Three Poems

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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.
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 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 forum,
or even as a bloom.
Let time be a will not.

Or a vantage's careful and ongoing notes in the dirt under the bed.

Or a wined spew.

Freelance there.
In a wishing space.
In the huge haiku of a single, testing breath.

Perhaps there is no way in.

Original Ovulation
Tense or even
The attribution of part of a sex;
Any situation a citizen?

Cataloguing to ensure
To apply centric to hit an electric
Time App

Can make pop down
day of a

PS1st's for many
100 for current

2014 for other
color now
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 bright light at first makes us wonder, and then it becomes a kind of wisp of mind. We see the past as a place of memory, where things are safe and unchanging. The present, on the other hand, is a place of change and uncertainty. We are forced to deal with the reality of the moment, where things are in constant flux.

Two gardens rival each other from either side of the glass. They both need attention, although neither demands it. One could ignore the tomato as easily as the books, and both might do just fine or wither. In my wallet, I keep a poem for an orderly spacetime. It reads:

"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 but with no rain?"

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 coiled 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: wlburt@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.