

ANNOUNCEMENT: Alan D. Perlis, a former member of the *BPJ* editorial board, has a chapbook *Skin Songs*, (1977, 40 pp., \$3. paper, from Thunder City Press, P.O. Box 1126, Birmingham, Ala. 35202).

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Cover: Sondra Boggs

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NO SIGNAL FOR A CROSSING

"Lady you're a poet do you think about death?"
I untangle my legs from his, listening,
knowing it's himself he wants to hear.
He tells me he dreams about trains,
"Always the same dream, the train running me down."
In moonlight he turns toward me,

but all I want is to feel those muscles
singing against my skin.
Our lives divide us. There is no signal
for a crossing, no place but here
that we can meet.

He rides me like a locomotive
chug and chug and chug and chug.
I am a field, marked in lines and grids.
I am a stuffed dummy, tied to the tracks.

Like any woman I've been shaped
by father, mother, husband, lover.
It's an old story, a long story
I've lost the need to tell.
I think about surfaces:

the angle of a hip
where lust and loneliness collide,
the grace of a smooth back,
that point on the far
horizon, the last stop.

Rhoda Donovan

THREE POEMS**The Retriever***for Jim Smith*

The farmer goes out so early,
crossing his fields in search of
a child. He stoops. He pries a find
from the hard clay: an ant's palace, a dog's
yellow skull. What makes him
brush the loose dirt from it? Call it
a pet, call it something he lost
years ago, call it his life. Now he takes
it back; he fondles it, holds it
to his lips, brailles the sockets, tries
to imagine a time before he felt
the crop inside, the harvest of bones.

Filthy Rich

Sky a gray slab,
the wind picking up,
you say your father went out
in such weather to jump
coal trains on the steep grade.
Then he was rich,
running his hands over it,
drawing its dark onto his skin.
He heaved it down
like a gambler who knew his luck

would run out, the heat
would go out, and the world

go on. Sky ripening,
the fields dusted with snow,
your father came through
the flurries, hugging coal

in his arms, his pockets
crammed full: money
to burn, money that stained.
Each time less scrubbed out.

The Fisherman

for my father

Back when I was still trying
to have a boyhood, my father
would take me fishing,
and lie with a book in good
tall grass by the dank Sandusky.

He wasn't fond of fishing.

So whenever he had to rise
and pluck some sorry crappie
from my hook, he would murmur
soft apologies as it struggled
in his hands like live money.

And he always threw it back.

He'd stand there with the sun
in his eyes, and then kneel,
holding his big hands out
to the river like rusty hooks
he sometimes dreamed of losing.

Will Wells

THREE VOICES : DELPHI

1.

I am the voice of the boy
who was killed
by wandering shepherds.
My father spoke
with the words of a poet,
his friends came with him
onto the mountain, Parnassus,
over the shrine of Apollo,
and snow was still high on the peak.

I was seven
and my body was clear as Parian marble,
my eyes green as the ripening olive.
Why did we go?
I was never told
except I know how my father
believes in old myths
and his friends believe in his words.

They chose a high camp
on the ridge where the bay swept out
from rocks beneath us,
and jumbled ruins clung
like shattered wisps of an old eagle's nest.
The sun sank into our campfire.
I heard their voices
in the circle of dark,

my father lifted up parts of songs
in the old tongue and then lapsed
into his own before I wriggled
and faded like a spark into my dreams.
How could I know what would await me
when I woke at dawn
and left them sleeping among tilted bottles
to walk over ridge and gully,
looking only for a sight of the summit
my father had promised we'd reach that day.

They were stooped in a circle,
backs and vests of lamb's wool turned to me,
so at first I thought them animals,
expected the bell-wether's startled face,
but found only masks of wild eyes
and their hands on my arms,
and still I was not afraid
because these were like the poor men
of my father's island,
the ones who live in stones and gorse
and talk to their sheep and gods.
They did not treat me roughly
for I was the answered prayer,
the wandering image of Dionysos
the mountain had given them.
When my feet bled in the long path
they lifted me up
and took me on their shoulders,
and the old one who walked beside me
touched my thigh
as if I were sacred glass,
the chalice of flesh.

High on the ridge
near the edge of snow
they piled rocks for an altar
and whetted the knife in my presence.
I wept and struggled
when they led me up.
I was cold when they took
what clothes I had.
How could I understand
the gentle reverence
they touched all parts of me with,
or the strange words
they said through my pleas?
With love they thonged my feet and hands,
with love they raised me up
as if I were newly delivered
from some prize ewe.
The thin blade slit my voice.

I would tell my father
*Live in the sacred body,
let the hands that caress you
lift you lovingly
before you are set down on stone.*

They found me in Spring.
I'd turned to bones.
My father no longer sings.
The old gods have fastened his tongue.

2.

I am the voice of the place.
I speak for the almond trees

and the eagles.

We blossomed here long before
the coming of altars.
In these twists and curvets of stone
the sun is always drawing us out,
coaxing our flowers into
the welcoming drone of the bees.
Before they came we cast our fruit
in profusion into the tufted weeds,
and the wild goats grazed at our feet.
In one place for all these years,
in one place watching stones hewn out,
white marble outshining our petals,
the bleating of sacrifice
while earth, that drags at our roots
and eats what we leave,
drinks itself black with blood,
we have watched the ground devour those stones,
the men loose their hammers
and lovers under our boughs fall asleep,
and our honey still flows in one place
fixed between sea and sky.

