THE *SRPR* REVIEW ESSAY: EXPOSURE, CONFINEMENT, HAUNTING: VISUAL POETRY IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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Ore Choir: The Lava on Iceland
Katy Didden / illustrations by Kevin Tseng
Tupelo Press, 2022
86 pages; paper, $39.95

Hotel Almighty
Sarah J. Sloat
Sarabande Books, 2020
86 pages, paper, $19.95

Yellow Rain
Mai Der Vang
Graywolf Press, 2021
224 pages, paper, $17.00

Introduction

Whenever I teach a poetry workshop, there is some point in the semester where I feel compelled to repeat Charles Wright's famous edict: "each line should be a station of the cross."[1] Wright's provocation quickly evokes the word-and-image tablets that adorn the walls of most Catholic churches all over the world to recount the story of Christ's condemnation, suffering, and death. On each tablet, one can see the unfolding of Christ's last hours as a mortal on earth—he falls, he's stripped of his garments, he dies on the cross, he's laid in the tomb—then read the caption that summarizes the dramatic action, thus engaging with the correspondence between word and image. As such, it becomes a productive site of meditation for the penitent viewer.

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[1] Halflife: Improvisations and Interviews, 1977–1987 *(University of Michigan Press, 1988), 5.*

My interest in Charles Wright's metaphor is not devotional in nature; it is pedagogical. Whenever I share his quote with students, I emphasize what Wright seems to be asking for: that every poetic line feel complex, urgent, and essential. What interests me most is that Wright's metaphor is possible precisely because of an emblem tradition that foregrounds the interplay between word and image, an interplay that is part of a centuries-old polysemous tradition that activates and moves the viewer/reader.

Of course, every poem, even without an image attached to it, creates its own visual field, and writers have been describing the rhetorical power of this phenomenon for millenia. Simonides of Ceos described poetry as a speaking picture, and painting as a silent poetry as early as the fifth century BCE; and hundreds of years later, Horace echoed this sentiment with his famous phrase *ut pictura poesis* (as with pictures, so too with poetry). In the medieval and early modern periods, poets and writers saw the visual field of a poem as a path to memorization; and in our contemporary moment, writers and artists continue to refer to writing as a kind of drawing. As sculptor Richard Artschweger has argued, language is "a visual sign system and when its function as one kind of communication device—verbal exchange—is altered, it can be put into service as another communication mechanism—art. To do so is to transform language from a closed system into an open field."[2] The relationship between word and image is always dynamic, variable, and full of textures and colors that amplify the charged explorations that one finds there.

This old idea is being recast in new and exciting ways in twenty-first century poetry. In what follows, I will describe how three poets—Katy Didden, Sarah J. Sloat, and Mai Der Vang—foreground the necessity of a visual poetics that excavates and documents, juxtaposes and resurrects. When I say "visual poetry," I am referring to a broad category that includes erasure, ekphrasis, collage, and altered books. It is an experimental field in which poets regularly leap across the chasm between word and image to trouble that distinction, expose what lies beneath authoritative texts, and interrogate and expose forensic documentary evidence. It is a poetics that is always explicitly political, even when it seems playful and aesthetically appealing. It is a poetics that demands that we listen to *and* watch, that we look *and* touch, that we interrogate *and* destabilize what appears to be the fixedness of literary expression.

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[2] *Lisa G. Corrin, "Artschwager's Way: An Introduction to the Notebooks of Richard Artschwager."* Up and Across *(Neues Museum Press, 2000), 11.*

Though erasure is a technique that feels modern, it is a practice that is foundational to writing practices in the West. In the millennia before ballpoint pens, typewriters, computer keyboards, and the easy glide of swipes on smart phones, cutting and erasing were activities inherent to the process of writing. Indeed, the etymology of the word "write" has its deep roots in the Old English *wrîtan* and the Old Saxon *wrîtan*, which mean to score, cut, scratch, lacerate, or tear.[3] In the Renaissance, a writer had to cut a quill with a knife in order in order to create a pen, and then use that sharpened instrument to cut into the paper. In various writing manuals, the quill is described as a tool that necessarily enacts violence with each stroke.[4] Knives were not only required to sharpen the quill; they were also used as erasers. The writer would use the quill with one hand and the knife, or eraser, in the other, correcting by cutting into the paper. In describing this practice, Jonathan Goldberg observes "there can be no act of writing without the knife."[5] So, while early modern writing was certainly a generative act, it required a constant process of cutting and erasing as well.

