

THE *SRPR* REVIEW ESSAY:
“DREAMS OF GROWING TO ROCK A RHYME”:
TRADITION AND EXPERIMENT IN RECENT
AMERICAN SONNETS

BRIAN BRODEUR

ON SELECT SONNETS FROM

The Survival Expo: Poems
Caki Wilkinson
Persea Books, 2021
72 pages; paperback, \$15.95

Living Weapon: Poems
Rowan Ricardo Phillips
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020
96 pages; paperback, \$16.00

Midlife: Poems
Matthew Buckley Smith
University of Evansville Press, 2023
80 pages; paperback, \$15.00

Out of Order: Poems
Alexis Sears
Autumn House Press, 2022
104 pages; paperback, \$16.95

Kontemporary Amerikan Poetry: Poems
John Murillo
Four Way Books, 2020
88 pages; paperback, \$16.95

The sonnet form, that lyric fusion of argument and song, has become increasingly disjointed in the United States. The typical example is self-reflexive, fragmented, and unmetrical. Many such poems rhyme (internal or slant) but few adopt a scheme of any kind. Some employ a marked volta; many do not. Most, not all, consist of fourteen lines. Though heavy on vivid images, startling leaps, and distinctive tones of voice (often hermetic), hardly any of these poems hazard that difficult interplay between discursive and recursive modes found in sonnets by poets as wide-ranging as Dante and Donne, Wordsworth and Borges, Pessoa and Heaney, Bradstreet and Brooks. Experimentation is necessary for any art to thrive; this is especially true with a form as flexible and enduring as the sonnet. But at what point does it become arbitrary for poets, critics, and audiences to interpret departures from form as the form itself?

As A. E. Stallings writes in her 2009 “Presto Manifesto!,” “Rhymes do not need to be hidden or disguised: they are nothing to be ashamed of.”¹ The same can be said of meters and received forms. Why should sonnets conceal their sonnet-ness? Whether pseudosonnets or quatorzains with sonnet aspirations, most recent attempts offer only a passing nod to the unique challenges presented by the Petrarchan, Spenserian, Shakespearean, and Miltonic varieties, which generate a great deal of energy by integrating opposing forces such as passion and reflection, repetition and variation, tension and release.

Rather than embracing the pleasures and rigors of a difficult form handled well, the standard contemporary American sonnet delights in subversion, locked in some Freudian scrum with Father Tradition. Yet this practice raises slippery questions. If in the interest of novelty most poets writing sonnets today aim to see how far they can bend the form before it breaks, don’t they risk trivializing their work through self-conscious innovation? If everyone “experiments” in a similar way, driven by the same impulse to undermine or negate historical antecedents, don’t these efforts amount to conformity flying the flag of the New? The countertraditional experiments of the

1 A. E. Stallings, “Presto Manifesto!,” Poetry Foundation (January 2009), <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/69202/presto-manifesto-2>.

twentieth century have become the entrenched poetic traditions of the twenty-first.

However, I maintain that some of the most compelling (and risky) American sonnets of recent years are surprising for the number of traditional elements they actually employ, and for how new they're able to make these elements sound. Rather than wading further into the murky debate over what does and doesn't constitute a sonnet, this essay will highlight some recent, successful examples written by younger American poets working within a recognizable formal tradition. All of these poets were born after 1970. All compose multiple examples of fourteen-line poems with a definite turn on or around the ninth line. All use rhetoric to propel their respective arguments-in-verse through meditation, counterclaim, narrative, and irony. And all embrace meter and rhyme as essential elements of what makes each "little song" sing.

Before I proceed, a note on my method. Rather than focus on whole books here, I look closely at a sonnet or two in each volume under review. I do so because writing broad reviews about concepts or projects can often eschew, through generalization, the intricacies of what makes a great sonnet great. I'm opting instead to linger longer with individual poems I consider exemplary. To be clear: I think highly of all five books under review, and I recommend them all. I also believe that my discussion of individual sonnets will offer enough information that readers of this review essay may glean the larger aspects of each book and so make a more informed decision about whether or not they want to pursue these books further.

The Survival Expo (2021), Caki Wilkinson's third collection, presents a lively and bizarre panorama of the American South, focusing on Tennessee, where Wilkinson was born and currently lives; she teaches at Rhodes College in Memphis. Populated by a dramatis personae consisting of "Zumba zealots," "Junior League / ladies," and survivalists hawking silencers and MREs at a convention space ominously named "the Agricenter," Wilkinson's poems place us within a zany nexus of "Xanax weather" and "sexy gun range selfies." Wilkinson, a vibrant formalist, refracts her subjects through her oddball sensibility and plucky diction. In this book, one finds reverse abecedarians, mock georgics, and dramatic monologues more lyric than narrative. The following sonnet, influenced by the Petrarchan failed-love lyric,

serves as an example of how Wilkinson works within rather than without such traditions:

Rite Performed with the Aid of High School Exes

To folly, lust, and knuckleheadedness;
to gods of overlooks and tunnel vision,
rulers of thongs and bong hits, indecision
and risk; to specters of expecting less
than what was fair, or thinking less was more;
who spread our flus and rumors; who hung moons
in notebook margins truant afternoons
when ever-after still eclipsed before:
we offer you fruition, our old dirt
and what it grew, and we beseech you, please,
O spoony fates, O green malignities,
undo our shrewedness. Help us now proceed
again unsure of what we seek or need—
remind us why it feels so good to hurt. (52)

What sort of “rite” is this poem performing? Who’s performing it, why, and for whom? Answering these questions first requires accurate identification of the collective narrator. The “we” of the poem is the grown-up version of those underachieving high school girls, including the poet and “Hope,” a hapless childhood friend who makes several cameos in prose poems throughout the book, providing the poet opportunities to pun with outrageous abandon in poem titles such as “Hope Comes to Elvis Week” (51) and “There’s No One Hope Won’t Ghost” (45). Elsewhere, the poet describes the “we” as having “undersold the rhapsody” and “developed [a] resting Roquefort face.” Both cheesy and shrewd, this collective narrator prays for the return of the misguided passions of youth, with all of their “green malignities” and “old dirt.” She does so, however, not in order to fulfill some vague, nostalgic wish amounting to *Oh, if I knew then what I know now*. Instead, she wishes *not* to know, to be free to indulge in youth’s “folly, lust, and knuckleheadedness” without the hindrance of adult conscience. The “we” requests a do-over not to correct the mistakes of her youth, but to commit those sins all over again, only this time with more relish, fervor, and abandon.

Wilkinson’s choice to cast this poem as a sonnet adds to its irony; the poet’s tight control over this difficult form belies her stated desire

for “thinking less.” In writing such a skillfully turned poem, Wilkinson flaunts her own “shrewdness,” presenting her sonnet as an offering to those “rulers of thongs and bong hits” she once worshipped and now only wishes she could resurrect.

But is this wish sincere? Which of the “spoonies” would read Wilkinson? Rather than sacrificing her “high school exes” in some bloody, phantasmagorical “rite,” the poet opts for the consolation prize of her poem, privileging imagination over action and *l’art pour l’art* over any pseudoreligious ritual. The strictness of this sonnet’s meter and rhyme scheme at first suggests a governing of ungovernable passions. But this poem takes place, in Shelley’s terms, “When passion’s trance is overpast”: twenty or more years after the dream has faded. The poem therefore constitutes an admission of defeat; the poet can no longer feel these feelings, only remember having felt them once. Defeat in this context, however, connotes both maturation and matriculation, the transition from reckless teenager to responsible adult subject to the pressures and expectations of ethical and professional standards, stultifying as they may be. Wilkinson’s deft handling of the sonnet form crucially emphasizes this, signifying this interpretation within the body of the poem itself.

Living Weapon (2020), Rowan Ricardo Phillips’s third collection, presents similar riffs on the Petrarchan love sonnet repurposed for the twenty-first century. Phillips, though, introduces a cosmological slant akin to the “chronicle of wasted time” we find more often in Shakespeare’s boastings about the perpetuity of his love and art. Here is the sonnet in *Living Weapon* that adheres particularly faithfully to the Shakespearean scheme:

Crisis on Infinite Earths

There’s the idea you should love someone—
And the idea you have fallen in love.
Both are just ideas. Both a cosmic con.
I enjoyed thinking I was above
Such things: that love was option and choice.
So if I were to love someone, or fall
In love with someone, it was more a yes
To my selves across the void, as though all
My life were one multiverse-spanning dash
After another in search of that man.

I loved like this until I turned to ash.
I turned to ash just like the Flash. I ran
So fast I turned into a wasn't. Like
Love ground down by the love it loved to love. (43)

Playfully alluding to both multiverse theory and the DC Comics crossover story line of the same title, "Crisis on Infinite Earths" functions like a little thought-box that controverts many of the statements it makes. The shift from present to past tense in the fourth line denotes a change of mind and circumstance—that the youthful period of the speaker's "thinking [he] was above" loving or falling in love has elapsed, and that he now understands love as neither "option" nor "choice" but as a kind of cosmic crisis with earth-shattering, universe-spanning implications. Even the hypothetical lover becomes an extension of the poet ("that man"), another intergalactic relay runner dashing from Earth to Earth in similar pursuit, so that the search for the lover equates to a search for the speaker's self but augmented to an "infinite" scale.

