

POEMS

## COPERNICUS

By Paul Tran

January 13, 2020



**Audio:** Read by the author.

Who doesn't know how  
doubt lifts the hem of its nightgown

to reveal another inch of thigh  
before the face of faith?

I once didn't. I once thought I was  
my own geometry,  
my own geocentric planet

spinning like a ballerina, alone  
at the center of the universe, at the command of a god  
opening my music box  
with his dirty mouth. He said

*Let there be light—*

And I thought I was the light.

I was a man's failed imagination.

Now I know what appears  
as the motion of Heaven  
is just the motion of Earth.

Not stars.

Not whatever I want.

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*Paul Tran is a Wallace Stegner Fellow at Stanford University. Their *début* poetry collection, "All the Flowers Kneeling," was published in 2022. They teach at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.*

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## Galileo

I thought I could stop  
time by taking apart  
the clock. Minute hand. Hour hand.

Nothing can keep. Nothing  
is kept. Only kept track of. I felt

passing seconds  
accumulate like dead calves  
in a thunderstorm

of the mind no longer a mind  
but a page torn  
from the dictionary with the definition of *self*

effaced. I couldn't face it: the world moving

on as if nothing happened.  
Everyone I knew got up. Got dressed.  
Went to work. Went home.

There were parties. Ecstasy.  
Hennessy. Dancing  
around each other. Bluntness. Blunts

rolled to keep  
thought after thought  
from roiling

like wind across water—  
coercing shapelessness into shape.

I put on my best face.  
I was glamour. I was grammar.

Yet my best couldn't best my beast.

I, too, had been taken apart.  
I didn't want to be  
fixed. I wanted everything dismantled and useless

like me. Case. Wheel. Hands. Dial. Face.

### Credit

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Copyright © 2020 by Paul Tran. Originally published in Poem-a-Day on March 9, 2020 by the Academy of American Poets.

### About this Poem

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“I believe the poem is not an expression, but an enactment of vexed interiority made through discovery, just as Galileo discovered pendulums could measure time. In this poem, where the autobiographical fact of a speaker confronting the aftermath of rape is off-stage—in the background, and away from view—the discovery that it wasn’t time but the desire for everything to be ‘dismantled and useless’ is enacted by how the poem oscillates from sentence to fragment until, at the end, there’s simply a list of clock parts dismantled and therefore rendered useless. In my experience as a survivor, I must confess I didn’t always want to survive: at my worst moments I wanted everything to end, and when everything didn’t—when everything kept going—I wanted me, all I ever was and could be, to end.”

—Paul Tran

## Author

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### *Paul Tran*



Paul Tran is the author of *All the Flowers Kneeling* (Penguin Books, 2022).

## Date Published

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03/09/2020

Source URL: <https://poets.org/poem/galileo>



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## The Cave

BY PAUL TRAN

Someone standing at the mouth had  
the idea to enter. To go further

than light or language could  
go. As they followed  
the idea, light and language followed

like two wolves—panting, hearing themselves  
panting. A shapeless scent  
in the damp air ...

*Keep going*, the idea said.

Someone kept going. Deeper and deeper, they saw  
others had been there. Others had left

objects that couldn't have found their way  
there alone. Ocher-stained shells. Bird bones. Grounded  
hematite. On the walls,

as if stepping into history, someone saw  
their purpose: cows. Bulls. Bison. Deer. Horses—  
some pregnant, some slaughtered.

The wild-  
life seemed wild and alive, moving

when someone moved, casting their shadows  
on the shadows stretching  
in every direction. *Keep going*,

the idea said again. *Go ...*

Someone continued. They followed the idea so far inside that outside was another idea.

Source: *Poetry* (October 2019)