We rise on our still wings
only on what we feel
in spread sinew and feather,
and lifting in circles from perch to perch
as the sun draws the air up into itself,
we spiral toward our golden hole in the sky
and hear the voice of air,
deep breathing of earth,
up past rough jaws of rock
where we rest and peck

at the split and ruddied fur of the hare,
 past the last eddy of cove and cusp
 and into the cold river
 that flows forever from snows and peaks
 till the trees lose their shapes
 and the temples are nothing but scars
 and the bay is a finger a wide sea jabs
 at the land, and we are seven circles in tiers,
 our eyes turned now to the sun,
 our wings on fire to rise.

3.

. . . speaks now
 speaks forever my voice
 the unending river
 with no source no ocean
 of destination always flowing
 that they may dip into it
 with their own vessels,
 holding a moment
 in the cupped palm
 this fragment this still
 clear song Apollon
 Apollon . . .

SONG OF INNOCENCE

From The Doctrine of Selective Depravity

Snickers Bar. Firm and rippled
chocolate on top. Biting it you pass
through caramel down to malt and peanuts
back to chocolate. Caramel threads out
you bite a piece off. Make it curl
upward, look at it. Suck the air in
sides of your mouth, chew, taste
better, too. Chew. Watch
feet going by, legs,
hips and arms. Going. Right.
On. Sun on heads, arms,
shoes, papers. On ears, hands,
dark glasses, caps. One
turns, comes towards you. Sits
next to you on your railing. Looks ahead.
Looks around. Looks at you.
Pops some air out of his lungs.
Waits, then says *Oof*. Silence.
Snickers starts to pop in your mouth.
Tastes better. Swallow. More.

Smack. The man says smack. So
wait until the caramel softens. Then
say *fifty dollar*. Make sure
you say it juicy so if he the Law
you can un-say it; meantime
you can figure *thirty-five you paid
from fifty leave you fifteen* so you wait
some more just wait he nervous
now popping that air, and *oof*.

You just get down and walk,
he coming on, around the corner where
an alley. In. When you reach to get
another Snickers in your candy sack he knows.
You keep your hand in. Wait. *See
your money.* He fumbling in a pocket.
Pitch your shoulder at his balls, reach
and feel for gun. None. *Hey. Shit,* he says,
but got the money. Give him a bag.
Say *Nice stash. Pure.*
I got more. Come back. Go.

You move along the sidewalk. Hold
your candy sack. The Hit Man not
here, not today. Not may be.
You are Innocence. You laugh. He always
run you off from the girls. Not
smarter. No so. She likes you. Warm.
Say *I like you. Warm.* Hold
her close. Lie on her. Play. Move
her with your mouth. *Too much,* she says,
you're too much. Then
eyes closed, pulls you closer.
Better than the Hit. You know. Because
you seen it: Hit he got to hurt,
he got to *give it to her* what
she wants but more, too much, but really.
You know. You know more because
you seen and once you seen you know.
Like the burning. Like the Hit
he didn't think of burning up
his mama. Only her. But really you.

You know. Standing by the Crescent Baths.
Massages. Turkish. Some he-shes here
who buy. Wait till Big Joe leaves
the door, the dodgem. Through the doorway, puckered
plaster, flowers, designs. Peeling.
You can hear the steam, sometimes shouts.
Edge in the dressing room. Poker.
Seven he-shes from a place on South
Park Way, the chorus line.
They got their wigs off now, just
poker playing. Stand and wait.
Crinkle paper. One looks.
What? asking. Wait. Then
crinkle again. *Betty Lou*
one calls out. High.
Yoo-hoo laughing, saying *ante*
up. Talking high and low.
Door opens and a tall one pokes
a head in, saying *washing out*
my hair. You crinkle one again.

Saying *You just come along here*
honey. You go on down a hallway where the steam
room. Skinny, with that towel draped
around, saying *What you got?*
You say *Candy*. Make the he-she laugh.
What else? Something may be good
you say, *fifty dollars*. Crinkle.
Smack? the he-she asks. You don't say
nothing. Voice fluttering. Like a butterfly.
You can see how much he wants. You can see.
Looking at you now, reaching out
I can make you comfy smiling

make his eye lids open. *Fifty dollars* you say. *You got?* Nothing. Just stands there. You close up the sack. *Wait* the he-she says. *Just wait.* Goes out. You can hear the poker up the hall. Steam in the pipes. Voices stop. Then *What the shit* and two feets coming, one bare, one with shoes.

You don't hide no place. Big Joe saying *What you doing kid?* grabbing on your shirt. Taking the sack. *Jes talking to the man* you say. *No* the he-she says *he's peddling me* eyelids open and breathing puffy. What he wants is just to take your stash. Not pay. That why you say *Gimme back my candy* holding out a hand: Big Joe saying *Candy huh?* looking inside, poking. *Shit, these is candybars, Durly* saying to the he-she, *what the hell.* *But it can't* — he-she starts and then he don't say no more. Because he can't. He better not. And Big Joe gives you back your sack and says *Git the hell on outta here.* And you take the sack and out of here, out of door, out of here

for now. Anyway. And you can see there still a little bag of smack way down there, hiding. Where it's buried. Where you buried it.

