

VOLUME 3/3

**POEMS
FROM THE **THIRD** ANNUAL
ARTISTS THRIVE SUMMIT**

JULY 30-AUGUST 2, 2019
BEREA, KENTUCKY

**LYRAE VAN
CLIEF-STEFANON**

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Thrive: On Silence

The heatbugs rev
a sound like the struggling
stutter of a pull-start mower. Sound
stripped to teneral abandoning
of exhausted bodies to August
sun. As it is, they are as if disembodied
sound. Heatbugs. Zzzz zzzz as though
an abstraction of sleep were to try
to rouse itself to fill the hot daylight.
Heatbugs my sister said in that tone
she gets of authority. I know sometimes
she likes to lie. I don't hardly believe
a word anyone says to me
but listen now for what they are

trying to convey. A chip on my shoulder,
I understood post-truth before
the world soaked itself in it. True story:
once she and I drove through
a forming tornado to get to
Cracker Barrel. The heatbugs sing.
Zzzz zzzz. If that emerging storm
had come together above the car,
we would have filled it with
The Doxology: her high mountain
perfect pitch and my low flat Florida
Pentecostal alto all up in the swirl
with the way we say to each other
I'm circling the drain on the phone when
we're feeling bad, except the opposite of that,
a lifting off instead as though we were
the mist lifting off the pond when
we fish with Dad at 5 a.m. to beat the heat
& we over-cast & snag ourselves in the trees &
we throw back the joke-worthy bass & we bask
in how he grouses after the bypass
about the boat, the way it turns in the water
the second he takes his hand off the throttle.

Thrive: In the Noise and Whip

*It is lonesome, yes. For we are the last of
the loud.*

Nevertheless, live.

*Conduct your blooming in the noise and
whip of the whirlwind.*

-Gwendolyn Brooks

The whirlwind forms ahead, approaches
flittingly
as a butterfly
might,
as if it would alight upon my sister and me, strengthens, becomes
visible, picking up
debris,
waves its hubris like a flag,
would whisk us as the country is
now whisked except for our mothers'
bind-you
prayers over us, their] *peace, be still* [tsk & tell-storm that
harmonized knocks whether down, keeps us
weighted against dry conversion
to bland husks of death.

Not only can I cry, I cry.
I have
a gift for life, my only gift.
How young I learned,

to live nevertheless requires—:
an elegance I put on like a woolen stole,
then sheepish, dropped my head as I walked
in it, somehow ashamed. How soon
I learned how late—:
Break the line the way that you would break,
have broken—: with those who taught you you would] still [
run.

Break the narrative.

A body is a story:
a severed snake's head in the sassafras.
And breakdown—:
tears :—
that fluid space from which we
might
reassemble—:
flight

Thrive: Broomcraft

after June Jordan

sweep seed plain bind reed
weep grain feed soil need
wind grass bend loss grow
leap bless blend sew lead

Thrive: Pressed

I am not Appalachian.
But here I am

by invitation, listening to
the artists in Boone Tavern
lobby who talk *nunofelting*.
Roving—: I am eager for

this language, to learn
processes by which
one might make wool &
silk hold fast, shrink
toward one another
via pressure, agitation, &
heat. I shrink from
crowds, but attend this
cross-hatching—: shade
how we position ourselves
perpendicular to what
grips us. *Nuno*, the felting-
women tell me, means
cloth in Japanese—:

air-trace kanji in Kentucky
haunting—: returning
tongues love's years lost
to silence—: fibers
in which to graph a crush—:
to craft :—a worthy shroud
in which love might be—:
still—: born—: held. How
such placings bind us—:
Lord, deliver me from
the oblique, I find
myself sometimes
at odd angles wanting
mind enough to state—:
in this place where
I have lived for more

than half my life torn,
cauled in such grammars
as might reveal—:
unwoven from birth
how tightly yet I am
pressed—: how firmly
held in mind.

