

New Poetry from Michael Chang



Friedrich Wilhelm Karl Kuhnert (1865-1926), "Bowhead whale."

the secret life of simon & the whale

the boy inches close to the water
barefoot backpack slung over one
shoulder
he plays with the sand dips his toes in
his name is simon
simon is my human
i quote mean girls: "get in loser, we're going shopping"
he giggles
he likes ranch dressing but sometimes the buttermilk is too
much for his stomach
he enjoys wong kar-wai's movies but would rather talk
about steven universe
when we play hide-and-seek he wants to be found because he
loves me
i take him to school he hums along to my songs but prefers
katy perry
we watch tv
i tell him how unrealistic the show shark tank is
he looks at me quizzically
we change channels then go to dairy queen
he doesn't say things like white whale because that is
derogatory
just like how we don't talk about sushi or climate change
he shoos screaming babies and barking dogs away from me
when we go to coney island we speak in russian accents and
fall over laughing
i ask if he has been following the news
he says someone is being mean to him at

what will we do when we're 200, he asks as i
wipe the tear from my face

fists of harmony and justice in 3 acts

i really believe in cities and
connecting people you say real
heartfelt

make me your nasty woman i say staring into your eyes

my intergenerational trauma is my parents live in
silver lake you say earnestly

mmhmm i say not objecting because
you are cute

so this is what it means to have a
moment of madness

you have come to the right place you have
so much to hide

perpetual war tell me your
secrets get me in trouble

obsessed
paralyzed the clerk will call
the roll

*

i regret to inform you that you will not be
home

in time for dinner with your wife no matter how often
she calls

you will put your phone on
vibrate then turn it off

to death : you have to buy our product to know what's in it :
we won't get into specifics : we don't want to set a timeline
on this : who gave you that information : we'll have to refer
you back to them : it's early days : this is going to be a
process that takes place over time : we were for it before we
were against it : there have been discussions : we will not
entertain hypotheticals : we are not going into tactics
techniques or procedures : this may be an iterative process :
that is above our pay grade : we want to stress that this is
pre-decisional : there is a plan but plans have to be flexible
enough to survive first contact : it may be OBE (overcome by
events) : we have not been given release authority : it is not
yet approved for action : we are on a conditions-based
schedule : all options are on the table : we will continue to
engage with alliance partners on a range of activities that
will ensure maximum lethality : please only quote us as senior
evil corp officials or persons close to senior evil corp
leadership : 9 out of 10 dentists choose evil corp : we are
your anger managers : very legal and very good : our revenge
makes us wise : let us look at you through our designer shades
: our product has been endorsed by kate bush : no, she is a
freshman at kennesaw state university : a real georgia peach :
we find your () faith disturbing : your lack of taste does
violence to our senses : your very being is inimical to our
existence : go somewhere else for that washer and dryer set :
bitch : we will take you to the cleaners : what do you love :
what do you hate : if you could live inside a tv show which
one and why is it lucifer on fox : who are you : what do you
want : we are on pace to find cadence : the quiet you hear is
progress : thank you for shopping at evil corp

october 6, 2019, remarks as prepared for delivery

i informed mister river barkley last night that his services
are no longer needed in my life. i disagreed strongly with
many of his suggestions, as did others in the administration,

and therefore i asked mister river barkley for his resignation, which was given to me this morning.

although i appreciated his jfk jr vibes and his assertion that his dick is his biggest muscle, he never did my laundry. he failed to deliver to me macaroons in every imaginable color or call me his pocahontas and he my settler.

he cast serious doubt on his intelligence by detailing the depth of his feelings in support of the vietnam war and the draft. the public was regularly informed of this.

his choice of veal over fish was totally inexcusable. i was equally appalled when i encountered tickets to mariah carey in his diary stained with sperm and electric blue ink.

he never recovered from the unusually loud guttural noises he made during sex. he was unconvincing when he said he loved me, often in a voice that suggested he was far away or underwater. his declaration that tulsi gabbard should win the democratic nomination was similarly off-putting.

he was unable to tell me how many planes are in the sky or if it is true there are more people alive now than have ever lived. he declined to feed me more jello shots despite our school motto *possunt quia posse videntur* (they can because they think they can).

he embarrassed me by getting into that fight with his truck and losing. subsequently he had his arm in a cast which stank to high heaven.

admittedly i will miss the firm underside of his thighs and the steady scaffolding of his sex. i am however comforted by the truth that nothing is better than breadsticks with the menendez brothers.

i thank mister river barkley very much for his service to our country and my happiness. i will be naming a new mister river

barkley next week.

thank you!