But you cry *I didn't do nothing man*
saying to Big Joe, walking slowly.
Jes git the hell out. And stay.
Now passing through the poker room.
Crying. *What the hell you do beating*
up on little kids? they hollering
to Big Joe. *Shee-yit* he says
and then he put his face down
close at yours and says *You'll cry*
some more. I hear that Shank is coming
out this afternoon. And picks you up
and put you right on. Out. The door.
Where the afternoon sun. Behind
Nation of Islam. Towers. Going
down behind the railroad, behind
the police station house. Blue Light Lounge.

Which is where you going. But then a hand
gets hold of you: the he-she, Durly. *Hey.*
He still after it. You step out in cars.
Hey just where you going? now he coming
on. Blue Light just ahead.
All dressed up now. Not in drag.
Black pants, leather jacket.
Hoo. *Kid we going to talk*
or no? Don't say nothing. *You going*
to the Lounge? You want to go to the Lounge?
Let's go to the Lounge? puffing himself.
You walking towards the little roof on poles
that come out to the curb. Get under. Stand
Wait. You have the feeling. Now.
Well? Well? He is quakey now.
Voice has got the shakes. You know

he got the fifty dollars. But
 he still don't want to hand it over.
 This is one he has to want, to hand it over.
 He wants, but not to hand it over. Yet.

Now the Fixer comes around the corner.
 You can hear them. Two inch heels.
 Shades. *Mmm* he says. Looks
 at you. Stop. Looks at the he-she.
 Wait. Moves his head. Sideaways.
 At you. That makes the Durly look
 away. The Fixer moves his head
 again. You can see the he-she put
 his hand in pocket. Fiddle. Pull
 it out with money. *Fifty dollar*
 you saying as the Fixer steps up close:
 you take the money, count. Put
 inside pants, inside jockeyshorts.
 Reach in sack, give the bag.
 Fixer moves his head again.
 And the Durly going. *What about them*
steam baths? the Fixer says to you.
That one the steam baths you say him back
I done that trick. He won't take me off.
He don't even scare. Just a he-she.

Fixer watches as the Durly goes
 inside. *But he got money* you saying
I know he got more. The Fixer looks
 at you. *Smell it. Mmm.* Laughs.
Find out where he live the Fixer says.
 He looks across the street. Where the Crescent.
There somebody else. Over there.
 Nodding. *Um.* You saying you got

to go back to your stash. Then you see.
Then you go. Shadows in the street
now. Car lights on.

Go around the corner. Up
on Thirty First. To an old apartment.
Living only on the first floor now.
Two walls of mailboxes
mostly open. Last one
on right. Three little baggies
inside. Your sister cut it on the kitchen
table. Put it into baggies. You keep
it here today. In the mail, safe.

Put them in your sack. Then you hear
the breathing. Know before you look
around. The Hit standing behind.
Bad. Badder. In the corner. Wait.
Hold your hand in candy sack.
Sound of walking on the stairs; now
you turn. The Hit. Plenty mad.
The walking coming closer. He turns.
Out the door. Now the other door
opening. *You lost your mama little
boy?* Lady. Big. Maybe grab you.
No ma'm. Standing looking at you. *Oh.*
Looking sorry. *Well where she at then?*
*She at the hospital you say just gone in
with my little sister. Your little sister sick?*
she asks. *Well yessm you say but Mama she
working for the Man. All day. Hard.*
Still standing there. *I ain't got no place.*
To go. So I waiting. She looking at you.
Swallows. *You just wait she says. Just wait.*

Bruce Cutler

TWO POEMS**The Telephone Operator**

For twenty years
she's spent her nights
trying to plug up the holes,
a headset clasping her by the ears,
holding her in place
like the secret the priest hears
in the confessional.
And like the priest,
she stays up all night
absorbing their sins. Her
prayers are numbers and
she knows them by heart.
Even in her sleep she
rolls them over in her mind:
police, fire department,
all night pizzeria.
She wonders at
how easy it is to hold
the city in her hand
like the formless soul
of a scared man.
Even the obscene caller
knows her as his wife.
She is the last one he dials
after all the others have
taken his dark voice into their beds,
persistent as insomnia.

She is the one who
cannot say no. And after
she's taken the message
and filed it in her catalogue
of numbers and emergencies,
she will put him on hold
where he'll burn before her,
a tiny light that shines all night
like the candle the priest offers
for the sinner humming
in his ear.

The Second Wife's Lovesong

The first time you took me out
in your fast car
I felt the cold, the whiplike
touch of speed, sex's awkward jitterbug
snapping steel fingers between us.
You warmed me with her fox-fur coat
which lay in the backseat
like a sleeping child.
"It's a fake," you said,
"don't worry,"
But when I put it on
I felt the fox
still breathing inside it.

Since then I have come home
to sleep beneath her lace ruffle,
to be the actress whose big break came
when the star leaped from

a window.
I think she is my mother,
this fox,
the way she sings to me
long after you go to sleep,
the way she tucks me into the bed,
that silk-lined coat they made
from her hide.
I think she is my sister,
this star
disappearing again whenever I try
to learn her secrets,
a flash of red fur
free as fire, free
as my breath burning holes
in the stillness of this room.

