



SEMI-AUTOMATIC PANTOUMS
A COLLABORATION ON GUN VIOLENCE

EDITED BY CHRIS GREEN

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The Poetic Justice League's founding members—Chris Green, Jan Bottiglieri, cin salach, and Tony Trigilio—asked groups of poets from across the country to write pantoums about America's gun insanity. We call them “semi-automatic pantoums” to emphasize how the repetition in the poetic form mirrors the firing of a semi-automatic weapon.

AMERICA'S RIFLE

...gunfire is only the sound of people trying to live a little longer & failing.
—Ocean Vuong

by Carolina Hospital, Nicole Hospital-Medina, Holly Iglesias, and Maureen Seaton

Exit wound, point of departure for the body shot through,
rainbow colored shards shift the center of gravity,
no one wiser, no one alive to claim the win.
Accurate and lightweight, it's "America's rifle."

Rainbow colored shards shift the center of gravity.
Observe the shape of fear, profile sleek, matte black:
accurate and lightweight, it's "America's rifle."
Proud protector, at the ready at each and every corner.

Observe the shape of fear, profile sleek, matte black:
loaded cartridge with wasted virtue.
Proud protector, at the ready at each and every corner.
Ear splitting discharge and smoke screens for hidden angels.

Loaded cartridge with wasted virtue,
how cock-sure your anticipation, how red-blooded your
ear splitting discharge and smoke screens for hidden angels.
What will happen when every angel is armed?

How cock-sure your anticipation, how red-blooded your
authority. The camera is a sky.
What will happen when every angel is armed?
What will happen when the sound cuts off

authority? The camera is a sky,
no one wiser, no one alive to claim the win.
What will happen when the sound cuts off?
Exit wound, point of departure for the body shot through.

BUBBLEGUN

by Max Barry, Meredith Boe, Kendall Steinle, and Jessi Terson

A strawberry skittle per entry wound.
Smith & Wesson's shock wave shakes both all & none.
It takes more than a pocketknife to gut tenderloin,
to travel faster than the speed of sound.

Smith & Wesson's shock wave shakes both all & none
& Lance & ... a candy cigarette per ampersand.
To travel faster than the speed of sound
takes more than guts ... & Sanders & Thompson

& Lance & ... a candy cigarette per ampersand.
Undead kids marching to Penn Ave, on & on ...
takes more than guts ... & Sanders & Thompson
& kindergarten carcass, to sway funds.

Undead kids march to Penn Ave, on & on,
warrant no knee-jerks, these PTSD teens
& kindergarten carcasses, to sway funds.
One sign of mental disturbance per exit wound

warrants no knee-jerks, these PTSD teens
with pain made-for-TV. Mute the sound.
One sign of mental disturbance per exit wound
tastes sweet. A skittle's slow dissolving

with pain made-for-TV. Mute the sound.
Chocolate gelt for Mallinger & Wax melting
tastes sweet. A skittle's slow dissolving,
the tongue turning reddish brown.

Chocolate gelt for Mallinger & Wax melting.
Thoughts & prayers. We swallow it down,
the tongue turning reddish brown.
Can you taste it? Do you care? Will you join in?

Thoughts & prayers. We swallow it down.
It takes more than a pocket knife to gut tenderloin.
Can you taste it? Do you care? Will you join in?
A strawberry skittle per entry wound.

MY SWEET BOULET WON'T HARM YOU

by Carol Eding, Margaret Brady, Joe Eldridge, Sarah Carson

My poem hit # 1 with a bullet.
Bullet points, bulletin, bulletproof.
My sweet boulet won't harm you.
The arm of the law is long.

Bullet points, bulletin, bulletproof
vests are as de rigueur as bowling balls.
The arm of the law is long
and limp. It's a bullet-ridden body.

Vests are as de rigueur as bowling balls.
We floss soft shot from our teeth
and limp. It's a bullet-ridden body—
our children its legs, its lungs.

We floss soft shot from our teeth
sucking traces of bulls-eye from
our children's legs and lungs
sinking in a soggy burble.

Sucking traces of bulls-eye from
innocents now laid to rest,
we sink in a soggy burble,
a garble of blaggard's words.

Innocents, now laid to rest
with texts that edit women's tales
into a garble of blaggard's words
cast ballots and fish for bull shark.

With texts that edit women's tales into
lie, lie, fake news, lie, Mothers
cast ballots and fish for bull shark,
ripple the water, swim for their lives.

