

At one point in Sally Ashton's new book, *The Behaviour of Clocks*, the speaker says, *I testify to what I saw*. It is by meticulously bearing witness to events throughout the book that the speaker is able to celebrate and transcend the mutability of Time, referenced in the title. In this sense, Ashton's real and imagined travelogue hearkens back to Jean Follain's classic, *A World Rich in Anniversaries*, while also becoming on its own one of the most engaging books of prose poetry I've read in the last ten years.

—**PETER JOHNSON**, author of *Eduardo and "I"*

Ashton's investigative meditations maintain constant awareness of territories shared by physics and poetry. These wonderfully reflective poems arise from something like a physicist's precision of mind and a shaman's sensitivity of vision. Wistful, fluent, and beautiful, the book launches inquiries into time, being, motion, and travel. Ashton gives us a poetry and a physics that probe powerful unseen forces. She shows us how both practices manifest as acute attention to and curiosity about the world. An expanded sense of *terroir* pervades these poems. This unfolds as a poetics of place not limited to wine and vineyards, but rather enlarged to address an emotional and spiritual sense of grateful, yet tenuous located-ness on our fragile planet.

—**AMY GERSTLER**, author of *Scattered at Sea*

Poems are magical because they operate both inside and outside of time. Sally Ashton's ambitious and marvelous *The Behaviour of Clocks* uses Albert Einstein's unusually poetic theories of time as points of departure to travel across and through time, countries, concepts, and characters. She brilliantly marries the narrative of prose with the lyricism of poetry to create a series of hybrid texts that echo Charles Baudelaire, Gertrude Stein, Francis Ponge, and Mary Ruefle. Her poems take us to Italy, to the past, and to the moon, but also to those vast continents of the imagination where *wherever we wander we're home*. Dear Weary Traveler, I have good news. You can at last sit back and relax. Make yourself comfortable because you will not want to leave this book.

—**DEAN RADER**, author of *Self-Portrait as Wikipedia Entry*

In *The Behaviour of Clocks*, Sally Ashton's poems move like foreign landscapes, strange and luminous as the *wind pressed against blades of grasses*. Invoking DaVinci, Einstein, Whitman, Pessoa, time is a radiant prism in her deft hand—elliptical, backward, stilled, and spun off the wheel of the ordinary altogether. Reaching toward history as vigorously as a *glossary of tomorrows*, her riveting inquiry loosens time from its linear track. If Ashton *brings home the ruins and dreams them out*, then we are gifted the chance to dwell in all the *possible circumferences*.

—**JENNIFER K. SWEENEY**, author of *How to Live on Bread and Music*

THE
BEHAVIOUR
OF CLOCKS

POEMS

SALLY ASHTON

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Who knows where the time goes?

—**SANDY DENNY**

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PREFACE

I took the title, *The Behaviour of Clocks*, from the name of a chapter in Albert Einstein's *Relativity: The Special and General Theory*, a book he wrote for the layperson in an attempt to simplify his theories of time, space, and motion, to make them more accessible.

I'm not a scientist. I became interested in Einstein after attending a local conference on creativity where a photograph of him playing a violin appeared on the screen. It struck me immediately. I'd never heard that he often played his violin, Lina, when struggling with complex equations. The speaker talked about the connections between scientific inquiry and artistic practice. I live in the Silicon Valley, birthplace of the tech industry and epicenter of innovation. It was as if I'd just been let into the club. Before long, I was pestering a physicist friend, Stefan Moeller, with questions. He suggested Einstein's book, and off I went, intrigued by possible parallels in these two theoretically oppositional practices. It was Einstein's famous "thought experiments," a series of metaphors involving the movement of trains and clocks, that began to captivate my imagination. Albert became my unwitting muse.

He's not an easy teacher. However, before long I found that inhabiting his thought experiments in my struggle to grasp the spacetime continuum began to frame my own work's inquiry into time—the simultaneity of the past, present, and future in how each informs any moment—and ultimately shaped this book.

Sally Ashton



A Theory of Relativity

I stand at the window of a railway carriage.

—ALBERT EINSTEIN

Across from me on a train Albert sat facing backwards, a little table between us, his forehead pressed against the glass. His eyes flickered as if to count passing fence posts. At length he reached a small notebook from a chest pocket, placed it on the table, jotted something down. I tried not to stare but couldn't make out what he wrote even when I did. He smiled. *May I trade seats with you for a while, my dear?* What could I say? In spite of my motion sickness, I agreed. For one thing, the train travelled a relatively straight path, plus his eyes were so kind and sad. He steadied my elbow until I was seated, took his seat, turned again to the window, again to his notes. Then I watched, as he had, the landscape recede, what I knew blurred in immeasurable distance. The sky lost light, Albert's white head bobbed, and just before I slept a luminescent clock appeared in the sky, though now I see it was the moon itself wearing a clock face that watched us speed by, or did we too appear to be standing completely still?

ONE

A ship is a piece of floating space

—MICHEL FOCAULT

You travel by airship—a jet—a placeless place at once threshold and destination, neither here nor yet there. You fly, translated to a café table set on uneasy cobble under some broad-leafed tree, the days turning to memories you will call “Portugal,” or “Italy,” or “that summer when.” You navigate by train schedule, by guidebook, by the sidewalk underfoot, and think you could stay. Traveling itself a placeless place you begin to feel at home in. You learn to move slow in the afternoons, to count change or be shortchanged, to say “I don’t speak . . .”

Translation, the movement of meaning from one language to another, connects thought to voice, a floating space between people. Time, memory, meaning—these spaces by which you travel.