Thrive: In Declaration, Fight or Float

*"...he would fight the wind did it blow
from the South side when he wanted it
to blow from the North."*

-a contemporary on 19th c. politician Cassius Marcellus Clay,
who donated the land on which Berea College
was founded

"and I could almost see the combats in the coals"

-Frank G. Carpenter, on Clay sitting beside the fire at White Hall
describing his fights

An iron chrysalis—: such black inside

:—a name transferred—: like ink from crumpled news-

print—:

abolition :—balled into a fist—:

inheritance—: "The Lion of White Hall"

lost to the rope-a-dope—: Which avant-garde

poet cuts eyes—: Who grips his Bowie knife]

"I saw Declarey on the street and went

up to him and asked him if his name was

Declarey." [thinking of himself :—to cut

a silhouette—: Whose shadowed—: *leaning out*

his window trying to see something on

his roof:—observed such meaning as :—his own—:

a masthead—: *True American* :—himself

floating above the news :—:

some still can't see?

Thrive: In Silence

O
a sound I fear
is the only sound
I know.

-Cameron Awkward-Rich

Never full or complete
perfect. or even quiet. It is im-
made, tended. It must be
I tend

to critique it—: this one fair to middlin', good
in that

the traffic that disrupts it
does not flood & is not only
from my own head but
from the hall or Swoosh
from beyond the window

—: road noise, & this...

one connected moment,
a little kinship with the other person who looked up.
Silence—:

in it. I could not keep still
I tried to fix it.

Thrive: In Chant] Fred Hampton [

after June Jordan

flight	base	home	run	dream
breathe	law	field	swift	team
build	lithe	will	space	strike
hill	black	love	less	seam

Thrive: Blooming

Try to spell the teeth-sucking sound—:

the sound that shoots
the eyes right, sidelong toward
the edge of a field

—: vision branched in full

flowering—: then

drags the eyes back, as swift, alert
toward witness—:

people the margin,
 leafy here

don't say *community* like that
don't say *communion* like that
don't say *communist* like that—: here

efflorescing like sound—: that is
 unspellable

spit-pull & air's-edge against
the enameled
walls inside one's maw. Sound
 frits, bites. Soothes.

2.

Sedge—:

a yellow field breathing space, roots.

To breathe is to heal
What a body might do
in a field with a breath!

To frit is to begin,
to pre-fuse sand and flux

but push the breath hard enough through and it is

to call the dogs, or
to call attention
to—:

St. John's wort, the sedge
in this wild blooming—:
how bored of dull walls
of every sort I am.

(...)

3.

Tsssssss...

a frustration of flowers—:

Pulled back over the tongue and stopped behind the teeth,

a hiss that is a click—:

an image shuttered,
a story the eyes shot.

Someone placed a skull in the middle of a field

I'm stumbling
through,

this commission I can't finish

until I invent a way of spelling

an upside down T, a row

of sssss's sucked backwards
to a thick-tongued stop

like someone's snapped.

A picture

I don't want to describe. The skull. The wall.

Let the T stand for Tool.

Let the T stand for Tag—: I'm *it!*

Let T stand for

the work

T does in Try
teeth, shoot, frit, witness—:

(...)

4.

...careful
you don't end up in the Chattahoochee...

5.

my mother warned me.

I am trying here not to open my mouth.

Your heart knows
where home is,

grandma reminded me. You understand—:

what happens when a sound opens?

—: if by assessment
you mean how will I measure
when I have sounded
the proper spelling?

What does it mean to thrive?

6.

I miss the gold
that glinted in my mama's mouth

and the gold
that glinted in grandma's mouth,

their sudden smiles glorious,
mischief. Those women
no kin to one another
for whom witness
meant to tell
an *old, old*
story—:

Notice the sedge, its structure. What
of the work T does in notice,
in structure?

Aerenchyma...

What if the poem fails?

(...)

7.

Florida babygirl &

Appalachia grandbaby—:
beholden

to glean
a simple gift,
a breathless glimpse

That's St. John's Wort...

gold &

Look at God!

glint.

