

THE BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL

Volume 37 — Number 4

Summer 1987

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Cover: Robert Shetterly, Jr., *Jack-in-the-Pulpits*.

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THE POLITICAL SAWYERS

The reek
Of red sawmill boards.

The whine
Of saws slowing through pitchknot.

Length, width & breadth of America
Graded, stacked, ready for shipment

On a distant cold November.

Ray Clark Dickson

THE LIGHT PILGRIM

On his wife's death Andy Goff went to West Pelham, built a cabin in the woods and lived in seclusion.

1. There is a shape of light
that lends itself to pinewoods—
a needling on moss
where beams fall straight and clear.

I saw them often
but did not listen
as light struck earth
or understand what I was to be
or do.

You built a wood—
green, sonorous, full
of stickburrs, floating seeds—
a private country
where each tree walked,
each bird spoke

where everything given
lives forever,
nothing saved matters.

When your eyes went out
what I knew of the universe
fell from between outstretched fingers.
Woods blew apart,
stood stripped of leaves,
joined limbs to snare me,
spewed bogs to suck me down,
raised branches to hold me prisoner.

When I broke through
 I could not watch daughters grow
 into your shape again—
 two new galaxies glimpsed
 through branches of a rotted tree.
 I could not stand to see sons flourish,
 shoulder axes, blaze paths
 to some other lovers' wilderness,
 toward small sounds of lovemaking,
 toward light falling straight and clear.

2. Light leaps out of hand.

Swooping, it arches
 beneath clenched fists
 of oak buds,
 above curled fern tongues.
 Each shattered beam is a thrush
 darting deep into forest
 where I cannot go.
 Ax sets trees ringing.

When I have chopped through heartwood,
 tree groans, topples into clearing.
 I hack budded branches off,
 leave strong, straight trunk.

At brook's edge
 I build my cabin—
 rough-hewn logs pulled
 through late snows,
 smooth stones gathered.

I sit by fire ring, brew coffee
 in dwindling light, in new forest
 which will never know your footstep,
 your voice.

I am here. I say to your shape.
I am here. I say to deep green stillness,
 moonless, original dark.

3. Lamplight sows shadow like seeds.

Corners blossom.

I blow out the flame. Your face
remains when room is darkness.

I have planted and harvested
beans and corn, squash and peas
in their seasons,
seen light slant and glide,
roll and dance through the forest
over waters of the swollen brook.

I have carried anger, guilt,
grief and sorrow before me
as though gold and precious stones.

4. At day's light, I cross the room,
fling rough door open,
step through.

I lift spring's risen stones
one by one
and lay them across the brook,
across the shallow pool
where water slows.
Each stone, as it breaks the surface,
spreads its rings from center—
circle out of circle.

I step across the stream, step
from stone to stone,
stand in the clearing
where trees wreath sun
and light turns new leaves golden

and I stand full of golden light
at peace,
giving everything I am
finally
to you.

DRESSAGE

At the end (all I remember)
the boy rides the horse into the ocean,
almost calmly, farther and farther out until,
the horse lifting its head at the last
wave, they both disappear.
I wondered about the horse.
Did it panic as it was pulled under?
Was the boy, my age, weight enough
to take both their lives?
No one I ask recalls such a film.
A French boy hanging from balloons, yes,
and a deaf boy playing with the dead
near Chickamauga, but no city kid
on a grey horse riding into the Atlantic.
And now that I am telling this again,
do I remember that the boy is saved
or that the horse returns alone,
pawing at rocks on the dirty shore?
No, both of them are out there still.
I can see them halfway to the horizon,
their heads just above the rough waves
this early morning, a storm off to the south.
I can see them when no one else can,
but today my son sees them too,
the boy's black head of hair, the horse's grey,
and shouts at the distant swimmers to turn back,
a gale's coming up, a hard cold wind.
But they can't hear him out there,
they've been riding too long together,
so they go on, slow as lovers in thick paintings,
impasto, impenitent, as I try to remember
for my son's sake, as he runs
along the beach shouting to the swimmers,
Turn back! turn back! what really happens.

TWO POEMS

Learning To See

A bramble shape of pain was sprouting from my broken teeth.
I lurched into the bathroom with my hand beneath
my scrotum, leaned against the sink until
the pain swealed down like matchflames, and the chill
of porcelain against my thigh was a delight,
and everything I noticed, every trite
reiteration of the antique car
suspended in the wallpaper was weird, exquisite, singular.

Dr. Ruth Reingold Descends The Stairs

I'm praying for the silent man
whose skin is gleaming like japanned
scroll handles in the polished case.
Two deaf librarians are placing
tissues in a crumbling book.
They slap their orange hands and look
about their clothes for orange dust,
then close the glass. One signs disgust
at leather smudges on the seams
of his white sleeves. The cases gleam.

