

THE SRPR REVIEW ESSAY:  
THE BODY APOCALYPTIC:  
RECENT BOOKS FROM THE ANTHROPOCENE

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*middle time*  
Angela Hume  
Omnidawn Publishing, 2016  
96 pages; paperback, \$17.95

*Notes on the End of the World*  
Meghan Privitello  
Black Lawrence Press, 2016  
47 pages; paperback, \$8.95

*Little Domesday Clock*  
Sam Witt  
Carolina Wren Press, 2017  
104 pages; paperback, \$16.95

At final editing of this essay, the harbingers of doom are too numerous to repost on Facebook: the remnants of Hurricane Harvey flooding much of southeast Texas; a glacier the size of Delaware cracking off of the Antarctic shelf; daily earthquakes and mudslides killing hundreds; dozens of species becoming extinct per day; islands, as well, disappearing day by day, millimeter by millimeter. It's not just the natural world either: the President obliquely supports neo-Nazis, and there is increasing evidence that he may have helped launder money for Russian oligarchs, all while we live through the returning specter of nuclear war. Gen-Xers who grew up running through the mist of DDT behind mosquito trucks are now getting tested for genetic markers and other signs of contamination. We talk about mutation and death in terms of markers: the act of naming the unnamable is no longer just the act of poets. Millennials face

increasing rates of asthma, autoimmune diseases, and autism, and newly mutated mosquito-borne viruses like Zika that will affect their entire generation. Tornadoes appear where they've never been seen, New Orleans floods with each new storm, and the largest wildfire Los Angeles has ever seen burns at Burbank's doorstep. In our lifetime, polar bears will become extinct. Colony Collapse Disorder threatens the world's food supply, and giant jellyfish blooming in an acidic ocean clog the ports and harbors of Japan. Just a few weeks ago, NASA announced plans to drill into the Yellowstone supervolcano that represents (according to scientists) a greater percent chance of affecting the entire planet than any asteroid or comet collision. Drilling, they propose, will release built-up heat energy from the magma lake below our national park. They liken it to Finland using geothermal steam to heat all those saunas, and we click the shocked face emoji and "share" without putting down our flat whites. But our doom as a species, and our specific role in this sixth great extinction—in the Anthropocene—seems assured to anyone paying attention.

Poets certainly pay attention, if the steady stream of collections dealing in some way with the end of the world is any indication. The publication of occasional poetry in response to catastrophic world and national events has never been greater. Online, the enormously popular e-zine *Rattle* publishes a twice-weekly "Poets Respond" poem, written in the moment, in response to the daily horrors, injustices, and fears. Seventeen thousand subscribers receive those poems in their inboxes each week. Political and activist poetry is experiencing a popularity it hasn't seen since the 60s, and much of it finds connections between the specific and the larger end-of-days fears that have only grown since the turn of the century. In a recent guest blog post, Jeannine Hall Gailey (author of, among other things, *Field Guide to the End of the World*<sup>1</sup>) argues that apocalyptic poetry is a growing subgenre. We (she identifies as Gen-X) grew up with the specter of nuclear war and have been fed an increasingly steady diet of zombie, alien invader, AI, and ecological disaster films and TV series. Combine that with the actual news from the scientific community—as Gailey points out, "scientists have been talking about unwieldy weather phenomenon,

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<sup>1</sup> Jeannine Hall Gailey, *Field Guide to the End of the World* (Springfield, MO: Moon City Press, 2016).

catastrophic climate change and impending earthquakes, mass extinctions and environmental disasters are actually happening as we speak (see: the unending crisis that is Fukushima),” and it’s no wonder our culture is now “fraught, anxious, unbalanced.”<sup>2</sup> In the three collections Gailey discusses<sup>3</sup> (all from 2016), she sees a common post-apocalyptic setting, a vague and unnamed reason for the end, and, of course, popular-culture driven imagining of how we might or might not survive the end of the world. Poets watch *The Walking Dead*, too. Gailey finds in these particular collections a “longing for ‘normal’ pleasures” in futuristic dystopias, and ultimately the “need to see past despair to a narrative of survival and even, yes, the possibility of hopefulness again.”<sup>4</sup>

But exploring how they might survive in a post-apocalyptic world isn’t the only way poets are responding to the sense of the world’s ending, and nor do they necessarily imagine hopefulness. In fact, Gailey herself touches upon something more interesting when she mentions her own collection. She points out that she began her collection’s poems before the recent calamitous political shift, and that they were borne out of the fact that it was her own personal world that seemed to be ending—in a medical sense. Neurological symptoms had left Gailey not only wheelchair bound, but also with “the knowledge that things like feeling where your hands and feet were in space, or remembering someone’s name, were no longer guaranteed.”<sup>5</sup> This specifically *physical* dislocation and disassociation informed her poems, as it does the three books to be discussed here.

