

C. Dale Young

C. Dale Young practices medicine full-time, serves as Poetry Editor of the *New England Review*, and teaches in the Warren Wilson College MFA Program for Writers. He is the author of *The Day Underneath the Day* (TriQuarterlyBooks, 2001), *The Second Person* (Four Way Books, 2007), and he is currently completing a third book manuscript of poems titled *TORN* (Four Way Books, 2012). He is a previous winner of the Grolier Prize, the Tennessee Williams Scholarship in Poetry from the Sewanee Writers' Conference, and the Stanley P. Young Fellowship in Poetry from the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference. Young has taught at several writers' conferences, including the Catskill Poetry Workshops and the Napa Valley Writers' Conference. His poems have appeared in many anthologies and magazines, including *The Best American Poetry*, *Asian American Poetry: The Next Generation*, *Legitimate Dangers: American Poets of the New Century*, *The New Republic*, *The Paris Review*, *Ploughshares*, and *Poetry*. He lives in San Francisco with the biologist and composer, Jacob Bertrand.

Brooke Hardy

Brooke Hardy is a graduate student at the University of West Florida where she is an editor of *Panhandler* and teaches English composition. She is also the president of the UWF chapter of Sigma Tau Delta, the English honor society.

Doug Moon

Doug Moon is a graduate student at the University of West Florida where he is an editor of *Panhandler* and teaches English composition. His thesis, a cycle of short stories, is forever forthcoming.

interview

Doug Moon: Thanks for letting us interview you and for reading to-night.

Brooke Hardy: So I guess I have a really introductory question to ask you. What was your introduction to poetry, and can you remember the first poem that you either read or that you wrote?

C. Dale Young: I don't know if I can remember the first poem I read. My mother's a literature teacher. So I've been around poems for a long time. She used to teach British romantics. I guess the earliest poem I can remember is "Kubla Kahn" by Coleridge because she used to read it to me and my younger sister to get us to fall asleep. I think I can probably even recite the opening lines of "Kubla Kahn": "In Xanadu did Kubla Khan / A stately pleasure-dome de-

cree: / Where Alph, the sacred river, ran / Through caverns measureless to man / Down to a sunless sea." So I don't really remember reading one poem and being like, "Oh my god, *poetry*." I kind of always have been around poetry. I guess all my brothers and sisters, really, but none of them are poets or writers. I'm the only one. [laughs]

DM: So was there a gradual point where poetry started to interest you toward where you wanted to be a poet?

CDY: It's kind of a serendipitous thing. I can definitely tell you the first time I was blown away by a poem. I was a junior in high school and we had to take English Lit. I think it was American Lit, then English Lit, then World Lit, or something like that. I actually had a teacher—and

I'm not making this up—her name was Kathy Doody. So she was Miss Doody. And Miss Doody had us all assigned various writers and once a week you would have to come in and do a little presentation on the writer. She usually required that you memorized either the opening of a story, if it was a fiction writer or a novel or something, or a poem. I was assigned W. B. Yeats, and I'd never read anything by W. B. Yeats. I still joke with people all the time that for me—for many poets, there's *the one*, the one poem that they read and they might not even understand it, but it just blows them away, and for me it was Yeats's "The Second Coming." I read that poem, and I'd heard poems like I was telling you, most of my life, but I read that poem and I was stunned. I was just struck dumb. I didn't even understand what the poem was about, but

there was something about it that was mesmerizing. And when I knew that it wasn't just me that I went in to do my little spiel on Yeats, etc., and talked about Ireland, etc., and I had memorized the poem and stood there and recited the poem, and what struck me was that everyone in the room was rapt by the poem. And I thought, "Wow, wouldn't it be amazing in your life to be able to do something that would have that effect?" I didn't even think I actually thought I would be writing poems, but I remember being completely stunned by that.

When I went to college, I started out in studio art, so I was actually a painting student, and how I ended up writing poems is that I got kind of drafted into working for the literary magazine as one of the art editors.

