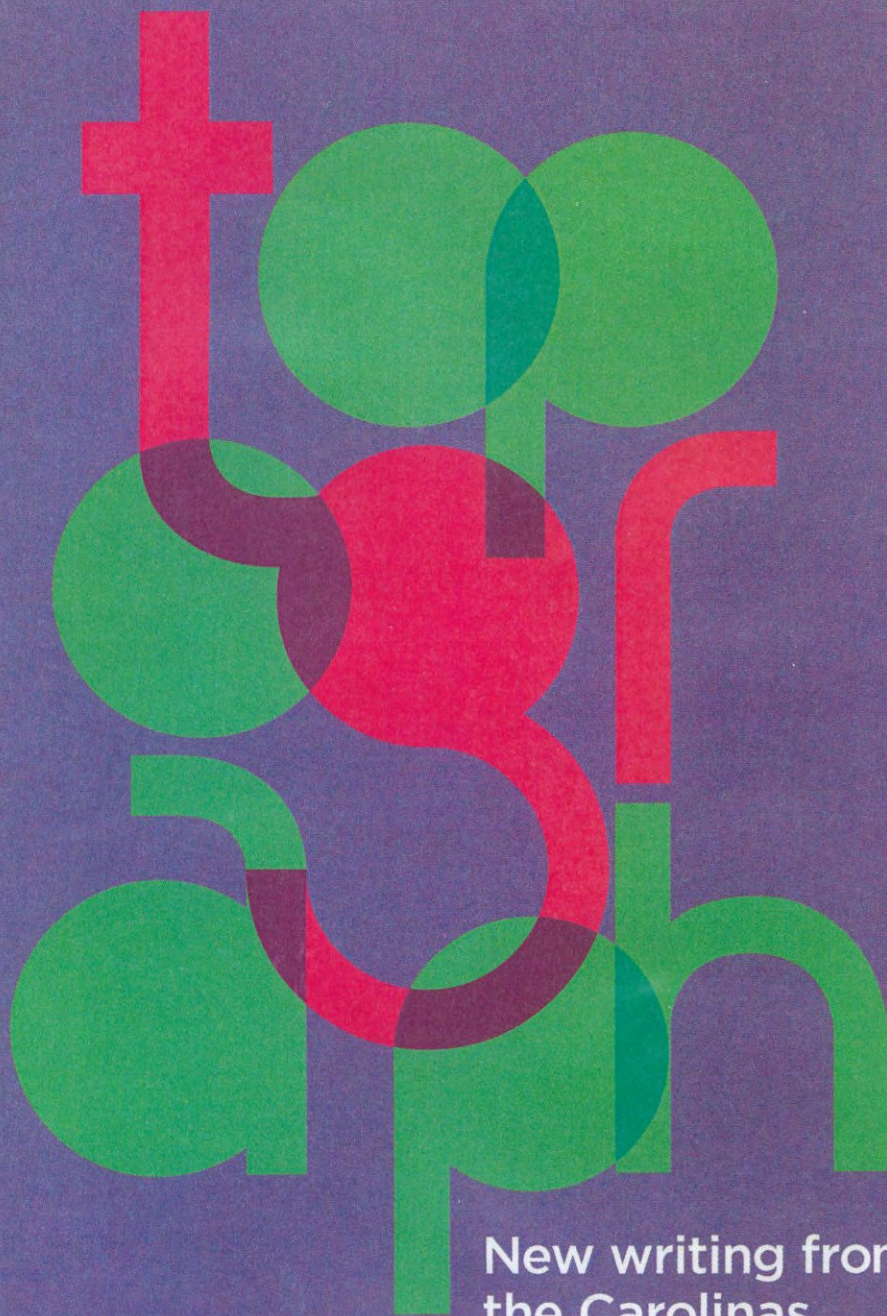




New writing from
the Carolinas
and the
landscape beyond

Edited by Jeff Jackson

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The Great Salvific Power

If you have a dialectical mind like mine and if a poem of yours is moving more or less compulsively towards its destination, you feel the need of a pistol shot to stop the action, so that it may resume on another track, in a different mood or tempo.

— Stanley Kunitz.

