UC SANTA BARBARA

THE Current

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Andrea Estrada

‘Spontaneous Overflow’

In the preface to his “Lyrical Ballads,” William Wordsworth described all good poetry as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling.” April is National Poetry Month, and to celebrate this auspicious literary occasion The Current is highlighting some of the campus’s resident wordsmiths.

Throughout the month, we have published pieces by faculty and staff poets whose work has been recognized nationally and internationally.

We conclude today with two poems by Sojourner Kincaid Rolle, community coordinator for the Center for Black Studies Research.

Here are the poets we’ve already highlighted: George Yatchisin, Rick Benjamin, George HS Singer, Yunte Huang, Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Swati Rana, Robert Krut, John Ridland, Stephanie Batiste and Teddy Macker.

The Mockingbird's Song

A Song of the Singers’ Singer

Remembering Clyde Woods

It was after the flags had been lowered -

We lifted our heads to watch

this insistent warbler

marveling at his timely retinue;

a rigorous rendition

involving runs

and several turns in the air.

and then he was silent

against the voluminous sky

He dipped down as if to bow

and then,

displaying the smooth white feathers

beneath his wings,

He gently soared away

Leaving us in awe-struck

contemplation and proud.

We, friends, colleagues, protégés -

we all loved him after a manner.

For the moment, we would survey

his gifts to us — personal and everlasting.

Random encounters in the ivied corridors,

fortunate and precise moments

in the tome-packed cubicles -

very few places to sit,

precious little space to talk.

We would also consider his innumerable

contributions to the academy

and to the community of us all.

A certain numbness blunted

any thoughts of depth or profundity.

We were a flock in sorrow.

Our swollen eyes and streaked faces

spoke what our tongues could not broach.

Our aimless wander from arm to arm

to touch or embrace or kiss -

to share that sad and soulful knowing.

We each had lost an irreplaceable friend.

Each of us carried our own piece of his soul.

Each of us knew a part of his song.

He was a singer's singer

able to pull the lyrics from our muted hearts

and show us how our own self could sound.

He was a blues man

He had seen the Blues people

the gathering of poor people

the pain on their faces

the substance of their existence

and traveled into the heart of their pain

ascertaining and deconstructing their songs

singing them back in mellow tones

even the heartless could hear.

He was a soul man of unordinary coolness -

born on the Mason-Dixon line;

bred in the East, refined in the West,

he navigated the cultural plains

claiming his own territory

singing his song of songs.

He was a man of letters with a common man’s sense

could listen to the illest rhymes on the street

then run them down with a philosopher’s beat

He was a man

who cared about the least of us

and we, we who learned his song

now sing our parts. We are the singers.

Across the plains; across the terrain,

across the diaspora, we sing his song - our song.

We Have Come To Now

(For the Women’s Center on its 40th Anniversary)

The Then The Now The When

The Me The You The We

The What The Why The How The Will

The Bruised The Battered

The Disillusioned The Disenchanted

The Solitude The Struggle The Silence

The Talk The Listen The Trust The Share

The Fear, The Pain, The Secrets The Shame

A Closet A Nest A Lounge A Home

The Open Door The Sages The Wisdom

Mothers Mentors Sisters Lovers

“Our Bodies, Our Selves”

The Strengthening

The Emboldening

The Standing Strong

“A Room To Call Our Own”

Our Own Stories Our Own Images Our Own Songs

Our Poets Our Authors Our Womanist Articulators

A Base A Foundation A Platform

“Our Own Piece of Ground”

The Visionaries The Leaders The Enablers

The Survivors The Overcomers The Thrivers

Our Unbound Feet Our Unbridled Breasts

Our Untangled Tongues Our Unfettered Feminism

Our Uncontained Joy

The Remembering The Experiencing

The Imagining

The Causes The Initiatives The Gained Ground

The Garnered Concessions The Continuous Strive

We Claim Our Right

“We Take Back the Night”

The Sanctuary The Refuge

The Ever-present Light in Trouble

A Leg A Hand An Arm A Bridge

To There From Here To There

Our Higher Hopes

Our Wilder Dreams

Our Greater Aspirations

To Live To Express To Choose To Love

“And Still [We] Rise”

— Sojourner Kincaid Rolle

George Yatchisin

Against Personification

An asylum is just

an empty room

with the right kind of people in it.

But then so’s a classroom

so I’ll forgive

this one its tiny size

and the students’ sighs,

large as an asteroid

out hunting dinosaurs.