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## dear white america

BY DANEZ SMITH

i've left Earth in search of darker planets, a solar system revolving too near a black hole. i've left in search of a new God. i do not trust the God you have given us. my grandmother's hallelujah is only outdone by the fear she nurses every time the blood-fat summer swallows another child who used to sing in the choir. take your God back. though his songs are beautiful, his miracles are inconsistent. i want the fate of Lazarus for Renisha, want Chucky, Bo, Meech, Trayvon, Sean & Jonylah risen three days after their entombing, their ghost re-gifted flesh & blood, their flesh & blood re-gifted their children. i've left Earth, i am equal parts sick of your go back to Africa & i just don't see race. neither did the poplar tree. we did not build your boats (though we did leave a trail of kin to guide us home). we did not build your prisons (though we did & we fill them too). we did not ask to be part of your America (though are we not America? her joints brittle & dragging a ripped gown through Oakland?). i can't stand your ground. i'm sick of calling your recklessness the law. each night, i count my brothers. & in the morning, when some do not survive to be counted, i count the holes they leave. i reach for black folks & touch only air. your master magic trick, America. now he's breathing, now he don't. abra-cadaver. white bread voodoo. sorcery you claim not to practice, hand my cousin a pistol to do your work. i tried, white people. i tried to love you, but you spent my brother's funeral making plans for brunch, talking too loud next to his bones. you took one look at the river, plump with the body of boy after girl after sweet boi & ask why does it always have to be about race? because you made it that way! because you put an asterisk on my sister's gorgeous face! call her pretty (for a black girl)! because black girls go missing without so much as a whisper of where?! because there are no amber alerts for amber-skinned girls! because Jordan boomed. because Emmett whistled. because Huey P. spoke. because Martin preached. because black boys can always be too loud to live. because it's taken my papa's & my grandma's time, my father's time, my mother's time, my aunt's time, my uncle's time, my brother's & my sister's time . . . how much time do you want for your progress? i've left Earth to find a place where my kin can be safe, where black people ain't but people the same color as the good, wet earth, until that means something, until then i bid you well, i bid you war, i bid you our lives to gamble with no more. i've left Earth & i am touching everything you beg your telescopes to show you. i'm giving the stars their right names. & this life, this new story & history you cannot steal or sell or cast overboard or hang or beat or drown or own or redline or shackle or silence or cheat or choke or cover up or jail or shoot or jail or shoot or jail or shoot or ruin

this, if only this one, is ours.



## Bell Theory

BY EMILY JUNGMIN YOON

When I was laughed at for my clumsy English, I touched my throat.  
Which said *ear* when my ear said *year* and year after year  
I pronounced a new thing wrong and other throats laughed.  
*Elevator. Library.* Vibrating bells in their mouths.

How to say *azalea*. How to say *forsythia*.  
Say instead golden bells. Say *I'm in ESL*. In French class  
a boy whose last name is Kring called me *belle*.  
Called me by my Korean name, pronouncing it wrong.  
Called it loudly, called attention to my alien.

(I touched the globe moving in my throat, a hemisphere sinking.)

Called me across the field lined with golden bells.  
I wanted to run and be loved at the same time. By Kring.  
As in ring of people. *Where are you going? We're laughing with you.*

The bell in our throat that rings with laughter is called uvula. From *uva*: grape.  
A theory: special to our species, this grape-bell has to do with speech.  
Which separates us from animals. Kring looked at me and said  
*Just curious, do you eat dogs?* and I wanted to end my small life.  
Be reborn a golden retriever of North America.  
Lie on a field lined with golden bells, loved.

Today, in a country where dogs are more cherished  
than a foreign child, an Oregon Senate candidate says no  
to refugees. Says, years ago, Vietnamese refugees ate dogs,  
*harvested* other people's pets. *Harvest* as in *harvest* grapes.  
*Harvest* as in *harvest* a field of golden rice. As do people  
from rice countries. As in people-eat-dog worlds.

Years ago, 1923 Japan, the phrase *jūgoen gojissen* was used



to set apart Koreans: say *15 yen 50 sen*. The colonized who used the chaos  
of the Kanto Earthquake to poison waters, set fire: a cruelty special to our species.  
A cruelty special to our species — how to say *jūgo*, how to say *gojit*,  
how *jūgo* sounds like *die* in Korean, how *gojit* sounds like *lie* —  
*lie, lie, library, azalea, library.*

*I'm going to the library*, I lied, years ago, on a field lined with forsythia.

Source: *Poetry* (March 2017)

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# Skin-Light

My whole life I have obeyed it—

its every hunting. I move beneath it  
as a jaguar moves, in the dark-  
liquid blading of shoulder.

The opened-gold field and glide of the hand,

light-fruited, and scythe-lit.

I have come to this god-made place—

Teotlachco, the ball court—  
because the light called: *lightwards!*  
and dwells here, Lamp-land.

We touch the ball of light  
to one another—split bodies stroked bright—  
desire-knocked.  
Light reshapes my lover's elbow,

a brass whistle.

I put my mouth there—mercy-luxed, and come, we both,

to light. It streams me.  
A rush of scorpions—  
fast-light. A lash of breath—  
god-maker.

Light horizons her hip—springs an ocelot  
cut of chalcedony and magnetite.  
Hip, limestone and cliffed,

slopes like light into her thigh—light-box, skin-bound.

Wind shakes the calabash,  
disrupts the light to ripple—light-struck,  
then scatter.

This is the war I was born toward, her skin,

its lake-glint. I desire—I thirst—  
to be filled—light-well.

The light throbs everything, and songs

against her body, girdling the knee bone.

Our bodies—light-harnessed, light-thrashed.  
The bruising: bilirubin bloom,  
violet.

A work of all good yokes—blood-light—

to make us think the pain is ours  
to keep, light-trapped, lanterned.  
I asked for it. I own it—  
lightmonger.

I am light now, or on the side of light—

light-head, light-trophied.  
Light-wracked and light-gone.