Anyway, let’s face it: poets have been writing about the end of the world since they were able to chisel stone. In part, this has been because the world has always been ending for someone or other, and

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2 Jeannine Hall Gailey, “Apocalypse Now: Why Are Poets Writing About the End of the World?” Trish Hopkins: A Selfish Poet (blog), July 2, 2017, <http://trishhopkinson.com/2017/07/02/apocalypse-now-why-are-poets-writing-about-the-end-of-the-world-guest-blog-post-by-jeannine-hall-gailey/>

3 Dana Levin, *Banana Palace* (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2016); Donna Vorreyer, *Every Love Story is an Apocalypse Story* (Knoxville, TN: Sundress Publications, 2016); and Jessie Carty’s *Shopping After the Apocalypse* (Chicago: Dancing Girl Press, 2016).

4 Gailey, “Apocalypse Now.”

5 *Ibid.*

because it's the poet's job to utter the unutterable. Even if we jump to the relatively modern Romantics, we hear the elegiac note of nature succumbing to the Industrial Age. And the Modernists' lament for all that was lost after World War I gives way to the Postmodernists' fears of chemical contamination and the Nuclear Age. Notice, however, that for all three of these groups, mankind is to blame for its coming demise. Our ingenuity and industry has been suspect from the beginning. Civilization itself to blame, capitalists and the middle class, and the way science leads to warfare. One noticeable part of that equation seems to have changed as we embrace the notion of the Anthropocene: our (broadly generalized) animosity towards science has given way to an embrace of its language as prophetic and even poetic. Activist poets still hold big energy and its petrochemical siblings up as evil (roughly three quarters of the dozen or so books I read to pare down to the present selection contained references to Fukushima or radioactive fish, and all referred to global climate change), but scientists now are seen as Cassandra, rather than Fritz Haber or Robert Oppenheimer.

Even in a collection like Jill McDonough's *Reaper*, images of deadly drones and endearing, self-learning robots sit side-by-side. This deft and surprising collection is certainly filled with the machinery of death, but it is also at times thrilled at that machinery's birth and wonders aloud if the robots might get it right where we went wrong. In the poem "This is. Like. The best. Time," a 3D printing engineer asks the speaker if her robot poem was "*like a horror dystopian / future poem?*" "Nah," she replies. "Too easy."<sup>6</sup> *Reaper*, while echoing the sentiment of earlier end-of-world poets that it's humankind—not its inventions—that is the problem, settles at times on the (hopeful) possibility that life after the Anthropocene might continue, if artificially. With McDonough allowing the machinery's engineers the poetic role of "maker" throughout her book, her collection is definitely more celebratory about our doomed engineers playing god than Mary Shelley might have been comfortable with.

Other than the noticeable shift in attitude towards science and scientists, however, it seems that we are still mainly writing elegies and laments for the world on the brink of its end. Like the Romantics,

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<sup>6</sup> Jill McDonough, *Reaper* (Farmington, ME: Alice James Books, 2017), 26.

Modernists, and Postmodernists, we blame ourselves, our hubris. And we do so in roughly the same range of form and style that poets have deployed for over 200 years. Even for someone who reads more apocalyptic nonfiction than apocalyptic poetry, these observations were initially surprising to me. I write plenty of apocalyptic poetry, but tend to seek the actual end of the world in science and history writing. My beach reading this summer was Elizabeth Kolbert's *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History*.<sup>7</sup> I now practice for the apocalypse by learning the Latin names of mushrooms and tracking hurricanes. So when I began reading deeply in the new collections of poetry mostly figuring the end of the world, I admit I expected an entirely new approach. Kolbert's bestseller, after all, gives us new information, walking the reader through the geologic history of the initial five great extinctions, and their absolutely natural causes, so that we are shaken to our core to understand ours is the first one to be caused by a single species: our own. Doesn't it seem somehow more horrific to realize that we've *already* destroyed the planet (as opposed to our realization in 1945 that we merely *could*)? And shouldn't the poetry being written out of this new understanding be equal to that horror in tone and form, somehow something already existing yet unthought-of, but revealed finally in poetry? Yet, in the many books of contemporary apocalyptic poetry I read there is the same lyric-narrative, the same fragmented elegy or Modernist myth-making, sometimes even the same pop culture glee.

