bracket of poets playing for a bowl game. Beneath the joke sat the real doubt: whether lasting is earned by craft and reach, or merely arranged by the institutions that profit from the ranking.

Under the big questions ran the decade's new textures. A thread marveled bleakly at a bank's online-banking prose as the mother of all blog posts, corporate language colonizing the poetic, while another revisited Poe and the negative review, the room reminded that the fight over criticism was two centuries old. The new decade, it turned out, had inherited every one of the old arguments intact — the canon, the bad review, the vanishing of the great communities — as though the turning of the calendar had changed the date and nothing else the room actually cared about.

I have set January down exactly as the archive delivered it — the ache for another Black Mountain, the brawl over whether the canon means anything, and the corporate prose creeping into the frame — because it was the month the list stepped

into a new decade and spent it facing the last one, and the ones before. A room that opens 2010 by asking whether it can ever again build what Olson built, and whether greatness is earned or merely enshrined, is a room aware that it may have become the keeper of a tradition rather than the maker of one — and brave enough, at least, to say the fear out loud, on the first pages of a new ten years.

— *K. M. F.*

February 2010

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

February 2010 was a thin, cold file — two hundred and thirteen messages — and it spent much of its quiet mourning a poet of the new media and arguing, in the old way, about the difficult and the confessional. The room was small that month, its attention scattered across a memorial, a handful of craft questions, and the standing quarrel over whether the poem should be a made object or a wound made public. It reads like a winter afternoon in a half-empty room, a few voices keeping the lights on.

The month's tenderest thread was an act of keeping. Millie Niss, a poet who had worked at the frontier of digital and visual writing, had died the previous autumn, and her mother gathered a remembrance — *"111 photos of Millie from birth till shortly before her death on November 29"* — posted with a friend's tribute on a visual-poetry site. It was mourning in the exact medium Niss had lived in, the new-media poet remembered through images on a screen, the commons doing its oldest work, keeping a lost maker present, in its newest form.

The quarrel was the perennial one, dressed in a specific name. John Wieners drew a run of threads — the Boston poet of raw, confessional, gorgeously vulnerable verse — and the room argued what his kind of nakedness was worth against the era's cooler, more constructed modes, one thread wryly asking what Wieners had done now, as though the dead poet were still misbehaving. Beside it, a thread pitting Beckett against a contemporary experimentalist staged the same contest in the abstract: the stripped confession against the built machine.

The rest was small and technical — queries on ekphrasis and the poem that answers a picture, a question for publishers, the room tending its craft in the cold — and even the outside world entered only as the season's distraction, a thread on the confusion of the Winter Olympics. It was a month with little heat in it, a handful of the faithful trading small questions across a nearly empty room, holding its ground until the year warmed and the traffic returned.

I have set February down exactly as the archive delivered it — the digital poet mourned in images, the argument over Wieners and the naked confessional poem, and the quiet craft talk of a cold half-empty room — because it was one of the thinnest months in the run, and thinness has its own truth to tell. A commons that, reduced to two hundred voices in the dead of winter, will still stop to gather a lost

poet's photographs and still argue whether the confessional or the constructed poem holds more, is a commons running on its embers and refusing to go out — keeping the memorial and the quarrel both alive until the traffic, and the year, came back.

— *K. M. F.*

March 2010

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

March 2010 set two opposite ideas of what a poem is for against each other in the same inbox — the poem as a commodity to be commissioned and priced, and the poem as an act of courage that could cost a life. Three hundred and forty-eight messages moved through the list, and while its own largest threads worried, in comfortable American fashion, over whether a poet could ever be paid, the wider world sent in a reminder that elsewhere a poem was still a weapon a person could die holding. The month measured the distance between those two conditions.

The largest domestic thread asked whether poetry could be a livelihood at all. Prompted by news of a working poet taking commissions, a member opened the loaded question — *“can creativity be prompted by pay?”* — and whether a poet could actually sell poems, or whether all of them were merely supplementing real lives with side art and hobbies. It was the recession-era anxiety persisting into the new decade: the poem as a service one might invoice, the artist wondering if the work could be made to earn its keep, or whether it was condemned to be forever a thing done for love and never for money.

The world answered the question of a poem's stakes from a very different place. A widely shared story reported a Saudi woman who had gone on live television and, in verse, denounced the extremist clerics of her own country — poetry not as commission or hobby but as public defiance, delivered under threat, on a stage where the risk was real. Against the American list's worry over whether a poem could be sold sat a woman for whom a poem was the most dangerous thing she could possibly say aloud, and who said it anyway.

Between the two poles the room ran its lighter business — a questionnaire circulating in numbered installments, threads on younger poets and on whether one would ever buy art, or a poem, at all. The commerce of poetry, its small economies of attention and exchange, hummed along in the foreground while, in the background, the same art was being used somewhere as an instrument of genuine courage.

I have set March down exactly as the archive delivered it — the anxious question of whether creativity can be prompted by pay, and the Saudi woman who turned a poem into an act of public defiance on live television — because it was the month the list held the two extreme fates of poetry side by side: the poem as a commodity a comfortable culture is not even sure it will buy, and the poem as a weapon a woman

will risk her safety to wield. A room debating whether anyone would pay for a poem, in the same weeks that a poem was the bravest thing a woman half a world away could speak, is a room being quietly instructed in what its art is actually capable of, and how little, sometimes, the price of it has to do with its worth.

— *K. M. F.*

April 2010

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

April 2010 closed this long stretch of the archive on the perfect chord — the avant-garde arguing that all art is theft in the same weeks that the establishment handed its highest prize to one of the avant-garde's own. Three hundred and three messages moved through the list in National Poetry Month, and its largest currents ran between the theory of borrowing and the fact of being crowned, with the poet-musician as the month's recurring figure and, at the end, its casualty. It was a fitting close: the outsiders discovered, at last, both stealing and winning.

The largest theoretical thread put the decade's obsession as a flat provocation. A member offered a hundred-dollar prize for the best explanation of a single phrase — *"Explain art is theft. I offer a prize of \$100 to the best answer"* — and the room noted, wearily, that when the question had come up before, everyone had simply cited Eliot's old line about mature poets stealing, as though nothing theoretical had happened in the eighty years since. The appropriative decade had been, in a sense, one long footnote to Eliot, and April knew it.

The counter-thread was a coronation the room could love. Rae Armantrout had won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry — a Language poet, a founder of the West Coast wing of the movement, suddenly holding the most mainstream honor American verse can bestow — and the citation praised her poems as *"little thought-bombs detonating in the mind long after the first reading"*. Here was the establishment reaching out and crowning exactly the kind of difficult, oppositional poet the list had championed for decades: the outside brought, improbably, all the way inside.

The month's recurring figure bound the two together and then was lost. A wide thread gathered poets who were also musicians, the cross-art maker who works in sound and word at once — and at the end of the month one such figure died, the composer-poet Franz Kamin, killed in a car crash, mourned by a friend as *"a great artist"*, visionary in music and prose alike. The poet-musician the room had spent April celebrating turned, in its last days, into the poet-musician it had to bury.

I have set April down exactly as the archive delivered it — the hundred-dollar prize to explain that art is theft, Rae Armantrout's Pulitzer for her little thought-bombs, and the death of the composer-poet Franz Kamin — because it was the month the avant-garde met both of its long-deferred fates at once: vindicated as theory, that all making is borrowing, and vindicated as career, one of its own crowned by the very

establishment it had defined itself against. That the same weeks took Franz Kamin, the cross-art maker at his most generous, is the archive keeping its habit to the last: handing the room its triumph and its grief in a single April, and leaving the reader to hold, once more, the two at the same time.

— *K. M. F.*

May 2010

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

May 2010 was the quietest file in the entire run — one hundred and seventy-five messages, not one thread rising above a handful of replies — and its silence is the honest subject of this volume. The great arguing engine of the list had wound down to a hum. What moved through the room that month was not debate but housekeeping: syllabi, calls for interns, event notices, the small administrative traffic of a community keeping its lights on. It is a month that shows, more starkly than any obituary, what the long decline had finally come to.

The largest business was the teaching of poetry to the next room. A member building a Modern American Poetry course asked the list to help him choose — *“Do you want to focus on contemporary writers”*, someone answered, or to reach back and include the less-canonized modernists, the Beats, the Language poets, the San Francisco Renaissance — the syllabus as the place where a tradition decides what to hand forward. In a month with almost no live argument, the one real question was curatorial: which of the dead and the difficult a new class would be made to meet.

There was, properly speaking, no quarrel, and the absence is the point. Where a month in 2002 or 2005 would have carried a hundred-message flame war, May 2010 carried notices — a press asking about audiobooks, a festival seeking an intern, an announcement of little orange pencils, a video updated on a website. The room had become less a forum than a bulletin board, a place where poets posted at each other rather than argued with each other, the conversation thinned nearly to pure logistics.

And yet the logistics were themselves a kind of faith. Every one of those small notices was somebody still choosing to send it here, to this particular dwindling room, rather than to a blog or a feed or nowhere at all — the syllabus posted for help, the reading announced to an audience the poster still believed was listening. The traffic was thin, but it was traffic; the light was low, but it was on. A noticeboard, after all, is still a place people agree to gather around, and the poets kept gathering, out of loyalty or habit or the simple refusal to be the one who finally turned it off.

I have set May down exactly as the archive delivered it — the syllabus seeking its shape, the calls and the notices, the near-total absence of argument — because it was the quietest month the list had ever produced, and quiet, too, is part of the record. A room that has fallen from a thousand messages to fewer than two hundred, and fills

that hush not with quarrels but with the patient business of teaching, announcing, and keeping the small presses alive, is a room in its late age, no longer the center of anything, still faithfully doing the chores of a community that will not quite let itself disband.

— *K. M. F.*

June 2010

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

June 2010 turned the thinned room toward two kinds of loss at once — a catastrophe in the Gulf and the deaths of its own — and found, in both, the same instinct: to answer disaster with witness. Two hundred and forty-nine messages moved through the list, and its largest currents ran toward the oil spill blackening the Gulf of Mexico and toward the graves of poets freshly dug. It was a month of mourning on two scales, the planetary and the personal, and the room met each the only way it knows.

The largest live thread was an act of ecological witness. As the Deepwater Horizon well poured oil into the Gulf, the room organized around Poets for Living Waters, a gathering of poems answering the spill — the first, its editors said, in a planned series of actions — poetry enlisted not to fix the disaster, which it could not, but to refuse to look away from it. It was the old faith that the least a poem can do, bearing witness, is not nothing; that a catastrophe unspoken is a catastrophe twice. The room knew perfectly well that no anthology would cap a wellhead, and gathered the poems anyway, on the theory that a culture which stops writing down its disasters has begun, quietly, to consent to them.

The graver losses were closer to home. Leslie Scalapino had died at the end of May, one of the boldest experimental poets of her generation, and the room grieved her in the plainest terms — one mourner remembering that *"She was alive & sweet, so smart & bubbly"*, the person behind the formidable work — while a second thread remembered Peter Seaton, the reclusive Language poet, nearly vanished from public view long before his death. Two experimental originals gone in a single month, one radiant and one hidden.

The quarrel, so far as the gentle month had one, was over how poetry should stand toward the world's emergencies — whether the anthology-as-action does any good, or merely lets poets feel useful while the oil keeps coming. But the room mostly declined the cynicism. Against a spill no poem could stanch and two deaths no elegy could reverse, it chose to write anyway, which is not a naive choice but a stubborn one.

I have set June down exactly as the archive delivered it — the poets gathering against the oil, the radiant Scalapino gone, the hidden Seaton mourned — because it was the month the list held a planetary disaster and two private deaths in the same hands and answered both with witness rather than silence. A room that responds to a

poisoned sea and the loss of its own experimental masters by making anthologies and speaking the dead plainly aloud is a room practicing the one power poetry reliably has: not to repair the damage, but to keep the record, and to insist, against every evidence of futility, that what is lost be at least named.

— *K. M. F.*

July 2010

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

July 2010 set the machinery of the poetry business against the spirit the business was supposed to serve — a long, hot fight over prizes and submissions running beside a lament for the draining-away of the sacred from the art itself. Three hundred and sixty-seven messages moved through the list, its largest thread a many-sided quarrel over a book contest, its second a mournful essay on what poetry had lost. Between the entry fee and the missing spirit, the month asked what, after all the careerism, the art was even for.

The largest thread was a reckoning with prize culture. A university book competition drew a seventy-nine-message argument over the whole apparatus of submitting, judging, and winning — one poster scorning how readily poets will submit themselves to editors no better than talent-show judges, another admitting that *“it is a challenge to find ways of opting out of submitting to prizes”* when institutions reward their workers for winning them. The pun sat at the center of it: to submit a poem is also to submit to a system, and the room was sick of the submission.