(don't pretend you're sorry□□)

acid taste like

He started seeing Sam everywhere.

Sam, who called him 'beautiful,' eyes like liquid smoke.

Sam, who stood perilously close as they poured the wine.

Strong yet gentle, blond-dusted hands.

Sam, who wore the plaid shirt, frayed khaki shorts, and beat-up loafers on their bodega run.

Chestnut-brown bedhead, cheeks rosy on their porcelain face.

The one he wanted to hold him, the one he hoped to make less lonely, the one he followed home.



Life was hard enough without a Greek chorus of Sams second-guessing his every move.

Haunted by his exes, he wanted significance.

He cried into his champagne, tired of questioning, tired of pushing back.

Acceptance sounded so good, like a drug.

Boy was with Girl.

Kind, inquisitive eyes the color of concrete.

Brown hair (of course) slicked back, shoulders firm, torso wide.

Girl freaking out, some low-rate drama.

Boy's body, a boar ready to charge.

Girl in the bathroom, Boy's expression softened—

Freed,

Granted a reprieve,

From performing masculinity.

Boy looked over, smiling as if he understood.

So tantalizingly close,
All he had to do was reach over,
Before Boy slipped back into character.

He imagined bringing Boy dinner, roast chicken and potatoes.
They would eat in silence, as if any stray sound might tip her
off.

Bellies full, side-by-side on the bed—
Striped pajamas,
Sheets that smelled like her,
Growing braver in the dark, bodies ablaze with feeling.
Skin, lips, tongue, there for the taking.
He raised a finger to Boy's lips and gently pried his mouth
open, inserting his finger.
Play it safe or swing for the fences?
Snatching Boy's receipt off the table, he felt a sickening
swirl of desire—
Like standing in the eye of a hurricane.
This little victory made him happier than he'd felt in a long
time.

Throwing up in that Waffle House, acid stinging his throat.
Outside for a smoke, his socks mismatched and his hair wild.
GO BACK TO CHINA, someone yelled, speeding past.
Possessed by cultural restlessness,
Always searching for a way in, a way out.

He decided that his favorite word was 'possibility.'
Even hope doesn't seem as surefire a thing.
Possibility is hope plus.
Nothing out of reach.
Maybe.

He unfolded the receipt, admired it.
CUSTOMER: SAM ____, it read.
He noticed the digits, the urgent scrawl.
Penmanship tight, compact, economical.
CALL ME, it said.

New Poetry by Sherrie Fernandez-Williams

she be like, damn

she be all tired.
she be like a flattened house shoe
she be full of compunction
she be remembering what was said.
she be told what she deserves.
she be believing everybody.
she be weepin' in the bathtub
she be like her momma,
she be lying.
she be saying it's the arthritis
she be talking like it ain't her head
she be actin' like hurt don't bother her.
she be actin' like she foolin' somebody.
she be foolin' no damn body.
she be scattered.
she be slidin' across marbles.
she be grabbin' onto nothin
she be almost breakin' her wrists.
she be lying on the floor
she be holdin' her stomach
she be trying not to vomit soggy cake
she be wishin' she ate almonds instead.
she be losin'.
she be wantin' rest.
she be told she ain't gettin' shit she want
and she be still wantin' shit.



Annibale Caracci, circa 1580s.

juanita

juanita put on her tap shoes and danced in her kitchen, in her living room, she composed. and into her gilded bathroom mirror, she gave monologues before powering on her home recorder that, in those days, weighed a sailor's duffel bag.

debuted films at thanksgiving, after feeding a houseful. she, in a form-fitting black dress made of sturdy garbage bags.