Airport Malpensa, Milan

In flight the late day gleams red, attendants pass out eye masks, pull window shades closed, turn off lights. Call it night. It isn't any hour but a place hurtling over land then water, across clouds and stars, the misted window, out of day through night and day again while no time passes but we pass through, rushed to a future that frames a tilted *now*. The stem of my watch falls off, disappears somewhere under my feet. No one meets us. We get our luggage, our passports stamped, trudge outside to the line of buses waiting in the dark of the next moment already falling forward.

When We Were in Italy

When we drove across the country, past the fields, past the paper forests. When we noticed every village was marked by a steeple. When we mourned each farmhouse tumbled into the cave of itself. When we knew none could be restored. The sun said this plainly, its words a glossary of tomorrows it will not be turned back from. Oats drying in a field. Everywhere a chance to forget. And one evening from a hillside after dinner, lightning bugs flicker in an olive orchard. No shooting star, but the wine is very good.

The Road to Chualar

I testify to what I saw—something aglint in the distance. A wink. Maybe miracles at work like new houses or springs of water fountaining forth, the adobe furrows rinsed wet and black. To the west, the mountains' dark margin held it in, held them back—fields of gold, a bird turning on silvered wings—*did not our hearts burn within us?* Shadows fell between the mountains' knees, and what could ignite did, just like that, spent vines ablaze, the sky forgotten. Stands of poplars, too, offered a type of forgiveness to incurious cows. People bowed low among lettuces. It was over in an instant. The CD ended, the road pulled away so I wouldn't see the shining dim or night veil what I had seen, what burns within.

Some Birth Day

Because my soul, open like a tin can under heaven, caught lost light refracted from a planet or star I never saw but felt illuminate my empty core, the dark matter of fact, and like a can once opened can never be resealed, this became my because, the thin curved metal of my remaining days, the lid-off-mouth-open-catch-all-that-can-be mystery of moment rolled under aluminum stars, a comet's glance, the knife-blade moon slicing, sliding, O Moon. And you, Sun, bleached memories of wakefulnesses flickering empty as a can, complete as a can can be opened, open empty under heaven, matter's dark fact and the seasons, turning.

Family Album I

* * *

A snowstorm, rural Tennessee, 1919. Grandma goes into labor at home two months early. The doctor sets the baby aside; how can it live. The midwife, a cousin, swaddles my dad and lays him in a box surrounded by flannel-wrapped canning jars she's filled with warm water.

* * *

As a baby Dad never crawls but scoots on his bottom. Grandma sews one of Grandpa's old banjo heads to the seat of his britches to keep them from wearing out.

* * *

Dad's family is seventh-generation Methodist, which means since Creation. The family, Tennessee farmers, supported the Confederates. Dad finds mini balls, bullets, a cannonball, and Civil War uniform buttons, both sides, in the fields where he plays.

* * *

Via Sacra

A pilgrim's journey up a worn cobbled path twists through trees and centuries, polished by faithful feet: the penitents, the grateful ones, those who sought particular mercy, some deliverance from pain. Dioramas stand along the way, life-size, Christ's passion recreated, a donation-only coin box, figures viewed through glass. Press a button for illumination. Light falls across veined marble—the shadows of suffering resume.

I continue walking, peering in windows, hoping. I want something to move.

Side Trip

We hike to a hilltop above the Collio outside Villa Russiz up a tractor path that steers through the vineyards—dusty, hot, steep—glad for walking shoes and the breeze that blows cool off the Adriatic, off the Alps. The two winds meet here, a local says. A domed mausoleum stands silent among a crown of cypress and pine that bends and murmurs like the oldest story. We are quieted and see the lay of the land we've come to, a countryside whose bloody battles lie healing beneath vineyards, an occasional stone farmhouse, the spire of some village. It's as if we'd traveled by horseback or by memory. By the scent of the earth. We nap there under the rocking branches. We watch the sky.

But life is a busy thing, each ant, a fly buzzing near. A leaf that turns. Words that won't fill my mouth, my mouth full of emptiness like wind pressed against blades of grass. The man who brought us there sits up. *Time is short*, he says, *time is beautiful*. Our son appears then among the grapevines. One row plowed, one left to weeds.

Gratitude

The woman woke from her nap. A breeze tossed the greeny branches overhead. Some bird wheedled in a way that matched the motion of the wind, the leaves. A stem of grass teased her bare ankle. The dry air buzzed. In one direction vineyard unfurled, rising, falling with the hills. In the other the steeple and tiled roofs of some small town stood almost asleep. She didn't want to move either. It was good that dinosaurs were extinct. They would have ruined everything.

Jet Lag

Now my canoe glides across a small lagoon. I trail my fingers and watch the ripples fan out behind the boat as long as I can. Already the twists and turns of the journey recede, and the canoe noses toward shore. I don't want to get out. When I look down at the water, a face searching in a wavery mirror peers back. The bow runs aground on the sandy bottom, but I pretend to sleep. My name is called. I answer *I'm sleeping* though nothing comes out of my mouth.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sally Ashton is editor-in-chief of *DMQ Review*, an online journal featuring poetry and art. Writing across genres, in collaboration with artists, and specializing in short prose forms, Ashton is the author of three collections, *Some Odd Afternoon*, *Her Name Is Juanita*, and *These Metallic Days*, and she is assistant editor of *They Said: A Multi-Genre Anthology of Contemporary Collaborative Writing*. She has taught at San José State University, UC Santa Cruz Extension, and workshops including *Disquiet: International Literary Program* in Lisbon, Portugal. She served as Santa Clara County's Poet Laureate, 2011-2013. Other honors include fellowships from Arts Council Silicon Valley and a Lucas Artist Residency at Montalvo Arts Center. She lives in California with her husband.