



Postcards from the Archive

A collaboration between
Rothermere American Institute
and Kelly Writers House

Edited by Heidi Williamson and Sylee Gore

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A collaboration between
Rothermere American Institute, Oxford
and Kelly Writers House, Philadelphia

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A Note from the Editors

On Postcards from the Archive

Reaching across the ocean is an adventure. As poets, the two of us often turned to PennSound's vast archive of sound and video recordings both for inspiration and to further our poetic education. Launched by the University of Pennsylvania's Center for Programs in Contemporary Writing in 2005 and based at Kelly Writers House, PennSound is committed to producing audio recordings and distributing audio archives. It is the world's largest such collection.

When the opportunity arose to curate a publication and event for the University of Oxford's Rothermere American Institute (RAI), we quickly thought of this resource. The RAI's mission includes engaging with American literature, enabling collaborative and interdisciplinary research projects, and developing a public engagement programme to promote the understanding of the US in the United Kingdom.

Working in tandem with Kelly Writers House Director Jessica Lowenthal and Modern Poetry Curriculum Specialist Laynie Browne, we approached poets affiliated with our institutions. An exciting constellation of poets quickly formed. From the University of Pennsylvania, we welcomed Ahmad Almallah, Herman Beavers, Julia Bloch, Sophia

DuRose, Mir Elias, Knar Gavin, Davy Knittle, and Alex Moon. From the University of Oxford, we worked with Erica McAlpine, Bernard O'Donoghue, Maya C. Popa, Yousif M. Qasmiyeh, Vidyan Ravinthiran, and Laura Theis.

Each poet was asked to explore the PennSound archives and choose a poem to which they wished to respond. The heard poem became a prompt. "You can agree with, object to, or rewrite that older view or stance," we suggested, and asked them to write a short poem distilling their response. This endeavour is titled *Postcards from the Archive* to reflect the exchange between each poet and their chosen work.

A dazzling array of conversations across time and space took place. The poets reenvisioned (or upended) poems by Amiri Baraka, C.S. Giscombe, Fanny Howe, Bhanu Kapil, Roy Kiyooka, Yusef Komunyakaa, Bernadette Mayer, Ange Mlinko, Harryette Mullen, Eileen Myles, Lisa Robertson, James Schuyler, Gertrude Stein, May Swenson, Elizabeth Willis, and W.B. Yeats.

We are honoured to share these missives from PennSound's archive with you—poetic postcards routed via Oxford back to Pennsylvania and beyond.

We are immensely grateful to the staff of the Rothermere American Institute and Kelly Writers House for their support. Our special thanks go to

Hannah Greiving, Katy Long, and Director Adam Smith at the RAI, and to Laynie Browne and Jessica Lowenthal at Kelly Writers House.

Sylee Gore and Heidi Williamson
Oxford, May 2023

The Postcards

Against Optics Ahmad Almallah

This is a bad poem like so many
Out there; i.e. it doesn't believe
In the tyranny of the word, and those
Bourgeois artists who want to make art
Wholesome and gobble up one pro
And against and then nouns nouns nouns

#OKUPPY every space and line—
Don't pass me the salt and sell us
The lie. We know you've confused
Performance for some revolutionary
Mission, and that your activism
Only exists for the privileged squares

That want to drink their lies to the lees...
Without the only thing that keeps
Them in check. Oh, not religious
Guilt. We've gotten rid of that, for
The sake of tonality! What will keep us
All in...is entropy, and aside from arms

And legs and other Arabic curse words
Nothing is going to keep us, mothers
And fuckers and our cute little chichi-es
in paren(theses)! i.e—once more!
Wake up you woke wankers! Capital-
ehem! Ach ja, excuse me: I'm choking on

my word-wursts! "Is there somebody here
to record this? Somebody should get this shit down."