I cannot resist the pull of poetry any more than my older son, the one whose degenerative illness first sent me diving into Emily Dickinson, can resist playing out every night at dinner the various possibilities and impacts of rainouts and pitcher rotations in post-season baseball or my boyfriend can resist escaping into the ambience and heroic plot lines of classic movies as a weekend antidote to the thin gruel of investment banking in a severe economic downturn.

Early on, my love affair with poetry trembled with newfound passion, much as my coterminous first encounter with raw oysters. No one forced the spiny mollusks on me; they were simply offered and I was uncharacteristically ready and eager, aware in an instant that the experience was new and yet so immediately taken in by the pleasure that

the anticipation and the “time before”—pre-oysters and pre-poetry—held nothing to draw me back. Unknown things arrived as if previously known; at least in part.

Prone to be a grinder, I am enticed by poetry toward the possibility that guardedness is over-rated, that the Grail might come flying at me looking like a curveball. Caught and held, a whole world could open. Ackerman to Zagajewski between the covers. Blue Points, Hama Hama, Canada Cup, Effingham, Kumamota, Malpeque, and Hog Island Sweetwaters on ice. Consider the poetry.

Once ignited, my reading of poetry blazed its course. Poetry and essays about poetry appealed to me simultaneously and similarly. Auden and *The Dyer's Hand*, Coleridge and *Biographia Literaria*, Wallace Stevens and *The Necessary Angel*, Louise Gluck and *Proofs and Theories*, Robert Hass and *Twentieth Century Pleasures*, William Carlos Williams and *Embodiment of Knowledge*, Muriel Rukeyser and *The Life of Poetry*, William Matthews and *Poetry Blues*. Sometimes the treasures were in the introductions—one to a slim selection of James Wright, another to a Larry Levis collection, another to a new edition of Wallace Stevens.

The parallels of reading poetry and reading about poetry seem as natural and as energizing as cooking and reading *Bon Appetit*, running and reading *Runners World*, and yet the essays about poetry expand to say things to me about life and thinking.

I read poems many times a day. I carry them with me in my pocketbook and in my pocket and on my laptop and one in particular on a folded notecard with me always, even at times tucked in my running shoes.

*There is this cave
In the air behind my body
That nobody is going to touch:
A cloister, a silence
Closing around a blossom of fire.
When I stand upright in the wind,
My bones turn to dark emeralds.*

James Wright called it “Jewel”; it is my always poem.

After a day's or a week's or a poet's-worth of reading, I hold more questions than answers. And better questions.

That is the private salvation.

Winter, now almost three years ago, I stopped in at the St. Agnes Branch of the New York Public Library as I often would late afternoon. The place buzzed with energy after school let out. I felt a childlike amazement at how much was at my fingertips there, how much could be requested and delivered inside the structure Carnegie built, his name in stone four floors up, gazing across the street to Sofia's Storage where neighborhood lore has it Jerry (Seinfeld) stores his cars. I imagined Carnegie liking the likes of Sofia and Seinfeld and casting the occasional wink down and right at Brother Jimmy's and its noisy sidewalk-congesting, cigarette-smoking, barbeque-finger-licking customers.

I had come looking for a curious intellect and willing spirit in the form of a librarian to whom to pitch my proposal for a poetry circle. I wanted to read and discuss poetry with other readers. I wanted to put it in the center of the room and have at it with others and watch others experience it. I wanted to take the love affair public.

The librarian jumped on the idea immediately, and we worked out themes. Poetry and Food, Travel, Heat, Water, Escape, Noise, Prisons, Distance, and Paper. Among hers was the contribution that it be *one* page of *published* poetry. She understood that I was proposing a reading group one evening hour a month not a writing workshop and she remembered her father, a businessman, saying anything worth saying could be said in a one-page memo.

The One Page Poetry Circle began: “open to all interested in reading, appreciating, and discussing poetry. Bring a single page of poetry by an established poet, plus your enthusiasm, thoughts, questions, and your curiosity about the poems others bring. [Myself], writer, teacher and neighborhood resident will moderate.” Over the months, I developed a folded, 8 ½ by 11 handout (not unlike a church bulletin I thought as I made my way from the copy place on the corner of my block to the library a block further west). Over the months the flyer came together as *Circle Lines*, the outer faces developing the month's theme and the

general nature and structure of the Circle, the inside faces focusing on a particular poetic technique.

