

**Our Life in Poetry: New Poets/New Poetics**

**January 29, 2008**

**7:00 PM**

**The Philoctetes Center**

**Levy: Francis Levy**  
**Nersessian: Edward Nersessian**  
**Braziller: Michael Braziller**  
**Calvocoressi: Gabrielle Calvocoressi**  
**Jordan: A. Van Jordan**  
**Rosal: Patrick Rosal**

**A: Speaker from audience**

Levy: Welcome to Our Life in Poetry: New Poets/New Poetics. I must say this is the youngest group of poets we've had here at the Philoctetes Center, and you're also alive, which is different than some of the other poets. We're really working in that direction. We want the living.

I'm very proud to introduce Michael Braziller. Mike Braziller is president and publisher of Persea Books, a literary publishing company that he founded in 1975. Mike will moderate tonight's panel and introduce our other distinguished—I don't know how to put this—young poets. Thanks, Mike.

Braziller: Thanks, Frank, and I'd like to thank Ed Nersessian, Ellen Fertig, Adam Ludwig and Polly Rosenwaik for their help—and Patricia Brody was a special help organizing this particular panel. This is a Philoctetes poetry first, a reading by three accomplished young writers, followed by discussion of formative pressures and influences, and what of their lives has come into their poems. Each will read for about ten or fifteen minutes, and then talk for a little while, generally about when poetry first occurred in their lives and about their life in poetry. We'll look a little—it's inevitable—at the regional, the local, family, street, neighborhoods, small town, coming of age, along with social awareness, politics, social criticism.

Gabby Calvocoressi is the recipient of numerous awards and fellowships, including a Stegner fellowship in Poetry, a Jones Lectureship in Poetry at Stanford University, and a Rona Jaffe Woman Writers' Award. Her poem, "Circus Fire, 1944," received *The Paris Review* Bernard F. Connors Prize. Her first collection, *The Last Time I Saw Amelia Earhart*, was published by Persea Books in 2005 and won the Connecticut Book Award. It was short-listed for the Northern California Book Award. Ms. Calvocoressi teaches in the MFA program at California College of Arts in San Francisco and in the MFA program in Creative Writing at Warren Wilson College. Her second collection, *Apocalyptic Swing*, is forthcoming.

A. Van Jordan is the author of *Rise*, which won the PEN/Oakland Josephine Miles Award and was selected for the Book of the Month Club from the Academy of American Poets. His second book, *M-A-C-N-O-L-I-A*, was awarded an Anisfield-Wolf Award and listed as one the Best Books of 2005 by *The London Times*. Mr. Jordan was awarded a Whiting Writers Award in 2005 and a Pushcart Prize in 2006, and is a recent recipient of a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship.

His latest book, *Quantum Lyrics*, was published in July 2007. He is an Associate Professor of English at the University of Texas at Austin, and serves on faculty of the MFA program at Warren Wilson College.

Patrick Rosal is the author of two full-length poetry collections, *Uprock Headspin Scramble and Dive*, which won the Asian American Writers' Workshop Members' Choice Award, and *My American Kundiman*, which won the Global Filipino Literary Award. His chapbook, *Uncommon Denominators*, won the Palanquin Poetry Series Award from the University of South Carolina. His poems and essays have been published widely in journals and anthologies, including *Indiana Review*, *The Literary Review*, *North American Review*, *Columbia*, and *The Beacon Best*. His work has been honored by the annual Allen Ginsberg Awards, the James Hearst Poetry Prize, the Arts and Letters Prize, and Best of the Net. He is currently Visiting Professor of Creative Writing at The University of Texas at Austin.

Once again, we're going to be treated to a reading of each of these remarkable writers, and then a brief biographical talk after each one has read. So Gabby, do you want to get started?

Calvocoressi: Absolutely. It's wonderful to be here tonight. Thank you so much for having me. I can't get over being in this circle. That's wonderful.

I'll start with a few poems from my first book, and then move into poems from the second book, which is autobiographical in a different kind of way. But I thought I would start by reading a few poems about an adult drive-in that was located near my home. My family owned drive-in movie theaters. We did not own the adult drive-in movie theater. If we did I probably wouldn't be here. I'd be, like, rolling around in my money somewhere. But this is what happens when you want to write a poem about your grandparents' drive-in movies and that doesn't work out. I'll just read three of them:

From the Adult Drive-in"

I.

The hill, no the body unbroken  
By the strip mall's lights arced  
Harp of her pelvic bone a mouth

Falling upon it like corn cut down  
In a field I was forbidden  
To walk through. There are so many

Kinds of darkness: her arms tied  
To the bed, the shadow they cast  
On the sheets whose brightness

Illuminates the hushed cars lying below.  
Dark mouth surrounding the root  
Or pressing against an opening,

A dog furrowing into the mole's home  
Following some distant trembling warmth.

II.

Following some distant trembling warmth  
I go to the field where the drive-in stood  
And imagine the women kneeling down again

Their bodies splayed against the night sky.  
The headlights on the hill formed constellations  
I could trace from one form to another.

What was it they wanted that I wanted too?  
Her body laid bare, the small of her back  
Sure against the man's hand, my hand

An orchard fire warming blossoms unseen  
From the roadside. Her mouth finds the woman's  
Thigh, that darkness, and we are all moaning

In the pasture. I am the only one hidden  
Having walked here through the darkening pines.

Having walked here through the darkening pines/  
The woman finds her lover in the abandoned  
House, some hunter's cabin, feathers everywhere.

She's been running, has been pursued, a jealous  
Husband who wants her. Is she afraid? Who cares.  
We want the fucking to start. The field is so full

Of hunger that when she bends over the cars  
Seem to move forward without being turned on  
Two women moving inside each other.

He's coming for them sure as raccoons in grain  
Pails. Their pale skin washes the screen  
So we're almost snow blind. They can't see us

Or him, for that matter, huge in the doorframe.  
He's beginning to unbuckle his pants.

Calvocoressi: There are a lot of poems that take place in this town. There was pornographic  
theaters and there was football. And other things too. And me, stuck inside my locker.

(She reads “Every Person in this Town Loves Football”)

Calvocoressi: This is called “A Love Supreme.”

You beautiful, broke-  
back horse of my heart. Proud,  
debonair, not quite there

in the head. You current  
with no river in sight.  
Current as confetti

after parades. You  
small-town. Italian  
ice shop next to brothels

beside the highway.  
Sweet and sweaty. You high  
as a kite coming

down. You suburban sprawled  
on the bed. You dead? Not  
nearly. Not yet.

Calvocoressi : This new book is called *Apocalyptic Swing*. I loved boxing when I was little, for lots of reasons—some sort of probably better than others.

“Boxers in the Key of M”:  
As in *Marvelous* and *Macho* as in Leon’s  
younger brother Michael, a name I learned

in Catholic school. Saint Michael of the mat,  
of the left hook and the deafening blow,

of teeth glistening as they made their arc  
to the laps of women sitting ringside.

You don’t like to see a man get knocked out  
cold? Then you’ve never lived in Hartford

or any town of boarded windows. Have you  
ever gotten hit or thrown against a wall?

There’s a sweetness to it, that moment when  
your God would forgive you anything. One

punch free as yesterday's papers. Marvelous  
the way his body moved on the TV

screen. And me? I moved around the room,  
bobbed and weaved. I learned to hold my breath

so I could fight with my head held under water.

