

MAN ON EXTREMELY SMALL ISLAND

Also by Jason Koo

Poetry

*More Than Mere Light*

*America's Favorite Poem*

As Coeditor

*Brooklyn Poets Anthology*

MAN ON EXTREMELY SMALL ISLAND

JASON KOO

BROOKLYN ARTS PRESS

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*for my parents*

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There is a motel in the heart of every man. Where the highway begins to dominate the landscape, beyond the limits of a large and reduplicating city, near a major point of arrival and departure: this is most likely where it stands. Postcards of itself at the desk. One hundred hermetic rooms. The four seasons of the year in aerosol cans inside the medicine chest. Repeated endlessly on the way to your room, you can easily forget who you are; you can sit on your bed and become *man sitting on bed*, an abstraction to compete with infinity itself...

—Don DeLillo

## SWEARING BY EFFINGHAM

Effingham, IL, let's just let it all out.

Sometimes you need to call a fucking ham  
a fucking ham. As I drive home past  
your road signs toward the tranquilizer

of Thanksgiving dinner, I think  
of Effinghamians effing this and effing that  
while shifting in line at the post office  
as the one clerk not on lunch break

chats to the matron with the fifteen  
badly taped packages about her daughter's  
improving performance in AP Chem,  
but what a whelp of joy and vindication

would I let out were I to see 5 miles  
to Fuckingham, what an eternal chorus  
of honks and *Fuck yeah!* would a sign  
like that elicit from the purgatorial stream

of interstate travelers, many of whom  
may, like me, have spent the past 300 miles  
kicking a love in their brains  
astonished at the swift toggle

between tenderness and *suck you*.

One moment, caresses and reconciliation,  
the next, meatloaf to the beloved's face.  
Sometimes you need to know you're not

alone, that for your rage there's a Fuckingham Palace.

Effing Manganese, effing Tungsten,  
effing Zirconium, which one of you  
elements is responsible for the seething

in the fluid of my eyes? I shake my head  
and clear, shake my head and clear,  
and for a moment see the peacefulness of fields  
gently laid with light

but soon the film of her is there again.

Once she was a lens. Once, a bridge to each  
of the weeds. Effingham, I salute the muffling  
of your name, the comic elegance

of so much restraint, as if you were slipping  
onto the punches of tongues large aqua-blue mittens;  
in an earlier life I may have enjoyed  
a certain camaraderie in your bleachers,

booing your effing quarterback fumbling  
the effing snap, or asking what a man has to do  
to get some effing fries up in this place;  
but now I need a city to carry the rawer

sound in my chest, the hate concocting  
a whole new slew of vowels, where to unleash  
such words as I mull might not bruise  
other ears but be gratifying and returned

with thanks.

I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw  
Or heard or felt came not but from myself;  
And there I found myself more truly and more strange.  
—Wallace Stevens

No man is an island...  
—John Donne

## TARGET

Today I'm thinking of all the people not in love: I'm with you!  
I'd like to say, though one of the conditions  
Of not being in love is that you can't hear other people not in love.  
You can only hear beautiful people, who have  
Symphonies for faces: Grace Kelly, Dominique Sanda, Emmanuelle  
Béart, ah, beautiful (can you hear the cellos  
And clarinets?), but hmm, maybe not, they are beautiful but distant:  
and what we want is not only the beautiful  
But the possible: for what is love but an opening of the possible?  
To be possible you must be new and nearby:  
You must also look available, or the windows will inevitably close:  
oh Alexs with an "s" at the record store,  
Alexs so inscrutable, with your long blonde hair and Sanda-like face  
and that Sanskrit tattoo on your wrist,  
You died, you died that day I bought the new Tom Waits and said,  
"Hi, Alexs, right?" and you said, "Huh,"  
Nodding your head and not looking up: Jo Ann vanquished you,  
Jo Ann of the perfect mouth and imperfect  
Yoga technique, who gave me her number in the YMCA parking lot  
but halfway through our first coffee date  
Revealed she was married: now I'm struggling, really struggling,  
to keep her alive. I walk around these days  
And my footsteps go, *Nobody, nobody*. I cup possibility in my hands  
like a mouse. Oh you out there not in love,  
I know how it is, when you wake up in the morning and look down  
at your body like an émigré looking back  
Disgustedly at his homeland; when you peer through the blinds  
and the world is nothing but a grey side;  
When you feel each day is a dart flung at a target you keep missing  
because who, or where, or what is the target?  
The soul cannot live like this, the soul needs a cable, a clasp, its talons  
are itching for a peak, there's too much space  
And it's thinning out like smoke: you step out of the furrow of the future  
onto an asphalt present. Worse, there's  
A whiff of sin about you, because not to be in love with a person  
should never stop you from being  
In love with the world: and the problem is you've fallen out of love

with the world. You've come to hear  
An underlying *Goddammit!* in everything, and never notice the trees  
tossing their heads in the wind like conductors.