Pat-Therese Francis

FROG SONG

I went down
among the frogs
and stood above
the barrel of their song.

From their boxes
in the hollows
they applauded me
and asked my name.

The sky went moonless,
the sky went netless above.
I raised a shout
and flung it in among their huts.

And they were nowhere:
as still as slate
they watched me with their ears,
the immense angle of me,

moving by their green cut
at the road's edge and up
to the unshuttered house
sunk in lilacs and apple flowers.

Quiet. Until, one by one,
they began to roll
the round pulse of my name
along the swamp floor,

gathering it at the root
and threading it through
their hundred voices: my forever
amplified divided name

became their song and I,
proud shouter, nameless,
will not beg
it back from them.

Robert Clinton

READING THE X-RAYS, APRIL,

phalanges of your left hand
 float around the pencil
 you're gray in the dark film
 floating how do i read
 when radiation floats right through
 your flesh of any color your white
 bones?

----- inscriptions at Persepolis
 carbon the soft-cut clay
 Akkadians would wedge
 by stylus, right to left, collapsing
 full round objects into pictures
 pictures into outlines
 into symbols less than pictures
 but enduring

scraped in the rock at Hamadan
 -----if *mouth* is a square with the tongue >=|<|
 lapping to the left, and *water* ¶
 is a rain of gentle arrows, *drink* fills the mouth >=|<|
 with floating arrows
 as the phalanges of your fingers
 move in the dark stiff film

-----you step forward white
 as i remember you with dark about to
 close in from the corners
 slick emulsion

about to cast you gray:
 your bones, the infinitely shadowed fine
 lines of your hair, invisible

the print of your insole here
 in shadow
 Cuneiform
 the three bones of your ankle
 jelled and swiveled in the womb
 poised as one Rosetta:
 the back foot
 Demotic
 Hieroglyphic
 Greek
 your footstep forward sprung from the old signs
 Persian
 Susian
 prattle of Babylon
 -----in such a dark
 of information, clinched
 in the cuneate skull
 it's how to read the fine susurus
 of your body how to read
 your stepping forward from the film,
 a line of graphite floating
 over your wrist, where the single cuneiform
 bone
 one delicate wedge in a surd of seven
 gray in the maze of you, writing;
 it's how to read
 the single message you send
 there being no comparison in Hamadan, Persepolis,
 or the shadowed style of other women?

THREE POEMS**Peace and Quiet Are Not the Same Thing**

At the exact moment the gay queen of Carnival
is crowned in New Orleans, ninety miles away,
and farmboys from the dry counties of south
Mississippi plow down Bourbon Street, feet
chattering through beer cans and shattered
bottles, their eyes gleaming like disc blades—
at the exact moment the whole raree-show goes
wild and streamers of purple, gold and green
winnow down from balconies through the uproar,
I am alone, stabbing a posthole into the hard earth
off Valley Road. The beer I drank before leaving
last night gleams on my forearms, back, my brow as
I rest, watch dust a pickup raised five minutes ago
settle back onto itself. I've hit rock just inches
down, not deep enough to stop, and the gatepost
must go here—I did not leave to dig around stone,
this knot beneath the flesh. I came to this dry county
to strike this one spot, to spend muscle and will
against buried rock, to hear my breath lunge and cough,
then rest for only this moment and listen to the air—
the earth draws the dust down, quiet gathers and
tightens like a heart forcing one last beat.

Coastal Bermuda Hay

There, across the pasture
laid flat beneath the sun,
long dry hour after hour,
round after round away,
tucked between the roots
of a sweet gum, within
a round shadow circumscribed
by the brightest light,
a quart jar of ice water,
the cool click and tumble
of leaves overhead, Soon,
soon I will be there.

Storm Watch

I can do little but watch. A cloud bank
crests the dark line of scrub oak and slash
pine to the west of our pastures, rises
like blood up an angry man's neck. I
fortify the land still between the storm
and my field of drying hay with whatever
comes to mind: a hogback ridge or two that

perhaps will head the squall, or the thick
gumbo of cypress and blackwater where rain
could stick and spend itself unnoticed.

Light and shadow seize and release the field.
The wind spins clouds around the sun, turns
weathervanes wildly on the barns, points me
one way, another, another: this moment or
the next may signal the storm's course.

I watch, count the seconds between lightning
and thunder, count to myself, measure, as if
measure were defense against those smeared
charcoal skies: across the bottom, the trees
have disappeared into a cobalt gauze of rain.

A mist swirls around the storm's cold center,
teases at the edge of the hay field, sifts
through the windrows toward me, past barriers
of earth and air and self-deception.
I can do nothing but watch.

Find cover, and watch.

Michael Pettit

WHITEY

“. . . just a line to let you know
Mom had a heart attack yesterday.
Hate to scare you but at her age. . . Cora.”

The words lurch on the page.

I've been expecting this message.
My mother is eighty-five.
She's three thousand miles from here.

I grasp these posts to regain my balance.

But I cannot eat. I cannot sleep.

