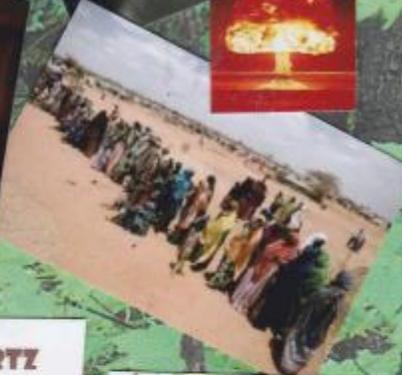




**KNOW BETTER**



**POEMS OF RESISTANCE**



**PATRICIA ROTH SCHWARTZ**



**locofos chapbooks**

# **KNOW BETTER**

poems of resistance

by

**PATRICIA ROTH SCHWARTZ**

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@ Patricia Roth Schwartz, 2017

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Chicago, USA, 2017

**LATE-NIGHT, NOVEMBER 9, 2016**

*remembering France, 1944*

like the mother whose smiling  
children the black-shirts have chased  
out the door into her kitchen garden  
and shot to death in her sight,  
you cannot yet begin  
to comprehend  
all that is lost

## THE PARENTS

2001

During the daytime hours that fall they kept up cheerful talk, never turned on television, hid newspapers, waited 'til the children were sleeping to watch CNN or read *The Times*, began secretly to stockpile water and canned goods in the garage behind the rusted lawn furniture.

On Fridays at Shabbos when blessing each child, their eyes would fill, throats tighten, as their hands lay lightly one by one atop each silky head; when their youngest drew a heart around the picture of a shattered city skyline his teacher had passed out, they praised him: *We feel so sad*, the boy had printed.

When later he awoke, terrified from a nightmare he told them was about Hallowe'en, they comforted him with promises, wondering how many might end up broken, and soon began a new ritual, one of studying on the late news the enormous dark eyes of faraway children, then tiptoeing together from room to room to gaze wordlessly at each still, sleeping face of their own.

## BLACK FRIDAY: FERGUSON

2014

“Mama worked some extra shifts  
gettin us our turkey and fixins.  
I made a sweet potato pie--my first--  
kinda burnt around the edges  
but okay, I guess. Me ‘n Leroy  
cleaned up the whole house, keepin  
the TV on, gettin ready for Grandma  
‘n Auntie June to come on over  
Thanksgiving Day. We love to watch  
that Macy's parade--those giant floats  
so colorful and bright, but now  
with that po-lice man, the one done  
shot Michael Brown gettin off scott-free,  
parade's not even on, just news news news...  
Mama got in okay from work  
but told us stores all busted  
up, people goin wild, stealin, but  
some marchin, singin all peaceful,  
carryin banners, colorful too,  
but fulla words. Granny called,  
too afraid to leave her place; Junie  
don't wanna drive. Guess we  
gonna have to eat all this ourselves,  
the whole bird ‘n stuffin Mama made  
just like Granny usta: cornbread, sausage,  
plenty herbs from way down South when  
she be young--hard times, her stories  
always fulla those. Still hard times far's  
I can tell. There be a black man in that  
big white house since I be four years old—  
so what. We was gonna shop on Friday—

Black Friday they call it, but now alla  
stores be empty and if Leroy pulls out  
his Jedi wand he could get dead. Some  
folks're only black Friday after Thanksgiving.  
Us, we're black every day all year long.”

## WEST VIRGINIA HISTORY

over the hill  
invisible to us  
Union Carbide stinks

just as far the other way  
tarpaper shacks  
squat in mud

no one's a miner now –  
collars white – but  
our granddaddies were

war bought our houses  
the war the war to end  
all wars helped to start

our children, all colors  
of collars frayed  
will go again to war  
return to streets of war

over the hill  
invisible to us  
Union Carbide stinks

just as far the other way  
tarpaper shacks  
squat in mud

## SNOWING IN AFGHANISTAN

*December 2001*

After four years of perfect drought,  
the only rain artificial limbs, the children  
of Kandahar, practicing childhood like  
a second language, shrieking with laughter,  
clamber over chunks of bombed-out rubble  
as if they were jungle gyms, pelting each other  
with snowballs, remembering just last week  
when a hundred darting, homemade  
butterflies on strings, flown without fear,  
had filled their sky, while women, learning  
personhood, faces up, feel, some for the first  
time, falling crystals of ice, delicate as lace  
on bare skin, blessed as a kiss.

