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Three Poems

Wendy Burk, Julie Swarstad Johnson, and Sarah Kortemeier

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA POETRY CENTER

These three works of visual art and poetry emerged from our professional experience as librarians and poets at The University of Arizona Poetry Center, a special collection of contemporary poetry housed in a public university. Frequently described as a “living archive,” the Poetry Center’s library houses both open stacks designed for browsing and closed stacks containing archival collections related to contemporary poetry. Our collections, building, and everyday work, as seen through the alternate lens of our identities as writers and artists, comprise the subjects of our collaborative assemblages. We began by generating a list of questions that became the titles of the three pieces. Based on our questions, we each wrote a poem that incorporated fragments of language found on the spines of books and in archival documents. Finally, we rendered the poems as visual assemblages incorporating found objects, photographs of public and hidden spaces in our building, and repurposed archival and office materials. The pieces progressed via a series of exchanges, so that each assemblage includes work by every collaborator. Specific authorship is relinquished in favor of collective achievement, reflecting the collaborative and sometimes hidden nature of the librarian’s and archivist’s work.
Is the Archive Alive?

Your battles are over. What befell
has been slipped into folders, boxed, and measured.
Your ink so flat, fruitful,
still desires to unfold —

I am sorry
I don’t remember
I have found great comfort
I regret
I have been terror-stricken

— an apology or an argument.

What do we reach for now, but words?

With them, with their aid
we finish each other’s sentences
and we finish the sentences of the dead.
Is the Archive Alive?

Your battles are over. What befell
has been slipped, into folders, boxed, and measured.
Your air so flat, fruitless,
still desires to unwind —

I am sorry
I don’t remember
I have found great comfort
I regret
I have been terror-stricken

— an apology or an argument.

"When I began a deliberate inquiry into my past, starting in 1899, I thought of myself as a man walking around with draped seals in his flesh, and I wanted to get the fragments out ..."

A commonplace about trauma, one buried deep in the psyches of American men, is that
it is noble to heal alone."

Larry Tye

What did we reach for now, but words?

With them, with their aid
we finish each other’s sentences
and we finish the sentences of the dead.

YOU ARE HERE
YOU ARE NOW
How Do We See What Is Hidden?

Let the edges blur.
A triangular way in.
Perhaps there is no way in.
Consider the edges.
A dark click.
Look up.
There is a bright shelf in the ceiling,
call it thought.
Stop thinking of time as a fever,
or even as a bloom.
Let time be a wild root.
Or a monster’s careful
and ongoing notes in the dust under the bed.
Or a wrecked armada.
Freelance there.
In a waiting space.
In the huge haiku
of a single, testing breath.
How do we see what is hidden?

Let the edges blur.
A triangular van in.

Consider the edges.
A dark click.
Look up.
There is a bright shelf in the ceiling.
Call it thought.

Stop thinking of time as a form,
or even as a bloom.
Let time be a will not.

Or a master’s careful
and ongoing notes in the dust under the bed.

Or a wiried almond.

Freelance there.
In a waiting space.
In the huge hue
of a single, testing breath.
How Do We Love the Past and the Present?

The brightest go first. Light
can illuminate, or it can bleach
all the color from a book’s spine,
so we keep the rarest things
safe in cooled darkness.
Two gardens rival each other
from either side of the glass
and both need attention, although
neither demands it: one could ignore
the bamboo as easily as the books,
and both might do just fine or wither.
In my wallet, I keep a plan
for an orderly apocalypse,
reminding me who to call
if the waters rise or fire falls
from a wire in the ceiling. Who
can I call to tell that the air
is burning out there, the hottest
October on record in a year hot
with hatred? I affirm that this
is a radical act of love: to look
you in the eye and say good morning,
to bring you what you ask for
out of the cooled darkness
where it rests. This is what light
can do: a whole lot of damage,
but how could we see to read
all these words without it?
How Do We Love the Past and the Present?

The brightest go first. Light can illuminate, or it can bleach all the color from a book’s spine, so we keep the rarest things safe in cooled darkness.

Two gardens rival each other from either side of the glass and both need attention. Although neither demands it, one could ignore the h anthem as easily as the books, and both might do just fine or wither. In my wallet, I keep a poem for a orderly sleeplight.

How can I tell that the air is burning out there, the hottest October or record in a year but with kindness? I affirm that this is a radical act of love: to look you in the eye and say good morning, to bring you what you ask for out of the cooled darkness where it rests. This is what light can do a whole lot of damage, but how could we see to read all these words without it?
Wendy Burk is the Library Director of The University of Arizona Poetry Center. Her publications include a book of poetry, Tree Talks: Southern Arizona (Delete Press, 2016). She holds an M.F.A. in Creative Writing and an M.A. in Information Resources and Library Science, both from The University of Arizona. Contact: wlburk@email.arizona.edu.

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Sarah Kortemeier is the Instruction and Outreach Librarian at The University of Arizona Poetry Center. Her poetry has appeared in Ploughshares, Alaska Quarterly Review, The Feminist Wire, Sentence, Fairy Tale Review, and others. She holds an M.F.A. in Creative Writing: Poetry and an M.A. in Library and Information Science, both from The University of Arizona.