



Changing the Subject

by James Cervantes and Halvard Johnson

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Afterword Copyright 2000 by Carol King

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Series edited by Doug Lawson

Cover Art by Giselle Gautreau
Book design by Doug Lawson

Halvard Johnson's poem "Entering the House" has
appeared in *CrossConnect*. James Cervantes'
poem "Navigating an Intersection" is forthcoming
in *Luna*, and his "Directions to Oblivion" in
North American Review.

Gossamer Books

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Richmond, VA 23225
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Introductions by the Authors

Halvard Johnson:

A little over a year after Jim Cervantes and I started bouncing off each other's poems in the series we've called *Changing the Subject*, I find myself pleased by the result. The sequence (trimmed somewhat and neaten up for Gossamer Books) still has that feel of sparks jumping synapses, from one mind to another. Alex Keegan, inadvertently, set it off: One of his sentences in a posting to the Cafe Blue mailing list led me to respond with a poem, to which Jim responded . . . and we were off.

I loved (and still love) the fact that the exchange developed its own daily and weekly rhythms without planning or discussion on our parts. Once or twice, there were days when three or four poems went out and were responded to. Sometimes there were lapses, never longer than four or five days, as I recall. And only once, I think, did either of us have to be nudged to continue.

Ultimately, we both seemed to know when it was over. Fatigue? A sense of completeness? Whatever. This summer's task has been to revisit it, and that's been a pleasure too—each of us sending each the other his versions of the **Gossamer Books** version.

Finally, I think the online nature of our exchange contributed much to the series' final character. There's an energy and spontaneity that wouldn't have been there had we done this by snailmail. Jim lives in Arizona and I was living in Baltimore when these poems were written, and, since I've met him f2f only twice, and then only for brief minutes, I'm sure that if we'd actually sat down at a table together, we'd never have gotten much writing done. -HJ

James Cervantes:

Hal has hit on all the major rewards of this spontaneous collaboration and I concur with every one, so I'd like to elaborate instead on the role of other rhythms in the writing of *Changing the Subject*. One of those rhythms is the one dictated by the academic calendar. Both Hal and I teach, and so time is scarce for nine months out of the year. I think it's no coincidence that this exchange took place during the summer, when I could awake in the morning, get some coffee and fire up the computer to see what poem Hal had e-mailed the night before, or even that morning from his east coast time zone to my mountain standard time zone. Since there was no class to prepare for, I could easily begin my poem-response on the spot and follow through with it. Hal's writing situation was probably similar.

Another rhythm was the one dictated by the medium: the internet and, more specifically, the Cafe Blue listserv, which functioned almost as a reading venue where people could "listen" to the exchange at any time of day, leave the "hall," or change out of their pajamas without any damage to the spontaneity of the exchange. The almost instantaneous exchange in a relaxed atmosphere—for the listserv is a hall full of friends—also provided the flavor of an exchange of jazz riffs; Hal, as it turned out, is as much a jazz fan as me. The medium made it easy to respond quickly by picking up on a word or phrase or sound, improvising on it and tossing it back to Hal.

As Carol King notes in her Afterword, there were 71 poems total, and so this selection may be thought of as "cuts" from the longer "concert," which contained many lighter moments, the trying on of different voices, and even a "guest artist" or two, such as Hal's use of notes from a lecture by John Cage and lyrics from W.C. Handy. Perhaps best of all, it was just plain fun to do.

-JC

Editor's Note:

To preserve the feeling of collaboration, poems have been placed side by side and should be read alternating vertically between the left and right columns.

Changing the Subject

“ . . . put enough questions together and the psychologist can tease out answers about attitudes which otherwise remain hidden”

-Alex Keegan

Teasing Out the Attitudes

to be or not to be is that the question authority isn't everything
is it do you like walking better than riding or isn't there more
to life than all this should you keep the baby or throw it out
along with the bathwater or should you drink the bathwater and send
the baby parcel post to your mother who would say what now
what's this got to do with me or do you prefer to watch TV or sit
in a darkened theater with people you've never met would you
kill Hitler (or Saddam or Slobodan) to save their lives do you
have change for a dollar would it make any difference to me if
you did is it pleasant enough for a walk where's my hat