Lie, lie, fake news, lie. Mothers
founder through waves of lie,
ripple the water, swim for their lives
while innocents sink slowly from lead.

Foundering through waves of lie
3-D gunmen don't miss a beat
while innocents sink slowly from lead
3,000 ordered, 1,500 shipped.

3-D gunmen don't miss a beat
my sweet boulet won't harm you
3,000 ordered, 1,500 shipped
This poem hit no one with a bullet.

THERE ARE BULLETS IN THIS POEM

by Jan Bottiglieri, Chris Green, cin salach, and Tony Trigilio

There are bullets in this poem. So best if you stay home.
Are you a) Hell-bent B) Holy c) Metal-detector-averse? Consider it.
Each bullet in this poem weighs a third of an ounce.
Each line returns, reloads. There are rules about this.

Are you a) Hell-bent B) Holy c) Metal-detector-averse? Consider it.
The bullet: the sound of wind breathing its last.
Each line returns, reloads. There are rules about this.
Anything you say can and will be used against you, more than once.

The bullet: the sound of wind breathing its last,
whistling into mushy flesh 2500 feet per second.
Anything you say can and will be used against you. More than once,
they've brought us here, into the wind: bullets

whistling into mushy flesh 2500 feet per second
as a boy leaves himself beside the road.
They've brought us here, into the wind: bullets.
He shall be unsaved by poems.

As a boy leaves himself beside the road,
his small body, an entire headline.
He shall be unsaved by poems.
The page is speechless.

His small body, an entire headline,
his English teacher in the bull's eye.
The page is speechless.
The teacher is bleeding.

His English teacher in the bull's eye,
those deep red circles widening, widening.
The teacher is bleeding
out beside the chain fence, the statue of the mascot.

Those deep red circles widening, widening.
Each bullet in this poem weighs a third of an ounce.
Out beside the chain fence—a kind of mascot—
the bullets in this poem. So best if you stay home.

SILENCE & PAPER

by Dina Elenbogen, Chris Green, John McCarthy, and Valerie Wallace

The place was swarming with flies.
It was hard to see beyond iridescent wings
& into the wild future their flailing concealed.
& nothing was the same as it had been.

It was hard to see, beyond. Iridescent wings
shadowed sight, lines drawn on each other's faces.
Nothing was the same as it had been.
Summer smells of chalk and blood.

Shadowed sight, lines drawn. On each other's faces
they saw reflections of what their hands were too small to carry.
Summer smells of chalk and blood--
how to live again in this place?

They saw reflections. Of what their hands were too small to carry--
grief, the feeling of having survived. They ask themselves
how to live? Again, in this place
where long hallways fill with silence & paper flies fall

grief, the feeling of having survived. They ask themselves
why live for despair and sorrow?
where long hallways fill with silence & paper flies fall
it is impossible to imagine a song, a rising

Why live for despair and sorrow?
For every death, the world shifts unbearably.
Is it impossible to imagine a song arising,
if not from grief, from the unceasing bodies of it?

For every death, the world shifts. Unbearably
& unrehearsed a mournful symphony of birds return.
If not from grief, from the unceasing bodies of it,
songs still rise with the rhythm of lost names

unrehearsed. A mournful symphony of birds return,
trilling, in new nests, watching over what was taken,
and their songs still rise. With the rhythm of lost names,
all that must be said and sung must also be remembered

Trilling, in new nests, they watch over what was taken . . .
& into the wild future, their flailing unconcealed.
All that must be said and sung must also be remembered.
This place is swarming with flies.

THE CONFESSION

by Jan Bottiglieri, Chris Green, cin salach, and Tony Trigilio

The Gun's Confession: He held my hand and led me toward the children.
The Hand's Confession: The bodies of us matched so perfectly.
The Eyes' Confession: The light inside is gray and scalds us.
The light is a body too. Each bullet confesses a way through.

The Hand's Confession: The bodies of us matched so perfectly.
Children are running across the field.
The light is a body too. Each bullet confesses a way through
leaving escape routes for the soul.

Children are running across the field.
Teachers, too—a whole school in flight,
leaving escape routes for the soul.
They flock, the living: a murmuration.

Teachers, too—a whole school in flight,
The turmoil of hell.
They flock, the living: a murmuration.
In the weather, children fall.

The turmoil of hell.
Nothing left to confess.
In the weather, children fall
prematurely, school's out.

Nothing left to confess.
It was just another workday.
Prematurely, school's out.
The shooter was fifteen.