Calvocoressi: I asked Pat if he would mind if I read this to him twice this week. Both of these poets mean so much to me. In the last two and a half weeks I've read "R&B" by Van Jordan twice a day every single day. And Pat's books have meant so much, and so I thought maybe we could have a conversation. This poem is called "Praying with Pat," and the title is also based upon the Mingus song "Praying with Eric," which is for Eric Dolphy. But it's also autobiographical.

(She reads "Praying with Pat")

Calvocoressi: I'll just read one more. This is called "Rosary Catholic Church." I think I might start my biographical talk a little bit by saying that one of the reasons I started writing poems—it's interesting being here tonight for lots of reasons—but one is that my mother's mental illness and subsequent suicide when I was thirteen was a tremendous influence on sort of this unspeakable thing happening, and trying to find a way to make some sense of what could not be spoken about, and at that point was very taboo. It's still taboo to talk about it in a lot of ways. As she became more mentally ill, her relationship to religion became very different, so that everything in our life was metaphor. I mean everything. God was someone I was quite drawn to and quite terrified of, as well. Her troubles began in 1964, in the summer when she was pregnant and sent to a home for wayward girls, and that is the same summer that churches all over the country were being bombed. So I'm sort of working on this idea of fervor and faith.

(She reads "Rosary Catholic Church")

Calvocoressi: I guess I'll talk for a few minutes. So this sort of unspeakable thing happened when I was thirteen years old, and there was total silence in my house about it, as there had been about my mother's illness. I just began writing these things. I didn't know what they were. I guess they were poems. At the same time I lived in this very small town. I had grown up in this very small town with my grandparents, and my grandfather was a lawyer, and so everyone would come to the house, and one thing I began noticing very quickly was that everybody would tell the same story, but totally differently. Everyone comes in and would say, "Well, this person did this to me, and this is what happened." Then someone else would come, and the same story, but something totally different. That became something that was very interesting to me, and I think it continues to be in my work: the idea of how everyone can see one situation, but speak about it in very different ways.

I was thinking about this, the idea of biography and what made me start writing—I say this also because I have many very dear friends in this audience—was that I grew up in a family that was really interested in music, and particularly my grandfather was very interested in opera, and so I grew up in a house where there was a kind of narrative going on that I was listening to, but I

didn't understand the language it was being sung in. I was always listening to stories where somehow I knew the arc of what was happening, but not because of something I was being told through a language I understood. I think that has a lot to do with something that goes on underneath my work.

Now I live a lucky life of getting to have seen Van a couple of weeks ago, as we teach together, and getting to be in the presence of Pat whenever I can be, and Michael and Karen Braziller and Gabe Fried, who save my life on a regular basis. So my biography is it's a lucky life.

Braziller: Okay. I have some questions for you on these early formative things you're talking about, but we'll circle back to it.

Calvocoressi: Yes.

Braziller: The poems speak for themselves, and it was a great reading. Why don't you read some poems and then we'll circle back. We'll all have questions.

Jordan: Oh, where do I begin? That was so lovely. I'm just still basking in Gabby's voice right now.

Thank you all for coming out tonight. Not only to allow us to read poems, but actually to talk about our work and ourselves in a way that we normally never have an opportunity to do. I started out with a very different mission tonight when I was coming here, thinking about what I was going to read. Then when I got, I guess in the green room, people were telling me that we were going to talk more about ourselves. So I'm going to read some poems I normally don't read too much. I have them in the book, but I don't often read them in these settings.

I'm going to start off with a poem called "Black Light." In this book, *Quantum Lyrics*, what I'm looking at, working with, is physics as a metaphor throughout the book, the unifying theme. The central issue within the book, though, is male vulnerability, and trying to wrestle with the public and private personas of men. There's a large section in the center that deals with Einstein and his relationship to the pre-Civil Rights Movement. There are sections that deal with comic book superheroes, and then there are these sections that are more personal, and I'm going to read some of these. I think I actually might read some of the comic book stuff, too.

Braziller: What's the title of the poem? It was a poem I read just this morning about a fast food place. It was about one of these poems you're talking about.

Jordan: Yeah, that's "R&B."

Braziller: That's "R&B?" Okay, that's the second request now.

Jordan: Yeah, okay. This is called "Black Light." I don't know if folks remember black light bulbs from house parties. I'm going to get very high-brow.

Our bodies cast a shadow of one  
body under a black-bulb pulse  
in your mother's basement. Light, even

when it's black, moves faster than  
youth or old age; it's the constant  
in our lives. But I remember when

I thought your house--always ready  
for a party, even during the week—  
was the fastest element in my life.

Toenails, lint, teeth,  
eyes—everything was holy  
under the glow. I suspect

even my bones radiated  
when we danced, which was always more  
of a grind than a dance.

Whether the song sung came  
from Rick James or Barry White,  
we called what we did in the coatroom

dancing, too: My hands, ultraviolet  
under your dress, but innocent. We  
were only kids, after all,

I was 16 and you were a woman of 18.  
Already, we knew how to answer each other  
without asking questions, how to satisfy by seeing

what nearly satisfied looked like  
in each other's faces. This all before  
I ran out to sneak back into my mother's

house in the middle of the night.  
But, now, it's eight years later,  
you're walking, it seems, so I offer

you a ride. And you look in and smile.  
And when I see you I wonder  
what would have happened

if we had stayed in touch. I have to get back  
to work the next morning in DC,  
a five-hour drive/; it's near dark

and I want to get on the road before night

falls completely, but I stop anyway.  
It's been too many years,

and I mistake your gesture.  
Then I realize you  
don't really recognize me,

until you back away and turn  
on your heel.  
Then a man with a Jheri curl

and a suit that looks like its woven  
from florescent lighting  
walks up and looks at me

like I wasn't born in this town,  
and for the first time in my life,  
I question it myself. He walks up as slow

and sure as any old player should on Sunday night.  
While walking away, you two exchange  
words. You don't look back. But

we see each other in our heads—aglow,  
half-naked—under our black-bulb pulse  
in your mother's basement. Given a diadem

by the lucid night and the street lamps's  
torch, the man wearing the florescent  
suit casts a broad shadow

like a spotlight into which you step.  
Maybe he's the reason we're here tonight  
beneath these dim stars, casting

a light true enough...finally,  
for us, after all these years, to see each other.

Jordan: I'm also battling a cold. This next poem is about my first day in college as an undergrad, at orientation with my mom. I come from a very blue collar family—you know, the typical story: the first generation to go to college. Somehow I ended up at a small liberal arts college in central Ohio, and it was a very different cultural experience for me. I went to a vocational inner-city public high school, and ended up at this school.

This is called "Orientation: Wittenberg University, 1983." It's sort of a relaxed sestina. You'll hear the right hand margin: I, color, people, experiences, experiences, people, color, I; ready, fall, study, loss, loss, study, falling, ready. It goes like that. Okay.