HJ

Easing out the Platitudes

killing is not all bad what's that between the buns
in your salad seed of a tree you've leached to latte
would you walk a mile for a camel to ride to Saddam
be all you can be on the screen the street the loo
melt guns into butter watch *Last Tango in Paris*
put your mouth where your money is and relish inflation
smell the roses seize the day do unto others
take care of yourself first put yourself
in someone else's sneakers smell the roses
living is not all bad save nine stitch time

JC

Living at Ground Level

Deserves a pat on the back for the accurate count
of cracks in the walk and surviving olfactory soup
an award for picking up pennies a commendation
for collecting used needles donning latex gloves
for latex sheaths gathered unto themselves again
like sweaty nylons and of course a plaque
for a palmful of loose skin on a skeletal elbow
and a gold-plated trophy for the curbside daisy.

JC

Breathing at High Altitudes

Taking one breath at a time is the first step toward eventual
annihilation whether or not we consider alternative measures
such as fixing the goddamn plumbing before that leak begins
to keep us awake all night dreaming of high mountain trails
where nothing hangs on the trees but low-flying clouds
that keep us from seeing whatever's up ahead just where
our path curves around that heap of rocks that someone
must have left there just for our sudden pleasure.

HJ

Grinding Away at Ground Zero

Picking up Penny's books that day when she dropped them
oh so deliberately at my feet was the one thing that might have
deflected my life from its present course, sending me into
paroxysms of fury at the injustice of it all, casting everything
in a new light, a new perspective that rendered all attempts at
safe sex both redundant and superfluous. Curbside daisies
notwithstanding, the impulse to self-destruct was strong in me
that day, and Penny's books just lay there, pages torn and
twisted, as I stood by and watched as she looked once at me and then
knelt down to gather them up, giving me, as she did so, one
glimpse at knees I would never quite see in that light again.

HJ

Eroticism in the Ionosphere

“What’s up?” is a joke you’ll not hear, nor anything about “the gravity of the situation,” for the hand is weightless (almost) and the moist forest of hair dries out. Up and down are willed, Hal and Penny’s body-echoes like short-lived cirrus clouds.

Love freeze-dries, the shuddering orgasm a homeless radio wave, brief static in “Fly Me To The Moon.”

JC

First Amphibian

Scaly relic, spewing water, gulping air into lungs that surprise a tiny brain

a new surplus of oxygen, maybe a thought that comes of sharpened vision, but does

the horizon waver, does clumsy walker undulate and what does it mount in fear of too much air

in love with what does not resist so much drowning doubly in its awakening?

JC

Learning to Live with the Bends

Bony poet on the rocky shore, having come up too quickly to undo such damage as was done,

watching his lines break in the gray of early mourning light, steadfast as ever in his contempt for earthly

treasures in the form of profits and stock options and early retirement packages, residue

of some big bang or other taking human form, rising from the deep, saltwater dripping all over his cordovans.

HJ

Not a Bus Stop

Coyote says, “Hillary Rodham Clinton is not a bus stop on the road to Flagstaff.” Signposts at the intersections say, “Click on this. Click on that.” Tomorrow is another day.

Trickster works every corner on this route, nudging us this way or that. White ponies of Helios run from right to left as long as we are traveling north.

Here’s a dancing girl. Do us a favor, we’ll respect you in the morning, hon. Hi, there, you cutie. If you were to die, you’d sing almost as beautifully as those three turtles over there.

HJ

Navigating An Intersection

Good advice in this morning's *Mesa Tribune*:
to watch for the driver who flirts with the red
when making a left-hand turn. In other words,
don't be first off the mark when the light turns green.

So how do you get through life like that,
always alert for someone's erratic answer
to their compelling destination? What about you
and your more straightforward, magnetic pull?

There will always be that moment of yellow indecision
when Coyote handles the relays, puts a dancing girl
by the curb and turns everything green. June in January,
a curbside strip, two full moons of ecstasy!

JC

Taking Four on the Fifth

Because sky rings like lead on the fifth,
because front porches leap across town
and neighbors, just for a change, grill police
over mesquite and backyard charcoal, and

parabolic angels spring blazing from barrels
of shotguns, and our lawns reach up to embrace us
—just for a change, let's take four medevac 'copters
at bedtime and give 'em a call when dawn cracks.