## **KIDDING OURSELVES**

*November 2016*

Today I am kidding myself: I am wearing silly bracelets;  
my wrists are laughing. On my shower curtain a tree grows;  
under a fragrant waterfall I stand drenched.

I like to watch Earth now as she appears from space, the  
blue-and-white-marble that Alice Walker realized was her  
blinded eye. I see how that eye is winking.

Tonight when my dog and I walk the dark field behind the  
silent house, the tail of the bear above trees tell us the time.

The possum we almost stumble over stares out from the  
flashlight's beam, glassy eyes inside a pointy feral face.  
Maybe it's laughing, or winking our way.

The time, the bear tells us, is that it is too late.

## KNOW BETTER

### 1

The way things end is often slow, each step creeping up surreptitiously, a stealthy yet ravenous cat, almost ignored, named something else, even though we knew better.

### 2

Families in darkly furnished rooms, up late, small glasses of amber drained, voices low, talking talking, leaning close, re-naming calculating: *it won't, he can't, we can't, let us wait it out*. Should have known better.

### 3

The flower of light that blossomed over the sleeping city that ate up everything, leaving only ashen shadows of what had been mothers, workers, babies, was years coming to fruition in bunkers where white men scribbled on chalkboards, smoking, knowing better.

### 4

Only the flimsy barrier of a door before which bruised knuckles hang raised stands between later and now.

There is no later. You hear your name.

What did *you* know?

## TARGETED

2011

Last week five thousand red-winged blackbirds dropped as if felled by buckshot from an unsuspecting sky in Arkansas, piling up I imagine as unimaginable carrion for the meals of other birds. Their bodies, the news said, were lacerated—by what? by whom? Then, said the news, *This is common. Mass bird kill. Mass fish kill. It's natural—maybe hail.* I'm wondering, Can hail do that? How many blackbirds can you bake in a pie— five thousand? How many ways in a poem can you see five thousand blackbirds? *Mass kill in nature is common*, the news keeps on saying. Yes, mass kill--like the bodies in the graves near Sarajevo, like Auschwitz, like Pol Pot's killing fields. This week no more bird kill was reported but yesterday a boy used a weapon as easily as many use shotguns to pick blackbirds off fence rails, to shoot in a hail of bullets twenty-two people; a nine-year-old girl who fell lay there, a broken bird, her body lacerated. Gabby Giffords, who yearned to change the world but failed to quell the boy's pain, fell too, targeted by a rival who'd had her staff draw red bull's eyes on a map to show her fans who to shoot down. Did those five thousand blackbirds I wonder also have

little targets drawn on their black bodies  
where the red feathers of their gleaming wings  
— like those of angels--used to be? Do all of us  
now wear targets circled over our bodies? Will  
we too begin to drop like hailstones--or in some  
other way no scientist will dare to identify-- that  
will take us down, fallen angels all,  
and will the skies of this earth continue, soaring  
on, completely empty?

## MIGRATIONS

*from an exhibit of the work of photographer Sebastian  
Selgado at The George Eastman House, Rochester, New  
York, June 2000, documenting refugees world-wide*

somewhere in the  
world always  
a limitless column  
of walkers  
inhabit a road  
continually moving  
never arriving