We were all sorts gathered in the carpeted room on the second floor of the library every fourth Tuesday at 6:30, the huge windows taking in the late-day noise of Amsterdam Avenue: two ladies who wore hats and had a fondness for Robert Louis Stevenson, a man who stood to read, always in Spanish first, then an English translation, his own, a man with a proclivity for Chinese verse, a lawyer, two professors, a neighborhood environmental activist, a nonprofit executive, a potter, a graphic artist, an advertising executive, and a man I came to believe was homeless.

I saw him almost daily after that first meeting, rummaging through the wire waste bins on Amsterdam, and then I passed him one day on Columbus and he smiled broadly, leaned toward me and said, "The British are coming, the British are coming!" I told myself he had come to the first Circle, billed as Poetry and Food, expecting the latter would be served. He came a few more times. He is still clear in my mind, how he joined in.

A simple structure is at the heart of the One Page Poetry Circle. Plan the structure, provide a focus, find the space, make it free, make it public, and poetry will deliver. Full of the self-doubt that seemed my too-frequent garment in the early months of my new alone life, I would make my way quietly to the public library with several books, a stack of papers, and a bottom-of-the-stomach certainty that something surprising was about to happen.

Here, come, take. As people walked into the room, I handed them poets' lines I had come to believe in.

I strung a line of words across the inside of *Circle Lines*: line, sentence, image; music, rhythm, thought, sensory; alliteration; line break; ligaments, ligatures, leaps; allusion, metaphor, dissonance; fractures, juxtapositions; shock, swoon, bliss, hinge, twist, turn, crux, twinkle. And more lines from one who has spent a life in poetry:

Reading poetry is an adventure in renewal, a creative act, a perpetual beginning, a rebirth of wonder . . . I love the frame of mind, the playful work and working playfulness, the form of consciousness . . . that come with the reading of poetry.

—Edward Hirsch

We sat in straight-back chairs, piles of papers in our laps and at our feet. Poetry lovers from the neighborhood and neighboring boroughs gathered to read lines from poems related (in obvious and less obvious ways) to the night's theme, Poetry and Food. "Oatmeal," "Eel," "A Clean Plater," "Formaggio," "How to Stuff a Pepper," "Adolescent Suicide," "Poem Holding its Heart in One Fist," "Desserts," "A Waitress's Instructions on Tipping or Get the Cash Up and Don't Waste My Time," "Death in the Afternoon," and "Blackberry Eating" were read and a few words said by the individuals who had brought each. One man recited a poem in Thai extolling the virtues of black crab paste. Another sang an Ecuadorian love song with lines about oranges, once green, now ripe. Words were read from the works of Galway Kinnell, Edward Hirsch, Jill Bialosky, Molly Peacock, William Blake, John Berryman, William Carlos Williams, Elaine Equi, Jason Schneiderman, Ogden Nash, Louise Gluck, Nancy Willard, Jan Beatty, Angel Gonzales, and Horace.

A reward of reading poetry is its reach—its ability to expand a word, a thought, a topic. The simple one-word topic, food, found its way in verse to pleasure, religion, hospitality, nourishment, survival, fear, hunger, place, experience, memory, work, agriculture, family, identity, preparation. The variety of method, of approach, of use of language is rich and fascinating.

It is not the single lines alone that make the poetry circle, though there have been times as with reading poetry solo where a single line has stayed with me. It is not the collecting of work as if we were poetry anthologists, though there have been times when I have reviewed the evening's gleanings and thought of it in that regard. It is more the moment of pulling together in the hands of readers at a library the strings to so many balloons. Poses and juxtaposes. A dance.

The second-generation American, now a successful corporate lawyer, father, soon grandfather, was so full of gratitude for the Circle's existence, for his wife's invitation to accompany her the third or fourth month. And what had he found there? Some of what he told me was the memory of his immigrant father, reciting poetry aloud as a tool to learn English, to learn the rhythm of speech, to rub the rough edges of his Russian accent just a little. And when our September meeting fell on

an 11th, he wanted to read something because he had lost a son in the World Trade Center and at the end I asked him to read again one I had brought and he did, in his eloquent way. At the group's request, he read it twice. Cornelius Eady's "Grief Bird."