My patient's face is offering,
among the other polished things,
a meditation on desire:
how (gaze into a stone or fire)
the tantalizing heart of light
we cannot touch or own invites
our yearning; how our yearning minds
uneasily contrive a kind
of love from that uneasy poise.

My patient's sweating skin annoys
the cake-soft man from personnel
who tries to blow the mammal smell
of fear into his handkerchief.

"We've work to do. This should be brief.
I'm pleased, Lamar, to offer you a place
among our team..." (His fingers interlace
to form a team) "...here in the Rare Book Room.
Ms. Winkler tells me that she's groomed
you for the circulation desk!
The program St. Elizabeth's
has placed with us, in every sense...
Lamar? You seem a little tense.
I understand your duties here
will be precisely what they were
except, of course, that you'll be paid...
I wouldn't worry...If you're afraid..."

His fat hands flutter toward me.

"We have a problem."

I agree.

A walnut wrinkle gathers in
the trembling end of Lamar's chin;
he points into his mouth.

"Sit still,"

I say. "You know your voice, hey! *will*
come back as soon as you calm down."

He pulls his lips. A lizard sound,
the lizard clicking of his breath
is all that comes.

"He's scared to death."

I say, "Will you please shut up please."

Lamar is plucking at his knees
and crying with a sound like salt
jingling in a shaker.

“It’s my fault.
I set him off with all my fol de rol.”

We hoist and dress him like a doll.
His fingers catch inside his sleeve.

Ms. Winkler asks, “Do you believe
he hears...?”

I answer, “He’s just way in there.”
My chin is trembling. Tall lamps flare
and tremble deep in polished floors.

We wait outside the elevator doors
until Lamar begins to cry
again. Then I start. He and I
start down and down and down the stairs.

John Burghardt

HEARTS AND FLOWERS

The valentine queen of the Shady Rest Home
is crowned with foil and paper hearts.
At any moment she could raise her scepter
to let the ball begin. The other revelers,
arranged around the edge of the hall
like a sagging fence, seem to be waiting
for the first strains of music or for permission
to leave the room. But the king can’t be bothered.
He slumps in his wheelchair, a piece of cake
forgotten in his lap. He is thinking about
his tractor, the way the rabbits erupted before it,
the way the dust swirled behind, how that dust
could swallow the whole field. He has plowed
all day and would like to stop for supper,
but the field seems never to end
and the fence keeps moving away.

Lynne Butler

THREE POEMS

At the Flying School

At the flying school the horses
are mastering the take-off,
but there are problems with perching:
even if they find a foothold, the branch
will break. The kiwis and ostriches,
enrolled in the workshop on roots,
are rediscovering their heritage.

Down in the Novices' section
an oyster whispers, "I want to soar."
The resident angel folds its wings
and touches the rough shell.
"First, learn to feel
your flesh's cool weight
nestled in its silky cup,
the sea pressing against your sides,
the brine filtering through your valves.
Now, at your center, find
the gray light sending beams
in all directions smooth as glass,
so smooth—see?—you can slip on them,
just a little bit, side to side.
Now your flesh, your valves, the sea
begin to dissolve. Watch the light.
You begin to rise."
"Yes, . . . yes," whispers the pupil,
moving its concrete wings.

Earth

Turning over loam in the spring
I am tempted to take a mouthful.
"Take, eat," says the earth.
"This is my body."



Moles swim through the soil,
among trees' tentacles,
tasting the dark flora,
resting in the ground's cupped hands.



A farmer married his field.
He plowed it and put in seed.
After the harvest he lay down.
The field put its arms around him.



The garden is pregnant
with potatoes, onions, beets.
They taste like earth.
Borscht: dirt soup.



My parents have invited me to dinner
in their permanent home.
"Just a quiet get-together," they assure me.
"All your friends will be here."

A Cold Day

Papa he the best salesman you ever see.
Folks ax him what he sell, he say "Nothing"—
That what he sell, and make folks think it something.
He come in stomping, steam shoot out his nose.
He kick at us, "Git loss, you imps!" We squeals
and runs away, his feets real sharp. He yell,
"You, Lize, fetch me up a scuttle of coal."
Mama she say, "What eating you? I never
see such a grouch." He say, "Nothing eat me,
bitch, how you like a taste of knuckle pie?"
Mama she say, "You been at Fauss' again?
Why don't you give up, he wasting your time."
Papa say, "You don't know squat about Fauss.
He the worstest I ever see since Jobe."
Papa lift up the stove lid, dump in coal,
smoke puff out the cracks. The room smell brown.
Stovepipe go tick, tick, tick, and pretty soon
it start to go hoo, hoo, hoo. Papa say,
"I'm a demon salesman, damn if I don't make
That Fauss crawl on his hands and knees and swear
notbing what he want most in all this world."
Then he look around real mean at all us kids.
"Damn, how come it always so cold in here?"