At least, this was the poet's youthful, romanticized, comic book version of love. Here, Phillips takes the idea of loving another as if they were oneself literally. The poet caricatures Narcissus drowning in his own reflection, replacing this mythic figure with the Flash, the DC Comics superhero who can move and think with extraordinary quickness, including the ability to thwart physical law. The poet-as-Flash burns his candle at both ends, like that other famous sonneteer Edna St. Vincent Millay, until he becomes "ash" out of which the mature poet, phoenix-like, rises. Phillips, however, identifies this idea for what it actually is: a romantic conceit, a "cosmic con"; Phillips puns here on Comic-Con, the annual comic book convention, treating this fantasy of love as "comic" (funny), convention(al), and wrong. The singsongy sentence "I turned to ash just like the Flash," with its thumping iambs and blaring internal rhyme, deftly emphasizes this point—the music here turning comedic, a way of channeling the poet's adolescent self mesmerized by the sound of his own voice.

This poem also functions, shrewdly, as a sonnet in search of a volta. The shift in the fourth line from present to past tense implies a rhetorical structure of *I used to think that way but now I think this way*. Yet all Phillips allows us access to is the misguided conceit of his youth, which presumably predates a more realistic apprehension of

grown-up love. But he never tells us explicitly what this is. Borrowing Shakespeare's "ashes of his youth" metaphor, Phillips depicts himself as choked by the ashes that once nourished the "flash" of his naïve passions. But the only explicit adult insight we find is that love is not merely an "idea." Instead of an option or a choice, love is a physical thing, an embodied fact. Thinking otherwise burns the lover, or pseudolover, to ash, cursing him to the Dantean reaches of cliché (fraud: the eighth circle). This move suggests that love simply cannot be imagined, it has to be experienced—otherwise, it is not physical love but some absurd, Platonic hypothetical "ground down by the love it loved to love" (a deft allusion to Joyce's "Love loves to love love").

Nor can love be outrun. "Dash" here serves a dual purpose. Given the speaker's inevitable transformation into "ash," the word "dash," in addition to meaning "running with great speed," also signifies the punctuation mark one finds on gravestones between birth and death dates. But, given the context of "multiverse-spanning dash / After another," the dash-as-gravestone-punctuation allows the speaker to extend his life, expand his self, and prolong his search to an almost infinite degree.

Infinite, that is, in terms of space, not time. As in Shakespeare, the love poem is the only vehicle through which the poet might continue after death by memorializing his love in memorable language: "That in black ink my love may still shine bright." Ironically, though, Phillips is not preserving his love that might "ever live young" in his verse, but only his nascent "search" for love. In this way, the poem functions as a kind of nightmare loop of longing that can never be satisfied—at least, not until the poet's puerile self burns up with the rocket propellant of his own desire ("So fast I turned into a wasn't"). Exhausting these adolescent, self-aggrandizing, and narcissistic desires is the only way that the poet can mature into a grown-up capable of real love. This revelation, which is fairly standard within a Shakespearean context, is shocking in Phillips because of the implied juxtaposition Phillips establishes between the lover consumed by self-love and comic book fantasy.

Matthew Buckley Smith shares with Phillips an obsession with the illusions of love in youth versus the realities of adult love. Given the anglophone sonnet's long tradition of unrequited affections, from Wyatt's posthumously published translations of Petrarch (1557) through

Marilyn Hacker's *Love, Death, and the Changing of the Seasons* (1986),² the sonnet seems something of an inevitability for Smith, who clinches one sonnet from his first book with the final couplet: "How happy, still, at dusk to talk about / The day with you I spent the day without."³

While including many sonnets that flaunt the poet's virtuosic formal facility, as well as the nimble elegance of his classically plain style, Smith's second book *Midlife* (2023), which won the 2021 Richard Wilbur Award, also presents several sonnets one might characterize as hidden. "The End," for example, begins:

You want your bedtime story
told, not read,
meaning you want it
made up on the spot,
so, sitting at the corner
of your bed, I tug my beard,
and stall, and like as not
begin the tale with
"Once upon a time" ... (43)

But this unrhymed, free-verse poem actually conceals a perfectly turned Shakespearean sonnet which, if lineated to restore the form without a single additional change, would read as follows:

You want your bedtime story told, not read,
meaning you want it made up on the spot,
so, sitting at the corner of your bed,
I tug my beard, and stall, and like as not
begin the tale with "Once upon a time" ...
and introduce a girl about your age,
locked in a tower far too tall to climb
or in a golden-barred, unbending cage,
from which she must in order to escape
employ both wit and heart, making new friends
and losing old ones as the end takes shape,
wherein a message, or a marriage, tends
to leave the kingdom's fictive doors ajar,
as if awaiting someone. As they are.

² Marilyn Hacker, *Love, Death, and the Changing of the Seasons* (New York: Arbor House, 1986).

³ Matthew Buckley Smith, "Black Bile," in *Dirge for an Imaginary World: Poems* (San Jose, CA: Able Muse Press, 2012), 43.