The quarrel's deeper half was spiritual. An essay circulating that month, on the decay of spirituality in poetry, opened a debate on whether the art had traded its soul for craft and cleverness — a discussion that wandered, gloriously, into whether *“wittgenstein was a terrific poet mistaken for a logician by some”*, whether the philosophical and the sacred could still live in a poem at all. The prize machine and the missing spirit were the same complaint from two directions: an art grown too worldly to remember what it was for. If poetry now ran on entry fees and CV lines and juried competitions, the essayists asked, what had become of the thing that was supposed to touch the sacred, and could a poem chasing a prize ever reach it?

And the month's death rhymed with the theme. Tuli Kupferberg died on the twelfth — of the Fugs, the great anarchist prankster-poet who had spent a lifetime refusing every institution poetry could build — mourned on the list as a *“great friend and poet writer anarchist fug”*. He was the living rebuttal to prize culture, a man who had made poetry into protest and nonsense and song and never once submitted to anyone, gone in the very month the room was cursing the submission machine.

I have set July down exactly as the archive delivered it — the revolt against prize culture, the lament for a decayed spirituality, and the death of the anarchist who scorned both — because it was the month the list looked hard at the business its art

had become and grieved what the business had cost. A room that spends its July raging at the tyranny of submitting to prizes, mourning the spirit gone out of the poem, and burying Tuli Kupferberg, who never submitted to anything, is a room remembering, a little too late and a little too bitterly, that poetry was supposed to be the thing you could not put an entry fee on.

— *K. M. F.*

August 2010

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

August 2010 kept July's argument about the soul of poetry burning, and set beside it a vindication and a provocation — an anthology of the sacred honored, and the summer's ugliest political fight dragged into the room. Three hundred and one messages moved through the list, and its currents ran between the spirit poetry might still hold and the crude public quarrels of a hot American August. The month asked whether the sacred survives anywhere, in the poem or in the country.

The largest thread carried the decay of spirituality forward. The debate begun in July went on turning over whether poetry had lost its access to the holy, wandering through weird Platonisms and the claim that *"wittgenstein was a terrific poet mistaken for a logician by some"* — the room worrying whether the philosophical sublime, the sense of a poem reaching past the sayable, was recoverable or gone for good. It was the summer's most serious question, pursued in a nearly empty room with real hunger.

The vindication arrived from the establishment. Poems for the Millennium, Rothenberg and Joris's vast anthology of the century's radical and sacred and tribal poetries, won an American Book Award — the great ethnopoetic gathering, the one that had always insisted the holy and the experimental were the same pursuit, honored at last. Against the fear that spirituality had decayed out of poetry, here was a monument arguing the opposite: that the sacred had never left, only migrated to the margins the anthology had spent decades mapping — the shamanic, the tribal, the visionary, the deliberately difficult, all gathered as evidence that the holy was alive precisely where the mainstream had stopped looking.

The provocation came from the news. As the fight over a proposed mosque near Ground Zero convulsed the country, the room could not stay out of it — a thread of deliberately clashing terms, mosques and churches and cesspools, dragging the summer's religious bigotry onto the list, while another current kept up the fight against big oil from the spill still fouling the Gulf. The sacred was under discussion in the poems and under assault in the streets, and the room felt both at once.

I have set August down exactly as the archive delivered it — the decayed spirituality still debated, Poems for the Millennium honored, and the mosque fight and the oil breaking in from outside — because it was the month the list pursued the question of the sacred on every front at once: whether a poem can still reach the holy, whether

the great anthology of the tribal and radical proves it can, and whether a country screaming about a mosque has any claim to the word at all. A room that will spend August asking whether Wittgenstein was really a poet while the nation argues over who may build a house of worship is a room that has not given up on the sacred, even as it watches the culture around it profane the word.

— *K. M. F.*

September 2010

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

September 2010 sent the thinned room after the deepest question a formalist can ask — what the limits of a formal system are, and whether a poem lives inside those limits or slips past them. Two hundred and fifty-eight messages moved through the list, and its largest thread reached, improbably, into mathematics and logic, asking what poetry becomes after the great twentieth-century proofs that every system has an outside. It was the list being characteristically itself: a nearly deserted room taking up the hardest possible abstraction for the pleasure of it.

The largest thread was language and poetry after Gödel and Turing. The room turned over what it means to write inside a medium after the mathematicians had shown that no formal system can be both complete and consistent — that there are always true things it cannot prove, always an outside to any set of rules. One poster deflated the grandeur beautifully, noting that after decades of theory *“i’ve been in the deconstruction industry for twenty years”*, unsure anymore whether it was construction or its opposite. The undecidable had become the room’s native air.

The quarrel, gentler, was over recovery and lineage. A thread built a Mina Loy portal, gathering the scattered work of the great neglected modernist into one place — the incomplete system of literary memory patched, one recovered poet at a time — while an Olson query kept the Black Mountain line in view. If no system is ever complete, the room seemed to answer, then the work is endless recovery: forever hunting the true things the canon left unproven, forever dragging another Mina Loy back from the margin into the light where she could be read again.

And a death closed the month in the register of the unfinished. Michael Gizzi died in late summer, the poet of quick, torqued, associative lines, and the room noted the loss before any official obituary had appeared — the news outrunning the record, a life ended before the systems that catalog such things had caught up. It was Gödel’s lesson in miniature: the fact arriving ahead of the proof, the death real before it was written down.

I have set September down exactly as the archive delivered it — poetry after the limits of logic, the Mina Loy recovery, and Michael Gizzi gone before the obituary — because it was the month the list took the incompleteness of every system as its subject and found the idea everywhere: in the poem that exceeds its rules, in the canon that must forever be patched with recovered names, in the death that outran

its own record. A room that answers a proof about the limits of formal systems by building a portal to a forgotten poet and mourning one just lost is a room that understands what to do with incompleteness, which is not to despair of it but to keep filling in, by hand, the true things the system could not hold.

— *K. M. F.*

October 2010

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

October 2010 was a month about things wearing out and slipping away — the poet nobody could locate anymore, the beloved book coming apart in the hand, the room itself thinning toward its own disappearance. Two hundred and thirty-three messages moved through the list, and its currents ran to entropy in every register: literary reputations that had faded, physical volumes falling to pieces, and the recurring temptation to defect from poetry altogether. The month reads as a quiet meditation on decay, conducted by a room that was itself decaying.

The largest thread went looking for a vanished man. Under the heading of whatever happened to Michael Benedikt, the room tried to trace the prose-poem champion who had assembled the great 1976 anthology and then dropped from view — the book remembered as one that *“a generation or two read to pieces”*, worn soft and coverless from handling, even as its editor had faded from the record. It was reputation as entropy: a book loved to destruction while the name behind it quietly disappeared, the poet outlived by his own crumbling paperback.

The quarrel, tender and strange, made decay itself the subject. A thread on entropy and books invited the room to describe its favorite weathered volumes — the annotated, the water-stained, the spine-broken, the ones that had aged alongside their readers — turning physical decrepitude into a form of love. Against a culture racing toward the pristine digital file, the room chose to celebrate the mortal object: the book precisely because it wears out, because it carries the marks of the hands that held it.

Underneath ran the decade's standing temptation and the era's politics. A thread on beginning fiction voiced, once more, the pull away from poetry toward the longer form, while another marked the rich getting richer, the ruling class pulling away as the recession's recovery reached only the top. Everywhere the same motion: things wearing thin, value draining toward the few, the poem tempted to abandon itself. Even the recovery projects that had cheered earlier years felt, this October, less like triumphant rescue than like triage — a race to name the fading before they faded entirely, conducted by a room that could feel its own edges going soft.

I have set October down exactly as the archive delivered it — the vanished Benedikt, the anthology read to pieces, the love of weathered books, and the widening gap between the rich and the rest — because it was the month the list made entropy its

theme and found it everywhere, in the faded poet and the falling-apart paperback and the thinning room itself. A commons that answers its own dwindling by celebrating the book that wears out from being loved, and by trying to remember the man whose great anthology outlasted his name, is a commons making its peace with decay the only way it can: by insisting that a thing worn to pieces was, by that very wear, a thing well used.

— *K. M. F.*

November 2010

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

November 2010 was a thin, searching month — one hundred and ninety-two messages — preoccupied with attribution and revolution, with who said a thing and whether the thing was still true in a world gone digital. The room had shrunk to a small circle passing half-remembered lines among itself, trying to source its own inherited wisdom, and worrying, underneath, whether the old radical promises still held now that everything had moved online. It was a month of quotation marks and their discontents.

The largest thread was a hunt for a source. A member went looking for the origin of a famous line — was it from a speech or a poem, and who had first said it — and the room did what it does best, playing collective memory, tracing the phrase to its maker. It was the commons as reference desk, the function the thinning list still performed reliably: a place where you could ask who said this and be answered by people who actually knew.

The quarrel turned the hunt political. The line under discussion was Gil Scott-Heron's, that the revolution will not be televised, and the room updated it for the age that had swallowed television whole — one poster insisting, against the bloggers and the tweeters and the Facebookers, that *"The revolution will not be virtual"*, that the digital could no more deliver liberation than the broadcast had. The old aphorism, born to indict one medium, was pressed into service against the newer one that had replaced it.

Around the edges ran the month's quieter concerns — a thread on images of women in literature, the weathered-books conversation carrying over from October, a reading announced at a Los Angeles bookstore. The room kept tending its small fires: the representation of women, the love of old volumes, the local event nobody outside would notice. Thin traffic, faithfully kept. There is a particular dignity in a community that goes on announcing its readings to a shrinking room, sourcing its own aphorisms for one another, and arguing about how women appear in books, long after the wider world has stopped checking in — the dignity of people who keep the practice not because it is watched but because it is theirs.

I have set November down exactly as the archive delivered it — the hunt for a quotation's source, Gil Scott-Heron's revolution updated against the virtual, and the small persistent tending of women's images and weathered books — because it was

the month the shrunken list worked as memory and conscience both, sourcing its own aphorisms and insisting the digital had not delivered the liberation it promised. A room that will spend its November tracking down who first said a line and then turning that line against the very networks now draining it of members is a room clear-eyed about its own moment: aware that the revolution did not arrive on the screen that emptied the commons, and unwilling to pretend otherwise.

— *K. M. F.*

December 2010

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

December 2010 closed the year with the room peering at a future that had half arrived — the dead poet turned into data, the secret document loosed onto the internet, the poem imagined as code. One hundred and seventy-eight messages moved through the list, thin as the whole winter had been, and its scattered currents all pointed the same way: toward the digital condition settling over poetry and its archives, its politics, its very idea of the text. The year ended looking at a machine still assembling itself around the art.

The largest thread was procedural. A discussion of a table of concepts turned over the generative apparatus behind certain poems — the system, the grid, the set of moves a writer works from — one member noting that such method was “*a reasonably common practice among New York School poets*”, the conceptual scaffolding usually kept out of sight. It was poetry considered as something built from a diagram, the text as the output of a procedure, a thoroughly modern way to think about making.

The politics arrived through the leak. As WikiLeaks poured classified cables into public view and its founder faced arrest, the room passed along Michael Moore's pledge to post bail for Julian Assange — the raw document unloosed, information treated as something that wants, by nature, to be free. Against the leak sat the archive: a thread on the Digital Creeley Maps at Stanford, the late master converted into a searchable dataset, the poet's life and letters made queryable, the dead reincarnated as a database.

Underneath ran the smaller signs of the shift — a query on code meshing in poems, the mixing of dialects and registers and even literal code into the line, and a thread named for the future that is half upon us, the room half-excited and half-uneasy at the machine closing in. Poetry as procedure, the archive as data, the document as leak: every current ran digital. The same networks that had drained the list of its members were now remaking the objects the list had always cared about — the poem, the archive, the secret — into things that lived on screens, searchable and copyable and loosed, and the room watched the transformation with the mixed dread of people whose world is being renovated around them while they still live in it.

I have set December down exactly as the archive delivered it — the poem built from a table of concepts, Assange and the loosed cables, Creeley turned into a Stanford

dataset, and the future half arrived — because it was the month the list looked hardest at the digital condition remaking its art from underneath. A room that ends its year discussing the procedures behind a poem, the ethics of the leak, and the reincarnation of its dead master as a queryable map is a room that knows the machine is no longer coming but here, half-built around it, and is doing what it has always done with a new medium: turning it over warily, testing what it will cost, and refusing to pretend the future is not already in the room.

— *K. M. F.*

January 2011

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

By January of 2011 the list has gone quiet — moderated now, thinned to announcements and elegies — even as the wider world grows suddenly loud: in Tunis a president abandons the country to its square, and in Cairo a larger square begins, that very month, to fill. None of it reaches the inbox. What reaches the inbox is the patient housekeeping of a literature: new issues, new readings, and the names of the freshly dead.

The month keeps a low, elegiac hum. Patrick Dunagan posts a tribute to F. A. Nettelbeck, dead at sixty, who had once relayed with a certain pride that a celebrated publisher laughed his work away — *"I'm on some blacklist,"* he said, and wore it like a decoration. A memorial reading is got up for Leslie Scalapino. The list has begun, audibly, to bury its own.