Modern erasure certainly draws upon this tradition, but it took on a new life in the cut-ups, collages, and other forms of appropriation that originated in twentieth-century surrealist practices. It is a straightforward constraint that requires the poet to erase words on a page of any text until a poem emerges from the words that remain. Though the concept of this procedure is always the same, the materials with which poets perform their procedure vary widely. For example, in *A Little White Shadow* (2006), Mary Ruefle uses Wite-Out to erase text from a nineteenth-century book of the same title. Tom Phillips's epic *Humument* (2005) highlights the potential of erasure to create fullness, whether it be with color, process, or design. Even in books that do not call attention to themselves as visual poetry projects, poets are incorporating erasure as a procedure. In her "Reaching Guantánamo" series from *Look* (2016), Solmaz Sharif deploys erasure as a process of state-sanctioned redaction. The opening pages of Kiki Petrosino's *White Blood: A Lyric of Virginia* (2020) feature a poetic sequence in which Petrosino erases a DNA test in order to foreground the historical erasures of enslaved African people in the Americas.

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[3] *"write, v."* OED Online. *Oxford University Press, December 2022, www.oed.com/view/Entry/230750.*

[4] *Jonathan Goldberg,* Writing Matter: From the Hands of the English Renaissance *(Stanford University Press, 1990), 77.*

[5] *Ibid, 78.*

While erasure suggests a process of excision and vanishing, it is a procedure that is generative for contemporary poets. Katy Didden describes erasure as a kind of "exposure" that took the form of a "core sample," and in her case, what's exposed is the prehistorical voice of lava (71). In some introductory commentary, Sarah J. Sloat characterizes erasure as "a process of discovery and reinvention. Above all, it's about possibility." When discussing the research process that led to the creation of *Yellow Rain*, Mai Der Vang describes the documents that she excavated from the archive, many of which were completely redacted. That state-sanctioned erasure haunted Vang, and as a result, she felt compelled to write into the erasure as a way to honor her ancestors.[6] This generative practice of erasure, when coupled with collage techniques, energizes each of these three collections in spectacular ways.

Part 1: Exposure

Katy Didden has a long-abiding and deeply held interest in the sentience of the natural world and how we engage with that sentience in the Anthropocene. In her first book, *The Glacier's Wake* (Pleiades Press, 2013), Didden uses persona poems to speak from the point of view of wasps, sycamores, and glaciers, and in doing so interrogates their fragility, grief, desire, and the earth's dynamic processes. In *Ore Choir*, Didden deepens and sustains her inquiry, creating a sentient, oracular voice for lava that is powerful in its range and depth. Her process of erasure for this project was complex: first, she chose the source texts that she wanted to erase, all of which have some bearing on the history, culture, and geography of Iceland. The extensive notes at the back of Didden's book provide some insight into the range of texts that she was drawn to in order to create her own texts: Benjamin Franklin's memoir, letters between W. H. Auden and Louis MacNeice, scientific articles from the *Journal of Geodynamics* and *Journal of Geophysical Research*, and an interview with Björk, among others. While most poets erase whole words until other words rise to the surface, Didden often erases until she has only one letter left in a word. She strings those individual letters together to create her poem. She creates grayscale images of each source text so that the reader can see the palimpsest underneath her erasure. Finally, she selects photographs to layer over the erasures. Artist Kevin Tseng worked with Didden to create this layering effect. The result is that each composite image feels like the flow of lava itself.[7]

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[6] *Lily Houston Smith, "Starting with Fire: A Conversation with Mai Der Vang."* The Rumpus, *September 20, 2021, https://therumpus.net/2021/09/20/the-rumpus-interview-with-mai-der-vang/# CivitellaRanieri.*

Didden's procedure, and her attention to the shape of the poems, reinforces the notion of the poem as a visual field with texture, color, and dimension. The result is, in brief, magnificent. Consider, for example, the first poem in *Ore Choir*, one of several that functions as an ars poetica. The voice that emerges in these lines is ostensibly that of lava, but it is also the voice of the poet confronting the ever-present difficulty of creating art:

> Art is central—
>   sun and stone.
>
> I trace the beginning
> of the modern;
>
> I paint vales.
>
> The old fear arises
>   that the public won't care,
>
>   that the sea is the true genius.
>
> I change
>   when I meet air—

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[7] *For more on this process, see Didden's "Notes" on pp. 71–74 of* Ore Choir.

sending embers arcing
                in syncopating showers.

