

# POETRY IN REVIEW



S T E P H E N B U R T

The word *identity* is a bear to define: documents proving identity show that you are uniquely you, but identity politics work on behalf of a group. An identity parade in Britain is a police lineup in America; *Identity Parade* is also the title for a much-attended, studiously multicultural anthology of U.K. poets published in 2010. Starting around that year the attitude toward identities, identity politics, and group identification for U.S. poets changed: a spate of high honors for midcareer poets of color, from the National Book Award for Terrance Hayes's *Lighthouse* to the National Book Critics Circle and other awards for Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* to the appointment of Juan Felipe Herrera as poet laureate, along with

---

**When I Grow Up I Want to Be a List of Further Possibilities**, by Chen Chen (BOA Editions, 96 pp., \$16 paper)

**Calling a Wolf a Wolf**, by Kaveh Akbar (Alice James Books, 100 pp., \$15.95 paper)

**Our Lady of Not Asking Why**, by Courtney Kampa (New Issues Poetry & Prose, 98 pp., \$16 paper)

**Gilt**, by Raena Shirali (YesYes Books, 104 pp., \$18 paper)

**Anybody: Poems**, by Ari Baniyas (Norton, 112 pp., \$25.95)

**Telepathologies**, by Cortney Lamar Charleston (Saturnalia Books, 128 pp., \$16 paper)

**The Virginia State Colony for Epileptics and Feeble-minded**, by Molly McCully Brown (Persea, 80 pp., \$15.95 paper)

**The Work-Shy**, by Blunt Research Group (Wesleyan University Press, 160 pp., \$24.95)

obvious changes in national politics, made it much harder for whiteness to go unremarked, or seem unmarked, among white readers like me. This changing climate might have made it easier for publishers to find and promote – perhaps (who knows?) easier for the poets to finish – some of this year’s best first books, all of which say something (no two say the same thing) about how group identities and categories (those we choose, those we inherit, those imposed by schools, employers, the state) inform who we think we are, how other people see us, and who we will let ourselves be.

Of all these first books Chen Chen’s *When I Grow Up I Want to Be a List of Further Possibilities* has the best title: it’s also the most varied and the most fun. Chen’s family came from China to Texas so that his father could study “in the graduate religion program at Texas Christian University,” while his mother ran a restaurant, “the grease-tang of kung pao chicken in [her] shirts.” During his middle school years they resettled in western Massachusetts, near Amherst, where Chen’s mother would not accept his sexuality (he’s gay). When he was thirteen, Chen tried to run away, spent the night in a tree, and broke his arm trying to run back home; the episode provides the narrative skeleton for one of Chen’s strongest poems.

It might have been easy for Chen to assemble a straightforward volume about his representative experience as the child of immigrants, a book whose accessibility, or teachability, resembles that of the mentors he brings up in interviews (Martín Espada, for example). Instead he’s done something stranger, and more playful, than any story-driven style could permit. The leadoff poem aspires to be “as fearless as a mango. / As friendly as a tomato,” producing “flying mango-tomato hybrids. Beautiful sons.” Chen is, in other words, willing to make a mess. He’s also willing to reach back to the inchoate ridiculousness of childhood, with its confusions, colliding registers, and contradictory axioms: “I tried to confuse God by saying I am / a made-up dinosaur & a real dinosaur & who knows maybe / I love you, but then God ended up relating to me.” In the perfect, sonnet-sized “Summer Was Forever,”

Time dripped from a faucet like a magician’s botched trick.  
I did not want to applaud it. I stood to one side and thought,  
What it’s time for is a garden. Or a croissant factory. What kind

of work do I need to be doing? My parents said: *Doctor, married to lawyer*. The faucet said: *Drip, drop, your life sucks*. But sometimes no one said anything & I saw him, the local paper boy on his route. His beanstalk frame & fragile bicycle. & I knew: we would be so terribly happy.

His parents, of course, reject this beanstalk-loving sexual self: his mother “almost struck down my door, asking who / was on the phone . . . some boy wasn’t it, / sick boy spreading his sick musky spring, / American spring, beastly goo of wrong wanting.” (Are those Sinophone phonemes, the long vowels, the terminal *ngs*?) Chen worries that “everything I write is in some way an immigrant narrative or another / coming out story,” but his asides and jokes say, to readers who already recognize such stories, “I know you know I know you know I know” (to paraphrase Thom Gunn). As Chen’s younger self had to escape from constricting familial expectations (become a lawyer, marry a woman, buy a house), the adult writer has to escape from the constrictions of autobiography, into hyperbole, stand-up comedy, fairy tale, twisted pastoral.

