



# Five Borough Songbook

20 Composers

20 New Songs

Celebrating

1 New York

World Premiere Recording

## Performers

Javier Abreu, tenor  
 Mireille Asselin, soprano  
 Thomas Bagwell, pianist  
 Jesse Blumberg, baritone  
 Meg Bragle, mezzo-soprano  
 Scott Dispensa, baritone  
 Jocelyn Dueck, pianist  
 Blythe Gaisert, mezzo-soprano  
 Martha Guth, soprano  
 Keith Jameson, tenor  
 David McFerrin, baritone  
 David Adam Moore, baritone  
 Harumi Rhodes, violinist  
 Alex Richardson, tenor

## Composers

Christopher Berg  
 Lisa Bielawa  
 Tom Cipullo  
 Christina Courtin  
 Mohammed Fairouz  
 Renée Favand-See  
 John Glover  
 Ricky Ian Gordon  
 Yotam Haber  
 Daron Hagen  
 Martin Hennessy  
 Gabriel Kahane  
 Gilda Lyons  
 Jorge Martín  
 Russell Platt  
 Glen Roven  
 Matt Schickele  
 Richard Pearson Thomas  
 Christopher Tignor  
 Scott Wheeler

## CD 1

- |  |                   |
|--|-------------------|
| 1. O City of Ships<br><i>Martha, Jesse, and Thomas</i>   | Ricky Ian Gordon  |
| 2. F from DUMBO<br><i>David Adam Moore and Thomas</i>  | Glen Roven        |
| 3. Breakfast in New York<br><i>Mireille, Meg, Javier, Scott, and Harumi</i>                          | Lisa Bielawa      |
| 4. The City's Love<br><i>David McFerrin and Jocelyn</i>  | Martin Hennessy   |
| 5. rapid transit<br><i>Martha and Blythe</i>   | Gilda Lyons       |
| 6. Coney Island Avenue<br><i>Blythe and Jocelyn</i>  | Gabriel Kahane    |
| 7. On Leaving Brooklyn<br><i>Mireille, Meg, Javier, Scott, and Harumi</i>                            | Yotam Haber       |
| 8. OuLiPo in the Bronx<br><i>Alex and Thomas</i>   | Christopher Berg  |
| 9. Fresh Kills<br><i>Martha and Jocelyn</i>  | Christina Courtin |
| 10. G is for Grimy: An Ode to the G Train<br><i>Martha, Blythe, Alex, David McFerrin, and Thomas</i> | Tom Cipullo       |

## CD 2

- |   |                        |
|---|------------------------|
| 1. City of Orgies, Walks, and Joys!<br><i>Blythe, Alex, Harumi, and Thomas</i>          | Jorge Martín           |
| 2. Refugee Blues<br><i>Blythe and Thomas</i>  | Mohammed Fairouz       |
| 3. The Avenue (II)<br><i>Alex and Thomas</i>  | Russell Platt          |
| 4. Days afield on Staten Island<br><i>Martha, Keith, Jesse, and Thomas</i>              | Matt Schickele         |
| 5. The New Yorkers<br><i>Martha, Alex, and Jocelyn</i>                                  | Daron Aric Hagen       |
| 6. Looking West on a Humid Summer Evening<br><i>Blythe and Jocelyn</i>                  | Renée Favand-See       |
| 7. At Home in Staten Island<br><i>Martha and Harumi</i>                                 | Scott Wheeler          |
| 8. 8:46 AM, Five Years Later<br><i>Jesse and Jocelyn</i>                                | John Glover            |
| 9. Secret Assignment<br><i>Martha, Meg, Keith, Jesse, Harumi, and Jocelyn</i>           | Christopher Tignor     |
| 10. The Center of the Universe<br><i>Martha, Meg, Keith, Jesse, Harumi, and Jocelyn</i> | Richard Pearson Thomas |

## WHAT IS A FIVE BOROUGH SONGBOOK?

Since 2007, Five Boroughs Music Festival has brought world-class and affordable musical events to every corner of New York City, breaking away from the traditional concert venues of Manhattan and reaching new audiences in a variety of neighborhoods. While we present music of many genres, throughout all our programming we have remained devoted to the emergence of new works. As we searched for an adventurous centerpiece to mark our 5th Season, the combination of these musical and geographical missions led to our boldest project yet: the creation of a new [Five Borough Songbook](#).

In early 2011, we commissioned twenty composers to write one new vocal work each, inspired by places, themes, and poetry from every corner of New York City. The idea was that the resulting *Five Borough Songbook* could serve as a celebration of the entirety of New York City, of its literary history, and of its most promising musical talent. We encouraged our composers to choose their own texts, and to write for any combination of SATB (soprano, mezzo-soprano, tenor, and baritone) solo voices, piano, and violin. What gradually emerged over the course of Summer 2011 was a collection of works of remarkable literary and musical diversity, and we grew more and more excited to present them all in concert. So when the *Songbook* had its World Premiere in October 2011, we were thrilled to hear countless audience members raving about the wide variety of musical styles represented, and how well they all fit together.

Conceived as a full concert experience, the *Songbook* is meant to be performed as a whole, leaving the ordering of songs to the performers' discretion. Here, we have resisted the temptation to group songs by borough, chronology, or theme, though you will undoubtedly discover some common threads running throughout. The representation of Walt Whitman was inevitable, given his looming presence in New York's literary history, but more than a few of our twenty composers chose to reach back into the city's past for inspiration. Two of our Staten Island songs, for example, are set in the 19<sup>th</sup> century: *At Home in Staten Island* (a poem by a visiting Englishman) and *Days afield on Staten Island* (excerpts from a naturalist's writings). *Fresh Kills*, on the other hand, takes its name from this same Island's not-so-celebrated landfill, which, thankfully, is now undergoing a gradual conversion to a city park. *OuLiPo in the Bronx* is actually the result of the composer's complete overhaul of a 19<sup>th</sup> century poem, via an "Oulipian" literary technique of replacing all the nouns and adjectives with their close neighbors (+3, in this case) in the dictionary. And *The City's Love* and *Refugee Blues* deal with two very different immigrant experiences from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The many references to trains and transportation should come as no surprise to anyone who has ever visited New York, but the *Songbook* is nevertheless full of unexpected twists and turns. Several composers wrote their own lyrics, and two of our songs are set to "found" texts: *Breakfast in New York's* words were all overheard by the composer in diners and coffee shops in all five boroughs, and the lyrics of *G is for Grimy* are a compilation of internet postings about one particularly unreliable subway line.