I still blanche at the void.

The answer is,
          again and again,

to erase the ground.

My dearest friends
are drawn to this same fire. (2–3)

Art is as foundational as the sun in the sky and the stones beneath our feet. The speaker fears the negative reception of their work, but they can also recognize the solution: to erase, and thus create, with others, and thus reveal art's power to endure. This first poem of the collection articulates the fear of isolation and rejection that any writer faces while also suggesting that the voices of others—in the source texts, in community with fellow poets and artists—is a form of consolation and productivity.

Here and elsewhere, Didden is attentive to the visual field of the poem, but she also attends to the topography of sounds that she creates. Notice the driving force of the trochaic "Art is central— / sun and stone," the slant rhyme of "sun" and "stone," the steady iambic trimeter of "I change / when I meet air," and the arresting realization, in iambic pentameter, that "My dearest friends / Are drawn to this same fire." This sensitivity to sound is one of Didden's strengths, and the arrangement of these tight lyric poems on the page calls even more attention to their aural textures.

Elsewhere in the collection, the prescience of the lava reminds the reader of the poet as prophet or seer. For example, in "[God moans]," an erasure of the letters of W. H. Auden and Louis MacNeice, both lava and the poetic speaker demand a new kind of attention. When reading these poems, the reader must contemplate the nature of seeing and poetry as a kind of divination. The lava describes God as "an eye / roving across the lake" and then arrives at the insight that "to see / is to add shape" (6–7), the "seeing," here, being the sight of the poet who is capable of discernment, of course, but also the reader who contributes to the shape as well. Elsewhere, as in "[The easel leaner]" (14–15), the lava announces that "the cliffs / are an archive of gestures," suggesting that the cliffs, too, are sentient and capable of affect and connection.

The movement of the color photographs dripping, lava-like, along and between each letter of Didden's erasures requires one kind of meditation, while the extracted poem creates another. "[Ocean-erased]" is an erasure of the text of an interview with Björk. Here, notice how the speaker is full of yearning as well as disaffection:

> Ocean-erased,
>   I didn't feel real.
>
> I wanted
>   iron songs,
>   ample time,
>   a sphere concert,
>   an ore choir—
>
> the core's sly music.

In this poem, and in others, too, lava speaks in the past tense, as if belatedly. What the lava wanted—songs made of iron, ample time, a choir made of ore, the entirety of the globe performing in unison—seems to have never come to pass. The core's music is "sly," as if the origins of the earth aren't ever truly knowable, and perhaps are gone or lost for good.

Elsewhere in the collection, this belatedness points to catastrophe in more explicit ways, and poses ethical challenges to humans as well. In "[The Ore]," for example, ore forms in order to put an end to capitalism, which is "wilder than / a massive volcanic eruption" (56). In "[Some scan situations]," an erasure of an article about the "eerie appearance" of a landscape transformed by disaster, the lava asks this question, thus asserting its foreknowledge of events to come as well as its hope that humans will support one another when the catastrophe arrives: "Will you   lean on each other / When I   wreck the seasons?" (58) Will we be capable of compassion and support as climate change threatens our annihilation? The inevitability of lava's action, and the uncertainty of the answer to lava's question, remind the reader of the ethical imperative of this collection: to be aware of the sentience of the Earth; to recognize each person's full humanity; and to listen very carefully to the dialogue between Earth and humans.

2. Confinement

Emblems are art objects that foreground an image and provide textual information that explicates, summarizes, or offers a didactic treatment of the image. For centuries, emblems have been disseminated for pedagogical, devotional, and literary uses. Emblems have an indexical function—that is, they point to what you will learn, and then they perform an illustration of that lesson. That kind of visual and linguistic correspondence and reinforcement is what makes them both pleasurable and memorable.[8]