The three books I examine here all have this. Meghan Privitello's chapbook *Notes on the End of the World* counts us down to the end through the brutal and cold days of failing marriages, dying nieces, abject and meaningless sex, and a voice who ultimately says, "Oh world, end already" (39). Sam Witt's *Little Domesday Clock* is Modernist myth-making at its best as it recasts Minerva's Owl (via Hegel) as both the airliner that hit the World Trade Center and a drone zeroing in on a hospital in Afghanistan. It is also deeply Postmodernist as it pairs that Greek mythology with poems made entirely of Tweets, as it time-stamps an entire series of poems, and as its footnotes seem to come from the cosmos. And, finally, Angela Hume's haunting and difficult

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<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (New York: Henry Holt, 2014).

*middle time* is a queer, fragmented masterpiece that dwells “between the violence of historical carelessness and the most dire of probable consequences,”<sup>8</sup> but it is still at its heart fragmented and Modernist in form (in a feminist, Woolf-inspired sense).

However, if our dawning understanding that we are living through the Anthropocene and quite possibly the end of the world as humanity has known it hasn’t led poets wholesale to new forms, it *has* led some of them to new themes and motifs, new topics. In the case of the three collections under review, we can begin to see more clearly what Gailey suggests about the body’s part in how we wrap our minds around the end of the world we’re living through. We may be the first species to effect the extinction of millions of species, but we are also the first species capable of realizing it, smart enough to know that we’ve killed ourselves in the process, and unfortunate, perhaps fated, to have to find out what this feels like. Thus for these three poets—and likely many more—the geologic becomes the bodily. We sense the world’s end. Privitello turns the end of the world into a metaphor for deep mental illness, loneliness, suicidal ideation, and other ends we experience daily as we live through grief. Witt explores, especially, the physical evidence of extinction that is aphasia and the bomb-like potential of an embolism in *Little Domesday Clock*. And, sensing the slow seeping of biophosphates into our bodies and mutating this data into poetic images that blur the boundary between body and world, Hume’s *middle time* is the one that revises our sense of the bodily so breathtakingly that you almost want to tell everyone else not to bother.

Privitello’s chapbook counts down (or up, rather, as we might count the days after an earthquake) the days of the end of the world, from 1 to 20. These are bookended with a prologue and epilogue poem, each titled “Notes on the End of the World.” The poems are pre-apocalyptic, but the voice longs for the end, and that end isn’t so much *World War Z* as it is *Melancholia*, Lars von Trier’s 2011 haunting film of visceral grief and madness as a rogue planet, *Melancholia*, collides with Earth. The similarities between Privitello’s chapbook and von Trier’s movie are uncanny. Similar to how *Melancholia* focuses on the lives of two sisters, the chapbook’s penultimate poem “Day 20”

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<sup>8</sup> Joan Retallack, *Review of middle time*.