If it’s mean of me

to make them eke out

their poetry in pencil lead

I’ll be that sumbitch,

be the cruel and human Cenozoic

slamming into the Mesozoic

like a glacier shaving

conifers to razor stubble.

I’ll never get over

being surprised their youth

still offers flits of wisdom,

lines they don’t know enough

to die for. It couldn’t

have been a happy first

fish to sprout legs, mount

land, gasp at the inexcusable air

of a wondrous new world.

— George Yatchisin, communications coordinator, Gevirtz Graduate School of Education

Rick Benjamin

To My Doppelgänger

You sit on the curb without knowing what

you are going to do while I start climbing

a tree toward a nest I will never actually

find. You, you’re of a mind to follow

directions, rules, to be dutiful before

authority. I disobey, routinely fail to

read instructions, walk away when

someone else tells me what to do.

We’re both walking the same road,

that’s true, without having any idea

of where we are headed. You ask

each person you meet for directions,

anxious for answers, while I enjoy

getting lost, forget where I meant

to travel, land in someone’s kitchen

drinking tea. You have grown tired

of me, always leading you to another

path you’d rather not have followed,

while I’m still trying to please you.

After all, we come from one nest.

— Rick Benjamin, adjunct professor of comparative literature and of environmental studies

George HS Singer

Well Met, the Light

Every second, all hours, lifelong

Like a bat on the wing the mind chirrs and pings

even wanting to want-- desperate to locate

itself with itself. And so for these groceries: Praise.

No need to instruct-- my arms know their craft,

hefting the cabbage and apples in the grocery bag

lugging the jug of milk as it sloshes. Ambling too—

long bones hinge and unhinge at the knee,

muscles clench and release in synchrony,

unthought though each step is a fall.

Breath needs not ask to enter and leave

the way children come and go freely in and out

the doors of a kindly home for years.

And light too is well met. Eyes apprehend

the sun as it tessellates through the scud

and spindrift on the Sound—no need to ask how.

The know-how lodges deep in the brain stem,

the neural webs that intend blink, swallow, and breath.

They flare and craft walk, they pulse and form see, they

link their billion nodes and conjure this sense of a me.

— George HS Singer, professor in the Gevirtz Graduate School of Education

Yunte Huang

To Be An Asian Poet

To be or not to be

That’s out of the question

Between Asia and America

I choose the life of a poet

Between English and Chinese

I prefer the authenticity of translationese

Between black and white

I have no choice but be yellow

Between truth and lie

I would rather get high

Between real and unreal

Well, it depends how I feel

I’m a Chinese poet on Angel Island

A Japanese poet in internment camps

A Filipino poet in sugarcane plantations

A Korean poet in LA riots

An FOB poet on Boeing 747

A Transcontinental poet on World Wide Web

A restaurateur poet in Alabama

A Language poet in Buffalo

A coolie poet at Harvard Yard

An academic poet in Santa Barbara

A funny poet in my kids’ schoolyard

A chicken poet in the year of the Dog

When they ask me

What kind of ‘nese are you

Chinese, Japanese, or Vietnamese?

I ask them

What kind of ‘keys are you

Yankee, donkey, or monkey?

I singsong

When they ask me to sing a song

I tango

When they call me Tang O

I write a locu

When they ask for a haiku

I write poems for fortune cookies

Where they expect to read

“A Great fortune is awaiting you!”

“You are a talented person”

Or “You are so beautiful!”

I put in “Watch out!”

“We know what you did last summer”

Or “April is the cruelest month”

Where they want to find

Their superlotto numbers

I write in the amount they will lose

To be or not to be

That’s out of the question

Between Asia and America

I choose the life of a poet

Between English and Chinese

I prefer the taste of translationese

Between black and white

I want to be a rainbow

Between truth and lie

I can usually get by

Between the real and unreal

I prefer the impossible

— Yunte Huang, professor of English

Shirley Geok-lin Lim

Learning to Love America

because it has no pure products

because the Pacific Ocean sweeps along the coastline

because the water of the ocean is cold

and because land is better than ocean

because I say we rather than they

because I live in California

I have eaten fresh artichokes

and jacaranda bloom in April and May

because my senses have caught up with my body

my breath with the air it swallows

my hunger with my mouth

because I walk barefoot in my house

because I have nursed my son at my breast

because he is a strong American boy

because I have seen his eyes redden when he is asked who he is

because he answers I don’t know

because to have a son is to have a country

because my son will bury me here

because countries are in our blood and we bleed them

because it is late and too late to change my mind

because it is time.