Why doesn't Smith arrange his poem this way on the page? No doubt he felt that "The End" benefited from being broken into twenty-seven lines of what Eliot might've called *vers libre*: a poem in which the phrase constitutes the basic line unit and rhyme remains optional. Joshua Mehigan does something similar in "Fire Safety," a hidden sonnet from *Accepting the Disaster* (2014), though Mehigan uses a meter that parses syntax a bit more consistently than Smith, who enjambes lines more forcefully ("far / too tall," "golden- / barred"). In fact, the endings of these hidden sonnets by Smith and Mehigan are remarkably similar. Smith's poem concludes:

tends to leave
the kingdom's fictive doors
ajar, as if awaiting
someone. As they are.

And Mehigan's:

all sitting
supernaturally still,

waiting for us to cry out.
And we will.⁴

But does Smith's poem lose more than it gains from this free-verseification? The most compelling aspect of "The End," in terms of theme, is the conspicuous absence of a male hero; the tower is "too tall to climb" so the "girl" in distress must rely on her own "wit and heart" to save her. One might argue that the form of the poem (a secret sonnet) imitates its content—that the form, like the princess, is hidden away, or that this "sonnet" negates its form just as Smith's post-feminist fairy tale excludes the conventional hero. But one wonders whether this move to camouflage the sonnet form doesn't imply, through benevolent deception, that the daughter will actually need a man—or several men over time—to rescue her, that the "someone" those "doors / ajar" await is not the woman the girl will become but the "new friends" who will save her through "marriage." Perhaps. The near rhyme of "message" and "marriage," however, leaves this

⁴ Joshua Mehigan, "Fire Safety," in *Accepting the Disaster* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014), 8–9.

possibility, like the doors of that fictive kingdom, open.

Regardless of Smith's intentions for "The End," some of the most moving poems in *Midlife* are sonnets unapologetic about their form. Unlike Smith's broken sonnets ("The Octonauts" (44)) or broken near-sonnets ("The Year of" (7) and "The Best" (20)), which conspicuously confound or conceal formal expectations, these genuine sonnets are noteworthy for the innovative ways that they manipulate Petrarchan and Shakespearean traditions. Here's one poem that works both with and against the former, introducing a narrative angle to the collection that Smith will develop in several accomplished dramatic monologues:

Requited Love

Here is the way they rose and bathed and fed
In silence, and in silence got undressed,
And microwaved the supper each thought best,
And meant the words the TV actors said.
Here is her naked hand outstretched in bed
To soothe some restless memory's knocking chest,
And here her present body, seldom pressed
Awake to his, and here his snoring head.
Here are the things they thought they had to fear:
Neglected taxes, mice, the common cold,
The figure at the far end of a glance,
The lovely hair's retreat, the vein's advance,
The skulls a little clearer every year,
Shares held too long, the child they'd never hold. (11)

Like most traditional Italian sonnets, "Requited Love" establishes a problem in the opening octave, then attempts to resolve or redress this problem in the closing sestet. But, as Smith notes in a recent omnibus review published in *Literary Matters*, "Built into this structure is the inadequacy of the six-line consolation to the eight-line problem."⁵ The problem introduced in the octave of "Requited Love" is that the lovers have fallen into the comfortable "silence" of marital routine, which has drained their relationship of passion (or

⁵ Matthew Buckley Smith, "Omnibus Review of Terrance Hayes, Charles Martin, Natasha Trethewey," *Literary Matters* 11, no. 3 (Spring / Summer 2019), <https://www.literarymatters.org/11-3-omnibus-review-of-terrance-hayes-charles-martin-natasha-trethewey/>.

has become a symptom of its lack). The sestet disquiets this silence, if you will, by introducing “fear,” a word anticipated by “restless memory’s knocking chest.”

Though any astute reader of Petrarchan sonnets is prepared for a ninth-line volta, the creaturely care and feeding depicted in the octave of Smith’s poem, along with the placid regularity of his meter, “soothes” or lulls to such an extent that this transition surprises when it arrives. This effect is compounded by Smith’s use of monosyllables in the ninth line (the only other exclusively monosyllabic line besides the first) and his rhyming of “fear” with “year,” a pairing that posits time and time’s passage as one possible source of these nighttime anxieties.

The sestet’s greatest power, however, lies in its recursiveness. The prepared-for fears and uncertainties of the sestet nudge the reader back to the poem’s title and octave in search of an answer to the latent question these last six lines suggest: If this couple *expected* that they’d have to fear pests, strangers, aging, bad investments, and childlessness, what cause for fear overtook them unawares? What this couple did not predict was how predictable “requited love” would be, how willingly they would embrace no longer embracing, and how readily they would abandon passion for the safety of microwaved suppers and TV dramas—still “present” in body but with a “snoring head.” Also unexpected is how deathlike the “soothe” and “silence” of their life together has grown; the only “knocking” to interrupt their stony peace arises unbidden from memory and dream when one partner reaches a hand in half-sleep to pacify the other. This pacification is the only touch exchanged between the two (only her hand is “naked”), and it is a gesture performed by rote in order to keep both parties subdued within the upholstered codependence of affections “held too long.” Smith’s use of the Shakespearean sonnet both emphasizes and challenges the form’s famous predictability.