chronicles how the speaker visits her sister, and they spread out on the grass under the “pink sun” so that they burn and their skin peels. Her blind dog paws over the peeled skin, telling her (yes, the dog speaks) that “[i]n the dead cells of her skin, / I have found your family. / There is an outline of a great tree. / They are all there—roped / around their necks, hanging” (43). This poem, in which the sisters share the heaviest of grief-filled thoughts (the weight of a dead daughter, a suicide pact), echoes the final image of *Melancholia* so clearly that the poem and the film will, if you know both, become intertwined in your mind. And throughout the collection, those dead—the ghosts in the old home that has become “a dollhouse made of bones” (3), the “armies of us dressed as ghosts trying to cross” the highway (5), and the dream ghost who “climbs inside” of the speaker and makes her “move / like [she’s] always feared: sexual, predatory, criminal” (27)—appear alongside the living, pressing them out of the present. In “Day 13,” the dream ghost Adam is so sad that the speaker “can’t believe [her] family / has not died” upon waking (27). It’s obvious that depression, loss, grief, and loneliness make up a figurative end of the world in Privitello’s book, but that end is deeply physical. In “Day 19,” the speaker laments: “World, I am tired of being the one / still alive. In my stomach, new worlds / are growing from swallowing / your old-fashioned despair” (40). Elsewhere, Privitello states, “Doctors ask if you come from a sick family, / try to convince you that fear is biological” (37). And it is. In that poem, “Day 18,” the speaker lays out for us how it will happen: “It always starts / with a storm” (37). A deaf daughter trying to teach the sign language for *storm*, a “red-haired wife” who is fire, and each one disappearing “when you love her.” She continues with lines that seem to unfold the entire collection for us: “The storm is where the mind ends, / where the world ends” (37). She tells us to say to the doctors: “*Insanity is only a premonition / of the end*” (38).

Privitello’s are poems that reveal a psyche lashed by hurricanes and destroyed by both loving and loneliness. “I should have known the world was ending / when the carnival never left town,” Privitello writes in “Day 15”:

Clowns and sword swallows lay down,  
made dirt angels and hoped their magic  
would sprout them wings.  
What a trick hovering would be.

How much quicker you can escape what you fear  
when you have no allegiance to the ground.  
[. . .]  
Our invisible hands hold on to each other.  
If this were a condition, it would be called Tethering. (31)

For the speaker, in the face of numerous storms, looking in at her old home where others now live, this “tethering” is somehow the cause of the end of the world and its only hope for survival. In the face of the end, capable of tremendous destruction and vast innocence, we are, as the speaker says in “Day 3,” “both animals and children” (9). And the generations of loss, the layers of grief, are gathering to this end. The speaker looking at her old home in the prologue poem sees that where she used to sleep, “dead skin hovers in its own trembling universe. / The sun is covered by the shadow of another wreckage. / The clothes on the clothesline motion to run away fast or to come closer, / depending on the direction of the storm” (3). As the beginning of the collection, this poem previews the push-pull of love and connection at the root of our insanity. But Privitello ultimately allows us a slim possibility of hope as the end finally comes, again in the form of the body-as-world. In the epilogue, the titular poem, the poet reverses the dusty pre-storm of the beginning, giving us instead the primordial sea from which life first emerged: “On the last day of the world it rains” (44). Another speaker states, “I’ve asked my husband to drain the water from my body / and make a small lake in my name. / I will put my germs in it. / They will build a home there. / This is either how it begins or how it ends” (46). The poem then ends with a challenge to someone beyond the reader, as the speaker admonishes, “Angels, this is your last chance. / You can choose to touch us one last time / and convince us we have always been holy” (46).

Privitello’s “us” is humanity in all its desperate “tethering” and fears of death and loss (even as we fetishize death or wish to be so full of loss we don’t care anymore). It is our minds that are ending, making, as they do, with other minds, our very world. For Privitello, depression, suicide, the unspeakable things we do to keep from feeling are as apocalyptic as the ice caps melting, and images of the storm-wrecked world are used to describe the brain-borne illnesses of the mind. Other than the very last possible moment, these are some of the bleakest poems you’ll read. And for anyone who knows how



much depression can feel like the end of the world (and look like it from the outside), they are truly apocalyptic.

Grief and loss on the individual scale and the larger, planetary apocalypse serve as evolving emblems for each other in Sam Witt's *Little Domesday Clock*. In the language of Greek mythology (and its Joycean counterpart), the evangelical tent revival, tweets, and the science of thermodynamics, the poet explores what appears to be a deeply personal loss of a child and her mother. But unlike Privitello's poems, these express the actual species loss at the same time. In Witt's poems, the human body *is* the world, and it is dying. Our veins are filled with light, sweet crude or are decaying at the rate of a particular element. We have a half-life, and we're close to the end of it. Humanity is both destroyer and victim in this book, and the poet's focus on aphasia (the symptom of not being able to come up with the right word for something) as the primary symptom of our dying allows the collection's poems themselves to enact the destruction, while his recurring images of cancerous masses, blood clots, and embolisms in the eye leave the reader feeling pre-cursed.

