TIMOTHY KERCHER
Segue is published once a year in August. We accept submissions of high quality fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction between January 1 and April 30 (closed May through December), and writing about writing year-round via email. Before submitting, please read past issues to understand the sort of work we publish, then read our submission guidelines.

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Gemini

I’m happy the stars aren’t howling tonight—afraid
my wife might be carrying Remus and Romulus in her belly.
I can’t take cold medicine! she screams after sneezing,
after ten thousand babies kick inside her, all ancient Rome’s
possible offspring dancing. O, Feral children! She cradles
the brunt of her belly that is growling like a she-wolf.
She would rather be on Turkey’s Turquoise Coast this moment
without me. But I tell her she is going to be a mother
to a city! How does a city bask on a beach
with babies? she asks. A beach is a knife, a gun, I say,
though I’m already thinking about grapefruits
and their pink insides, the way the juice glows
when I squeeze. If these babies were poems, she offers
as I do the math in my head—first there was a trinity,
but one has been subtracted (did it subtract itself?)
and now there are two, like Cain and Abel,
like the Iroquois right and left handed brothers—¡Dios mío!
Did I say the stars weren’t howling? They are,
all of their tiny, distant voices. I saw Baby A wave
to me (I was looking at the machine while my wife was not)
as the doctor probed her with a wand. I saw Baby B’s heart pulse
like a tiny nova; I’m now convinced our progeny are constellations:
Castor and Pollux dancing in the sky of a belly, dancing on a screen
in placentas, dancing with the Milky Way, dancing
in a fold belonging to my wife, dancing with a million twinkling heads
of stolen cattle, not dancing in a city but a universe that is growing, growing.
Balance

The month of indecision has come and gone,
going home has been put off again;
new life at the beginning now is growing, dying.

The day I first learned I’d be a father I thought
of the long line of my wife’s family passing, our three
embryos somehow sent for balance—three blessings

for three losses since we’ve been away. When I was ten
I said the three babies my mom was growing
were to make up for the two she lost. Life begins

in the death of others, hope returns when all is gone.
But then one of three has not developed, leaving us
with only two; does this knock my faith’s

balance off-kilter? Does this bowl over my sense
of order? Balance, balance, I sing to myself, balance
becomes my mantra: life balance, death balance.
Rain in Paradise

I was reading Paradise Lost when my wife called from our bed; I dropped my book and went wondering if something was wrong in the bucket of her belly—

upon entering, there were spots on the sheet which I took for blood or her water breaking—

in that moment, the sky fell, our two or three babies expelled from Eden,

until I realized it wasn’t her leaking but our light fixture leaking water—

I put my raincoat on, went outside, but couldn’t reach the roof.

I got soaked in a fruitless effort to find anything to bridge the twelve-foot gap—

I could have tried propping up a wooden bench, or climbing the brick and rock that line our home, but was feeling too old for that. God was resting when
I put the book down,
and I was relieved as I took
the light fixture off, relieved
our act of creation was still
creating. But this relief did not
relieve the rain, did not save
the bed for us that night; Allison
resting on the couch,

me wide awake in our spare room,
and the outside rain
filling a bucket.
Author Notes

Originally from Colorado, Timothy now lives in Kyiv, Ukraine after living in the Republic of Georgia for the past four years, where he has been editing and translating an anthology of contemporary Georgian poetry. His manuscript Nobody’s Odyssey was recently selected as a finalist for the John Ciardi Prize for Poetry, and his translation of Besik Kharanauli’s long poem, “The Lame Doll,” is set to be published in the Republic of Georgia next year. His poems and translations have appeared or are forthcoming in a number of recent literary publications, including Crazyhorse, upstreet, Versal, The Minnesota Review, Atlanta Review, The Dirty Goat, Poetry International Journal, Los Angeles Review, and others.

About the Work

All three of these poems were precipitated by one event: finding out my wife was pregnant with twins (actually, at first, they were triplets, but one absorbed). This was a wild time in my (our) lives—we had already decided to move from the Republic of Georgia to the Ukraine, but didn’t know what this revelation meant to our plans. I’ve never had a single event change what I write about so much—every poem I was writing, it seems like, became an examination of this topic, and these three certainly belong in that category.

“Balance,” perhaps, of all of them, was the most intentional. I was writing to a chapbook manuscript that included a group of poems about my wife’s family members who had passed away (each year she lost someone important to her: aunt, father, grandmother, grandfather, and step father, in five successive years), and another group of poems about my having grown up with triplet little brothers, and another group of poems about our twin revelation (and the loss/disappearance of one of the three). In my mind, these three groups of poems are intimately connected—my mom tells the story that when she became pregnant with my triplet brothers (I was ten at the time), and this was after she just lost a baby, and had lost another before I was born—that I told her this was God’s way of making up for those two losses. Also, when we found out that our third embryo did not develop a heartbeat (even though very normal for pregnancies with multiples), it was not easy to take—having grown up with triplet brothers, I maybe identified our own three too much with my little brothers. I wanted to use all these ideas somehow in a poem—to make a poem that all these ideas hinge upon, which would be important in unifying The Trinity Cycles chapbook thematically. It took a long time to get this one right.

“Gemini” was written in the same timeframe, but I wasn’t writing specifically for the manuscript. I wrote this from an exercise I made for my students combining a couple of ideas given to me by my professor Richard Jackson, from an essay I wrote examining what makes Ilya Kaminsky’s poetry work, an exercise called “20 Little Poetry Projects” from Robin Behn’s The Practice of Poetry, and then I added some of my own ideas, like “relate a personal experience to classical mythology.” I called it the Kercher Poem Poetry Idea, and have given it to my students for several years if they want an A in the poetry unit. Really, this exercise is meant to take the writer to a place he doesn’t expect to go. I’ve written this exercise countless times with my classes, but this one in particular came out better than most, I think. And, as everything I wrote during this period (and to some extent, even now), the subject of the poem ended up being my wife’s pregnancy with our twin girls.
“Rain in Paradise” was written, as happens in the poem, right after a rainstorm. We lived in a home on the outskirts of Tbilisi, a beautiful stone house that was poorly put together, and a light fixture above my wife who was reading on the bed began leaking. As the poem records, I was reading Paradise Lost at the time, and when I wrote the poem, my anxiety from thinking my wife was bleeding/had a miscarriage combined with Milton on the mind produced the poem.

I find it striking how good a subject for poetry birth and fatherhood are. I staved off having kids for as long as I could, having spent my teenage years helping raise my identical triplet younger brothers. But, oh, what an experience children are! I like what one of the poets I translate, Zviad Ratiani, has to say as to how he looks at poetry: “I write in order to understand my life,” and even though I’ve been writing a lot about birth and children, many of the poems end up staring squarely in the face of my own mortality. I think all three of these poems do this. I like HOW Galway Kinnell how remarked in an interview for NPR, “Mortality makes everything worth more to us,” and maybe these poems are an exploration of mortality in light of having children. Poetry to me is expression, revelation—it’s the process of making sense, and I’m still trying to make sense of the experience of fatherhood.

Timothy Kercher on the Web

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