

# Nepantla

Issue 3



# Nepantla

A Journal Dedicated to Queer Poets of Color

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## Welcome to *Nepantla* Issue #3

Wow! I can't believe this is already the third year of *Nepantla's* existence. It feels like just the other day when I only knew a handful of queer poets of color and now my whole life is surrounded by your community. Thank you for making this journal possible! This year, we read thousands of poems to consider for publication in *Nepantla*. We have published twenty-seven poets below (three of them being posthumous publications). It's getting increasingly more difficult to publish all of the amazing poems we encounter during the submissions process. Please do not be discouraged from submitting to us multiple years! This decision, to publish posthumously, was made in a deep desire to carry the legacies of those who have helped shape our understandings of self and survival in the world. With *Nepantla* we want to honor those who have preceded us and honor those who are currently living. We are proud to be publishing the voices of June Jordan, Akilah Oliver, and Tatiana de la Tierra in Issue #3. This year's issue was made possible by a grant from the organization 'A Blade of Grass.'

Also, I want to acknowledge other queer of color journals that have formed in the recent years too. I believe that having a multitude of journals, and not a singular voice, for our community is extremely important. Oftentimes, people believe in a destructive competition which doesn't allow for their communities to flourish. I want these journals to flourish because they will provide more opportunities for queer of color voices to be heard (and from a different lens than my own). If something were ever to happen to *Nepantla*, I could rest knowing that my QPOC community still has a place for their poetry, so thank you to those journals for existing. Also, and pardon for the awkward transition, I want to acknowledge the recent massacre in Orlando. A few months ago, 49 members of our community were murdered by gun violence. *Nepantla* is not an apolitical journal. We stand firmly against all transphobia, homophobia, sexism, racism, islamophobia, ableism, etc. We stand against the state's decision to increase policing in queer communities after our murders. We do not support increased police presence in queer of color communities which continue to face hyper surveillance and disproportionate criminalization.

*Nepantla* Issue #3 is dedicated to everyone impacted by the tragedy in Orlando.

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**hyena (an absolution chant for the beloved community)**

ashe ashe ashe  
ashe how you say  
ashe ashe ashe  
ashe why you say  
ashe ashe ashe  
ashe which you  
say ashe ashe ashe  
ashe what you say  
who you say

ohkay ohkay ohkay  
ohkay how you do  
ohkay ohkay ohkay  
ohkay why you do  
ohkay ohkay ohkay  
ohkay which you do  
ohkay ohkay ohkay  
ohkay what you do  
who you do

ayo ayo ayo  
ayo why you want  
ayo ayo ayo ayo  
how you want  
ayo ayo ayo ayo  
which you want  
ayo ayo ayo ayo  
what you want  
who you want

kikikiki kikikiki  
kikikiki how you lie  
kikikiki kikikiki  
kikikiki which you lie  
kikikiki kikikiki  
kikikiki what you lie  
kikikiki kikikiki  
kikikiki why you lie  
who you lie

olu olu olu olu  
what you kill  
olu olu olu olu  
why you kill

olu olu olu olu  
which you kill  
olu olu olu olu  
how you kill  
who you kill

shalom shalom shalom  
shalom why you hide  
shalom shalom shalom  
shalom how you hide  
shalom shalom shalom  
shalom which you hide  
shalom shalom shalom  
shalom what you hide  
who you hide

selah selah selah selah  
what you let down  
selah selah selah selah  
which you let down  
selah selah selah selah  
why you let down  
selah selah selah selah  
how you let down who  
you let down

ye ye ye yemanya  
why you trouble  
ye ye ye yemanya  
how you trouble  
ye ye ye yemanya  
what you trouble  
ye ye ye yemanya  
which you trouble  
who you trouble

wadi wadi wadi  
wadi which you love  
wadi wadi wadi  
wadi how you love  
wadi wadi wadi  
wadi why you love

wadi wadi wadi  
wadi what you love  
who you love

**Self Portrait**

In the white cream  
of my lie,

I swallow warm pennies,

listen to the church bells  
in the distance—

So much depends  
upon insertion.

Just look at all this  
face hunger!

Even my peaches  
are obscene.

Don't you hear my name  
dissolve like the body

of Christ?

*Siempre salgo  
con el Jesús en la boca.*

Always tearing  
at the hollyhocks,

always so slick  
with summer.

Under the corpulent  
clouds,

I feed the birds  
of my failures,

so tenderly!

My tongue grows plump  
as a greedy slug.

Again and again,

an umbrella  
opens inside me.

Orifice of heaven—  
the twilight comes

like a soiled miracle,

bright as my own  
awful pinkness,

and how like a fever  
it dazzles.

**DataLounge - Gay Celebrity Gossip, Gay Politics, Gay News and Pointless Bitchery since 1995.**

Meredith is not attractive in the slightest. Why does she look like that? She would scare small children.

All the concepts he holds so dearly in his little albino head are nothing but sand castles...completely wiped out when the tide (or logic) rolls in.

This person makes Rachel Dolezal look sane and reasonable by comparison. Also, if you have albinism you are not, by definition, a person of color. If this tedious pigment-less biological male can insist he's a black woman and expect the world to accept that...I don't even know what to say.

I don't understand how this Meredith Trans chick gets all these opportunities to have articles published when (s)he was a stalker / harasser / sociopath?!?!

Albino Black Trans privilege

Why are we discussing trannies here? This is a gay board and trannies are not one of us. I sympathize with injustice, but I object to having them made a topic of soulful blabber.