The threads of language, myth, and obsessive image coil around themselves in the collection, and, at times, overwhelm, flood, contaminate, transmute. All is mutation, a spreading stain. As readers, we become implicated, through several poems, in the prideful sin of eating Helios's cattle, of consuming too much energy, and so suffer the punishment of a sun engulfing us. Icarus appears throughout the poems, in several forms, often as a woman (a pregnant one who falls because of the weight of her unborn child), as do other uncountable images of falling birds and people. As oceans rise, floods (Biblical and otherwise) engulf, jellyfish colonize the bases of oil rigs in the Gulf, various speakers try to bargain with God in language that falls apart when its true purpose is revealed. In one poem subtitled "The Drone Inside (Syria, Iraq, Yemen, 2014)," the speaker describes an evangelical megachurch, its worshippers "one massive human wave folding down," at prayer, "bound / blindfolded in sight goggles, ears plugged, white noise, Ted Nugent froth," and preaches, "Testify. *Sell* it, baby" (66). The worshippers are drone pilots, of course, who "sell it" but are actually "filled with that high-pitched piercing scream" (66) of the drones, their bombs, and their victims. In Witt's view of the apocalypse, the very language

we have used to justify destroying the planet will mutate, decay, and possibly become extinct as well.

Humanity itself is a disease in Witt's poems, one of pollution and plunder, but our bodies are also simultaneously the geological features of the world. In "The Aphasia Ward," a girl taking photos of dead birds on the beach is simultaneously the beach being beaten by the "acidic gray waves" (9) of the ocean, her mind eroding like the coasts, the sea crashing against the "pink eggshell of her powerful forehead" (11). Another poem begs the dark new moon to "speak me up until now. All the wiped out honeybees have surrendered / into an oceanic droning within us" (13). The disease exists at the genetic level, too. We "carry the gene for falling" (16), we are "genetically unquiet" (17), and (in a tweet) our "genes need to be stopped" (69). I say "we" because although many of these moments are in first person singular, the reader cannot help but be implicated in the Anthropocene extinction. (Other poems repeatedly mention "We the PPL" (8) and "We the Hordes" (57). In the poem subtitled "Stroke the Sixth: Poet of Underwater Cities," the speaker further identifies our failing: "with our long ass half-lives < if / if > our viruses, our styrofoam. / / [. . .] Riots, gossip, flash mobs, depleted food stores, / fissile isotope U-235 & the depleted uranium, the yellowcake / Left behind < that's us > / [. . .] / < all b/c we touched Her massive empty face at last >" (63–64). We flew too high.

In several poems, the disease is figured as an embolism or a mass on a scan, often in the eye/I of the speaker, and humanity is a speck, a tumor, or a bomb waiting to explode. The stunning poem "Thermal Signatures: The Owl Of Minerva Spreads Its Wings Only With The Falling of Dawn" begins with fragments of accounts from the World Trade Center, as the first speaker of this multi-voiced poem makes "eye contact with the man in the cockpit" just before impact (36). Via Hegel, the notes tell us, Minerva's Owl is only able to clearly see history after it is completed or "past." The speaker is reborn in the fall through the sky, and the eye of the jetliner becomes the eye of a stealth bomber, through which the speaker now seeks the thermal signatures of a target. Language that seems lifted from an instruction manual tells us that the stealth technology of the plane's skin will "bounce your image straight back at you—you'll see yourself. / / A dark mass of contagion in the owl's pupil" (39). This poem, like many others in the collection,

is pitiless in its condemnation of humanity's thirst for war. A victim of September 11 becomes a pilot flying bombs to Afghanistan. But it's the "mass" in the eye that resonates the loudest, echoed as it is by the final image of the poem. The speaker has morphed even further, becoming the remote pilot of an unmanned drone. When the targets of the bombing "shrink back to dots" the bomber suddenly realizes that he is the "I swallowing into dawn into a cosmic brain lesion / Of the Birdless Aorta" (41). Elsewhere in the collection, we find the twinning of stripper and suicide bomber, who is "an embolism, / just waiting to explode" (42), and "We the Watchers have been filled / in advance with all of this. & when we're parted & alone, / we'll each of us explode, We the \_\_\_\_\_: / (just watch me now): bright exfoliations, black prisons, / sea-ice collapsing *oh yeah*, migration triggers, warm beer" (44). The "We" are at once victims of a suicide vest and bombs ourselves, offering "our pure products to the sky" (44). Blood, the oil in our veins, smoke and ash, all taking down not each other (note that we will explode when alone), but the physical earth.

