Jenna Goldsmith: I want to begin this interview by asking you about another beginning—the title of your latest book, *Oh You Robot Saints!*, which was published by Carnegie Mellon University Press in 2021. In a literary landscape of one- or two-word titles (I'm guilty of this, by the way), or titles that set a general mood for a collection of poems, *Oh You Robot Saints!* is bold and specific and expressive. Titling is a craft topic I've seen emerge in writer spaces more and more lately. It's a necessary exercise—unless you're Emily Dickinson—and one I think deserves more conversation in the public exchange of ideas between poets. What's the genesis of this title?

Rebecca Morgan Frank: I love that you're talking about one- and two-word titles because I aspire to have one of those for my next book. I tend to lean towards long titles. I'm trying to think back to what I was considering here. So much of the book is about automata, but it did spread into robots. I wanted to bring that long history of automata and robots into the title. On the cover I have an automaton monk; and in the book, I have robot priests; and there is an exploration of an automaton Virgin Mary. I like the idea of a speech act bringing humanity into the title with an exclamation. I actually crowdsourced this topic a bit at one point and asked how folks felt about titles and exclamations, and I got a lot of positive feedback and examples. It felt like a kind of permission. I recently published a short story with an exclamatory title and so I now feel like I have spent all of my "titles with exclamation" points. I wanted it to reflect the content and tone of the writing, and with a humanizing quality; I see automata not as the objects but as an expression of human thinking. One of the things I like to do with graduate students is have them generate a list of titles and read them aloud to each other for feedback. I think it's important to get a sense of the visceral response of readers. In the end, we are always the arbitrator for our own work.

JG: My favorite poem in the book is "Epithalamion Aubade" not just because it forced me to go into the dictionary, which is always a pleasure. I had to look up both words in the title (I think I have titles

on the mind because I just finished reading Mark Doty's *What Is the Grass*, where he reports that Whitman's "Song of Myself" was originally titled "Walt Whitman" and I can't stop thinking about that), then do the work of sticking them together, and all of this before the first line of the poem. I love this! Both *epithalamion* and *aubade* are types of poems, so the poem itself is a poem chimera, which seems fitting for a book that blurs the line between the familiar and the unfamiliar, the biological and the mechanical, the human and the automaton. Can you tell us about this poem and perhaps comment on the architecture of it?

RMF: I love that most basic hybrid form, that bringing together of different forms and modes. I ask students to do that all the time and get excited about what emerges for them. I ask my students to do a lot more interesting things than I do myself. Every once in a while, I try to turn this on myself; what if I were to try to bring together these two things? I was interested in this idea of an occasional poem for a wedding, and this traditional poem of lovers leaving at dawn. My past experience as a visiting writer emerges here: leaving Mississippi or Illinois to teach at Brandeis University in Boston, or leaving during the week to teach in Ohio at Bowling Green State University. I know so many academics who have this life of parting; it emerges from what we called the "two-body problem" but what is really the "two-mind problem," this inability to be in the same place. It had both a personal genesis and an occasion and a poetic exploration to bring those two kinds of poems together.

JG: This is a book steeped in research. I love reading acknowledgements sections of books because it helps put the book and its author in context and creates a kind of web or ecosystem for the book. Your acknowledgments section is so interesting because you offer thanks to everyone from roboticists to museums to a medievalist you happen to be very close to. Information was needed to write this book! It is true that all poetry requires research, in the broadest sense of the word, but you needed a certain field of knowledge or understanding to make these poems work. How did you conduct this research? How did it start, and what are some of the starkest memories from the process? What advice do you have for poets looking to write researched poetry?

RMF: Research is such a key part of my work. I think of research also

as just conversations and listening. I want to expand my work from beyond myself and my own interiority and my own looking. In my book *The Spokes of Venus*, I was interested in different kinds of artists and makers. In that case, I had been teaching an artist's writing class for the Fine Arts Work Center, so I was reading a lot of artist statements by established artists and my students. I started to think about the permission and imagination that artists use, and I loved that. I loved going in and reading something as a place to jump-start what I was writing. I would just go into the art section of the University of Southern Mississippi library and run my finger along the titles and pull books. That's what I love about poetic research. We can be eclectic, we can be superficial, we can lean on the depth of others' research, we can move between the real and the imagined. I have a friend who was a fact-checker for a major magazine and she remarked on what fun it was when she had to email a poet and fact-check certain things that were on the border between the real and the imagined. Does a bee really do that? What are the lines of reality and imagination?