I have a tranny friend and he's not the least bit whiney about losing his vagina. He had his corrective surgery and became one of the boys. The reverse story for guys becoming girls never seems to be a happy one.

What did this one do with its genitalia?

What is wrong with its appearance? Is it some kind of albino?

Ew, what is it! Kill it! KILL IT!

Do women who become men ever behave this badly? I never seem to hear about it.

This Talusan sounds like a real little shit. And, regardless of whatever her gender identity might be, she is a biological male behaving in a threatening way to a woman.

Oh c'mon, the poor deluded dear is an albino Filipina tranny, and not easy on the eyes either. Do you really doubt she's had a hard life? Focus your hate on the smug Philly 3 Gay-Bashers rather than this one-tranny army for social justice.

She's fugly, wonder if she's ever had sex.

Filipino lady boys, trannies, etc are always 100% unhinged.

She's acting like a dude trying to force his way onto everyone else.

as a man who prefers transgirls, got something to say, that transgirl is one ugly bitch but if she got a got ass and mouth than why not. Not that I would be in a relationship with an ugly transgirl like that but get all the pleasure out of it and move on to the next pretty transgirl to be with.

MTF trannies tend to be more looney than a Bugs Bunny cartoon, but the Asians bring things to a whole other level. Leaving aside the exhibitionism, hysteric, delusional, self-absorbed and the host of other tendencies trannies often bring to the table, the Filipino trannies like their women seem to be universally known for exploitation of men.

Forget pronouns -- Meredith is so sensitive she might claim a split infinitive as violence against trans women of color.

This Meredith creature must really hate itself. Not only is it a tranny, but also does the skin whitening creams so popular with Asian women and Michael Jackson.

Its obvious that this bucket of Tranny Crazy is looking for pain EVERYWHERE. He finds drama and a reason to play the victim in all situations. Its all about ME ME ME and he will twist any situation to a reason to scream oppression. He is an absolute nightmare and a perfect example of why people are quick to dismiss the Transgender community.

maybe THAT'S why people transition...so they can be a victim.

This guy is fucking delusional. Why he thinks he could possibly pass as a woman is beyond me. His skin bleaching just adds to the hilarity.

Does Meredith still have her cock?

I hope she didn't cut it off. Or, split it down the middle into a makeshift vagina.

One of the few ways MTFs can support themselves after 40 is from generous cockhungry tranny chasers.

I would guess Meredith's story will end very unhappily, especially since she cannot stay on at Cornell forever.

What is Meredith going to do with her life when she finally gets her Ph.D.? It's hard to imagine what kind of universities or corporations would put up with her constant drama and nonsense. No wonder she's dragging her heels at getting the hell out of Ithaca.

In a few years, Meredith will have been kicked out of Cornell for not graduating, and she will be doing performance art pieces in Williamsburg which will involve her dumping chocolate sauce over her head and screaming, "TRANSPHOBIA! PATRIARCHY! HATE!"

**AT THE END OF THE SWORD**

my grandmother's neck, my  
botany & altars, my kink, my  
africanness, my father's hair, my  
gospel, my wilderness & name, my  
herbs, my sage & tea, my spice, my  
good memory, my resistance, my  
codes & distrust, my loose jaw, my  
grandmother's grandmother's tongue, my  
grandfather's grandfather's burros, my  
land, my flesh hands, my spirits, my  
poems, my place, my ceremonies, my  
balance, my reason, my kin, my kin, my sins.

**from *Food***

Keep the dry and wet ingredients in separate bowls before mixing.

You do the egg/cream thing, and I'll take care of the salt/flower/sugar situation.

Reader, do you hear the moaning plane overhead? Feel the beating noon heat on yr t-zone?  
See the sizzle of foam on the salt water? Poems light up corridors of the mind, like food. If I owe  
poetry to cooking, this is an inheritance of that lineage

I grew up on a food desert, a speck of dust on the map of the United States—an Indian  
reservation east of San Diego in a valley surrounded by mountains that slice thru the clouds like  
a loaf, where the average age of death is 40.7 years old. I am 32. I live in the busiest city in  
America. I am about to eat an orange.

Every feed owes itself to death. Poetry is feed  
to the horses  
within me.

**scents of my mother**

*for nana, hu guaiya hao*

drugstore lotion

cheap imported cigarettes

grief

flores m<sup>1</sup>

a pot of white rice

anger

instant coffee

bleach

a 6-pack of bud, "the premier beer of the mariana islands since 1949"

boxed curry sauce mix

lipstick, in deep red

yellowed vinegar pickled mango love

boonie<sup>2</sup> peppers

trash burning out back

anxiety

eyeliner shavings

fuetsan yan mamuti<sup>3</sup>

five maternity wards

blood-milk

typhoon season

the space between the equator and the tropic of cancer

---

1 Chamoru for plumeria.

2 U.S. English slang for boondocks, the sticks, or the middle of nowhere. Since the WWII militarization of the Mariana Islands by the United States, the word boonie has been ironically adopted by Chamoru peoples to describe our island jungles. As we have a strong, genealogical sense of place, and historical and contemporary relationships with our neighboring Indigenous Pacific Islander peoples, Chamorus don't literally believe that our lands are "the middle of nowhere"—an otherwise deeply racist, colonial worldview that European and U.S. American imperial powers expressed about Oceania and her islands.