Leonard M. Trawick

TWO POEMS

Allegro

At a performance of our local
symphony orchestra the solo
violinist, young and German,
shudders, mumbles, foams, and pummels
his way through Brahms, attacking him
the way a cat attacks a bird.

I'm bored in the very front row
where I can spot every twitch
of musicians—the cellist
rubbing the dust from his instrument,
then wiping his hand on his knee,
the concertmaster preening
in the glee of his pre-eminence,
the conductor, safe inside his beard,
his tails flapping like the wings
of a giant cockroach.

Meaning,
“a single thread in the brute flow
of composition,” isn't what
we strive for. Brahms and his kind
understand, but this stilted
young violinist thinks his chainsaw
technique will touch the intellect,
pander to the Aristotle
in us all.

The long afternoon
quickens to *allegro*, the light
outside shifting on Brickyard Pond,
the skaters eloquent as high notes,
the curved staves sketched by their blades
impossible to transcribe,
a music of sheer process.

I wish I could join them,
but dark will soon pour down from the hills
and the cold will drown all sensation
with its insistence on matter,
its denial of music
as reality, humorless
as the young violinist intent
on rasping through the meat of Brahms
to expose his pale and lunar bones.

Harlow Farm

Apples meaty as buttocks
pout in five-pound paper bags:
Macoun, Mackintosh, Delicious.
Jelly jars of chutney primp in rows
while strawberry popcorn dangles
in holiday arrangements from nails.
I'm already sick of autumn,
the rusty hills abrasive
in my dimming eyes, the pumpkins
brutal as so many severed heads.

I long for those city evenings
bicycling to Cambridge to sprawl
hour after hour in Widener
with my face full of books so shy
and elusive few have read them.
Bicycling home to Back Bay
I'd feel the dark tenements breathe
like cattle behind barbed wire,
waiting for fire to hunger up
from the basement and devour the whole.

Then on the bridge at MIT,
the lit-up skyscrapers thrusting,
I'd feel myself returned to grace,
the monoxide air too sweet
to swallow except in tiny sips,
the washed-out starlight pressing
like damp laundry against my flesh.
No need of long hilly vistas
of farms littered with implements;
no need of horses browsing in fields

bronzed the yellow of last summer's tans.
This show of bounty—all for sale—
demonstrates how vegetable passions
still lure the suburbanite
up here from the flatlands, his face
as flat and sallow as a gourd.
I want to tell him why Eve ate
so deeply of the apple
and ignored more exotic fruit,
why knowledge wasn't really her goal,

rather the creation of cities—
wrestling the stubborn land to fit
the already nascent ideal
of suburbs, the disparate classes
of gentility self-defined
as much by sheer dispersal
as by whatever's more refined.
I can't absorb the innocence
of this matriarchal world-view
without feeling the earth revolve

unpleasantly under me,
the shift from city to country
too abrupt to afford the pleasure
of simple contrast, the tourists
up from New York and Boston

(Stanza continued)

too absorbed in the scenery
to notice how every crease and fold
in the winsome hills is oozing
fluids from the very wounds
they thought the long drive north would heal.

William Doreski

FIRST MATE

Sleep came slow in that castle forward
where the sea's pitch and heave could break bones
unless I held on, feet braced,
and clung to the bunk's uprights, lay spread
for the nails to be driven.
Sleep comes as clumsy in this dry house.

Last night loose roof shingles rattled
like hatch clamps and I rode a trough
hearing plates crack in the squall
that lashed my window, my lawn
groaning in its oily groundswell,
and calm came to find me eagled, limbs

pinned and outflung where I had clung
as often before in yellow weather.
A neighbor tacks boards back shifted
by the wind, a brake shrieks,
but the tense angles of body repeat
old storms in the brawls of tangled muslin.

E.G. Burrows

THREE POEMS

It Takes An Old Woman Screaming *Vietato Fumare* !

It takes an old woman screaming

Vietato Fumare !

And beating

The hell

Out of you

With a broom

And believe me

You will stop smoking

In her parlor.

The world

Needs an old woman

Like that

With her broom

Of conviction

Strong enough

To stare down

The crocodile smile

Coiled somewhere

In the DNA

Of war.

The Decoys

Fresh-Air Johnson
Never ran out of wood.
Fresh-Air's hand-carved birds
Flew out of old highway markers.

One-Arm Murphy
Scratch-painted his feathers
With a ten-penny nail; it is said
One flew north and raised a family.

Buck-Eye Joe,
Good as the Canadian carvers
Chose a glittery obsidian
Over the cold enamelled eyes from Germany.

They sit together at the convention;
Coffee steaming a light fog
Over the duck blind of the mind,
Dreaming of low-keeled, tipped-up
Feather of a woman,
Henna-haired; sort of a ruddy duck
In courtship display. . .

Fresh-Air, One-Arm and Buck-Eye
Floating together
Between hunters and the wild things

rising, falling

In sharp chop of baywater, eyes
On the warmeyed waitress, her arms
Extending into wings.