Because they had tons of editors but they all did poetry, fiction, etc. I was drafted into doing this by someone a year ahead of me. There weren't that many painting students at Boston College. Week after week after week after week after week, we would have these editorial meetings, and it was always sitting there listening to them talking about poems and stories, poems and stories, many, many more poems than stories. A lot of the people on the editorial board were pretty good poets, or at least I thought they were good poets at the time. They were all talking about how they were going to take such and such poetry workshop, so I decided that I wanted to take this workshop, too. So I went to the teacher and she said, "Well you can't take the workshop because

you haven't taken any of the prerequisites. You haven't taken Intro to Creative Writing. You haven't even taken Beginning Poetry Writing. This is a senior-level creative writing class." So I went back the next day again, and I was like, "I really want to take this class." I basically went to her office every day for about a week, and she broke down and said, "Fine, on Monday bring me ten poems. I don't know if I'll let you in the class, but if you get in the class and you get a C, don't complain to me." Getting a C at Boston College is like failing out of college. I left there all excited, but I had no poems because I'd never written any poems. So I went back to my room and over the weekend I wrote these

"I guess the earliest poem I can remember is 'Kubla Kahn' by Coleridge because she used to read it to me and my younger sister to get us to fall asleep."

ten godawful poems. I turned them in, and she said, "Fine, you can take the class." I've never stopped writing poems since then. But that's why I say it's kind of serendipitous because if I weren't working at this magazine, I would never have met these people who wrote poems, and I would have never thought that that was something I could do, or even try to do. So I hope that answers your question.

BH: Yes, that actually does. Completely. This moves on to a different area: in reading your poems, they often deal with corporeality in relation to our inability to capture an essential way of classifying the body, especially in its parts. In your line of work as a doctor, however, that seems to rely upon a specific system

of knowing the body. How do these things reconcile?

CDY: I don't think they do. I don't think of poetry in terms of medicine. I don't think of medicine in terms of poetry. There aren't that many doctor-poets out there in the country, but I know certain ones really see a link, and I think they exploit that link. But I actually don't. That's both the truth and also a lie. There are aspects of both that are similar. Both involve listening or observing things and trying to put them together in a way that is meaningful for someone else. I'm not sure that I understand the question completely because are you asking about the language of naming?

DM: In *The Second Person*, there's the poem "Invective." The speaker is faced with this quandary that there

doesn't seem to be an intersection that the speaker can identify between the two. So I guess we were wondering if that is something essential in your poetry, whether or not there is an intersection between the two.

CDY: I don't think I probably think of it that way. I think it ends up in the poems because parts of you end up in yours poems. But I never sit down to write and think directly about medicine. I actually, when I first started writing, I did everything not to write about medicine. The irony is there's a poem in my first book that everyone assumes I wrote when I was in medical school. I think it's the second poem in the book. It's "Complaint of the Medical Illustrator." I wrote that poem

six years before I went to medical school. I started it six years before I went to medical school. People assume because of the subject matter that I must have written it as a freshman medical student studying anatomy or something like that. But I didn't. I think though that, again, I was saying it's hard to keep your life out of your poems even when they're not autobiographical. At this point, I have been a physician for a decade. I spend the vast majority of my time on this earth being a physician, which is kind of interesting because I have a lot of friends who are in literature and poetry and writing and things, and I don't think many of them actually believe I'm a physician. I think they think I play one on TV or something. Then I have people in medicine who have no idea that I write at all. It's not that I'm purposefully trying to be schizophrenic or to keep them apart. It's just that, for me, the only thing that puts them together, even though it sounds narcissistic, is the fact that I do them. I don't really sit down and think of them as interconnected or intertwined.

DM: Is that an obstacle you've ever faced when you're submitting poetry and people have this expectation, "Oh, he's a doctor/poet, I'm going to read some doctor poetry"?

