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Modern Poetry

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Modern Poetry

Chris Beyers

Until 1990, the poet laureateship of the state of Virginia was awarded irregularly and capriciously by the Virginia General Assembly. The first laureate, Carter W. Wormeley, was the state's publicity director, and the next two, Charles O'Day and Thomas Lomax Hunter, were best known for their newspaper columns, "Lights O'Day," and "As It Appears to the Cavalier," respectively. After 1948, the honor went Leigh Buckner Hanes, Ruby Altizer Roberts (the publisher and editor of the little magazine, *The Lyric*), Guy Carleton Drewry, and Katheryn Forrester Thro. After 1996, the Poetry Society of Virginia was given the task of selecting the finalists for the laureateship, the governor making the final choice. The list of laureates has since more closely resembled the Virginia poets that academics and fellow poets esteem: Joseph Awad, Kelly Cherry, Rita Dove, George Garrett, Claudia Emerson, Caroline Kreiter-Foronda, Margaret Ward Morland, and Sofia M. Starnes.

In the twenties, Anne Spencer (1882–1975, Henry County) began placing poems in the journals and anthologies that have come to represent the Harlem Renaissance: *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, *Carroling Dusk*, *Crisis*, *The New Negro*, and *Opportunity*. As with many in the movement, Spencer criticizes racial attitudes. "The Sévigné's" addresses a statue of a bent old African American man that stood in a public square in Natchitoches, Louisiana, its plaque reading: "Dedicated to the arduous and faithful services of the good darkies of Louisiana." Spencer calls the image "a shameless thing" that is "callous beyond belief." More subtly, "Grapes: Still-Life" describes a plate of different grape varieties. The grapes' different colors, the speaker explains, come from their "heritage," and the platter symbolizes multiethnic America. The speaker reminds those who "force the plight" of the plate of grapes – who have imported peoples of color into the country only to discriminate against them – that multiculturalism is their heritage as well.¹

In addition to being a New Negro, Spencer was a New Woman, asserting a gender role much different from the Victorian ideal

of a subservient, self-abnegating woman. In "Lady, Lady," the speaker decries the "yoke of men" upon women, anticipating Zora Neale Hurston's remark in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* that black women are the world's mules. In "Letter to My Sister," the speaker remarks that it is "dangerous for a woman to defy the gods," which in this poem seems to mean the impersonal mechanisms of patriarchal control; still, she goes on, it is "worse still if you mince timidly."² Similarly, "Before the Feast of Shushan," dramatizes the first chapter of Esther, in which Vashti refuses to dance before drunken King Ahasuerus and his court. F. E. W. Harper had previously told the story from Vashti's point of view, portraying a heroine with too much self-respect to display herself for the pleasure of men. Spencer narrates it from the king's perspective; he declares it is his right to "force the petals wide" regardless of how his queen feels about it.³

Spencer's most persistent image is the garden, which she depicts as eternal and redemptive, an antidote for human mortality and mutability. Spencer's garden, never a lonely place, offers opportunities to experience life before the Fall. For instance, in "Any Wife to Any Husband," the female speaker envisions her world as a garden where the couple can "Feel all human joys" and a "shadowy third" – the inverted commas announcing her debt to Ellen Glasgow's short story by the same name – but here Spencer indicates the presence akin to the angels who converse with Adam and Eve in Milton's *Paradise Lost*.⁴

Though Spencer's freer poems can be connected to the New Poetry movement, she did not see the poetic tradition as either patriarchal or inherently Eurocentric. In one poem, she finds connection to Robert Browning, and in "Dunbar," the speaker, Paul Laurence Dunbar, unironically groups himself with Thomas Chatterton, Percy Shelley, and John Keats.