Harry's Somewhere In the Lost Coast Mizzle

Cape Mendocino's mizzle: *between mist & drizzle*
 says our search guide Charley; we follow seanumbed, stumbling
 over old sawmill foundations,
 dogholes of Needle Pock & Jackass Gulch,
 logging burns in old-growth redwood; sound of elkhorn thrashing
 creek canopy & eucalyptus
 like over-revved jeeps whining in double-traction.
 Roosevelt Elk, racks like sputtering candelabra—sober clerics
 dressed for celebration in the meadows. . .
 cliffs sharp as Barlow knives—seal popping up, periscoping
 in gullgray water,
 eyes tracking like spent bullets falling on our path
 above the sea.
 Is that driftwood or sea lions stacked on a black sand beach?
 Sea lion.
 (Seaskunk smell rinsed from kelp & tide)
 Seabirds climbing updraft—long—long ladders of fog—
 fall between gauzy rungs—
 recover—rise—brush our faces. . .
 Gulls & osprey racing teams of grebes & terns—
 mergansers, fly fishermen casting with long slender beaks—
 brown pelicans
 blurring sand,
 vultures hovering over shore debris (watched through
 Charley's glass
 with care)
 E-5 eyes—unspilled sights of Nam—rice ports dissolving, reappear
 as lumber ports of Bear Harbor, Shelter Cove. . .
 Combing bear tracks, mountain lion, raccoon, rodent—
 down to faintest
 rabbit whisker—
 reef slant, sea stars, spent tracelets foaming in the back surge—
 a nod offshore to the gray whales of winter
 like migrating mounds of boat people contemplating shore.

Charley has something in his power scope: grunts as if finding
the Lost Coast needle;
bright suturing, snippets of haze—he points—
is that a topographical map washing in the surf? Glint of compass?
What's that fluff twelve feet up from the base of cliff
like a cotton swabstick in a medic's mouth
in his run for a rising Huey?
Or will our last-chance look at Harry show a tide book
floating from his pocket?
It takes two hours to climb down—find him perched on an
 osprey nest—
one foot above high tide—
salt-swollen eyes—winking—reaching out with bloody
broken fingernails—

what took you guys so long?

as we pop a can of beer for Harry & nurse him back to home.

Ray Clark Dickson

FOUR POEMS**Stoning of a Ton-Ton Macoute**

People are putting words on their stones.
Words that will taint his blood.
The words of his victims.
He will hear their voices speak
again behind his eyes . . .

. . . He waves his hand,
a flag of contempt.
His breath is an anthem.
He is a deep lake
that will swallow every stone.

The Whore's Dream

I dreamed I trespassed on
the seminary's campus and
the priests came out of doors,
methodical as gardeners,
to prune me, to cut me back,

but I escaped to the street
and the traffic.

That is my life —
a lesson for traffic.

And I dreamed of myself as
an autumn leaf on a maple tree,
exposed, flame red—

the one a nun would pluck
and press forever in a holy book.

California by Edward Hopper

If I ever lose interest in
father or mother, it will be in
California, where the sun shines
forever as in the short dream
of my parents' death.
It's Early Sunday Morning:
storefronts are as vacant
as the eyes of the dead.
My parents die without my knowing
until a white limousine gets me out of bed.
There's brunch and a be-in at the beach.
Everyone has a terry-cloth parent
sepulchered beneath an umbrella.
Then a stop for coffee
at the Nighthawks cafe.
The silver urn across the counter
reflects a brownstone's window
across the street:
There are my parents, playing gin—
patient for nightfall
and the haunting to begin.

The Flower

He would rather have been a flower, a rose.
He wished for a garden by the back door,
black Russian soil moist like fresh rye bread,
the hot months' haze in which to open slowly,
an array of pastels to bloom among.

But he fled to America and kept
to the free room in his brother's flat.
His loneliness was gasoline.
He would sit by the window
waiting for sunlight to ignite his skin.

MY GRACIOUS SILENCE

Coriolanus to his wife, Virgilia
—Shakespeare

From dusk into darkness we'd sit, quiet as two cats,
on the sagged back step. Close to my father's Indian-
browned forearm, veiled in his aura of creosote and sweat,
I needed no mention of moon, stars, planets; only this
muteness more knowing than nomenclature.

The porch light blasts us from behind. "An idle mind
is Satan's workshop.' The Langervelds are playing pinochle
and laughing." It's Mama siphoning sociability from the
neighbors. "—and the Hookendoorns are singing hymns."

Shush of fingers on jaw stubble. "And we're resting,"
Dad drawls in his mourning dove tone.

"Resting? Well, Dora an me, we're restless."