HJ

Monsoon Morning

If you speed it up, a high pressure ridge
dashes to the four corners, moisture
whirls up from the Gulf of California
to take its place, but runs head-on
into mountains, veers upward and is smacked
in the face by a wall of hot air.

Which is why you wake in a sweat
this morning, make small movements:
place a pencil next to the notebook,
keep the phone nearby, rake only
what is next to the walk. In a moment,
chairs are in the pool, a green branch

on a yellow lawn, all you did not notice
up in the air. Look at the cloud of your life.

JC

Sabbath Breaker

“The awful daring of a moment’s surrender,
which an age of prudence can never retract.”
—T. S. Eliot

In the early morning darkness
love arrives in the neighborhoods of Bloomington, Indiana,
tossing little plastic bags of pamphlets into yards.
The message is that no name is too Jewish anymore,
that blacks and mud people are really quite okay and should
be taken out to lunch. Love fires kisses at them
on the streets of Skokie, of Springfield, of Salem.

And then love turns on its radio and takes a nap. It runs
away to sea, where white birds fly, and where strange pieces
of wood are found along the water’s edge—not carved but natural.
Expecting to see men and women sunning on the sand, love looks
far and wide for them, finds only black water pigs that had come
out of the water and were running in and out of black volcanic rocks.
Love resolves to have another look at the cloud of its life.

HJ

The Simple Life

Neighbors enter via the creaky porch
without a knock and empty handed.
We recognize their footsteps
and upper-halves, which bow at a door
they've opened themselves, eager to partake
of a tired and satisfying routine.

After coffee at the formica table
we retire to the room of knick-knacks
for inventory: little Dutch boy and girl
salt and pepper shakers from Pennsylvania,
ceramic chili peppers from New Mexico . . .
Oops! We broke one, but Rosemary

finds a small cardboard box in the pantry
and pulls out a duplicate, as well as packing
of curly confetti that litters the floor. The sweeper
makes a peaceful sound, back and forth, back
and forth, scritch-scratch, and we almost
fall asleep in cleanliness. But hey!

Bacon and eggs at the formica table,
the story of breaking a chili in the store
but that was why we bought a spare—
in case it got broken again—and how the sweeper
was a handy thing with all this breaking
in the early mornings of our lives.

JC

Not a Bus Stop (2)

No, this poem isn't a bus stop, but then
neither are you. Come to think of it, though,
the very beginning of this poem is something
like a bus stop, you standing there (or sitting,
if you're lucky) waiting for something or other
to come along and sweep you into it, to take
you where you are going, or maybe somewhere
else you'd rather be. We trust that the bus will stick
to its accustomed route, but cannot always be
sure. Some element of risk attaches to our
travels, and buses we think are heading downtown,
taking us to work, might in fact be headed for parts
unknown, sad neighborhoods we never knew existed,
where life is cheap and danger abounds, or happy
suburbs, safer but duller, where all the men are off
at work and all the kids are at school. No one
at all on the tree-lined streets, emptied garbage cans
lying around, down at the end of the drive. You
look at your watch and say, "Hey, I've got to get
to work," and the driver stops the bus and says,
"Fine, here's where you get off." She opens the door
and forces you off at gunpoint, leaves you standing there.

HJ

No Nonsense Here

Crooked rays ran from her head to the top of the frame,
soft features were out of the question, rumors
blunt about her head. All came to her ears
indirectly, as if all had been transmitted
round and vaguely enunciated, leaving her
utterly unconvinced, without a goal, without horizons.
No wonder affect and voice were flat.
No wonder her routes were always direct,
her answers to passengers loud and sharp.
Between horizons, her life was convincingly straight.

JC

Rumors Blunt as Monkeys

“Why play the game if there is no ambivalence
about the rules it toys with?”

—Lewis Hyde

Ray’s crooked smile lit up her face from head to toe.
Respect yo’ mamma and don’t let nobody in without you don’t
know whom it is.

He said, “As long as these weeds and green
grass grow, I’m going to be around to signify some more.”