It was just another workday
like today, tomorrow. Write it on the calendar:
The shooter was fourteen.
The shooter was nineteen.

Today, tomorrow. Wipe it off the calendar.
The Eyes' Confession: The light inside is gray and shows us.
This is shooter seventeen.
The Gun's Confession: He held my hand and led me toward the children.

SOMEWHERE A MAN IS CLEANING HIS RIFLE

by Mark Arendt, Gregory Dunne, Chris Green, and Richard Jones

Somewhere a man is cleaning his rifle
He slips the oiled cloth into the barrel
The heft in his hands, a serious weight
With it, he would be able to speak.

He slips the oiled cloth into the barrel
He shoulders the rifle to practice his aim
With it, he would be able to speak.
Outside the window, birds are singing

He shoulders the rifle to practice his aim
Down the hall into his mirrored reflection.
Outside the window, birds are singing
While here the only sound is a clock ticking.

Down the hall into his mirrored reflection
He sees a man who wears a puzzled face,
While here the only sound is a clock ticking
That severs time: what is past: what is to come.

He sees a man who wears a puzzled face,
a man who sees his days as black holes in space
That severs time: what is past: what is to come.
It is the story about his hours, and the years--

A man who sees his days as black holes in space
What is this heavy thing in his hands?
It is the story about his hours, and the years
blown away and turning to dust

What is this heavy thing in his hands
but just an emptiness he aches to see
blown away and turning to dust
under a slowing breath and ready finger?

But how just is an emptiness he aches to see?
What remains unforeseen, beyond knowing?
Under a slowing breath and ready finger
This sad recurrence of slow days will cease.

The night seems so gentle. He does not speak.
The heft in his hands, a serious weight.
An old wound has opened. You are asleep.
Somewhere a man is cleaning his rifle.

ACTIVE SHOOTER TRAINING

by Jan Bottiglieri, Chris Green, cin salach, and Tony Trigilio

I don't know
how I ended up here
hiding with my students
behind the tipped table

how I ended up here
huddled together
behind the tipped table
practicing a truth that might come true.

Huddled together
this is an impossible job
practicing a truth that might come. True,
we love freedom here.

This is an impossible job.
Shiver. Or else withdraw.
We love freedom here
the present is not what it used to be.

Shiver. Or else withdraw.
Arm yourself with buckets of stones.
The present is not what it used to be.
The past is too far ahead.

Arm yourself with buckets of stones.
Study your Active Shooter Training.
The past is too far ahead.
The future silenced its phone.

Study your Active Shooter Training.
Put on your bulletproof backpack.
The future silenced its phone.
The shooter— acting alone.

Put on your bulletproof backpack.
I don't know
the shooter, acting alone,
hiding with my students.

ANOTHER LIFE

by Chris Green, Judith Kerman, Mary Hawley, and Mike Puican

I never used to imagine snipers.
Now enemies crouch outside. It is another life.
Let's break this down.
Once I was a child who loved the rain.

Now enemies crouch outside. It is another life.
Rain pings against my window.
(Once I was a child who loved the rain.)
Closing the curtains is no defense.

Rain pings against my window.
What is America? It is night.
Closing the curtains is no defense.
I feel we are night.

In America, it is night.
So thick you can grab hold of it.
I feel we are night.
I thought we were different.

I can't grab hold of it—
How millions have armed themselves to kill.
Yes, we are different now. Preparing
to watch our children run from snipers.

How millions have armed themselves to kill.
We will never be ready for this,
for watching our children run from snipers,
The red bead of the laser pinning them.

We will never be ready for this.
The shooter whispers the details of his life,
The red bead of the laser pinning them.
We talk until the beam is bright.

The shooter whispers details of his life
to those below running from the rain.
His red beam shines bright.
Its shadows pool around our feet.

To those below him running from the rain:
I tell you this is not America.
As shadows pool of outstretched hands and feet,
I say this is not the freedom others died for.

I tell you, this is not America.
A license to kill
Is not the freedom others died for,
Hiding in the bushes.

Freedom is not a license to kill.
Let's break this down.
Hiding in the bushes,
I never used to imagine snipers.

WAITING TO RISE

by Jan Bottiglieri, Chris Green, cin salach, and Tony Trigilio

Hear: it's happening again.
Or is this another lockdown drill?
Teachers rifling through protocol
The cries almost imaginary now.

Or is this another lockdown drill?
A child fled right out of his shoes, taking cover
(the cries almost imaginary now)—
I found them, empty in the hallway, after.