Orientation: Wittenberg University, 1983

A mock class. My mother and I  
are the only faces of color.  
I've never studied with white people,  
but I've had my experiences.  
And sometimes having experience  
is the only way to study people.  
But is there really a color  
for ignorance when they hurt self? I

can see that I'm not ready.  
The class is titled *The Fall  
and After*, which is a study  
of what happens after waking up: loss.  
At this point, I understand loss  
more than what comes before. A study  
lending itself more to the act of falling,  
and art in itself. How to appear ready

to step into the next stanza of life,  
while tumbling down a page.  
But, for now, in this classroom, the discussion  
of Gauguin, Blake and the Bible  
passes over our heads. Suddenly the Bible  
is a foreign text, in the way they're discussing  
it. I look down at the page  
and it looks as blank as the life

I must have lived up to this moment.  
The new students and the parents  
get into this lecture, talking  
about the art of falling. No hard times  
or unfaithful lovers come up; this time  
the blues can't frame the talk.  
It's clear that, for some, life is a parent's  
attempt to prepare a child for this moment:

when you walk into a room full of the educated  
and you need to know what the hell  
is going on. After class, my mother turns to me,  
and says "You know, you don't..." she pauses,  
"You don't have to do this," which gives me pause;  
she's never said anything like this to me  
before. I knew, even then, without skills any job is hell,  
but then you prepare, you begin your education.

I decide what to do before she even gives me an out,  
while we sit here, on the verge of knowing,  
surrounded by people who sound like they know—  
me with a Jheri curl, she in a wig—setting out

to make a mockery of class, my mother and I.

Jordan: This is “Que Sera Sera.” It’s set in Black Mountain, North Carolina, where I taught for a while down the road at Warren Wilson College.

### Que Sera Sera

In my car, driving through Black Mountain,  
North Carolina, I listen to what  
sounds like Doris Day shooting  
heroin inside Sly Stone’s throat.

One would think that she fights  
to get out, but she wants to stay  
free in this skin. *Fresh*,  
the Family Stone’s album,

came out in ‘73, but I didn’t make sense  
of it till ‘76, sixth grade for me,  
the Bicentennial, I got my first kiss that year,  
I beat up the class bully; I was the man.

But for now, in my head, it’s only ‘73  
and I’m a little boy again, listening  
to Sly and his Family covering Doris’ hit,  
driving down I-40;

a cop pulls me over to ask why  
I’m here, in his town, with my Yankee tags.  
I let him ask a series of questions  
about what kind of work I do,

what brings me to town—you know  
the kind of questions that tell you  
this has nothing to do with driving a car.  
My hands want to ball into fists

But, instead, I tell myself to write a letter  
to the Chief of Police, to give him something  
to laugh at over his morning paper,  
as I try to recall the light in Doris Day’s version

of “Que Sera Sera”—without the wail  
troubling the notes in the duet  
of Sly and Cynthia’s voices.  
Hemingway meant to define  
courage by the nonchalance you exude  
while taking cover within your flesh,  
even at the risk of losing  
what some would call a melody;  
I call it the sound of home.  
Like when a song gets so far out  
on a solo you almost don’t recognize it,  
but then you get back to the hook, you suddenly

recognize the tune and before you know it,  
you’re putting your hands together; you’re on your feet—  
because you recognize a sound, like a light,  
leading you back home to a color:

rust. You must remember  
rust—not too red, not too orange—not fire or overnight  
change, but a simmering-summer  
change in which children play till they tire

and grown folks sit till they grow edgy  
or neighborhood dogs bite those not from your neighborhood  
and someone with some sense says Down, Boy,  
or you hope someone has some sense

who’s outside or who owns the dog and then the sky  
turns rust and the street lights buzz on  
and someone’s mother, must be yours, says  
You see those street lights on don’t you,

and then everybody else’s mother comes out and says  
the same thing and the sky is rust so you know  
you got about ten minutes before she comes back out  
and embarrasses you in front of your friends;

ten minutes to get home before you eat and watch  
the *Flip Wilson Show* or *Sanford and Son* and it’s time for bed.  
And it’s rust you need to remember  
when the cop asks, What kind of work you do?

It’s rust you need to remember: the smell  
of summer rain on the sidewalk  
and the patina on wrought-iron railings on your front porch

with rust patches on them, and the smell

of fresh mowed grass and gasoline and sweat  
of your childhood as he takes a step back  
when you tell him you're a poet teaching  
English down the road at the college,

when he takes a step back—  
to assure you, now, that this has nothing to do with race,  
but the rust of a community he believes  
he keeps safe, and he says Have a Good One,

meaning day as he swaggers back to his car,  
and the color of the day and the face behind sunglasses  
and the hands on his hips you'll always remember  
come back gunmetal gray

for the rest of this rusty afternoon.  
So you roll up the window  
and turn the music back on,  
and try to remember the rust caught in Sly's throat—

when the song came out in '73,  
although I didn't get it till '76,  
sixth grade for me, the Bicentennial;  
I got my first kiss that year.

I beat up the class bully.  
I was the man.

Jordan: My father died at the end of 2005, so I have a couple of elegies. This is called "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions."

I place the trombone back  
on its stand, after attempting  
"Summertime" in C major. Childhood  
memories of band camp and lessons  
stream to my embouchure, hands  
and gut, after the ringing in my head  
has passed, and the notes settle,  
it seems, at my feet; I linger  
on a photograph of my family: my parents,  
brothers and nephew. I suppose  
I stare off into it, longer than I mean to,  
thinking of my father, dead eight months  
now.

I turn the TV off  
and sit back down to the horn,

I don't really play anymore,  
you know. I once thought music would be my life.  
And it's simply too easy to try to play  
and say, That's enough, too easy to say,  
At least my nephew plays strings.  
Nothing changes that easily.  
It's in the way the mouthpiece  
refuses to kiss me back, how the ceiling fan  
whirs in the room, yet humidity  
hangs in the air. A need builds in me  
only after struggle builds around me,  
a mythical ether challenging this horn  
with its song stuck in its throat: memory,  
the present moment and all the notes falling  
between them, struggling to get out.

Jordan: I'll just read one more. I'll do "R&B." There's a quick reference to C. Delores Tucker at the beginning of the poem: the Civil Rights activist and former Secretary of State of the state of Pennsylvania. But she really became famous for her work against explicit lyrics in rap music, having explicit lyrics labeled for their misogyny and violence in rap music.

## R&B

Listen long enough to the radio, and you'll think  
maybe C. Delores Tucker was right.  
While the hip world is falling  
in love with rappers with marquee-quality prison records,

I'm falling deeper under the spell of singers  
who can still play a piano. I never needed my female  
vocalists to look good in a thong to feel their voices  
in my bones; I never needed the male crooners to carry

guns to know they'd kill for love.  
I said this the other night, driving  
through Akron a week after my father's funeral,  
trying to find a station without gangsta rap

or smooth jazz. For years, I watched  
my father die, and when the day came,  
my father had already predicted  
the Chicago White Sox would win

it all this year. And on the TV

in his hospice care room,  
as he took his last breath, Jermaine Dye hit  
the first home run of the series....

This is all over now. November.  
Trees on front lawns rustle  
and globes on streetlamps rattle  
in a determined wind. I'm looking for fast food

and some music to change my mood  
and the weather. In these silent moments  
I listen, open to any sign or savior  
I can find. I pass a half-lit, neon

Arby's Roast Beef sign  
struggling through a dark night  
of orbiting debris. I can barely tell  
whether they're open or closed,

so I take a chance, turn around and fall  
into its orbit as well. I walk in and see  
two young black men—young brothers,  
to me—with cornrows in their hair

and each carrying about 50 pounds  
more than they should on their young bones,  
standing behind the counter.  
One brother asks me if he can take my order,

but I can't think about roast beef;  
I think why is he so overweight as a teenager.  
I think what is he going to look like when he's 40,  
my age; I think what is he going to look like  
if he makes it to 77, my father's age  
when he died. I shake my head  
and tell him I'm not ready; I try  
to focus on food. I'm having a hard time,

because the music is so loud,  
some alternative rock with an emo boy voice.  
Once I order, the brother who took my order starts  
to argue/with the one making my sandwich.