On these two CDs we hope you will experience twenty very distinct, but equally tasty, "bites of the Big Apple," in the words of our tireless producer Glen Roven. Just as every trip around NYC is a singular adventure, we hope your *Five Borough Songbook* journey will be full of new surprises each time you take the trip. Thanks for coming along for the ride, and *stand clear of the closing doors...*

Jesse Blumberg, Artistic Director and Donna Breitzer, Executive Director  
**Five Boroughs Music Festival**  
[www.5BMF.org](http://www.5BMF.org)

## About the Composers and Their Songs

**Ricky Ian Gordon's** credits include: *Rappahannock County* (Virginia Opera), *Sycamore Trees* (The Signature Theatre), *Green Sneakers* (Bravo! Vail Valley Music Festival), *The Grapes of Wrath* (Minnesota, Utah, and Pittsburgh Operas, Carnegie Hall), *Orpheus and Euridice* (Lincoln Center), *My Life With Albertine* (Playwrights Horizons), *Dream True* (Vineyard Theater), *The Tibetan Book Of The Dead* (Houston Grand Opera), *Only Heaven* (Encompass Opera). His songs have been recorded and performed by such artists as Renée Fleming, Audra McDonald, Kristin Chenoweth, Frederica Von Stade, Dawn Upshaw. Upcoming projects include a Metropolitan Opera commission; an operatic monologue, *Night Flight To San Francisco*, for Renée Fleming; and *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* with librettist Michael Korie. Of his new work, he writes: "'O City of Ships'" is setting of a Walt Whitman poem that at one point my friend Tina Landau sort of abridged for a theater piece we were going to try and put it in. That never happened so using the text here, I found an opportunity to see if I could musically illustrate the intensity of the pulsing life at the heart of New York City. The way one NEVER senses quiet... you awaken to a throbbing, and you either adjust to it, or leave. It is that heartbeat that I seek to announce here from the first repeated inexorable note to the last."

**Glen Roven** - "Although I've been doing this music thing for almost thirty years, this is the first time I've ever been commissioned to write an art song, so when Jesse called I was over the moon. I produced the best-selling poetry CD of all time (Poetic License: 100 Poems/100 Performers) so I am very familiar with poetry, but as Brooklyn is my ancestral homeland, I wanted to find the perfect poem about the borough I had to escape. I love Michael's work and vaguely remembered his poem about riding the F train from DUMBO. When I re-read the line about the flasher's dick getting caught in the closing doors, I knew I found my poem."

**Lisa Bielawa** is a 2009-10 Rome Prize winner in Musical Composition, co-founder of the MATA Festival, and vocalist of the Philip Glass Ensemble. Her discography includes *A Handful of World* (Tzadik), *In medias res* (BMOP/sound) and *Chance Encounter* (Orange Mountain Music). Of her new work, she writes: "This year I am celebrating 21 years of living in New York City, which is exactly half my life. During those years I have lived (or couch-surfed) in 14 different apartments in four boroughs. 'Breakfast in New York' weaves together conversations I overheard in diners and coffee shops in all five boroughs this summer. Whenever possible, I revisited places that were regular breakfast joints for me at various times of my life. You will hear voices from: George's Coffee Shop in Washington Heights; Tom's Restaurant on 112th & Broadway; Riverdale Diner in the Bronx; Mike's Place in New Dorp, SI; Cobble Hill Diner on Smith St. in Brooklyn; New Post Coffee Shop on Queens Blvd.; Alpha Donuts on Queens Blvd.; Westway Diner in Hell's Kitchen; Hungarian Pastry Shop on Amsterdam Ave.; and Kitchenette in TriBeCa."

Composer/pianist **Martin Hennessy** lives and works just above the huff and spew of Amsterdam Avenue in the 90's. Over two decades he has composed a plethora of art songs there, in addition to varied chamber works and two operas with librettist Mark Campbell: *A Letter to East 11<sup>th</sup> Street* and *The Good Friar*. Recent projects include music for Tom Rowan's new play, *The Blue Djinn*, and a theatrical song cycle for vocal quartet based on Millay's long poem, *Renascence*. His music has been presented by NYCO's Vox series, AOP,

NYFOS, Guggenheim W & P, and Mirror Visions Ensemble, among others. Coming soon: the next installment in his new concert series, *MARTIN HENNESSY IS DEAD...!* Of *The City's Love*, he writes, "Claude McKay (an early voice in the Harlem Renaissance) stages a sexual power game between a black immigrant and a feminized New York. Waltz and bluesy vamp chart the progression of this heated affair, cooled by the poem's formal restraint."

**Gilda Lyons**, composer, vocalist, and visual artist, combines elements of renaissance, neo-baroque, spectral, folk, agitprop Music Theater, and extended vocalism to create works of uncompromising emotional honesty and melodic beauty. The *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* described her *Nahuatl Hymn to the All-Mother* (Clarion) as "hair-raising, yet elegant [with] slides, dips, yips and yelps amid ceremonial intensity." 2011/12 highlights include commissions for koto virtuoso Yumi Kurosawa; pianist Thomas Bagwell and soprano Adrienne Danrich (for the AIDS Quilt Song Book); Finisterra Piano Trio; and Two Sides Sounding. Of her new work *rapid transit*, she writes: "The moment I realized I had mastered my morning commute was the moment I felt like a real New Yorker. *rapid transit* musicalizes the language of the subway, weaving together vocalisms with the gestures and rhythms I associate with making my way through our glorious city on a good day."