It's a sweltering summer day.
We're riding in a streetcar:
My mother, Cora, and I.
Mamma is scrawny and sallow,
with frizzy taupe hair,
and eyes so odd she pretends to look at her lap.
Cora, who is ten, is swarthy,
with crimped black hair and brown eyes.
I am five, thin, towheaded, gray-eyed.

My sister and I are picking our noses.
Mamma whacks Cora.
Strangers twist in their seats to glower.

Mamma crouches towards the women across
the aisle: "I don't hit Whitey.
She hasn't got long ta live."

Home, in our little brown bungalow, I droop.
"Don't brood," Mamma scolds.
The sunken eyes—one brown, one gray—watch me.

I jest *said* that. I was havin a spell
with my nerves n sumpin come over me
n I *said* that."

Days later, I'm still drooping.
"I *told* ya!" The witch-stare warns me.
"I jest made it *up*!"

Cora found a chum to cuff her about.
I languished on the couch.

In kindergarten, with hands folded, lips locked,
I was no more trouble than a trillium.
The teacher coaxed me into motion with crayons,
nourished me with praise.

Then another summer clamped down, like a lid,
and again, I receded to the couch.

I think that was the summer Mamma
jabbed a paring knife into Cora's shoulder:
"Fer teasin Whitey! *That's* why!"

"Pray for one another," sighed our ashen father,
and departed, dinnerpail under his arm,
for the railroad.

"Eat!" Mamma begged me. "I don't know what'll
b'come o ya if ya don't *eat*!"

I turned my face to the wallpaper.

"Hey!" she whispered, "How's bout some chin-pie?"
She knelt beside me and started stroking her
sharp chin across my cheek. "Tell me what ya hate!"
she hissed. "Come on! *Tell* me."

that sauerkraut-breath sneaking across my nostrils,
 that cudgel-chin digging at my jaw
 “Nope? Then I’ll tell *you* what *I* hate:
 It’s them high muckety-mucks.”
 grinding at my collar-bone
 “You know: a person that thinks their strundt
 don’t stink. Aw, come on, Whitey. It’s *yer* turn.
 What d’ya hate, huh? *Huh?*”
 the chin prodding and prodding my pallor

• • • • •

I dreamed up a smooth mother.
 I pictured her moving into the stucco house
 across the street: a stylish lady
 with calm light hair and bland doll-eyes.
 “*Cora! Wilhelmina!*” she’d call in a creamy voice.
 She’d be standing on her porch, smiling,
 smelling like the art teacher.
 She’d ask us to take care of her cats while
 she went away with her husband, or someone.
 “—*and help yourselves to lunch!*”
 “*Eat! Whitey! Eat! Eat! EAT!*” Mamma chanted.
 “Ya want the wind ta blow ya away?”
 And her flatulence dittoed her distress.

Summer after summer, it was the same:
 In August, when she had scratched away the small
 gloss of school, Mamma would struggle up out of
 her affliction like a wounded beast out of its lair
 and make us board that streetcar with her “ta buy youse
 a school outfit.”

Cowering through the shops,
 that feral glance nabbing the customers,
 she'd sputter, "Stuck-up Yankee!" her armpits
 reeking panic "Ridin fer a fall!"

Steered by her clammy claw, I paddled
 through nausea dense as pond scum.

Through a greenish membrane, I observed
 my classmates: When Barbara's mother picked
 her up after school for dancing lessons,
 she fondled Barbara's long curls: "Honey! You look
 so pretty!" After the Christmas program,
 Shirley's mother hugged her: "Sweetheart! You
 sang like an angel!"

One summer Mamma drove a hatpin into her wrist.

"Oh, Sisters!" my father sniveled, tucking his Bible
 into his dinnerpail, "This is what we have to expect
 in The Last Days." And the screendoor blammed
 behind him.

Enter, khaki-colored, pillow-lipped Uncle Klaus,
 on parole from prison followed by vinegar-colored,
 bushy-haired Casey, laid off from the mill.

"It's Whitey!" Mamma bleated.
 "I'm worried ta *death* over Whitey."

Hunched at the kitchen table, the pair
 proceeded to dose Cora and me with the saga
 of family-sufferings: "Nobody'd bleeve ve vuz
 from da Nedderlunds."

"'Nigger in da voodpile!' dem Yankees vould holler.
 'N 'touch o da tarbrush!'"

“‘Hey, Coon!’ dey’d holler. ‘Hey, Crow!’”
 “‘Crazy-Eyes!’ dey called yer mudder.”
 “‘Tink dat don’t jar yer slats?’”

Two uncles, mother, sister, all downcast,
 all dusky, like Van Gogh’s potato eaters—
 no, *duskier*—they crouched around me—
 pristinely blonde, like my paternal grandma. . .
 turned four gazes like beggar’s cups, upon *me*,
 The Lily, youngest of the clan, as if the smudge
 had at last burnt itself out in ME.

“Whitey’ll mount ta sumpin,” Casey wheedled.

Mamma thumbed her nose. “When it comes ta
backbone,
 Whitey can’t hold a candle ta Pickanniny.”

In school, I started confronting a compliment
 as if it were a curse. Let a classmate exclaim,
 “I’d give anything for your *brains*, Wilhelmina!”
 I’d pull a wry mouth: “I’d give anything for *your*
health!” Let someone sigh, “What lovely platinum
 hair!” I’d whirl like a ballerina: “It’s *dark* in back!”