*After those buildings fell,
And New York City stank from bad intent,
And the wind twirled with human pigment,
And the sky darkened in one spot and howled,*

*There we walked, newborn, holding flashlights and shovels,
Dusty with shock, the streets painted mad,
Ears still smarting from the evil crumble.*

*Now the combing, the sifting,
Now the hauling, the uncovering.
The astonished song.*

Now along with the poems, there are people and questions associated with poems in my less lonesome head. How did that poem do that? Why in verse form rather than prose? Why this poem and not that one? Why this poet here and not there, then and not then? Why do I keep reading that one? Why was it so much fun or so fiery or so beautiful to sit with a dozen other readers and hear poems read aloud?

Would you be willing to try this and let me know?

Take one "Oatmeal" (Galway Kinnell), follow with "Next Day" (Randall Jarrell), "The Man on the Dump," (Wallace Stevens), and "Smell" (William Carlos Williams). Invite three people. Each of you reads one aloud. Listen. What happened? Did you smile, write down a line, make a mental note, note an allusion you might look up later? And more? Word delight, sound, the grouping of words on the page (if you had a page in front of you, the way you imagine they're grouped if you did not)? Was one slow and leisurely? Was one relaxed, another tougher, more formal? Did you imagine yourself as the speaker of one? Would you say "what tactless asses we are"? But would you say "The the", just like that? Are people or characters or persona handed to you? A friendly

knowing sort, the sort of friend you know, something on your face?

Are you warming up now?

Four more. Take "A Miracle for Breakfast" (Elizabeth Bishop), follow it with "Words" (Barbara Guest), add "The Scarecrow" (Charles Simic), and slide into "Litany" by Billy Collins. Do you concentrate, now on the image, now on the words? More now on something you want to see, more now on something to understand? Worry, humor, affection in both?

Take four more. Robert Hass's "Meditation at Lagunitas," Jane Kenyon's "Otherwise," Heather McHugh's "What He Thought," Anne Carson's "God's List of Liquids." Is one a cha-cha, one a quiet lying still, one in your head, another in an unfamiliar place?

Does one seem embodied, booked, a poem you'd read in a library? Another pixilated, twitterable, envisioned in light projected on a screen?

Are leaps mandatory? Within a poem? Among poems? How else do you get from "Eel" to "Formaggio"? Nash to Gluck?

Maybe we become the rhetoric, frame, prosody of the poem. We become a piece of a whole. We become a symbol for something other, a stand-in. We are the meaning. We take the place of the meaning. We lie down next to. We make fun of. We are made fun of. We become the poems taking their words into us and speaking them out.

The leaps and embodiments begin solo as each one coming to the circle combs through the possibilities. The poems are acting on me as I read for the ones I will decide to take. The mind expanding and the intimacy begin there.

The second embodiment and energy exchange happens in the room. First on Amsterdam Avenue, then on West 100th Street, now in the third floor conference room in the new Darien Library, Exit 10 off I-95. Soon, again, perhaps in the St. Agnes Branch of the NYPL, just reopened after renovation. Some who come have practiced or researched. Some simply come with a poem they like. One traveling businessman passing through town pulled an Edna St. Vincent Millay poem from the stacks and read

with the cadence and presence of a performer. Another pulled from his rich knowledge of visual imagery and referred to painters and paintings that his selected poem brought to mind. Another reads regularly from poets of World War I.

Do we know (instinctively if not admittedly) that poetry can thicken a life, enhance its stratigraphy even as we know that it cannot "add a cubit" to its length? Is it possible that Cooperstown and Hollywood are not so far from Martins Ferry, Ohio, and Duino, from 85 East 4th Street and City Lights, from the upstairs rooms at the St. Agnes and Bloomingdale Branches of the New York Public Library and the bright new library on the Post Road in Darien? Is it possible that we reach for Lucille Clifton or Frank Bidart or Eavan Boland or Denise Levertov from desire and need of the most basic sort?

We leave the Darien Library on a crisp clear October evening. The yellow maples that line the cemetery nearby are bright even in the dark. The library itself is a beacon in the chilly Connecticut night. Our theme was Poetry and Masks, and we looked at line breaks and at reflexive and enjambed meanings. We heard lines from Siegfried Sassoon, Carl Sandburg, Robert Browning and Alan Shapiro.

I drive home from the poetry circle. The always poem is in my wallet.

Two circles—everything and what matters—continue, expanding.

Value that.