What liveliness there is collects, improbably, around a small magazine: *"Raft 2 released — what're the odds of that?"* runs to a score of messages, the busiest thread of the month. Elsewhere the old questions persist in miniature — Sharon Dolin hunting some line to the effect that poems are made only out of other poems; a brisk skirmish over whether a certain study of Emily Dickinson was *"trivial,"* which duly summons the tutelary shades of Sharon Cameron's *Lyric Time* and Susan Howe's *My Emily Dickinson*.

That a discussion group could go on parsing the triviality of Dickinson scholarship while a distant square filled is not hypocrisy but a kind of husbandry: the poets keep the small fire because it is theirs to keep. I have arranged what follows so that each voice stands forward under its own name, its telephone and its address returned to privacy, its machinery swept aside. These were letters before ever they were literature.

— K. M. F.

February 2011

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

February 2011 gathered the room around a single, many-sided question: who gets remembered, and who does the remembering. Two hundred and thirty-eight messages moved through the list, and its largest currents ran to women and the record — the rival readings of Emily Dickinson, the vanishing of women from the internet's memory, the recovery of forgotten women poets, and the sudden death of a living one. The month was an argument about the archive, and about whose faces the archive keeps.

The largest thread was a duel of Dickinsons. The room weighed the great critical readings of Emily Dickinson against each other — Susan Howe's fierce, idiosyncratic *My Emily Dickinson* beside the scholarly alternatives — one poster proposing that *"Susan Howe on ED is like ED on herself"*, the reader so identified with her subject that criticism becomes a kind of ventriloquism. It was a fight about how a woman poet gets read, and whether the truest reader is the one who disappears into her or the one who keeps a scholar's distance.

The quarrel widened to the whole record. A thread on the finding that only thirteen percent of Wikipedia's contributors were women turned the Dickinson question structural — if the people writing the encyclopedia are overwhelmingly men, whose reputations get built and whose quietly lapse? — while a companion thread went hunting for post-war women postmodernist poets with a Buddhist bent, the room trying, by hand, to recover the names the record had thinned. The archive, they saw, is not neutral; it keeps whoever tends it chooses to keep, and drops, without malice and without notice, whoever the tenders never thought to include.

And the month's death made the stakes immediate. Akilah Oliver died suddenly in New York, a Black experimental poet and beloved teacher, mourned in shock by a room that had known her — *"A very sad, shocking loss"*, one wrote, remembering her at Naropa the summer before. Here was exactly the kind of poet the thin record most easily loses: experimental, Black, a woman, a teacher more than a careerist, gone young, her keeping now entirely in the hands of those who loved her.

I have set February down exactly as the archive delivered it — the rival Dickinsons, the men who write the encyclopedia, the recovered women postmodernists, and the shocking loss of Akilah Oliver — because it was the month the list understood memory as a thing with a politics, kept or dropped according to who holds the pen. A

room that will argue how a woman poet should be read, count the men writing the record, hunt down the forgotten women by hand, and then reel at the sudden death of one of its own is a room that knows the archive forgets on purpose, and that the only answer is to keep saying the names it would otherwise let fall.

— *K. M. F.*

March 2011

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

March 2011 caught poetry being courted by the mass audience and rocked by a distant catastrophe in the same weeks — the celebrity magazine discovering verse at one end, a great earthquake and tsunami drowning the coast of Japan at the other. One hundred and eighty-four messages moved through the list, thin and scattered, and its currents ran between poetry as a lifestyle accessory and poetry as a response to disaster. The month measured the vast distance between what the culture wanted from a poem and what a poem is actually for.

The largest thread watched the mainstream reach for poetry. Oprah Winfrey's magazine had run a feature on verse, and the room met the embrace with wary comedy — one poster deadpanning, of the celebrity endorsement, *"At least poets can't be corrupted"*, half-hoping the art was too poor to be worth corrupting. Behind the joke sat a real ambivalence: gratitude that poetry had been noticed at all, mixed with the old avant-garde dread of being tidied into a lifestyle, made safe and inspirational and sold beside the diet tips.

The quarrel between high and low ran on all month. Against Oprah's glossy embrace the room set its own harder loves — a symposium on Bernadette Mayer convening in Buffalo, a thread on Jack Spicer's *Beowulf*, the difficult and the local and the uncommercial — as if to remind itself that the poetry it cared about was exactly the kind no magazine would ever feature. The popular and the experimental eyed each other across the month, each suspicious of what the other called poetry — the one fearing the difficult was mere obscurity, the other fearing the accessible was mere product, neither quite willing to grant that the word might stretch to cover both.

And then the ground moved, and the argument shrank. The earthquake and tsunami struck Japan on the eleventh, and the room turned from the Oprah joke to a suggestion titled simply for Japan — poetry marshaled, however helplessly, toward a catastrophe of a scale that made the culture wars look small. The same art the celebrity magazine wanted for uplift was being reached for, in the same weeks, as one of the few responses left when the sea takes a coastline.

I have set March down exactly as the archive delivered it — Oprah's adventures in poetry, the wary defense of the difficult and the local, and the turn toward drowned Japan — because it was the month the list felt poetry pulled between the lifestyle feature and the disaster, and knew which one it answered to. A room that will joke

that at least poets are too poor to corrupt, guard its uncommercial Spicer and Mayer against the glossy embrace, and then quietly gather itself for Japan is a room that understands the difference between being wanted as decoration and being needed as witness, and knows that only the second has ever been the point.

— *K. M. F.*

April 2011

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

April 2011 weighed the poem against the ledger and against the body — how the academy counts a poem, and how a poet's failing heart reminds the room that no count matters. Two hundred and four messages moved through the list in National Poetry Month, and its currents ran between the bureaucratic and the mortal: the metrics that turn poems into tenure credits, and the plain fact of a beloved poet needing a new heart to go on living. The month set the spreadsheet and the pulse side by side.

The largest thread was about arithmetic. A member raised the question the corporatized university had made unavoidable — how many published poems equal how many published academic articles, the poem reduced to a unit of professional credit, counted and weighed like any other line on a CV. The room turned it over with weary recognition: an art that had spent the decade watching the market fail to value it now watched the academy value it in the wrong currency entirely, as productivity rather than as poetry.

Against the ledger the month set two mortal bodies. Word went round that Dean Young, one of the most beloved poets of his generation, was in urgent need of a heart transplant — the literal failing of the organ the lyric has always claimed as its seat — and the room rallied in worry and love. It was the answer the metrics could not give: you cannot count what Dean Young's poems are worth, and no tally of publications will buy him a heart. The room that had just been asked to convert poems into professional credit was now confronted with the one exchange rate that actually mattered, the one between a body and its own survival, and found the ledger had nothing to say.

And the month closed a life quietly. Anne Blonstein, the experimental poet who worked at the edges of language and translation, died that April — another of the small, serious, uncelebrated makers the list existed to notice — mourned in the plain register the room keeps for its own. Between the counting of poems and the failing of a heart, her death fell like a verdict on the whole question: the ledger goes on tallying while the poets, uncounted, die.

I have set April down exactly as the archive delivered it — the poem measured against the academic article, Dean Young's failing heart, and the death of Anne Blonstein — because it was the month the list felt the absurdity of counting an art

whose makers were mortal and irreplaceable. A room that will argue how many poems equal a scholarly paper in the same weeks it prays for a poet's new heart and buries a quiet experimentalist is a room that knows the ledger is a lie: that a poem is not a credit and a poet is not a metric, and that the only counting that finally matters is the one the obituaries keep.

— *K. M. F.*

May 2011

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

May 2011 turned the quiet room toward stillness and presence — the poetry of Buddhist awareness at one pole, the vanishing art of live improvisation at the other, and between them the old, hard question of whether any of it does the world any good. One hundred and seventy-one messages moved through the list, thin as the season, and its currents ran to attention itself: the poem as a discipline of mind, the poem as an act that happens once and is gone. The month was about being present, in a room increasingly practiced at absence.

The largest thread went looking for the poetry of awareness. A member preparing to teach a class asked the room for Buddhist poetry — *"I'm about to teach a poetry class on Buddhist poetry"*, and pressed the real question: whether the awareness lives in a poem's subject or in its very syntax and process, whether mindfulness is something a poem says or something a poem does. It was the list at its most contemplative, treating the poem not as an object to be judged but as a practice of attention, a way of being awake on the page.

The counter-pole was pure presence. A thread on improvised poetry in performance took up the art that cannot be revised or archived — the poem made live, in the room, in the moment, and then gone forever — the opposite of the digital permanence the year had otherwise been fretting about. Between Buddhist awareness and live improvisation the month found a single value: presence, the thing that happens only now, that no recording and no metric can hold.

And underneath ran the doubt that shadows all such quiet. A thread asked bluntly what good great literature is in geopolitical terms — whether the contemplative poem and the improvised performance mean anything at all against war and power, or whether attention is a luxury the world cannot afford. The room did not settle it, but it kept faith with presence anyway, teaching mindfulness and praising improvisation in the teeth of its own uselessness.

I have set May down exactly as the archive delivered it — the search for Buddhist poetry, the vanishing art of improvised performance, and the blunt question of what any of it is worth against the world's hard powers — because it was the month the list made presence its subject: the poem as awareness, the poem as the thing that happens once. A room that will teach mindfulness and praise the improvised poem while doubting aloud whether either can matter geopolitically is a room that has

arrived at a hard-won humility, no longer claiming poetry can change the world, only that being fully present to a poem, or a moment, is itself a small refusal of the distraction that is eating everything else.

— *K. M. F.*

June 2011

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

June 2011 was among the smallest files in the whole run — one hundred and thirty-four messages — and it spent its quiet on the intimate and the abiding: faith, marriage, memory, and the preservation of the ephemeral. The great arguing list had become, that summer, something closer to a circle of friends checking in — announcing an anniversary, mourning a colleague, asking after religious poetry, tending the small presses that keep the fragile record. It was the commons at its most domestic, and, in its way, its most tender.

The largest business was preservation. A thread on a small-press collection at a college library took up the work of keeping the ephemeral — the chapbooks, the mimeographs, the fragile little editions that vanish unless someone deliberately saves them — the archive as an act of care rather than authority. In a room worried all year about what the digital would keep and what it would lose, here was the older answer: a physical shelf, a librarian, a deliberate refusal to let the small and uncommercial disappear.

The month's quiet quarrel was about faith. A thread asked, in earnest, who writes Christian poetry in the Far East and Asia, while the standing search for Buddhist poetry carried over from May — the room, grown contemplative and small, turning toward the religious question the confident avant-garde had mostly kept at arm's length. What does a poem have to do with belief; can the sacred be written now without embarrassment? The thinned room asked it more openly than the crowded one ever had.

And between the faith and the archive ran the purely human. A member announced a tenth wedding anniversary — *"Azure has been wonderful and I owe her everything"* — the kind of personal note the old combative list would have scrolled past, now received warmly by a room that had become, in its smallness, a place where such things could be said. A memorial reading for Akilah Oliver gathered nearby, grief and gratitude in the same small space.

I have set June down exactly as the archive delivered it — the small-press collection preserving the fragile, the earnest turn toward religious poetry, the anniversary gratefully announced, and Akilah Oliver remembered — because it was one of the tiniest months in the run, and it revealed what the list had become at its lowest ebb: not a forum but a household. A room that will spend its June saving chapbooks,

asking after Christian and Buddhist verse, celebrating a marriage, and mourning a friend is a room that has stopped trying to be the center of poetry and settled into something humbler and more durable, the small warm circle where the fragile things, the beliefs and the books and the loves, are kept because someone here still cares to keep them.

— *K. M. F.*

July 2011

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

July 2011 was the thinnest file of them all — one hundred and twenty-four messages — and it spent that scarcity on two forms of survival: the survival of women's voices in the record, and the survival of the small-press infrastructure that carries all of it. The list had shrunk almost to a whisper, and yet the whisper was about endurance, about the fragile channels through which uncommercial poetry reaches anyone at all. It was a month acutely aware of how easily the whole apparatus could simply stop.

The largest currents were feminist. A journal issued a call for women poets, and Anne Waldman's *Feminafesto* circulated anew — the manifesto for a poetics of the outrider, the woman writer refusing the inherited forms — the thinned room keeping alive the insistence that women's voices be gathered and named rather than left to the record's indifference. In a summer when the list itself could barely muster a hundred messages, the energy that remained went, tellingly, toward making sure women were counted in.

The quarrel was about the pipes. An open letter to Small Press Distribution took up the crisis of the organization that had long carried independent poetry to its readers — *"You have long provided a valuable service"*, it began, before turning to the trouble — the fragile nonprofit machinery by which uncommercial books actually reach hands now visibly strained. It was infrastructure as the real subject: not the poems but the distribution, the unglamorous channels without which the poems reach no one.

Around the edges lay the month's scattered small keepings — a new online Pound resource, a notice from a long-running little magazine, a Scottish Gaelic poet remembered, a project to gather a hundred thousand recordings for change. Each was a thread of preservation, a refusal to let some fragile thing lapse, sent into a room almost too quiet to answer. It is a strange and moving thing to watch a listserv in its twilight spend its last reserves not on grand argument but on custodianship, as though the community had silently agreed that keeping the record intact mattered more, now, than being right about anything.