Like Spencer, Murell Edmunds (1898–1981, Halifax County) often addressed social issues. Edmunds saw himself as a true son of Virginia, proud of his state's heritage and its connection to liberty and the Bill of Rights, so he was disgusted by the attitudes of its politicians toward segregation. Edmunds wrote poems responding to the Massive Resistance movement in 1958, in which Virginia politicians tried to circumvent federal mandates to desegregate their schools, voting to shut down any school on the brink of being integrated. In "December – 1958," he bitterly notes the irony of "empty schools/Closed by hate to pleasure fools" during the season of Christian charity. Furthermore, he lampoons the movement's architect, Harry F. Byrd, in "To Build Himself a Monument." In "Virginia (1958)," Edmunds notes the irony that in the

state of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Patrick Henry, "No protests thunder/While bigots plunder/Your house asunder/Virginia!" and in "The Great Seal" he reimagines the state motto, *Sic Semper Tyrannis*, as the credo for those fighting for civil rights.⁵

Edmunds also wrote elegant lyrics about the Virginia countryside, often connected with love poetry. In "Grand Oaks," for instance, the speaker says to his beloved that the memory of her is like the Virginia landscape's beauty. Edmunds's fine sonnet "The Lawn" describes the grassy area of the University of Virginia's "Academical Village" planned by Thomas Jefferson. It implicitly compares the cyclical eternity of nature – the trees have not yet heard "death's litany" – with human mortality.

The limits of the human condition are also an abiding concern of Dabney Stuart (born 1937 in Richmond, though he has lived mostly in Lexington). His early poetry tends to be in traditional form, with neat quatrains and poems like "People Asleep," a villanelle. His later poetry is in open form, and tends to move away from the sharp, frequently satiric, certainties of his early work.

Stuart often writes about relationships, though these relationships are generally broken, breaking, or potentially on the mend. Like many contemporary poets, he writes about reconnecting with children after divorce in poems like "Discovering My Daughter," and watching the decay of older relatives in poems like "The Hospital of Lies." The physical position of the characters in "Commencement" is an emblem for the emotional positions of most of his verse: the speaker stands on one side of a steel pole facing in one direction, his mother on the opposite side facing the other way, and his daughter a half a mile away, wondering where her father and grandmother are, "two people in separate worlds/by the pole" while they wonder "where she is,/who's misunderstood, what to do/so they won't further lose one another."⁶

Stuart's poetry is often psychological, describing the effect of growing up in a home where the mother's "way of motherhood," remarks the speaker of "Star River," "was to displace children with her need to be adored." Though in such poems the voice can be bitterly satiric, Stuart is honest enough to turn the psychologist's eye on himself: the ideal woman in "The Girl of My Dreams," for instance, creates herself by looking at the speaker, is always sexually available, enjoys being ogled, and speaks with a voice that is "a combination/of my own and my mother's." She is, she says, "everywhere you put yourself." Everyman, he implies, is Narcissus, in love with an obedient familiar image that always does what he does without being asked. Something similar is also evident in "My Hostess at the Renovated

Inn," where the speaker imagines himself in love with a friendly though by no means flirtatious hostelier who moves "the way I dream my mother/might have moved if she hadn't been/my mother."⁷

Dreams occur time and again in Stuart, especially as his verse moves further and further away from traditional numbers. His later poetry often occupies a netherworld between solipsistic psychology and spirituality. "The Birds" begins by describing sandpipers running on a seashore. They outrun a wave, "but they seemed barely to touch it, too"; it seems "as if/they drew each wave in after them," and from these suppositions the speaker parallels the relationship between the imagination and the world. Dreams in Stuart's verse combine experience and personal desire; we live our lives like umpires, he says, in "Umpire," envisioning an invisible, ideal square through which we try to control and interpret experience. The interplay between observation, desire, and possible transcendence is poignantly displayed in "Will the Circle Be Unbroken," which takes its title from a gospel song by the same name. Lying in a hospital bed near death, the speaker's father looks toward the light; his eyelids "seem to glow faintly" and

he is all but gone
inward toward a different light
yet he says *Open*
as if it were another air he could breathe.

Powerless, watching his father die, Stuart can only hope that the circle of life will complete itself and that there is a better home awaiting in the sky.⁸

More than any other poet in this survey, Dave Smith (born 1942, Portsmouth) actively takes on the mantle of Southern writer while avoiding the family dysfunction and "dialect and drawl" of conventional Southern poetry. "Poetry," he asserts, "must juxtapose a community-eroding present to a community-protective past. The poet needs the hard lens of naturalism and the soft lens of romantic yearning, ill-fitting spectacles at best," a combination that often lends an elegiac tinge to his verse.⁹ In an essay on Poe, he characterizes the writer's "nightmare" as "the individual cut off from history, abandoned by family, place, and community."¹⁰ The speakers of Smith's poems live in constant fear of this nightmare.