And when I think their argument is getting too loud,  
when I think they're going to come to blows, they burst  
into laughter and they stop and they look at me

and then they look at each other. The brother

on the grill nods to the brother at the register, who then,  
with great earnestness, makes a request of me:

*Sir, could you please tell him that that's not Al Green.*

I say, of course that's not Al Green.

Then the brother on the sandwich says,

*Naw, not what's playing out there*—pointing towards me—

*What's playing back here*, pointing behind him.

The register brother says, I don't think he can hear it.

So they start to sing "For the Love of You,"

in harmony and falsetto. When they finish their set,

the brother on the register says, *Tell him that's Ron Isley.*

Yes, I exclaim, it *is* the Isley Brothers.

The sandwich brother confesses, *I know, I know...*

*I wanted to see if he could tell the difference.*

*but you've got to admit, on some of those songs,*

*Al Green sounds a lot like Ron Isley.*

Here I insert a caesura, while I ponder this cogent point:

You know, I say, you've got a point.

I never thought about it before, but it's true.

If you listen to Ron Isley and didn't know the song,

one might mistake him for Al Green. At this moment,

I laugh with these brothers louder than I've laughed

since my father's death. I'm their last customer,

so the brother comes from behind the register

to let me out and lock the door.

I get outside and walk to my car

and get on with what's left of my life

as wind tears at the earth, leaves

settle around the streets,

and daylight subdues again.

till one day, through a near-closed window

in my mind, I'll see these two

young men among the generation

I once thought only sampled R & B;

I'll hear the vibrato in their voices,

and the mind's dust will wipe away:

with their song the sharp prongs of moonlight  
will catch me smiling—a silly look of hope,  
really; an equation of time and memory—breaking  
through at least two generations of my blood.

Jordan: I don't know where to begin as far as my formative years. I didn't grow up reading poetry or thinking about it. I grew up mostly reading comic books, playing with my friends, chasing girls, that sort of thing. In school, poetry was one of those things that I didn't think I was good at. When I would raise my hand and think I had an answer it was always the wrong answer. So I never thought about poetry as a kid. I didn't think about poetry even in college as an English Lit major. I was mostly thinking that I was going to be a journalist, and because I was at this small liberal arts college, the only way to get to journalism was through the English department, which had a minor in journalism. You could take a sequence of classes.

There I did have a class with a woman, Dr. Maryellen Jones, who was the first person at the school to actually take an interest in me as a student. One day we had an assignment to write sonnets. It was the first time I had written a sonnet, and it felt right. So I did the assignment like everyone else, but then she called me to her office, which was scary because she had a reputation for being the toughest professor in the department. She hadn't given higher than a C the semester before, and the whole class had taken her to the Provost. It was a very conservative school. She was a shorthaired, overweight, bra-less lesbian. Just a complete anomaly there at this school. So I was scared when I went to her office. But she was very encouraging. She said, "I really liked your work and I want to know if you're a poet, and if you're not you should think about it." That was the first time I actually thought about writing poetry. And so I did. I started writing these really bad love poems, but that was as far as they'd gone. That was in the early '80s.

Years later I went to grad school. I worked as a journalist in D.C. and then later I ended up going back to school after going to a reading by Cornelius Eady. This was November 15<sup>th</sup> of '94. I heard him read at the Folger Shakespeare Theater in D.C., and it was the first time I had seen an African American male poet as a professional poet. It did something to me. He read his poem "Gratitude"—it was his *ars poetica*, beautiful, sprawling poem. Cornelius is about ten years older than me. He's from Rochester, New York, which is a lot like Akron, Ohio, the town I grew up in, and he had all these scenes in this poem that were very similar to moments in my own life. I found in the middle of the poem that I was starting to cry, and it was the first time I'd ever been moved by art in that way. I never cried at a movie or anything else in my life at that point. I didn't understand what that was. So I knew then that it had a different power, a resonance that I hadn't experienced before.

Then the more I'd written, the more I read publicly work that I was working on, almost completely unformed, I realized also it was the first time that people listened to me across generational lines, racial/cultural lines, regional lines, as a black male—listened to me in a way they wouldn't listen to me in a conversation. It was a very different way of having a dialogue with the world, and so for me it became the medium through which I could start engaging with others.

Braziller: That's great. Okay, we'll come back to that. Patrick?



Rosal: As the reading approached, Mike called me up and was talking about the focus of what we were going to do and how our lives in poetry were going to kind of be the lens that we were going to use for the evening. And also our formative years and our influences. My influences are really all over the place. They're very disparate, and so I'm going to read a lot of really different kinds of poems.

Braziller: Okay, I prepare you all for a slightly different style of reading than we've heard this evening, but it's very much Pat.

Rosal:

*Todo tiene su final*

*Nada dura para siempre*

*Tenemos que recordar*

*Que no existe eternidad*

Freddie claimed lineage from the tough  
Boogie-Down Boricuas  
who taught him how to break-  
dance on beat: up-  
rock headspin scramble and dive

We called it a suicide:  
the front-flip B-boy move that landed you  
back flat on the blacktop That  
was Freddie's specialty — the way he'd jump  
into a fetal curl mid-air then *thwap*  
against the sidewalk—his body  
laid out like the crucified  
Jesus he knocked down  
one afternoon in his mom's bedroom  
looking for her extra purse  
so both of us could shoot  
asteroids and space invaders  
until dusk  
    That wasn't long before  
Freddie disappeared  
then returned one day as someone else's ghost  
smoked-out on crack  
singing

*Todo tiene su final*

*Nada dura para siempre*

*Tenemos que recordar*

*Que no existe eternidad*

That was the first summer we believed  
you had to be good at something  
so we stood around and watched  
Freddie on the pavement—all day—  
doing suicides  
until he got it right

*Todo tiene su final*

*Nada dura para siempre*

*Tenemos que recordar*

*Que no existe eternidad*

Rosal: I had everything lined up, and then these guys really messed me up because I wanted—

Braziller: Really, read what you feel like reading.

Rosal: I did this residency with this artist named Beth Campbell who does these really interesting kind of conceptual things. One of her pieces is actually in the lobby of the Whitney right now. You can check it out. It'll be kind of like this alternate life decision trees that she makes. When we were out in this residency together, she said, "All I want to do is participate." A little bit jumping off from what Van was saying is you just want to be part of the big conversation. So Gabby had made reference in one of her poems about running, and this is a poem about my own running:

"About the White Boys who Drove By a Second Time to Throw a Bucket of Water on Me"

The first time they merely spat on me and drove off  
I stood there a while, staring down the road  
after them as if I were looking for myself  
I even shouted my own name  
But when they cruised past again  
to toss a full bucket of water  
and who knows what else on me  
I charged—sopping wet—after their car

and though they were quickly gone I kept  
running Maybe it was hot that August afternoon  
but I ran the whole length of Main Street past  
the five-and-dime where I stole Spaldeens

and rabbit's feet past the Raritan bus depot  
and Bo's Den and the projects where Derek and them  
scared the shit out of that girl I pumped  
the thin pistons of my legs all the way home

Let's get real: It's been twenty-five years  
and I haven't stopped chasing them  
through those/side streets in Metuchen  
each pickup b-ball game every  
swanky mid-town bar I've looked for them  
in every white voice that slurred and cursed me  
within earshot in every pink and pretty  
body/whose lights I wanted to punch out  
--and did To be honest I looked for them  
in every set of thin lips I schemed to kiss  
and this is how my impossible fury  
rose: like stone in water I ran  
all seven miles home that day/and I've been  
running ever since arriving finally  
here and goddamnit I'm gonna set things straight

The moment they drove by laughing  
at a slant-eyed yellowback gook  
they must have seen a boy  
who would never become a man We could say  
they were dead wrong/but instead let's say  
this: Their fathers gave them their rage  
as my father gave me mine

and from that summer day on we managed  
to savor every bloody thing  
that belonged to us It was a meal  
constantly replenished—a rich  
bitterness/we've learned to live on for so long  
we forget how—like brothers—  
we put the first bite in one another's mouths.