All my life, wherever I've resided, my mother's posse
has pursued me. "Spook!" shrieks my college roommate
who's stumbled upon my solitude in our dark dormitory
room. "I'm concerned about you, Kiddo," cautions
the psychology major. "Come to the poetry reading," says the
kindly professor,
and politely I applaud some word-proud academics
running off at the mouth. "You look so lonely—"
That's my suburban neighbor who's spied me idle
in my lawn chair. What use to snap to snarl: Until
you molested me, I was convalescing from the clamor?
It was the period of rivalry when every evening in my
rocking chair hyphenated to my husband's by an end table
I endured his phonograph roaring a rampart between us
and the calls from the nursery. . . when his post-concert
pontifications drubbed the sleep that had huddled under
my skull.

Punch drunk from his evening pleasures, I began to recover
some days during long walks in the woods with our sons.
Resting in sparkling shade, I'd glimpse in one a familiar
forearm on knee, in the other a way of gazing skyward,
and their gracious silence gave back to me a fragment
of that early Eden.

Then—a letter from Dora, who'd been delving into our
lineage: “—Dad's brothers were both hanged for murder.
Is it any wonder Dad was so withdrawn?”

Grief or grace? Reverie or recoil?
Bonded by those back-step evenings,
bent backwards by the posse,
I seem fated to channel my father's silence to my sons.

Karen Snow

THE METAMORPHOSIS

I kill cockroaches
and I think about going to bed in the dark
how in Boston I slept with the light out because the cat ate
the cockroaches
how in Chicago I slept with the light on because the cat
was still in Boston

I kill cockroaches
in this new apartment in East Lansing, Michigan
and I think about cockroaches following man to every part
of the earth
and I not knowing whether these are Boston cockroaches
that came with my books
or Chicago cockroaches that came with my clothes
or a pure prairie breed that comes with the apartment

I kill cockroaches
and I think of Jean Rhys lying in bed in the West Indies
praying
to the cockroach as big as her hand
to the cockroach on the wall near the ceiling
praying to it not to fly

I kill cockroaches
and I think of Robbe-Grillet's cockroach and life
from the point of view of a cockroach watching
women put on red lipstick
from the point of the view of a cockroach watching
tight-lipped men drink gin

I kill cockroaches
and I think of the night before I left Boston for Chicago
how you tried to cheer me up with a fifth of Beefeater's and
a lemon
how the sight of a cockroach
set you off
a frenzied rage against America
and you were so sorry you had come back here
from your dozen civilized years in Germany
you kept saying,
They don't have cockroaches in Germany
They don't have cockroaches in Germany

I kill cockroaches
and I think of what I didn't say to you
that these cockroaches are 350 million years old
that these cockroaches are called the German cockroach
but that finally I did say,
Then what was it Kafka was writing about

I kill cockroaches
and I think about you tight-lipped
gin-drinking
and I knew my lipstick was worn off
and I knew I should at least be praying
when you said,
I don't believe you understand the nature of metaphor
Catherine Kalkowska

party clothes
 To be still. Not from the clenched unborn
 too busy, clicking
 Off the hours on their beads. But the past voices
 of the days, each one
 Bulky in its gray silk scarf, mumbling
 "Write me, write me
 Write me flat and empty. Make room here
 under the skull for more."

In A Minor Key

Overhead, reeling gangs of crows throw down their
 cries and one in a high spruce by the lake we walk
 announces the world's disharmonies. You shudder
 and say, "They're everywhere I go," as if they've
 watched you all your life from the river's other
 side, placing themselves in some high tree so you
 could see the ragged blot they make of any limb.

I remember it like that. You spoke of crows
 and stopped to hear their call, and I suppose because
 to me they are no more than black notes on a line
 of any score that's worth its trouble—that

that day when the wind rose up, the way it will
 in November, ripping the clouds off at their roots,
 I chattered of the things we never tired of, poetry
 and art and how we tried—like no two others come
 since Adam yanked his roots up like a sapling in a myth
 and followed her to Earth—to make this their paradise.

Yet I knew. Although we walked with arms around
 each other in the cold, your right and my right leg
 in unison so we could feel the hip joints move beneath
 the clothes as one, between us there had come a fallen
 thing, as if a metal door had dropped, or that the raspy
 voice of crows had caught us in its tooth, sawing us apart.

Prophecy

I've already told you what I want:
that sloshing sea of you turned in this direction,
my arms reaching into you like jetties.
The tides taking care of the rest.

You ask then how it will be. I only know
the sea and land lock in their own fashion,
batter and slide, leaving on their seams
gifts along the tide lines and in their pools
salt and life. And birds—their tracks
where they tease the water's edge and the hoop
and cry they startle into morning, and sometimes
at dusk, a silver pelican, like the last
escaping light, shooting out of the sky.