3 Chamoru for strength and pained muscles.

**Poem about Police Violence**

Tell me something  
what you think would happen if  
everytime they kill a black boy  
then we kill a cop  
everytime they kill a black man  
then we kill a cop

you think the accident rate would lower subsequently?  
sometimes the feeling like amaze me baby  
comes back to my mouth and I am quiet  
like Olympian pools from the running  
mountainous snows under the sun

sometimes thinking about the 12th House of the Cosmos  
or the way your ear ensnares the tip  
of my tongue or signs that I have never seen  
like DANGER WOMEN WORKING

I lose consciousness of ugly bestial rapid  
and repetitive affront as when they tell me  
18 cops in order to subdue one man  
18 strangled him to death in the ensuing scuffle  
(don't you idolize the diction of the powerful: *subdue*  
and *scuffle* my oh my) and that the murder  
that the killing of Arthur Miller on a Brooklyn  
street was just a "justifiable accident" again  
(Again)

People been having accidents all over the globe  
so long like that I reckon that the only  
suitable insurance is a gun  
I'm saying war is not to understand or rerun  
war is to be fought and won

sometimes the feeling like amaze me baby  
blots it out/the bestial but  
not too often tell me something  
what you think would happen if  
everytime they kill a black boy  
then we kill a cop  
everytime they kill a black man  
then we kill a cop

you think the accident rate would lower subsequently

**PUERTO ESCONDIDO**

*Península de Paraguaná, Falcón, Venezuela*

I remember home with the car speeding off in the night,  
my mother held to the gun. This is how life will continue

to happen: the mall held up, the cinema doors slam, four men  
dressed as policemen come in with guns, the first-floor bank

floods with bullets. When it ends, people will go about their day:  
another day, another shooting. At a certain party someone

will unabashedly defend communism, argue to me the benefits  
of “what shouldn’t be called a dictatorship” while they brush off

their Polo and sip their Bombay Gin cocktail. I like to think  
that when I find something beautiful, I will no longer be alone.

But what I found is what I’ll never return to—far enough  
to reach the lighthouse at the north, the family of fishermen,

the rusting ship tipping out of the sea. I had once found everything.

untitled (#4)

The lover writes a poem about the night we met. How we turned abrupt corners through the West Village under a full moon obscured, finally, by the onset of a blizzard. A week goes by and she removes all the line breaks. I say, give me a good prose block any day. The rows of beet and radish seeds I put down in the garden this afternoon settle in like small brown vertebrae hugging the cold earth. I want to feel possible in all of the intimacies: radical / queer / sisterhood / State / room. *The way the phone rings in a foreign country*. Tell me what block is not a good prose block? The heart, its own many-roomed country.

**Winter, 8 pm**

That night, my town set the world record  
for the most snow angels made simultaneously in one place.  
I watched them from my window, the children,  
who were loud with joy as they unfurled their wings.

Afterwards, I had dinner with my mother, and she  
mentioned that with my studies almost finished  
I should start thinking about marriage. Unsure  
of how long I could keep my secret, I told her the truth:

I was gay. She grew quiet.  
We finished dinner, and after I cleaned the dishes,  
she took me to the living room where our ancestral altar was. She  
gave me matches and I lit the candles. Then she motioned

for me to kneel in front of the altar. "Pray to them," she ordered,  
and with my hands clasped together, I stared at a picture  
of my great-grandparents. "For how long?" I asked, and she said until  
they forgave me.

*Forgive me for what?* I wanted to shout, but couldn't  
because I was my mother's son.

She turned off the lights and sat on the couch. I felt  
the candles' brutal heat on my face. Even when I closed

my eyes, I could see the orange flame and my great-grandparents' portrait  
burning within it. Whenever I fell asleep, my mother  
came from behind and shook me awake and commanded me  
to keep going. This is how I remember her, constantly

waking me, reminding me that my life was a never ending prayer, asking for  
forgiveness.

Outside, thousands of snow angels  
were melting.

**Last Sunrise Over Mobile**

Last sunrise over Mobile  
a wildly dangerous pink  
splitting open the swamp lands.

Driving along the causeway,  
which had been called The White Way,  
—named after George C. Wallace  
an old Alabama Governor—  
no longer means passing through Jim Crow

but through an ocean of stares  
by older white people at the seafood restaurant  
exchanging silent whispers  
at your mixed up family.

“Are you from here, Sir?” she asks,  
the waitress to my father.  
She does not ask my mother.

In New Orleans, a young man  
spits right at my mother’s feet.  
I have never seen father so sad  
and so angry. My mother keeps on  
Walking. Elegant and black she is,

Not letting history’s fools  
Ruin her shine. She had been down here before and seen  
a world we can’t truly know.  
Last sunset in Mobile, orange

skies eat the past, swamps open again.

**A Black Woman's Burden**

“Sisters there is a hole in my heart that is bearing your shapes  
over and over as I read only the headlines of this morning’s  
newspaper.” - Audre Lorde

Sisters there are bruises on my body  
And bullets in my brain  
And knives in my back  
And burn marks  
All over  
In the shapes of our names  
Chosen and  
Dead  
As I read only the headlines  
Of forgotten news articles  
For us forgotten girls.

One day we will all live past our girlhood.  
One day they will give us our flowers before we are dead.