"i am more than wife, mother of ten, church organist." then, she started with captain and tennille, followed by neil diamond.

nieces, nephews elated. her children feigned embarrassment, but devotees, nonetheless.

a woman from disbanded and reshuffled peoples. owned by a garden variety, bearing traces of many countries, the dominant, the birthplace of black magic.

what might have been if they hadn't made us afraid of our gods? she could have been another brooklyn starlet, sing stormy weather like lena horne in the movies. what *if* we harnessed the power of our goddesses?

you favor her. nearsighted. prone to excessive pounds in mid-life, obsessed with communing with the dead. her grandfather, angel, the cuban cigar maker, joined in the chorus of *guantanamera*, and when she strummed like memphis minnie, nada, rocked back and forth

the way grandmothers do when they are stirred. all principle and heart—that one. sung *time*

in a bottle with sam, her second husband.
sam on guitar, juanita at piano. time was
a real question for those graying lovers.
never enough time for a woman
whose first husband tried to reduce her
like soup stock. being mad took more time
than she could give. so she produced.

wrote about an urgency for peace,
though we were not the ones who begged for war
but in 1984 she scribbled in "jesse." argued
about the virtues of speaking one's mind
to punks who called it a wasted vote.

you hold onto the ways that you might be like
juanita, though you know you are dot's child.
in a family large enough populate three small towns. you
were never one to be known in these townships. not like
aunty,
who mailed everyone copies of her latest records,
performed at all family gatherings, taught whosoever will how
to play.

when there are so many, there are so many to lose.
juanita weeped the longest over all bodies—ah, yes,
another way you are like her. your spirit, too, is made
of blown glass. at the last burial before her own,
she warned those within the sound of her voice that she was
tired.

you were young but old enough to know the weight of words.

juanita is a starlet. it is time for another moment under
glaring lights.

it is quiet on the set, a recreation of 1943. she is small-
wasted again,
and in high heels. she looks directly into the camera, then
up,
when studio rain hits her face.

hot tea

precious one, emancipate your feet. stretch
your soles from here to far from here,
across acres of african moons.
young dignitary, miles of highway
know the impression of your shoe
by heart. it is tender at your core.
the injured hum their names in
your ear like seraphim. faces soaked
up by the cortex for sight cannot
be unseen like the ground where
they last stood cannot not absorb
a life poured out. this agony, you
haul with all subtle movements
and speak at movements of
national proportions. in squares,
your voice expands beyond
itself and crescendos into a whispers.
hot chamomile with lemon and honey
will help. i have prepared this for you.
sit as we remember our future. rest
until you are well again. and you
will be well again to move us further.

tony

this father's son is loved not only by this father
but by the holy angels too, and by a few demons
who step to him on the street to give him what-up
jabs on the shoulder. i do not mean to compare
this father's son to the son of the father, but that is
what this father's son had been to sisters.

one came to him at night spooked by utterances

in her own head. one saved for him her best jokes.
another came when broken by a boy. the last placed her
report cards on the table just before he sat down to eat.
all waited for his perfect response, better than imagined.

to sisters, this father's son was close to the son of the
father
when this father/a daddy departed. not to be with the father,
but to be with a woman he met in night school.

to sisters, the one who gabs with the unseen, the formerly
broken,
now zealot, the first to die, a comedian and especially, the
last,
the critic of religious patriarchy, who loved showing off
her report card, this father's son, a shepherd. for that
moment
in time, sisters, not yet knowing what else they could be,
were lamb.

inflammation

1.
something almost remembered
then, pushed away for a later date
only to find its way into the body, dawdle there
and hope to be recognized, assessed, sifted through
for what good it carries, then separated from its waste.

if left alone for too long it splinters
into the convolution gray matter
latching onto cells weakening them

sometimes it arrives as a simple question
while listening to gossip radio, while not
wanting to be bothered by anything too
onerous like separating sewage from my

cells while driving home from a hard-day's work

the words link together and i remove them
like a chain from the bottom of my belly,
straight out of my mouth—

“what do i do with the men?”