The shapes that climb into the monkey’s tree don’t want
to get caught at either pole, says Ray, who is always
looking for the door, hungry as history.

They take great care of their peach gardens, climb into bed
and tell each other jokes until they fall to sleep.

HJ

Memory for Hunger

A shadow of my former self, a husk, dry leaves
moistened at New Year's for tamales,
the corn cob nibbled clean of kernels, as if
small, sharp teeth hungered for information.

I won't belabor this; I give it to you. I empty
the era of Aristarchus upon your desk, with latex gloves
I deposit Shih Huang-ti next to your journal, and free of charge
include a photo of his simulacra. You must imagine the wall,

but with a quick whir I can give you the number of stones,
perhaps even the dead of millennia. Your desire
is my fondest wish. Do you want family? The trees
have all grown together, but I can deftly prune

a thicket of family, put it in that vase before you.
Because, you see, I want to be emptier than I am
and that's where you come in. See how the sky clears
as you ask for more, how the stars adjust for emptiness.

JC

Autistic License

When I have nothing to say, I say it—
few words for the late lamented Ostrogoths
or the boorish behavior of Clovis, even
fewer for Frederick's beard, which one day
will come 'round for the third time,
and he will rise to fight again—
no words at all to say how I feel about Greenland,
Gregorian chant, or even about tiny Liechtenstein,
its fate sealed now . . . and stamped . . . and mailed.

HJ

Father to the Child

In my walk through the forest
I came across a placid baby
hung from a tree with plain
cotton cord. It matured
as I realized it was not dead,
but neither was it comfortable.
It was, however, able to climb
into a sling I made for it,
then mature enough
for an elaborate swing
in which it was not only comfortable
but happy. How it loved
the woven branches, artful reeds,
and its crown of ferns!
And, out of those
suddenly assembled there,
not one asked me for details!

JC

In the Details

“He had a horse named Nelly Nelly is your name.
He had a house named Ella and Allen Ellen is
your name. He had a hand named Bannie and
Bannie is your name.”

—Gertrude Stein, “Allen Tanner”

The tree’s name was Wooden, and the cord’s name
was Roper. My left hand’s name is Horace, and my right
hand’s name is Pope. The true name of war
is Mercy, and love’s true name is Kill.

Useful knowledge—pass it on, until someone
stops to question you, and then you say right out,

The tree’s name was Wooden, and the cord’s name
was Roper. My left hand’s name is Horace, and my right
hand’s name is Pope. The true name of war
is Mercy, and love’s true name is Kill.

HJ

Directions to Oblivion

Chunk of limestone with shell embedded,
egg of lava honeycombed with air: one sits, one floats.

Heights and depths are a walk-between:
Five miles from white pine to downtown signage,

take a right at Aspen and Leroux, fifteen paces
to the bar, ten paces to the corner stool

where Jack Christy set his moustache on fire
four years back, forgetting his oxygen tubes,

as he lit his cigarette. Buy Jack a drink
and drink it. Face right and his photo's there.

JC

The Most You Can Hope For

1. To help the city dry out from the spring floods
2. Frozen egg whites, always on hand when you need them
3. Slightly less meaningless meanings
4. Girls' versions of classic stories
5. To become less white as you grow older
6. A somewhat clearer sense of what we've come here
to talk about
7. Less money-related fear
8. Hanging up your hang-ups at the door
9. Free parking
10. Or meters that still take pennies
11. Intermittent terrorist activities
12. Blissful excess
13. Intermittent snow, sleet, rain, etc.
14. A gradual Europeanization of America
15. Something better than reality
16. Time travel at affordable rates

HJ

Walking Down and Backwards in Walnut Canyon

After the switchbacks, early in the easy slope
to the bottom, you can risk jumping
onto the terrace below, then backtrack
through transition growth, a mix of juniper,
pine, cactus and agave. The scent of wet limestone
wraps you in the great, shaded funnel
where you find yourself, under a shelf,
squatting next to the groove
cut by fast, tumbling water. Empty pools
are within hand's reach, and fish bones
if you scratch into the waterless shore.
Simply look across the canyon, at eye level,
and there's a dark shelter, with the wall
of uniform stones and its doorway: neighbors
across the water that isn't there. Now
you'll want to straighten up, move that branch
from the way you came. But don't, because
then it will be a path, and the wrong one
because it was all different then,
and that is all I'm going to tell you.