a child's eyes  
grow and grow  
'til they hold the world

work becomes death to  
feed the children  
of somebody else

home finds itself  
in a dented bucket  
a rude bunk  
a precious set of rags

in        the        Sudan  
one       shy       boy  
has only one arm

and a smile like sunrise

## “OPEN HAPPINESS”

Driving out today in my Subaru, I'm almost clipped by a block-long 18 wheeler, bright cherry-red, whose entire sides serve as billboards for what's inside: those iconic curvaceous bottles: and you can feel it now, the screw-top loosening, that first pucker of sweet-strong fizz that kind of burns yet thrills, and feel that after-buzz, that caffeine euphoria that raises from the dead any random sluggish mid-afternoon, reminding you were born to slay the world with your brilliance. By supper, you're crashing, of course, and you remember it doesn't actually taste good, or, if you get it as a fountain drink, like anything at all, just half-flat sugar water--and just as that huge red thing on all those wheels squeaks by you, sparing your life but not your nerves, it comes to you, and not for the first time, how America is Coke and Coke America: *We'd like to buy the world a Coke... Just* the way those G.I.'s gave out Hershey bars but then afterward two atomic bombs, and how, in a lot of villages in Africa (you saw it on *60 Minutes*), there isn't any more potable well water, yet every little kiosk sells--you guessed it—Coca-Cola, and how in Cambodia, the emptied-out bottles are also on sale, full of gasoline for the putt-putts, how all over Iceland you can get the bottles with the names of soccer players printed on the labels; in Israel the letters come in both Hebrew and Arabic. I'd like to teach the world to sing, as well, but there are no lullabies for the bloated-bellied babies of the Sudan... And you remember your mother allowing you and your sister Royal Crown Cola and NeHi orange (ten cents at the corner store that also sold Nips and wax lips), but not Coca-Cola, which has too much caffeine for kids, and which she drinks late at night, avoiding your father, along with the Hersheys she

hides in her sewing cabinet. Now they're telling us we can pop that pull-tab, unscrew that cap, letting out all the fizz and the hype and *Open Happiness!* The original cola held cocaine, and you remember the science project your old friend Roger did in fifth grade: putting his little sister's baby teeth into a full bottle, re-capping it tightly, then proving that in one week there was nothing left in that bottle of all-American brown liquid at all except—  
*The Real Thing!*

## TRUE PROGRESS

will have arrived  
when we do not applaud  
the fifty year old model  
in the *Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Edition*  
but the complete cessation  
of its publication

when we will not grant awards  
to the hospice in the prison  
but the coming down  
of the prison walls

when we will not praise  
the corporation that donated water  
in plastic bottles to those who thirst  
but the full restoration  
of their river to purity again

when we will not exclaim over  
fat Barbie, sporty Barbie,  
queer Barbie, but the cessation  
of any Barbies at all--

plus the giving out  
of a baby doll  
for every boy child,  
a female ninja action figure  
for every girl

**GIRL-TALK IN THE LOCKER ROOM  
OF THE PUSSY-CAT CLUB**

*Still, she persisted.*

Paula Jones

speaks in  
the voice of

Mary Jo Kopechne:

*the water is rising  
why does he not come for me?*

Anita Hill

speaks in  
the voice of

Shondra Levy:

*the forest is so dense,  
I cannot see the light*

Donna Jones

speaks in  
the voice of

Meghan Kelly

*when the bright-lit screen goes dark,  
what you are left with is yourself*

Divine Brown

speaks in  
the voice of

Silda Spitzer:

*what you pay for  
is what you get*

Huma Abedin Weiner  
speaks in  
the voice of  
Monica Lewinsky:  
*sometimes a cigar  
is just a cigar*

Mary Richards  
speaks in  
the voice of  
Monica Lewinsky  
tossing her beret  
into the air:  
*You're gonna make it, girl, after all...*

## WHEN WAR ENDS

*remembering France 1944*

streets swarm  
with dancers  
bells speak

war is dead  
long live the new

yet something  
    a hooded fungus  
has sprung up  
from old rot  
from the body  
of the dead

the face though bold  
is not young  
hooded eyes  
flimsy disguise  
it is old, old

dancers cannot stop  
bells speak  
of joy—

or is it dread?