For example, in "Homage to Edgar Allan Poe," the speaker recounts an incident when he was fourteen and refused to go skinny dipping with his friend despite the cheering encouragement by "girls in canoes." Instead, he climbs to a height far removed from the place where "boys went nekkid"

and gains a more beautiful, romantic view. His squeamishness and penchant for philosophizing mirrors that of Poe, whose ideal beauty, Helen, does not seem to be made of flesh and blood: she embodies, somehow, Greece's glory and Rome's grandeur, resembling a statute in a niche. Smith's narrator eventually comes down off his high perch and returns to society, only to stumble upon a couple copulating energetically. When the young woman sees him watching, she only winks, while the male is enraged and threatens him. The speaker runs away, but the rest of the summer he is bedeviled with the threat, the wink, and the sense that he has been "flung like spit into the universe."¹¹

As a Southern regionalist, Smith acknowledges the lasting impact of Civil War tensions yet is disengaged with the war's political and social causes (his forebears, he mentions pointedly, fought on both sides), seeing the conflict as a catastrophe that decimated communities. He generally puts himself with the "women who bore the mess" rather than the men who instigated the war.¹² For example, his poem, "Harper's Ferry," contains only hints of John Brown. From the speaker's perspective, the site offers ruins and natural regeneration, "a tumbled foundation, ancestral hills/that keep heaving up wildflowers, planks, seams."¹³ Likewise, in "Photograph of a Confederate Soldier Standing on Rocks in the James River at Richmond," the speaker eschews both the idealizing myths of Southern partisans and any condemnation of soldiers fighting for the cause of slavery; instead, the image in the photograph is part of a long continuum of history, with the speaker ineluctably situated in the present.

Perhaps most typical of his poetry is "Tide Pools," which describes the speaker and his family exploring the rich variety of life that occurs in the pools of seawater that appear when the tide comes in. As his family explores the area, they "drift apart." In the midst of his own exploration, he feels a chill and recalls his "father's whistle" and how it "called/the sundered shadows of a family into the house" yet in his present, he does not whistle, because "we have come where we may be apart/and whole." As with so many of his poems, the individual is on the verge of losing his community. The poem ends with the setting sun, frolicking in the cold water, and a "long and dark" journey home. Even this poem of family connection ends with the fear of separation. Rather like William Wordsworth, who after being stunned by a field of daffodils, asserts that the memory of the sight will sustain him while in the workaday world, Smith's speaker maintains that this memory of what they once were will buoy his family as it enters the cold world. Ceaseless metamorphosis is part of the "unkillable

pulsations of life," yet this same transformative power threatens always to drive people apart, leaving some washed up like driftwood upon distant shores.¹⁴

The poetry of Elizabeth Bryant Voigt (born 1943, Chatham) is likewise concerned with memory, though she has less faith in community. While her poems do not lack emotion, they are often austere. They recoil from anything that approaches sentimentality. For instance, her poems about the natural world typically depict rural farm life and often include the death of animals as part of the landscape. Natural processes are depicted as relentless despite human misgivings. In "Snakeskin," for instance, the speaker admires animals because they can move unselfconsciously through a constantly changing world: "How easily they leave old lives" she says, "as an eager lover steps from the skirts/at her ankles" without a backward glance. In "Jug Brook," the speaker asks, "Why grieve for the lost deer. . . . The earth does not grieve/It rushes towards the season of waste."¹⁵

This relentless moving on is even more marked in a poem at the end of *Kyrie*, a collection about the influenza epidemic of 1918. "After the first year, weeds, and scrub," the speaker comments, and after forty years, nobody "can tell us where there was an orchard/where a swing, where the smokehouse stood."¹⁶ Like the snake discarding its old self without regret, the natural world eliminates all traces of human life, so that even a pandemic that took more than three times the lives claimed by World War I is covered over and virtually forgotten.