Rosal: I used to date a woman in London, and it was the summer of 2003, and Western Europe had that terrible heat wave where thousands of people died. That was the summer that I was in London, and the summer that she and I had fallen in love. In her backyard she had an apple tree, and one morning she went back there and she plucked a few of the apples. She cut them up, and she put them in vinegar and salt. I hadn't eaten this in a very long time, so that was kind of the triggering point for this poem.

“The Woman You Love Cuts Apples for You

and stirs them in sea salt and vinegar

She takes a drag from her Silk Cut

eases again through the fruit's flesh  
the blade stopping short of her thumb

You are both sweating at the shoulder  
(East Ham's hottest summer) And you realize

these are not the times to come to poetry  
You have everything you need

Your father's bone-hard stare  
can't reach across the Atlantic

so you save yourself for another day  
because there is this woman slicing apples

stirring them in vinegar reminding you  
of an afternoon twenty-five years ago when

you knelt with your brothers at your mother's  
feet to pluck apple slices from a small basin

pinched between her legs And one of you  
would lift that bowl—almost completely empty

except for a sour clouded liquid  
and a few seeds shifting at the bottom

You'd just taste at first but soon you're handing it  
from brother to brother gulping lung-fulls

of that tart cider You'd sweat snuffle gasp chug  
'til your lips turned white and numb

And before you went out into those Jersey streets  
you'd rinse your chin You'd soap your hands

because the girls would hold their breath  
for every reason and stink on your fingers and neck

You won't dare tell anyone you've learned  
to love the taste of something so strange until this

woman cuts apples for you in vinegar  
and the familiar fumes fill your nostrils and gullet

She will lift the bowl to drink She'll twist her face  
and laugh when she offers it and you will drink

and she will drink and you will drink again  
She will kiss your cut knuckle She'll kiss your eyes

Of course the vinegar stings  
It's the hottest summer ever in London

And you and the woman you love fall asleep side by side  
like this—reeking and unwashed—breathing in

each other's dreams of open skin

Rosal: I'm just going to read one more.

Braziller: There's no rush, Pat. Read a couple.

Rosal: Can I read a couple? Okay. Gabby read "A Love Supreme." I'm going to read "Naima"

(Rosal reads "Naima.")

Rosal: I'll read one more, which is a little bit longer than the other ones. In the last couple of years I've been interested increasingly in the intersection between dream and fact, and the way that fact can inhabit dream, but the way that dream is also inhabiting fact. Just the other day my brother sent me that article of a man who looked like he was part tree because he didn't have the right immune system to stop this kind of growth, and it looked like there was bark growing from him. That to me was a kind of a manifestation of something that was dreamlike. Before that there was the young girl in India who was born with eight limbs. This poem in part was triggered by that, imagining what this girl dreams of. So this—it's a litany, it's a long list poem, and it's called "The Dream of the Girl with Eight Limbs."

Hands to hustle  
Hands to sing  
Hands to pick kindling from the brambles

Hands to alight  
Hands to haggle a crucifix for bread  
Hands to break across long stones

Hands to ache against wood  
Hands to nail them still

Hands to haul water from the infant's grave

Hands to cover the puny heart

Hands to pound that muscle back to its beastly life

Hands to write these lies  
Hands to cross them out  
Hands to lug the goat by rope to the bloody block

Hands to sting  
Hands to coax the first lick of honey from your hips  
Hands to cut gristle from gut  
Hands to murder time  
Hands to tell it  
Hands to behemoth  
Hands to sting  
Hands to tie a perfect knot around the throat  
Hands to lead the rest of the body blind

Hands to count piggies and Injuns  
Hands to pinch the cigar's burnt out stub  
Hands to bid on field niggers  
Hands to clench the six-foot whip  
Hands to crack it  
Hands to yank it back by the tip

Hands to fill deep wells  
Hands to shoot the shoddy guns  
Hands to solder the metal mouth shut  
Hands to salute the shroud  
and hands to stain it with berries and blood

Hands to hold small animals under water  
Hands to untame them

Hands to burn the cassock  
Hands to sew it to the skin

Hands to open the book to blasphemy  
Hands to hold it to flame  
Hands to splash chin-deep in muddy waters

Hands to sallow white linen  
and spoil the wall  
and flat the fifth

Hands to raise the motherfuckin' roof  
Hands to dial up the demons at 2 am  
Hands to pin down their wrists

Hands to light the last cold lanterns  
Hands to welcome winter's tooth  
Hands to twist the bent bronze key before it snaps off in the frost

Hands to pick the lock and pluck the jewel  
Hands to slide it deep inside the sleeping king's throat

Hands to separate one lamb from the next  
Hands to pour the bitter liquor  
Hands to sip from  
Hands to slap the dumb child across his good eye

Hands to test the rivers  
Hands to paddle you out  
Hands to exhume the living  
Hands to offer rocksalt to horses

Hands to grip the crowbar  
Hands to drive the heavy hook into the giant's left knee  
Hands to gouge it for its cartilage

Hands to catch cold rain  
Hands to spit in  
Hands to catch lightning

Hands to caress the wreckage  
Hands to push it off your chest  
Hands to pull the stocking up mid-thigh  
Hands to shred the wings of swans  
Hands to drive the mule that pulls the plow  
Hands to savage his rump with a wrist-thick switch

Hands to beat the broken piano for bass  
Hands to hold the bolo's blade  
Hands to hack in half a coconut  
Hands to lift to your lips the husk

Hands to stall the gods like pelicans  
Hands to flock them  
Hands to feed them stale cornbread, sugar, dead fish

Rosal: I came to poetry really late. I didn't much like books. I didn't start writing poems until my mid twenties, but that's not to say that my education into poetry didn't start very early on. I don't know if you got the reference in the first poem, but I was a street dancer, I was a B-boy. I was a breaker. And I was a musician. I wanted to go to conservatory. My family's filled with musicians

and my dad didn't want us to become musicians because we wouldn't earn any money, so I became a poet.

But all that is to say that my life as a dancer and my relationship to my body, even as it's changed over four decades, and my relationship to music and the things that I hear, and my relationship to stories, because my brothers and my uncles and my aunts are a bunch of shit-talkers—all that stuff has kind of informed what I write about and how I write. My father is also an ex-Catholic priest. He was a Thomistic scholar, so he was a theologian for the Catholic Church. So many of my poems also deal with a struggle with faith, poisoning yourself between belief and disbelief. In some ways it's the product of being a son of immigrants in America. You have this incredibly rich and disparate background to draw from, and friends and family to steal stories from.

Braziller: I'll throw out one thing to get the ball rolling, and that is cadence. Music interests me in all three of your work. Gabby, you talked a bit about opera, and you have a very, very unique cadence.