CDY: I don't know. I don't think until recently most people would know enough about me or my work to have that expectation. I don't know if that's true now and I'm just not aware of it. I meet people all the time who have no idea that I'm a physician. So I don't know about that. Maybe. [laughs] I'd have to ask some poetry editors out there. The thing about it is that at this point I don't feel particularly old, but I

started writing and publishing poems in 1993. I have the tendency to feel like that was a few years ago. But then I stop and start doing the counting and, wait a minute, that was 15 years ago. It's hard for me to tell how much people actually know about me. Though I guess some people do. [laughs]

DM: In *The Second Person* there seems, as I was reading it, there's a series of related images throughout the sections. For example, the Pacific and weather imagery in the first section, and the second section has more medically inclined images, anatomy and parts. Do your poems typically begin with an idea or an image and these become the prompts for discussion in the poem?

CDY: I have a messed up way of writing. I didn't know it was a messed up way of writing until I started talking to other people about writing. Actually I've had other poets when I talk about my process, they couldn't imagine writing a poem like that. I almost always know the last line. That's usually the first thing that I have. It's not usually even image-related, it's usually the last line because I have two things in my head, and I can't really make sense of the two things at the same time. As I think about it, I come up with, almost invariably, I'd say 98-99% of the time, is the last line of the poem. Once I have the last line it could be a long time before I come up with the first line, and for me the excitement or the joy of writing the poem is to figure out, "How do I get from point A to point Z?" I know the first line. I know the last line. What has to happen in between? I have friends who, they have the title, then they just write the poem. I would probably keel over and die tomorrow if

I woke up and knew the title of my poem. The title of my poem usually comes long after the poem has been drafted, revised, revised, revised, has several fake titles. I can't think of many times writing poems where I just knew the title. That's pretty unusual. To go back to what I was saying, sometimes people think that just doesn't sound tenable to writing. I had a friend who said she could never write a poem like that because she would feel like the poem was already solved. If you knew the last line, what was the point of writing the poem? But then it goes back to that thing I was saying that for me the excitement is getting from the first to the last line. When I write short stories, it's the total opposite. I never know how the story ends. I never know what the last sentence is. I usually end up coming up with the first sentence and I just start writing. I kind of discover the story as I go along. It's a completely different experience. I have no idea why my brain is wired that way. I don't know why it has such a difference. I would expect for them to be similar but for me they're not similar at all.

DM: So that's the composition of individual poems, but I was wondering about the work as a whole. *The Second Person* is organized according to the four sections. I noticed the last poem in the first section is "Maelstrom." I think the last line is "Rain coming down. It started like this." This seems to me to encapsulate the entire section and its recurring imagery. Maybe this is me projecting myself onto the poem.

CDY: [laughs] I like it. It sounds great though.

DM: Well, good. Absolutely take credit for that.

CDY: Like, “Yes, yes, that’s exactly what I planned.”

DM: But I was wondering about the composition of the sections of the book. When you’re putting together a book of poetry like that, does the organization of the book largely come after the poems? Or when you were composing them individually did you have some idea of how they might be structured into a collection?

CDY: I guess I have to say I’m lucky. The one time my being obsessive compulsive is a good thing in this regard. I have never written a book, so to speak. I know people who have projects or stories or some kind of narrative arc, and they have it and they write the poems. They kind of know the architecture of the book they are writing. I can’t imagine writing that way. Again, I guess because I know the last line first and the whole thing is coming up with the space in between, it would be really hard for me to conceive of all these different poems. I think for all three books, even the new one that just got taken—I’m still working on it—the books came out of the poems. I write a lot of poems. I publish a whole bunch of them. At some point I have so many poems, I sit down and start looking at them. Some things cohere and some things don’t. So some things just get thrown out. It could be published in *The Atlantic Monthly* or something, but it doesn’t fit with anything else. Once you start seeing how things cohere then things like sections start to come up. Then there’s the next level of, “Where do the sections go in order for the book to make any sense?” So for me it’s kind of more assemblage than an idea from the

get-go. There’s no way I could have said that back in the late 90s, “Oh, I just started *The Second Person*.” There’s no way I could have done that. You know, there are poems in *The Second Person*—I think two or three poems—that were written before the first book. But they didn’t fit with the first book. They didn’t fit at all. It was weird because they kind of predated—they came into existence before I had become obsessed with what was going in the second book. It’s the same thing with the new manuscript. There are at least two or three poems in there—one could have gone into my first book. And one or two could have gone into the second book in terms of chronology, but they just didn’t fit. If I had to actually sit down and say, “OK, I’m going to do a book on, I don’t know, scorpions,” it just would never happen. I would become stymied by the idea that this is what I’m doing.