As her poetry steadfastly avoids infusing the natural world with emotion, so her poems about human beings as often depict separation than they do connection. In "The Visit," for instance, the speaker comes to see her father only to find him asleep in a chair. "I want to wake him with kisses," the speaker comments, "But I turn away, without speech or gesture."¹⁷ In "Blue Ridge," the speaker watches Fourth of July fireworks next to a friend whom she obviously desires. Even the way that they stand reflects intimacy and detachment. He is taller than she is, so she stands as tall as possible while he slouches, "knees locked, one leg stuck out/to form a defensive angle with the other./Thus, we were most approximate/and most removed." After the fireworks, they go their separate ways. "And what would it solve," she asks helplessly, "if he took one hand from his pocket,/risking touch, risking invitation." Such a gesture "would not alter/this explicit sadness," and the two part "like the fireflies dragging among the trees/their separate, discontinuous lanterns."¹⁸

Another poet might suggest marriage as the antidote to the inevitable partings of relationships, but in Voigt's "Long Marriage," the institution is

likened to a dance marathon where each partner is holding the exhausted other up, amazed to have stood together for so long. In "Variations: Two Trees," the speaker asserts that separation is intrinsic to life. The "paradigm" for relationships, she says, is in "nature" and the "division of the first cell," which marked the beginning of what we call life.

Voigt is a trained musician, earning an MFA in music and literature from the University of Iowa in 1966, and musical structures influence her verse. This is most obvious in her many poems which are variations on a theme, including "Messenger," "Garden, Spring, and Hawk," all of *Kyrie*, "Variations: Two Trees," "Dialogue: Poetics," which can be thought of as fugal with their repetitions and counterpoint. In her book of prose, *The Art of Syntax*, she argues that poetry evinces a tension between the rhythms of the line and the sentence.¹⁹ To hear a Voigt poem properly demands close attention to the play of grammar of her sentences across the grid of lines. For example, "Art of Distance" (written in William Carlos Williams's triadic line with its "variable foot"), when the speaker says, "to see a thing//one has to push it away," the distance described is enacted by the stanza break; in a later section, the ongoingness of natural processes is reflected by enjambment, parataxis, and a reliance on commas instead of punctuation that creates hierarchies, such as periods.

While Voigt frequently depicts human suffering, it is Kate Daniels (born 1953, Richmond) who should rightly be called the poet of female suffering. The title of her second book, *The Niobe Poems*, is the classical figure of maternal grieving, the mother transformed into an eternally weeping stone after the gods took her children from her. In the volume's penultimate poem, "The New Niobe," Daniels transforms the image of inconsolable grief to one of survival – the modern Niobe is stone, though strong like a diamond and finally able to say, "It happened. / He died./I lived."²⁰ Similarly, Mary, a speaker in the second section of *Four Testimonies*, watches her children die while pinned in the wreckage of a freeway collapse. At the funeral, she scornfully notes her drunken ex-husband while she looks, dry-eyed, at the burial. "People looked/at me like I was a monster," she comments, but they didn't know that she had become "hard as metal on the outside, empty/as a suit of armor within."²¹

Four Testimonies wants to show that suffering has the redemptive effect of bringing the afflicted ones, in the phrase of Simone Weill (whose philosophy is infused throughout the volume), "into the actual presence of God."²² Indeed, Mary's suffering is intertwined with the voices of two others in the same freeway collapse – John, who finds salvation in the fact

that, while immobilized, he is able to see a petunia beyond the debris, and Jane, rescued by what she sees as the miraculous hand of a paramedic who pulls her from the wreckage. Even though she has become a paraplegic, she feels blissful for being alive and having the memory of the saving hand, which in the poem becomes a parallel to the hand of God reaching out to Adam in the Sistine Chapel.