In her debut collection, *Out of Order* (2022), winner of the 2021 Donald Justice Poetry Prize, Alexis Sears displays a similar tension between formal skill and difficult emotional content; she opens one villanelle with the remarkably understated line of iambic pentameter “One afternoon, my father chose to die” (24). *Out of Order* also contends with its share of unrequited desires; “I’ve always loved what cannot

love me back," she confesses in "When My Best Friend Reminds Me That Nothing Matters" (76). Unlike Smith, however, Sears confronts contentious political issues throughout her book (as in "Protests. Plague. Paralysis." (32)), establishing an evocative tension between the ephemerality of the news cycle and the enduring legacy of poetic traditions ranging from the looser forms of *terza rima*, the *ghazal*, and the prose poem to the formidable rigors of fixed forms like the *sestina*, *canzone*, and *sonnet redoublé*.

One of the most appealing aspects of Sears's work is the rawness of voice and sophistication of style she marries in poems that also display a disarmingly self-deprecating humor. "I'm running out of rhymes," she admits in one sonnet addressed to her prematurely deceased father, "the meter's fucked. I don't have many stories" (39). When Sears sounds these notes in conjunction with a strict metrical framework and rhyme scheme, the results highlight the poet's rare talent for juxtaposing confessional, diaristic candor with classical decorum. Though two or three poems resemble an apprentice's foray into complicated forms, rather than the mature accomplishments of a seasoned maestro, Sears brings to even her shakiest formal experiments an emotional immediacy, psychological complexity, and stylistic panache.

To illustrate, I'd like to consider two sonnets from *Out of Order*. The first, "Sandwich Shop Sonnet," uses the same conventions of the Shakespearean love poem that Phillips repurposes, but uses them to posit a sly thesis about the societal role of the artist. The second, "On the Appearance of Angels," offers a much looser application of the form, shifting focus away from meter and rhyme to emphasize a volta shocking for the jump-cut comparisons it makes between private pain and public turmoil.

One of the strictest sonnets in the book, the following poem presents an understated yet evocative interaction between two "artists": one older and established, one younger and obscure, both female:

Sandwich Shop Sonnet

The *sandwich artist* at the hoagie shop—
a chubby "cool aunt" type with lime-green hair—
asks me, "Do you have a man?" I stop
and think. Should I make up a love affair?

I'll brag about my grungy Boston dude
 whose Smashing Pumpkins T-shirt hides his tats;
 the architect with Mensa aptitude
 (he used to chair the College Democrats).
 An athlete, maybe! Six-foot-three and ripped,
 who tutors prisoners on his free days.
 I'll find a writer type whose brilliant script
 lights up my face and cures my deep malaise.
 But I say, "No," my eyes fixed on my feet.
 She sighs, "Here. Have this ham and swiss. My treat." (54)

As in Phillips's "Crisis," Sears's Shakespearean sonnet entertains fantasies about love and features an initial, premature volta in the fourth line. Sears's third line, the only one in this poem of "fixed ... feet" that isn't composed of ten syllables, embodies through metrical variation the double-take reaction caused by the sandwich-maker's prying question. This line includes three trochees, one monosyllabic foot, and one iamb (*ASKS* me, | | "*DO* you | *HAVE* a | *MAN*?" | | *I STOP*), making it not only the single irregular line within an otherwise highly regularized metrical context, but a metrical aberration that stands out for its mimetic rhythms; the meter stammers temporarily in order to imitate the narrator's psychological state.

This tightly calibrated use of metrical variation forecasts the overall theme of the poem: artistic legacy. The "cool aunt" sandwich artist (a maker in her own right) serves at least two purposes for the younger poet: she "stops" the poet by presenting her with a question that makes the poet "think" and flex her imaginative faculties, and she presents the younger artist, once she has responded honestly to the maker's question, with a gift that sustains her. The fantasy about the lover, which occupies about two-thirds of the poem, is noteworthy because it forces Sears to amalgamate imagination and fancy, undermining the Coleridgean notion that the two are fundamentally incompatible. The "ham and swiss" then becomes a "treat" in two senses. First, it satisfies the physical need of hunger through a donation of free food. Second, this transaction, which has shifted from commerce to compassion, permits the poet to create her own art (the poem) by providing her with energy to proceed and an experience about which to write. The form of the poem emphasizes this theme of nourishing bestowal and legacy, helping Sears, as she puts it on her website, to "gain some control" over circumstances by utilizing poetic tradition

to “make sense of the incomprehensible.”⁶

The other poem channels the Miltonic tradition of political sonnets but without a rhyme scheme and with little metrical regularity. I include it here because of the way Sears places embedded or implied lines of iambic pentameter beside lines that more closely approximate the meter (often falling one syllable short). Consistently inconsistent, Sears’s line withholds or denies meter to evocative mimetic effects, often embodying, as in the “Do you have a man?” line above, psychological turmoil too fierce to contain. This poem, with its Miltonic allusion to angels and its conspicuous ninth-line volta, also gains in emotional intensity whatever it may lack in adherence to formal requirements:

On the Appearance of Angels

There are days I want to eat the moon,
to tear it up with coffee-stained teeth,
to flick it with my tongue. Swallow. Choke.
Cough up little incandescent stars. On windy nights
in Baltimore, I wear sweatpants and a crown. I read
stories online: refugee bans, boys-to-women-to-caskets,
Marines share nude photos of female comrades.
As cop cars made of salt speed down my cheeks,
I ask myself if all the world is bad. Maybe not. I once read
about a soldier who met a black man for the first time
after he was shot in Vietnam, his eyes tainted with sweat
and grime, his blood congealing. As the black man
helped him to his feet, the soldier thought,
This, this is what angels must look like. (77)

Through a rapid-fire toggle through apparently disparate current events (refugees, trans death, misogyny in the military, police violence), Sears risks short-circuiting the low-battery device of this loose sonnet. In this respect, she invokes the *discordia concors* that Johnson perplexingly disparaged in the metaphysical poets, yoking by violence the most heterogeneous ideas;⁷ the paratactical line “As

⁶ Alexis Sears, “About My Writing,” <https://www.alexissears.com/about-my-writing>.

⁷ Samuel Johnson, *The Lives of the Poets: A Selection*, eds. Roger Lonsdale and John Mullan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 16.

cop cars made of salt speed down my cheeks," the poem's only line of iambic pentameter, serves as a particularly disturbing example. But, just as narrator and poem alike are about to crumble under the weight of so much "bad," Sears employs a volta that refreshes the poem for two reasons. First, the poem leaps from a domestic 2022 live-feed context into the drama and trauma of the Vietnam War. Rather than being overwhelmed by headline after headline, Sears takes a breath, slows down, and focuses on one character: a wounded soldier, far from home, who has a transformative, religious vision (or believes he does). Second, after the surprising cop-car tears image, the soldier's observation comes across as naïve, problematic, yet strangely hopeful and oddly transcendent.

This is the brilliant trick of that surprise volta: how much work it accomplishes in so little space. In a more regularized context, Sears might not have been able to achieve such a surprise because the reader might have anticipated the turn, as we do in a stricter sonnet like Smith's "Requited Love." But the final, most compelling aspect of Sears's volta is subtler, more specific to the experience of the poet herself. Given the information the reader has already gleaned about Sears's African American father, a former soldier who died by suicide ("my black / father, once-Marine," she writes in "Hair Sestina" (68)), the white soldier's slip becomes freighted with tragic, and tragically beautiful, implications. The surprise in "On the Appearance of Angels" is certainly amplified by such echoes from elsewhere in the volume, but of primary importance is the high-voltage zap the volta brings to the poem, which then gets adjusted by context.

Like Sears, John Murillo channels Miltonic protest in sonnets that challenge political subjects. Murillo, in his second book *Kontemporary Amerikan Poetry* (2020), has also written a variation on the *sonnet redoublé* in which the first line of a given sonnet becomes the last line of the subsequent. Where Sears uses the *sonnet redoublé* to confront painful, personal material (her deceased father's absence in her life), Murillo employs it to lament, bemoan, and oppose police violence against African American communities across the United States. The sequence, titled "A Refusal to Mourn the Deaths, by Gunfire, of Three Men in Brooklyn" cycles through a nightmarish panoply of tragedies ranging from the LA riots (1992) through the killing of Tamir Rice (2014), using Dylan Thomas's anti-elegy of the London Blitz as a jumping-off point (37–51).

Throughout *Kontemporary Amerikan Poetry*, Murillo launches a convincing critique of both “Kontemporary Amerika” and “Amerikan Poetry.” In addition to providing a compelling and concise example of how Murillo brings twenty-first century American life to bear on a fixed form, the sonnet that ends the book unites conventions of hip-hop with the Shakespearean brag. Here is Murillo’s poem:

Variation on a Theme by the Notorious B.I.G.

It was all a dream. I used to read AGNI magazine—
Martín Espada, Komunyakaa, Philip Levine.
Gripped by dreams of growing to rock a rhyme,
picked up steam when I seen *Where a Nickel Costs a Dime*.
Spent my time weekdays and weekends,
thinking of ways of freakin’ the Nuyorican.
Thursdays were my worst days,
‘cause I had my workshop. But the work paid.

