Special Feature:
Poems from the Alphabet *Archives*
By Inger Christensen
Translated by Katrine Øgaard Jensen

Editor's note: The Danish poet Inger Christensen's 1981 book *Alphabet* is widely considered one of the masterpieces of twentieth century European poetry and has been translated into numerous languages, including English (by Susanna Nied, 2001). A booklength Abecedarian, organized according to the Fibonacci Sequence, the book is a profoundly lyrical meditation on ecological and political threats. The poems published in this issue of *Notre Dame Review* were excised from the final version of the book, though some of them were long rumored to exist, including the legendary "O series." Christensen's son, Peter Borum, and her Swedish translator, the poet Marie Silkeberg, discovered the poems when combing through Christensen's archives after her death in 2009. They included them, along with other unpublished writings, in the voluminous collection *Verden ønsker at se sig selv. Digte, prosa, udkast (The World Wishes To See Itself: Poems, Prose and Drafts)* in 2018. We present these poems here for the first time in English.

evening, September nineteenth, 1980

I consider the calm moon, it sees me
as clear as a child observing its mother

about as old as Earth is the moon
only younger and lonely and without the unfortunate
knowledge of Earth and earthly time

there are areas in space where Earth is just
far enough from sight to resemble
a globe; so small, so easy to comprehend
that it hovers; yet it often will hover
with the south pole up and the north pole down

as an experiment, I consider the globe with south
as north, where America's farthest point
bends against the icy pole, where Africa's
curve allows the sea to travel

with such ease, so liberated from countries, divided only
by the weightless drift of whales from tone
to tone in the language of music, in the world
of agreements, where wordlessness applies to art

applies to art, like in the world of humans,
where the agreement divides speech into waves,
where joy leaps up as in freedom,
and your breath carries your body
like the wind does a feather. Trust

in the agreement. Without the existing agreement
no conversation. The speaking are driven to extremes,
everything polarized into mute unreality,
as if the south pole's frost froze with another
kind of frost than the north's, as if the moon, on this
evening, September nineteenth, 1980,
did not consider the Earth, did not carry it
as agreed upon, and without evidence, with ease

Eniwetok exists
an archipelago around
a blue lagoon
with a dream land's
climate East of
the easternmost sunrise
but West of the
westernmost sunset;
but West of its
westernmost setting;

a single atoll
a ring-shaped island
made of corals
with palms and all
like an arch of
radiant air and
clarity around it
vanished in a

hydrogen bomb explosion
in 52; vanished like
so much vanishes
like sand through fingers
vanishes, but only to be
lifted by the wind
or to rest, vanished

not like sand
through fingers vanishes
vanished as itself
like a corpse when
burned vanishes
that is, vanished entirely

more toward east than
the sun in its easternmost
rising more

given limits exist, streets, oblivion,
and grass and gourds and goats and gorse,
eagerness exists, given borders exist,

the border between sleep and all kinds of awake,
where Mercury Bay weed fans its oxygen
and blue gourds climb through fog,

a throat that yawns sleepily like a wild
and collapsed poem, wherein the loose,
the sentenceless goats gently bleat,

where the gorse slope's summer-yellow carelessness
can incorporate the light into such
radiant and self-contained dozing

that the body seems exiled with bliss.
Imagined borderlands do exist,
in which language suspended and wrecked

can move about, consumed by other true
sensations in the body's region
where you can feel the breath blending,

sterile, into the same word: inspiration,
a thin, white word that whispers everything
from the small mountain station of nothing

whisperings exist, whisperings exist;
harvest, history, and Halley's comet exists,
and hosts exist, hordes, high commanders,
hollows, half-shadows, hares exist;
and human skin, heights exist, half-lives,
hunger, and honey; and gardens exist;
bracken exist, and blackberries, blackberries

in this landscape, where the sun disappears behind
woods, throwing shadow over wheatfields
like a wall, and in that moment,
in this landscape, when the shadow reaches
the outermost stalks in the wheatfield
one can hear the wheatfield whisper, can
almost hear the footsteps of children

today, no one fears Halley's comet.
Today, no one is afraid. Grief
has already spread, and the harvest that never
completely fails is divided among
the high commanders. Some children seek shelter
in a hollow, only watched mutely by a hare

hungry and weak as if they were children
from childhood's fairytales they hear
the wind speak of burned fields,
of hosts of locusts, angels, and bombs;
but they are not children, no longer carried by anyone.