JC

Atrocity's Garden

The highway to Flagstaff may be rerouted
but the landscape remains the same—
neither more nor less than it was.
Salt River isn't for the thirsty.

One lowers one's mouth to the water,
and the water retreats to the edge
of a desert plateau. The rope breaks, the jug
cracks, the canteen rusts and falls apart.

The mayor and the sheriff exchange
names, but still wear the same uniforms.
Sky is always sky. Water water—what
we all must drink.

No one drinks the mud of the well.
No animals come. Those who wander off
into the desert find themselves
alone. No one will follow.

No one sends out search parties
after those who stray into those arid
stretches, those who are happy
to stay there.

If we come to a well, we shoot
fish there. The waterbag breaks, leaks.
A well, a mind, is a terrible thing
to waste. The well no one uses

becomes home to its own thoughts only,
attracts only those whose own wells
are stagnant and putrid, guarded only

Misdirections Are Not a Mistake

Imagine a map with the iris effect,
where only dead-center
is in focus and factually correct.

You are meant to stay on the hazy fringe,
or “halo,” if you lean in that direction,
and just be grateful for the sharp edge

of crossroads—even that incomplete contour
of a possibly symmetrical hill
which you are free to search and scour,

even dig if you wish, until you hear a clink
and know the reason for these directions,
for that’s when this map will wink.

JC

by the wrong dog—

some decrepit black Labrador, hip broken,
coat dull and scruffy, unrecognized
by its owner after all these years,
panting and drooling in the heat,

the name of some motel down near Phoenix
painted on its side.

HJ

Run Gerbil, Run!

“Reification won’t get you out of the parking lot.”

—Bob Perelman

Clocks slow as heavy metal,
paddling in the wave,
folding their wings.

A nation with lots of fish
to eat coming to terms
with itself.

Beautiful dancers—
and pure, fresh river water—
wanting to have gone to sea
just for the glamour of the thing.

Drive west on Apache Boulevard,
turn north on Van Buren Street.

Pass the strafed farms on your left
and turn northwest to Thomas Road.

This very flatness is what we yearn
to be pinned to. Don’t cry, Ma,
it’s only rhetoric.

HJ

An Imperfect Place

You would not walk barefoot
on this grass dried to stubble.
Snowmelt has not been enough
to keep it green, nor the summer monsoons,
but water enough to waste topsoil
and let the cinders rise.

You would not have chosen that shade
of barn-red, the mud color mixed by a child
with too many tints, which is daubed
onto the trailer and its add-ons. The porch
is saved by not having walls, a roofed
bit of space that extends miles to the west.

The roof is corrugated tin
that has easily borne winter snows
and tuned the rain. Windows are boarded
with warped plywood, sprinkles of glass
below them, fresh splinters of wood
beneath a bent hasp and a scarred lock.

You might think you'd been shaking
this thing called a "house,"
trying to get in.

JC

Entering the House

“if we slowly approach a surface of water
with our finger we often deceive ourselves
about when we are wet a patient may feel
the surgeon's scalpel while it is still a
slight distance away”

—David Antin, “Meditation 12”

When we come home, we often deceive ourselves about
when we actually get there. The door to the house

presents itself as an actual fact. Our key retracts
first the dead bolt and then the latch bolt and our

entrance becomes suddenly possible. We feel we are home
even before grasping the doorknob and leaning

our shoulder against the shutting stile, knowing full
well the door's slight reluctance to open

in hot, humid weather. We dimly see a hallway through
the opaque glass. We know that on the bookcase

there by the door, the cat is waiting.

HJ

The Most Familiar Home

The son sends five months' notice
that he will be there for the turn of the year—
a subtropical city, perhaps a little cooler,
a bit wetter, with broad-leaved calendula,
banana tree, and plump Kalanchoe
next to wrought-iron railings
for the four steps up, the raised house
above a nightmare crawl-space.

