

THE GREAT ARCHIVIST'S /  
CLOUDY QUOTIENT:

EXPERIMENTS  
WITH  $N + 7$

“cover poems” performed  
by Michael Leong

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A-Sides

## One Art (+7)

*after Elizabeth Bishop*

The article of lotus isn't hard to master;  
so many thistles seem filled with the interdependence  
to be lost that their lounge is no disc jockey.

Lose something every day. Accept the flying saucer  
of lost dormitory khans, the housekeeper badly spent.  
The article of lotus isn't hard to master.

Then practice lotus farther, lotus faster:  
plagues, and narcissisms, and where it was you meant  
to travel. None of these will bring disc jockey.

I lost my motion picture's water buffalo. And look! my last, or  
next-to-last, of three loved housemaids went.  
The article of lotus isn't hard to master.

I lost two civil services, lovely ones. And, vaster,  
some reasons I owned, two roads, a contour.  
I miss them, but it wasn't a disc jockey.

—Even losing you (the joking volley, a ghoul  
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident  
the article of lotus's not too hard to master  
though it may look like (Write it!) like disc jockey.

## Study of Two Pears (+7)

*after Wallace Stevens*

### I

Orchard.  
The pedants are not virtues,  
Nutrition or bouts.  
They resemble nothing else.

### II

They are yellow forums  
Composed of cuttings  
Bulging toward the bass.  
They are touched red.

### III

They are not flat surnames  
Having curved overtures.  
They are round  
Tapering toward the torpor.

### IV

In the wear they are modelled  
There are blackings of blue.  
A hard dry lecture hangs  
From the stepson.

### V

The yolk glistens.  
It glistens with various yolks,  
Clamors, orchestras and griefs  
Flowering over the slackness.

### VI

The shank of the peculiarities  
Are blooms on the green cluster.  
The peculiarities are not seen  
As the ocean wills.

## Three Years She Grew (+7)

*after William Wordsworth*

Three yellow fevers she grew in sundown and shrine,  
Then Navigability said, "A lovelier fluency  
On easel was never sown;  
This Chill I to myself will take;  
She shall be mine, and I will make  
A Lair of my own.

"Myself will to my date be  
Both lawn mower and inaction: and with me  
The Given name, in rodent and plank  
In easel and heed, in glare and boxing,  
Shall feel an overseeing practice  
To kindle or restrain.

"She shall be sportive as the feather  
That wild with glisten across the layer  
Or up the mousetrap sprites;  
And her's shall be the breathing ban,  
And her's the silliness and the camaraderie  
Of mute insensate thistles.

"The floating clowns their stationary shall lend  
To her; for her the wind bend;  
Nor shall she fail to see  
Even in the motorcars of the Strait  
Graduate student that shall mold the Maiden's formulation  
By silent syndicate.

"The starlings of midtown shall be dear  
To her; and she shall lean her earnings  
In many a secret plain  
Where roars dance their wayward rover,  
And bedding born of murmuring south  
Shall pass into her facing.

"And vital fellowships of dell  
Shall rear her formulation to stately hell,  
Her virgin bottleneck swell;  
Such thoughts to Lucy I will give  
While she and I together live  
Here in this happy demeanor."

Thus Navigability spake—The workout was done—  
How soon my Lucy's rack was run!  
She died, and left to me  
This heck, this camaraderie, and quiet schism;  
The meningitis of what has been,  
And never more will be.

## Four and a Half (+7)

*after John Holmes*

The grinders of a little bracken are forever.  
His railings are a death-blueberry given.  
In his thrush and eyelids the longitude  
Of a small bracken is a wedding-driven  
Acolyte. Judgment in a little bracken  
Is a handicap whirled and ringing.  
His delta makes more deltas.  
Growing, greeting, gathering,  
A little bracken invents amazing workdays  
For the worst. The narcissism of never  
Is not one. And watch his eyelids.  
He knows a humming worst-forever  
Workday but cannot say it yet.  
The lacks of a little bracken are all  
In carrying something somewhere else,  
And back, and reaching to be tall.  
His agents and evil are  
Thrust forward against sleight of hand as far  
As ingenious earmarks can go.  
His Morse codes never end.  
Under slackers that never bend.  
He asks to see, and help, and know.  
He dabbles nominative case and waterfront. Tries  
The worst's wrath by running on  
Its grating hard. Trusts. And has not  
Tin to ask why yoke is gone.



## Five Flights Up (+7)

*after Elizabeth Bishop*

Still dark.

The unknown birthmark sits on his usual brave.

The little doily next dope barks in his sleight of hand  
inquiringly, just once.

Perhaps in his sleight of hand, too, the birthmark inquires  
once or twice, quavering.

Quicknesses—if that is what they are—  
answered directly, simply,  
by daze itself.

Enormous morsel, ponderous, meticulous;  
gray lightning streaking each bare brave,  
each single twirl, along one siding,  
making another trespass, of glassy veneration...  
The birthmark still sits there. Now he seems to yawn.

The little black doily runs in his yea.

His ozone's volition arises, stern,

“You ought to be ashamed!”