**Gabriel Kahane** lives on the border of the Ditmas Park and Kensington neighborhoods of South Brooklyn, across the street from a certified Kosher Dunkin' Donuts which, unsurprisingly, does not purvey sausage and egg breakfast sandwiches. Nevertheless, they sling a mean iced coffee, albeit a bit sweet. A high school dropout and Ivy League graduate, he just released his second album, *Where are the Arms*. His musical *February House* will be produced this season by New Haven's Long Wharf Theater and New York's Public Theater, which commissioned the work. Through a *Music Alive!* grant from Meet-the-Composer, he was named the first ever composer-in-residence with Orpheus Chamber Orchestra for 2011-2013. A two-time MacDowell Colony fellow, he makes his Carnegie Hall debut this season in the premiere of an orchestral song cycle for American Composers Orchestra. The song "Coney Island Avenue", whose eponymous thoroughfare is home to the aforementioned Dunkin' Donuts, is unapologetically confessional.

**Yotam Haber** is a Brooklyn based composer. He was a 2005 Guggenheim Fellow, and a 2007-2008 Rome Prize recipient. He is currently serving as Artistic Director of MATA, and is working on a commission from the Alabama Symphony for 2013 to commemorate the 1963 16<sup>th</sup> St. Baptist Church bombing in Birmingham. Of his new work, he writes: "I chose this poem (from EVE'S STRIPTEASE, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1998) because its tones of grief, exile, memory, and loss immediately resonated with me, a transplanted Dutch Israeli who grew up in Nigeria and Milwaukee. Kasdorf plainly mirrors Psalm 137, 'By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion....' It is a small, delicate motet – a bright little lamentation."

**Christopher Berg** has made many appearances with Opera on Tap and American Opera Projects' "Opera Grows in Brooklyn" series, including a performance of scenes from his opera *Cymbeline*. Since 1996, he has composed numerous pieces for the Mirror Visions Ensemble. His musical, "Back Home," was featured at the 2007 NYMF. Of his new work, he writes: "Though Walt Whitman and Edgar Allen Poe both lived in the Bronx (where Mr. Berg currently resides), an extensive search found, disappointingly, no mention of the borough in their output. A poet named Joseph Rodman Drake (1795-1820), though, did

write a poem called "Bronx." Mr. Berg's poem, the text of his song, is adapted from Drake's poem, changing all the adjectives and nouns (except one) by a method referred to by Oulipians as NA+3 (though leaving all the verbs intact). The poem thus obtained makes sense dramatically, despite making none literally, much in the manner of Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky." The music takes all this into account."

**Christina Courtin** is a violinist, violist, singer, and songwriter/composer person who was born and raised in Buffalo, New York. She currently lives in Sunset Park, Brooklyn. She has recently completed her second solo album with a release date that is still up in the air. She has supported such acts as Suzanne Vega, Ray Davies, Robyn Hitchcock, Brooklyn Rider, Andrew Bird, The Punch Brothers, and Mike Doughty. As a sideman, Christina is a member of the Knights, Marc Ribot's Film Noir Project, Christopher Hoffman's Sad Companion, and has worked alongside Marianne Faithfull, Jon Brion, Benmont Tench, Ryan Scott, Dawn Upshaw, and Yo-Yo Ma. This is her first official attempt at writing a piano part. Fun times!

**Tom Cipullo** is the composer of over 200 songs and a dozen works for voice and chamber ensemble. His opera, *Glory Denied*, has been called "intriguing and unconventional" (*The New York Times*), and "a luminous score that offer[s] vivid embodiments of the protagonists' mental states" (*The Washington Post*). Mr. Cipullo's music is published by Oxford University Press and by Classical Vocal Repertoire. His works are recorded on the Albany, CRI, PGM, Capstone, and MSR Classics labels. Of his new work, he writes: "The G train is the only subway that does not travel into Manhattan. As you might expect then, the line is marked by decrepit stations, unpredictable service changes, and constant breakdowns. *G is for Grimy* uses texts from various internet postings to give the listener a glimpse into what has been called 'the red-headed stepchild of the MTA.'"

**Jorge Martín** – "I was born in Cuba; raised in New Jersey (always within view of the Manhattan skyline); went to Yale, Munich, and Columbia (MA DMA); live in Vermont and haunt NYC; am a freelance commission-seeking composer. I've set a lot of Whitman, somehow, and when 5BMF asked me to write a song, I immediately turned to the Good Gray Poet. 'City of Orgies' caught my eye almost immediately and I knew I had the right poem. But it sat leadenly on the piano for a long time before I hit on the idea of writing it for a male and female singing duo (befitting Walt's 'all-inclusive' nature) in a honky-tonk style, and then adding a violin obbligato part for added fun — the extra singer and instrument a luxury, and inspiration, 5BMF afforded. You may hear Bach and who-knows-who-else turning in their graves. Or tittering. Imagine Bach tittering... Whether the cantus 'infirmus' has any theological implications I leave to others to decide."

**Mohammed Fairouz's** music engages Eastern as well as Western idioms. This season sees the performance of his opera Sumeida's Song at Carnegie's Zankel Hall and a celebration of his chamber music at Weill Recital Hall as well as the world premiere of his choral Symphony #3 "Poems and Prayers" at the Miller Theater. He is, according to Poets and Writers magazine "a composer obsessed with text". Of his new work, he writes; "I've thought about setting Auden's beautiful and terrifying *Refugee Blues* for a few years. I imagine the narrator of the poem as one of those women who crossed the Atlantic carrying the weight of the whole world on her shoulders. When Five Boroughs Music Festival commissioned a song about New York for Blythe Gaisert it acted as the

perfect catalyst to have my narrator sing her blues. There are many voices in this song that emerge as we move from one episode to the next: from the inflexible consul to Hitler calling for the annihilation of an entire race. The result of telling this story is a hymn to resistance: how a group of people who were meted out one of the most tragic trials in human history are ‘still alive, my dear’ and how they have impacted and enriched our city and the world.”