Such escapes never entirely succeed: when Chen envisions himself leaping or flying out of his family home through a window, he ends up

So blah & bewildered, my hands  
have turned out to be no bee,  
all bumble, unable to tell the difference  
between the floor & the ground. They feel dirt,  
but it feels like something they made.

Chen will not let himself, or his readers, forget what turns him on: “our competing, conspiring tongues, nipples, / armpits, the terribly neglected inside bits / of our elbows, which we’ve dubbed ‘bowpits.’” He also knows that erotic experience grows out of other experience, that we do not fall in love, or even masturbate, in an apolitical vacuum, and he gets comedy from the identity politics: are Asian American men sexy? Can they be hot, or sufficiently masculine, when white culture refuses to treat them that way? “One summer, to further the cause, I jerked off / exclusively to Koh Masaki, a Japanese gay porn star . . . But then I felt conflicted,

listening to relatives in China / lament the popularity of Japanese cars. But Chinese porn / wasn't as good." "Lament the popularity" is quite a mouthful; it works because it's funny, as does the first bit of "Elegy for My Sadness": "Maybe the centipede in the cellar / knows with its many disgusting legs / why I am sad. No one else does."

Chen wants to support resistance (a word he uses in interviews) to various kinds of bigotry and violence. That laudable wish produces his most earnest and his schmaltziest moments ("Elegy to Be Exhaled at Dusk," for instance), but it is also part of his personality, something else he can ironize: "The least I could do is not droop / & wilt like a bad houseplant, / it doesn't give people any / strength." He can also open the curtain, or pull the camera back, to reveal our generic expectations around personality, and identity, and what undergraduates a few years ago liked to call relatability:

People person seeks paid internship in liking you as a friend,  
 respecting you as a coworker. Serial monogamist  
 seeks change of pace in slutting it up for the summer.

Animal lover seeks entry level position, teaching guinea pigs  
 how to swim.

*When I Grow Up* isn't for everyone (what is?); if you are used to extremes of concision, or to surface difficulty, you may find it chatty, or undercooked. I find it, instead, self-belittling, self-appeasing, self-affrighting, self-delighting (as Yeats said of his own soul), largely delightful, and probably important: it's easy to imagine a young reader seeing himself here as he had not seen himself in poems before. As for this not-so-young reader, I wish that this long first book were longer.



I do not harbor the same wish when I get to the end of Kaveh Akbar's *Calling a Wolf a Wolf*, even though it's more passionate, more consistently inventive line by line, and more likely to contribute its share to best-of-the-decade anthologies. Akbar (who is also known for a series of online interviews with poets titled *Divedapper*; he's interviewed me) sets out, like Chen, to portray multiple, formative, sometimes stigmatized, demographics to which he belongs: he is a Persian American, and a Muslim Ameri-

can, and a recovering alcoholic, and – to judge by the poems alone – erotically attracted to men and to women. Even more than Chen, he embraces the goal of depicting these group identities but rejects the demand that he do so in clear, reportorial, unadorned ways.

Instead, Akbar reaches for big symbols, dreamlike scenes, dramatic figures and announcements that suggest Dylan Thomas by way of Brigit Pegeen Kelly. Like Thomas, like Kelly, Akbar emphasizes the animal, the instinctive, the thunderclouds that rise from the id: “My whole form is mostly / skeleton and loose meat; that I’ve managed / anything at all seems cause for praise.” The proximate senses of touch and taste can seize the foreground over sight and sound, as in “Portrait of the Alcoholic with Doubt and Kingfisher”:

You just don’t know yet which parts  
                                   of yourself to value –  
 your spittle or its syrupy smell,  
                                   your irises or their mothish obsession  
 with light. Even the trap-caught fox  
                                   knew enough to chew away its leg.