Like "erasure," the word "emblem" suggests difficulty, even violence, in the translation from image to idea. Scholars trace the word "emblem" to ancient Greek, where it referred to the inserting or inlaying of a mosaic, the imprint of an image, as in a medallion or appliqué, or the process of grafting a cultivated branch onto a wild tree.[9] The word has its origins in a range of pressing, inserting, or grafting practices which served to ingrain memories into the mind of the viewer or reader. This mode of creation never really went away; it's just shifted over time. In the early twentieth century, collage became a not-so-distant cousin to the emblem: like the word "emblem," "collage" also has its origins in pressing and adhering: it comes from the French *coller*, the verb for "to paste" or "to glue."[10] Collage, like the emblem, conflates disparate elements in order to both fuse them in strangeness, call attention to their differences, and create a powerful image worth remembering. For these reasons, I see a connection between those medieval, early modern, and avant-garde practices and the visual poetry of Didden, Sloat, and Vang. We are living in a moment when the ease of four-color printing, high-resolution JPEG files, and innovative layout and design techniques allow for easier dissemination of this groundbreaking work.

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[8] *Mary Carruthers,* The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture *(Cambridge University Press, 1992), 17.*

[9] *Daniel Russell, "Du Bellay's Emblematic Vision of Rome,"* Yale French Studies *47 (1972), 98–109, p. 105.*

[10] *As Louis Aragon observed, the process of collage necessarily requires that the viewer perform a kind of "double reading": "that of the fragment perceived in relation to its text or origin; [and] that of the same fragment as incorporated into a new whole, a different totality. The trick of collage consists also of never entirely suppressing the alterity of these elements reunited in a temporary composition." Qtd in Marjorie Perloff,* The Futurist Moment: Avant-Garde, Avant Guerre, and the Language of Rupture *(University of Chicago Press, 1986), 47.*

Each line should be a station of the cross. Of the three books that I explore here, none is more explicitly attentive to this dictate, and the emblem structure and thought embedded in it, than Sarah J. Sloat's *Hotel Almighty.* The original text for Sloat's book is Stephen King's *Misery*, a novel that centers on the isolation, confinement, and victimization of a novelist. At the top of most pages, "Misery" appears as a header, functioning as a kind of motto, and then Sloat's erasure and collage provide a pictorial experience that points back to that motto. I have read Sloat's book several times over the past year, and each time I do, I am struck by how powerfully her poems interrogate two frequently overlapping problems: the difficulty of the writing process, and the challenges of living in confinement during an illness. Reading her book now, in early 2023, I cannot help but think of the various forms of confinement that we have all endured with COVID-19—first in lockdown, then as pandemic, and now as endemic—and the ways in which that catastrophe has disrupted our collective thinking about relationality and solitude.[11] Misery, indeed.

Sloat deploys a number of artistic techniques to create her effects. Often, like Mary Ruefle, she uses Wite-Out or perhaps correction tape to erase lines; other times, she erases with a colored pencil or pastel. She almost always inserts a visual object—abandoned canoes from vintage postcards, vernacular black-and-white photographs, and illustrations from old encyclopedias, advertisements, and instruction manuals—in order to create a conversation between Stephen King's text and her own. Consider this erasure of page 101 of King's novel, in which the emblem of misery is announced at the top of the page ("Misery"), a small picture of a city tree in wintertime is pasted on to the page, and Sloat's found words are circled in fine black ink:

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[11] *Of course, Sloat created these erasures well before the pandemic, and I do not mean to suggest that my reading is informed by her intentions for the collection. In fact, in her introduction to the book, which she wrote in 2019, Sloat contends that she "abandoned any binding narrative" when creating these pages ("Introduction," unpaginated).*

the sound of the wind
filled

the phone

squeezing into the

line

like

a

nerve awake
at night (6)

Like most of Sloat's erasures, this single sentence contains one simile that creates the primary surprise of the poem. The loneliness of the simile—a sound squeezing like a nerve awake at night—is haunting. Whom is the speaker calling? Why does the wind answer, and why does it squeeze? Through this and other erasures, Sloat is creating a mood that is unsettled, nervous, and alone.