DM: So *Scorpions* is not a forthcoming title.

CDY: No. [laughs]

BH: You’ve been talking about what you usually start out with in a poem. Before that, what would you say are your poetic triggers, or what usually prompts you to write a poem? Is there something where you end up hearing a line in your head?

CDY: It varies a lot. I have stuff floating around in my head all the time. But I have to come up with a line. If I don’t have the line, I don’t have any—it’s knowing that something sounds like a line that makes me start looking for the first line. So if I don’t have anything like that I won’t actually start looking. Sometimes I have things that pop up in my head and I think, “Oh, that definitely

sounds like a poem.” But then they don’t go anywhere because the lines don’t materialize. It’s really weird to talk about creative process because it always sounds kind of mystical and bizarre. It really brings out the California in me. I really sound like someone from California. You really just have to be open to possibilities. Again, I think it goes back to having an idea for an entire book. If I had an idea, just a flat-out idea and I was like, “OK, I’m going to sit down know and write this poem,” I’m probably not ever going to finish this poem because I’ve already committed too much. Again, because for me the writing of a poem is connecting A to Z, so to speak. That would rule out almost all these others possibilities. I would never be able to reach line six. I would be stuck.

DM: Along those lines, do you have that problem with certain formal constraints? “Triptych at the Edge of Sight” follows the same formal constraints. Does that pose a similar difficulty?

CDY: It’s very funny; when my first book came out, a lot of people labeled me a formalist. Which is very weird because in the entire book—I’d have to go back and check—but I think there’s two or three poems that are quote unquote “metrical.” I know there’s a sonnet. And I know there’s a poem that is in rhyming iambic pentameter. But I’ve been struck by the fact that I keep getting labeled as a formalist. I think it’s just that I probably obsess about things in a way that people who used to write metrical poems maybe would do. For me, though, almost any poem that I have that is formal, I didn’t sit down with the intent of it being that form. “Maelstrom” is a perfect example. I started “Maelstrom” probably six or

seven times. Trying to write it the way I would normally write a poem in that I just kept trying to write a 20-25 line poem, which in my head at the time was the correct number of lines or something. And it never worked. It was always prose-y, or it sounded kind of dull. The time that I started working on it, when I actually drafted the poem, I realized that one of the lines was very close to another line. I thought, "Hey, that's actually in the position of the repeats or variations in a pantoum." So I went back and tried to shift this draft that I had, which was pretty bad, into the pantoum form. It was really weird because it happened almost instantly. Different forms have different strengths and different weaknesses, and I think that the subject matter is such a bizarre, obsessively strange scenario that the pantoum made the poem significantly better. I have never tried to write a pantoum. I used to joke that I would never write a pantoum because I always slightly despised that form. But it kind of arose out of the playing with the drafts. I say this to my grad students all the time, and I think they're convinced it's just like this mantra I have and I don't actually believe, but I actually really believe it: I don't actually think the writing is getting down the first draft. For me, I always refer to it as drafting. I always say that and people think I'm an architect or something. The real writing comes in the revision and being open to possibilities. That's an example of if I weren't willing to try something, I probably would never have that poem. Yeah, forms. I think I have two my name; I have one villanelle, one sestina, one pantoum, a

couple of sonnets. That's about it.

DM: It kind of sounded like you were listing them like felonies or something.

CDY: I kind of feel like they are. [laughs] I served a month for my sonnet, two weeks for my sestina.

BH: You've been talking about the revision process. How do you usually approach the revision process? Do you do revisions until you feel comfortable?