So, getting back to the research of *Oh You Robot Saints!*, a lot of it was reading. I did extensive research, only the surface of which comes out to be seen in the poem, but a lot of it was about the ways it made me think. That's why I want to do research. I want to find new ways of thinking about the world. But there is also a lot of content in there. E. R. Truitt's *Medieval Robots* was the catalyst for this. I lean on her research a lot and I'm grateful for it. I was able to speak with Harvard roboticist Robert Wood about the RoboBees and the idea of "soft robots." I originally thought this was just going to be a bestiary of automata. But it really expanded, and the really cool thing about the research that I'll say here is that I found that anybody whom I talked to about the project would have something that they had read about or was connected to their field, or someone else they knew, so people would send me things. Acquaintances would send me links to articles on the research of a dancer or sculptor. Anybody who has a little bit of an interest in automata is pretty excited to talk about it, share information, and read about it. I would say that is where the conversation part comes in. That led the way.

It's just like when we are writing a poem. If you're not discovering things along the way, there is going to be no life to the poem. My

advice is to ask oneself, "Why is this a poem?" There is so much that I'd love to write about but could not find that seed of why it should be a poem. Many tidbits about automata did not make it into the book. My other piece of advice for writers is to hold onto those tidbits! You can bring them into the chatter at talks or readings or interviews. This is the bonus content. There are still many ways for that knowledge to take root.

JG: *Emplacement* not only ties all the poems published in *SRPR* together, but it is also the guiding philosophy of the journal. How is place—that is, the idea of place but also the physical characteristics of where writing happens for you—inflecting the poems in this issue and embedded in your writing in general?

RMF: That's a great question because in some ways, this book comes out of displacement. When I think of the journey of when I started writing this book, my base was in Mississippi, and I moved up to Brandeis to be the poet in residence and was going back and forth between the two places for a year. Then we moved to Illinois, and I was going back and forth for a year. Then I was teaching in Ohio and going back and forth between Illinois and Ohio for a year. This is a book in which I was travelling to other times and worlds because I didn't have a strong sense of place myself. I was a newcomer to Illinois and working in other states. I also taught at Beloit College in Wisconsin for a semester, so that was four different states besides Illinois that were in the mix. The book right before *Oh You Robot Saints!*, *Sometimes We're All Living in a Foreign Country*, had been very much a book of place about what it was like to be in Mississippi. I think I am always grappling with that idea of displacement throughout my work, and both feeling a part of a lot of landscapes and places and also disconnected from them. I think that comes out in the work and the poems in this issue of *SRPR*. These poems are inspired by Calvino's *Invisible Cities*. This is the idea of cities that both don't exist and exist everywhere and reflect the world but are not of this world, imagined places. In the pandemic, folks would ask "Where are you Zooming from?"—our place was our living rooms, our bedrooms, our kitchens. It could have been anywhere. That's kind of interesting to me too; the way that we think about place has been altered through the pandemic, certainly in terms of human connection, that our communities have

expanded even more, even for people who are really locked in to one place. That was, in some ways, no longer true.

JG: I received my copy of the book in February 2021, which means that the process of the book straddled pre-pandemic and full-on pandemic life. Can you share with us what you remember about writing and moving through a publication process during this fraught time frame?

RMF: I turned in my book March 1, 2020. The pandemic made writing from scratch difficult because it was hard to be out in the world. You couldn't even get into libraries at that time. It was also challenging to get the book into the public. I will say that one of the things that did help me with moving forward and writing was when Ragdale, the artists' community in Lake Forest, reopened. I was able to join a cohort of six women there last November, and that was a time when I was reminded of how much I needed external connection, support, and creative spaces, which we've been denied through the pandemic.

JG: Where are you right now in your next poetry project? What are these poems about? Another way to ask this would be, where are your ideas and energy coming from?

RMF: I'm working on a new book and the working title is "Hostile Architecture." I've moved on to thinking about architects, another kind of maker. I'm finding writing by architects interesting and expansive in ways that I didn't expect. I'm interested in failed architecture and writing about architectural failures and disasters, which can be defined as horrific disasters or just something that's hideous or unusable. What are the ways architecture is trying to control human movement? What is the role of defensive architecture in places? Forensic architecture? How can we solve mysteries and learn about wars and atrocities through architecture? As always, for me it is an exploration, and I have a shelf full of books that I'm reading and thinking about. The piece I am missing right now is the more organic conversation that will lead me in unexpected directions. As we all get out into the world again, hopefully those conversations will start to take place.