Alcohol dependency, the hunger for answers, the wish to know God, the erotic: these desires are all, for Akbar, analogous, though never identical. Each can overflow, each can reach excess, and that excess becomes by turns magnificent and ridiculous and dangerous: “It’s all I can do to quiver / in and out of my jeans each day, to keep / my fingers out of the wrong mouths.” Kaveh’s language seems meant to bridle (as with a horse) or steer (as with a boat) instincts that almost ruined him. Several of his poems bear titles beginning “Portrait of the Alcoholic.” The last, “Portrait of the Alcoholic Stranded Alone on a Desert Island,” also asks us to envision the poet as Noah, awaiting his own private flood: “The boat I am building / will never be done.”

When Akbar is not expecting the waters to rise, he lives in the world of the Fire Sermon, where everything and everyone is either “hot” in the vernacular sense of “sexually desirable,” or else dangerous, too hot to touch. “Ways to Harm a Thing” might end up as a warning or as a love poem:

## Things

have been getting  
 less and less hypothetical  
 since I unhitched myself  
 from your bedpost . . .

## Another

way to harm something is to  
 melt its firebox,  
 make it learn to live  
 in the dark. I still want  
 to suck the bones out  
 from your hands.

Akbar has what every poet needs: the power to make, from emotions that others have felt, memorable language that nobody has assembled before. He demonstrates that skill with his poems' titles: "No Is a Complete Sentence"; "Besides, Little Goat, You Can't Just Go Asking for Mercy." He does not yet have – as Thomas, also, did not have – the ability to make individual poems into multipart, logical, or sequential large-scale structures. Instead, we know how it feels to be him in a particular state of mind; we are moved, impressed, shocked, bowled over, and we feel that same way until the end of the poem. There's a new figure every couple of lines, and even when Akbar gets literal, he never stays there:

All I want is to finally  
 take off my cowboy hat and show you my jeweled  
 horns. If we slow dance I will ask you not to tug  
 on them but secretly I will want that very much.

To read *Calling a Wolf a Wolf* straight through – and that is probably not the best way to read it – is to notice all the demographics, all the identity-constituting problems and labels to which Akbar belongs, including the Persian American ("*delam barat tang shodeh*, I miss you, // and *shab bekheir*, goodnight"). It is, also, to be swept away by those problems' gathered force: "mirror neurons double the pain they see," Akbar warns, and Akbar's neurons may be firing all the time. Yours may fire too, not only

because you feel his pain, but because you are moved to quote him: few first books hold so many takeaway lines. “If you / could be anything in the world // you would.” “I’ve spent my whole adult life / in a country where only my parents can pronounce my name.” “What you lack and the punishment for your / lacking are the same.”

•

Courtney Kampa is – or at least the poems in *Our Lady of Not Asking Why* paint her as – a white southerner by birth, a New Yorker by choice, and a loyal, attentive sister, both to an adult who now teaches young children and to a much younger sibling, a tween or a teen. As with Akbar and Chen, so with Kampa, we cannot read the book without noticing the categories and identities into which she fits, nor without noticing how the poet has made them into something better than, stranger than, other than familiar stories. The poems that pop out put sisterhood first: what can women do for one another, and for girls? “Bella Figura” begins at a performance of the eponymous Jiri Kylian ballet, in which “each ballerina’s breasts [are] completely bared.” “A man beside” Kampa is crudely rating their bodies:

any minute now my sister steps  
 onstage, and he will score her as he has the others  
 and I’ll hear it. My sister’s half-bareness  
 is everything I know and don’t know  
 about love. There is probably a different word  
 for that but there is also one for the way  
 he’ll see their color, shape, and I’ll see Thursday  
 in Raleigh, trying to boil pasta on a hotplate,  
 our youngest sister thirteen, arms folded  
 over her chest, her new bras hidden deep in her closet  
 where she hoped we wouldn’t see. So we stood  
 in front of her, our shirts off  
 watching the pasta soften.

Kampa’s free verse tries not to be showy, either in its cadence or in its figures; instead, it asks us to admire its poise and control. (Among the good poets who are Kampa’s seniors, the one she most resembles might be Linda Gregerson, whose best poems – also

braided narratives – seek a similar precision.) As if to set off these deft first-person anecdotes, Kampa offers a series of poems confusingly titled “Short Essay,” spoken by overheard or made-up characters, and written in ragged, interview-like lines: “I wasn’t *looking* for a woman to keep / me, if that’s what you mean. I must have / been twenty-five at the time. Too poor / to get drunk.” “But I did have this tutor: a grad student . . . He smelled like 50-year-old / ink.” These poems, though shaky on their own, bolster the volume, whose overall fluency never forgets that speakers depend on imagined listeners, that how we can see ourselves (as in “Bella Figura”) grows out of what we believe other people perceive.