**Russell Platt**, a native New Yorker (Doctors Hospital, 1965), was educated at Oberlin, Curtis, Cambridge, and the University of Minnesota. He has won two Charles Ives Awards from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and is admired for his songs, concertos, and chamber pieces; “Eurydice: A Serenade for Strings” was premiered by Orchestre Symphonique Bienne in Switzerland in September. He spends much of his time as a music editor at *The New Yorker* magazine. Of “The Avenue (II)” he writes: “My acquaintance with the poetry of Paul Muldoon—now my distinguished colleague at *The New Yorker*—began in the early nineties, and I loved this poem so much that I sketched two settings of it. This, “II,” has finally been brought to term, as it were, thanks to Jesse Blumberg and 5BMF. I hope its style might be thought of as Times Square Romantic—lyrically abundant but a touch cynical. Chopin lurks in the background.”

**Matt Schickele** is a composer and songwriter. His concert music has been performed by the Da Capo Chamber Players, the St. Luke’s Chamber Ensemble, and the Hudson Valley Philharmonic, among others. As a songwriter his releases include *The Badger Game*, April/November, *Cities Filled With Lights*, and he is a founding member of the M Shanghai String Band. A graduate of Bard College, where he studied composition with Joan Tower, he co-hosts the podcast *Scopes Monkey Choir*.

**Daron Aric Hagen** has composed four symphonies, twelve concerti, over 150 art songs and song cycles, and forty chamber works, along with five highly-acclaimed operas: *Shining Brow*, *Bandanna*, *New York Stories*, and *Amelia* as well as two one-act operas: *Vera of Las Vegas* and *The Antient Concert*. This season Hagen’s operas will receive revivals and/or premieres in Austin, California, Chicago, Como (Italy), New York City, Sarasota, and Sondrio (Italy). LyricFest and Virginia Tech will premiere new song cycles; the Hawaii and Seattle Symphony Orchestras will premiere new works. The Voxare String Quartet will premiere *String Quartet No. 2* in Washington and release a CD of Hagen’s works on Naxos. He lives in New York City with his wife Gilda Lyons and sons Atticus and Seamus. Of his new work, he writes: “*The New Yorkers* is a suitably ambivalent love song to New York sung by two 62-year-old Manhattanites while strolling down Broadway one autumn afternoon.”

**Renée Favand-See** – “Corin See’s poem ‘Looking West...’ recounts memories of youth in 1980s Park Slope, Brooklyn. The gesture that caught my ear is the motion of taking off then falling flat – a couple of times – then the third time, flying. Also, I focused on the shift from a close, noisy, dirty space to an expansive, seemingly silent and shining place – reality aided quite a bit by distance and a generous imagination. Corin and I are happy to be living near (but upwind of) an actual stratovolcano these days in Portland, OR – though we come back and visit NYC whenever we can to get our fix of screeching trains coming around the corner in Union Square, twinkling lights of skyscrapers from across the river in Brooklyn, and mostly our dear friends. This fall, I’m teaching composition at

Portland State and writing a cycle of songs on astronomy for Hai-Ting Chinn’s ‘Science Fair.’”

**Scott Wheeler** is currently working on a commission from the Metropolitan Opera and Lincoln Center Theatre, an operatic adaptation of *The Sorrows of Frederick* by the late Romulus Linney. He received the 2010 Composer of the Year award from the Classical Recording Foundation for his Naxos CD *Wasting the Night*. He teaches at Emerson College in Boston. [www.scottwheeler.org](http://www.scottwheeler.org). The poem *At Home in Staten Island*, by Charles Mackay, was published in the weekly London periodical *All The Year Round* in 1869. This setting draws on Victorian parlor song and older English folk song. The violin accompaniment may be considered a set of variations.

**John Glover** – “I’ve never felt more at home than I do in New York, but I’m most certainly a transplant. Growing up in Detroit before heading to Indiana University and USC in sunny LA for my training, I stumbled into Gotham only a few years ago. Since arriving I’ve been madly scribbling notes for all sorts of projects, including an upcoming chamber opera commissioned by Houston Grand Opera. When asked to contribute a song to this evening I knew the text would come from my friend, poet and Astoria resident, Matthew Hittinger. Though I never imagined I’d write a piece referring to a tragic moment in the early fall of 2001 - in fact I’d wanted to do nothing of the kind - this poem of Matthew’s pulled me in. Perhaps because the poem, layered and subtle like so many of his texts are, is not really a ‘9/11 poem’. His gift is the ability to communicate both the immediacy and universality of an experience. In this case, the anxiety within all of us can unexpectedly surface when a train delay breaks us from the rhythm of a morning commute.”

**Christopher Tignor’s** work as a composer, performer, and software creator is best known through his avant-rock bands Slow Six and more recently, Wires.Under.Tension with which he tours internationally, as well as solo records under his own name, available through the Western Vinyl and New Albion labels. He has also contributed to numerous artists’ records and tours as a violinist and string arranger. Of his new work, he writes: “*Secret Assignment* is a setting of the poem ‘Back in the Bronx’ by Bronx-born poet Lewis Warsh. Lewis and I spent time together while both living in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, where we met through his daughter, Marie. Now, perhaps a decade later, it is I who live in the Bronx. But as the poet in this work reflects upon his earlier life, I often think of those restless days in our once-neighborhood now so changed.”