Daniels more often depicts less remarkable suffering, especially the loss felt by mothers as their children leave their body after birth then slowly grow away from them. The connection mothers feel, Daniels would have us know, is both bodily and spiritual. Daniels is virtually the poet laureate of breastfeeding. In the title poem of *A Walk in Victoria's Secret* (the title echoes Philip Levine's *A Walk with Tom Jefferson*), the female speaker focuses on the "tables of brassieres" in the popular lingerie store. The poem could be read in tandem with Billy Collins's poem, "Victoria's Secret," which concerns the male gaze and the complex vocabulary used to describe the features of women's undergarments. The store's wares are less exotic to Daniels, and the poem slowly morphs into a paean to breastfeeding, ending with an image of a woman in bed with her husband, who sidles up to her and starts sucking on her breasts. She feels "the untidy rush of hormones in her head, the milk rising and rising,/breaking so exquisitely the unanalyzable mystery of flesh."²³ "Mystery" implies possible religious significance, and in the final poem of *Four Testimonies*, the speaker likens breastfeeding to the Last Supper: her children's "first meal was my own body," she says, adding ruefully that she hopes she will "will not live/to serve, or share" their last.²⁴

The other path to transcendence in Daniels's poetry is through art, though at times art is used as an evasion. "Ars Poetica," from *The Niobe Poems*, is her version of W. H. Auden's "Musee dex Beaux Arts," describing how the artist dispassionately turns personal tragedy into a solvable artistic problem. Ironically, after displacing the sense of loss in the creation of art, the artist experiences loss again when the painting is sold and taken from him. Still, she sees hope in the possibilities of poetry in "Self Portrait with Religion and Poetry," where the speaker remarks, "when a line/of poetry is perfectly good, the Mystery/is inside me again" – the capitalization and the poem's title indicate that she has in mind a not-quite-knowable-but-palpable-nonetheless spiritual presence which the poet is able to "transform into substance."²⁵

Rita Dove (born 1952, in Akron, Ohio, but she has been at the University of Virginia since 1989) typically takes a less transcendental approach. "Ars Poetica" from *Grace Notes* aptly describes her poetic. The

poet imagines herself as a hawk, soaring above the landscape. The shadow she casts on the land below is "a traveling x-marks-the-spot," a symbol of her poetic stance.²⁶ Her poems typically observe the world with an awareness of the greater "larger map of wills," their cultural contexts.²⁷

Unsurprisingly, Dove's poems frequently address historical figures. She has written poems on such subjects as Robert Schumann, the proto-feminist female saints Catherine of Aragon and Catherine of Siena, Rafael Trujillo, Benjamin Banekker, Rosa Parks, and many others. She won the Pulitzer Prize for *Thomas and Beulah*, a sequence of poems chronicling the lives of its African American protagonists. *The Darker Face of the Earth* is an Oedipal verse drama set in antebellum South Carolina addressing interracial coupling, a topic frequently commented upon in slave narratives. In addition, *American Smooth* has a section dedicated to African American soldiers who fought in World War I.

Dove's ambitious volume, *Sonata Mullatica*, features a mixed race figure, George Polgreen Bridgewater, a young violin virtuoso, the son of a self-described "African Prince" and a white European woman. He attracts the notice of Ludwig van Beethoven, who eventually wrote a work for him titled *Sonata Mullatica*, only to rename and rededicate the work after Bridgewater made a suggestive comments about a woman Beethoven knew.²⁸ Dove's complex book takes a very high, hawk's eye view, contextualizing what has happened in the era's political, social, and aesthetic trends.

The volume features poems written in a variety of forms. The scene where Bridgewater alienates Beethoven, for example, is cast in a form that calls to mind the raucous tavern scene in Goethe's *Faust*, entirely appropriate for depicting the anything-goes atmosphere where Bridgewater is egged on by disreputable company. This knowing use of form is typical of Dove's verse, which, contrary to much critical comment, tends to extend rather than subvert the traditions of verse. *Mother Love*, for instance, is a sonnet sequence using the Demeter/Persephone myth as a mirror for the mother's point of view, as she watches an alien male take her beloved daughter, who can only return occasionally.²⁹ The book constantly experiments with the sonnet form, tinkering with the placement of the *volta*, stanza divisions, syllable count, and so on. It ends, appropriately enough, with a crown of sonnets, where the last line of one sonnet becomes the first line of the next, and the sequence's first line is its last. Yet innovation has been common in sonnet sequences since Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*. Dove's sequence ends with the disconsolate Demeter watching her daughter return to her husband Hades, standing in the darkness, staring at

the closed ground. That is to say, her sequence ends just as Sidney's does, with its protagonist alone and bereft.