## I'M CHARLIE TUNA

I'll be sitting at home, eating a tuna salad sandwich,  
when the awareness kicks in: *Well this is a little sad.*  
The 2 PM light, weak through the trees, the crooked  
cloth napkin on my lap, crusted stains in the creases:

sad. The lunch looks almost professionally made:  
wheat bread lightly toasted, pickle perfectly placed,  
just the right smattering of BBQ chips to fill out  
the gap of plate, but still I am conscious of a blight

on it all, something that makes me stop my chewing  
and notice the minute dirt speckling the carpet,  
the cat hairs clinging to the couch, all the fine grains  
of my slovenliness. I feel too grown for my chair.

I am attacking my sandwich, really wolfing it down.  
Look at this barbecue pollen on my fingers. What is it  
about lunch alone in my apartment that makes me  
feel I am not evolving into my life but becoming

sweepable, material for a dustpan? I can hear my mom  
in the silence: *None of my friends asks about you anymore.*  
*They all feel sorry for me; they think you're a failure.*  
*Where did you get that shirt? You look like an orphan.*

Hard to disagree as I watch myself picking lint  
off my sweater and dropping it on a small helipad  
of books to my left, licking the orange microbes  
from my fingertips and dipping them right back in

to the chips. Not my solitude but my narrowness  
bothers me, how eagerly my mind takes to this  
focal field, delighting in the thought process  
of sandwich, pickle, chip, sandwich, pickle, chip,

then the variants, chip, pickle, sandwich, sandwich,  
chip, pickle, sometimes studying one of the components  
at a slower chew, the tender, watery seeds tattooed  
on the inner skin of the pickle, the pockmarked canyon face

of a chip, when it could be studying the face  
of a man, looking for the inner skin of him, the seedbeds  
there beneath the deadgrowth, combining that face  
with other, far-ranging things of the world in a process,

opening out from the cell of my apartment, taking in  
the Pentagon and penguins, car bombs, marriages,  
mudslides and satellites, helicopters disintegrating—  
already I can see the details thinning as my mind reaches

its limits. But would there be any limits if I were living  
differently? If I let more people into my life, even those  
I couldn't stand? People who act as if they've never had  
a feeling, never experienced a single moment

of transcendence—already I am doing it, keeping people out.  
I like to think I am generous, a jazzy Falstaff  
to the world, but the dirt and silence of my apartment  
read like an indictment. My mom calls, I don't pick up.

*Jason, are you there? Are you there? Jaaaay-son. I know you're there.  
Why don't you call us once in a while, let us know we have  
a son. Gee.* I finish my lunch, look at what I've left  
on my plate: dimpled pool of pickle juice, breadcrumbs,

splinters of chip. Part of me just wants to shut down,  
staring at that plate, feeling the pressure each small thing  
is putting on it, asserting its last life before being swept  
by water down the drain. I don't know how my plate

manages it, holding so much scrappy smallness up,  
not just the smallness but the lame air above it, polluted  
by my exhalations, unleavened by the light, but it does, it  
takes the weight, just as the table below it takes *its* weight,

the floor below the table, the table's, the whole apartment  
below me, the floor's; so that I *can* get up, clean my plate,  
feel the majesty running in my veins again, gift of so  
much water from an unknown source, walk confidently

down the hall into the other room, type *Hello bello*  
at the top of a new page, beginning to get past myself,  
the privilege of my emotion, this grainy actual window  
lacquering my vision: into the world ongoing

and vociferous, my fingertips tapping on the keys  
as on the smooth foreheads of cats, releasing me  
into alleyways and nooks, the shade of tanks, prying open  
all the cabinets and closed doors, poking into trash.