Just as Didden's erasures point to writerly anxiety, so too does Sloat interrogate the process of creation and the labor it requires. Notice what she does with a page of King's novel:

I got rid of
contempt,
the wooden sound
of it
'I picked my way back

like

an artist,

going to

sketch the ruins. (25)

In this collage, Sloat uses what appears to be white correction tape to conceal most of the source text. With the phrase "I got rid of/contempt," Sloat is providing insight into what it takes to create: avoid contempt, claw your way back from it, and create again. This insight is juxtaposed with a cluster of images that Sloat has inserted in the middle right portion of the page: a tiny silhouette, a bouquet of red peonies, a flower pattern, and the sketch of a conical shape. These images feel like they are providing a peephole for the viewer to look "beyond one image through to another."[12]

Elsewhere, Sloat describes the strangeness of time when one is isolated, and her observations take on another valence when read in the era of COVID-19. One collage emphasizes distance with the insertion of a tiny apartment building and an upside-down astronaut. Her found text reads:

for a long time

I think about

isolated things like

neighbors
like

a small
house
and the wind

somewhere

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[12] *Bev Speight,* Project: Collage *(Hachette, 2019), 141.*

checking

how many people could there be (58)

Later, Sloat continues this concern with time and solitude, erasing King's text with a turquoise pencil and inserting two disembodied hands from a black-and-white photograph (30). In between the hands, she pastes a spray of lavender confetti and circles the erased text in fine black ink:

A long moment

could

weigh as much as fifty pounds.
no alloys, no plastics . . .

no

trouble

once you get the hang of it. (30)

Upon a first glance, the hands seem to be juggling the lavender confetti, which suggests a disembodied playfulness; however, as Jennifer DeVere Brody has suggested, those lavender confetti chads carry a charge that might connote queerness—not only in a sexual sense, but in a sense of looking at things askew or off to the side.[13] Sloat uses confetti techniques throughout the collection. Sometimes her points are quite small and seem reminiscent of the pointillism of Georges Seurat; other times, her dots are larger and more playful and seem to be part of the tradition of Yayoi Kusama, Leigh Bowery, Ross Bleckner, and others. Polka dots have been characterized as superficial, decorative, and frivolous; however, they connect Sloat's work to part of a larger avant garde tradition that frames dots as dynamic: as Yayoi Kusama has observed, they are "round, soft, colorful, senseless and unknowing . . . polka dots become movement [. . .] polka dots are a way to infinity."[14] They can also function as "visual data points" that cohere with the message of the poem. For example, during the height of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, some artists incorporated dots and spots into their visual art to allude to Kaposi's sarcoma, while others used dots to mirror the spot maps that indicated points of sexual contact and contagion in various geographical areas.[15] Seeing these confetti dots of varying sizes in Sloat's book is a vivid reminder of the kinds of visual data they contain during a global pandemic.

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[13] *Jennifer DeVere Brody provides a fascinating analysis of the performative value of punctuation of all kinds, including periods-as-dots and polka dots, in* Punctuation: Art, Politics, and Play *(Duke University Press, 2008).*

In the isolation of lockdown, time slows and morphs into another reality, and Sloat's erasure suggests that it has its own weight. In one erasure, the solitude of confinement could dissolve and sociability could return—but when it does, it feels insufficient:

the
interludes are coming back.
what poor

things they are,

torn in several places (53)

Sloat juxtaposes this erasure with a variety of architectural elements—photographs of vbuildings, houses, arches—and organic elements—flower petals, cacti—to create an awareness of how space will change when the interludes come back. Sociability is possible again, but it feels permanently damaged by what we learned in isolation.

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[14] *Yayoi Kusama qtd. in Katy Kelleher, "The History of the Polka Dot, from Minnie Mouse to Yayoi Kusama." April 3, 2018, Artsy.net https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-history-polka-dot-minnie-mouse-yayoi-kusama.*

[15] *Ted Kerr, "Connecting the Polka Dots."* BOMB, *February 7, 2017. https://bombmagazine.org/articles/connecting-the-polka-dots/.*

3. Haunting

In the twenty-first century, poets have been creating a body of poetry inspired by archival research that underscores the power of poetry as a tool of investigation and documentation. At the same time, these poets and their works offer a critique of the very archives that ought to give us a sense of a "real" past. Archives are repositories of cultural and forensic knowledge, and as such, they can be productive sites of inquiry; however, the organization and construction of this knowledge alternately reveals and suppresses the past.