**wander**

crawling along in this life as the dog bunny hops through.  
here again in a field at the end of the world.  
my singing has dulled in my own ears,  
my useless fortitudes threaten blood with dust.

then I break into a run. I'm running to no where, for no one  
in particular. I am running and the hairs on my arms stand up,  
stand up where they are, like antennae on a queen about to leave the hive  
with her swarm, and follow the sun to a new life.

dear trees, please sculpt the byway; dear breeze, whisper a map;  
dear magnetic field, make of me a sail in the solar wind,  
that I may unwind into the light of my own throat's longing.

oh praise the one that enters me  
I am the child of Audre's coal.  
dissipating in her mouth.  
turning on the axis of her fist.  
I arise perpendicular to the plane of this incident –

so plasma so melt  
oh so metal so river  
so gristle so petal  
oh so alive

## A Future Yesterday

we was dancing, like we could let all the breeze out our lungs,  
sounded like a church, like the one down the road with no streetlights  
behind the second lot, then abandoned.

the trees didn't scare us no more, weren't no more blocks to burn effigy.  
just all of us taking turns smiling back and forth,  
a concert, a gathering across a main drag.

you can smell the grass & gasoline & frying of peppers,  
& grease. it didn't matter when you got there  
just as long as you didn't miss the band, in all white.

a host of beat-box soul, there the saxophone sweetened  
the bend in the back of our knees. we knew that dust  
wasn't gonna rise without our shuffle atop it.

the earth finally swallowed all the graves into itself  
& sprouted wings & jean shorts, & neon body suits,  
riding around on technicolor bicycles.

you couldn't see nothing but the crackling  
of the present. couldn't hear nothing  
but the night finally time un-afraid of its shadow,

the moon stopped boiling blood,  
remembered how we always been its creatures  
& when the second sun rose we sang to her too.

told her           *thank you for the land again,*  
all our blood been the keepers.  
this rapture was a home-going back

to ourselves. it didn't matter when you got there,  
as long as you didn't miss, the generations of abandon lots,  
sprouting streetlight revivals at the end of the world.

even the sea stayed quiet there,  
made way for our bones to again quake & holler  
— all this, a joy

## ODE TO UNSAVORY LESBIANS

i love an ugly lesbian  
one who walks with a limp  
talks with a lisp  
leaves her dentures out overnight by the bathroom sink  
wears polyester pants and men's cologne, the cheap kind  
has a beard so long she steps on it  
sprouts warts on her toes, all twelve of them  
carries a spittoon in her breast pocket  
chortles at church people

i dream of a lesbian who's always broke  
she doesn't own a car, walks  
streets barefoot, near and far  
washes all her clothes by hand  
steals from wal-mart  
scams business-suited man  
lights matches on her wooden leg  
barbeques freshly plucked birds on her shopping cart  
seasons them with salt, that's all  
licks her fingers in the moonlight

i crave a lesbian who's fat and fleshy  
so big she can't fit through the door at starbucks  
and they set up an outdoor café just for her  
so fat she wears bangles on her fingers  
her belly is a boom box  
her stretch marks are hieroglyphic etchings  
she's so heavy, tectonic plates shift beneath her feet  
so huge, lake erie is her bathtub

i lust after an unsavory lesbian  
she blows away my lackluster day  
leads me in a lambada, lights  
lantern between my legs  
lays my head down on lace pillows  
humps me like a lamppost  
lacerates me with leather lust  
lacquers my body with blue latex paint  
logs the forest for prime wood  
builds me lakeside throne

sets me there and worships me  
-goddess in blue-  
lines my path with ladyslippers  
ravishes me with sex words  
pets me like little lamb

wins me by landslide

**from Last Four Months**

yo pienso piense  
when i started my instagram  
i shared my successes  
only  
didnt think i could  
grab help in kind  
the  
kind i needed  
i still dont  
my body only  
knows  
as much as  
its  
allergic  
to  
thats squat

an  
apparition  
awaits  
you

i wish i never made any  
white friends so many  
have demanded a life story  
but i only have those  
of the dead  
i dont trust  
cis folks  
people  
cars men  
traffic gas money  
id burn them all too  
im not always that angry  
or beaten down  
god  
dear diary  
im on the bus  
where are you  
why are you  
so sad

i will murder every  
last one of you

tylenol inherent  
i intro  
spect my life  
im gone  
im done and gone gone and done

darkness  
is construct  
melanated  
warfare

convincible  
of  
separate  
unequal

deatheat  
the hands  
of the  
unprotected

silence is death  
140 characters vs a colonic  
she died on that  
cross too heavy

touch me touch me  
dont be sweet  
-lady gaga

my boyfriend  
is still on grindr  
=  
fuck that

back to  
i give up  
dont touch what you cant accord

hate isnt everything

its currency

**I Am Only An Ocean Because I Resemble A Vast Regret**

I mean to say I look like no one and this  
is considered my best feature  
once a man took my Abuelo's island  
and that is how my mother was born  
once my grandmother met my grandfather  
because they both fled to the same place  
more than once a wound was inflicted  
and a hand begged the wound to sing  
and the wound wept out its one crimson eye  
until there was enough history to make me  
I mean to say without trauma I would not exist  
if there is no invasion I might just be lonely

**OUTSIDE MY APARTMENT DEALING WITH A ROACH HOLE WHEN IT IS TOO  
HOT TO EVEN BE OUTSIDE TO BEGIN WITH**

ain't it wicked / like a boulder of hands / nails bitter at the bite & yellow / coming for  
you / their black shells / in flood light / on concrete body / & they scatter like / husband  
or / father / hunched cold & / cockless / i fear they have forgotten what i am capable of  
/ a body before fire as comfort / match rotten / stock of impeccable fly-borne bushes //

oh i dare / far too often / to burn / my mother / she a root / thinning above ground /  
deserves no less than the wood / in his pyre / body too broken / (knees, hip, back) too  
bent to be at the mercy of a man / one who follows her to lunch / in sunglasses & hat /  
as he is aware / i do not have to say why he hides himself //

there are five of them / crawling out of the manhole cover / a crack in the metal /  
dawned into darkness & back into the same / i stand over them with raid & spray /  
*scurryscurryscurry* / a way of proving to the world i am like him / & they will see me as  
such / yet i am more than holes / washed-up in white foam / cruel with no end / &  
what is cruelty / if not our finer genetic trait //