Calvocoressi: Opera was something that affected me when I was young-*er*. I hope I'm still young, but when I was very young there were two things. I would hear sermons in church and then I went to Catholic school. I had just moved in with my father and my stepmother and they were very anti-church, but Catholic school was the only school where I could get what they thought of as a decent education. The nuns loved me because my parents said to the nuns, "She is not to go to church services, and she's not to do any of that," and I—it was great—I went to the nuns and I said, "You have to let me go to church. I have to be saved." So I would go and I would listen to the sermons.

The other thing that happened when I went to Catholic school was that a guy came—it was like the beginning of the year and they would come with the instruments to see which instrument you wanted to play, and they would lay them all out. I walked up to the saxophone. I think it may have been the day I began to really love women, because like I had never seen anything so beautiful in my life. It was just so beautiful, and there was something about it that I just loved so much. I said to my father, "I want that. I want to play that." The guy said, "It's gonna be hard for a girl." But what happened was that I ended up playing the saxophone and the saxophone outlasted Catholic school. I moved to a different kind of town, and I would sit in my room with my little Fisher Price record player, and I would play Dexter Gordon and I would play Jackie McLean and I would sit there and I would just try to make it sound like something. They would have us playing Phil Collins at school, and then I'd be sitting there trying, and I couldn't. For various reasons I stopped playing that, but I think that a lot of the cadence in my work and in my reading has to do with both of those things.

Braziller: Right.

Calvocoressi: And not so much the—

Braziller: Church and—



Calvocoressi: Church and the music, but also the cadence of trying. You know what I mean—like pushing against this kind of silence that is perhaps that place you want to get to so badly and can't. This new book has a very different kind of cadence than the first.

Braziller: And it's called—

Calvocoressi: It's called *Apocalyptic Swing*. Which has something to do with music and boxing—because there's a lot of boxing in it—and also to various things that move in that direction.

Braziller: Pat, I know music is major in a lot of your—

Jordan: Well, my first book, *Rise*, was—it's all about music. It tries to tell American history through black music. But it's also a very personal book, and I talk in there about my childhood. I played the trombone as a kid, and I still fool around with it now as an adult. I play in a house band, doing house parties and stuff, R&B and funk. So that was the music that was in my head, but I was also playing jazz and listening to a lot of jazz as a kid—Weather Report and J.J. Johnson and these guys—and trying to find a voice musically first. A similar situation, coming from a blue-collar family, going to college and saying I want to be a musician, and them saying, “No, you can't do that. You've got to do something more practical.” So it's always tethered to the back of my mind in the writing, and I think I'm still trying to find a beat. We call it ‘meter,’ but it's the same thing. You're just trying to find that rhythm that fits the content.

Rosal: I was just thinking the other day about a conversation that I had. One of my buddies I grew up with, Terrence, once he said, “Doesn't it amaze you when you meet somebody who doesn't like music?” I thought to myself, I don't know anybody who doesn't like music. To me it was such a phenomenon to know that T had met somebody—T loves music—and he's trying to have this conversation with this person, and he was like, “No, I'm just not into it.” I think everybody here likes music. Some of you like bad music; you know who you are.

But regardless, it's the thing that—you can't help it. Like poetry, you know not everybody's gonna like poetry. But everybody loves music. In some way I want my poems to be able to approach that kind of widespread joy and affection for something—a shared kind of joy—the way that music can have that. The thing about music is you can have a shared joy, but you can also have a private relationship with music at the same time. You can have both things in that. There's that anecdote of Pablo Neruda, when he gave this reading to thousands of people in Chile, and he's reciting his poem from memory but he forgets it somewhere in the middle, and like every single person in the audience finishes the poem for him. That's the poem I want to write.

Calvocoressi: Yeah.

Braziller: You talked about being a rapper, or what were you looking for—? No, those were your own words.

Rosal: Well, actually I could never get into a cipher and rap very well. But hip-hop was definitely—I found out that the guys of my generation who do rap, even the younger guys, they actually listen to lyrics. But because I was a dancer I was really only listening to the beat. I

realized I don't really know a whole lot of lyrics. So hip-hop was big. I studied jazz pretty seriously as an amateur. I worked really late at night at this little local television station in the master control room, and the only other guy in the room at 2:00 in the morning was this guy, Fred Patella, who graduated from Manhattan Conservatory. He would bring in these original manuscripts of Philip Glass. And he brought in Hindemith's Theory of Harmony and he would teach me about, like, first species counterpoint. I learned about really basic music theory, and I kind of took it off on my own. So I mean, all over the place, from Hindemith to John Coltrane to T La Rock to the kundimans that my dad would play on the piano, to the lullabies that my mom would make up when she would try to put my brother to sleep. It seems like chaos to you all, but it's not chaos up in here, so when I'm composing the poem I want that. I want to be able to move in and out of those things.

Braziller: Great. Well, anybody have questions, or we can open it up—were you going to ask questions of each other?

Calvocoressi: One thing I am interested in, because I think all of us think about it—all I keep thinking about all week was the first time you called a radio station to dedicate a song to somebody. I've been thinking about that in terms of poetry and that sort of yearning and that waiting. We've been talking a lot about sound and music, but I guess I'm interested, because I think both of you use silence in a way that I really value as well. I don't know if there's anything to be said about that, but that's something I would say aloud, and I wonder if it's something you could talk about or think about. I mean that idea of pause, and the way the breath works a narrative that is unspoken.

Jordan: I'm going to have to think about that for a minute, but the one thing I do keep in mind is the spaces between—whether it's action or the sound in the poem. Irrespective of whether I'm describing a scene and some action within it, or whether it's the actual utterance of the language, I'm also conscious of the links between them, and also the spaces, the silence. And the inaction, because then that helps to define what's happening in the poem, or helps to define something that you're going to hear that's going to be more important. We often think as poets about stresses, stress being the thing that is to be emphasized. But then things can be stressed by how they're positioned around what's not being said as well. I think whenever I'm struggling with trying to say something in a poem I do think about, well, is there a way to just deal with this struggle to say it without actually having to say it? The struggle to say it is enough sometimes, and that's enough of a silence.

Calvocoressi: Right. Oh, I love that.

Rosal: I agree.

Braziller: You can't say it better than that.

Rosal: No, that was really right on. That was right on.

Levy: You know, as the poets were reading it was sort of reminiscent. I kept thinking, this is not like John Ashbery performing. It's like Ginsberg. It reminded me of the early confluence of jazz and improvisational poetry, especially like "Howl." And also William Carlos Williams, like

“Paterson” and poems like that, with intensely autobiographical elements and musical elements. I always thought the derivation of rap came out of the early jazz movement and the improvisational jazz movement, and the way in which it segued into certain kinds of poetry. I’ll just throw that out.

Braziller: I think that’s very observant. I hadn’t really thought, at least consciously, of linking you in that way, but, yes, I think—

Levy: And were you guys—do you think about people like Ginsberg? What are some of the influences on your work? You’ve talked about life, but in terms of—

Braziller: Okay, yeah, we haven’t talked about formal influences. Other than Cornelius Eady, who were the first people that you either studied or started to read and started to translate a lot of, say, community or local experience or personal experience—that you started to turn to as you translated that into art?