Pivoting on praise, flaunting flaws:
 I had touched magic. I was turning into
 a kind of peripheral princess.

But always that awful spiral of seasons pitching me
 down from my domain, plunging me into those cauldron-
 summers with Mamma.

My all-A report card was a diamond I had to swallow
 on my way home. Upon entering the bungalow, I’d
 collapse,
 pale and dizzy, onto that couch.

My ailment accused her. Her worry wrung me.
We marinated in mutual misery.

“*Kate Von Musson*. Is that my name?
My mind’s slipped again. . .”
Crazy-Eyes droned to the frying pan.
“Katie Koenig that married that German guy?
Am I in America? Is this 1932? Is this my house?
Is this white-haired girl my daughter?”

that drone drilling through the stove
“Is that black-haired girl my other daughter?
Was my mother a nigger? Pa wouldn’t say.
Agnes members her: brown, very small.”

the hunched form dredging the darkness
“Sikes members her, too. Not Africa, he says.
West Indies. Is that a country? I’m so dumb.”

Darkness spurting through the floor
“Do my daughters have nigger blood in their veins?
N will their children? n *their* children?”
the bruised stare spilling riddles.

I lay there making the wallpaper bloom that
Renoirish neighbor. *Now!* I’d pray.
If she comes now, it’s still not too late.
Now. Let her come: This lady who likes her life.
NOW. While I’m still unstained—

But the summers came and went, came and went,
pinch pinch pinch

Then came the summer that trapped me. I was twelve.
My backbone seemed stitched to that couch.

The doctor pricked a T.B. test into my forearm.

Coffined on that couch, I sank down down down
 through mauve mists down down through darkness
 down into muck and stayed and stayed.

The three dots failed to swell like peas.
 The doctor shrugged: "She'll be better
 when school starts."

In a kind of fever a kind of delirium in an
 awful heat I started sprouting started climbing
 up up like a clematis up up up a snow-white
 clematis I saw myself leaving here someday
 for college for marriage and on a distant day
 returning transfigured Adult Angel
 with Radiance to heal All

I guess it was then my wraith-body started pumping
 out those poems.

A scholarship swept me away.
 "*—lacking Pride, they went for Pity, like a pack
 of hyenas for left-overs—*" was a line of a freshman
 poem.

Swoosh! A second scholarship.
 "*—I dreaded catching my mother's madness, like flu—*"
 went a sophomore poem.

A sequence of scholarships swooshed me away some
 more.

Then a princely young foreign correspondent swooped
 me
 away for good.

Cora's letter nudges me:
 "*—hate to scare you but at her age—*"

It's November, 1951. My squeamishness subdued
 with tranquilizers, I've descended for a day into
 that sooty hometown for my father's funeral. . .
 Ducking her head deferentially as I make my hasty
 exit, Mamma addresses my black Parisian veil:
 "Sometimes I'd like ta see yer house, Whitey—"
 thrusting up her palm like a STOP sign
 "Not *company*. NO! But like a *mouse*, just ta
 peek at yer dishes n things n yer rugs—"

Oh, Mamma.

*Always—In London, in Paris, in Hong Kong,
 in Tokyo, in Amsterdam—I've paddled through
 pond scum. For my children, often that
 greenish membrane.*

"Dear Cora," I write.

*In poems all these years and only
 in poems have I occasionally
 digested the chin-pie*

Dear Cora—

*Do I pack the black veil? And swallow
 the sequence of pills? And descend
 once more the zombie?*

Dear Cora—

*This salutation stains this stationery
 like mouse turds*

Dear Cora—

*Or do I fly back to you Mamma
 bearing your Madness like a torch?*

Karen Snow

WEEKEND

The relatives and guests
have found us in our summer house,
have invited themselves on our vacation,
and questioned our ethics.

Soap-operatic,
they storm and whisper,
wagging heads in the sane, cubed light
of their customary bedrooms.

When we go to the beach, a mother smooths our sheets.
How can we explain we end and begin
in our arms as in the violent sea,
drowning. That we thrash

and are held under willingly to burst
to the surface speechless and savage.
That the world drowns,
and if we aren't in love, it doesn't matter.

Carol Frost

I AM THINKING OF PORTALS

I am thinking of portals
tonight when the air
is sharp as a fish spine
and trying to remember
how to plant
and harvest
by moon-phase.
Long ago, Indians
fertilized
hills of corn with fishes
and taught this to pilgrims.
The Eskimo Mother-of-All
dropped all kinds
of fishes from her nipples.
Once Cadmus sowed the earth
with dragon-serpent teeth.
The Zuni men would masturbate
together to seed the soil.
The plow buries itself
in the long furrow;
rows of sprouts
spring to light.
Europe to Japan
the neonate
is placed on the earth,
Antaeus-like.
We come out of dark
through a passage
only to turn
and return to the tunnel.

How deeply we dip
when we dip into woman.
Always before us
waits the bony mouth,
the shark-jaw
of the pelvic arch.
All our lives we sail
toward those white lips.

Carl Lindner

FLIGHT

The woods' emptiness tastes of salt.
Walking, our words puff into smoke.