time signatures Herman Beavers

i don't have a clue what Monk
would say if I asked him if humming
gives way to knowing. i've heard
him tangle with affliction's tight

fisted geometry; figured he knew weapons
were trained on him, fixed his mind on
the buzz of asymmetrical voicings of chords,
comprehended the blessing of errant notes.
you believe nothing happens fast enough,
so telling me your heart's replete
with bruises is not an argument. lord,
i envy the head you have for songs

that mimic speaking in tongues,
jangling with consternation, taut with
renovated slang. i haven't lived long
enough to form a pithy response to a single
query regarding something as dangerous as poetry.
if poems could take the form of dreams, i
would vouch for how i've landed in places i
still can't fathom: chillicothe, ohio, penumbra,

mississippi. one night, i found myself
in brazzaville, republic of congo & i
was drinking warm coca cola at a table with
w.h. auden and art blakey, cadging
change for the juke. i heard blakey's gravelly
voice saying, *i swear i didn't understand playing
drums till i unlearned everything i thought i knew
about time* & auden agreeing said, *yes, that's so, yes.*

On Form Julia Bloch

The grammar of
a four-feathered thing, or
the grammar of its
images, shot through.

I thought this was an
incomplete sentence but it
was a dump truck.

I kid you not, let's
puncture this ecosystem, go
to the museum or the library
or the café or the roundabout
of nature. Maybe

form is too close to wind.
Maybe it stops at the rim.
Maybe it wants a little
company, like lemons.

“Screamingly lonely.”

I am the comma
between the legs, I'm
small but I split the
sentence, Joan says
grammar is a form
of living. If
you don't notice
you die. Look here, just
torn plastic shaping the
garden. Look.

Sophia DuRose

leather weather between my her home and the his car whose license plate's isn't-alphabetical but could-be-alphabetical order says HOR5SHIT, "get in, bitches!" - a great dickering of who gets to sit in the front though a backstory can be should be big enough for us to practice not being afraid of getting drunk again, like the word thesaurus has always been might just be big enough to claim everything's migration into sameness, I see my friends' language bombs exploding until all noise is one big blurslur, HOR5SHIT backways spells THIS just enough to warn me I am will always be a bodysynonym right here. Itchy sort of waiting makes me feel fused to the this girl next to me, like she we need each other desperately because I know where we left and she knows where we're going and our liberties hold fingers of definite limits, the grid of our confident city is a temporary tattoo rained into soggy stuckness, vrooming through my stammer, we'll made it there soon she says into my ear, a wobbly grammar that means we've both arrived and have yet to, there is a car moving through space and I will not stop if it does, I'll show newton motion, a misnomer of law or whatever men call mirrors, the original clarity of my fear is separating, is the engine of definition, headlights of habit pull over, she's stopped because the car stops stopping but I'm still moving, never can't stop

Entwined Mir Elias

let me rest	in this forest of meat
<i>I want</i>	<i>to lie down in the place I am from</i>
the clamps on my back	when it rains indigo
to unfurl so	lightening forks pink
a monster's work	a migrant bird pecks
on a goldbluesday	on the main road
washing the streets	slipping in slick
collecting clots of blood	ankles sparkling
handling eyes with care	brown and degrading
is monstrous work	the daffodil aftermath
in that April snow	simply cleaning up
gore sizzling pink	eking out
a living	gore sizzling pink
simply cleaning up	in that April snow
the daffodil aftermath	is monstrous work
brown and degrading	handling eyes with care
ankles sparkling	collecting clots of blood
slipping in slick	washing the streets
on the main road	on a goldbluesday
a migrant bird pecks	a monster's work
lightening forks pink	to unfurl so
when it rains indigo	the clamps on my back
<i>I want to lie down</i>	<i>in the place I am from</i>
in this forest of meat	let me rest

The Univercity, Old Bleeding Edge Knar Gavin

Trailing the places of Cecil's poem, I find matches — graphic ones! — here in Philadelphia. Instance matched to general rule, the pattern thumbs on through. From the proposed stadium in Chinatown to FD-Our Meadows, the climate crisis is a shape that repeats. A pattern of putting afoot the many. Look to UC Townhomes in so-called "University City." To the single, high-powered dollar that bloomed into a hundred million — dollars, or lives displaced.