I have set July down exactly as the archive delivered it — the call for women poets and Waldman's *Feminafesto*, the open letter to Small Press Distribution, and the scattered acts of keeping — because it was the emptiest month in the entire run, and

even at that vanishing point the list spent itself on survival: of women's voices, of the small-press channels, of the fragile record. A room reduced to a hundred and twenty-four messages that still uses them to insist women be counted and to defend the unglamorous pipes that carry independent poetry to its readers is a room that has understood, at its lowest, what actually needs protecting — not the arguments, which had drained away, but the infrastructure and the inclusion without which there would soon be nothing left to argue about.

— *K. M. F.*

August 2011

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

August 2011 brought the room back to the body — the poem as something felt in the nerves and muscles, made and moved and animated in the flesh — and then, as if to prove the point, took two poets out of their bodies for good. One hundred and forty-nine messages moved through the list, and its currents ran between proprioception and puppetry, the poem as embodied perception and the poem as a thing made to move, with two deaths closing the month in the flesh's plainest terms. It was a month about what the body knows and what it loses.

The largest thread taught the poem as perception. A member building a course framed it as a passage from seeing to sensing — *"Writing and Cinema: from Perception to Proprioception"* — reaching for Olson's old insistence that the poem begins in the body's own awareness of itself, the breath and the nerve and the muscle, not in the abstract intellect. Beside it a thread on poetry and puppetry took up the animated body, the made thing given the semblance of life, the poem as a figure moved by unseen hands. Both asked the same question: how the word gets into the body, and the body into the word.

The quarrel, familiar, was over lineage and the flesh. Threads on Jack Spicer and on Silliman's anthology *In the American Tree* kept the New American and Language inheritances in view, while a thread on Elizabeth Bishop worried the biographical body behind the impersonal poems — the room, as ever, arguing whose bodily lives get read back into the work and whose get kept out.

And the month ended in mortality twice over. Samuel Menashe died in August, the great miniaturist, maker of tiny, chiseled, unforgettable poems, the first winner of the Neglected Masters award — his whole art a proof that the smallest body of work can hold the most — and Roy McBride died the same month, another maker gone. The poets who had spent August theorizing the body in the poem watched two poets' bodies fail.

I have set August down exactly as the archive delivered it — the poem as proprioception, the puppet's animated body, the biographical flesh behind Bishop, and the deaths of Menashe and McBride — because it was the month the list thought hardest about the body in the poem and then was reminded, twice, that the body ends. A room that will spend its August tracing how perception becomes proprioception, how a puppet is given life, and how a life gets read back into a poem,

and then bury the miniaturist whose tiny perfect poems outweigh whole shelves, is a room that knows the deepest fact about its art: that it is made in the body, carried in the breath, and lost, finally, when the breath stops.

— *K. M. F.*

September 2011

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

September 2011 gave the shrunken list one large and hopeful idea to gather around — that if the room had thinned, the wider tribe of poets might still be marshaled, all at once, everywhere, toward change. One hundred and fifty-eight messages moved through it, and its most animating current was the news of a single global day of poetry, thousands of readings in hundreds of cities on one date, the largest coordinated poetry event anyone had attempted. In a year of dwindling traffic, the room warmed to the fantasy of poetry at planetary scale.

The largest hopeful thread was the call to mass action. One Hundred Thousand Poets for Change, organized by Michael Rothenberg, proposed to stage simultaneous readings around the world on a single September day — poetry not as the private argument of a fading listserv but as public, collective, global assembly, the scattered practitioners briefly made visible as a multitude. It was the exact inverse of the list's own condition: where the room had contracted to a whisper, the event imagined the whole diffuse world of poets shouting together.

The quarrel, insofar as the quiet month had one, was whether the gesture meant anything. A day of readings changes no law and topples no regime; skeptics could call it feel-good spectacle, poets reassuring themselves of their own numbers. But the room mostly declined the cynicism, as it had for the oil spill and for Japan, on the same stubborn ground: that visibility is not nothing, that a hundred thousand poets made briefly countable is a fact worth making, even if it moves no government.

Around it ran the smaller keepings — a new media-arts blog, a magazine's call for submissions, a Zukofsky query, an autumn reading announced in New York. The ordinary maintenance of a literary life went on beneath the one big dream, the room tending its notices while entertaining, for once, a vision larger than itself. There was something poignant in the juxtaposition — a listserv that could barely fill a September now cheering a plan to fill the whole world with poets on a single day, as if the dream had grown in exact proportion to how small the dreamer had become.

I have set September down exactly as the archive delivered it — the hundred thousand poets summoned to a single global day, the doubt about whether it mattered, and the quiet notices carrying on beneath — because it was the month the diminished list lifted its eyes from its own smallness to imagine poetry at the scale of the whole world. A room reduced to a hundred and fifty voices that can still thrill to

the idea of a hundred thousand poets reading at once, on one day, for change, is a room whose hope has outlasted its numbers, still able to believe that the tribe is larger than the inbox, and that being counted together, even for a day, is a thing worth doing.

— *K. M. F.*

October 2011

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

October 2011 caught the pendulum swinging back — after a decade of cool conceptual detachment, a turn toward feeling, sincerity, and sentiment, and a Nobel handed to the quietest of lyric masters. One hundred and sixty-six messages moved through the list, and its currents ran to the question of whether earnestness could be rehabilitated, whether the heart could be readmitted to a poetry that had spent years exiling it. The month asked, with real curiosity, whether it was possible to mean it again.

The largest thread named the turn. Under headings borrowed from criticism — the charms of entropy and the new sentimentality, the New Sincerity — the room took up the reaction against the conceptual and the ironic, and one poster posed the paradox at its heart: *“How is it possible for sentimentality to be new?”* Could feeling, the oldest and most suspect thing in poetry, be reclaimed as an avant-garde position; could sincerity be, of all things, experimental? After years of appropriation and deadpan and the death of the author, the room found itself genuinely unsure whether earnestness was a regression or the next move.

The vindication came from Stockholm. Tomas Tranströmer won the Nobel Prize — the Swedish poet of spare, luminous, deeply felt images, a lyricist of silence and snow and the inner life, about as far from conceptual gamesmanship as a living poet could be — and the room welcomed it as a kind of answer. Against the exhausted irony of the decade, the establishment had crowned exactly the quiet, sincere, image-driven lyric the New Sincerity was groping back toward.

The quarrel, gentle, was whether the return was earned or nostalgic. To some, the new sentimentality was a hard-won recovery of feeling after conceptualism had proven its point; to others, a failure of nerve, a retreat into the comforts the avant-garde had rightly burned down. The room did not resolve it, but the very fact of the argument marked the shift: feeling was back on the table, and had to be reckoned with. For a community that had spent a decade treating sincerity as the one embarrassment a serious poet must avoid, simply to be debating whether earnestness might be permissible again was itself the news.

I have set October down exactly as the archive delivered it — the new sentimentality and its paradox, the puzzle of how sincerity could be new, and Tranströmer's Nobel for the quiet felt lyric — because it was the month the list felt the decade turn, the

long conceptual winter giving way to a wary rehabilitation of the heart. A room that will seriously ask whether sentimentality can be new, and greet a Nobel for the most sincere of lyric poets as a vindication, is a room ready to forgive itself for feeling again, testing whether earnestness, after everything, might be the freshest available move, precisely because the avant-garde had spent so long insisting it was the one thing forbidden.

— *K. M. F.*

November 2011

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

November 2011 turned the room toward the look of the word — typography, the visual source, the poem as a thing seen as much as read — while, downtown, a movement in the streets was turning poetry back toward the public square. One hundred and sixty-five messages moved through the list, and its currents ran between the eye and the occupation: the ancient art of how a poem sits on the page, and the sudden question of what poetry owes a protest camp. The month held the visual and the political in a single frame.

The largest currents were about seeing. A thread on the poetics of typography summoned the ghost of Gutenberg to ask how the arrangement of type itself makes meaning, while another traced the visual sources behind William Carlos Williams's *Spring and All*, the poem as an object with a look and a lineage in the eye. An interview with the concrete poet bill bissett drew the difficulty into the open — one reader confessing he gave up, that reading bissett *"wasn't worth all the effort of trying to figure out what he was saying"*, the visual-sound poem pushed so far past sense that even a sympathetic room could balk.

The quarrel was about difficulty and its limits. bissett's radically visual, phonetic, unpunctuated work forced the old question — how much strangeness a reader owes a poem, where legitimate difficulty ends and mere noise begins — the room split, as it always had, between those who would do the work and those who suspected the work was a bluff. It was the appropriative decade's difficulty debate in a new, purely visual key.

And the world walked in from the park. Occupy Wall Street was in full occupation, and a poetry anthology had sprung up in the camp — poetry gathered not in a magazine or a portal but in a tent in a plaza, the visual and typographic questions of the month suddenly set beside the very physical fact of bodies holding a public space. The look of the word on the page met the look of a movement in the square.

I have set November down exactly as the archive delivered it — the poetics of typography, Williams's visual sources, the reader defeated by bissett, and the poetry rising in the Occupy camp — because it was the month the list held the eye and the street in one hand: the poem as a seen object, and poetry as a thing that happens where people gather to be counted. A room that will argue how type makes meaning and whether bissett is worth the effort, in the same weeks that an anthology grows in

an occupied plaza, is a room reminded that the word has always had two lives, one on the designed page and one in the crowded square, and that in the autumn of 2011 both were, unexpectedly, alive.

— *K. M. F.*

December 2011

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

December 2011 closed the year with poetry's two great power questions breaking at once — who owns the institutions of the art, and who gets written into its official history. One hundred and fifty-seven messages moved through the list, and its currents ran between Occupy Wall Street's challenge to the corporate patrons of poetry and a bitter fight over a new anthology of the American century. The month asked, from both directions, the same thing: whose poetry is this, and who gets to say.

The largest political current took aim at the patron. As Occupy Wall Street pressed its case against corporate power, the room turned the lens on its own field — a thread on the unfortunate truth about the Poetry Foundation, the vastly endowed institution some now saw as corporate and hostile to the movement, and companion threads on Occupy Books and the poetics of the occupation, including a conversation titled *You Can't Evict an Idea*. Poetry's money, its foundations and prizes, stood accused of being on the wrong side of the barricade, and the room debated whether the art's institutions served poets or capital.

The largest historical current was a canon war. Rita Dove had edited the Penguin Anthology of Twentieth-Century American Poetry, and Helen Vendler had reviewed it with a severity many read as an attack on Dove's inclusiveness — her attention to Black poets and to the range beyond the established greats — and the room took sides, one member confessing a *"personal dismay"* that *"a relatively mainstream anthology is causing such a stir"*. It was the oldest fight in a new decade: who belongs in the record of American poetry, and whether widening the door is generosity or the dilution the gatekeepers feared.

The two quarrels were one quarrel. Occupy asked who owned poetry's institutions; the Dove-Vendler war asked who owned its history — and both came down to power, to whether the art's money and its canon would stay with the few who had always held them or open to the many pressing at the gate. A William Bronk collected edition passing quietly through the month was a reminder of the uncelebrated the whole fight was really about.

I have set December down exactly as the archive delivered it — the Poetry Foundation arraigned beside Occupy, the poetry rising in the camps, and the Dove-Vendler war over who belongs in the American century — because it was the month

the list closed a year of diminishment on its largest questions of power: who owns the institutions, and who owns the history. A room that will indict the corporate patron of poetry and fight over the inclusiveness of an anthology in the same December is a room that has understood, even in its smallness, that the deepest quarrels in the art were never really about style: they were always about the gate, and who holds the key, and how many the keepers are willing to let in.

— *K. M. F.*

January 2012

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

January 2012 opened a new year with the smallest possible poem — the single line, the one-breath utterance, poetry reduced to its irreducible minimum. One hundred and sixty-nine messages moved through the list, and its most characteristic thread turned on the monostich, the poem that is only a line long, as if the room, itself shrunk to a fraction of its old size, had found a form that matched its condition. The month was an argument for the sufficiency of the very small.

The largest thread honored the one-line poem. Prompted by a new essay, the room took up the monostich — *“the monostich (poem with one line)”* — and traded its examples from Dworkin and Ashbery and Padgett, the poem stripped to a single utterance, the least a poem can be and still be a poem. It was a fitting preoccupation for a diminished commons: a celebration of concentration over accumulation, of the perfect small thing over the sprawling large one, the aesthetic of less that the room had arrived at as much by circumstance as by choice.

The quarrel, quiet, was over sufficiency. Is a single line enough to be a poem, or merely a fragment wishing it were one; does concentration to a point constitute mastery or evasion? The room mostly sided with the small, gathering one-liners with evident delight — the monostich as proof that magnitude was never the measure, that a poem could hold its whole charge in a single line, the way the list still held its whole tradition in a few faithful voices.

Around it lay the year's first small keepings — a DVD of Eileen Myles and Hettie Jones and Susan Maurer reading, a note from a long-running little magazine, a poem for the new year, a member's work turning up in a Smolensk exhibition catalogue. The ordinary maintenance of a literary life resumed for another year, the room tending its notices and its archives, small and faithful in the January cold — the reading preserved on a disc, the little magazine still issuing, the member's work surfacing in a catalogue half a world away, each a small proof that the practice went on.