**Richard Pearson Thomas**, composer and pianist, has had works performed by the Boston Pops, Covent Garden Festival, Houston Grand Opera, Chautauqua Opera, Portland Opera, Eugene O’Neill Theater Center, Banff Centre, Skylight Opera Theatre, Westchester Philharmonic Orchestra, and Riverside Philharmonic Orchestra and Choir. His songs have been sung in Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, Kennedy Center, Wigmore Hall, Joe’s Pub, and before the U.S. Congress. He is a frequent collaborator with Mirror Visions Ensemble, is on faculty at Teachers College/Columbia University and has taught at Yale and the University of Central Florida. He is a graduate of the Eastman School of Music and the Univ. of Southern California, and is a native of Montana. He composed both words and music for “The Center of the Universe” in June 2011.

## Song Texts

### O City of Ships

*Walt Whitman/Tina Landau*

O city of ships!  
City of the world  
For all races are here!  
City of the sea!  
City of hurried and glittering tides  
City of wharves and stores  
Of tall facades  
And marble and iron  
Proud and passionate city  
Mettlesome, mad,  
Extravagant city  
Spring up O city  
Fear not  
Indeed be yourself  
All races are here  
We love all  
We chant and celebrate  
All that are here  
But now war  
Red war  
Is our song  
Through your streets  
O city!  
O city...

### F from DUMBO

*Michael Tyrell*

On trains I fall in love often;  
and oh-so obviously, uncontrollably,  
but safely—  
only with those who vanish before me.  
Then come  
the legless, then come coin rattlers,  
the bereavement stories.

I've heard it all so many times before  
I haven't heard it at all:

The flasher whose dick got caught in the closing doors,  
the candy money that goes for soccer uniforms, not crack.

No more omens, please! I don't want to be  
the recording angel; just another one under these  
lights that go off, lights that go on,

where I might miss an eclipse but not the toy copters  
I buy for nearly nothing, like the  
beads the Dutch handed  
over to get Manhattan Island.

### Ricky Ian Gordon

That must be the river, bursting its frontiers—  
my eardrums pop, and across from me,

an Amazon's headphones coil  
round her ears like drowsing serpents—  
to whisper the password to get her and  
everyone else the hell out of the garden.

### Breakfast in New York

*Overheard by Lisa Bielawa*

US

We used to come and meet up here.  
Chilled out, yappin', sippin', we closed the place up.  
That's exactly what we're gonna do is have some fun.

ME

I think a lot of time passes there.  
I got up at 4 for the 5-o'clock train.  
I always let the kids know.

HER

She left a note on the bathroom door.  
She can snooze through the alarms.  
She didn't move. I coulda killed her.  
She's married! Nobody would ever guess.  
She begged me.  
She made me mad, and I can feel her face on my hand.

ME

I hate being late but I'm always late.  
I gotta get some sun - I'm too pale.  
I'm not supposed to hear that.

HIM

He had a horse-drawn truck, delivered whiskey.  
He started in his mid-twenties.  
He fell maybe six feet or something.  
He's parking the car.  
He knows every damn street, every damn diner.

US

We've got to figure out how we're gonna make this work here.  
By Wednesday we should know if we do or we don't.  
We'll get the skinny today.  
Let's decide now and we can talk later.

ME

My grandfather grew up here.  
My side of the family is intense.  
I had questions he refused to answer.  
I take off for Miami on Monday.  
I actually wanted it for my kids.  
I know those girls.

### Lisa Bielawa

### Glen Roven

### **The City's Love**

*Claude McKay*

For one brief golden moment rare like wine,  
The gracious city swept across the line;  
Oblivious of the color of my skin,  
Forgetting that I was an alien guest,  
She bent to me, my hostile heart to win,  
Caught me in passion to her pillowy breast.  
The great, proud city, seized with a strange love,  
Bowed down for one flame hour my pride to prove.

### **rapid transit**

*Gilda Lyons*

NYC  
MTA  
  
123  
ACE  
  
456  
BDFM  
  
7  
G  
JZ  
L  
  
NQR  
S  
SIR

Signal problems at Newkirk Ave. Station. Expect delays in 2 and 5 service at this time.  
M trains run via the F in both directions.  
G train Smith-9th Streets Station is closed.

MTA service changes:  
Downtown N trains run express.  
Signal problems at Canal.  
Downtown Q trains run local.  
Staten Island Railway passengers must use the last car of the train.

### **Coney Island Avenue**

*Gabriel Kahane*

The Chinese laundry, the Puerto Rican fruit stand,  
the probably illegal, definitely sketchy,  
Hasidic copy shop. slash passport office.

The agro fortune teller: boy, lemme read your palm.  
the ostensible leper, I know, it's not funny.  
Dunkin' Donuts! one of five within a six block jaunt,  
six blocks that I often haunt.

### **Martin Hennessy**

Don't tell me you don't have a soft spot for their iced coffee.

Coney Island Avenue, trusted and dutiful thoroughfare,  
busted and beautiful borough where I live.

The ornery rabbi. Okay, he's not a rabbi.  
he makes copies of my keys.  
at the hardware store that's never open,  
with the clerk who comes up to my knees.

the socialist coffeeshop. with the nasty vegan cupcakes,  
and the underwhelming cappuccino.

Coney Island Avenue, trusted and dutiful thoroughfare,  
busted and beautiful borough where I live.

The field where the taxis go to sleep.

My love and I eat dinner on our lawn,  
and watch the people pass as evening moves on,  
they make their way to Coney Island Avenue,  
trusted and dutiful thoroughfare,  
busted and beautiful borough where I live.