A child fled right out of his shoes, taking cover.
Blue waffle soles and Velcro straps—
I found them, empty in the hallway, after,
buried in a rubble of backpacks.

Blue waffle soles and Velcro straps.
Somewhere, a barefoot boy
buried in a rubble of backpacks
is safe, alive, waiting to rise.

Somewhere, a barefoot boy,
not even sure he is awake,
is safe, alive, waiting to rise.
His legs begin to shake.

Not even sure he is awake,
he wonders where he left them.
His legs begin to shake,
hoping his mother won't be angry.

He wonders where he left them.
Stood in them this morning and now,
hoping his mother won't be angry,
he walks on naked feet through the debris.

Stood in them this morning and now,
how to explain the bareness?
He walks on naked feet through the debris
How to wash off what he sees?

How to explain the bareness?
He felt himself less than anything.
How to wash off what he sees?
Unable to speak,

he felt himself less than anything.
Teachers rifling through protocol.
Unable to speak—
hear: it's happening again.

RED PEN

by Crystal S. Rudds, Lani T. Montreal, Aletha Osborne-Cole, Rachel L. Slotnick

I mark broken sentences about violence in blood red pen, the fragments of fractured thoughts:
lives cut short.

Run-ons, breathless, run off the page towards an unknowable future tense.
Tension drowns out comprehension, leaving lifeless words lying about
Peace and gun control. Empty phrases of condolences blot the page with pain and hopelessness.

Run-ons, breathless, run off the page towards unknowable future tense.
Lives fragmented, with no infinitives to split
Peace and gun control. Empty phrases of condolences blot the page with pain and hopelessness
How do you justify when the line has no sentence?

Fragmented, our lives crack into impossible infinitives: to teach, to grieve, to split
Times when we take work home, leave students behind
I'm trying to justify this sentence in a line:
Two of my students were killed last weekend. What syntax wouldn't suffer?

IN THE DARKNESS BEHIND THE BOOKSHELVES

by Elizabeth Bradley, Katherine LaTour, Anne Terashima, and Chris Watkins

in the darkness behind the bookshelves,
pretending dying is as real as
sunlight through closed blinds, shadows of desk legs.
Only a drill, your teacher says. But we must be prepared.

Pretending dying is as real as
arms wrapped around your knees, you hold in a cough.
Only a drill, your teacher says. But we must be prepared.
You picture the glittering spine of the carpool lane, endless.

Arms wrapped around your knees, you hold in a cough
because: You must stay silent, no matter what.
You picture the glittering spine of the carpool lane. Endless,
this silence. Not silence—your stomach growls, jeans rustling.

Because you must stay silent no matter what,
you hear the footsteps in the hall, the doorknob clicking—
this silence-not-silence. Your stomach growls. Jeans rustling,
you see how long you can hold your breath. Someone whispers:

You hear the footsteps in the hall? The doorknob clicking?
You don't hear them breathing. How could you stop breathing?
You see how long you can hold your breath. Someone whispers.
You scan book spines, find *The Sound* and . . . something you can't make out.

You don't hear them breathing? How could you? Stop breathing.
Sunlight through closed blinds—shadows of desk legs—
you scan book spines. Find the sound—something you can't make out
in the darkness behind the bookshelves.

MUZZLE REPORT

by Ann Hudson, Jeff Oaks, Liz Ahl, and Noah Stetzer

Not fireworks. Not whipcracks. The sonic boom a bullet makes.
I dive off the couch just in case
some projectile's got my name engraved on it.
I don't always trust what my ears tell me.

I dive off the couch just in case
what I hear is what I think is out there.
I don't always trust what my ears tell me.
Death can sound like fireworks, like happiness.

What I hear is what I think is out there.
What's the name of that deep-hearted drum
death can sound like? Fireworks, like happiness,
like cruelty, can take you by surprise.

What's in a name? That deep-hearted drum
busy in the background, like the footsteps
death can sound like. And fire, working like happiness,
consumes as much as it gives, leaves behind little.

Busy in the background, like the footsteps
of intent children, this uneasiness
consumes as much as it gives, leaves behind little.
I press my cheek to the dusty floorboards.

Intent on children, this unease
is a projectile with my name engraved on it.
I press my cheek to the dusty floorboards.
Not fireworks, not whip cracks—this sonic boom: a bullet.

THE BREAKING NEWS

by Jan Bottiglieri, Chris Green, Amy Moses, and cin salach

Guns going off on a tangent, a tear.
I recall the breaking news, the way it spread,
The way it stopped spreading too soon.
Time folded like the daily paper—slipshod, smeared.