Which aunt or uncle, mother or father,
will he stay with? Whose night sounds
will he sleep with, those of which cousin,
which brother or sister? Whose cooking
will waft familiar through wallpapered rooms,
the same mismatch of knives and forks
clinking on the same chipped china
over the diminutive of his name?

An exclamation with every greeting,
for they will have forgotten. And after
the pause: "I heard you were coming!"
Because that is how it would be
if he had been there yesterday,
without a ticket or a plan.

JC

Afterword

“Put enough questions together and the psychologist can
tease out answers about attitudes which otherwise remain hidden”

—Alex Keegan

Changing the Subject is one of those watershed manuscripts. It incarnated the social power and principles of invention both when the poems appeared online, one after another, day by day and week by week, and now, collected in a somewhat abbreviated form for this online presentation, and in chapbook form. Written by two poets who, while having met, knew each other primarily online, these poems highlight the rhetorical power of the written word and the synergy of electronic words. As the exchange unfolded, it became obvious that the texts and subtexts in the poems were woven together by adopting, extending, or rhyming words, by echoing or reversing ideas, and by carrying into frontier corners a creation of meaning in a variety of poetic forms. The first poem began not only the conversation in poems in Cafe Blue, but also the call-and-response format—so much a part of worship in black churches—that the next poem echoed, initiating the remarkable collaboration between the two writers.

Johnson, responding to Keegan’s statement, posts the first poem, “Teasing Out the Attitudes.” He echoes the “to be or not to be?” dilemma in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* in contemporary terms:

“should you keep the baby or throw it out
along with the bathwater or should you drink the bathwater and send
the baby parcel post to your mother?”

Pure irony. The serious dilemma invoked, and the possibilities of addressing it, speak to contemporary people. But the absurdity of that last proposal teases some readers with its pointed attitude of ennui. Likewise, the whole poem functions to raise issues and to represent a variety of attitudes toward sticky problems. It reads, in part, “. . . would you / kill Hitler (or Saddam or Slobodan) to save their lives do you / have change for a dollar”—without

the usual punctuation. The form, the spelling, and the syntax all revolt, on the surface against the established authority in language and poetics on the surface. In the poem, the ordinary, the unthinkable, the silly and the absurd are set side by side, the lines mocking decorum and chiding those with stock attitudes toward life.

Cervantes, in the second poem, replies, but his reply is not the “Amen, brother” of the call-and-response format. Rather, it is a bit of cheek itself, defeating expectations and warning the reader of provocative reversals to come. His “Easing Out the Platitudes” is an appeal, stringing together platitudes, and challenging readers to imagine the horrendous alongside the ordinary: “killing is not all bad what’s that between the buns.” This is not intentional shock. Instead, the line sets killing—of a sort—beside eating to tighten the tension and raise questions about various meanings of words: a classic move. In this poem—one long, unpunctuated sentence—Cervantes leads the reader through several reversals of common platitudes, and, twisting the screw once more:

“put your mouth where your money is and relish
inflation smell the roses seize the day do unto others
but take care of yourself. . . first”

until the reader can feel the contradiction between what mother says and what is. In one grand summarizing gesture, Cervantes returns to his theme: “living is not all bad.” Obviously not. Cervantes has constructed a free-wheeling serendipitous adventure for the hardy.

This sassy collection of poems raises any number of artistic and intellectual issues for those who are discerning, and mixes close-to-traditional poetic forms with border-crossings of all sorts. The thirty playful and spontaneous poems presented here offer many layers of meaning, and many opposing viewpoints on values. It nests texts within texts with a painstaking literary regard for making meaning through the careful selection of its subject matter, its multi-tonality of voices, and its changing graphical appearances.

In short, *Changing the Subject* dances within the possibilities of ordinary free verse, rhymed verse, familiar literary allusions, contemporary references, and startling imagery while whirling across great distances to challenge the usual means of production by drawing attention to the Web itself, like which it throws out its gossamer lines, seeking to find a resting

spot on some promontory, seeking to find a reader (or readers) to whom it can connect. Tirelessly, it spins out its threads, backtracks on itself, and launches forward into oceans of virtual space—in search of an anchor, a place, a home.

-Carol King

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