— Shirley Geok-lin Lim, professor emerita of English

Swati Rana

Plane Ride After 9/11

Sash is half

down to block the sun

coming out instead

of its reflection

in the ocean.

Waves are still

moving minutely

like sand. A boat

blemishes hills

of water, more boldly

shaded by the drag

of clouds. Where ocean

ends and sky

begins, can’t say,

a heavy ledge

then lighter grey

retreating. Clouds mount

the horizon, soundless,

aroused by a wide

mad expanse.

The coast intrudes,

casts an edge,

but the sun

is driving

up the mouth

of an estuary.

This is where we begin

to exist

upon the fetid

soil, its long

cultivated skin,

the effort

of order exerted

on a landscape.

A furious shine passes

over lakes, ponds,

metal siding.

The plane slants aside

till the earth’s face

meets mine,

horizon climbs up

then down again through

clouds, cavernous

breath. Spit out,

we break from land

traces, abridged

sky. The hot cabin

is like waking

from a restless

night, window

closed too tight—

Suddenly

I see another plane

fly in the opposite

direction, occult

mirror of the sky

briefly revealed

to contain

our own precarious

situation. I see myself

peering

from below a half

downed sash,

brown skin,

a kind of

terror.

—*Swati Rana*, *assistant professor of English*

Robert Krut

Divinity

Virus-blind, you stumble to an alley,

under a lentil rainstorm, a preacher

waves rudder arms to the thunder,

makes lightning scatter until five canaries

escape his sleeves, singing condolences,

a misdirection from the transistor radio

around his neck, beneath his vestments,

its zealous torque fusing electrodes

to your breath, turning thoughts to words,

your face a cannon, and the realization

that he was merely a collection of discarded

nightclub flyers lifted by wind

between graffitied walls.

— *Robert Krut, lecturer, UCSB Writing Program*

John Ridland

To the Brave Generation

Who have been fired on, and march now for their lives

Those who should lead this land of the free and the brave,

Who should have led you, must now themselves be led

By you who learned too early what it is to give

A life, or rather, to have it taken away

For no good reason except that it was *there*

For the gun and the shooter who could shoot anywhere,

Who had no image of what it means to live,

Moved by a spirit angry as it was dead.

You learned how easily night can shadow day

By pulling a switch, a trigger. You survive,

You have been tested by fire, and chosen to save

Our nation from itself: you'll be *The Brave*

Generation, and the Free, who can keep us alive.

— John Ridland, professor emeritus of English

Stephanie Leigh Batiste

Fray

Loops remain.

Remnant of the tangled thread

Memory restored to the past,

the present

threads forth across the knot

Restored towards prismatic being.

Losing One

Losing one’s mother

is like losing your root.

being unattached

to the world

to history

yesterday now and the day before are doubtful

perhaps not having been at all

tomorrow

a wall of static

beyond it

a tear that might swallow

and you wonder

perhaps

is it possible

no longer to belong

to this planet.

Is it even still

spinning...

— Stephanie Leigh Batiste, associate professor of Black studies and of English

Teddy Macker

The Otter and the Seaweed

This is what you need to know:

you need to know that otters wrap themselves

in seaweed so they won’t,

while sleeping at night, float out to sea…

Are you imagining this?

Can you see the otters actually doing this?

Does it break your heart a little?

Does it seduce you just a bit

into loving more

this odd hard world?

Oh otters, wrap yourselves tight! And sleep,

exactly like you do, floating but seaweed-held

in our salty living waters! Oh otters,

wrap yourselves tight! And you,

the one who doesn’t, the one who doesn’t

tether himself down right,

we are with you as you float away,

we are with you as you sleep

and lose yourself in the night.

On This Earth

after a line by Mahmoud Darwish

We have on this earth what makes life worth living:

the perfume of a sleeping child, the four rain-colored wings

of the dragonfly, the hourglass on the black widow’s belly

pouring blood into blood. We have the mineral green innards

of cucumber, rain-pocked snow, the plastic crucifix

on the sick whore’s wall, sincerer than any cathedral.

We have an alley of poplar trees and road-darkened feet,

bats sipping clear water from a dwindling creek,

we have slices of black bread at a blue table by the sea.

We have on this earth what makes life worth living,

what makes it so queer and lovely and painful,

moon on the snake in the dying rosemary,

and the young couple upstairs in bed

undressing each other regardless.

— Teddy Macker, lecturer, College of Creative Studies

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draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.