Rosal: Well I was going to write *The Tempest*, but Shakespeare was born 400 years before me. Shakespeare was big. I had a liberal arts education, so Shakespeare and Blake were really big. But then also, my first creative writing class was with Paul Genega, and he introduced me to living voices. Allen Ginsberg was one of them. Amiri Baraka was definitely one of them. Robert Hayden was somebody whom I discovered during that time too, so very early on.

Jordan: When I think about poets that I find myself and found myself tracing, trying to follow the syntax and the structure and form of their work, Hayden is certainly someone I’ve learned a great deal from, from reading his work. And I think about the people who came before the Beats. I mean what really started with music was the Harlem Renaissance, Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown: these guys, and the influence that they had on American language—internationally as well, as they traveled around the globe. That’s the music that I hear, that’s the language that I hear, and where I’m trying to extend a tradition as I’m trying to write. Not just because I connect culturally with the iconography within their work, but also because the work works in two frequencies. On one level it’s formal; there’s formal qualities to it. The blues is the only American poetic form. So there’s the blues and jazz and these other qualities to it.

But then there’s also this accessibility that Pat was talking about. You can hear Countee Cullen, it could be a sonnet, but people didn’t have to know that. They just connected with what was being said. That part of it is seductive—when you think about how seductive a poem can be it becomes like a song, because it has a certain formal quality to it, a certain sonic quality to it, but then on top of that it’s saying something as well. So those are the poets when I think about people early on that influenced me, but I’m also thinking about how you have to identify yourself first in the work. If you don’t find yourself in the work you can’t really connect to these other writers. I read Williams, for instance, because Cornelius Eady said it was an influence on him, and then you keep going back and back and back. But you have to connect with it, find yourself and locate yourself first and then go from there to connect with others.

Calvocoressi: Yeah, I agree with that very much.

Braziller: Didn't you say earlier that you actually started writing—it wasn't even poetry—just started putting some of this—.

Calvocoressi: Yeah, I don't think I knew what I was doing or what I was writing. It wasn't until I got to high school—. I left public school. I wasn't really safe in that school anymore for various reasons. Oh my God, she's a lesbian. So I went to this very good boarding school. I was a day student, and in one year Seamus Heaney and Donald Hall came and read, and I worked at a bookstore that was going under right around then, and that was sort of great for me, because I would just sit and read all day. I didn't have anyone to tell me how to make my way into any kind of cannon, so what I just did is I went and I got Seamus Heaney's book and I looked at the back and there were blurbs. So I was like, "All right." I started going—I did—I went from blurb to blurb to blurb. But the amazing thing is that if you do that you start reading communities. Somewhere in the blurb someone would say something at some point about, you know, Wallace Stevens, and I would go, "All right." And then I grew up in Hartford, and Wallace Stevens was an insurance guy in Hartford.

So I came to it in this sort of very strange way, but it's interesting. The poet as I got older who really influenced my work tremendously was a poet that I didn't like in high school, and that was Robert Frost. I was not interested in Frost when I was in high school, and I think he had not been taught to me particularly well. Because I didn't like his work very much I said I was going to read him book by book, like I was going to go to the library and I was going to get each book and I was going to go, you know, piece by piece—so I could really talk about why he stunk. I got to *North of Boston*—only book number two—and I just, I couldn't believe it. It was not my—well, it *was* my mother's Frost—but it was not like anybody else in my family's Frost. The amount of real terror, and the notion that he was—yes, he was a nature poet, but he was a nature poet insofar as there was this terror of what was—and what is more terrifying: if there is something out there or if there is nothing out there? Constantly in that book people are looking into the darkness and saying, "What is out there?" There's always these moments of "you see," and the other person says, "I see," and then the other person says, "You don't see." You know? You don't see.

There's one moment in that book, in this poem called "The Fear," that changed my life as a young poet. There's this husband and wife—many of these are persona poems—and they're looking out in the darkness, and there is a figure out there who could be death or the devil, or it just could be someone passing through—that's sort of the bargain with Frost—and the woman is looking. She's—"I can't see"—and the voice from the darkness says, do you want to see? Because I can come forward into the light if you want to see. Which is, I mean I think it's the bargain. Talk about the dream, you know? That moment spoke to everything about my rural upbringing. I used to go out in my pj's and stand against the woods with my back to them, like in the middle of the night. I was a strange kid. But I'd stand as long as I could until I would hear something and I would have to start running. I never knew why I did it, but in the middle of the night I would creep out. And Frost did that too, and that changed my life as a poet.

A: For any of the poets, I just was wondering if when you pick up a book of poetry that may be somebody you know or somebody you don't know, do you always read it aloud? Are there any poets that you don't read aloud?

Jordan: I do. For me that's the litmus test. If I don't like the way it sounds I don't want to buy it.

Braziller: So if you like it you start reading it out loud?

Jordan: Yeah.

Braziller: But if you don't—

Jordan: Or if it doesn't have any sonic quality to it I don't. I'm not attracted to it enough to stay with it, and I don't know if that's not intellectual enough or whatever, but it's just that—

A: And do you know that without reading it aloud? I mean when it's just on the page.

Jordan: Yeah. I can kind of hear it and think, oh, I can't wait to take this home and read it aloud, because I know it's going to be good to hear it. Then at the same time I look forward to bringing it to the classroom to read aloud in that way as well.

A: I have a question for any of you. When you're writing a persona poem do you find that it frees you? Do you know what I mean? Do you find there's a freedom in that? If you could talk about that a little bit.

Jordan: Yeah. I didn't read any from *M-A-C-N-O-L-I-A* tonight, but I was thinking—. *M-A-C-N-O-L-I-A* is my second book, and it tells a story of Macnolia Cox, who was the first African American to get to the final round of the 1936 Spelling Bee. I tell her story from her adulthood backwards to her childhood and her moment of greatest potential. When I think about this book, I think that's probably the book that has the most of me in it, because I'm completely unvarnished in whatever I want to say and I can say it in a way that I couldn't say it in the first book.

Even now with the poems I have here—some of these poems have an 'I.' But the personas in this book are definitely more revealing of my heart than the 'I.' I'm much more conscious of it. That's one of the things I really admire about both of you guys in your work is that when I hear poets who can put the 'I' out there with that level of honesty and just lack of self-consciousness—. It's being self-aware of yourself in the world and how people are going to perceive it. I'm attracted to that. Because when I'm writing a poem and the 'I' is there I'm always conscious of how people are going to perceive this, and it bugs me, you know? But when I'm writing in the voice of a comic book superhero or Macnolia or Einstein or someone else, I can say anything that I believe.

Braziller: Weren't we talking about this last night, sort of where you're going, writing in different voices or different persona—and you mentioned Amelia Earhart.

Rosal: Yeah, at some point a couple of years ago I was getting a different kind of gratification—I'll say it that way—by writing poems that were not about me. I've started this novel in verse now, with these two characters, Willie and Yolanda, and discovering the landscape that they live in. They live in this kind of fantastical urban landscape, and there's something about that—you know, a little of me is in Willie, and Yolanda also, and some of you all are in the book. But there's something liberating about transforming the self or the things that the self perceives and

takes in from the world, and transforming that in language on the page. There's another kind of gratification that happens.

A: Yeah, speaking of transporting language, that poem of yours called "Donnie" something, something, and it's a completely incomprehensible language. Now, what's that?

Rosal: I don't know what poem that is.

A: I think it's yours.

Rosal: Oh! Well, it would be comprehensible if you were from the Ilokanos region of the Philippines.

A: That's what I wondered. What would you expect somebody who doesn't speak that dialect or whatever—I speak Spanish, but not that dialect, so what would you expect somebody to hear there or read there?