But you are young and so you want *forever*
and because I can deny you nothing I say
whatever is hauled by the moon, yanked up
against the rocks, or stands there at the edge
yearning for itself, lost to the world, is
yes, forever, and yes, you might fall
down the black cliffs of yourself when this is done
lost in the roar of your own drowning, a piece
of you left empty as a hull gone down years ago
tipped into its circles. But you will carry
the grit of me away on your tongue as the wind
does, dipping off the rocks' crown, and you will
remember—not in dreams, not around the dinner table,
not in any ordinary way, although, yes, that too
for a while—but when times of great change
come like quakes along the ocean floor and that
disconsolate wreck shifts along the fault line
lifting up the cloud of silt that gathers there
still breathing, still yearning against its side,
then, for a stunned second, you will have it all again.

Alice Friman

TWO LOVE POEMS

A Taste of Cider

He tastes drifting smoke
of autumn cider
from Baldwins, Russets, Red Delicious
he picked yesterday.

She smells of crushed apple
humming in the rum
of her nakedness,
back turned,
looking out the window
at the rain.

The Great Blue Heron of the Salt Pond

He remembered her eyes—
Algae streaking color of the salt pond;
Stumbling over middens
Of fragile shell
To the passionate proximity
Of their inexperienced bodies;
The great blue heron in his heart
Floundering
In flight.

Guilt (he found later)
Is a cormorant
Feeding on dead cord grass & all crude salt
Of the world
Is but chlorine & caustic soda.

He would find a secret formula
And see
The great blue heron
Fly again.

THE OLD POET WALKS HOME WITH A NEW GOAT

I go down to the city
to buy a new goat
for my wife; and the one I find has such deep
brown eyes, all the way home on the road
I give her the benefit
of my thoughts. "Goat!" I say,
"The young are too eager to outgrow
their mistakes. If a man can speak
the foolishness of his own people,
so that it will be seen for foolishness,
he serves us well. But if he denies
all error, and hides behind high talk,
we gain nothing." The goat won't say yes
or no, but she doesn't stop me,
and when we reach the river I boldly
continue: "Consider old Hazzad,
in our village." (I welcome the goat to
citizenship, although it is
a village she has not seen.) "Old Hazzad
is truly a good man: he prays when he should,
he shows respect for those who depend on him,
he has earned his old age.
What can he learn from you
or me, or anyone?
He has only his mistakes for teachers.
But!— you ask —what mistakes?"
(Here the goat looks away,
embarrassed.) "He has only the mistakes
we all make and cannot help
making: he breathes air another man
might breathe. He takes other life
into his own, for sustenance.
His only sin is the large one, the true
sin against Paradise, against
the Possibility of All Things:

(Stanza continued)

his sin is his life, which takes
the place of all other lives he
might have lived.”

At this the poor goat is astonished.
She walks as far away as she can on her tether.

So I say the rest in a soothing voice,
although what I say may or may not
be soothing: “Old Hazzad treasures
this error, his life. He eats
nothing without blessing its source.
He counts each breath.

He weighs each word against the coin
of silence.” (She trudges on,
too polite to point out what fortunes
I squander in her behalf.)

“Hazzad attends
carefully to his sin, for only his own sin
can teach him; only his sin can lead him
at last to his forgiveness, before he
gives up his place in the courtyard
and enters Heaven.” And there we are,
at the gates of my own house,
in the golden light of late afternoon.
My wife is pleased. It is a superior goat.
And so well-taught—but that
I don't trouble to tell her.

Polly Brown

COTTON POISON

They had to be sitting in that car, drinking.
My gran was on her way south from Wisconsin
with my mother, and it was snowing bad cats, big dogs.
It took a long time to come to where the land
was once one big plantation,
and snowflakes turned to balls of cotton
before their wet, red eyes, and they was singing,
“Wish I was in Dixie, away, away—”
least, that’s how I dreamed it.

Granny Annie was a cackler, smoked a tinny pipe.
My one-breast mama had a thin and pleasant song,
God bless her. My buried grandpa must have rolled
from side to side. He always used to worry about
his women. But he turned stone-white inside and
croaked with the cotton poison, shrivelled his poor
old black body up like burned potato jackets,
cooked too long in the fire, in the spit—
least, that’s how I seen it.

Richard T. Zinman, he calls me late that night
when I’m in bed, in a pillow, and he says, well,
never mind that, but he knows I been juicing
downtown with nobody in particular and I’m
telling him it be none of his goddamn business
and he say he my cousin and Mama gone with Gran
who never did have a license but some almighty
notion to get behind a wheel to spin it into cotton
and they’s both killed—
least, that’s how he heard it.

So I jump right out of my dreams
and I chuck down those cotton covers, my old shirt,
I reach for something warm and it coats me, and
I go down these twenty stairs counting, out
the door in only slippers, and I curse that black sky,
calling it negro, and I curse them cotton stars calling
them women, and I curse the cold for keeping company with
wet, red eyes and turning my blood to a fine, mist vapor—
least, that's how they found me.

Fjaere C. Nilssen

THE WOMEN ON RHODES

It's while holding your penis cold and limp
swaying in the hotel bathroom on Rhodes
that the fever is triggered inside you.
Sweat pops from your forehead like hammered
chips must have sprung from those statues
you've admire all through this country.
Soon you're burning up and know it's serious.
You hold on to the cold limp penis for life
and it seems to urinate out of ancient grief.