CDY: Yeah, I think almost with the exception of one or two poems I have, they've all been through a lot of revisions. A friend of mine who

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was teaching an undergraduate class wanted to do a session talking about revision, so he pestered a whole bunch of us for drafts. He asked if there were any poems that we had where we had every single draft. It's harder now because with the computer when you change things you hit save and then the other version doesn't exist anymore. But there was a period where I was really obsessed about tracking changes, so I remember I would print after every save. So I actually had a complete record of this poem. The poem is "33rd and Kirkham." The funny thing is I don't even have them now. My friend David is the only one who has all of these drafts. I think he has all nine or ten drafts. I have some that have been through twenty drafts. I have some that I've worked on for ten, twelve years. I don't know. One of my

teachers was notorious for revising things even after they'd been published in books. I remember when his selected poems or new and selected poems was about to come out, he was still changing words. He was kind of crazy because he'd change a word and then ten years later he'd change it back. It's interesting because if you go through various editions of the book, you find these teeny, tiny changes. It's almost like he's writing for some poor academic 200 years from now who can write a dissertation on, "What did Donald Justice change in this edition versus that?" He never felt that a poem was completely finished. I don't know if I'm that way, but I still pick and poke. Even now, I have this new manuscript and I'm still changing lines and changing words. I think if you get really satisfied with your

poems you should be very nervous. [laughs]

BH: In one poem in particular in *The Day Underneath the Day*, "The Apprentice," the persona seems to be expressing anxieties about the creative process. What role do you see anxiety playing in the creative process?

CDY: Anxiety about—just general anxiety?

DM: The sort of anxiety of the creative process.

CDY: I have to look at the Apprentice now, I don't remember it being like that.

DM: Brooke just felt you should be anxious.

CDY: I should be anxious? Well I'm anxious now! [laughs]

BH: That was the point of the question, to elicit that response.

CDY: [looking at poem] Now I can understand why you'd say that. I don't really sit down and write—I know there are people who say they sit down to write for posterity, and all the great poets before them are looking over their shoulders. When I sit down to write, it's about the loneliest, most solemn thing. I don't have music. I don't keep any images on the wall in my studio where I write. My partner is a composer and a biologist, and his studio is spotlessly clean. It's immaculate. Grand piano. Large table. Scores. Sheets. Music. Pens. Pencils. All of his CDs are catalogued perfectly. You can just walk in and say, "Mahler," and he'll walk you over to the Mahler section. Or, "Brahms," and there they are. My studio is a disaster zone. There is nothing on the walls. There are papers, books, folders, submissions to *NER*, student essays. There's just stuff everywhere. I think you can only see about one-eighth of the floor in my studio. Everything else is just covered in papers and books. Strangely enough, I actually know where everything is, and I am so obsessed about that space, I won't actually let someone go in there and look around. But when I sit down to write, I'm not really thinking about anyone. I mean, usually, at this point, we were talking about the fact that by the time I actually sit down to write, I've already thought about the first line and the last line, and many times, I have most of the lines in between. So when I sit down it's this weird grappling to get it down on paper. I don't really feel that anxiety

because for me the writing is what comes after you have the first draft. I think I'm much more nervous and jittery once I have the draft and I start really picking it apart. When I start saying things like, "C. Dale, why would you do that? That's a terrible word." Or, "God, how many times can you use the word 'dark' in a poem? You've already used it 40 times in your first book and 50-something times in your second book. Do you really need it in the next book?" That's probably when I start feeling issues of anxiety, but not in the actual writing. I think in the actual drafting, getting it down, I'm just trying to get it down. I'm not really thinking about other stuff.

We're both kind of maniacal-looking when we're writing. My partner, Jacob, sometimes you know he's writing and sometimes you don't know he's writing. You sometimes know he's writing because you hear the piano. But other times you don't hear anything. You hear this weird silence. And you think he's not writing, but he's actually writing with a pencil. But we both have commented that the other looks really frightening when they are working.

DM: Is there any sort of hard-learned wisdom you've gathered in your years of writing poetry that you would impart upon beginning poets?