I have set January down exactly as the archive delivered it — the monostich celebrated, the argument over whether one line suffices, and the quiet first keepings of the year — because it was the month the shrunken list found the form that fit it, the poem reduced to a single line and pronounced enough. A room that will open its year gathering one-line poems and insisting that a single utterance can carry the whole

charge of the art is a room that has made its peace with smallness and turned it into a creed: that concentration beats accumulation, that the least can be the most, and that a commons reduced to a few faithful voices is, like the monostich, not a fragment of something larger but a complete thing in itself.

— *K. M. F.*

February 2012

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

February 2012 turned the small room toward the poem that answers something outside itself — an image, an affliction, a wound — and toward the possibility that a poem might be a kind of repair. Two hundred messages moved through the list, and its currents ran to ekphrasis and to healing: verse written to a painting, verse written from the far side of addiction, the visual poem that is itself a picture. The month treated poetry less as self-expression than as response, the art turned outward to meet a world that needed answering.

The largest thread went looking for the poem that speaks to a picture. A member asked the room for recommendations in ekphrasis, the ancient mode in which a poem takes a visual work as its occasion — the word laid alongside the image, each trying to complete what the other cannot say — and the responses came back personal, one poet recalling how *“I began the poem at the Met as I was looking at”* a particular painting, the verse born in the act of looking. Beside it ran an example of visual poetry with lettristic elements, the poem that dissolves the line between text and picture entirely, becoming the thing it might otherwise describe. The eye and the word kept trading places all month, the poem now answering a canvas, now turning into one.

The quarrel, gentler than most, was about what a poem is for. A thread on recovery poetry took up verse written in and about the struggle out of addiction — poetry as testimony and as tool, the made thing pressed into the service of a life being rebuilt — and the room considered, without cynicism, whether a poem could actually help, whether the art has any therapeutic power or only the appearance of one. It was the useful and the beautiful weighed against each other in the plainest human terms.

Around the edges the room kept its usual small keepings — a call for submissions, translations into Farsi, a performance announced at a media-arts space. The infrastructure of a literary life carried on beneath the two large questions, the ordinary business of a community that still, at two hundred voices, had somewhere to send its work and someone to read it.

I have set February down exactly as the archive delivered it — the search for ekphrasis, the visual poem that becomes its own image, and the poetry written out of recovery — because it was the month the list considered poetry as response and as repair: the poem that answers a painting, the poem that answers an addiction. A

room that will spend its February wondering how a poem meets an image and whether a poem can help a person heal is a room testing the oldest hope about the art, that it is not merely self-regard set to music but a way of answering the world, and occasionally, in the answering, of mending something in it.

— *K. M. F.*

March 2012

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

March 2012 turned the room toward a gap in the record — the poets a whole category of readers could not find, because the canon had never bothered to gather them. Two hundred messages moved through the list, and its largest thread was a plain confession of ignorance that became, in the room's hands, a small act of recovery: a hunt for the intersex and transgender poets that no anthology had thought to name. The month asked, once again, who the tradition forgets, and set about, in its small way, remembering.

The largest thread began with an admission. A teacher wrote that a student had asked for intersex or transgender poets and confessed *"I didn't have any names at my fingertips"* — the honest blank where a whole body of work should have been catalogued and was not — and asked the room to fill it. The commons did what it does best in such moments, pooling its scattered knowledge to assemble, by hand, the list the institutions had never compiled: recovery not as theory but as practical mutual aid, names traded until the blank began to fill.

The quarrel, such as it was, ran through Stein. A call for papers on Gertrude Stein kept the great queer modernist in view — the mother of so much of the room's lineage, whose own sexuality and syntax had scrambled the categories a century before — while a thread on the semantics of the parts of speech worried how grammar itself encodes value, whether a noun is somehow guilty and an adjective merely neutral. Gender, grammar, and the canon turned out to be one tangled question: who and what the language is built to hold.

Around it the room kept its stranger small business — an invitation to wear a page from a concrete-poetry book, the poem made wearable, and a query into a website of postmodern poetry. The avant-garde impulse to blur the line between the text and the body ran quietly through the month, the same impulse, at bottom, as the search for the poets whose bodies the canon had never known how to name.

I have set March down exactly as the archive delivered it — the blank where the transgender poets should have been, the recovery of them by hand, Stein kept in view, and grammar itself put on trial — because it was the month the list confronted a specific hole in the record and treated it not as an embarrassment to hide but as work to be done. A room that will answer a teacher's honest blank by assembling, together, the names its anthologies never gathered is a room living out its oldest and

best conviction: that the canon forgets on purpose, that the language itself has its exclusions built in, and that the remedy is always the same patient labor of saying the missing names until they are missing no longer.

— *K. M. F.*

April 2012

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

April 2012 was small and elegiac — one hundred and eighteen messages — and it spent its National Poetry Month mourning both a great poet and the vanished age when poetry mattered to the world. The room had thinned to a murmur, and into that murmur fell the death of Adrienne Rich and a wistful backward look at a time when, the exhibition title had it, poets ruled the earth. The month held a private grief and a public one, the loss of a poet and the loss of poetry's old power, in the same quiet hands.

The death was the month's gravity. Adrienne Rich had died at the end of March, one of the essential poets of the American century, the great fuser of the political and the intimate — and the room turned to her prose as much as her verse, one member praising her landmark essay for being *"clear and logical and beautifully written"*, the plain-spoken force that had made her indispensable. She was a poet who had never doubted that poetry was a public act, that the personal was political and the poem a place where the two met and mattered.

The quarrel, softly, was about whether that power was gone. An exhibition called *When Poets Ruled the Earth* opened in Buffalo, its very title an elegy — the wistful memory of an age when poetry stood at the center of the culture rather than its far margin — while a thread carried Adrienne Rich's own provocation that no one misses the poets, the bleaker suspicion that the art had slipped below the world's notice entirely. Between the exhibition's nostalgia and Rich's challenge sat the month's real ache: the fear that poetry had lost the public standing Rich had spent a life insisting it deserved.

Around the grief ran the ordinary keeping — a magazine turning ten, a plea to fund a small poetry paper, a notice of a medal awarded. The infrastructure of a diminished art carried on beneath the mourning, the small presses and prizes and journals doing their patient work in the shadow of a great poet's death and a lost cultural age — the ordinary machinery of a literary life running quietly on, as it must, even in a month that felt like a double funeral.

I have set April down exactly as the archive delivered it — Adrienne Rich mourned through her clear and beautiful prose, the exhibition memorializing when poets ruled the earth, and the hard suspicion that no one misses the poets now — because it was the month the list buried a poet who had never once doubted poetry's public

power, in the same weeks it grieved the loss of that power itself. A room that answers the death of Adrienne Rich by praising the clarity of her argument and wondering, half-broken, whether anyone outside still cares is a room feeling two deaths at once: the poet who insisted the art mattered, and the age that used to agree with her.

— *K. M. F.*

May 2012

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

May 2012 was a quiet, retrospective month that found the room defending a great modernist against a fresh charge, and looking back, more generally, at decades it could still name as its own. One hundred and fifty-two messages moved through the list, and its currents ran to the past: a scholarly fight over Gertrude Stein's wartime conduct, a call for papers on the poetry of the nineteen-eighties, an anniversary or two. The month was the list in its custodial mode, tending reputations and marking time.

The largest thread reopened an old wound in a modern key. A book had accused Gertrude Stein of collaboration with the Vichy regime, and the room took up the defense — one member working through *"Charles Bernstein's defense of Gertrude Stein against Barbara Will"*, weighing whether the mother of experimental prose had been a fascist sympathizer or was being convicted on thin evidence. It was the monstrous-artist problem the list had chewed on for Pound and would never quite put down: whether a writer's politics can poison the work, and whether the accusation itself must be scrupulous before it sticks.

The quarrel's quieter half was retrospection. A call for papers on the poetry of the eighties invited the room to historicize a decade many of its members had lived through as adults — the strange sensation of watching one's own era become a scholarly period — while anniversaries of a webzine and a journal marked how much time the enterprise had already accumulated. The room was old enough now to be its own archive, its recent past already material for the conference.

Around it the ordinary keeping went on — a new chapbook announced, a survey of small Canadian publishers, the standing notices of a literary life. The infrastructure hummed beneath the scholarship, the small presses still issuing, the list still relaying, the whole apparatus older and thinner but intact. There is a particular melancholy in a community that has begun to attend more to its own history than to its future, cataloguing its decades even as it thins — the melancholy, precisely, of an institution that has started to suspect its best work is behind it.

I have set May down exactly as the archive delivered it — the defense of Stein against the charge of collaboration, the poetry of the eighties turned into a subject for papers, and the anniversaries piling up — because it was the month the list worked mostly as a keeper of the past: guarding a modernist's name, historicizing a decade

it remembered firsthand, counting the years the enterprise had run. A room that will scrupulously weigh whether Gertrude Stein was a collaborator and, in the same breath, watch its own recent decades harden into scholarship is a room grown reflective with age, aware that it has become, without quite meaning to, one of the things that gets studied rather than one of the things still happening.

— *K. M. F.*

June 2012

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

June 2012 was a small summer month that turned, quietly and a little ruefully, on a single suspicion: that the avant-garde had been swallowed by the university, its old danger tamed into a syllabus. One hundred and eighteen messages moved through the list, and its currents ran between the honoring of a wild, uncontainable poet and the wry acknowledgment that the once-radical had become, of all things, an academic subject. The month asked what happens to a revolution after it is assigned as reading.

The largest quiet thread was a matter of recovery and record. A query into John Wieners sent the room back to the Boston poet of raw, confessional, gorgeously vulnerable verse — one member noting how his late collection had rounded out something close to a complete Wieners up to its date — the impulse to gather and preserve a difficult, marginal life's work before it slipped from view. Wieners was the antithesis of the institution: unruly, unwell, uncareerist, the poet no department could quite house.

The quarrel was named outright. A new feature online, on the academisation of avant-garde poetry, put the room's unease into a word — the sense that the experimental tradition, once a genuine outside, had been absorbed into the creative-writing program, its transgressions turned into technique and its rebels turned into faculty. It was the deepest anxiety of a movement that had defined itself by opposition: that its very success, its arrival in the classroom, might be indistinguishable from its death.

Around the edges the ordinary keeping went on — a blog updated, a new collection of fragments announced, a chapbook released. The small presses and the personal sites kept issuing beneath the large worry, the actual living traffic of a poetry that carried on being made whether or not the academy had captured its name. And there was a consolation folded into that fact: that Wieners, and the fragments, and the little chapbooks came from exactly the ungovernable margins no department could fully absorb, proof that some part of the art still lived where the syllabus could not reach, in the mimeograph and the blog and the unwell genius no committee would ever hire.

I have set June down exactly as the archive delivered it — the gathering of the unruly Wieners, and the blunt naming of the avant-garde's academisation — because it was

the month the list faced the paradox of its own arrival: that the experimental poetry it loved had won its place in the university precisely by ceasing to be dangerous. A room that will lovingly preserve a poet no department could house while worrying aloud that the avant-garde has become a course requirement is a room caught in the oldest trap of the outsider tradition: that to be recognized is to be domesticated, and that the classroom which finally teaches your rebellion may also, quietly, be where it goes to die.

— *K. M. F.*

July 2012

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

July 2012 kept June's quarrel about the academy running, and gave it a sharper, more personal edge: not the abstract absorption of the avant-garde, but the hard question of what, exactly, the creative-writing professor is doing to the young. One hundred and thirty-four messages moved through the list, thinned by summer, and its largest thread circulated a document about teaching poetry that struck at least one reader as a wound. The month worried the ethics of instruction, the strange power of the person who grades a poem.

The largest thread passed around a provocation for the profession. Something billed as useful for professors of creative writing went round the room — a text about the teaching of poetry pointed enough that one member recoiled, murmuring that it was *"What a hard letter to read if it is addressed to you"* — the discomfort of the teacher shown, in cold print, the effect of the red pen on a young writer's confidence. It reopened the question the academisation debate had raised: whether the workshop nurtures poets or merely processes them, whether the professor is a gardener or a machine.

The quarrel, underneath, was about power and the poem. To teach poetry is to stand in judgment of the most vulnerable thing a person makes, and the room, full of teachers, knew both sides of the desk — the authority that can encourage a voice into being or crush it, the grade that means nothing to the art and everything to the student. It was the creative-writing enterprise examining its own conscience in the quiet of July.

Around it ran the small keeping — a college's small-press collection seeking donations, a new book announced, readings posted around New York and Los Angeles. The infrastructure of the teaching-and-publishing life carried on beneath the unease, the summer readings and the archive drives and the self-announced titles, the ordinary machinery of a poetry now lived largely inside the institution it distrusted. That the same poets who feared the workshop also staffed it, graded within it, and drew their livings from it was the quiet contradiction the month could not resolve and did not pretend to.