Even at her weakest Kampa (like Gregerson) comes across as trustworthy, as a writer who wants to get human life right, and like most of us she can try too hard to reassure. A poem about school shooting drills begins wonderfully, with the poet’s schoolteacher sister “searching for adult versions of the child-proof words / she speaks in every day”; alas, it ends with children “singing to some goodness in our world.” Kampa does better when she lets herself end on unresolved anger, as in “The Rules,” about what appears to be her first experience of workplace sexual harassment (she was eleven), or when she ends with hints, solidarity, irony, as in the short, almost abstract poem to her adult sister about “the men / we are about to marry”:

Outside, our mother’s  
picking beetles off her roses – they bob like empty pennies  
in their plastic cup . . .

This love, sister, we hold  
like household scissors  
against each other’s throats. Nothing human  
in you  
is alien to me. And you – you know by now  
what I’m made from.

•

Like Akbar and Chen, Raena Shirali presents herself as the child of immigrants, but her sense of ethnicity feels unlike theirs; she has apparently traveled in her parents’ country of origin, and her poetry brings in conventions, current events, and proper nouns

from India: “daayan summoning magic,” “the Sabarmati Express.” The energy in *Gilt*, however, comes – like the energy in Kampa’s volume – from a youth spent in the southern United States, when Shirali was, and in some ways still is (by her own estimation), dynamic, endangered, riven by ambivalence about what her body might want. “Fuck the so-called return to nature,” her final poem exclaims, “its verdancy, its promise / that things will continue to grow.” Growth, “nature,” sexual energy are for Shirali, as for Akbar, a threat – they make us want to do things which, at the same time, we do not exactly want to do:

Beard clippings litter the bathroom sink.  
 I forget which are yours, which are his.  
 This is not to say  
     I had both of you at the same time.  
 It is to say:  
     you all wore the same red plaid shirt.  
     It is to say:  
         I don’t know who I am alone.

Shirali’s ethnicity made her exotic to boys in a way that seems, in retrospect, predictable (“how they writhe when I flash a dark nipple. I’m durga, I’m kali”); but (the poems ask) if she were to swear off acting exotic, if she were to distance herself from what boys want her to be, what, or who, would she be? Shirali’s waterlogged, fertile South Carolina and Georgia are places where girls define themselves by how boys feel and what young men can do for, or with, or to them; raw poems place those definitions in exceptionally high relief.

Some of those poems, emerging from what Shirali calls “the space between girl and grown,” make sense as what we have learned to call performance poetry, an art that overlaps more broadly every year with its more careful, better-funded, page-based cousin, as poets who grew up with YouTube earn MFAs. (Shirali herself has read at slam events, as well as at the usual passel of colleges.) “To miss America,” Shirali writes (the first phrase is also the title), “is to turn twenty-four with an ass that refuses / to fit squarely into a string bikini,” and “to miss the point / of each perky each taut muscle / rippling its way across a wheat field.” Such lines demand to be read aloud. They also dis-

play what performers and rappers call “flow,” an ease inseparable from the energy of continuous creation: indeed, Shirali’s best poem is also called “flow,” and it leans on a series of puns:

As a noun, it’s a word that makes most girls I know cringe.  
 A word whose synonyms – *motion, flux, current* –  
 remind me of the Cooper, the Ashley, the steady, continuous  
       rivers

I swan in at sixteen, the first time I ever  
 wore a bikini. I wonder if those girls  
 think of a body of water – or just of bodies, of boys  
 who poke fun at *cycles*. It gets tricky for me  
 with the verb . . .

I went with the flow once  
 at a party in college & the next day threw away all  
 of my tank tops, every strappy thing  
 I could find.



Ari Baniyas is a trans man of Greek American extraction, once a New Yorker, now studying at Stanford: more than the other poets here, he sets out in his poems to explain himself to people who are not like him, and to generalize about his experience. He is, in other words, a poet of plain, almost neoclassical style (which has its own long history at Stanford), a style that fails when it emphasizes the obvious, and succeeds when it offers wisdom. (Not by coincidence, this plain, drab, khaki, or stony style goes with colors and textures often gendered male.) Like Kampa, like Shirali, Baniyas in *Anybody* asks us to think about how his multiple identities might overlap and collide in the eyes of his readers, and in the eyes of his lovers: he rails against “the assumption my beloved is white”; “in whiteness together we steamroll what matters,” he goes on, “that *we* a fake universal I’ve wanted to wreck / by how I live.”