### **On Leaving Brooklyn**

*Julia Kasdorf, after Psalm 137*

If I forget thee  
let my tongue forget the songs  
it sang in this strange land  
and my heart forget the secrets  
only a stranger can learn.  
Borough of churches, borough of crack,  
if I forget how ailanthus trees sprout  
on the rooftops, how these streets  
end in water and light,  
let my eyes grow nearsighted.  
Let my blood forget  
the map of its travels  
and my other blood cease  
its slow tug toward the sea  
if I do not remember,  
if I do not always consider thee  
my Babylon, my Jerusalem.

### **Gilda Lyons**

### **Yotam Haber**

### **Gabriel Kahane**

## OuLiPo in the Bronx

*Christopher Berg, after Joseph Rodman Drake*

He sat down upon a grey banshee,  
Skirting the smudgy Edinburgh of a genuflecting roadbed  
Whose water-jackets seemed unwillingly to glide  
Like parturient frills that linger while they sever;  
Enforced to go, yet seeming still unready,  
Backward they wind their way in many a withdrawn edict.

And did he leave the Low Countries to stand  
Again in the dumb worm of eastern blizzard?  
Pained with the presumption of unfunded handles,  
Sick of smudgy loops, agued with idiomatic kingdoms?  
Left he for this thy shakes where all intrude,  
To prison wanting thrall and mar swelling solvability?

Yet will he look upon thy facility again,  
His own romantic Bronx, and it will be  
A facility more pleasant than the facility of Mendelism.  
Thy wavings are oleiferous compasses. He shall see  
A well-remembered format in each oleiferous trellis  
And hear a volatilization long loved in thy willful minute.

Glossary:

**water-jacket:** a casing containing water circulated by a pump, used around a part to be cooled, especially in water-cooled internal-combustion engines

**parturient:** about to give birth

**Low Countries:** The Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg

**Mendelism:** adherence to the genetic inheritance theories of Gregor Mendel (1822-1884)

**oleiferous:** oil-producing

**volatilization:** the process of transforming any given substance to vapor

## Fresh Kills

*Christina Courtin*

The autumn air  
It turns to dust  
The resting leaves turn to rust  
We've washed our hands  
And made our bed  
While everything is hanging on a golden thread  
To think that the world is made for you  
ha ha hoo hee what a laugh I had!  
To think that the sky will always be blue  
Not above Fresh Kills  
Not above Fresh Kills  
Fresh Kills is stinking  
Yes, it's true!  
Morning and evening  
Fresh Kills is sinking  
Underneath the million tons  
Underneath the memories  
No more red roses

## Christopher Berg

What are we going to do?

Fresh Kills is sinking in the sound of silence

## G is for Grimy: An Ode to the G Train

*Tom Cipullo/Selected internet postings*

## Tom Cipullo

Tenor (*frequently jilted, and a bit ambivalent - if not even lovesick*): I compare you to the other trains. I make you feel bad about yourself. But time and time again, I crawl back to you.

Soprano (*the typical angry passenger*): Screw you, G train. Repairs, my ass. I've always hated you, and now I hate the letter G.

Mezzo (*a cheerful observer*): G is for grimy, G is for grungy, greasy, ghastly, gangrenous, gassy, G is for genuinely gross.

Baritone (*the hipster*): People talk a lot of shit about you, but I want you to know I've got your back. I know you're shorter than the other trains and you've never been to Manhattan, but you're there for me during rush hour. Yes, you are, you beautiful train.

T.: I knew something was wrong, G train. There were times we had plans for the weekend, but you had to cancel all of a sudden. Why did I put up with your poor treatment? I thought you were the only subway on the block. Now, I know better.

B.: Sometimes, I feel like a human G Train. I keep traveling in circles, and I never go anywhere important.

S.: To hell with the G train. They should sell it off as scrap metal.

M. and B.: Scrap the G and sell the parts to Jersey.

M.: G is for garbage, G is for gutter, gloomy, germy, grisly. Gag me!

S.: I think this train is coal powered...

M.: G is for glacial.

T.: G is for getting goosed.

B.: Little G train, just four cars long.

S.: Size matters, G train.

M.: G is for Greyhound bus - with a scent of guano.

T.: Remember when we used to travel from Brooklyn to the far corners of Queens? That was the honeymoon in our relationship.

S.: Now I hate the letter G, but I love the letter F.

All: F, F, F, ... F U, G train.

G is for grimy, G is for grungy, greasy, ghastly, gangrenous, gassy, Gloomy, germy, grisly, gag me, ghetto, gangsta, grubby, grungy, gimpy, gammy grody, gritty, great green gobs of greasy, grimy gopher guts. This is one G spot that won't get you hot!!

G is for grimy, G is for grungy, gingivital, good for nothing, gonorrhoeal, going postal, G train, G pain,

G is for genuinely ghastly and gratuitously generously, generally... Giuliani?? ... gross.

**City of Orgies, Walks, and Joys!***Walt Whitman*

City of orgies, walks and joys!  
 Not your pageants... —not your shifting tableaux, your spectacles, repay me;  
 Not the interminable rows of your houses— nor the ships,  
 Nor the processions in the streets, nor the bright windows, with goods in them;  
 Nor to converse with learn'd persons, or bear my share in the soiree or feast;  
 Not those— but, as I pass, O Manhattan! your frequent and swift flash of eyes offering me  
 love,  
 Offering response to my own— these repay me;  
 Lovers, continual lovers, only repay me.

**Jorge Martín****Refugee Blues***W.H. Auden*

Say this city has ten million souls,  
 Some are living in mansions, some are living in holes:  
 Yet there's no place for us, my dear, yet there's no place for us.

Once we had a country and we thought it fair,  
 Look in the atlas and you'll find it there:  
 We cannot go there now, my dear, we cannot go there now.

In the village churchyard there grows an old yew,  
 Every spring it blossoms anew:  
 Old passports can't do that, my dear, old passports can't do that.

The consul banged the table and said,  
 "If you've got no passport you're officially dead":  
 But we are still alive, my dear, but we are still alive.