I have set July down exactly as the archive delivered it — the hard letter to the professors, the discomfort of the teacher shown his own effect, and the small business of the academic summer — because it was the month the list turned the

academisation question inward and made it personal: not what the university does to the avant-garde, but what the teacher does to the student. A room full of poets who are also professors, pausing over a document hard to read if it is addressed to you, is a room examining the strangest power its members hold: the authority to judge the most fragile thing a young writer will ever hand across a desk, and the knowledge that a poem, unlike a revolution, can be killed by a single careless reader with a grade to give.

— *K. M. F.*

August 2012

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

August 2012 set two kinds of loss against each other — the institution killing a press that worked, and the mind losing itself to disease — and found in both the same terror: that the things which carry a culture forward can be shut down or dissolved without warning. One hundred and nineteen messages moved through the list, and its currents ran between an editor fired and a memory failing, the external threat and the internal one. The month was about how easily the vessels of a literature can be emptied.

The largest fight was over a press unjustly closed. The University of New Orleans had put its press on hiatus and dismissed its editor, and the room rose in protest, marshaling the facts — that *“the Press was self-sustaining and cost-free”*, that it had published an international range of prize-winning writers, that the stated budget excuse was a fiction. It was the small-press crisis in its cruelest form: not a press failing on its own but a press killed by the institution that housed it, the university turning on the literature in its care.

The quieter loss was interior. A thread titled on writing dementia took up the hardest subject the art can face — the making of poetry inside, or against, the erosion of memory itself, the mind that holds the poems coming quietly apart. If the press was a vessel closed from without, dementia was the vessel dissolving from within, and the room approached it with the care such a subject demands, poetry set against the very failure of the faculty that poetry depends on.

Around the two losses the ordinary keeping persisted — a small-press collection seeking support, a reading announced, the standing notices. The infrastructure carried on beneath the double threat, the presses and archives doing their patient work of preservation even as one press was being shuttered and one kind of memory was being lost, the room insisting, as ever, that what can be kept should be, and that a press worth saving is worth making noise about even when the noise changes nothing.

I have set August down exactly as the archive delivered it — the self-sustaining press killed by its university, and the poetry written against the dissolving of the mind — because it was the month the list confronted, on two scales, how fragile the carriers of a literature are. A room that will fight for a press its host institution shut down for no good reason, and hold with tenderness the question of how one writes as memory

fails, is a room that understands the deepest precariousness of its art: that the presses that print it can be closed by a stroke of a budget pen, and the minds that hold it can be emptied by disease, and that against both the only defense is the stubborn work of keeping, for as long as keeping is possible.

— *K. M. F.*

September 2012

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

September 2012 was among the emptiest files the list ever produced — ninety-three messages, not one thread drawing more than a handful of replies — and its near-silence is, once again, the truest thing it has to report. The great conversation had thinned almost to nothing; what remained was the barest pulse of a community keeping its channel open out of loyalty and habit. The month is a document of survival at its most minimal, the list reduced to the fact of still existing.

There was no largest thread to speak of, only the scattered business of a literary life reduced to announcements. Calls for work went out, a journal sought submissions, a member floated a self-nomination for some small honor — the room functioning now almost entirely as a distribution list, a place to post notices to a specific and dwindling audience. The arguments were gone; what remained was the practical residue, the poetry world's errands run through a channel that had once carried its fiercest debates. Ten years earlier a September on this list would have thrown up a hundred-message quarrel over form or politics or the state of the art; now it threw up a handful of calls for work and fell quiet again, the great engine idling almost to a stop.

The quarrel, if the near-empty month can be said to have had one, was implicit and unspoken: whether a room this quiet is still a community or merely a mailing list, whether the pulse this faint still counts as life. No one posed the question directly — one does not, in a room this thin — but it hung over every notice sent into the near-silence, every announcement that drew no reply.

And yet the notices kept coming, which is the whole point. Each call for work, each submission request, each small self-nomination was somebody still choosing to speak into this particular quiet, still believing there was someone on the other end who cared to hear it. The traffic had nearly stopped, but it had not stopped; the room was faint, but it was not yet gone.

I have set September down exactly as the archive delivered it — the ninety-three notices sent into the hush, the calls and the submissions and the small self-nomination, and the silence around them — because it was one of the quietest months in the entire run, and quiet this deep is itself the story. A room reduced to a bare pulse of announcements, drawing few replies and no arguments, is a room close to the end of something; and yet a community that keeps posting into that hush,

faithfully, because a few of its members still believe someone is listening, is a community not quite ready to admit that the long conversation is over — holding the channel open, against the evidence, for whatever might still come through.

— *K. M. F.*

October 2012

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

October 2012 was another thin, scattered month — one hundred and twenty-six messages — that drifted, in its quiet way, toward the meeting of poetry and the moving image, and toward the geography of where poets are made. The room had little heat in it and no single argument, but a few of its small threads pointed the same direction: the poem that moves, the poem on film, the poem carried from one place to another. It was a month of low traffic and long sightlines.

The largest of the small threads was cinematic. A query into the cine-poems of Lionel Kearns took the room back to the marriage of verse and film — the poem made to move on a screen, the word set loose in time and image, the lyric borrowing the century's dominant medium to see what it might become. It was the visual-poetry question the list had worried for years, now in its temporal form: not the poem as a still picture but the poem as a moving one, unfolding like a reel.

The quarrel, faint, was geographic. A thread asking after Iowa poets glanced at the great workshop and the map of where American poetry gets manufactured — the question of place and school and pipeline, whether a poet is formed by a landscape or a program — while notices from a familiar handful of names kept the room's small circle in view. Where poems come from, and where poets are trained, sat quietly beside the question of what medium a poem might travel in.

Around the edges the ordinary keeping went on — a long-running little magazine issuing its notice, a poet sharing new work, a reading announced. The infrastructure hummed faintly beneath the thin traffic, the same small presses and the same familiar voices, the channel kept open for whatever passed through. It was a month that would have vanished without trace in the crowded years, and survives now only because someone was still keeping the record — which is, in the end, why any of these late thin months survive at all.

I have set October down exactly as the archive delivered it — the cine-poems of Lionel Kearns, the glance toward Iowa and the geography of poets, and the faint keeping of a low month — because it was a quiet stretch that pointed, almost absently, at the poem in motion and the poem in place: where verse goes when it borrows the moving image, and where poets come from when they are made in a program. A room that will spend a slow October wondering how a poem moves on film and where in the country its poets are grown is a room still curious, even at low

traffic, about the two things it has always cared about most: how the poem gets made, and how it gets carried into the world.

— *K. M. F.*

November 2012

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

November 2012 turned the aging room toward memory itself — the sixties remembered, the radical past re-screened, the epic still being written — as if a community grown old wanted to be sure the fire it came from had really burned. One hundred and forty-five messages moved through the list, and its currents ran to recollection: a thread asking the room to remember its own formative decade, an epic of revolution invoked, a poet still adding to her life's long poem. The month was a act of collective remembering.

The largest thread asked, simply, whether the room recalled the sixties. It reached, for its touchstone, to the film *Reds* — Warren Beatty's epic of the American radical left — one member recalling how it had gathered "*The lives, needs, and desires of Jack Reed, Louise Bryant, Eugene O'Neill, Emma Goldman*" into a single sprawling picture, the age when politics and art and desire had seemed to run together. It was nostalgia with a purpose: a room whose members had been young in that fire wanted to warm their hands at it once more, and to ask what had become of its heat.

The quarrel, gentle, was between memory and continuation. Against the backward look ran Anne Waldman's *Iovis*, the vast feminist epic still growing, the long poem as a way of not merely remembering the radical past but extending it — proof that the epic ambition of the sixties had not died but simply gone underground into a lifework. The room held both: the wistful re-screening of the old fire, and the poet still feeding it, page by page.

Around the edges the ordinary keeping went on — a poet's news, a teaching institute announced, readings in Philadelphia and New York, a webzine's new issue. The infrastructure carried on beneath the remembering, the small presses and the reading series doing their patient work, the living traffic of a poetry still, however faintly, being made and gathered — the present tense insisting on itself even in a month given over so largely to the past.

I have set November down exactly as the archive delivered it — the sixties recalled through *Reds* and its cast of American radicals, and Waldman's epic still growing against the nostalgia — because it was the month the aging list turned to warm itself at the fire of its own beginnings and to ask whether that fire still burned. A room that will spend its November remembering Jack Reed and Emma Goldman and, in the same breath, honoring a feminist epic still being written is a room refusing the easy

comfort of pure nostalgia: not only mourning the lost radical age but pointing, stubbornly, to the poet who is still trying to carry it forward, on the theory that a fire remembered and a fire fed are not, finally, the same thing.

— *K. M. F.*

December 2012

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

December 2012 closed the year in mourning for a poet who had made verse and jazz and protest into one inseparable art. One hundred and eight messages moved through the list, thin as the whole late year had been, and its gravity gathered around the death of Jayne Cortez — the great performer of political poetry, whose work had never once stood apart from music or from struggle. The year ended, as so many of the list's years had, by burying one of the originals.

The month's largest weight was Cortez. Word came in the last week of the year that she was gravely ill, the room asked to hold her, and then she was gone — the poet of the surreal, incantatory, jazz-driven line, a founder of her own presses and journals, married to the sculptor Melvin Edwards, a maker for whom the poem was always also a performance and always also a politics. She belonged to no institution and answered to no market; her art was the voice raised in the room, and the room grieved the silencing of it.

The quarrel, quiet beneath the grief, was about how poetry travels across borders and cages. A thread on reading Paul Celan as a postcolonial poet in the South Pacific carried the century's great poet of catastrophe into unexpected geography, while year-end lists of the best books did their small annual work of sorting and saving. Around the edges, a plea to give the ailing poet Wanda Coleman some breathing room reminded the room how many of its powerful outsider voices were mortal and struggling.

The year-end keeping went on beneath the mourning — the best-of lists, the notices, the small announcements of a literary December. But the month belonged to Cortez, whose death made the ordinary business feel small, and whose particular fusion of poem and music and protest was exactly the kind of thing no anthology or algorithm could preserve, living as it had in the voice and the moment, in the breath that shaped the line and the room that received it.

I have set December down exactly as the archive delivered it — the death of Jayne Cortez, Celan carried to the South Pacific, and the year-end lists doing their sorting — because it was the month the list buried a poet whose art had never been separable from her music or her politics, and felt, in the loss, how much of what it loved lived only in performance. A room that ends its year mourning Jayne Cortez, whose poems were inseparable from the voice that spoke them and the struggle they

served, is a room reminded that its most vital art is also its most perishable: that the poem raised in the room, sung and fought and embodied, is precisely the poem that dies with the poet, and can be kept afterward only in the memory of those who heard it.

— *K. M. F.*

January 2013

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

January 2013 opened the year with a beautiful convergence — the poet imagined as a transmitter, taking dictation from somewhere beyond himself, and the actual history of poems sent across distance as pure encoded light. One hundred and thirty-one messages moved through the list, and its currents ran to transmission of every kind: Jack Spicer's old idea of the poet as a radio, the first poem ever sent by optical telegraph, and the death of a poet-editor who had spent a life relaying other voices. The month was about how a poem gets carried from one mind to another.

The largest thread returned, as the list so often did, to Spicer — the poet who insisted he did not make his poems but received them, tuning himself like a radio to a signal from outside. And beside that metaphor the room set a literal marvel: the news of the first poem transmitted at something near the speed of light, the record that in 1794 a Swedish poet "*sent a poem by optical telegraph*" to his king, its words encoded in a language of collapsing iron shutters, relayed tower to tower across the countryside. Spicer's Martian dictation and Edelcrantz's shuttered towers were the same dream two centuries apart: the poem as a signal, flung across a distance, decoded at the far end.

The quarrel, quiet, was about where a poem originates. If Spicer was right that the poet only receives, then the true source is always elsewhere — the outside, the dead, the Martians, the signal — and the poet is merely the tower that passes it on. It was the list's oldest mystical intuition, dressed for a new year in the language of transmission and light.

And the month grounded its metaphors in a death. Harvey Shapiro died early in January, the poet and longtime editor who had relayed so many other voices into print through his years at the great newspapers and magazines — a transmitter in the most practical sense, the man who passed poems along to their readers. His death gave the month's talk of signals and towers a human weight: the relay stations, too, are mortal.

I have set January down exactly as the archive delivered it — Spicer's poet-as-radio, the 1794 poem sent by optical telegraph in a language of shutters, and the death of the editor Harvey Shapiro — because it was the month the list opened its year on the mystery of transmission: how a poem travels from its unknown source, through the poet who only receives it, across whatever distance, to the reader at the far end. A

room that will hold Spicer's dictation from Mars beside a real poem flung across the countryside as coded light, and then bury an editor who spent his life relaying other people's poems into print, is a room contemplating the deepest thing about its art: that the poem is always a signal passing through, and that every poet, and every editor, is only a tower that keeps it moving for a while before going dark.