## AMERICAN LIMOUSINE

Slow the limousine to the side of the road and drop off *silver*,  
*moonlight*, *wet grass*. Pick up *dildo*, *shortstop*,  
*Phyllis*. “When you have arrived at Phyllis,” Italo Calvino says,  
you know you’re getting somewhere. Pick up  
*Lizzie Lozano*, who’s bought a new watch. “Do you think it’s too big?”  
“I think it looks good.” She makes a face.  
“Honestly.” On her light pink pants from Paris, the zipper flap  
opens on the left instead of the right, making  
For a startling little difference. Europe: the southpaw continent.  
Pick up *Roy G. Biv*, who, annoyed, whines,  
“Isn’t long division yellow?” Slip him a martini, leave him  
to his old friends *sun*, *sky* and *afternoon*, as  
Comfortable as couches as they hit on *table*, *window* and *avenue*  
across the aisle. “You look like Paris”  
Is their pick-up line, quoting a James Salter novel. Pick up *Salter*,  
who’s clean as a hotel. “Life is weather.  
Life is meals.” He jumps ship when *motherfucker* clambers aboard.  
“Is he mad at me?” *motherfucker* asks.  
“He better not be. I’ll blow that motherfucker up.” Pick up *cocksucker*,  
*bitch-ass*, *anilingus*. Don’t be afraid. Pick up  
*Orel Hersbiser*, who says of the slugfest, “You’ve got to believe in future  
perfect tense right now if you’re a pitcher.”  
Pick up *Big Mac*, *Whopper*, *Dr. Pepper*. Introduce *Dr. Pepper* to *Mr. Pibb*,  
two halves of the same Robert Louis Stevenson  
Soft drink. Pick up *pussy*. Pick up *Bobby Thor*. Bobby Thor stares  
into the pussy at the All Nude clubs like an oracle  
And hears, “Forget, forget, forget.” Pick up *phallic*, pick up *catharsis*.  
Timothy Speed Levitch on his double-decker tour  
Of New York announces, “If the history of architecture is the history  
of all phallic emotion, then the Empire  
State Building is utter catharsis.” Pick up *love*, pick up *dead*.  
Hemingway says one cannot remember  
The smell of a battlefield full of dead in hot weather as one  
cannot remember the sensation of being  
In love. Drop off *sun*, *sky*, *afternoon*, pick up *terror*, *scream*,  
*annihilation*. Ride for a while in silence.  
Go over long dark icy bridges, circle the empty parking lots, slow

into the weed-choked alleys. Do everything  
They tell you to do, which is nothing. Make sure to go back and pick up  
*sun, sky* and *afternoon*. “My boy,” says *sun*,  
Smiling at *terror* and nudging *Roy G. Bin*, “I’m going to turn you  
into a purple fucking trapezoid!” Pick up  
*Blob*. Infantry divisions in WWI would attack trenches in columns,  
lines or an “infiltrating blob,” writes John Keegan.  
Packed inside your elegant machine, you bring the blob, all the goopy  
disorder sloshing in the heart of a cool blue  
Panther exterior. Pick up *La Notte*, to help you with that panther finish.  
Pick up *Peggy Doig*, the mother of Boswell’s  
First child, pick up *Plorn*, Dickens’s last. Pick up *Bugs Bunny*,  
an old bunny at millennium’s end, having  
Debuted in his first film, *The Wild Hare*, on July 27, 1940. Pick up  
*Hershey*, older than Bugs: a 64-yr-old Hershey bar  
Was discovered recently at the South Pole and is now being shipped  
to the Hershey museum. Pick up *Karen Joseph*,  
Whose name, if indexed, would read *Joseph K.*, who wrote accidentally  
in an email, “How will I ever keep up  
With this HUGH beacon of love?!” She’s strong and capable  
of Hugh love, sits presidential in your limousine.  
The limousine is long. It makes room. Tinted into democratic blue  
are all the hick and cosmopolitan bodies  
That throng across your path, ferocious as a pack of pumas. Manage  
*knife-thé*. “Just the fact of your writing poetry  
Is a testament to your knife-thé,” the Polish poet says to his American  
graduate students. Drop off *comfort*.  
Says Nietzsche: “Poets always know how to comfort themselves.”

## CELL

*How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea*

—Shakespeare

She emails me this  
face in her new hat. Oh it is haunting.  
I text. one of the most beautiful  
images I have  
ever seen. Company. she texts. im sorry. my guess  
was accurate last night. Meaning  
boyfriend

drove thirteen hours  
to make sure I was not at her party,  
which I was, until I left just minutes  
before he showed up.  
The photo is her way of saying sorry now that  
the word's dead. And I have to say,  
for once

I don't hate her while  
I writhe to forgive, don't want to punish  
her by punching my thumb into the slim  
console of my phone,  
typing a language I've only learned over the dis-  
integrating battles of our  
affair,

absurd, trying to  
write *cunt* and getting *unt*, trying to write  
*cocksucker* and getting *cockpualer*,  
worst, trying to write  
*hate* and getting *have*, so that the final message reads,  
*I have you you aunt how can you*  
*love that*