The cold tells us to go back, hints the
tangle of spruce is home to something dark.

Each branch I touch bids ice splinters
ride the cold air like witches. We stop.

The spaced Y's of a titmouse poke through
the snow. Wander past a pine seedling.

Drop into space. Days ago he flew
from there bearing his message.

Tonight we will make love. Dream separate
dreams. Wake alone in the same bed,

thinking: what if our tracks, here,
stepped into thin air.

Paul R. Lilly, Jr.

BOOKS IN BRIEF

Here are three regional books, each intensely individual, almost documentary, suggesting tapes and snapshots. **Wendell Berry's** *Sayings & Doings* (Gnomon Press, P.O. Box 106, Frankfort, Ky. 40601, 1975, 38 pp., \$4.50, hardbound) is a good introduction to this genre. This elegantly-produced little volume contains memorable yarns and sayings that Berry has been hoarding up like verbal "found objects," including one marvelous story, "Uncle Rad Milton and the Pup." The verse form, the poet tells us, is necessary to carry the inflection and weight of the spoken words: "memorable speech is measured speech." This valuable observation helps define the difference between raw documentary material and true poems, and it helps us to appreciate the art of the "documentary" poems in the next two volumes.

Marnie Walsh's *A Taste of the Knife* (Ahsahta Press, Boise State University, Boise, Idaho 83725, 1976, 42 pp., \$2.00, paper) opens with 15 poems as spoken by Northern Plains Indians. In bitter relentless detail they dramatize the experience of being a Native American today, with horizons so narrow they crush. One of the poems (through the persona of Thomas Iron-eyes, born circa 1840, died 1919, Rosebud Agency, S.D.) reflects the old lost culture, with the effect of intensifying the bitterness in the other poems so as to make it almost unbearable. This group makes almost every other poem on the Indian sentimental by comparison. The second half of Walsh's sharp-edged book contains poems "like a piece of glass/ we look at each other through."

(Incidentally, the commendable Ahsahta Press alternates volumes of contemporary poetry, of which Walsh's is a brilliant example, with volumes by "modern" poets of the next generation older. In that half of the series we have a valuable *Selected Poems of Norman Macleod* and what for me was a real discovery: *Selected Poems of Gwendolen Haste*. The best of these, from the twenties, distill the bleak life of the Montana frontier woman into

lyrics that can stand without apology with the poems of Robinson and Hardy. Haste is a real poet. All these handsome Ahsahta books are an unbelievable \$2.00 each.)

The third of the regional poets I want to recommend is David Budbill, whose *The Chain Saw Dance* (Crow's Mark Press, Johnson, Vermont 05656, 1977, 64 pp., \$2.50, paper) presents sketches of a couple of dozen inhabitants of a fictional Judevine, Vermont. Judevine is a real place, no question, and the speech of the people, many of French descent, is strong on the ear. (For \$5.00 you can get a 60-minute cassette of Budbill reading from the book.) Although Budbill's view of his neighbors is not quite as bleak as Marnie Walsh's, they are both biting, as their titles indicate. They both care, painfully, for the people they translate into their poems, but Budbill's affection pounds through in every line.

By now most readers are aware of the poetry of Greece's eloquent Yannis Ritsos, through the widely-translated *Romiosini* and the powerful settings of his work by the composer Theodorakis. There is now a volume that provides a comprehensive view of this major poet's profound and various work: *The Fourth Dimension: Selected Poems of Yannis Ritsos*, translated by Rae Dalven (Godine, 1977, 156 pp., \$12.50, hardcover, \$5.95, soft). Rae Dalven, who first introduced Cavafy to English-speaking readers in 1961, has provided generous selections from Ritsos' volumes from 1938 to 1974, together with a substantial biographical-critical introduction. Knowing the poet's history of social and political dedication and his years of suffering from tuberculosis, exile, and imprisonment, knowing how deep the roots of the poems go into particular areas of Greek landscape and history, the reader can begin to appreciate the triumph of the poet's transformation of these national and personal and historic occasions into poems that speak for all people in all times. An unexpected discovery in this volume is the section of long dramatic monologues, in which the poet's lyric imagination combines with his experience in the theatre to produce complex and moving characterizations: timeless but immediate encounters with Electra and Ismene, and compassionate contemporary portraits in "The Moonlight Sonata" and "The Window." The fourth dimension of the title is, I would guess, that inner world where the sacred

objects retreat in time of trouble, where the real man who counts escapes the counting guard ("Secret Independence"). It is the dimension of integrity and survival, and this is one of the rare books that can draw us into that dimension.

If it's a children's book you are looking for, here's one: Tamar Griggs' collection *There's a Sound in the Sea: A Child's-Eye View of the Whale* (Scrimshaw Press, 6040 Claremont Avenue, Oakland, Cal. 94618, 1976, 96 pp., 60 color illustrations, 27 poems, \$5.95, paper). Fifteen hundred children responded to Tamar Griggs' request for children's poems and art work about whales! This book presents the cream of these, including one unforgettable Eskimo myth, told by Marco Abularach, aged 8.