You try to keep everything under control.
You gulp down gallons. Water runs through
you so fast it splashes out contempt
for the searing tissues that must scream
for it. Outside it's dark. There's a disco
in a park across the street. Another mistake.
The music is Californian the voices European.
You're not sure, maybe French maybe Scandinavian,
but women so pleased to be where they are
they can't help being too loud too happy.
The penis you hold grows silent and angry.

It keeps shrinking into you. It wants no part
of this. And your testicles drop away too.
A tactical way to protect sperm from fevers,
you recall from somewhere. They knew before you
that meat was bad. All night you soak
through sheets on two beds. You chew aspirin
like peanuts and clutch again and again
the only part of you that knows what to do.
And always those voices. In languages you don't
speak the meaning gets louder. They're so glad
to be here they've never had so much fun.

Maybe you forgive them now. You don't know.
In the morning you walked to Mandraki Harbor
and sipped cup after cup of tea. You ate
scraps of toast, read the Herald Tribune.
You studied the women too. Noticed how
they looked without the silk and makeup
damp dreams in your dark fever gave them.
That was years ago. You still recall
how thankful you were for that sweet tea
and dry toast that stayed down.

But it's not simple. You might appreciate
the shrewd biology that knew when to drop
your fragile sperm away from the heat
of your sickness. But forgiveness? That
takes more than biology. You said maybe.
You still can't decide. It's a question
you straddle, straddle with feet planted
on the resentful shores of memory, the tide
between your legs going in, going out.

Michael Lee Phillips

BOOKS IN BRIEF

The Ecco Press has initiated The Essential Poets Series—the “essential” work of the “essential” English language poets, each selected and introduced by a distinguished contemporary poet and presented in “handsome pocket- (or briefcase-, or backpack-) size edition.” Sounds good. So far we have Philip Levine’s *The Essential Keats* (145 pp., \$6.00 paper, \$14.50 cloth), Galway Kinnell’s *The Essential Whitman* (138 pp., \$6.00 paper, \$14.50 cloth), Robert Penn Warren’s *The Essential Melville* (64 pp., \$5.00 paper, \$12.50 cloth), and Stanley Kunitz’s *The Essential Blake* (92 pp., \$5.00 paper, \$12.50 cloth). In the ten volumes listed for future publications, there are no further Americans and no women at all. One of the most promising values of this project should be the insights into the poets doing the selecting, but the introductions and choices tend to be disappointingly obvious. The one conspicuous exception is Kinnell’s illuminating analysis of the problems in choosing the best texts of the much-revised Whitman poems. Kinnell’s introduction is a model: clarifying the complex textual problems, defending a canon that differs from any other available selection, inspiring a shared enthusiasm for the poetry, and casting an oblique light back onto the poetry of Kinnell himself. Future selectors, take notice.

Rita Dove’s *Thomas and Beulah* (Pittsburgh: Carnegie-Mellon, 1986, 80 pp., \$14.95 cloth, \$6.95 paper) is a two-part sequence of lyrics that chronicle the lives of her grandparents. It is amazing that a young woman living a half-century afterwards could so intimately envision the details of the lives of her forebears. The book has the qualities of a fine novel, but the chapters are true lyrics: intense in their imagery, condensed in their vision, rich in their language, and eloquent to the ear.

Ecstatic Occasions, Expedient Forms: 65 Leading Contemporary Poets Select and Comment on their Poems, edited by David Lehman (N.Y.: Macmillan, 1987, 256 pp., \$19.95 cloth), is badly titled. The "expedient forms" are there all right (all too expedient in many cases). But there are few if any "ecstatic occasions." We've all been at poetry readings where the poet's commentary was more interesting than the poems. Well, this book has something of that problem. Each of these poets was asked to explain how the form related to content in one of his or her poems. Understandably, there is little or no free verse here; the volume is a testimony to the new formalism. There are pantoums aplenty, and a wide range of fourteen-line constructions, including Brad Leithauser's fourteen-word "Post-Coitum Tristesse: A Sonnet." In the history of prosody, Molly Peacock's little essay deserves attention, for a candid and appealing account of how a poet who grew up ignorant of the whole tradition of English versification came to a respect for the value of form. Unfortunately she perpetuates a Platonic notion of capital-F Form, in which any organic evolution is conceived as imperfection. Fortunately she learned from Elizabeth Bishop that "imperfection" is not necessarily error. Anyone interested in the direction of poetry in the eighties will want to read this volume, but don't buy it for the poems, at least not if you look for "ecstatic occasions."