*cockpualer?* And  
she responds with a *ha*—cutting through all  
the accumulating intensity,  
my feet braced against  
the bench opposite in my booth at the Heidelberg,  
my head zeroed in on a min-  
iscule

screen, my thumb a shark  
fury, so that despite my desire  
to detonate the happy hour crowd  
closing in, I can't  
help but see the comedy in the situation,  
a man engaged in cellular  
thumb war,

but the thought of her  
exploiting my soft spot for the absurd  
makes me retaliate with even more  
methodical rage.  
Something about love refuses to see itself from  
outside, especially when wound-  
ed: the

lover knows to heal  
he must step outside the self, judge his love  
for what it is, an absurd, destructive  
force, what's obvious  
already to all his friends; but to heal means to lose  
that rare, strange, stubborn perspective  
that lit

his life with meaning,  
rigged him with a power of insight that  
dropped him to the sea floor of her beauty,  
giving him a feel  
for the dark places nobody else could see; so if  
he holds on to the hurt, it is  
because

he mourns the thought of  
that seeing passing from the world, which will  
                    deaden him to pain, but with that pain, joy.

Already I can  
                    feel myself sliding from her face, this face I have kissed  
I don't know how many times, like  
                                    Hamlet

poor Yorick: from here  
I can't make out the pores and blemishes,  
                    the pads under her eyes I once fed on  
with such unflinching  
                    desire; and if I see a beauty that haunts me  
in this image, it is not the  
                                    beauty

she wants me to see,  
but the beauty of a ruin. The slide  
                    is into sympathy from desire.  
She looks at me with  
                    such love and helplessness, such regret, wearing the hat  
and scarf I bought for her, that I  
                                    feel no

disgust she's belted  
into his car, allowing herself to  
                    be driven away, taking this picture  
on the sly as he  
                    stops, perhaps, for gas and cigarettes. I drop the claims  
of the possessive self and see  
                                    her as

a human being  
riddled with abuse, unable to leave  
                    what is slowly killing her in spite of  
her love for me; and  
                    I understand. But this understanding puts me at  
a distance, even as I seem  
                                    to move

closest to her by  
seeing through her eyes I feel more firmly  
myself; calm, detached; and though one might call  
this ideal, the no-  
blest outflow of love, I refuse it. It is not *our*  
love. And I suddenly want my  
anger.

## BAD BREAK-UP TELEVISION

And now I'm watching *Fair Game* on HBO  
growing excited at the prospect of seeing Cindy Crawford's  
tits. This must be the culmination  
of my childhood, all those hours watching MTV's *House of Style*  
and being denied even a glimpse  
of what was under Cindy's mercilessly rotating bikinis.

I am not sure how I arrived at the knowledge  
that Crawford gets naked in this movie, but I am confident  
that after another half hour  
of punishing action sequences and Billy Baldwin's hair  
I will be rewarded. I begin rooting for Billy as he slowly  
earns Cindy's trust, a man I have always admired

for his choice of roles that put him into contact  
with A-list Hollywood tits, there's a kind of integrity  
in that, you have to admit, though it seems  
the director is misusing Billy's talents by having him bounce  
from one car to another in this chase scene,  
at one point he's hanging from a passenger seat door

with his feet dragging on the freeway  
and I'm wondering what kind of condition he's going to be in  
to make love later, but Billy pulls himself up  
and Cindy looks relieved, even titillated, it is at this moment  
she knows she will sleep with him.  
I understand now the function of this sequence

in the plot, which is entirely constructed  
around the removal of Cindy's tank top.  
I change the channel to avoid the close-up  
of the mole on the forehead of the guy  
who played Victor Maitland in *Beverly Hills Cop*, thinking,  
Well his career hasn't exactly blossomed since the '80s,

and what do I see on HBO West  
but *Top Gun*, chicken soup for the male heterosexual soul,

and I sink further into my couch  
briefly enjoying the feeling that I'm not, in fact, miserable,  
there's something so calming, so ethereal  
about the cosmetics of Cruise's face, we know like Kelly McGillis

that we're in the presence of greatness  
when he lowers his white-T-shirted, blue-jeaned body down  
onto the wicker chair on her porch  
with an agile *crunch*. I have to be honest, your MIG sighting  
is very important to my work, I don't normally  
invite students to my house, and I have to be honest, Kelly,

your flirting mechanism has gone seriously awry,  
that kind of deflective tactic might stop Billy Baldwin  
but not Tom Cruise, we all know he can be inside you  
in the time it takes to say "Jester's dead."