The Production of Knowledge is a frontiers' hen, algal bloom. *Edgy*, you know? Egg-like, like the sharpened side of a blade. Or like how *corral* comes from 'running' to meet semantic resolution as 'enclosure.' But let's not mince words, meats of our solidarity.

A freeway is nothing like what the crow dreamed or devoured. A boy on a bike stands in as a static image of suburbia. Nothing like utopia, but an actual, taken place. To instantiate a favouring of the underdog, there ought to be a miracle in this poem, dog of predicament and narrow-corridorred hope.

Neighborhood? Proximities change on you sooner or later.
Look up! You see, now, trees and dwellings, crouched, each, in the shadow of a 'dozer. A massive, lazy tooth. Sweeten its engine with sugar, the rot trail of which stretches and saws back and forth in time.

Why It Was Spring Sylee Gore

A sunless pause where jackhammers tear
apart the concrete box. I can see the satchels
weighing each step. Metaphors flounder.
Progress is loss. Crumpled wings
won't fold.

Cars, deliberating speed.
Leaves orange like autumn has mirrored
August sun. Revenger – redeemer: paint
my eyes remembering the crisis.

Watching the dismantling past.
How silver wire knots everything.

I can't shake off the light on things,
how it falls across schoolchildren and broom and
onto the leaves swept in a heap just as another child
rounds the corner.

The street's so clean. It could be any day.
It's getting fainter, harder, monochrome.

The fountain's just turned on.
It's the bristles, cinched by the rusting band.
It's the oak leaves clogging the bristles.
It's the crimson and navy threading the broom.

It's the shape of the broom.
Vanity of vanities, I can't tear my eyes wider.

I Came Here Because I Wanted a Home

Davy Knittle

the Army Corps came here to
plan for storm surge, there's a new
plan now. they're working on
a cereal bowl around the city
to fill when it rains with milk
and your apartments and parks.
Eileen sat here parched in April
tightened to a cherry tree, an old
person arrested under blooms.
no one asked Eileen what they wanted
but they said anyway East River Park
where the city was cutting down 991 trees
to ward off environmental harm
and here comes the Army Corps for
more of it. storm surge is romantic
tidal flooding is the realist
genre of basements. it's like
Eileen fell in love
with New York as a metonym
for their misfitness. this big home
their living room flooded parks plus
everyone else. New York, it's your
temporary permanence too
you've been hard surface
and decoupage, bassoon, and demo
site and land theft, and habitat for
cherry blossoms – a pink Eileen
used to crush on in their hand

Poets Can Be Horrid Erica McAlpine

Keats is a bolt of lightning
Splitting the Wordsworthian oak.
(Coleridge on a bench beside that oak.)
Shelley finds it frightening.

Through Whitman's unhinged door
Dickinson looks,
Sewing little books
For Bishop and for Moore.

Stevens is a speckled sparrow,
Eliot a demon.
Williams squeezes a greeny lemon
Beside the wheelbarrow.

Plath is wrath.
Lowell's in trouble.
Ashbery's iridescent bubble
Pops on Auden's path.

Merrill swans
In past Gunn eating cherries.
Hass begins picking blackberries.
Bernstein yawns.

Still there is beauty
Though the world is sick,
Says Graham to Glück.
Myles shouts, Hey Cutie.

Muldoon doesn't care
But Hill does, torrid.
Poets can be horrid,
Or light as air.

My Dear Martian Friend Alex Moon

Hello. I hope you are well. Recently, I learned about your planet's size, atmosphere, and weather. How difficult it seems! The professor talked about the lack of life, and I held back a laugh. Stay strong and hidden, my friend!

I have been thinking about you. Often, I remember our first meeting. You may recall how scared I first was, and nearly hit my head against the doorknob! I am still grateful for your patient countenance and kind demeanor. Alone in my room, the brisk wind scattered the car headlights outside my window. Do you remember that too?