CDY: I don't know if there's anything to impart. I think there's always the whole read, read, read, write, read, revise, write, write, revise, read some more. It just never gets easier. I remember a very laureated poet who was asked that question, and she said, "Every time I sit down to write, it's horrifying. Every

time I sit down to write, it's like I'm writing a poem for the first time." I remember when I first heard that, thinking, "Oh that has got to be crap. This is someone who has six, seven, eight, nine books, all these awards. You can't possibly tell me that she sits down and it's alien to her." But over time I've grown to see that that's kind of true because I always think, "Well, in five years, this is going to be so much easier." But it never is. It's still as hard. You learn how to be comfortable with yourself and your own voice over time. But the actual process of putting together a poem is still work. It's not easy. Those *New Yorker* cartoons where the muse comes floating in the window and whispers and the poet just exudes this poem, it's a cartoon. It just doesn't happen like that. I wish it did. But it doesn't.

DM: You're also writing short stories, could you tell us about those? We didn't have the opportunity to see any of those.

CDY: Oh my god, I don't know if I'd ever show you one of my short stories. [laughs] It's weird. When I first started writing, I always wanted to write fiction. I'm almost embarrassed to say this but I was actually kicked out of a fiction writing class and told to study poetry again. [laughs] But for years I thought I could not write fiction, that I just wasn't capable of writing fiction. I'm not really sure what happened, but I read a lot of fiction. I've read almost as much fiction as I have poetry. I went to visit a university in the spring, and I was on a shuttle bus to go to the airport, and a sentence—I thought it was a line—it was something to the effect of "No one would have believed him if he had told them that such and such could disappear."

So I pondered this for a while, and I thought, this doesn't sound like one of my lines. This doesn't sound like a line of poetry. I don't know what that is. I remember kind of joking with myself in the shuttle bus, "Oh, maybe that's the start of a story." I was actually chuckling out loud. I wrote it down because I didn't want to forget it. Then ten or fifteen minutes later, I opened that laptop, and I started playing with it. Once I had the sentence then I started writing more. I think within three days I had written about 3,200 words of the story. And I thought, "That's really weird." I showed it to a couple of people, and they were like, "That's a pretty good start," and I was like, "really?" Then I wrote another story. So far, I've written six stories this year, but I don't know why now. In some ways it's actually much more fun for me because I don't have the same investment. If I write a story, no one knows my stories. I've never published any stories. I don't really feel like I have anything at stake. It's just this kind of mental exercise.

DM: In preparation for the interview, and when you were coming to *Writer's in the Gallery*, I started stalking your blog.

CDY: [laughs] Oh. That's just great.

DM: Very recently there was a link you posted to a question about political poetry. The question was "Any thoughts about political poetry in our current climate? Will it make a comeback? Do we have an obligation as poets to comment about the world at large and how exactly do we do that?" So since you didn't answer that on your blog, I was hoping maybe you had some thoughts on the political nature of poetry.

CDY: I'm one of those people who thinks that every single poem, every single story, every single piece of art is political. That's probably not what people want to hear because I think when people say "political poetry" they have a very specific thing in mind. They want a poem of protest, or a poem of witness, or on and on and on. But for me, a lot of those poems end up just being propaganda. They're not much different than the leaflets that people from other countries drop on the countries they are bombing. I wouldn't be surprised to find poems from the United States all over Iraq. But the thing about it is that the idea that you have the right to sit down and write a poem is a political statement in and of itself. That is not a normal thing. Everyday people don't do that. It sounds strange, but if Jacob sits down and writes a violin concerto, there aren't very many people out there that just do that. That is a political act. You cannot divorce the person from the works. That adds another level of it being political. I think the reason I put the link on the blog is that I always find those kinds of things—I find them interesting because they always elicit some kind of response, either ire or shock or "Why is he posting this?" I'm kind of perverse in that I like doing that. I post lots of things just because I know it's going to spark one of my readers' interests. I don't know. We could all sit around and write poems protesting this or protesting that. But I don't know if they would end up being really your poems. But at the same time, we live in a world right now that's very different, and I know as an editor that I don't have the same patience that I used to for another poem about walking in the woods. It could be a great poem, but I'm

just like, "Do we really need another poem about a birch tree?" No, we don't. Does that mean I want people to go out and write about protests or loss of rights or some amendment? Well, if they got to it on their own out of something genuine, sure. But the problem I have with a lot of the "political" poetry is that it's not arrived at in a genuine way. It's arrived at either because they want to sensationalize or they want to show that *I'm so thoughtful, I'm writing something to protest*, etc. It always rings out false. It always rings out, for me at least, like propaganda. I think that there have been some great political poems, but a lot of what I think of as "political poems," other people might disagree. I think Whitman wrote some amazing political poems. Even Lord Byron wrote what I consider to be some amazing political poems. But they're not necessarily what people today when they say "political poems"—that's not exactly what they mean.