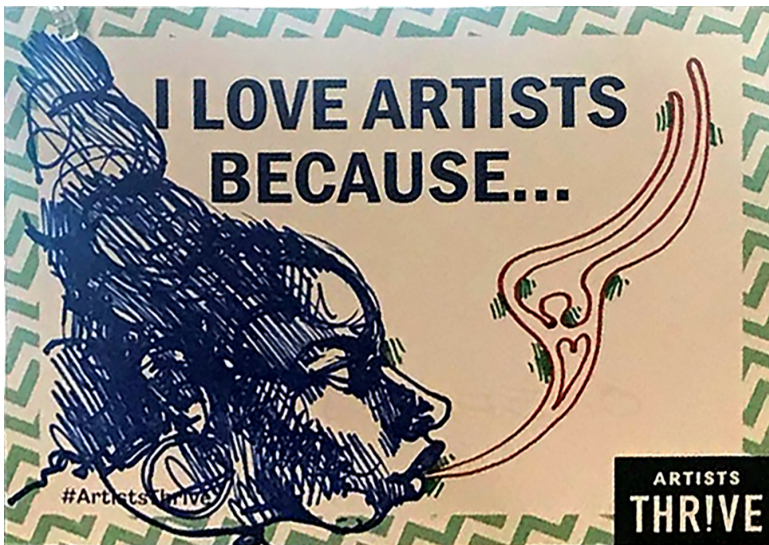


Thrive: “Fly Away Little Pretty Bird”

In the photographs after I've returned home, then abandoned home,
I find my doppelganger. There in the woodcraft shop,
in a mustard-colored jumper with a black leather backpack. She is so much myself
I stare even now in disbelief at the shot I don't remember having had the presence of mind
to snap. What does it mean when I can't tell my own face, my own arm, my hand
from another's hand? I left Kentucky full of joy, then found myself
at odds with my own body. I study the way she holds herself. The phone rings
and it's the realtor with an offer on the house I've called my home for 15 years.
I am eager to accept, to shed it in this light of revelation of a weakened artery wall.
In the ICU after the angiogram, I could not open my eyes. Did I die? I wasn't sure. I heard voices,
a chorus, demanding my attention. I had poems to write. Deadline meant something
altogether new. In the hills in Kentucky, riding shotgun with my sister, I had listened
to one song on a loop. How beautifully the swoops of harmony matched the view—:
*fly far beyond the dark mountain to where you'll be free evermore, fly away little pretty bird
where the cold winter winds don't blow....* Where to go but into the harmony?
The way the road's curve curved with the curved peaks of the hills, with the curved dark spaces
between the trees where if someone walked alone, who would notice?

Thrive: I Love Artists Because...

Swirling in from the western peak of
her own high bun, she unravels
from abstraction. A black woman is
a vision; her locs: direction;
her mind—: some stranger understands,
pulls from source-layer, her welcome
to dance before her eyes,
a post-card from elsewhere—: the wind is
—: pen-stroke, blue ink, her
high cheekbones, —: a hollow,
the tremulous breeze filled
with the beautiful thought,
her full lips, pursed
to speak it. I love
artists because—: that strange
love is—: scale
—: stretches the gesture,
whistles to rustle—:
the green word, shifts
the atmosphere
waves the line
through
here—thrive—
—thrive—here—thrive—



BIOGRAPHY

Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon is the author of *Open Interval*, a finalist for the National Book Award and the LA Times Book Prize and, and *Black Swan*, winner of the Cave Canem Poetry Prize, as well as chapbooks *Poems in Conversation and a Conversation*, a collaboration with Elizabeth Alexander, and *Leading with a Naked Body*, a collaboration with Leela Chantrelle. She is currently at work on *The Coal Tar Colors*, her third poetry collection, and *Purchase*, a collection of essays. Awarded fellowships from Cave Canem, the Lannan Foundation, and Civitella Ranieri, she was one of ten celebrated poets commissioned to write poems inspired by Jacob Lawrence's Migration Series in conjunction with the 2015 exhibit *One-Way Ticket: Jacob Lawrence's Migration Series and Other Works* for MoMA. She has written plays and lyrics for The Cherry, an Ithaca, NY, arts collective, and in 2018, her work was featured in *Courage Everywhere*, celebrating women's suffrage and the fight for political equality, at National Theatre London.

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