Now I seek the limelight, hope my rhymes might
take me from born sinner to fancy award winner.
From sardines for dinner straight to champagne toasts,
gala seats, meet-and-greets, all down the east coast.
Changed my ways now it’s all in reach—
till I pen my nigger pain and they snatch my seat.

This poem, which takes up the theme of influence (going so far as to name names), never mentions any practitioners of the sonnet or the conspicuous fact of its sonnet-ness. Out of the two most essential formal and stylistic influences on this poem (the Notorious B.I.G. and Shakespeare), Murillo only alludes to the former. Yet Murillo, who refers as Shakespeare does to poetry as “rhyme,” participates in the aspirational mode made famous by the Elizabethans: the sonnet which declares its intentions for the sonnet and sonneteer.

Like Shakespeare’s sonnets, which aspire most often to preserve through immortal versification the poet’s love (“Reserve them for my love, not for their rhyme”) and the beauty of the beloved (“His beauty shall in these black lines be seen”), Murillo confesses to seeking a similar fame (“the limelight”). In this respect, the poem splits the difference, so to speak, between *notoriousness* and *notoriety*, two nouns that share the same Latin root (*notus*, “known”). Murillo aspires to transition “from born sinner to fancy award winner” through poetry.

Borrowing the style, theme, and tone of the Notorious B.I.G.'s track "Juicy" ("It was all a dream, I used to read *Word Up!* magazine"⁸), Murillo connects the "dreams" and "rhymes" of the present with the past. The poet establishes this past/present contrast syntactically and formally by beginning his octave with "I used to" and his sestet with "Now."

Such borrowing allows Murillo to participate in that most essential objective of poetry, which Mallarmé first articulated as "*l'ange / Donner un sens plus pur aux mots de la tribu*" and Eliot adapted in *Four Quartets* (1941) as "to purify the dialect of the tribe."⁹ Like Eliot cribbing Mallarmé (who was elegizing Poe in an Italian sonnet), Murillo chooses to "purify" through an act of homage bordering on pastiche. Hip-hop artists would refer to this kind of repurposing as "sampling": the foundational practice of reworking one aspect of a previous sound recording into a new track. "Juicy," for example, samples from Mtume's 1983 song "Juicy Fruit."¹⁰

Poets have been "sampling," of course, since before Homer set his invocation to the Muse in dactylic hexameters. Shakespeare himself famously imports the plots of his Histories from Holinshed's four-volume *Chronicles of England, Scotlande, and Irelande* (1577). Using an unlikely muse, Murillo appropriates the lyrics and tone of "Juicy" by playing these against the regular pulse of iambic pentameter and the sonnet form in a way that "purifies" both. Another way of putting this is that Murillo "signifies" the sonnet, as Marilyn Nelson viewed this practice in her essential essay "Owning the Masters" (1999), by "paying due homage" through "de-colonizing" this white European form.¹¹

In this respect, Murillo's poem links two seemingly incompatible traditions, hip-hop and the European lyric, a marriage not consum-

8 *The Notorious B.I.G.*, "Juicy," track 10 on *Ready to Die* (Bad Boy Records; Arista Records, 1994), compact disc.

9 T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909–1962* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1963), 204.

10 Josh Russell, "Music Producer Seeks Accounting of His Heavily Sampled Hits," *Courthouse News Service*, July 5, 2018, <https://www.courthousenews.com/music-producer-seeks-accounting-of-his-heavily-sampled-hits/>.

11 Marilyn Nelson, "Owning the Masters," in *After New Formalism: Poets on Form, Narrative, and Tradition*, ed. Annie Finch (Brownsville, OR: Story Line Press, 1999), 9.

mated without risk. “Changed my ways now it’s all in reach,” Murillo writes, “till I pen my nigger pain and they snatch my seat.” The incorporation of Murillo’s “Nuyorican” inflections into the sonnet tradition risks personal harm, as if some Western poetry inquisition stood ready to censor the language of this “born sinner.” By uniting painful aspects of Blackness with this traditionally European form, Murillo has achieved fame (notoriety) at the risk of infamy (notoriousness). By concluding *Kontemporary Amerikan Poetry* with these lines, the poet ends the book with a thud, like a mic drop, challenging potential detractors to unseat him from a “Kontemporary Amerikan” Parnassus. This sort of pose—the poet as tough guy, as “one of the roughs”—is common to both poetry and hip-hop, as we can hear in Biggie’s “packin’ gats” and Murillo’s forcefully anapestic lines from “On Confessionalism”: “hand on a gun, and the gun / in a mouth, and the mouth / on the face of a man on his knees” (3).

But where Biggie performs his hip-hop braggadocio (often referring to himself as “The King”), Murillo confesses vulnerability. In a moment of acerbity, Murillo reveals his expectation that “they” (white literary culture) will take away the “seat” he’s earned as soon as he stops expressing the kind of pain they demand, or starts expressing the kind they abhor. The double-edged pun on “pen” is crucial. Murillo both composes (writes) and confines (imprisons) Black pain. By doing so, he seeks—and indeed achieves—“the limelight”; *Kontemporary Amerikan Poetry* won the 2021 Kingsley Tufts Poetry Award.