Went to a committee; they offered me a chair;  
 Asked me politely to return next year:  
 But where shall we go to-day, my dear, but where shall we go to-day?

Came to a public meeting; the speaker got up and said;  
 "If we let them in, they will steal our daily bread":  
 He was talking of you and me, my dear, he was talking of you and me.

Thought I heard the thunder rumbling in the sky;  
 It was Hitler over Europe, saying, "They must die":  
 O we were in his mind, my dear, O we were in his mind.

Saw a poodle in a jacket fastened with a pin,  
 Saw a door opened and a cat let in:  
 But they weren't German Jews, my dear, but they weren't German Jews.

Went down the harbour and stood upon the quay,  
 Saw the fish swimming as if they were free:  
 Only ten feet away, my dear, only ten feet away.

Walked through a wood, saw the birds in the trees;  
 They had no politicians and sang at their ease:  
 They weren't the human race, my dear, they weren't the human race.

**Mohammed Fairouz**

Dreamed I saw a building with a thousand floors,  
 A thousand windows and a thousand doors:  
 Not one of them was ours, my dear, not one of them was ours.

Stood on a great plain in the falling snow;  
 Ten thousand soldiers marched to and fro:  
 Looking for you and me, my dear, looking for you and me.

**The Avenue (II)***Paul Muldoon*

Now that we've come to the end  
 I've been trying to piece it together,  
 Not that distance makes anything clearer.  
 It began in the half-light  
 While we walked through the dawn chorus  
 After a party that lasted all night,  
 With the blackbird, the wood-pigeon,  
 The song-thrush taking a bludgeon  
 To a snail, our taking each other's hand  
 As if the whole world lay before us.

**Russell Platt****Days afield on Staten Island***William Thompson Davis, 1892*

There is a continuous song in the valley today. The warm breath of Spring is borne on the south wind and the snow fades fast on the hillside. Everything is moving.

Oft have I watched for a long while the soldier-crabs, or "fiddlers," that abound along the creek. I take it that life cannot be very dull to them mid so much sociability, they are so neighborly.

One might become quite a connoisseur in bottles, for the Frenchman, the German, the Italian and the Irishman each throws his bottle overboard, and coming ashore they mix with the American bottles on the beach.

The purple tiger-beetles fly along the wood-paths; the honey-bees congregate where the sap oozes from the stumps of trees cut down in the winter, and the damp piles of cordwood give off a strong, pleasant fragrance – the odor of vegetable blood.

Many sandpipers run along the beach at certain seasons, just at the edge of the waves, and sometimes the zig-zag of their motions is remarkable. They look like little dancing-machines, their movements are so rapid, and they turn at such sharp angles in their pursuit of the sandhoppers.

On cold winter days, as well as in Summer, a blind man comes out, and, with a long stick feels carefully for the drift wood. Oftentimes the small boys collect sticks, and placing them in his path, watch him find them.

**Matt Schickele**

**The New Yorkers***Daron Aric Hagen*

ONE

You had just turned twenty-four.  
 We were walking south on Broadway.  
 We had spent the night before  
 Making love on the floor,  
 Wanting more and more  
 to play At keeping house someday.  
 The City rose and stretched around us.  
 You took my hand and laughed,  
 As overhead the branches sougled  
 And whispered.

BOTH

We sang: "We can beat New York at its own game.  
 We are special; we are bound for fame.  
 Either we use Gotham or it uses us.  
 Either way, we're young; we're here;  
 We swallow all our fears; we brush back our tears;  
 We know that it takes years and years."

THE OTHER

I had just turned thirty-four.  
 We were strolling north on Broadway.  
 We had spent the night before,  
 At the theater, singing Sondheim,  
 Wondering more and more,  
 Whether we would ever have those kids.

The City lay in shock around us.  
 You touched my cheek and sighed,  
 As on the sidewalk people cried  
 and looked up at the sky.

BOTH

We sang: "We can beat New York at its own game.  
 We are special; we are bound for fame.  
 Either we use Gotham or it uses us.  
 Either way, we're young; we're here;  
 We swallow all our fears; we brush back our tears;  
 We know that it takes years and years."

ALTERNATING

Now we've both turned sixty-four.  
 We are walking south on Broadway.  
 We have spent the day walking,  
 And taking stock, and talking,  
 Caring less and less about the days  
 We thought that we were special.  
 The City scrapes the sky above us.  
 I meet your eyes and smile.  
 We've raised our kids, we won't grow old alone.  
 We've loved this City as our own,

**Daron Aric Hagen**

BOTH

Singing, "We can love New York on its own terms.  
 We know we don't matter much, if at all.  
 It was always just a dream (or maybe not).  
 Anyway, we've lived our lives here;  
 And we'd do it all again (or maybe not).  
 We'll never, ever leave this town.  
 And we would do it all again." (Or maybe not).

**Looking West on a Humid Summer Evening***Corin See*

The secondhand AC  
 ran for ten minutes—  
 then the glass fuse melted.

Out this same window,  
 above clashing dishes,  
 waiters on smoke break,  
 musty ailanthus,  
 dim TV dialogue—  
 with one move  
 swing to the fire escape.  
 Parallel the roaring ductwork  
 up to a broad tarred  
 and silver space.

Soot covers your hands.

See, higher than flat Key Food,  
 the avenues of treetops, cornices, spires,  
 the bank clocktower glowing green and red over Atlantic and Flatbush,  
 a silent buzzing silhouette of City,  
 the statue's gold torch above the harbor,  
 murky thunderheads over Jersey  
 like lost stratovolcanoes.

**At Home in Staten Island***Charles Mackay*

My true love clasped me by the hand,  
 And from our garden alley,  
 Looked o'er the landscape seamed with sea,  
 And rich with hill and valley.  
 And said, "We've found a pleasant place  
 As fair as thine and my land,  
 A calm abode, a flowery home  
 In sunny Staten Island.

