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## Success

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# SUCCESS

KATIE PETERSON

I want to choose the word “success” to capture the relationship between poetry and the global, as in Allen Grossman’s formulation from *Summa Lyrica*: “The function of poetry is to obtain for everybody one kind of success at the limits of the autonomy of the will.”<sup>1</sup> I’m tired of people talking about what fails in poetry. Haven’t we had enough of that? The work of the poem is always different, but it is never to produce stability.

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***In poetry it’s never an idea I’m after but a direction.***

”

At least it opposes that. Grossman’s definition of poetry accounts for the etymology and history of the word, which favors the sense of “coming close behind,” like Sir Thomas Wyatt and the impossible hind, rather than the sense of winning present in the (pompous, tainted) adjective form of the noun, *successful*. A Californian in sunny weather, growing up amid, and now living near, the success stories of Silicon Valley, I read with greatest hunger, these days, the writers of the Northern latitudes—Tranströmer, Heaney, Inger Christensen, but also Joan Kane, C.

S. Giscombe, dg nanouk okpik. I don’t just read to romanticize—I read to oppose my climate. I oppose the certainties of sunlight. The writers of the North often watch roads and routes disappear, appear again, disappear in conditions those of us who hug the extended middle of the globe might call harsh. I recently made a movie with my husband and a donkey. We try to have a picnic with the donkey but she’s always moving out of the frame. The frame becomes something like a disappearing road. In poetry it’s never an idea I’m after but a direction—poetry requires straining to look at something moving outside my field of vision. It’s the feeling of that necessitated migration, not the luxury of travel, and not the circumnavigation of the globe for the purposes of self-discovery, but the imagination of possible escape in the midst of palpable restraint. I revise Grossman with Californian brevity to read: “Success at the limits of the will.”

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Allen Grossman, *The Sighted Singer: Two Works on Poetry for Readers and Writers* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 209.

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KATIE PETERSON is the author of three collections of poetry, *This One Tree* (2006), *Permission* (2013), and *The Accounts* (2013). She collaborates with her husband, the photographer Young Suh, in film, artist books, and sculpture. Their recent show “Can We Live Here? Stories from a Difficult World” appeared at Mills College in Oakland this winter. She is at work on a new book of poems that might be called *I Wish I May Never Live in the United States Again*. She teaches in the English Department and the Graduate Creative Writing Program at the University of California at Davis, where she is Associate Professor.