Baniyas also wants to take apart, to examine as their own identities, positions that have been unmarked, empowered, majority. Take masculinity, for example, which he has worked to claim for himself; but what kind of masculinity? “Cheating husband, vapid fag / checked-out corporate guy, self-centered evolved guy”?

“predator, messiah, martyr”? “Who cares what men are. Can’t we / scrap this whole enterprise?” But for Baniyas, we cannot: we can make and remake our own identities, but we do not make them from scratch, being limited by the concepts that we think the people around us can understand. Gender is one of those concepts, and for Baniyas it feels like a motel room: “if I want to talk to almost *anyone* I have to go in! / It’s too fucking small and we’re all in it. But no, not all of you // seem to hate it.”

Such poems are not lyrics so much as they are short essays, or explanations, about gender, embodiment, and adulthood that happen to take place in verse; that is not a reason for their failure but a condition for their sometime success. When your identity baffles other people, but you hold a position that encourages trust (when you are, for example, a teacher of writing) you are sometimes called upon to explain that identity, to make it comprehensible, in literal language, at length. Baniyas’s writing (more than the writing of other recent trans poets) incorporates such literal explanation. And yet Baniyas can inhabit extended metaphors too. “Your Wild Domesticated Inner Life” returns to his ancestral Greece by way of Abraham and Isaac:

Experience is a lamb. Memory  
 leads that lamb by a rope  
 uphill again to the rocky plot of land  
 where your ancestors once farmed.  
 Every time you set out  
 the lamb resists, pulls a steady NO  
 against the rope . . .

How can it be that the path  
 you and the lamb  
 have worn into the mountain  
 is, for the lamb, new every time?

•

“After the final no there comes a yes,” wrote Wallace Stevens, “and on that yes the future world depends.” Yet some poets have to say no over and over – like Baniyas’s lamb – to a present that threatens any future at all. Cortney Lamar Charleston is one of those poets; his *Telepathologies* draws its subjects explicitly from the Black

Lives Matter movement and from the violence against black bodies to which the movement responds. Most of the poems in the first half of *Telepathologies* remember named victims: many respond with rage, or rage turned inward, to the public climate of 2014–16, when it seemed that even well-intentioned elected leaders could not protect black bodies from ill-intentioned police. “Our American sins can never be paid for in full,” Charleston declares in “State of the Union,” coming close to Lincoln’s Second Inaugural. “Feeling Fucked Up,” on the other hand, begins “Lord, they done did the damn deed again took him out / like *POOF* like ace” (the “him” in question is Walter Scott, killed by police in South Carolina in 2015). Other poems in the first section rely on nonstandard English and hip-hop cadence (“He say the bigger they come, then the deeper the roots. / She say the darker the flesh, then the tighter the noose”) or impersonate nonliterary prose, as in “Spellcheck Questions the Validity of Black Life”:

[Trayvon] Martin: *did you mean traction?*

Yes, in the way that lynching, the first  
quintessentially American sport, has regained its  
footing among a younger generation – no robes  
worn, no fouls given, not a whistle to blow.

Yet others take up regular hexameters (“Facing the Music”) or turn on a pin-sharp pun: “How Do You Raise a Black Child?” “From the dead.”

Charleston, like many of us, needs formal variety so as to stay alert to public events: otherwise the steady downhill slide of news might just leave us depressed. His most frequent sonic choices could not exist without Terrance Hayes – he’s especially indebted to the older poet’s fast-paced, multiply hinged, twitchy compound sentences. Yet the younger poet rarely works like the older one: he’s talkier, rawer, less canny, less likely to build complicated puzzles. He’s also coming from another generation, with another relation to higher education. “Artfully Dodging the Sublime and Obvious” describes Charleston’s life as an undergraduate at the University of Pennsylvania: “What they said was *you’ll get in for sure*. / What they meant was: *affirmative action* is a bitch.” Charleston writes about black life for black readers, but he also writes about life as a black man expected to explain blackness to white people:

I walk into a room full of ghosts, their translucent  
 intentions packed  
 from wall to wall.            I avoid speaking. There's a human  
 piñata –  
 a mob victim – hanging in the back of my mouth I don't  
 want them  
 to see or smell.