I am much older now. I am taller, maybe even taller than you. Have you changed as well? Do tell me about your health. I am also in a different location. After you left, our family moved twice, and now I am in school, far away. Perhaps you might think that is strange, but this is practical in our world.

Some nights, I have trouble falling asleep. I miss talking to you infinitely under the covers. It is so easy to be hopeless!

I know it may be difficult, but please come visit me. My address is below. I know our postal customs can be confusing, so I have attached a photo of my house. Please send a message before you come, and I will fling open my window, as wide as it can go, to greet you.

At the Wimpy Bar on Cornmarket

Bernard O'Donoghue

He has nodded off, his big head drooping
towards his knees, the half-drunk half-bottle
of whiskey sloping out of the pocket
of his withered sports-coat. From the next table
a young man reaches across with a wink
and furtively extricates the bottle
from the pocket and passes it along
to his friend. You stopped what you were saying,
sprang to your feet and shouted:
'Put it back. It's his. Give it back to him.'
At once they did, the whole thing unknownst to him:
this intervention on behalf of the rights
he hadn't known whether he had or not.

Dawn Over Roissy Maya C. Popa

By August, the charm of Paris
had come to feel
like purposeful indifference.

The writers all had fevers
and no one would admit
they weren't sure the city fit

the bigger picture
of a world bridegroomed
to catastrophe

with its balconies dressed
in red and pink flowers.
No one dared to ask

the locals if they could feel it:
the planet reneging
on the human scheme.

An hour before dawn,
the taxi to the airport
slowed for a commuter train.

Then the two paths split
and it was possible to see
what becomes of time

if you're not careful,
and if you are.

Mother Talk Yousif M. Qasmiyeh

Thus spoke Kheizeran

The name as pronounced
by the father in
anticipation of what
might not become.

Not to break into the
sunflower seed at the first
instance
is the late archive.

Fever felt on the forehead
before the body

The murmurs for the
coming sound. Then
there was time to dwell in
time,

how it will be when
words forgo the body,

refugees suspicious of time.

Limb by limb, she lets
herself descend on to the
doorstep built by green
fingers
and borrowed water

To summon and be
summoned

*I was a guest myself where
she lies day and night*

For once to reap the
trace of a trace in life,
from right to left,
so we trace back

In time and
dialect

Since becoming a
refugee is a coming and
since the refugee is
history's certainty

My mother's,
a calling to scythe the
superfluous in fields so
as to grow its echo,

Whispers can also speak

What grows is history's
face

To Arise... Vidyan Ravinthiran

Strange word, WB! You've done a number
on Percy Bysshe and his lions
that [a]rise *after slumber*
—swapped Peterloo for a dreamy getaway

the *deep heart's core* what's that
for modern persons like you and me

there's only a vacancy hardly Mandeville's Silha
where where
crocodiles—forget lions and tigers—cross your path
it looks like someone
pulled a bush through the sand

where the tears of our progenitors
add up to a mountain
lake and no beast will harm an outsider
only the natives
whose dark skin still
—how's that for a molossus
Mister Bée Lóud Gláde—
surprises me from time to time in the mirror

the sea there seems to touch the clouds
and may one day envelop the land
—*and that is gret mervaylle*

so let's not pretend
you and I that wherever we end
up in this world
is a place we can stay

Poem from a Witch's Pocket Laura Theis

this is not how I remember it at all
my favourite line from your poem
that I carried with me for seven years
the one I chose to live by around
other people's rosemary bushes and cherry trees
the one I was even ready to steal
from you as a title for one of my own
I always thought you said *whenever a witch sees
something she likes she will put it in her pocket*
but listening to your reading I realise
it was a false memory all this time
your stanza talks instead about a witch
slipping the thing she desires into her glove
which is confusing to me
what kinds of gloves are we talking?
gardening gloves? what witch would need them?
or evening gloves? the long black velvet kind
that only movie stars wear? maybe flying gloves
for better grip on a broomstick?
and as for the thing that is not hers
where is the line between desire and fancy?
you will never know Willis
but I've taken this small thing
I wanted from you
made it mine
I like how it feels in my pocket
so dear against my ungloved hand

