THE GREAT ARCHIVIST’S / CLOUDY QUOTIENT:

EXPERIMENTS
WITH $N + 7$

“cover poems” performed
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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 venerations...
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,
al ready 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,  
er 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.
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 and bigother.com.