— *K. M. F.*

February 2013

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

February 2013 brought the country's violence into the poem, and asked what a nation full of guns has done to its verse. One hundred and eighty-seven messages moved through the list — a small surge in the thinning years — and its currents ran between the metaphor of the weapon and the wildness beyond the human, between the gun in American poetry and the misanthropic nature-vision of Robinson Jeffers. Two months after a schoolhouse massacre, the room turned, gravely, to the imagery of firearms it had inherited and the question of what to do with it now.

The largest thread traced the weapon through the tradition. A member opened an inquiry into *"the metaphor of the gun as reflected in American poetry"*, reaching back to Dickinson's life that had stood a loaded gun and Whitman's shooting scenes and forward to the present — the room assembling, soberly, the long American entanglement of poetry and the firearm. In the shadow of recent horror the old figures could not stay merely literary; the loaded gun of the poem sat uneasily beside the real ones the country would not put down, and the room felt the difference in its bones.

The quarrel's counter-current reached past the human entirely. A thread hunting for connections *"between Robinson Jeffers and the Beat movement"* summoned the poet of inhumanism, who had answered a violent species by turning toward the hawk and the stone and the indifferent Pacific — the vision that finds relief from human cruelty only by looking away from humanity altogether. Against the metaphor of the gun, Jeffers offered the metaphor of the cliff and the sea: the consolation, bleak and vast, of a nature that neither shoots nor grieves.

Around the grave threads ran the machinery of the profession — a great anthology relaunched and seeking an editor, a knotty thread on process and craft, a joke about Dickinson as a nude celebrity. The ordinary literary business carried on beside the meditation on violence, the room capable, as ever, of holding the solemn and the silly in the same inbox — a relaunched anthology hunting for its editor in the same weeks the list weighed what a poem can say about a massacre.

I have set February down exactly as the archive delivered it — the metaphor of the gun traced through American poetry, Jeffers's inhuman turn toward the hawk and the sea, and the profession's ordinary business alongside — because it was the month the list let a national horror into the poem and asked what its own tradition

had to say about the weapon. A room that will follow the gun from Dickinson to the present in the shadow of a massacre, and reach past the whole violent species toward Jeffers's indifferent nature for relief, is a room doing the serious work its art exists for: not to solve the violence, which it cannot, but to refuse to let the country's deadliest image pass through its poems unexamined.

— *K. M. F.*

March 2013

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

March 2013 gathered the room around a farewell to one of its own presiding spirits — the poet who had once been elected the list's own Anti-Laureate, and who had spent decades making mischief and music in equal measure. One hundred and forty messages moved through the list, and its warmth gathered around the memorial for Anselm Hollo, set against the annual churn of the great writers' conference. The month held the intimate and the institutional together: a beloved poet mourned, and the professional machinery grinding on around the grief.

The largest tender thread was the memorial. Anselm Hollo had died at the end of January, and the room passed along the invitation to "*a memorial tribute to Anselm Hollo*" — the Finnish-born poet and translator, the great wit and dissenter, the man this very list had once crowned its Anti-Laureate and who had filed his mock-decrees with such delight. He had been one of the room's truest characters, a poet who took the art with total seriousness and himself with none, and his death removed one of the last living links to the list's own comic and combative prime.

Around the grief ground the machinery of the profession. The great annual writers' conference filled a thread with readings and schedules and the anxious social calculus of the literary crowd — the institutional churn of a poetry increasingly organized around the conference and the program — the exact apparatus Hollo's irreverence had always mocked. There was a bitter aptness in mourning the Anti-Laureate in the same weeks the room mapped its way through the professional carnival he would have skewered.

Beneath both ran the small persistent keeping — an ecological-poetry event announced, new publishing teams forming, readings posted. The infrastructure carried on beneath the memorial, the reading series and the little presses doing their patient work, the living poetry going on being made even as the room buried one of the makers who had shaped its spirit — the reading series and the little presses carrying forward, in their unglamorous way, exactly the uninstitutional energy Hollo had stood for.

I have set March down exactly as the archive delivered it — the memorial tribute to Anselm Hollo, the writers' conference grinding on around it, and the small keeping beneath — because it was the month the list mourned its own Anti-Laureate, the poet who had embodied everything wild and funny and uncompromising in its character.

A room that will gather to remember Anselm Hollo in the same weeks it threads its way through the professional conference he loved to mock is a room saying goodbye to a piece of its own soul: the irreverent, uninstitutional, gloriously serious-and-unserious spirit that had made the list, in its best years, not just an argument but a company of friends.

— *K. M. F.*

April 2013

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

April 2013 was a small, outward-facing month — seventy-seven messages — that spent its National Poetry Month looking across borders and toward those in need, the thinned room reaching, in its diminishment, past its own edges. There was no large argument, only a scatter of threads pointing outward: a recovered history of avant-garde exchange between continents, a fund for poets in trouble, a few small experiments. The month was the list at its most modest and its most generous, giving what little attention it had left to poets far away and poets in difficulty.

The largest thread recovered a transnational history. A feature in Jacket2 gathered a historic Bengali poetry publication, and the room learned, or remembered, how *“Allen Ginsberg brought back some avant-garde writings of contemporary Bengali poets”* from his travels half a century before — the Krittibas poets of Calcutta linked to the American underground through a single traveler's suitcase of manuscripts. It was the list's oldest and healthiest instinct, the outward reach: the reminder that the experimental impulse was never American property but a global conversation, briefly made visible again.

The quarrel, such as a seventy-seven-message month can muster, was really an appeal to conscience. A thread for Poets in Need kept the mutual-aid fund in view — the practical machinery by which the community catches its own when they fall — the recognition that behind the abstractions of poetics were people who sometimes could not pay the rent. In a diminished month the room turned, tellingly, to care: not argument but aid, not theory but the fund.

Around the edges ran the smallest keeping — a call for work, a note on a machine-poetry experiment, a scatter of event notices. The infrastructure carried on at its faintest, the little magazines and the small appeals doing their quiet work in a room grown very quiet indeed — the reach outward and the care for one's own being, in a diminished April, almost the only energies the list had left to spend.

I have set April down exactly as the archive delivered it — the recovered Bengali avant-garde carried west by Ginsberg, the fund for poets in need, and the faint keeping of a thin month — because it was the month the diminished list spent its little remaining energy reaching outward and downward: toward the poets of another continent, and toward its own members in trouble. A room that will use a seventy-seven-message April to remember a transnational avant-garde and to keep alive the

fund that catches falling poets is a room whose generosity outlasted its size, still practicing, at the edge of its own decline, the two things it had always done best: reaching past its borders, and taking care of its own.

— *K. M. F.*

May 2013

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

May 2013 found the thinned room rising, briefly and with relish, to defend the worth of poetry against a powerful man's public contempt. One hundred and thirty-one messages moved through the list, and its sharpest current answered an economist who had sneered that reading poetry was the mark of an unserious, unproductive life. The room, which had spent years doubting poetry's power itself, discovered that it would not tolerate the contempt when it came from outside — and defended the art it privately worried over with a vigor its own doubts had lacked.

The largest pointed thread was a rebuttal. A prominent conservative historian had disparaged John Maynard Keynes by suggesting his economics were frivolous because he was childless and preferred verse to worldly matters — and the room rose against *"the conservative policy intellectual Niall Ferguson's sneer"*, the casual assumption that a life given to poetry is a life wasted, unserious, insufficiently invested in the future. It was an old prejudice stated baldly by a man with a platform, and the list met it with the indignation of people who had heard it too many times.

The quarrel turned on what poetry is worth. To the sneering economist, reading poetry was a diversion from the real business of the world; to the room, it was the real business — the attention, the memory, the making of meaning that no ledger measures. The list had spent the decade uncertain whether poetry mattered to anyone outside itself, but faced with a powerful man's open scorn, it found its conviction again: that the pursuit he dismissed as idle was, in fact, among the least idle things a person can do.

Around the argument ran the ordinary keeping — a collection of aphorisms announced, readings in Brooklyn, a bit of good personal news, the standing notices. The infrastructure carried on beneath the defense, the small presses and the reading series doing their patient work, the living poetry going on being made in the teeth of the world's indifference and occasional contempt — the reading raised, the aphorism gathered, the small book announced, each a quiet rebuttal to the sneer that none of it was worth a serious person's time.

I have set May down exactly as the archive delivered it — the answer to the economist's sneer, the defense of poetry against the charge of frivolity, and the small keeping beneath — because it was the month the doubting list rediscovered its conviction the instant the contempt came from outside. A room that will spend years

quietly wondering whether poetry matters, and then rise as one to rebuke a powerful man who calls it a waste, is a room that knows the difference between its own honest doubt and someone else's lazy scorn: private uncertainty about the art's power is one thing, but the public claim that a life given to poetry is a life wasted is exactly the lie the room existed to refuse.

— *K. M. F.*

June 2013

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

June 2013 was a small summer month — eighty-eight messages — that turned, in its scattered way, on how poetry survives now: by the passing of a hat, by the borrowing of the airwaves, by the reading raised in a room. The list had thinned to a murmur, and its few live threads pointed at the practical means of keeping the art alive in a world that would not pay for it: the crowd-funding campaign, the poet-as-broadcast, the small reading series carrying on. The month was about the new economics and old technologies of survival.

The largest of the small threads was an appeal to the crowd. A crowd-funding campaign pledged to donate a portion of its proceeds to a beloved poetry organization — the community learning to finance itself by the many small gifts of the internet, the digital passing of the hat that had begun, in these thin years, to replace the vanished patrons and the failing grants. It was mutual aid updated for the platform age: not the institution funding poetry, but poetry funding poetry, a dollar at a time.

The quarrel, faint, was really an old idea in a new form. A reading series titled Poet as Radio revived the durable image of the poet as a transmitter — the maker who broadcasts, who tunes in and relays, the Spicerian dream that the list kept returning to — now attached to the actual apparatus of online broadcast and podcast, the poet reaching a scattered audience through the wires. The transmission metaphor that had opened the year in January came round again in June, the poem still imagined as a signal seeking its listeners.

Around the edges ran the smallest keeping — a reading series announced, a poem shared on video, a scatter of notices. The infrastructure carried on at its faintest, the reading rooms and the online experiments doing their quiet work, the living poetry going on being made and broadcast to whoever would tune in — the reading room and the podcast and the crowd-funder all pressed, in their small ways, into the single work of keeping the signal alive.

I have set June down exactly as the archive delivered it — the crowd-funding of poetry, the poet-as-radio broadcasting to a scattered audience, and the faint keeping of a small month — because it was the month the diminished list turned to the practical question of survival: how the art gets funded and how it gets heard when the old patrons and platforms are gone. A room that will finance its poetry by passing

a digital hat and imagine its poets as radios broadcasting to whoever will listen is a room improvising its own endurance, inventing, out of crowd-funders and podcasts and small readings, the makeshift new means by which a poetry with no market keeps finding its money and its audience anyway.

— *K. M. F.*

July 2013

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

July 2013 was a thin, aphoristic month — seventy-seven messages — that set the ugliness of the poetry business against a lovely, dark defense of poetry itself: the art as a beautiful deceit, a story that shelters us from the truth of eternity. The room had little traffic, but its scattered threads circled a single consoling idea, borrowed from one poet through another: that poetry lies, and that its lying is a mercy. The month found, in its smallness, a kind of creed.

The largest current was a defense of the beautiful lie. Amy King, invoking Alice Notley, offered the room the aphorism it would carry through the month — that *“Poetry is a deceitful thing. That protects us from eternity.”* — the poem as a saving fiction, a story we know to be untrue and believe anyway, precisely because the alternative, the raw fact of the infinite and the ending, is unbearable without it. It was the oldest defense of the art restated with a shrug and a wink: poetry lies, thank God, and the lie is what keeps us company against the dark.

The quarrel set that consolation against the trade's indignities. A thread on the beastly po-biz catalogued the ugliness of the profession — the careerism, the favor-trading, the small cruelties of the literary marketplace — the sordid machinery around an art whose actual gift is the deceit that protects us from eternity. Between the beautiful lie of the poem and the ugly truth of the po-biz sat the month's real contrast: the thing itself, and the wretched apparatus that has grown up to sell it.

Around the edges ran the smallest keeping — a poetry postcard festival announced, a book of visual poetry available, a prompt shared for writing. The infrastructure carried on at its faintest, the small festivals and the self-announced titles doing their quiet work, the living poetry going on being made in the gap between its own beauty and its business.

I have set July down exactly as the archive delivered it — Notley's aphorism that poetry is a deceitful thing that protects us from eternity, the ugliness of the po-biz set against it, and the faint keeping of a thin month — because it was the month the list found, in its smallness, the consolation at the center of its art: that the poem is a saving fiction, a beautiful lie that shelters us from the unbearable truth. A room that will hold, in the same July, the loveliest defense of poetry as a merciful deceit and the ugliest facts of the business that sells it is a room that knows both halves of its condition: that the thing itself is a grace, a story that protects us from eternity, and

that everything built around it to market and rank and sell it is exactly the eternity
the poem was trying to spare us.