The DNA Molecule – A Coupling Heidi Williamson

See the undersurfaces of the spiral treads
of this helical staircase, its interiority hidden

and the spaces in between
through which variance seeps. This staircase hosts a woman:

she is descending and at the same
time she flows persistence along the banister. At the same

time ascending, she moves around herself.
The fluidity of her movements makes of her body a chain

for she is the staircase
rooted between foreground and sky. Call her

a protoplasmic framework an internal scaffolding
such beautiful terms for her self-hood

that twists and turns.

— *Italicised lines from May Swenson's 'The DNA Molecule'*

Authors

Ahmad Almallah is a poet from Palestine. He is the author of *Bitter English* (2019) and *Border Wisdom* (forthcoming in 2023). He is Artist in Residence in Creative Writing at the University of Pennsylvania.

Herman Beavers teaches courses in 20th and 21st Century African American Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Pennsylvania.

Julia Bloch's most recent collection is *The Sacramento of Desire* (Sidebrow Books). She lives and works in Philadelphia.

Sophia DuRose likes puns and pugs. She graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in 2021, and is now an MFA Candidate at Temple University, studying poetry.

Knar Gavin (they/any) is a poet, teacher, and environmental justice organizer in Philadelphia.

Sylee Gore is a poet, artist, and translator.

Davy Knittle (he/they) is Assistant Professor of English at the University of Delaware. He completed his PhD at the University of Pennsylvania in 2021.

Mir Elias is a poet, lawyer and immigrant from Bangladesh. She has won several poetry prizes and is working on her debut collection.

Erica McAlpine is Associate Professor of English at Oxford and Fellow of St Edmund Hall. Her books include *The Poet's Mistake* and *The Country Gambler*.

Alex Moon is an undergraduate at the University of Pennsylvania studying sociology. He is a member of the university's spoken-word group, the Excelano Project.

Bernard O'Donoghue was born in Co Cork in 1945 and has lived since 1962 in England where he taught medieval English at Wadham College, Oxford. His latest book of poems was *The Seasons of Cullen Church* (Faber 2016).

Maya C. Popa is the author of *Wound is the Origin of Wonder* (W.W. Norton and Picador) and *American Faith* (Sarabande Books). She is Poetry Reviews Editor of *Publishers Weekly* and holds a PhD from Goldsmiths, University of London, on the role of wonder in poetry. She teaches at NYU and elsewhere.

Yousif M. Qasmiyeh is the author of *Writing the Camp* (shortlisted for the Royal Society of Literature's Ondaatje Prize and a Poetry Book Society recommendation) and *Eating the Archive*, both published by Broken Sleep Books.

Vidyan Ravinthiran has published two collections of poetry. A book of his essays on verse is out now from Columbia UP, and a study of prose style, from OUP.

Laura Theis's work appears in *Poetry*, *Magma*, *Rattle*, *Msllexia*, etc. Accolades include the Society of Authors' Arthur Welton Award, Oxford Brookes Poetry Prize, Live Canon Collection Award and a Forward Prize nomination.

Heidi Williamson is an Advisory Fellow for the Royal Literary Fund and teaches for the Poetry School, Poetry Society and others. She has three collections with Bloodaxe.

Events Programme

The publication of this volume was accompanied by two public events hosted by the Rothermere American Institute at the University of Oxford.

In March 2023, a generative, interdisciplinary workshop titled “Writing Postcards to the Archive” was held at the RAI, in which participants listened and creatively responded to archival recordings of poems from PennSound.

In May 2023, a transatlantic reading and reception were held to celebrate the launch of this volume. Contributors read their work and discussed the inspiration behind the poems they had authored.

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