While *Mother Love* ends with its speaker in the cold, so to speak, such is the constant position of Anthony Grooms (born 1955, Louisa County) in his single book of poetry, *Ice Poems*. The experience of being one of the few black students in an otherwise white school helped Grooms develop a "detached sensibility." In the volume's last poem, the speaker admires the clouds as "They float above everything" and are "dispossessed of care." Down on earth, however, things are not so free of anxiety. Several poems describe soldiers going off to Vietnam – a war he depicts as created and orchestrated by "old men," who themselves do not fight. The toll of combat is depicted in "Homespace," where the main figure, a veteran returning from the war, displays symptoms of PTSD, including flashbacks, social withdrawal, and hypervigilance.³⁰

The only relief, it would seem, is a death that brings respite but not salvation. In "My Death," the speaker imagines death as freezing, where "Coldness peels away my skin" (one of the volume's few hints regarding race). He imagines becoming "as hard as diamond" before sinking "Into the cold heart of Earth." Probably the most detached poem in the volume is "Billy Sheehan," about a boy who drowns by falling through the ice – but his death is fortunate because it protects his loved ones "From what Billy Sheehan would have become."³¹

The poetry of Michael Chitwood (born 1958, Rocky Mount) more resembles the community-seeking spirit of Dave Smith than Grooms's coldness. Chitwood's poetics are described in "Threads, End of Another Day." The speaker compares the poet's experiences to the threads that cling to workers as they leave a weaving factory: the poet weaves them together to make a poem, and the thread "you notice becomes your life."³² Chitwood's verse attends to apparently trivial details that speak to more important human truths.

In *The Weave Room*, Chitwood uses the weaving plant as a metaphor for intertwined lives of the people at the plant. It is so loud that workers "can feel it in their soles" through vibrations in the ground, with a pun on the homonym. Workers must come close to one another and shout in each other's ears. The jokes, jibes, and flirtations are "mostly meaningless/save for the breath the other can feel," as the workers exchange human contact, not information.³³ The community is so strong that when a woman develops carpal tunnel syndrome, she is inconsolable over the prospect that she might lose her job: she cannot imagine life outside the plant's community.

The volume documents tension between management and workers. White-collar workers are distinguished by wearing ties (ironically enough since the whole book is about ties of one sort or another), and as the speaker begins working in the plant, he envisions himself as separate from his coworkers. The mock epic title of the poem, "Thunderbolts of Zeus," satirizes his attitude toward his co workers – college-bound, he feels he is above them, even though his actual job is only climbing ladders to change fluorescent light bulbs. Later, he returns after graduating from college, wearing a tie in his role as reporter for a local paper. As he fumbles through an interview, the worker he talks to recognizes him and asks, "'What's wrong, boy?/You having trouble standing behind that tie?'" He has become one of "them."³⁴

As Daniels is willing to risk the sentimental when she talks about motherhood, Chitwood takes what, nowadays, is even a greater risk – being shown to be religious. Nowhere is this more evident than in *Spill*. Some of Chitwood's poems are satiric – in "On Being Asked to Pray for a Van," for instance, he does just that, including prayers for the carburetor, transmission, and steering column. More often his poems find intimations of spiritual truths in the everyday – blue skies after a rainstorm, dogs on a leash, seagulls flying around Wal-Mart, weeds like Beggar's Lice and cockleburrs, and so on. The title of "Maher-shalal-hash-baz," which describes a red-tailed hawk, comes from Isaiah 8.1; the Hebrew is translated in the poem's first line, "Speed, Plunder, and Devour"; at the end, the speaker says to call the hawk "Immanuel" – literally, "God with us," but often taken by Christians to mean Jesus.³⁵ Chitwood wants readers to see the spirit is alive and well in this world, constantly present for those willing to see.

Like Chitwood, the poetry of Claudia Emerson (1957–2014, Chatham) ultimately seeks what Auden called the "affirming flame." Her poems about intimate relationships typically portray a fear of disappearing into the Other. In her Pulitzer Prize-winning volume, *The Late Wife*, "My Grandmother's Plot in the Family Cemetery" describes a gravesite in which a man's first wife is buried in a joint grave with him, while his second wife the (speaker's grandmother) is put in another grave far away. Ironically, the poem is a sonnet, the form traditionally associated with love, yet here the bonds of love are the cause of deletion.