**suicide note #1**

in this dream, my father is dead.  
i pour alcohol down your spine—  
slender canal—and your house flowers  
with music. this is some kind of funeral.  
you swat your eyelashes  
when you want a kiss. my lips are fake.  
i take them off, garnish the edge  
of my wine glass. the bartender's tattoo  
is my home address. i visit his mouth  
at the end of the dream. he asks  
about sadness. i don't move.  
i don't want to move. my father watches  
me through the bartender's  
muted eyes, says *stay safe*. i can't. i'm black.  
i stammer outside, lipless, a siren  
searching for destruction.  
*this is some disease*, you say,  
enter me slowly. everybody  
is watching, raises their wine  
to my father's death. that gets you off.  
*the disease*, i whisper in your ear,  
*is osteoarthritis*. it takes you from the inside.  
you feel its tail roping my dna, crossing out  
cartilage. a need for home. that keeps you  
afloat. i lean back into you the way  
the city storms. i'm from here.  
*this is where i was born*,  
point to your pelvis. you rise.  
my father stays put when the water  
beads down his new home. lovely coffin.  
when my tongue confesses  
to the slaughter of black boys,  
you speak your condolences.  
my father's grave is damp from the rain  
and this city ain't worth the gray sky  
it paints. i blame my gay, its hunger for men.  
the body's dagger. my first mind says  
*jump. drown*. give your bone  
before it steals away inside  
the tyrant's belly. you push me in.  
i thank you.

**Things I Have Been**

called:	black	African American
non-hispanic	Black	(American)
Chief.	Yes, madam.	Are you a
man?	Are you a	Boy
or a girl?	Brother.	Son.
Nigger.	Bitchhhhh	Are you
transitioning?	Sir.	I just want to know
what to call	You.	Freak.
Peculiar.	Bruh.	Don't be
a sissy.	Faggot.	You my
Nigga.	You my	Child.
You my	Brother.	Baby.
Smart.	Love bug.	With your
Funny ass.	Faggot.	You a
writing	Motherfucker.	Nigger.
Friend.	Did you hear	That,
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	Nigger?

**Watching Paul Mooney Hum Amazing Grace Post-9/11 While Eating Hot Wings From Crown Fried**

don't try this at home (by yourself). we're at war & i'm American (again), sleeping at 8 like shit. new, visibly cankered. coy. mythologies locked in before morning coffee (there's an order to this).

a working list of what makes my teeth white? dick. chicken. everything but solitude (it's unbearable—*twelve niggas going to flight school* bad). & repercussion is so certain (but you knew that). peep the joke hiding: i leave him a blues & he leaves me for dead. who knows about being (pathetic yet) functional. you got shoes, i got shoes so i suppose we should be intimate. maybe just moan (at our echoes). it's mostly productive with a punchline involved. (i haven't smirked in weeks.)

**Tyler, Texas**

2 out of towners  
    in the sharp grasses  
    white churches  
not a hair feels out of place  
    They say the next county over  
        from Smith is wet  
You go around Ben Wheeler  
Through dumb-fuck White House  
Back over Black Beauty Ravine  
    Drink till mothers due  
    back at the home (for memory care)  
for a random viewing of Eastside-Westside, 1949  
    (Where Stanwyck and Ava Gardner step into the same picture)  
Finally alone together  
more arrowhead hunting  
We are fuses left scorched under lavender skies  
    where Karen Carpenter's longest note  
    is broken in half. Near dark I shot what I thought  
    was a long stick  
and didn't check back for two days  
    It was a water moccasin  
    head all blown off  
and caved in  
    slick as snot

**PAISAHOOD**

Is this what it means to be a Paisa  
Hearing Mariachi tune instruments  
to play out my eleventh hour  
Too tired from migrant labor  
to ask the sun why this is so  
Hoping Ama y Apa are all right  
Counting almond rows and out-singing the tractor  
to pass the time.

Is this what it means to be a Paisa  
To be visited by the corn-sent saint  
jugs full of water hanging from both hands  
plaid shirt unbuttoned just enough  
tip of a serpentine tattoo visible  
me wanting nothing more than to follow it  
to canonization

to Paisahood.

**Mihret**

No offense to God, but every thing my mother prayed I wouldn't be, I became.  
Every place she prayed I wouldn't go, I went. I walked so long I found Mercy.  
I draped her thighs over my shoulders & drank. She's abundant  
& I'm finally alive. Had I been what I was supposed to be I'd be my mother's  
safehouse. I'd be her mother land. I wouldn't wander, I would remain.  
Were I from whence I ought to be from I'd call this something else but  
I belong to the country I was born in. Everything I've done has been in Love's name  
& in Love's name I've done these sins: I've clenched my fist. I've run.  
I've bitten my tongue dead raw. Mihret covers my chest while I hum & swallow blood.  
She keeps me warm. Doesn't ask for me to stay.

**AstroPhysicist**

a        *Hijoooooooo*  
          *de la gran*  
          *chingada!*

almost trembles the locked door out of its hinges.  
Inside there's a fuzzy 18 inch television,  
y a welted indio who failed his remedial English exams.

A indio who couldn't translate  
the blank papeles of belligerent civilization  
that enclosed his bastardized name.