The final poem in the collection also contains the last reference to a mass in the eye/I. "Toxic Assets / Stroke the Twelfth" is a wrenching sonnet, simultaneously a condemnation and a prayer, made terrifyingly prescient by the devastation Hurricane Harvey left on the Texas coast. The speaker (Earth? Helios? someone Christ-like but not Christ?) acquiesces to the "Vast forests" that "have already been sacrificed" at the altar of greed. But now mankind turns that greed to the Arctic circle, where "portions of the glacial ice have calved [note the allusion to Odysseus's men eating Helios's cattle] to reveal stone / That hasn't been exposed for thousands of years, / In the secret history of my left eye" (101). That "emptied and black" secret is exposed. There is a brief moment of love as the speaker admits to having "stored away the tiny pearl" of a beloved's face in the *volta*. Is this us? The image of mankind as innocent? In the quatrain the speaker reveals either the lengths to which he'd go to release this pearl, or the lengths to which our greed has driven him:

If I were the death of ice, I'd calve.  
 If I were deep waters, the birth of flesh  
 Would be whispered in overtones of fire.  
 If I were Corpus Christi, I'd simply vanish into the sea. (101)

Throughout Witt's collection, the human body and the desecrated body of the earth are the same. Tent revival preachers offer only sales pitches, Greek mythology only sterile hindsight. We've ingested too much. Our hunger was too great.

Whereas Privitello's book explores the end of the world through the mind (and body) of a deeply alone "I" and Witt's "I" figures the teeming bodies of the horde, the "we" as the polluted and decaying body of the world, Angela Hume, in *middle time*, turns her feminist/queer/ecopoetic focus on the systemic polluting history of the patriarchy. She pins down primarily the chemical, pharmaceutical, and insecticide industries as causing the most harm at the site of women's bodies, but she does it against a backdrop of the American West in severe drought and fire (implicating the general forces of the Industrial Revolution, as well). In an interview, Hume notes that she is especially interested in how women's bodies have historically needed "fixing" through various hormones, and how those bodies have then been forced into causing harm to the next generation in utero as toxins build up and are passed to the unborn.<sup>9</sup> Jenny Drai sees Hume's poems as focusing on the permeability of the body to its environment, but also that the body is clearly being forced to absorb much of "what should not be" introduced to it.<sup>10</sup> Drai charts this division between body/world as that between I/you, but doesn't get quite as specific as I believe we can in saying that these poems clearly show the parallel between the rape of the body and the rape of the environment.

The queering of modernist forms Hume accomplishes is interesting enough for its own essay. As with Witt's poems, the Greeks influence these as she undertakes the goal of reclaiming the *threnos* of women's lamentations in Greek drama as a lyric which can actually work against the political power of the *melos*<sup>11</sup> (which is the title of one of the four long poems that make up the collection). The lamentations are fraught with the intruding language of chemicals and hormones,

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9 Angela Hume, interview by Geraldine Kim, *Weird Sister*, February 25, 2016, <http://weird-sister.com/2016/02/25/5538/>

10 Jenny Drai, review of *middle time*, by Angela Hume, *Medium*, January 24, 2017, <https://medium.com/anomalyblog/review-angela-humes-middle-time-9734f8c7f5ae>.

11 Angela Hume, interview.

medical questionnaires, and other forms of “the myth” (per Adrienne Rich) that the singer of one poem begs actual history to “whelm” (53). But as a queer poet, Hume is careful not to simply replace one language for another—the names of pesticides like “chlorpyrifos” (57) are reclaimed and put to use as poetry. And in one section of “melos,” the female singer even reclaims the language of passion from its place of violence: “here [ ] my tongue / on your teeth // in as much of your body as // (possible [ ] earth // capsizing // toward you // unessential // world [ ] dissoluble” (13). (Her use of white space is indicated by the absent ellipses.)