I recall the breaking news, the way it spread,
reporters reporting.
Time folded like the daily paper—slipshod, smeared.
Truth is truth is Pain.

Reporters reporting
the troubling dreams. Darkness fills the house.
Truth is truth is Pain.
So you wait, you stare, give yourself over to nothing.

The troubling dreams. Darkness fills the house.
The lockdown of my body beginning.
So you wait, you stare, give yourself over to nothing,
nothing being the only thing quiet enough to tolerate.

The lockdown of my body beginning
to seem ordinary, right. No, it's
nothing being the only thing quiet enough to tolerate.
A matter of policy

to seem ordinary, right. No, it's
a map I cobble out of time,
a matter of policy
alone, lost in my head.

A map I cobble out of time,
the wound remembers the pain.
Alone, lost in my head,
no one suspects a thing.

The wound remembers the pain
replaying, rewinding, replaying.
No one suspects a thing.
Shhhhhh! I keep shouting, Shhhhhh!

Replaying, rewinding, replying
with a new kind of silence, spreading.
Shhhhhh! I keep shouting, Shhhhhh!
echoes back, static between the reports.

COPPER SHELLS

by Paulina Freedman, Madelyn Funk, Becky Harrison, & Paul O'Neill

Copper shells, gleaming: do you know what this means?
Stray bullets, like confetti, glitter on the floor.
You've never seen the color red quite like this before.
Bodies opened like piñatas under your feet.

Stray bullets, like confetti, glitter on the floor.
Silence ringing in the wake of gunfire.
Bodies opened like piñatas under your feet.
Lifeless eyes pointed upwards in shock.

Silence ringing in the wake of gunfire.
You're not sure whether to stop or run.
Lifeless eyes pointed upward in shock.
Should you start a war?

You're not sure whether to stop or run.
A child's scream haunts your every step.
Should you start a war?
The smell of gunpowder lingers too long.

A child's scream haunts your every step.
Where does the line get drawn?
The smell of gunpowder lingers too long.
The face of the future falls to the floor. Dead. Gone.

Where does the line get drawn?
Children and teachers, innocents and their keepers.
The face of the future falls to the floor. Dead. Gone.
Humans with so many steps left in their lives.

Children and teachers, innocents and their keepers.
Please, oh please, just a few decades more.
Humans with so many steps left in their lives.
Now their feet no longer stand flat on the floor.

Please, oh please, just a few decades more.
You've never seen the color red quite like this before.
Now their feet no longer stand flat on the floor.
Copper shells, gleaming: do you know what this means?

FACE THE FLAG

by Chris Green, Eliza Palumbo, Layne Ruda, and Chris Watkins

This is what it means to discharge:
a thought or prayer rains down—useless shield.
Bullets are persistent, erratically designed,
and guns suddenly appear in place of trees.

A thought or prayer rains down – useless. Shield
your body when you find hope rooted there like weeds
and guns suddenly appear in place of trees.
Take yellow tape and measure a Safe-Place in millimeters.

Your body, when you find hope rooted there like weeds,
continually unclenches. It won't happen to you—repeat it. As often as breath
take yellow tape and measure a Safe-Place in millimeters.
After, you sing the alphabet. You'll recite the pledge when Colt comes.

Continually unclench; “it won't happen to you”—repeat it as often as breath.
Stand in front of your desk, put your hand on your heart, face the flag
after you sing the alphabet. You'll recite the pledge when Colt comes.
Shoes skid on the gym floor wiped to soil, a new home to lilies and crosses.

Stand in front of your desk, put your hand on your heart, face the flag,
praise the suffering and bones.
Shoes skid on the gym floor wiped to soil, a new home to lilies and crosses.
Praise the rising generation, the way small plants grow old in a day.

Praise the suffering, and bones
begin to speak with their human voices.
Praise the rising generation, the way small plants grow old in a day
and small bodies are cramped into the ground.

Beginning to speak with their human voices:
Lead and Powder say, “This isn't our fault”
and small bodies are cramped into the ground.
Turn in ignorance as the blood level rises, almost enough to drown you.

Lead and Powder say, "This isn't our fault."

They only speak the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

Turn-in ignorance. As the blood level rises, almost enough to drown you
those drowning are recast as friends and family of the victim.

They only speak the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

Bullets are persistent, erratically designed. . . .

(Those drowning are recast as friends and family. The victim.)

This is what it means to discharge.

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