The genre of documentary poetry is rich and varied. It includes Honorée Fanonne Jeffers, who spent years delving into the archives at the Massachusetts Historical Society and the American Antiquarian Society to reframe the life and work of Phillis Wheatley in *The Age of Phillis* (2020). It includes *Habeas Corpus* (2009), in which Jill McDonough uses found materials from legal documents in the Boston Athenaeum and the New York Public Library to write a sonnet sequence about Americans who have been executed over the past four hundred years. Mark Nowak's *Coal Mountain Elementary* (2009) investigates the exploitation of coal miners around the globe, and Martha Collins's *Blue Front* (2006) uses archival materials from the U.S. Custom House Museum in Cairo, Illinois, the Cairo Public Library, and the Illinois State Historical Library to explore the events surrounding a lynching of an African American man that occurred there in 1909. These poets are looking for what is present in the archive, but they're searching for what's missing, too—the secrets, the redactions, the missing documents that offer gaps that they can fill in as makers of new work. In doing so, they question the very power structures that maintain and organize the information.[16]

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[16] *As Jaques Derrida observes, "the meaning of 'archive,' its only meaning, comes to it from the Greek* arkheion*: initially [. . .] the residence of the superior magistrates, the* archons*, those who commanded. The citizens who thus held and signified political power were considered to possess the right to make or to represent the law [. . .] every archive is at once* institutive *and* conservative." Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, translated by Eric Prenowitz (University of Chicago Press, 1996), 2, 7.*

Erasure certainly is a generative process of creation for poets. However, it's important to remember that erasure also has its roots in extra-literary practices, and that processes of redaction have been used to silence and erase the victims of state power. In "The Near Transitive Properties of the Political and Poetical: Erasure," Solmaz Sharif identifies the political valences that are embedded in the process. As she rightly notes, "Erasure means obliteration. The Latin root of obliteration (*ob-* against and *lit(t)era* letter) means the striking out of text [. . .]."[17] Government redaction renders "information illegible" and makes "the reader aware of her/his position as one who will never access a truth that does, by state accounts, exist."[18] Such practices "invoke fear and paranoia via inaccessibility" and "fashion text into a dead end."[19] Erasure, then, is not just a poetic process but also a precondition of state power.

Sharif's insights bear upon Mai Der Vang's *Yellow Rain*, which draws upon the "clutter of information" that she found in the archive as she attempted to extract any kind of knowledge from the redacted materials that she found there.[20] At every turn, *Yellow Rain* illustrates this point. Vang's text both emulates and interrogates the erasure of war crimes committed against the Hmong people during the Secret War that lasted from 1960 to 1975. Though Laos was a neutral state, the CIA trained Hmong people in Laos to fight against Communists who were coming from Southern Vietnam to infiltrate the area. Because the war was technically illegal, the CIA referred to it as that Secret War. More bombs were dropped on Laos during the Secret War than anywhere else in human history, and even now, dozens of Laotians die every year from stepping on bombs that have not yet detonated.[21]

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[17] *Solmaz Sharif, "The Near Transitive Properties of the Political and Poetical: Erasure"* Evening Will Come: A Monthly Journal of Poetics*, Issue 28, April 2013, https://thevolta.org/ewc28-ssharif-p1.html.*

[18] *Ibid.*

[19] *Ibid.*

[20] *Lily Houston Smith, "Starting with Fire: A Conversation with Mai Der Vang."* The Rumpus*, September 20, 2021. https://therumpus.net/2021/09/20/the-rumpus-interview-with-mai-der-vang/# CivitellaRanieri.*

[21] *For more details about the Secret War, visit the Legacies of War website: https://www.legaciesofwar.org/legacies-library.*

When the war ended in 1975, the Hmong people who had helped US forces fight Communism fled Laos, and in the process, they were exposed to a poison that has been described as "yellow rain": "specks descending from aircraft overhead, falling onto trees, into water, and onto skin. Specks of a mysterious substance ranging in color [. . .] specks of illness and death" (5). The source of this poison, and even its precise chemical composition, has been contested by researchers for decades.

Perhaps we imagine that poets write toward knowing, toward finding an answer to the most complex problems. But sometimes that simply isn't possible. In *Yellow Rain*, Vang sustains her inquiry into what happened when thousands of Hmong refugees were poisoned by yellow rain. She aims to honor her ancestors with the lessons she acquires in the archive, only to find concealment, redaction, a superfluity of inconclusive documents, and what appears to be purposeful confusion. Vang frequently incorporates archival images into her poetry in order to reveal the sensation of that confusion.