Leonard Nathan's *The Teaching of Grandfather Fox* (Ithaca House, distributed by Serendipity Books, 1976, 49 pp., \$3.50, paper) is a playful romp. The poems introduce raunchy Grandfather Fox and his primal Honey Girl in a leaping eclectic creation myth, bounding and squinting and fornicating through the world of Yahweh, First Gene, Dante, Ecologists, and the Lord of Toilet Training. If all this sounds a little cute, stay away, but you'll be missing a good show. Incidentally, it is good news that recent Ithaca House volumes are once again handsomely designed and cleanly printed.

Louis Simpson's *Searching for the Ox* (Morrow, 1976, 93 pp., \$5.95, hardbound) has an endearing autobiographical preface that throws an arm around the gentle, highly-civilized poems and draws the reader into the circle. Among other fine work is a haunting prose poem, "The Driving Instructor," and a broad satire, "Before the Poetry Reading," which should be required reading for all of us who arrange such events.

Readers who depend on bookstores and standard anthologies to keep up with significant developments in poetry are bound to miss a great deal. For example, no one should feel in touch with the full range who is not familiar with the books from James L. Weil's Elizabeth Press (available through Serendipity Books, 1790 Shattuck Ave., Berkeley, Cal. 94709; unless otherwise noted, \$8. in paper, \$16. in boards). Elizabeth books resemble each other in the classic elegance of the printing. The poets are similar in the

clarity and precision of their language and in the intensity of their vision that condenses and concentrates experience into crystals. No looseness or self-indulgence here: the poems have a classic control that deserves the deliciously clean format that is a Liz trademark. But there the similarity among the poets ends. Here are a half-dozen for a sampler; each one belongs in any serious library of contemporary poetry.

In Lorine Niedecker's *Blue Chickory* (1976, 80 pp.), Cid Corman, literary executor for that exquisite poet, has gathered the completed poems left unpublished at her death and added a group of previously unpublished works—a generous mixed handful of polished and uncut gems. The energy-level in even the tiny rejected bits is breathtaking. For instance:

The radio talk this morning
was of obliterating the world
I notice fruit flies rise
from the rind
of the recommended
melon

Let that one melt on your tongue and curl around in your ear!

Another crystalizer of consciousness is William Bronk, with a power flowing in the opposite direction from Niedecker's intensity of sensuousness. She moves from the threatening vacuum to the fruit fly. Bronk's genius is to confront the menacing zero with pure mind and language: "If there were a maker I'd praise the maker but/ I think there isn't one; making is ours." This is from *Finding Losses* (1976, 75 pp.). The poet's calling is to confront the uncertainties of the outermost universe with all that he has for sure: a withering wry honesty, a human responsiveness to the urge to love and inquire, and a distinctive human voice. We treasure the rare epigrammatic poems of Landor and Frost. Here we have a whole volume to keep that dialogue of civilization going.

Carroll Arnett's *Come* (1973, 57 pp.) has all the succulent sexuality that its title suggests, in the two-dozen-plus poems of "Part One . Or Optimism." The three powerful poems in "Part Two . History as Such" divide into pounding double columns to speak out of the poet's own Native American heritage. Arnett carries this

drumming voice into *Tsalagi* (1976, 27 pp., \$5. paper, \$10. hardbound) with "The Story of My Life" and then follows this eloquent introduction with a scary little narrative "Out in the Woods," with several vivid vignettes of implicit violence—equally scary, and then seven medicine songs that brilliantly essay "a hard thing/ to trust the blood."

To savor the range of Elizabeth Press books you should have at least two more: J.D. Whitney's hard-bitten colloquial sketch of a marriage, *sd* (1973, 20 pp., \$6. paper), and Theodore Enslin's *Etudes* (1972, 89 pp.) or his *Views* (1973, 65 pp.). *Views* is outward-turning—wirey accurate sketches of brilliantly-selected landscapes, most of them in Enslin's Maine. *Etudes* is a winter book, turning more often indoors and into the moving mind. They are only two of the dozen Enslin books on the Elizabeth list, but they make a beautiful pair.

Robert Bly's excellent *Old Man Rubbing His Eyes* (Unicorn Press, P.O. Box 3307, Greensboro, N.C. 27402, 1975, 51 pp., \$10. cloth, \$4. paper) is in its second printing. Each one of these short poems involves the reader in a visionary experience, couched its own memorable music and its own pencil-point accuracy of external and interior observation. What's more (though who would ask for more) facing each poem is a haunting pencil sketch by Franz Allbert Richter—each one of someone or something I felt sure I recognized.

M.K.S.

Two verse novels deserve reading and invite comparison. One, by Ted Hughes, *Gaudete* (Harper & Row, 1977, 200 pp., \$10. hardbound) is set in an English village. The other, by Bill Hotchkiss, *Fever in the Earth* (The Blue Oak Press, distributed by Capra Press, 631 State Street, Santa Barbara, Cal. 93101, 1977, 320 pp., \$3.95 paper [sic], \$5.95 hardbound) is set in the Sierra Nevada east of Sacramento. Both are strong stuff, full of violence, gore, sex. Both involve the supernatural. Here resemblance ends. Hughes is terse, dour, sardonic, sketching with grim humor a cult tale. Hotchkiss is romantic, personally involved with his materials, showing his deep feeling for the land and his vision of an idyllic world so fine that only the demonic can account for the evil he finds rampant.

D.M.S.