**AFTER THE LATE NEWS,  
A WOMAN CAN'T SLEEP**

a veil may honor  
a marriage with death

a stadium may house  
a sport with human quarry

an envelope could hold  
an invitation from evil

bringing blood to cold hands  
milk in a warm cup  
does not help

what she remembers are babies  
that no one feeds

what rises up to greet her  
at this hour  
is everything  
she has ever killed:

bees, rodents, a goldfish  
children overseas  
across town

their faces beseech her

the power, their dark eyes tell her,  
the power was yours

and you let it dribble away

like warm milk

like blood

on sand

*for Iris Miller*

## MALLARDS, AT SARATOGA

Outside the sandstone-bricked conference hall where we came to learn all that was, attach it to our own lives like a fashionable scarf, two mallards out of the prim campus lake had attained the sidewalk, one in full pursuit of the other. He pounced, mounted, pinned her, surprising wings unfurled, strong, wide, covered her completely. Under him she struggled mightily, strength evident yet not enough. Down the walk, by their own dual momentum, the pair was pushed, he brooking no refusal to satisfaction, she desperate to say no, yet having no animal right. He won. She stilled. He bucked above her.

It was ugly. It was primal. It was what it was. No need for us to enter the soft light of the hall to pretend there was more to learn.

## “DON’T CALL ME POCAHONTAS”

“When I wore my long beaded Navaho dress to get my high-school diploma, some kids pelted me with rolled-up paper, shouted out, ‘This is America! Go home’ ‘I *am* home, motherfuckers,’ I would’ve screamed if I dared. ‘Don’t you know? We were here first!’ One girl, back in middle school, said, ‘You’re an Oriental, right?’ Then she started speaking fake Chinese at me. ‘No, I’m native,’ polite as pie, I said. ‘Oh! Hawai’i! Hula girl!’ And that became my name ‘til I got outta there. In history class it’s Custer, Custer, Sitting Bull, Cochise. ‘Could we study The Long March?’ I asked. ‘WW II’s next year, honey,’ teacher said. ‘Then will we study Code Talkers?’ ‘What?’ she said. ‘I don’t know what you mean.’ Well, lady, my great-uncle was one. He was a real American, just like me and you. I’ve got a card I carry with me. 100%, it says, Navaho. Makes me think of that big fancy dog show on TV—pedigrees and all. That’s how they treat us. My Auntie June married out; her kids’re just  $\frac{1}{4}$ . You know, you really can’t cut people up like pieces of pizza. I’m going to leave Rochester, apply for school in Arizona, study archeology, history, and art. Go teach some kids on the res. Let them heal me. Let them make me whole.”

## DISMANTLING THE MANDALA

Saffron-robed monk  
gives us each  
a bag of sand,  
candy-colored.

A child says, *Are we  
going to keep this?*

I see her bones  
laid out on the mountain –  
vultures wheeling.

*No*, I say.

## **THIS TINY HAVEN**

Late morning in tranquility you sit in the back yard above the herb garden replete with late June roses, blowsy and scarlet. A soft rain begins over the deep blue-black of the tops of distant trees. Crows spit out a raucous anger, wheel up across the shrouded sky stifling the gentler birds' calls. The rain hardens. A green light permeates the roses. From inside the house the dog barks.

The crow-sky has become a swirl of everything—

Warning?

Danger?

How quickly an illusion dissipates.

What surrounds this tiny haven is absolutely there and will not be changing.

## CORVUS

we sing of wings  
that beat against air  
that feels as silk  
feels to you

we sing of corn  
that tastes of summer

we sing of story  
our stories are written  
in the tracks we leave  
over fields of snow

we sing of sky,  
branch, field,  
ground, snow--  
our world, a constant  
astonishment

for hundreds of years  
we have been  
watching you

when we swoop  
over a tree covering it  
like black fruit  
winter is coming

when the black of our bodies  
crowds the sky  
something is dying

your way of things,  
we tell you, is coming  
to an end

## RESISTANCE

*France 1940-44*

you chew your bitter bread  
that one day you may bake  
new bread

you do not lower your eyes

stealing is punishable  
by firing squad  
you steal a turnip  
to feed your child

you sing at night  
in the woods  
with your friends  
you dine on chestnuts  
and bitter nettles

you steal an onion

you do not lower your eyes

treason is punishable  
by hanging

betrayal has a bitter taste

in the square you watch  
your friends swing  
bending the heaviest limbs

you have made a sweet stew  
of turnip and onion  
no salt but tears

your child has been smuggled  
out so that she make bake  
new bread

you refuse the blindfold

you do not lower your eyes

## **FEBRUARY DUSK**

pink moon pink sky darkness  
at bay birds chortle  
lustily undaunted by high  
unmelting banks of snow