What Mai Der Vang is interested in is the lost-ness, the adriftness, the confusion. In the first poem of the collection, "Guide for the Channeling," she is Dante-like in her desire for a straight path:

> Toward a worn legacy
> of rain, I have been lost
> down every jungle path,
>
> adrift and senseless to
> split open a cascade of
> knowing [. . .]
>
> Here is the talk: biological
> weapon, yellow spots,
>
> apiary blame, for decades
> to wane and cold
> filed. Believe me as a
>
> torch of this wandering
> that I have been digging
> within the origins of
>
> redaction. Believe where
> I am sending you[. . .] (6–7)

Vang's poem establishes many of the obsessions and concerns that appear throughout the book: a sense of how thorough Vang has been in her search for answers; the exhaustion that it has created, even as she forges on; and the emphatic desire to be believed. Indeed, that repetition—"believe me as a / torch [. . .] Believe where / I am sending you"—exemplifies the fear that she and other members of the Hmong community have: that because Western forensics have not been able to determine the nature of the chemical weapons used against them, that perhaps the poisoning never happened at all. As Solmaz Sharif has observed, redaction is a tool of the state, and Vang had to grapple with this in very explicit ways as she exhaustively searched government archives in order to understand how and why the Hmong people were poisoned by chemical warfare during the Secret War.

Throughout this collection, Vang regularly incorporates archival documents and photographs as watermark graphics that appear alongside or beneath her text. In "The Fact of the Matter Is the Consequence of Ugly Deaths," Vang juxtaposes a graphic of a declassified cable from the National Security Archive. Its forensic appearance suggests the possibility of revelation, but upon closer inspection, the viewer sees that it is a faint photograph of a completely redacted document. This poem was inspired by an ethically fraught episode of Radiolab, in which the podcast hosts perform a kind of erasure on the suffering of their Hmong interviewees.[22] Though their aim was to unearth the truth about yellow rain, the hosts were ultimately dismissive of the narrative that Eng Yang and his niece Kao Kalia Yang were sharing. The hosts of Radiolab received a lot of criticism for their treatment of the Yangs in this episode. This has a direct bearing on the final lines of Vang's poem:

                    You refuse our dead,

As though
We were never alive.

Just say what you mean to say, that is:

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[22] *Jad Abumrad and Robert Krulwich, "The Fact of the Matter."* Radiolab *podcast. September 24, 2012. https://radiolab.org/episodes/239470-the-fact-of-the-matter.*

Hmong,
Keep
Your dying
To yourself. (11)

After the Hmong people reported illness and even instances of death from yellow rain, the United States government asked individuals for samples of their bodily fluids so that researchers might learn more about this chemical weapon. In "Blood Cooperation," Vang reveals how feckless the collection, transportation, and preservation of the samples was, and how any research conducted was bound to be inconclusive. The poem begins with two epigraphs that include quotes from cables from the US Embassy in Bangkok that confirm that the samples were damaged (47). Vang reproduces a watermark graphic underneath her text that features photographs of test vials and labels. Again, the images provide a fantasy of thoroughness, of forensic evidence that will bring Vang toward a discovery, but they fall short at every turn. Her poetry is an indictment of this carelessness:

You've already scorned our hillsides,
Stripped into the ecology of our songs.

Now you beg for our blood, beseech us
Down to bruising kernel with no valley

To reclaim our roofs [. . .]
leave us in a

Daze to wander these camps in a state
Of vague withholding. (47)

The lengths of Vang's couplets align with the grayscale redaction lines that appear in the watermark image on the page, and the consonance of her sounds in some passages—*bed, blood, beseech, bruising*—emphasize the countless assaults that the Hmong people endured, and the assonance of her sounds—*daze, state, vague*—lengthen and slow the lines, even as the couplets remain balanced, taught, and regimented. A sequence of poems about the specimens continues to sprawl across several more pages, the watermark images appearing again and again, as if to suggest that the documentation of these mistakes is exhausting, overwhelming, and ultimately futile.