A indio who sleeps on dictionaries,  
believing that the contact will help memorize  
every entry con his accent intact.

A indio whose parents don't know  
how to read, but they associate red zeros  
con a reluctance to try, a resistance

to integrate into the exploited gates  
of irate achievement that apprehend jaded  
wrists y clenched fists

that used to roam  
through dirt roads, ramshackle cathedrals  
mud brick plazas, y

jungles concealing  
monumental stones con  
the vernacular of the universe.

*Tonight on NOVA, asteroid belts*  
          *and*  
*segregated paradises.*

**on the seventh day**

I PUT HER TOGETHER from  
self-reference. eyes on the mirror.  
hands, on the keyboard. she will have  
this - skin, like mine. freckles, like mine.  
fat, like mine. she is half-spun from my  
dreams; i sleep just for her, orchestrate  
a crown of thorn / placed upon her mantle.  
her name means 'to tear', but in passing  
i call her Woman King, the Eve who  
sprung from the pulling of my ribcage.

(when she is grown, i will lay my bone  
down and let her bloom).

**We Have Come to the End of the Oyster Months**

All that time, I was briny and bivalve  
for you. Through winter I traded the sea  
  
for your mouth, roiled in your landlocked hands, fed  
  
you raw, left my armor glistening, tossed  
off in gutters or turned into the earth  
  
of your garden. I made every shallow  
  
place a bed for you to gather my pale  
iridescence, my fine ridges, body  
  
curved as a comma or teardrop, filling  
  
your whole palm. I gave you my delicate,  
brackish bones. You dredged me rough from the reef,  
  
alive, morsel of flesh plump with clear blood,  
  
crisp as snow on your tongue. All those brief, dark  
days, I promised cucumber, melon, bright  
  
liquid summer, never felt the heavy  
  
gloves you wore to dull my scrape, to soften  
my sharp frame, never troubled when you slipped  
  
that short, stout blade against my hinge, the twist,  
  
the pop, the knife sliding up to sever  
the muscle that held me closed, never cared  
  
when too much force would strip a red sliver  
  
from your connoisseur's finger, never guessed  
your disgust when you first tasted my murk,  
  
when the bay could not stay cold and I turned

lush, exuberant, protandric, clouding  
the water, spawning millions of others

I might be. How you contracted then, shut

tight, left me to spoil in this heat, this meat  
still rich and mineral, swimming in juice

that once summoned tides, that once summoned you.

## **Ocean Vuong Interview with Christopher Soto**

This year Copper Canyon Press released, to widespread critical acclaim, Ocean Vuong's first full length poetry collection, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*. Vuong's collection is an astoundingly graceful examination of queerness, language, love, (resistance to) assimilation, the war in Vietnam, mourning, and discovering what it means to be Vietnamese-American.

Sitting with Ocean over a friendly dinner, I sprung out the question, "Hey, I'm starting to edit *Nepantla* Issue #3. Can we do an interview together?" He said yes. Thus, this interview happened on the impromptu on a walk back to Ocean's house, after dinner. The recording is interrupted by cars on the street, running into Peter (Ocean's partner) on the sidewalk, a neighbor who doesn't want us on the stoop. This interview feels like home--two friends sharing life and chatting about the craft we love.

**Can you tell me a bit about your use of repetition within your new book (*Night Sky with Exit Wounds*)? I've heard our mentor, Yusef Komunyakaa, refer to repetition as a rallying cry. I was wondering how you relate to repetition?**

I'm interested in how a word changes. A lot of times we are told that words have definite meanings, an economy that gets exhausted in a certain space. I was hoping to explore that perspective and see how a word can garner different contexts and pressures based on what surrounds it. For example, in one of my poems I say "good or bad" twice. The first mention is very comical, the second mention is much more serious. I've learned that language is very malleable and there is a limitless ability to charge it, depending on what you do in the space between repetitions.

**I'm also interested in the use of American pop culture within your work. You reference John F. Kennedy, Whitney Houston, and other pop figures. Can we talk about your relationship to Americana?**

I guess, this is an attempt to gather all of the paraphernalia that is vital to me so that it's not just paraphernalia. I'm trying to find meaning in these Americana signals and beings that exist. I was very interested in JFK because he is an American president who was one of the main orchestrators of the war in Vietnam, the war that killed up to 4 million Vietnamese people. What happens when a man like that is not even safe? So I wanted to speak through the person who was closest to JFK, which was his wife, Jacqueline Kennedy.

It was a challenge for me to step into the voice of a white women but I realized that there was a common ground for us and that common ground was the destruction of the bodies that we loved. And through violence I saw a moment where, ironically, a woman of her status was feeling the same as someone who comes from the lineage of a Vietnamese peasant. I was interested in how far I could stretch pop culture into the personal ruptures that happen. Whitney Houston is another example. She died a very human death, of addiction and in that poem where she is mentioned, I am thinking about the overdose of friends that I grew up with. When I use pop culture it is usually an attempt to find common ground. Andy Warhol uses pop culture similarly. He was obsessed with Coca-Cola. He said a king in Saudi Arabia would pay the same price for a Coca-Cola as a regular person on the street and it was this moment of a common bridge across all classes.