a great deal is dying  
the light the truth  
earth and our dreams

spring exists now as only a metaphor

still we cannot say  
there was not beauty

## INAGURATION DAY

*January 2001*

star-burst paper whites  
bright as the blanketing snow  
fill your sheltering kitchen  
with an ecstasy of fragrance  
on this bitter day at the century's  
full stop

while a constant broadcast  
streams a ruinous message out  
from the hub of this nation:  
stewardship abdicated  
once more for greed

you extinguish the signal  
and walk outdoors:  
deep in the rich leaf mold  
under the dormant lilacs  
snowdrops hunker  
ready to remember  
the returning light

here overhead  
on this sacred site where  
time before history  
migratory crossroads have converged,  
the blood-pull of unstoppable instinct  
sends even now on great wings  
always  
the full-throated

## SNAPSHOTS FROM A PLAGUE

*Boston, Massachusetts, 1982-84*

Browsing the lgbt paper you write for, out jumps a bizarre headline: “Mysterious Gay Cancer: Cases Multiply.”  
*What the fuck? What next! What else can they blame us for?* You refuse to believe.

You score a free ticket for the Human Rights Fund Dinner; you and 300 gay men eat flaccid chicken; when you leave you glance back, see the entire cleaning crew sporting enormous bright yellow rubber gloves.

Your pal Gino from grad school, famous for crazy parties at the brownstone he shares with his lover, a much older professor of Renaissance Art, plus the professor’s long-time companion, a sculptor, orders in sex like Thai food.  
*Gino’s got it, everyone’s buzzing. Gino’s got it.*

Jane, the woman you’re seeing, a nurse, volunteers for home care, tells you she’s sure she just saw Kevin, her favorite, six months dead, trimming her Christmas tree; every time you call you learn what Peter’s T-cell count has fallen to now; he won’t last ‘til Easter.

You go with Jane to Dignity services at Harvard. Every Sunday the priest--risking ex-communication—calls the roll call of the dead.

Every time any of you meet: too much leaning in, whispers, whispers: *His parents won’t come; He looks like a survivor of Auschwitz; He won’t get tested.*

After staging all of his goodbyes, your editor's ex, Jason, swallows enough hoarded Nembutal to take himself out; when he wakes up still alive, he just takes some all over again, plus more; finally the phone call comes.

Your editor, Paul, keeps a leather-bound journal, enters every name; Jason's brings the count to eighty-five.

Summer, Pride--and all down Charles Street in silence row after row of marchers stream--

all in green, holding high banners of green--

*Living, they say. Living Living*

## **Acknowledgements:**

“Know Better” and “Resistance” appeared in two volumes of the Poets Speak series from Beatlick Press, Albuquerque, NM

## **Author’s Notes:**

“West Virginia History”: I grew up downwind from Union Carbide in Charleston, WV; many WW II veterans like my father financed houses on the G.I. Bill

“Snowing in Afghanistan”: this poem came from several news stories: a well-intentioned but somewhat misguided humanitarian effort to help amputees involved artificial limbs being parachuted over the Afghani countryside; the Taliban forbade kite-flying

“Kidding Ourselves”: the Big Dipper is also named *Ursa Major*, the Big Bear; it is possible to tell time by its handle; author Alice Walker, blinded in one eye in childhood, has written a beautiful essay about seeing her wounded eye as the earth in space

“Don’t Call Me Pocahontas”: from an interview with a Navaho college student from the *City* newspaper, Rochester, New York, 2017

“Snapshots from a Plague”: from my own life (names changed) but inspired by the film, “Dallas Buyers’ Club,” and the play, *The Normal Heart*, by Larry Kramer, 2014

After viewing the French television series, “The French Village,” about a small town occupied by the Germans from 1940-1944, I was moved to relate their struggles to our own in 2016-2017. Several of these poems came from those stories.

## Locofo Chaps

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