Often, Vang's archival documents achieve the effects of collage as she arranges and layers her archival materials. Old photocopies of messages sent via cable from the Pentagon and documents that are redacted or labeled "CONFIDENTIAL" create their own visual field that invokes, as Solmaz Sharif says, "fear and paranoia via inaccessibility." Vang's arrangements of materials are particularly compelling when she arrives at patterns of repetition and juxtaposes them against the found text of messages conveyed via cable. In one found poem titled "Ever Tenuous," Vang reproduces what appears to be a list of samples and their status after shipment from Laos to labs in the United States:

> TH841004-121MS BLOOD (CRACKED IN SHIPMENT)
> TH841004-122MS BLOOD (CRACKED IN SHIPMENT)
> TH841004-123MS URINE
> TH841004-124MS BLOOD
> TH841004-125MS BLOOD (CRACKED IN SHIPMENT) [. . .] (58)

The itemized list of samples goes on, with the repeated phrase "(CRACKED IN SHIPMENT)" appearing after many of the samples. The repetition of these lines suggests order and efficiency which is juxtaposed with the disorder that destroyed the samples. In the section titled "Composition 2," Vang creates a collage of found materials from the archive. Her chaotic arrangement points to the ways in which the Hmong people are turned into scientific categories of study, rather than a group of complex human beings:

> Human subjects
> Example Yellow rain
> Activity
>
> project project project project project project
> project project project project project project
> project project project project project project
> [redacted] [redacted] [redacted] [redacted] [redacted] [redacted] (78)

The repetition of the word "project" juxtaposed with "subjects" and "example" creates a critical distance between the horrors that the Hmong people have endured during the Secret War and the ways in which their bodies have been turned into specimens that will yield no reliable data.

The lab technicians responsible for receiving these damaged samples expressed their frustration in the following cable that Vang found in the Armed Forces Medical Intelligence Center, with the subject heading “Breakage problems”:

> *1984 October 31*
>
> ARRIVED IN A DEPLORABLE CONDITION. ALL SAMPLES HAD THAWED–THIRTY PERCENT OF THE GLASS TUBES CONTAINING BLOOD WERE BROKEN AND LEAKING. THIS RESULTED IN A SERIOUS BIOLOGICAL HAZARD WHICH COULD HAVE BEEN AVOIDED IF THE RECOMMENDED PROCEDURES HAD BEEN FOLLOWED. AFMIC WILL NOT ACCEPT FUTURE BLOOD SAMPLE SHIPMENTS UNLESS THEY ARE PROPERLY PACKAGED. (58)

The writer’s use of the passive—*were broken*, *were leaking*, *which could have been avoided*, *had been followed*—does not blame any one person or group for the mishandling of the samples, but suggests a broad level of carelessness and disregard for protocols. Not only does this create a biological hazard for the researchers, but it also means that there is no way for them to conclusively determine how the Hmong people were poisoned.

At the beginning of this section, I described Vang’s first poem from *Yellow Rain* as Dante-esque, but not just because she alludes to getting lost. The book is epic in its depth and breath, and to read it feels like an exploration of hell. The archive that Vang excavates is enormous, and all of her attempts to find answers to the questions surrounding yellow rain—and the serious bureaucratic failures that obfuscated any potential discoveries—are maddening. To read this book, one gets the sense of how exhaustive Vang’s years-long project was, and how exhaust*ing* it must have been. The archives that she engages with ensures that the Hmong people remain in a purgatory of suffering. In one poem titled “We Can’t Confirm Yellow Rain Happened, We Can’t Confirm It Didn’t,” Vang borrows found material from several documents and assembles them to emphasize this infuriating limbo:

Expert-bounding   between what we know
and what they’ve told   we can sell
you this much fact: these people   forever canceled out
in a perpetual chasm   of   in-between
immortal   vacillation
of now and never   never there nor here [. . .]

Here lie
the ashes

of our
sanity. (71)

At the end of Dante's *Inferno*, the poet and Virgil ascend from hell "to the bright world" until, "through a small round opening ahead of us / I saw the lovely things the heavens hold, / and we came out to see once more the stars" (34.134, 137–139).[23] For Vang and the Hmong people, the heavens only hold the specter of the yellow rain that fell from the sky, and the harm that it continues to afflict on them. In the penultimate poem in Vang's collection, she may not be able to "see once more the stars," but she can create her own radiant energy to find her way toward love and reconciliation with the horrors of the past:

I gather sharpness of my
Burn, beyond agony for an
Answer: it is not to know
The shape of what happened
But to know it happened, it
Happened, it happened. Here I
Make my light to gaze the
Trail. Then sing this rain threadbare
Into storm. If love is
The sacrament of digging, then
Here I hold my found into fire. (179)

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[23] *Dante,* The Divine Comedy, Volume 1: Inferno, *translated by Mark Musa. Penguin, 1984.*