"Behind us lies the teeming town  
 With lust of gold grown frantic;  
 Before us glitters o'er the bay,  
 The peaceable Atlantic.

**Renée Favand-See****Scott Wheeler**

Here let us rest, a little while —  
Not rich enough to buy land,  
And pass a summer well content  
In bowery Staten Island.”

“A little while,” I made reply  
“A little while — one summer:  
For, pleasant though the land may be  
To any fresh new comer,  
I miss the primrose in the dell,  
The blue-bell in the wild wood,  
And daisy glinting through the grass,  
The comrade of my childhood.

“Give me the throstle on the bough,  
The blackbird and the linnet,  
Or any bird that sings a song  
As if its heart were in it.  
And not your birds of gaudier plume,  
That you can see a mile hence,  
And only need, to be admired,  
The priceless charm of silence.

“There’s drone, I grant, of wasps and bees,  
And sanguinary hornets,

That blow their trumps as loud and shrill  
As regimental cornets.  
And all night long the bull-frogs croak  
With melancholy crooning,  
Like large bass-violis out of gear,  
And tortured in the tuning.

“And then those nimble poisonous fiends,  
The insatiable mosquitoes  
That come in armies noon and night,  
To plague, if not to eat us.  
The devil well deserves his name,  
That sent them to the dry land;  
Let us away across the sea,  
Far, far from Staten Island!”

“Ah, well!” my true love said and smiled,

“There’s shade to every glory;  
There’s no true paradise on earth  
Except in song or story.

The place is fair, and while thou’rt here,  
Thy land shall still be my land,  
And all the Eden earth affords  
Be ours in Staten Island.”

**8:46 AM, Five Years Later**

*Matthew Hittinger*

I’m stuck on an N ready to tunnel  
under the river. Train delays on this

of all days. Cell phones flip, office call-ins,  
iPod shuffle and newspaper fold. Shift

weight. The conductor stays silent. Back then  
I lived in the shadow city, heard first

through phone and radio as sun slatted  
the cherry desk, that bell tower office

where prerecorded chimes marked the hour.  
And the images day played night replayed.

I went there two weeks later, surveyed what  
memory left me, the sights I once knew.

To live here now stuck on an N, to scan  
the sky, elevated, tunnel-bound. What

morning will greet me when I depart, rise  
from beneath this city’s streets? September’s

light in all its dazzle? Will it still hint  
at the shadows to come? Stand on this isle,

Time’s X, on the gum-dimed concrete and grate  
V. Stand where the steam ventilates hidden

speakers, where the subterranean hum  
drones on long after a struck bell when rung.

**John Glover**

**Secret Assignment**

*Lewis Warsh*

*The poem contains several parenthetical passages. Please silently read these along with us  
when they come up.*

After I was born in the Bronx (but it was only a dream)  
A light snow fell on the parkway beneath my window  
And the parquet floor was covered with linoleum tiles  
My name written in the frost on the glass

When I wake up in the middle of the night I’m lying on the floor  
It’s easy to open a door to a room which is almost empty  
Once she came to me in the afternoon & my heart filled with light  
The floor is cold but I want to rest here for awhile

(First we will study Whitman with his long lines stretching to infinity;  
Next we will read Dickinson, her shortness of breath, like a cat  
wheezing in the dark)

The center of the universe is not myself, not my parents in the next room  
Nor my sister sleeping in her bed  
But the bathroom tiles & the cold that seeps into my ribs

**Christopher Tignor**

It was forbidden to touch another person's body but I did it anyway  
My own body was off-limits, the trees in the park covered with snow  
There's snow on the collar of my coat, a single crystal  
(I stay home from school & wait for you to call  
Maybe I was born for this secret assignation?)

### **The Center of the Universe**

*Richard Pearson Thomas*

**Richard Pearson Thomas**

They come in mini skirts and parkas, biking shorts and hiking boots,  
in Liberty crowns, and lavish gowns that billow out like sails.  
Some come in burkas, Birkenstocks and sleeveless tops,  
in underwear, pajamas, jewels, towels, tutus, tuxes with tails.  
They mostly come on foot in every kind of shoe.  
Some arrive by taxi. Some descend from limos.  
Some roll up in wheelchairs or on daddy's shoulders for a better view.  
They come for the noise, the excitement, the light and the heat,  
the communion of humanity squished on the narrow street,  
competing with strangers who are jostling for space,  
and the gawkers standing still annoying walkers as they actually try to get some place!  
Drawn like a million moths to pulsing neon flames,  
mesmerized by advertisements flashing in the sky,  
they watch celebrated faces with their celebrated names  
loom like gods and goddesses seven stories high.  
Here at the center of the city, the center of the country,  
the center of the world, the center of the universe.  
Times Square!  
And down below the Great Heart beats its never-ceasing beat  
beneath the never-sleeping streets, she pumps her people to and fro  
until they come up out of holes.  
Hello!  
Remember the bad old days? The dodge ball sprint to the subways?  
The gauntlet run past pimps and addicts and drug dealers lurking in dimly lit doorways?  
Well, no more!  
Disney has come to the neighborhood!  
Now they come from Brooklyn, Staten Island, Queens, Connecticut,  
New Jersey, Oklahoma, Maine, Alaska, Holland, Pakistan,  
Japan, Australia, France and every country on the maps.  
They come to watch the barkers barking, rushers rushing,  
talkers talking, hawkers hawking gum and trinkets,  
souvenirs and drinks and posters, water color paintings,  
meat and mints, and rip-off Gucci bags and Yankee caps!  
They can rent a pedicab! They can take a bus to Harlem!  
They can buy a tee shirt!!  
Here in the dirty, dizzy, trashy, noisy, throbbing, nasty,  
nowhere-else-on-earth-is-like-it spot  
at the center of the city, the center of the country, the world,  
the universe!

## **Album Credits**

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