DM: Do you have a Family-Feud-style, top-five list of propagandistic poems you'd expect to find in Iraq after the invasion?

CDY: [laughs] It's funny because right after 9/11, I did an interview on a public radio station and the guy asked me, did I think that there would be great poems that came out of 9/11, and I said, "Yeah, but they won't show up for awhile." He said, "What do you mean?" I said, "Anything that shows up in the next two or three years is going to be propaganda." The host was horrified. How could I be saying this? How anti-American. How unpatriotic of me. But I actually think that that is pretty much right. I think that the best poems I've seen that relate to 9/11 have been coming out in the

past year or so. They have perspective. They have the difficult parts of putting together things that are not pleasant but at the same time are almost inevitable. I just don't think that's possible six months after 9/11. I saw horrible poems written by some amazing poets published in the year or two after 9/11, but most of them were 9/11 poems. The poems that I'm seeing now are deeply disturbing, picked over—there's something about a mind being able to process that whole thing. Not just the event, but all the things that led to it, what has happened after it, that make for a more powerful poem. So you I think that's political. But like I said, I am one of those people that thinks every poem is political.

DM: Would you tell us about the manuscript you're working on?

CDY: It's slated for February 2012. That was at my request because I can't imagine getting it actually "book ready" faster. There are so many things that go into—I think the final manuscript is due in January 2010, and people are kind of shocked by that. But there's a lot of stuff. At least my publisher, Four Way Books, does a lot of things to prepare to release a book. Even the advanced copies are usually an advanced run of the book. They're not even galleys, so there's a lot of stuff they have to do. I'm just not really ready to do that. I just have a lot of other things I have to do as well. It's titled *Torn* after a poem of mine. It's—I don't know what it is yet. I think that it's probably—I thought that when I published my second book or when I was putting together, I thought my second book was radically different from my first book. I think that's something a lot of writers and artists do

to convince themselves that they are making progress or something. I think you have to think that you're doing something different to do it at all. It's really weird because when the book came out, and I actually sat down and read both of them, I was like, um, it's not that different. They are different books, but it's definitely still me. I know right now that I have this nagging sensation that the new book is just radically different. But I'm sure again, I've just lived long enough now to know that that's probably not true. It might be a variation or something like that. But I think it's a tormented book. That's about the only way I can put it. [laughs] But we'll see. We still have some time to change it.

DM: Or at least torment it more.

CDY: Yeah, or it will torment me more is more like it.

Proximity

I have forgotten my skin, misplaced my body.
Tricks of mind, a teacher once said: the man
with the amputated right arm convinced he could

feel the sheets and air-conditioned air touching
the phantom skin. There must be a syndrome
for such a thing, a named constellation of symptoms

that correspond to the ghost hand and what it senses.
This morning, I felt your hand touch me on the shoulder
the way you would when you turned over in your sleep.

What syndrome describes this? Not the sense of touch
but of being touched. Waking, I felt my own body,
piece by piece, dissolving: my hands, finger by finger,

then the legs and the chest leaving the heart exposed
and beating, the traveling pulses of blood
expanding the great vessels. The rib cage vanished

and then the spine. If your right hand offends you,
wrote Mark, cut it off and throw it away,
for it is better for you to lose a part than to lose

the whole. But I have no word for this phantom
touch, and the fully real feeling of the hair
on your arm shifting over my own as your hand

moved from my shoulder and out across my chest.
Desire makes me weak, crooned the diva,
or was it Augustine faced with his own flesh?

Whisper me a few lies, god, beautiful and familiar lies.

—from *The Second Person*