**I'm wondering about the various languages that you have in your poems--a high lyric, a colloquial English/Vietnamese. I'm wondering about how you write into these different languages and dialects?**

It took a while for me to see all registers of language as tools for creative work, particularly something worthy of the respect to be used in the craft of poetry. Often times we speak of poetry as elevated language. And I found myself struggling to obtain that standardization of language because I didn't come from the class where that elevated language was spoken. But when I was reading Ashbery it was so liberating. There is this poem where he just starts off by saying, "Hey you!" And CD Wright also, she has such a democratic view of language. That liberated me to look at language, and all sonic and vocal moments--such as words like "yikes"--as materials. But I had to work through the high lyric to get there, in the same way that Duchamp, Pollock, Picasso, and others have had to work through so much craft in order to use the most common tools. It made me aware of where the language pressures are in relation to other registers.

**Last craft question, let's talk about how you organized the book. What's your editing process like?**

I never expected to have a book this early. Jen Bervin, at Poets House, made us put a book together and that helped propel this book. At first, I had to think about the thematic / chronological moments or weave all of these moments together. I think Eduardo C. Corral weaved a lot of his book, *Slow Lightning*. I wanted a designated space for my family's story, in an unbroken narrative, because a lot of times the Vietnamese immigrant story is told by white veterans. I think I had to sacrifice a lot of innovative moments that I wanted to do, in order to tell the story linearly in the first section.

In the second section, I focused more on America, queer bodies, my personal experience--an American body navigating through personal violence, and the violence that my friends have felt. The last section was an interesting moment for me because that is where I decided to weave the thematic and the temporal nature of the poems. I think if the editorial process was longer that my book might have looked very different.

**What would you consider success to be from this first book?**

I experienced success during my book launch. For me, it's when a writer gets to be in a room where the people he cares about and loves are in the same space listening to what he has to say, if even briefly. For me that is success, to be able to speak with one another with our best intentions. I always see that as the end goal, to reach humans. Success is when the world becomes a vehicle for the work.

## **Brenda Shaughnessy Interview with Christopher Soto**

Brenda Shaughnessy is the author of four books of poetry. Her most recent collection *So Much Synth* was released in 2016 from Copper Canyon Press. Shaughnessy and I first met at NYU, where I studied under her in a poetry workshop course.

In this interview we discuss music, writer's block, safe spaces in queer communities, motherhood, and more. It is a pleasure to be speaking with her again for *Nepantla*.

**Hello my mentor, thank you for taking the time to do this interview. I'd love to talk about your most recent collection *So Much Synth* which came out with Copper Canyon Press, earlier this year. Maybe we can start with talking about the process of creating the book. I heard that you were only able to start writing after taking voice lessons. Can you tell us about that?**

After I finished my 3<sup>rd</sup> book, *Our Andromeda*, I felt drained; I had nothing left to say, my heart was wrung out and I was sick of myself. You know that feeling after you've poured everything into a poem or a book of poems, where you're just embarrassed? All that stuff you wrote! Ugh! Suddenly everything that was private is now out there in a paradoxical way. It's not private anymore, but that doesn't mean anyone's reading it. Whatever was precious and interior is now available to be ignored, as much as read. So there was a period of ambivalence and stasis.

One day I saw a Facebook post by the magnificent poet and artist Pamela Sneed, in which she said she was taking singing lessons and I was struck by that. Here was a woman who was undeniably one of the most powerful presences I'd ever seen. And she was going in to learn something new. It inspired me, so I started taking singing lessons with a wonderful instructor named Rebecca Pronsky (in Park Slope, Brooklyn! Poets, go to her!) and somehow the process of forcing myself to be embarrassed, just "letting it rip" allowed me to stop wallowing in bullshit. I had to face my own voice. It didn't matter if I couldn't sing. I could still learn. I could still submit myself to the discomfort of trying to get better at something I wasn't good at, and didn't know how to do. Sure it was embarrassing, but so what?

From the first day of singing lessons, for about 6 weeks, I could not stop writing messy, dorky poems and, as in singing class, I did not care how I sounded. Once I stopped worrying how I sounded, the poems flowed, surprising me day after day.

Embarrassment is so useful. We often just use it to shut ourselves up. But I found that I could use my embarrassment against itself: a new kind of fuck-you to an inner critic I hadn't realized I'd been listening to my whole life. Really it's neither difficult nor devastating to hit a wrong note or to write a bad line of poetry. Just write another. Sing another song. Big whoop, I realized. But it took me decades to figure that out.

**How do you usually deal with writer's block?**

Writer's block is just fear. When faced with fear, we fly or fight. Unfortunately, when it comes to writing, those two instincts merge into the same thing. We flee ourselves and we fight ourselves and in both scenarios no words get written. I wish I could face this fear the same way I would if I were about to get on a rollercoaster. Like, "I know I'm scared but it will probably be fun, if I don't die or puke."

Facing a blank page is facing mortality, it just is. I don't know any way around that. It's terrifying. But just as terrifying to turning your back to the page and running away. It will always be there right behind you!

**There is a lot of music in these poems. Was that influenced by the voice lessons? I'm thinking about your poem "But I'm the Only One" after a Melissa Etheridge song. How does music function in this book for you? How does music relate to identity?**

There are certain eras in one's life where the music you listen to becomes inextricable from who you are, who you are becoming. Prepubescence and adolescence are such times, when you can channel the beginnings of sexual desire into the music you love. Maybe it's not safe to explore sexuality at 12 with other humans, and maybe at 17 you want to explore but don't have the chance to. Desire doesn't go away just because you can't express it. So we memorize the lyrics, we dance alone in our rooms, we make mixtapes, we get crushes on bands. For me this time was during the 80s, when synthpop was everywhere. Artists like Duran Duran, Madonna, Prince, and Erasure provided formative, ubiquitous, endlessly exciting coming-of-age soundtracks.