I switch back to *Fair Game* to check on Billy's progress  
and he's masterfully steering a convertible alongside

a train trying to hop from one  
to the other to get back to Cindy, nothing can stop us now  
from seeing these tetas. He lands safely  
in her box car and she rewards him  
with a few punches to the face, Are you crazy,  
Why don't you just let me go, and then they're making out

on the hood of a car that mysteriously  
materializes behind them, Billy's hands all over the soft  
upper part of her tank top  
but being oddly discreet, why don't you just remove  
that piece of clothing, Billy, we're with you  
100%! But the director, who's in complete control now, cuts

to Victor Maitland chasing the Sex Express  
in his chopper, still stewing over the machinations of Axel Foley,  
still hearing that synthed-up theme song  
in his head, and I panic as I realize that Billy and Cindy  
are on the clock, we must see these tetas now,  
Billy, there's no time for foreplay! But one can't hurry a Baldwin,

and he leans back to let Cindy and camera  
in tandem go down on him, wasting precious seconds  
as one of Maitland's men slithers into the box car  
and draws a bead on them, moving a red dot  
from one face to the other and then, just as he's about to pull  
the trigger, hesitating, awed by the sight of Cindy's breasts

finally revealed, almost disappointing now  
next to the man's reaction. He wasn't expecting this, Wow,  
look at those tits, feeling that trigger  
in the groin, wanting to see a little more, and I'm laughing  
at his hesitation but mourning his stupor  
and my own when Cindy reaches for Billy's gun and eliminates him.

## WHY CAN'T YOU MEET A NICE KOREAN GIRL

You know you're not doing well  
when the most tenderness you've felt in months  
comes in the form of Lucy Liu  
touching you on the back in a dream.

You were on a secret mission together.  
You were wearing wet suits. She put the most  
discerning little pressure on your back  
with her hand. But maybe that's just how long

it's been since you were touched.  
Maybe you yourself were touching your back in bed.  
But even so, how does that explain  
the striking reciprocity in that touch, the way

she looked at you as if to say, *What's wrong?*  
*I know something is wrong*, then took your hand  
and kept her eyes on you as you walked  
toward the stage in a boy's prep school

auditorium, all those eyes squinting at you  
from the darkness as you tried to prove  
you'd grown up to be a man deserving of Lucy,  
yet struggled to put one flipper

in front of the other with any kind of dignity.  
Yes, I'm in trouble, Lucy, you whispered,  
I still haven't gotten over high school  
apparently, and now my confidence in love

and myself has been shattered, plus  
I'm not wearing a jacket and tie, which are required  
for morning assembly. Hard to believe  
anyone would listen to this, let alone Lucy Liu,

but she was listening with rapturous concern,  
she was really in love with you or just  
a much better actress than you'd given her  
credit for; either way, you started to think

when you woke that your mom was right  
about you needing to meet a "nice Korean girl," Lucy wasn't  
Korean or even what your mom would call  
"nice," in fact she'd probably call her slutty

because of her role on *Ally McBeal*  
or simply because she was Chinese; but in the dream world  
Lucy was close enough, with your mom  
as backlight. Nice Korean girl, nice Korean girl,

you murmured as you burrowed back into bed,  
hoping to see more of Lucy, wondering why it was always  
a *nice* Korean girl your mom was pushing,  
why did being Korean inherently make a girl nice,

you'd met many not-so-nice Korean girls  
your mom instantly would have preferred to some  
of the nice non-Korean girls you'd dated,  
she *could* just tell you to score a cruel Korean girl

since Koreanness, in the end, always made one nice.  
Lucy was pulling you after her diving into the stage  
turned into the shallow end of a pool, amazingly  
you didn't scrape bottom, only a nice Korean girl

could have managed that. Then you were hiding  
under a battleship when your commander-in-chief got shot,  
his clueless mug went floating by you  
and a dirty blonde lingerie model next to Lucy

swam up to avenge his death. You thought  
Lucy would stay put but she left to help, then came back  
wielding a harpoon and said, Come on,  
get out of there. But you didn't want to break cover.

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Named one of the “100 Most Influential People in Brooklyn Culture” by *Brooklyn Magazine*, Jason Koo is the author of the poetry collections *More Than Mere Light*, *America’s Favorite Poem* and *Man on Extremely Small Island*. Coeditor of the *Brooklyn Poets Anthology*, he has published his poetry and prose in the *American Scholar*, *Missouri Review*, *Village Voice* and *Yale Review*, among other places, and won fellowships for his work from the National Endowment for the Arts, Vermont Studio Center and New York State Writers Institute. An associate teaching professor of English at Quinnipiac University, Koo is the founder and executive director of Brooklyn Poets and creator of the Bridge ([poetsbridge.org](http://poetsbridge.org)). He lives in Brooklyn.