The loss of individuality in relationships goes further than funeral arrangements. The opening section of *The Late Wife*, "Divorce Epistles," chronicles a failing marriage. In the first poem, "Aftermath" (the title a nod to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's fine poem with the same title), the

speaker returns to the house where she used to live with her ex-husband, remarking that while residing there, she felt "formless as fog." After an unsatisfying tryst in "The Spanish Lover," she ends up alone in bed but tells her ex-husband (through apostrophe) that she was at least "not/invisible as I had been to you."³⁶ Most tellingly, in "The Last Christmas" the speaker goes out to chop some firewood while her husband is upstairs too feverish to help. He looks at her through the bedroom window and calls to her, but his breath fogs up the window panes, and she never notices his noticing. The poem gives a poignant image of failed communication in a doomed relationship. To end affirmatively, the volume concludes with a sequence of sonnets to the speaker's current husband, a widower. The speaker continually comes across little mementos of the first wife – an old daybook, a photograph, a driving glove – that point to memories of the past relationship that haunt the present one. In the volume's last image, the speaker and her husband free a turtle that has been tormented by two boys, then watch as it disappears into its proper element; symbolically the two are ready to move on from the trauma of the death.

Memory is also a key theme in *Secure the Shadow*. The book is replete with descriptions of old photographs and empty buildings, both present reminders of past lives. Like many contemporary poets, Emerson writes about the heartbreak of Alzheimer's. Ironically, when the speaker's nonagenarian father talks to her, he starts talking about her as if she were dead. He has found "solace in memory," and she finds similar solace: she has "fallen away then from the present/tense into reminiscence – the lucid was."³⁷

Claudia Emerson's nature poems share a continuity with earlier American nature writing. Consider, for example, her rewriting of Robinson Jeffers's "Hurt Hawk": the California poet describes a grievous injury to a noble bird, and concludes the poem by giving the "lead gift" to the animal (i.e., shooting it) in order that its spirit may leave this corrupt world and soar freely. In "The Practice Cage," a jogging narrator comes upon a similarly noble hawk caught in the netting of a baseball batting cage; after she manages to free the bird, it flies away unharmed, and the speaker continues her jog elated. "Jubilation" describes the speaker's feelings after finding out that birds stunned after flying into glass windows sometimes revive, and the poem asserts that nature itself celebrates the resurrection in the cicada's song. In all, the poet's view of the natural world is similar to the transcendental vision, especially the perspective advocated in an essay like Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Circles," where the circle of the observer's eye mirrors the cyclical processes of nature, all of which reveals a divine form.

Notes

1. Anne Spencer, "Appendix: The Poems," in J. Lee Greene, *Time's Unfading Garden: Anne Spencer's Life and Poetry* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), pp. 191–192.
2. Spencer, "Appendix," pp. 179, 194.
3. Spencer, "Appendix," pp. 195–196.
4. Spencer, "Appendix," p. 186.
5. Murrell Edmunds, *Dim Footprints on a Hazardous Trail* (South Brunswick, NJ: A. S. Barnes, 1971), p. 21.
6. Dabney Stuart, *Light Years: New and Selected Poems* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994), p. 184.
7. Stuart, *Light Years*, pp. 126, 108, 157.
8. Stuart, *Light Years*, p. 36.
9. Dave Smith, *Hunting Men: Reflections on a Life in American Poetry* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), pp. 21–22.
10. Smith, *Hunting Men*, p. 46.
11. Dave Smith, *The Wick of Memory: New and Selected Poems 1970–2000* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), pp. 130, 132.
12. Smith, *Hunting Men*, p. 231.
13. Smith, *Wick of Memory*, p. 88.
14. Smith, *Wick of Memory*, pp. 160–161.
15. Ellen Bryan Voigt, *Messenger: New and Selected Poems 1976–2006* (New York: Norton, 2008), p. 23.
16. Voigt, *Messenger*, p. 148.
17. Voigt, *Messenger*, p. 22.
18. Voigt, *Messenger*, p. 31.
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