2.

i know what the question means.

you get rid of them. i said “rid” motherfucker, rid of you.
praise be to—

well, not all of them, of course.

i love daddy. he was forty when I was born.

when i turned forty i was the adult daughter.

tenacious. never falling apart for too long, anyway

since enacting my three day rule

three days to be dumbfounded, three

days to panic, three days to flounder

full recovery occurs on the fourth day.

too goddamn much to do to flounder four whole days.

so by the fourth day I am fortified,

and so daddy shares with

one part regret, one part pride

in his accomplishments of bedding women

sometimes a handful in one weekend. some

served with him on neighborhood watch. most

were the mothers of the pta, he was president, and

a poor man with classical tones resounding from his

long, thick cords; like blues from a cello

and, women moved to the sound of him.

bed became a verb that broke my mother.

but she's dead now, so what does it matter. daddy's nearly
ninety.

growing older provides perspective. distance

dilutes notions about what to do with the men.

3.

the question is absurd.

4.

there were four of us girls. i was the baby.
the others had me my by eight, ten, and eleven
years so i benefitted from my sisters' skill in hair braiding
and designing clothes. my favorite was the red jumpsuit with
shoulder ruffles. i looked like a five year old disco queen
the day i wore it for my birthday. one sister picked my hair
out.

i do not blame any of them for their lack of warning
about life in a girl's body; the ownership some feel they
have.

to take without permission. they never spoke of rape by the
neighbor or by nana's boyfriend. "it's just the way it was,"
one sister
told me. "it was our job to be okay."

I do not want to answer. I'm done being a traitor
It is difficult to defend this place where I enter the story.
I am middle aged, not a helpless girl.

real women grow up and care for the most devastated among us
and I already decided a long time ago that I would be the
giver
not the taker of care. not the interminably wounded
and, I love a woman so what does any of this matter to an old
dyke like me?
feminine discomfort is an act of treason.

5.

I know the forces against my man-child-

6.

the one long gone was the easiest of all.
a stack of papers, a hearing or two, the crack of a gavel
and it was done. i did not wish a brother dead.
and every day, i am reminded, i forgive him and
every day i am reminded, i am the one who is sorry.

7.

i have chosen the path of the giver.

Shh...i will only say this once. do not repeat this to anyone.
the leading cause of death for
young black women between the ages of fifteen and thirty-five
is intimate partner
violence. *Four times greater for black than it is for white.*
The consequences for

*perpetrators of intimate violence is less when the victim is
black than when she is white.*

*shh... i will only say this twice. the leading cause of death
for young black women between
the ages of fifteen and thirty-five is intimate partner
violence. one last time, i will say, the
leading cause of death for young black women between the ages
of fifteen and thirty-five is
intimate—*

Brie Golec trans woman of color stabbed by her father,
Yazmin Vash Payne trans woman of color stabbed by her
boyfriend,

Ty Underwood trans woman of color shot by her boyfriend
within days of each other—

debbie and i once made soup out of dirt and rain.

as teens, she had ramell. i had an on again,

off again, thing with jesus. between debbie and ramell,
were ramell's hands that behaved any which way they pleased
especially when clenched into spherical solids.

my hands secured notes in white envelopes.

"god loves you," my hands told the pen to tell the paper

to tell debbie. no wonder debbie cut her eyes at me
whispered loud enough for me to hear her talk about my
whack old lady clothes to the other girls. ramell and i both
lost
the battle against our powerless hands. i was outcasted.
ramell and debbie made a baby.
when debbie's little brother became a teen his hand held heavy
steel to the face of his pretty boo across the street. when
the steel
exploded with one motion of a rogue finger little brother's
hand
brought the steel to his own face. however, that time the
rogue finger
refused. it triggered the same dumb ass question.

long before any documents were filed, i recognized
the man i married had hands like ramell,

but the righteous knows what's up.

race matters. gender belongs to somebody else.

i know men who want to reclaim their innocence.

deemed guilty without due process. I will speak their cause,
but speaking mine would perhaps pose a conflict of interest
as
the earth collapses between us.

8.

the body becomes inflamed in the protection
of itself swelling occurs while the question is held in the
nerves.

i sit on the floor of my bedroom and in four square breathing
i release the question back out into the air to revisit at a
later date

man-child barely knocks. i struggle to my feet. open the
door.

taller than me, he lowers his head to my shoulder. "goodnight
mom,"

he says. n four counts, i release the question and hold him.
i hold him as the question finds its way back into my body.

demands to be answered demands to be answered demands to be
answered demands to be answered demands to be answered demands
to be—shhh.... do not repeat this to anyone.