The sonnet form, then, serves as both means and end. Composing art according to the expectations of “they” will bring both accolades (“champagne toasts”) and castigation, which Murillo both desires and fears. The phrase “Kontemporary Amerikan” embodies this ambivalence. On the one hand, the poet’s intentional misspelling distresses language in a way that anglophone poets have been doing since the ballad revival of the Romantic period;¹² Coleridge’s antiquated spelling of “Ancyent Marinere,” for example, brings to his poem the illusion of folksy sincerity. On the other, the two *K*’s of Murillo’s distressed phrase cause the reader to “look for the third” (*Ku Klux Klan*)

¹² See Susan Stewart, *Crimes of Writing: Problems in the Containment of Representation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994).

as the poet acknowledged in a 2021 interview, thus representing the malevolent subtlety with which racism can function.¹³

Murillo takes advantage of this kind of subtle-not-subtle approach in the rhythms of his "Variation." Common to the sonnet and hip-hop is a reliance on strong stresses and accentual meter. The comparison of the metrical regularity of hip-hop with formal poetry is one that the New Formalists have often made. In "Disappearing Ink: Poetry at the End of Print Culture," Dana Gioia writes about hip-hop's relationship with English spoken verse, citing examples dating from the origins of rap, including Sugarhill Gang, Run-DMC, and others. Gioia explains that "rap consciously exploits stress-meter's ability to stretch and contract in syllable count."¹⁴ Picking up on rap's indebtedness to jazz syncopation, Gioia continues: "In fact, playing the syllable count against the beat is the basic metrical technique of rap."¹⁵

From Shakespeare to Murillo, metrical poetry does the same. With internal rhyme, Murillo emphasizes his practice of sampling accentual verse and hip-hop syncopation. This technique is most audible in the sonnet's sestet, which provides the only lines that do not end rhyme (or that slant rhyme assonantly). The double internal rhymes of *lime-light / rhymes-might* and *born-sinner / award-winner* pulse behind Murillo's loose iambic pentameter, echoing the Notorious B.I.G.'s "Now I'm in the limelight 'cause I rhyme tight."¹⁶ But Murillo trades Biggie's confidence ("rhyme tight") for anxiety and doubt ("rhymes might"). The rightness of Murillo's verse depends on such historical echoes. Evoking Shakespeare on the one hand, and Biggie on the other, Murillo's poem insists on the legitimacy of both. The innovative sampling Murillo achieves throughout *Kontemporary Amerikan Poetry* also runs contrary to poetry's privileging, since the Romantic period, of originality over imitation.

Commenting on her book-length sonnet sequence *Mother Love* (1995), Rita Dove claims that form in general, and the sonnet in

13 "In the Poetry Library with John Murillo," Claremont Graduate University, November 29, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RH_DFn2oIzk.

14 Dana Gioia, "Disappearing Ink: Poetry at the End of Print Culture," in *Disappearing Ink: Poetry at the End of Print Culture* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2004), 16.

15 *Ibid.*

16 The Notorious B.I.G., "Juicy," track 10.

particular, can serve as “a talisman against disintegration.”¹⁷ As we have seen in love sonnets by Wilkinson, Phillips, and Smith, as well as Miltonic protest sonnets by Sears and Murillo, the rigors of form afford the contemporary American poet the opportunity to achieve the emotional distance necessary to make art out of difficult subjects, to rescue experience from obscurity, and to engage the reader’s imagination through the shared traditions of meter and rhyme. Whether grappling with a marriage that has cooled or struggling to find something—anything—redeeming in the day’s tragic news, form can be a way of connecting with readers on a deeper psychological, emotional, and intellectual level.

Though contradictory at first glance, both conditions are essential to composing lyric poems that matter: emotion *and* tranquility. Philip Larkin brings Wordsworth’s lofty definition down to earth by claiming that poems require both “the fork side” (emotion) and “the knife side” (detachment) with which the poet can dissect experience, “chop it up, arrange it, and say either thank you for it or sod the universe for it.”¹⁸ The sonnet form, with its long tradition spanning more than 750 years, provides poets with a means of stepping back from experience so that they might at least *attempt* objectivity, while also inviting readers into the inner drama of poems that seek, above all, to reach them.

17 Rita Dove, “An Intact World,” in *A Formal Feeling Comes: Poems in Form by Contemporary Women*, ed. Annie Finch (Brownsville, OR: Story Line Press, 1994), 57.

18 Philip Larkin, “An Interview with John Haffenden,” in *Further Requirements: Interviews, Broadcasts, Statements and Book Reviews, 1952–85*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 51.