For the most part, however, the (human altered) environmental penetration of the body is figured as violent. Again, in “melos,” the singer cautions that “the crisis is [ ] the end of the commons [ ] is // very slow // violence // and we do not heal // vocalization declines” (17). This slow seeping of (male) body into environment and environment into (female) body is violent and not without consequence, including a loss of voice, madness (39), and a separation from selves that is unnatural: “whose // other [ ] are you?” (50). In the early parts of a section of the book called “the middle,” Hume clarifies the penetration, as the voice of a clinical observer asks “do you experience // [. . .] painful / intercourse” (78). Do you, the voice continues, experience “regret [ ] a dearth / bores [ ] a drill // only after / a symptom // makes of / your body / a middle / or cave [ ] a derelict” (78). The patriarchy of medical questionnaires demands that its violence and damage become the patient’s fault; does the patient regret the absence of the violence? Does the patient identify as the damage done, as the place of that violence?

If we are, as the book claims, in the middle time, then we are living in the only time that will have both a history to consider and a future to frame. What has been the effect of violence of the beginning, the centuries of damage to body and earth? For Hume, the greatest effect has been on bodies of water and on the body’s water. Without such elemental sustenance, the middle is “the temporality of waste” (79). A medical questionnaire similar to the one in “the middle,” asks the subject “the date of your last / period” (38), and the vanishing and decaying water of Earth parallels the body’s fluids throughout the collection. Whereas Privitello’s (on the Jersey shore) and Witt’s (on the Gulf Coast) poems are full of flood and rising sea-levels, Hume’s

are of the kindling-dry California coast. The setting of one section is the exposed shoulder of a dry lake or an empty reservoir in the Sierra Nevadas, the “riprap / crumpled / skeleton // impossibly / luminescent” (20). Women’s bodies are shown as skeletal and dry throughout the four poems, with similarly arid images of interrupted pregnancies (82) and those “last periods.” A lagoon dries to dust, a “geologic fact” that “like all the day’s weight / in sand and // wind [ ] lifting [ ] arid // reach[es]” (15) into the back of our teeth. This is in the “year of tar // sands [ ] four-degree // scare / year of the / aquifer” (16), and once water becomes contaminated, a later section notes, “the problem is / the closed system: // nothing at risk [ ] of falling out” (34). The section ends with the lament:

we say water’s  
wax-white  
  
like human eyes  
after long illness  
  
we say water’s  
a gorgeous thing (35)

If the greatest danger of continued violence is the contamination of the ocean, the aquifers, the metaphoric amniotic fluid or breast milk of the world (both are images that appear in the poems), then what is the correction needed as we approach the end of the middle time, which is presumably the beginning of the end time? The answer, of course, for a poet, is song and the agency with which to sing. We need “inter [ ] ruption / pretation // like will to myth / to change” (41), and we must “mitigate. / damage” (23) or else all of humanity will go down together under the glacial pressure (24). This song, against the historical “aesthetics of the middle” (80) will correct the wasted violence of the past. The problem, the singer laments, is that “we did not have to [ ] reckon with it / force the middle its // non-ache [ ] ultradian / cycling” (80). But we must. The middle’s “difficulty” was that it was:

never a question of	
whether	<i>(also another after</i>
song	awaiting
	vocalization

awaiting  
a present  
a waiting  
far from whole (81)

So there is, after all, hope in this very bleak, beautiful book. As the end of the world approaches, as our bodies collect toxins like dust on shoes, we await the vocalization of a present that is far from whole but might yet become.

Perhaps the human body as apocalypse isn't that new after all. It is frequently argued that Eliot saw humanity's failure in World War I as actual male impotence. But the level to which the end of the world as both idea and reality affects us physically now is particularly palpable. We watch 24/7 coverage of natural disasters and fill our Xanax prescriptions, and veer wildly between eating healthy and buying that coffee table book on famous chefs' *My Last Supper*. And that's just the first-world-problem version of these last days. The world continues to end. And poets, as we do, will continue to write elegies to and for the world that is ending. That's not at all a bad thing. We might not ever reach as many people as *The Walking Dead*, but if we're very good—as are Meghan Privitello, Sam Witt, and Angela Hume—we might just sell a few books of poetry before the apocalypse and in so doing better attune ourselves—mind and feeling body—to this world which we've created and which we suffer. Shantih. Shantih. Shantih.