As for the Melissa Etheridge reference, that poem was set in the mid-90s, when that song was popular. At that time, too, I was coming into a new sense of myself as a penniless, heartbroken, poet-in-training lesbian in New York City. That song was an anthem for those of us who had nothing but passion.

**I've heard you describe your second book *Our Andromeda* as a book to your son and *So Much Synth* as a book to your daughter. Can you explain? I'd love to hear more about femininity and adolescence and power in your poem "Is There Something I Should Know" too. (Also, I just discovered that is a Duran Duran song).**

You just discovered that it's a Duran Duran song?

Okay. I'll just feel old for a minute here.

Minute's over, now to your question. *Our Andromeda* is a book I wrote in part to process my transition into motherhood, a transition which, for me, was catastrophic. My son was not brought safely into this world and the trauma was and is profound. I wrote that book to save my life, and to be the strong mother I needed to be and have since become. My boy knows love, and security, and happiness, and he also has major disabilities which disallow most if not all of the rites of passage most of us associate with growing up. Then I had another baby, a daughter, who did come safely into this world, and she is growing up with all the typical ups and downs of a girl with no disabilities. It made me think, a lot, about the reality that even when there are no massive, obvious obstacles in one's life, and growing up is still pretty perilous.

One night, talking with Craig, my spouse, fellow poet, and dad of our two kids, we somehow we got on the topic of girlhood, and what it was like growing up a girl. What it was like to be a free, happy little kid and to suddenly plunge, at age 11, into 700 days of nonstop hormonal chaos, an irreversibly changing body, sudden street harassment, sudden objectification, and this terrible sense of danger all the time. I described all these things and was blown away by how the ordinary, everyday experience of coming into womanhood was really so secret. I'd been so ashamed and afraid and humiliated even though everything was "normal" and nothing bad really happened to me. It was bad anyway! Ordinary adolescence meant coming into rape culture silently, unknowing, powerless.

I committed to writing about it, even though it wasn't what I wanted to write about, because I had always assumed that we'd have found a way, by now, to stop or at least protest the rampant objectification, dehumanization, shaming, belittlement, and general degradation of young girls as a cultural norm. I figured by the time I had a little girl to raise she'd have less bullshit to have to deal with. I don't know why I thought we'd have "progress." Because it's only gotten worse. Girls are in more kinds of danger now than ever before, things that didn't even exist when I was a girl (internet predators, cyberbullying, etc.) on top of the old ones. It's sickening. I wrote my truth to break silence in the face of that myriad danger. I want my kid to know (whether she reads it or not) and I want all of us who went through our own gauntlet to know that being a girl and becoming a woman isn't an inherently disgusting, embarrassing, dangerous, unfair and humiliating thing. It shouldn't be. We can call it out. I want my daughter to know that even if our culture surrounds her with cruel insults and threats to her humanity, sexuality, voice, opinion, mind, heart, and body, she doesn't have to be silent. I want her to know that she is entitled to deny those insults and to defend herself against those threats, and to claim her power by believing in herself, in her truth.

**Lately, I've been struggling to relate to some of my queer community because of trauma that I've faced inside the community. I am thinking about your poem "Why I Stayed 1997-2001." How do you relate to your queerness now, after having two children?**

Cruelty and violence inside the queer community is another place of terrible silence, isn't it? "Why I Stayed" was something I wrote in solidarity with other folks who wrote about their experiences with intimate partner abuse. I felt safe in my lesbian community, but I wasn't safe with my lesbian partner, and I couldn't talk to anyone about it, even though everyone knew what was happening. I think there can be a lot of internalized homophobia—and overt biphobia—going on in situations like this: feeling one doesn't deserve better because one has absorbed the cultural hatred of sexual minorities. This was back in the 90s, and many people weren't out—lesbian life was a cherished subculture and I think some of us felt a terror of being seen as damaged or less-than, a terror of feeling unworthy of love.

I know that when I was living as a lesbian, I was pretty biphobic myself. None of us lesbians wanted to be left for a man, and for some of us, that's what "bisexual women" seemed to threaten. But of course my biphobia was there because I was afraid of my own bisexuality, afraid because I was one of those "traitors". Fun times! Once I came to terms with the fact that I loved who I love—that that's all sexual freedom is about, being able to love who you love—I became much more comfortable with who I am, who I've always been. I'm still bisexual, even though I have two children begotten in the old-fashioned way. I'm biracial, and bisexual, and my two kids are both Geminis, so there's a lot of double-ness in my world.

**The book starts with a poem you published last year in the New Yorker, called "I Have a Time Machine." This poem ends with the lines "I thought I'd find myself / an old woman by now, travelling so light in time. / But I haven't gotten far at all. / Strange not to be able to pick up the pace as I'd like; / the past is so horribly fast." Can you talk about how time functions in the book and in your life?**

Well, that's a big question because time is such a mystery, a lie, a constraint, a waste, a miracle, a waiting game, a Jenga game, an accumulation of vanishings, a constant failure, and also all we have!

Our entire lives have to be fit inside this time we have. And when I think about how few years a beautiful poet like Max Ritvo had, and how many years we've been deprived of the live presence of

Lucille Clifton, and how the recent loss of CD Wright is heavy with the weight of years and years of her poetry the world needs but that time didn't allow for [...]

Poets can't beat time. We are stuck in our timeline. The words we write will maybe have more time than we do, but we must find the time to write them, line after line after line, if only because there will be a last line, and we don't want to have already written it.

**Thank you again for your friendship and your poetry!**