Rosal: Well, I mean—

A: Do you want to read it, just so people will know what I'm talking about?

Rosal: Well, let me say what this is. Ilokano is my parents' native dialect from the Philippines. It's really my third language, so English is my first, Spanish is my second, Ilokano is my third. But when I came back from the Philippines it was probably the highest level of fluency that I had ever had, and I wrote this poem, which is a kind of a tribute to the city of my mom's birth and the people there. I'll read the first stanza. It means "A Poem for Luang."

(Rosal reads the poem in Ilokano.)

Braziller: Wow. Okay, a few more questions. People can leave and we'd go on talking too. Yeah, go ahead.

A: One question. We talked about formal training, which referred to history, and then recent history in terms of growing up, but since this is a roundtable of young poets, how has the current technology affected the way you write, and how do you think it would have affected those who influenced you from the past, such as William Carlos Williams and Allan Ginsberg? How would they have handled blogging? How would the tools affect them in terms of—

Jordan: Williams would be good at text messages, man. Red wheelbarrow—you could get that whole thing in one text message, man.

A: When you send it, the form might get messed up.

A: But even the fact that someone found a piece of your poetry through the internet—the fact that your work is so naked and bare out there. How does that influence your creative choices, knowing that people will find your work, not even just in books but on the virtual things? Or does it? Do all of you blog?

Calvocoressi: I don't blog.

Rosal: I do. In terms of the work, I don't think the technology is really—. I get the sense, and I'm not the first person to say it—but the book is kind of a dying technology, right? So you wonder, what does that mean for poems? There's also this resurgence over the last fifteen years of spoken word and slam poetry. Even people who are not considered kind of spoken word people—Li-Young Lee's new book's got a CD in it. Nobody's calling him a spoken word poet, right? But he has access now to a kind of technology that allows his living voice to be distributed in ways that it wasn't before.

I'm happy that we have recordings of Dylan Thomas, who was an amazing, a riveting reader. To be able to kind of distribute one's work without the limitations of time is kind of an amazing thing. But then there's a great responsibility. You've got to write something that's worth it.

A: It's pretty interesting. You've been talking about pulling music into poetry. But years ago, it seems to me, the lyrics of lots of songs, especially of love songs, pulled poetry into the music. For example, "Moonlight in Vermont" was based on a haiku poem. There are so many fantastic lyrics, like "somewhere over the rainbow, way up high," and it goes back and forth I think.

Braziller: The kundiman is a traditional song itself?

Rosal: Yeah, the kundiman is a Filipino song of unrequited love. It's usually sung by a man to a woman, and the woman's saying, "Hell, no," and the man is saying, "Please?"

A: I just wanted to offer an observation on your experiences with finding freedom in the persona poems. I actually started as a poet and then I became a sort of non-fiction writer, and I published a memoir some years ago, which was well reviewed. Now I'm writing fiction, and I'm finding incredible freedom in the fiction to get into emotional areas that I never—. So I feel like it's the same thing.

Jordan: Yeah. I like to work with historical figures a lot, and so you'll have that framework, but then you kind of approximate the emotion around it. That's where I feel the freedom comes in.

A: But you can really enter it in some ways. You have to be so much more controlled when you're writing first person.

Jordan: Yeah.

Braziller Okay, one more question, and then we'll continue informally.

A: Can you talk for a minute about how you come to the formal structure of a poem? When you're starting a poem, could you talk a little bit about the forms? Sometimes that just appears for me and sometimes I'm more—actually, mostly it just appears. But how do you come to the form? Do you consciously decide or is it more from the words you have in your head, or—.

Calvocoressi: I think it depends on the poem for me. Those drive-in poems—once I realized what they were actually going to be about I became very nervous. The material seemed so huge for me. The idea of making those poems that had to do with pornography and desire into a crown

of sonnets felt like a way to sort of contain a kind of energy that I felt could very easily have just exploded out in a way that would actually make the poems really diffuse, or diffuse the power of the poems. But also there was the notion of the kind of musculature that could be added to that through the way the sonnet works, and our expectations of the sonnet, the kind of conversation we have with history when we work in a really strict form.

That's one moment where I decided ahead of time to write in a more strict form, although those sonnets are quite loose. But the thing that really changed my life formally was thinking about syllabics, because to me working in syllabics was one of those ways that you could actually control the poem from behind. I think when you have a villanelle or a sonnet or a sestina, one of the remarkable things about it is the reader can see immediately what it is, and immediately a kind of dialogue begins with lots of other poets, and with the form. With syllabics, the reader very often feels it in their body first. I am drawn in. Something is happening. But if they even pick up on specifically what it is it takes longer, and so there's a different kind of wrestling that goes on.

A: What do you mean by syllabics?

Calvocoressi: Oh, yeah—making the choice to have a specific number of syllables per line, alternating patterns. There's a kind of magic, for instance, in alternating an even number and an odd number of syllables back and forth. There's something about the nine/eight or eight/nine pattern that is remarkable.

A: Like iambs, you're talking about?

Calvocoressi: No, I'm just talking about actual syllables in the line. It's not iambs. It's the idea of something that actually mirrors conversational speech a little bit more. I was writing these incredibly long poems that I had no idea how to revise, and Richard Howard—who changed my life in millions of ways—one of the ways he did that was talking about syllabics as a means of pulling back, pulling back, pulling back.

A: I know Richard Howard uses a lot of Greek syllabic forms, which I never really understood.

Calvocoressi: Yeah.

A: Did you try that, or did you just do the syllable count?

Calvocoressi: More of a syllable count. He sat with me and he said there's a magic—if you really do it you'll find the magic in the count. And he was absolutely right.

Jordan: Just to kind of piggyback off that, my second book is almost all syllabics. I think of formal qualities of poetry as being stuff like scales for a musician. We don't really have anything else that we can practice. I tell my students all the time that it doesn't matter whether you're good at the sonnet or good at sestinas or villanelles, whatever. You should just practice doing them. I've written many pantoums, but I've never written a good one. But at the same time I'll start there sometimes if I feel that the subject matter could be contained within this. Then if it doesn't work I'll break out of it, but that'll be my way into the structure of that poem. I'm more concerned with that process of working through the formal qualities of the poem and seeing



things that I may not normally think to wrestle with or deal with within the poem through the form. I'll look at a subject maybe through the restrictions of a form, and it'll force me to say something or do something I wouldn't normally say if I had the freedom to just do it in free verse. Because I'm now working within this axial skeleton, but within the guts of it I can roam free. But it's also going to call me to make certain moves that I wouldn't normally think to make if I didn't have that structure preset for me.

Braziller: Okay, last question, go ahead.

A: In your crown were they placed in different sections in the book?

Calvocoressi: Yeah, they're spread. Because the book had all these long series of persona poems I wanted there to be a sense—because of growing up sort of watching the movies in the way that I did—that there was this 'I' that was moving through the book. As the 'I' was looking at the screen and these bodies and trying to make sense of them, in a very similar way so many people in that book are just looking at the events in front of them, at the kind of narrative, and trying to place themselves within it. That was one of the decisions about breaking it up like that.

A: Did you think also that somehow the crown just gets to be too much—

Calvocoressi: Yeah, and the incredible pleasure of picking up the crown, like pages later—

A: You did a good job with that.

Braziller: Okay, we're staying up here, so come up and keep asking questions. And thank you very much.

Calvocoressi: Thank you.