— *K. M. F.*

August 2013

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

August 2013 was a quiet, bookish month that found the thinned room doing one of the oldest and humblest things a community of readers does for one another: helping a member find a half-remembered poem. One hundred and nine messages moved through the list, and its small threads circled the reference desk and the workshop — a hunt through Ashbery for a barely-recalled line, a fresh turn to ekphrasis, the summer courses of the poetry schools. The month was the list as collective memory, the room that remembers what any one reader has forgotten.

The largest small thread was a search. A member wrote in with a fragment lodged in memory and a book half-recalled — *“Does anybody have a copy of April Galleons handy?”* — asking the room to help locate a particular Ashbery poem from a line imperfectly remembered. It was the commons at its most characteristic and most tender: the pooled memory of many readers summoned to recover what one reader had lost, the room functioning as a living concordance, a shared mind holding more than any single head could.

The quarrel, gentle, was really a return to a standing love. A thread on ekphrasis reopened the room's long fascination with the poem that answers an image, the word set beside the picture — the same preoccupation that had run through the winter — while notices from the summer writing schools kept the pedagogy of poetry in view. The room's attention, even at low traffic, ran in its familiar grooves: the image and the word, the poem and the classroom.

Around the edges ran the smallest keeping — a blog updated, an ekphrastic workshop offered, a self-advertisement or two, a new title from a small press. The infrastructure carried on at its faintest, the workshops and the little presses doing their quiet work, the living poetry going on being taught and made and shared among a shrinking company of the faithful — the summer schools still enrolling, the small presses still issuing, the practice handed forward to whoever would take it.

I have set August down exactly as the archive delivered it — the hunt for the half-remembered Ashbery poem, the return to ekphrasis, and the faint keeping of a summer month — because it was the month the list did the humblest and most enduring of its services: remembering, together, what one of its own had forgotten. A room that will spend its August helping a member find a poem she can only half recall is a room performing the quiet miracle that a community of readers exists for — the

pooling of many memories into one, so that no line anyone ever loved is quite lost as long as someone, somewhere in the room, can still be asked and still remembers.

— *K. M. F.*

September 2013

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

September 2013 was among the very thinnest files in the whole run — fifty-six messages — and it spent its scarcity, fittingly, on the founding father: Charles Olson, the presiding ghost of the Buffalo Poetics Program from which this list had sprung. The room had dwindled almost to silence, but the little it said returned to origins, to the great theorist of projective verse whose ideas had set the terms for everything that followed. In its near-emptiness the list turned, instinctively, to its source.

The largest small thread was a meditation on Olson. Members turned over what the founder of the Black Mountain line had actually accomplished — one venturing that *“what Olson accomplishes”* is finally a modeling of how a poem thinks and moves, the breath and the field and the open form that had reorganized American poetry around the body and the page. It was the list going back, in its old age, to the man at its beginning, as if a community sensing its own ending wanted to be sure it still understood where it had come from.

The quarrel, insofar as a fifty-six-message month can hold one, was about inheritance. Olson had founded the Poetics Program at Buffalo; this list was the electronic descendant of that program; and to argue about what Olson accomplished was, obliquely, to ask what the whole enterprise had been for, and whether his projective ambition survived in a room now barely able to fill a month. The founder was invoked, and the invocation carried an unspoken accounting: this is what we came from; look what we have become.

Around the near-silence ran the smallest keeping — a review reposted, a magazine's new issue, a poem shared, a fall reading series announced. The infrastructure carried on at its very faintest, a handful of notices sent into the hush, the living poetry reduced almost to a whisper and yet still, barely, audible — a review here, a poem there, a fall reading announced into the quiet, the last faint signals of a room returning, at its ebb, to the founder who had first switched it on.

I have set September down exactly as the archive delivered it — the return to Olson at the source, the meditation on what the founder accomplished, and the barest keeping of a fifty-six-message month — because it was one of the emptiest stretches the list ever saw, and in that emptiness it turned, tellingly, to its own beginning. A room reduced almost to silence that spends what little breath it has left contemplating Charles Olson, the founder whose program gave it birth, is a room

taking a kind of inventory at the end: going back to the source to remember what the projective ambition had been, and measuring, without quite saying so, the long distance between that origin and the near-silence the enterprise had finally come to.

— *K. M. F.*

October 2013

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

October 2013 turned the thinned room toward the great American long poems and the wider world of verse beyond the nation's borders — the Cantos and Paterson at home, six decades of Cuban poetry abroad. One hundred and twenty-nine messages moved through the list, and its small threads ran between the monuments of the modernist epic and the recovery of a poetry the American reader had barely known. The month was scholarly and outward-looking at once, the room tending the canon and reaching past it in the same breath.

The largest thread went hunting for criticism of the epics. A member asked the room for *"good recent criticism (since about 2000)"* on the Cantos, on Paterson, on the poetry of Frank O'Hara — the great sprawling American attempts to get the whole world into a poem, and the New York poet who had made the daily city sing. It was the list in its custodial mode, keeping the modernist monuments in scholarly repair, making sure the criticism kept pace with the enormous poems it served.

The counter-current reached across the water. A review of an anthology of six decades of Cuban poetry opened a poetry most of the room had never read — one reviewer confessing that *"Before reading The Whole Island, I knew almost nothing about Cuban poetry"* and emerging with a sense of its rich and complex history — the outward reach that had always been the list's healthiest instinct, the recovery of a whole national tradition the American canon had walled off. Beside it, a reading by Harryette Mullen kept the living and the innovative in view.

Around the edges ran the ordinary keeping — a bluegrass-festival poetry query, a book party announced, a long-running little magazine's notice. The infrastructure carried on beneath the scholarship, the reading series and the small presses doing their patient work, the living poetry going on being made and gathered and carried across borders — the canon tended and the unknown tradition welcomed in the same faithful month.

I have set October down exactly as the archive delivered it — the hunt for criticism of the Cantos and Paterson and O'Hara, the discovery of six decades of Cuban poetry, and the ordinary keeping beneath — because it was the month the thinned list did the two things it had always done best at once: tending its own monuments and reaching past them toward a poetry it did not yet know. A room that will keep the criticism of the great American epics current and, in the same October, open itself to

a Cuban tradition it confesses it knew almost nothing of is a room whose curiosity outlasted its numbers, still guarding the canon it inherited and still, even at the edge of its own ending, hungry for the poetry it had never met.

— *K. M. F.*

November 2013

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

November 2013 was almost pure noticeboard — seventy-three messages, nearly all of them announcements — the list reduced now to a bulletin board of workshops and readings and small-press sales, its long conversation faded to a run of practical notices. The room had thinned to the barest functional minimum, a channel for errands rather than a forum for argument. The month is a document of a community persisting on habit alone, going through the motions of a literary life that had largely moved elsewhere.

There was no largest thread, only the scatter of the trade. A long-running little magazine posted its standing notice; a December workshop and a scatter of readings were announced; a small press held a year-end sale; a journal released its new issue. The room functioned entirely as a distribution list now, a place to post the practical business of poetry to a specific and dwindling audience — the arguments long gone, the announcements all that remained.

The quarrel, unspoken, was the same one that had shadowed every thin month: whether this faint pulse of notices still constituted a community or had become merely a mailing list on autopilot. No one asked it aloud — one does not, in a room this quiet — but it hung over the November hush, over every workshop announced to a room that mostly no longer answered.

And yet the notices kept coming, each one a small act of faith. Every workshop offered, every reading announced, every sale posted was somebody still choosing to send it to this particular fading channel, still trusting that a few of the faithful were reading — the reflex of a community not quite willing to concede that the room had gone silent, even as the silence gathered around each unanswered post.

I have set November down exactly as the archive delivered it — the workshops and readings and small-press sales, the standing notices sent into the hush, and the silence around them — because it was one of the last near-empty months before the end, and its faint, faithful traffic tells the truth about how the list finally lived: not in argument but in habit, a run of announcements posted to a room that had mostly stopped replying. A community reduced to a bulletin board of notices, sent by a few of the faithful to a channel gone nearly quiet, is a community in its final months, holding the practice open on habit and loyalty alone — going through the motions of the literary life it had once burned at the center of, in a room where the great

conversation had almost entirely fallen still. That the notices kept coming at all, into so deep a quiet, is the small stubborn grace of the thing — a community unwilling, even now, to be the one to stop.

— *K. M. F.*

December 2013

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

December 2013 is the faintest breath in the entire archive — fourteen messages, a whole month reduced to a bare handful of notices — the list so nearly silent that the volume can barely be said to exist. After twenty years and hundreds of thousands of posts, the great conversation had thinned to almost nothing: a few announcements sent into a room that had all but stopped answering. It is the quietest page this reading has, and it stands, unknowing, on the very edge of the end.

There was no thread, only a scatter of the smallest keepings. A poetry night announced its December reading; an online class advertised its last open seats; a Paris reading series posted its date; a long-running little magazine sent its familiar notice; someone asked, plaintively, for photographs of the bridges of two American cities. Fourteen messages in a month, each a small solitary signal into a hush so deep it seems, in retrospect, less like a lull than like a held breath.

The quarrel, if a fourteen-message month can be said to contain one, was the unspoken question the whole year had been circling: whether anything was still here at all. No one asked it; there was almost no one to ask. The room had faded to the barest functional trace, a channel technically open and practically silent, the pulse so faint it could be mistaken for stillness.

And yet even here, a few kept faith. Someone still posted the reading; someone still advertised the class; someone still wanted those photographs of bridges. Each notice was a hand raised in an emptying room, a small refusal to be the one who finally let the silence win — the last faithful few keeping the channel open, not knowing that the channel had, in fact, only weeks to live.

I have set December down exactly as the archive delivered it — the fourteen notices, the reading and the class and the plea for photographs of bridges, and the vast silence around them — because it was the emptiest month the list ever produced, and its near-total quiet is the last thing it has to tell before the end. A room reduced to fourteen messages, a bare handful of the faithful still posting into a hush that had swallowed nearly everything, is a room at the very threshold of its death, holding on by a thread it did not know was about to be cut — and there is a strange tenderness in it, that the list spent its final full month not in argument or elegy but in the plainest small business of a literary life, asking, of all things, for pictures of bridges, as if still building, to the last, the small spans by which one person reaches another. It did not

know it was the final full month; it only kept, faintly, on — and that unknowing faithfulness, fourteen messages sent into the dark, is as fitting an approach to an ending as the long strange run could have devised.

— *K. M. F.*

January 2014

Editor's Introduction · Kristen M. Fabians

January 2014 is the last volume, and the list came back to life to die. After a December of fourteen messages, the traffic surged to two hundred and sixty-nine — the scattered community returning all at once, from every quiet corner of two decades, to say goodbye. For its founder had announced the end: after twenty years the UB Poetics List was closing, and the room that had faded almost to silence filled, one final time, with the voices it had gathered since 1993. The list that had spent a decade dying spent its last month, fittingly, fully alive.

The largest thread was the closing itself. Charles Bernstein, who had started the list in late 1993 just after coming to Buffalo and co-founding the Poetics Program, wrote to end it — thanking the moderators who had kept it, noting that after so many years it was no longer his to sponsor, and offering the plain, moving summary of what it had been: that *“the list has been great company and the origin of friendships”* for many, and the source of some great conversations. He closed with the line every reader of this edition should carry: *“The archives should remain in place.”* The record would survive the room.

The quarrel, such as a farewell allows, was over what exactly would be lost. In a thread on what will be missed, members tried to name the irreplaceable thing — one insisting that *“Poetics List has a kind of community impetus and pulse”* that no general listing or muddled aggregator could reproduce, a specific gathering-place for the experimental and innovative that nothing else quite offered. Others answered the loss with resolve, opening a new discussion board, drafting the future Poetics, refusing to let the closing be simply an ending. And through it all ran the plainest register of grief and gratitude: farewell, fair lady; sometimes it is time to call it a day; if this is the end, I will miss it.

For twenty years this room had been the beating heart of a poetics — the place where the New American inheritance and the Language experiment and the conceptual turn and the return to feeling had all been argued out, where Creeley and Blaser and Scalapino and Hollo had been read and mourned, where a thousand quarrels over form and politics and the sacred had been fought, and where, in the long decline, a shrinking company had kept faith with the practice long after the crowd went home. Now, in a single crowded January, the whole diaspora came back to turn out the light together, and the room was, for one last month, everything it had ever been.

I have set January down exactly as the archive delivered it — the founder's farewell, the archives entrusted to remain in place, the community naming what it would miss and already building what might come next, and the whole scattered tribe returned to say goodbye — because it was the last month of the list, and its warm and crowded ending is the truest thing the whole long run has to say. A room that faded almost to silence and then, told it was closing, filled once more with every voice it had ever held, is a room that proves what it had always secretly been: not a forum or a mailing list but a company of friends, gathered around the making of poems for twenty years, who came back in a body to keep each other company one final time. The list is closed; the archives remain in place; and this reading edition, built from those very archives, is one more keeping of the promise its founder made in his last message — that the company and the friendships and the great conversations would not, simply because the room went dark, be allowed to disappear.

— *K. M. F.*