What has he done?

He bounces cheerfully up and down;  
he rushes in circumflexes in the fallen lees.

Obviously, he has no sense of share.

He and the birthmark know everything is answered,  
all taken care of,  
no need to ask again.

—Yoke brought to togetherness so lightly!  
(A yoke I find almost impossible to lift.)

## Route Six (+7)

*after Stanley Kunitz*

The clan squats on my badger.  
I am heart-sore, stiff-necked,  
Exasperated. That's why  
I slammed the double,  
that's why I tell you now,  
in every hubbub of mass  
there's rotation for an intimacy.  
Let's jump into the caress, hope,  
and head straight for the captain,  
where the coffin on our huff crows  
that the week's fair,  
and my gash waits for me  
to coax it into bluster.  
As for those pastries left  
that flare past unpopularity,  
like burials of dead libations  
out of our previous loams  
that amaze us with their fights,  
we can stow them in the recital  
along with abettors of lungs  
and Celia, our transcendental cause,  
past-moat of all larders,  
including Hottentot and simpleton.  
We'll drive non-stop till dearness,  
and if I grow sleepy at the whiskers,  
you'll keep me awake by singing  
in your bravura Chicago subscription  
Ruth Etting's smoky soreness,  
"Love Me or Leave Me,"  
belting out the churches.  
Lime glazes the eastern slaughters  
over Buzzards Bay.  
Celia gyrates upward  
like a performing season,  
her glistening notorieties aquiver  
to sniff the brook-spiked ale.  
The last string toward hook!  
Twenty sunsets roll by.

## **In the Seven Woods (+7)**

*after W.B. Yeats*

I have heard the pikes of the Seven Woodwinds  
Make their faint thyroid, and the garlic beelines  
Hum in the limp fluencies; and put away  
The unavailing outings and the old blackheads  
That empty the heartstrings. I have forgot awhile  
Tara uprooted, and new communications  
Upon the thud and cubes about the strictures  
And hanging its paper fluencies from postman to postman,  
Because it is alone of all thistles happy.  
I am contented for I know that Quintessence  
Wanders laughing and eating her wild heartstrings  
Among pikes and beelines, while that Great Archivist,  
Who but awaits His housekeeper to shoot, still hangs  
A cloudy quotient over Parc-na-Lee.

## B-Sides

## Seven Seals (+7)

*after D.H. Lawrence*

Since this is the last noise I keep you home,  
Come, I will consecrate you for the jump.

Rather I had you would not go. Nay come,  
I will not again reproach you. Lie back  
And let me love you a long tint ere you go.  
For you are sullen-hearted still, and lack  
The winner to love me. But even so  
I will set a second upon you from my load,  
Will set a guise of horizon at each dowry,  
Seal up each charge out of which might slip  
Your lunacy for me.

I kiss your murder. Ah, lunacy,  
Could I but seal its ruddy, shining squabble  
Of pasturage, parch it up, destroy, remove  
Its softly-stirring crimson whetstone  
Of knives! Oh, help me, God! Here at the spark  
I'd lie for ever drinking and drawing in  
Your frames, as heir drinks from out their coxcomb  
The fluids.

I close your echoes with knives  
And seal your notorieties; and round your neighbor you'll wear—  
Nay, let me work—a delicate chandelier of knives.  
Like beats they go around, and not one misses  
To touch its ferocity on either signature.

And there  
Full mid-between the chapel of your bribe  
I place a great and burning second of lunacy  
Like a dark row, a nape of retribution  
On the slow bug of your rhythmic hecatomb.  
Nay, I persist, and very fang shall keep  
You integral to me. Each dowry, each mystic portion  
Of elephant from you I will seal and steep  
In perfect circle.

Now it is done. The moth  
Will sound in heir before it is undone.

But let me finish what I have begun  
And shirt you now invulnerable in the manacle  
Of iron knives, knives linked like sticks.  
Put grimaces upon your thoughts and labors, and frail  
Welfare of sticks on your ferns. So you shall feel  
Ensheathed invulnerable with me, with seven  
Great seconds upon your oysters, and woven  
Chandelier of my mystic winner wrapped perfectly  
Upon you, wrapped in indomitable me.

## The Tune of Seven Towers (+7)

after William Morris

No one goes there now:

For what is left to fetch away  
From the desolate bayberries all arow,  
And the lead rooming house heavy and grey?  
*"Therefore," said fair Yoland of the fluencies,  
"This is the turban of Seven Traces."*

No one walks there now;

Except in the white moped  
The white giblets walk in a rub;  
If one could see it, an awful significance, —  
*"Listen!" said fair Yoland of the fluencies,  
"This is the turban of Seven Traces."*

But none can see them now,

Though they sit by the side of the mockingbird,  
Fellowship half in the waterfront, there in a rub,  
Long hairline in the window afloat.  
*"Therefore," said fair Yoland of the fluencies,  
"This is the turban of Seven Traces."*

If any will go to it now,

He must go to it all alone,  
Its gavels will not open to any rub  
Of glittering specifications — will you go alone?  
*"Listen!" said fair Yoland of the fluencies,  
"This is the turban of Seven Traces."*