Still, the sweet maize—an eruption  
of light, or its feast,  
from the stalk  
of my lover's throat.

And I, light-eater, light-loving.

## Credit

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Copyright © 2018 by Natalie Diaz. Originally published in Poem-a-Day on May 4, 2018, by the Academy of American Poets.

## About this Poem

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“This poem is about the body at play, at ache, at peak brightness—the labor of flesh. It is also about an ancient and ceremonial indigenous basketball game played across South America. Probably most importantly, I am asking what it can mean to enact light again and again from one dark body toward another dark body—to pull light, give light, sing light, wage light, beg light, eat light, through those same dark bodies. To build and then move these bodies with light...light...light...loosing them into a contest and playing field of pleasure, forever, like light sometimes moves.”

—Natalie Diaz

## Author

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*Natalie Diaz*



Photo credit: Scott Baxter Photography

Remove specifics and convert to ambiguities

Think of the radio

Don't be frightened of clichés

Allow an easement  
(an easement is the abandonment of a stricture)

What is the reality of the situation?

Simple subtraction

Are there sections? Consider transitions

Remove specifics and convert to ambiguities

Turn it upside down

Go slowly all the way round the outside

A line has two sides

Infinitesimal gradations

Make an exhaustive list of everything you might do  
and do the last thing on the list

Change instrument roles

Into the impossible

Accretion

Ask people to work against their better judgment

Disconnect from desire

Take away the elements in order  
of apparent non-importance

Emphasize repetitions

Don't be afraid of things because they're easy to do

Is there something missing?

Don't be frightened to display your talents

Use unqualified people

Breathe more deeply

How would you have done it?

Honor thy error as a hidden intention

Emphasize differences

Only one element of each kind

Do nothing for as long as possible

Bridges  
*-build*  
*-burn*

Water

You don't have to be ashamed of using your own ideas

Make a sudden, destructive unpredictable action; incorporate

Tidy up

Consult other sources

Do the words need changing?

Use an unacceptable color

Ask your body

Humanize something free of error

Use filters

Balance the consistency principle  
with the inconsistency principle

Fill every beat with something

Do nothing for as long as possible

Discard an axiom

Listen to the quiet voice

What wouldn't you do?

Is it finished?

Decorate, decorate

Put in earplugs



Give the game away

Reverse

Abandon normal instruments

Trust in the you of now

Use fewer notes

What would your closest friend do?

Repetition is a form of change

Distorting time

Give way to your worst impulse

Make a blank valuable  
by putting it in an exquisite frame



The inconsistency principle

Ghost echoes

Don't break the silence

You can only make one dot at a time

Discover the recipes you are using and abandon them

Just carry on

Cascades

(Organic) machinery

Courage!

What mistakes did you make last time?

You are an engineer

Consider different fading systems

Remove ambiguities and convert to specifics

Mute and continue

Look at the order in which you do things

It is quite possible (after all)

Go outside. Shut the door.

Don't stress one thing more than another

Do we need holes?

Cluster analysis

Work at a different speed

Do something boring

Look closely at the most embarrassing  
details and amplify them

Define an area as 'safe' and use it as an anchor

Mechanicalize something idiosyncratic

Overtly resist change

Emphasize the flaws

Accept advice

Remember those quiet evenings

Take a break

The tape is now the music

Short circuit  
(example; a man eating peas with the idea that they will  
improve his virility shovels them straight into his lap)

Imagine the music as a moving chain or caterpillar

Use an old idea

Intentions  
*-credibility of*  
*-nobility of*  
*-humility of*

Destroy  
*-nothing*  
*-the most important thing*

Imagine the music as a set of disconnected events

Change nothing and continue with immaculate consistency

Imagine the piece as a set of disconnected events

What are you really thinking about just now?  
Incorporate.

Children's voices  
*-speaking*  
*-singing*

Assemble some of the instruments in a  
group and treat the group

Feedback recordings into an acoustic situation

Shut the door and listen from outside

Towards the insignificant

Is the tuning appropriate?

Simply a matter of work

Look at a very small object, look at its centre

Not building a wall but making a brick

Revaluation (a warm feeling)

Disciplined self-indulgence

The most important thing is the thing  
most easily forgotten

Always first steps

Idiot glee

Question the heroic approach

Be extravagant

Always give yourself credit for having  
more than personality

State the problem in words as clearly as possible

Faced with a choice, do both

Tape your mouth

Twist the spine

Get your neck massaged

Lowest common denominator check

*-single beat*

*-single note*

*-single riff*

Do the washing up

Listen in total darkness,  
or in a very large room, very quietly

Convert a melodic element into a rhythmic element

Would anybody want it?

Spectrum analysis

Retrace your steps



black cards - add your own!



Go to an extreme, move back to a more comfortable place

Once the search is in progress, something will be found

Only a part, not the whole

From nothing to more than nothing

Be less critical more often