If you think the United States as of 2017 is in a crisis without obvious precedent (and there are good reasons to think so), if you think the country's institutions are on fire, it might help you to read a poet for whom they were on fire already, a poet in whose particular scenes and frames and topics – not black life but *his* black life; not racial injustice but *his* sense of race and of justice – the continuous disaster, the need for resistance, began long ago.

That said, I would not recommend *Telepathologies* if the book felt like monotonous agitprop, or like an attempt at a single collective voice. It does not; some of its best pages amount to one-off, near-whimsical takes on pop culture ephemera: take “Miley Cyrus Presides over the Funeral for the Twerk” (you can find that poem – and its bizarre backstory – online), or “Keeping Jell-O,” about Bill Cosby's long-hid scandals: “If worried about taste, / consider purchasing the powder mix and then stowing / it away in a cool, dark pantry where it can sit indefinitely.” If Charleston's book begins by asking how to stay angry, it ends by asking how the poet can feel something else, in a poem called “Unmaking a Fist”:

Truth be told, I'm no better  
 than the rope that started this, but my mother raised me right.

My

father raised me right. My grandmother and  
 grandfather raised  
 me right. That's four right turns right there, friend:  
 always been

a square, but I still have sharp edges, corners of my own define  
 I can put claim to. I still have the threat of my skin to back me  
 up,

the color of everything that has burned to the ground.



Nobody's likely to call Charleston a selfish poet, nor a poet of mere private life, but his poems do revolve around "I" and "me"; he recalls, reacts, generalizes, arranges figurative language in ways that assemble an imagined self. That's what it means to write lyric, by some lights, but of course not all poets follow those lights, and not all poets write lyric in any sense. Some tell long stories; some resist all prose sense, or morph into critical prose interrupted by poems (the year's best avant-garde first books could well be another review). Others still generate verse documentaries, like Molly McCully Brown's *The Virginia State Colony for Epileptics and Feeble-minded*. The short volume's sequences speak for, to, or about the women once confined to this house, its grounds, and its farm. Many were involuntarily sterilized: "You are not for this world," they were told (in Brown's paraphrase); "It would be cruel to let you / replicate yourself."

Even compared to other books suffused with the spirit of protest (Charleston's, for example) *The Virginia State Colony* has little tonal range, and less variation in diction. Brown does vary her line shape, though, and the tones she gets are the tones that she needs: animated by sorrow and sympathy as well as outrage, with a strong sense of there-but-for-the-grace-of-God-and/or-disability-activism-go-I (Brown has epilepsy). A poem called "Every Other Thing I See Is a Ghost" begins with chilling advice to the confined: "Whatever it is you were born to do sweetheart there's no doing it here . . . there's nowhere to leave to." Epilepsy, in these portraits of confined, neglected women, parodies the idea of poetic inspiration, the bolt from heaven that singles the poet out, dividing her from the prosaic world:

When I go, it is because they are tired of the shadow I make on  
 the window,  
 the mound I make on the bed, the noise I make when they pull  
 my dress  
 down over my head and it catches in my mouth and makes a  
 gag.

The poet's "I" is like the inconsequential, aspirational spirit of the women "not allowed outside. // Instead, we go to the window &

make / a game of racing dogwood blossoms / knocked down by the wind.” These women in literal isolation parody, for Brown, the idea that lyric poetry reveals the genuine self by portraying solitude; instead, her poetry argues, when we are very much alone we lose our minds unless we are able to make up company, to imagine that someone is listening, to get some parts of our identities confirmed. Her role as a poet and researcher – and as a tourist, when she visits the site – is to be that confirmation, to join a kind of anachronistic congregation, which she names “The Convulsions Choir”: “They did not build / the church / for us.”