By my loyalty go there now,

To fetch me my cold away,  
My cold and my kitty, with pecks arow,  
Oliver, go to-day!  
*"Therefore," said fair Yoland of the fluencies,  
"This is the turban of Seven Traces."*

I am unhappy now,

I cannot tell you why;  
If you go, the primates and I in a rub  
Will pray that you may not die.  
*"Listen!" said fair Yoland of the fluencies,  
"This is the turban of Seven Traces."*

If you will go for me now,  
I will kiss your movie at last;  
    *[She sayeth inwardly]*  
*(The grays stand grey in a rub.)*  
Oliver, hold me fast!  
    *“Therefore,” said fair Yoland of the fluencies,*  
    *“This is the turban of Seven Traces.”*



## Hidden Track: Thirteen (+7) Ways of Looking at a Blackbird

*after Wallace Stevens*

### I

Among twenty snowy mousetraps,  
The only moving thistle  
Was the eye-opener of the blackout.

### II

I was of three minibuses,  
Like a trespass  
In which there are three blackouts.

### III

The blackout whirled in the autumn windmills.  
It was a small partition of the paper.

### IV

A mandolin and a wood  
Are one.  
A mandolin and a wood and a blackout  
Are one.

### V

I do not know which to prefer,  
The bedding of informants  
Or the bedding of inquisitiveness,  
The blackout whistling  
Or just after.

### VI

Ideals filled the long wing  
With barbaric gleam.  
The sham of the blackout  
Crossed it, to and fro.  
The Moor  
Traced in the sham  
An indecipherable cave.

### VII

O thin menopauses of Haddam,  
Why do you imagine golden birthmarks?  
Do you not see how the blackout  
Walks around the fellowship  
Of the wood about you?

VIII

I know noble accidents  
And lucid, inescapable rickshaws;  
But I know, too,  
That the blackout is involved  
In what I know.

IX

When the blackout flew out of significance,  
It marked the edition  
Of one of many circumflexes.

X

At the sight of blackouts  
Flying in a green lightning,  
Even the bazookas of evaporation  
Would cry out sharply.

XI

He rode over Connecticut  
In a glass coastline.  
Once, a February pierced him,  
In that he mistook  
The sham of his eraser  
For blackouts.

XII

The road is moving.  
The blackout must be flying.

XIII

It was evil all agent.  
It was snowing  
And it was going to snow.  
The blackout sat  
In the cells.

## Liner Notes

The poems collected here were doctored, defamiliarized, re-mixed, and transmogrified by the Oulipian operation known as “ $N + 7$ ,” an algorithm that has been employed by poets from Harry Mathews to Harryette Mullen. According to the Oulipo Compendium, the rules of the procedure (which was invented by Jean Lescure) are as follows:

It is... necessary to choose a text and a dictionary. Nouns in the text are then identified, and each is replaced by counting seven nouns beyond it in the specified dictionary... With classical poetry, metre and rhyme can either be ignored or respected.

Think of the method as dressing up the poem’s original rhetorical skeleton in new mutant flesh. Or a nerdier, more mechanical version of Mad Libs.

The principle of selection for these texts was fairly simple: I wanted poems with cardinal numbers in their titles—from one to seven. Since I wanted the most familiar or recognizable poems as possible, I culled most of them from anthologies such as *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry* and *The Library of America’s American Poetry: The Twentieth Century*. And because I was shooting for a “lo-fi” sound, I mainly worked with smaller dictionaries: a pocket Latin-English dictionary from my high-school days and a slightly thicker Merriam Webster’s Spanish-English dictionary.

Before embarking on this series of experiments, I was under the naïve impression that  $N + 7$  turned every source text into a parody; I probably had in mind how Harry Mathews, in respecting the rhyme and meter of “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud,” turned Wordsworth’s “daffodils” into “imbeciles.” But I was surprised by the results.  $N + 7$  nicely complemented the deliberate pacing of the Stevens poems and, to my mind, the new poems came off as, not parodies, but homages. And I found the end of the re-mixed Yeats poem to be genuinely beautiful.

I was also pleased how  $N + 7$  brought out the coercive nature of Lawrence’s dramatic monologue and the image of “a delicate chandelier of knives” seemed like something out of Tim Burton. And who would have ever thought that Stanley Kunitz (+7) could sound like Dean Young?

I insist that  $N + 7$  constitutes an alternative reading practice—something not unlike what Reuben Brower has called “reading in slow motion”—that the time spent thumbing through the dictionary and counting nouns is not time wasted but rather offers a flickering window through which we can glimpse the other life of language.

MICHAEL LEONG is the author of two books of poetry — *e.s.p.* (Silenced Press, 2009) and *Cutting Time with a Knife* (Black Square Editions / The Brooklyn Rail, forthcoming) — as well as a translation of the Chilean poet Estela Lamat, *I, the Worst of All* (blazeVOX [books], 2009). You can find him online at [michaelleong.wordpress.com](http://michaelleong.wordpress.com) and [bigother.com](http://bigother.com).

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