Inside the half-shadow, technically the part
of the shadow where some light from the source
filters through, they examine the human skin: whether the skin
holds the body in place throughout the half-life
they know nothing and everything; they know
not of the world's famine; they know
only that they remember a sweet taste of honey, remember

a high-lying landscape, a wild garden, and the sound
of goats, the sound of their own steps on the gorse slope

catastrophes exist, catastrophes exist
the movement of capital over crested dog's tail and
common pigeons exist, chemical warfare agents
exist, over grains and potatoes, causing
the grain that exists to vanish, causing rice and
potatoes and clover to vanish, animals,
birds, cherries, and rowan berries to vanish,
and flocks that exist here and there of rootless

people, farm animals, dogs to vanish,
tomatoes, olives to vanish, the earthly
women who harvest them to wither vanish,
while the ground dusts of nausea, a powder
of berries and leaves, and the buds of the caper
to never be gathered, pickled with salt,
and eaten; but before they vanish, before we
vanish, one evening we sit at the table with
a bit of bread, a few fish without sores, and water
cleverly turned into water, when one of
history's thousands of warpaths suddenly
cuts through the living room, you get up, and
limits exist, limits exist

everywhere, and your hideout comes no nearer,
see, the moon is too brightly lit, and the Big Dipper
returns as empty as it came,
it is you who must crawl to the cross and bear it
together with all the broken pale
soldiers looking like Narcissus; together,
you must wander so strangely, eternally around,
make a stop in a cabbage patch unkept
for centuries, listen your way to
a dried-up spring, somewhere in Karelia
perhaps, peel a bit of bark from a tree,
think of words like chromosomes, chimeras,
and of Calamis's horse figures, unpreserved.

Oil exists; ornaments, organs,
oil exists; orchids exist;
Earth and its detours exist; the detours
of orchids, detours of organs, intertwined
detours of oil and ornaments—
orchids stylized in fossil patterns,
resembling the patterns of algae in coal,
white as snow in the microscope's dark,
and the patterns of algae in oil, remains
of organisms, skeletons and plants that cannot
be seen, only burn, only shine, illuminate
the earth so it can overwinter, this one
dear oasis, where the olive tree grows old

where the oxeye blooms with its hundred
species or more, its thousands of colors
or more, its millions of tubular disk florets
and ray-shaped ligulate flowers
or more, its billions of scents and seeds,
its trillions of springs and summers, always moving
around, making sure it is always spring and always
summer in thousands of places—or more

and always winter. It is for this winter
that Earth has gathered the mighty summers
of primeval times, gathered their countless
dying foliage plants, hidden
the collected light in its cavities

Now we turn on the light. Use, somewhere,
some packed-together plankton. Consume,
as humans, millions of summers a day.

We upgrade. Buy up summers. Surveil
summers. Set the price of summers.
Threaten to close down summers
once and for all. Stockpile summers,
so prices rise. Burn summers.

Burn the algae's patterns. Burn
the ornaments. Burn the organs
and the slow deepening of the oceans
like plankton through water. Burn
the detours, the oasis in the tiny enclosed
universe where the oxeye blooms
with its trillions of joyful cries.
Burn what can be burned—and more.

To heat the brief industrial summer.
To heat the hectic bank summer.
To heat this entire Western summer,
this holy military summer. There is
war. That is why there is war. There is
war all the time. I think of the oil lamps
in Babylon's hanging gardens, of the peace
that has never endured, of millions
of people who were never asked. Never
about the war. Never about the oil. Never
about their love for the earth, which for so long
has stored the oil, delaying the radiant sunlight
from the summer of paradise.

alone in the apartment with fifteen kilos of paper

obsessed with certain kinds of immersion
~~— such as Archaeopteryx script in stone~~
—

death is only made clear at the sight of the gift
that the dead has been given for the grave, and which resembles
the box I always carry with a coin, a tooth,
a ring and an empty perfume bottle from Grasse

—

the alphabet we share like bread summer light

—

bottomless roses the sand martin's naked yellow chick
has fallen from the cliff

—

to keep writing a little longer crashing waves, the crested
tongue of foam like a
— veil trailing behind the
unceasing descent of the woman
begins June 29th 1980 into the sea
when nothing happens

approx. halfway between the house and the garden
an elder tree with pale immobile along the sea the road
flowers along the road

—

an image that solely and in solitude exists

—

a red-footed falcon sweeps the night sky clean

—

~~a lemon knows the land where it blooms~~

—

~~anxiety has grown more comfortable on the doormat~~
—
like the same glass of water
placed by the bed each morning
—
a crashing wave turns in its sleep
and tucks its dream beneath the beach stones
—

the apricot tree blooms in Arzbach today
—

the brothers in Seveso's monastery
make their rounds when the bells toll
—

Curie lies awake at night, listening