Attempting to represent a collective, to show Brown’s research in Brown’s distinctive cadence, as well as to articulate a kind of shared identity, *The Virginia State Colony* becomes a unified lyric book almost despite itself. *The Work-Shy*, on the other hand, does not: its only named author is the Blunt Research Group, a set of poets who work as one in creating texts from documentary sources, in this case the written records of institutions meant to house juvenile delinquents and adults declared insane. Part 1, “Lost Privilege Company” (which appeared as a chapbook in 2016), consists “entirely of phrases drawn from case files of inmates in the earliest youth prisons in California,” arranging the inmates’ words beside those of their caseworkers. Part 3 arranges (often in translation) words written by people confined to American and European insane asylums. A much briefer part 2 (whose short blocks of prose remind me of Auden’s “Dichtung and Wahrheit”) tells us what the Blunt Research Group thinks it is doing, and why it has (or does it have?) the right to do these things: “The poem hovers between the obligation to seek permission to listen and the impossibility of obtaining it from a voice that cannot be reached.”

In contrast to the Virginia Colony women, or to the men Baniyas imagines, there is no single representative “I,” no identity, that holds together the people quoted here, no more than there is one personal name that represents Blunt Research Group. Instead there are kinds of confinement, bars and walls and near-total erasures, from which stray claims escape. Each page of verse bears the name of a patient or inmate, and many serve as memorials to the badly treated person none of us today can meet. “Uriah,” for example,

considers himself “pretty wise” he has  
silly laughing spells

his chief joy  
to collect rubbish and

tear up  
American flags *any*  
*he could get* and burn them

*oh I don't know I just play around*

The found-language portrait is not new – see William Carlos Williams, or C. D. Wright’s *One Big Self* – but it’s almost all Blunt Research Group does, and they do it superbly, scarily, never forgetting how much these lives have been shaped by what restricted them, and never forgetting how much we cannot know. “Javier” could have been, or is, an imaginative writer:

At Juvenile Hall fairy tales  
interest him chiefly

he merely “sits”

making no attempt  
to work

Refusing productive work is the real sin for which so many of these teens have been locked up; they are victims either of American capitalism or of Adam’s curse, and Blunt Research Group does not so much attempt to show what they were like, overall, as gather the scraps of individual tastes or habits or rebellion left over after institutions and time have destroyed the rest, from Javier and his reading habits to “Helen,” with her “tendency to take the world / as a joke,” leaving her minders “unable to keep her / *a minute after supper.*”

The young people of “Lost Privilege Company” become audible to us through the same system, the same set of caseworkers and officers that confines them (we read, mostly, what adults say about them); the people of part 3 arrive only in their own words. Some don’t make sense: “Sworn in, // pivots between two birds / my plan to release myself.” Others could make a cat cry. Take “Theodor”: the poem named for that inmate reads, in full:

Oh, please  
 forgive  
 I have written  
 Theodor  
 with a pencil  
 it was done  
 in case of emergency

It is the kind of emergency – the lack of an adequate name for the self, the failure of any attempt at personal identity – that poetic language can assuage. So is this, from the end of “Jacqueline”:

aside from my business  
 it’s the most beautiful day of my life  
 why must I give things  
 I don’t have  
 to others oh mama said this and then me

These inmates’ extreme solitude (like the incarceration of the epileptics and “feble-minded” in Brown) twists and travesties the partly chosen, partly fated isolation of the lyric speaker, reminding us both that we mortal millions really do live alone, and that nobody anywhere should have to endure, as “Marmor” did, a “55th DAY OF MY SOLITARY CONFINEMENT.”

The structure of *The Work-Shy*, its restrictions and methods, like the overall designs of *Telepathologies* and *Virginia State Colony*, works as social protest, reminding us how some kinds of torment are (as Adrienne Rich put it) “shared, unnecessary, and political.” But the individual portraits and fragments sometimes point in another direction: some kinds of pain, some sad outcomes are inevitable, like the laws of thermodynamics or the fact that we grow old and die. A poetry that does justice to the systems that restrict us, to the vicissitudes of identity, and to the feedback loops that connect individuals to groups, must also do justice to our sometime wish to escape, not from one or another asylum, one or another category, one or another room, but from everything in the knowable world, as in the prayer of “Mary M”:

I cry out after some known-unknown Thing  
 as I hurry over my sand and barrenness. Oh,  
 Kind Devil, if you are not to fetch me Happiness

then slip from your great steel key-ring  
a bright little key to the door of the glittering  
bad things and give it to me.

Maybe the Blunt Research Group and the lyric poet, the aspiration of a collective and the romantic yearning of an individual, point to the same thing, the same wish, the same deficiency in life as we know it; maybe they are, at least, not so far apart.