Richard Jackson's *Acts of Mind: Conversations with Contemporary Poets* (University of Alabama Press, 1983, x + 222 pp., \$18.75 paper) is well titled. Jackson's interest in poetry is formal, theoretical, and intellectual. He prepared for each interview as though he were planning a major critical article on the poet. Clearly the poets appreciated this intense attention on their work. Frequently they seem flattered and impressed to be described in terms of Bachelard or Barthes. Jackson's language suggests his special concerns in contemporary poetry: *voice, presence, temporalities*. He uses these nouns as verbs: *to voice, to temporalize, to presence*. After a while I felt the concerns of the interviewer become a Procrustean bed, in which the poets took on a certain uniformity. Some, like Ammons, Merwin, and Booth come off very well—eloquently and distinctively. Some, like Creeley and Heather McHugh, had the advantage of conducting their "conversations" in writing and respond wittily and elegantly to Jackson's questions. So there are fine things here, though the book as a whole gets to be tedious.

Gary Snyder's *Left Out in the Rain: New Poems 1947-1985* (Berkeley: North Point, 1986, 224 pp., \$15.95 cloth, \$9.95 paper) is a substantial collection of poems not previously assembled in book form. Even the earliest of these have Snyder's distinctive sensibility, as the "Lines on a Carp":

old fat fish of everlasting life
 in rank brown pools discarded by the river
 soft round-mouth nudging mud
 among the reeds, beside the railroad track

you will not hear the human cries
 but pines will grow between those ties
 before you turn your belly to the sun.

The book is elegantly organized by topic, but I would have appreciated more notation of the dates of individual poems. Some poems date themselves: "On Vulture Peak" is a rollicking, raunchy, mind-bouncing memorial of the Dharma Bums. But the delicious section titled "Satires, Inventions, & Diversions" is unhelpfully dated 1951-1980. This is just a quibble. The book is a joy.

Nancy Willard's *Household Tales of Moon and Water* (San Diego, N.Y.: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987, 96 pp., \$6.95 paper) collects poems on domestic subjects from the poet's earlier publication and arranges them (perhaps with some new work; I can't tell) into a graceful and occasionally magical new whole. There are old friends here, such as "How to Stuff a Pepper" and "When There Were Trees." But they take on a burnish by being set in this assembly of domestic and fairy-tale and visionary poems.

Amy Clampitt's new book, *Archaic Figure* (N.Y.: Knopf, 1987, 116 pp., \$15.95 cloth) has more obviously "literary" poems than her earlier volumes: one section of Hellenic traveler's poems, one on mythological and legendary characters from ancient Greece, another—"A Gathering of Shades"—largely on women writers such as George Eliot and Dorothy Wordsworth. I somehow wanted them to have titles like "Lines Written on Reading a New Biography of Dorothy Wordsworth." Not surprisingly they require ten pages of endnotes. I must say at once that I thoroughly enjoyed the volume—every page. But I could not be sure that much of my pleasure did not come from my having, like the poet, meditated in an olive grove on Thasos, pondered the biography of Dorothy Wordsworth, picnicked to thrush song on a Maine shore. I suspect that these poems do not transcend their subjects as gloriously as many of her earlier poems do.

Carcenet is promoting Christopher Barker's *Portraits of Poets*, edited by Sebastian Barker (Manchester and N.Y., 1986, 128 pp., \$16.95 large-format paper) as a gift book, intended for the general reader. But it is really much more than that. The sixty-four photographs of British and Irish poets born in the first forty years of the century are magnificent—spell-binding. From the winsome portrait of Philip Larkin on the cover to the haunted R.S. Thomas, they are powerfully eloquent. When I first read the poems facing the portraits, I assumed that the poets had written them specifically to accompany the photos. They are brilliantly apt. But it appears that Sebastian Barter has culled them from previously published volumes. The match is astonishing. Uncanny. Moreover, the volume serves beautifully as a survey of British and Irish poetry from Sir Sacheverill Sitwell to Seamus Heaney. Indeed, it is almost an anthology of retrospective autobiographical meditations—an anthology of considerable value in its own right.

Yaqui Deer Songs/Maso Bwikam: A Native American Poetry, by Felipe S. Molina and Larry Evers (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1987, 238 pp., \$32.50 cloth, \$16.95 paper) is not only a marriage of literature, anthropology, ecology, and art, it is also a marriage of traditional culture, the best modern scholarship, and the book designer's art. The songs of the deer dance are the many voices of the desert; we find them here in Yaqui and English, with moving narrative introductions and notes, as well as photographs, maps, and appendices, not to mention exquisite colored endpapers. In the words of one of the songs: "First you just look,/ later you will find, find."

Ai's *Sin* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986, 80 pp., \$13.95 cloth, \$5.95 paper) is an unforgetting and unforgiving book. Its monologues capture the personae of twenty wielders of modern power and victims of modern (mostly male) authority. Ai imagines herself into the consciousness—and even the conscience—of the Kennedy brothers, Oppenheimer, the Atlanta child murderer, various anonymous victims, and even America herself. Many of these are dream-poems, passionately conceived in clarity and rage and almost unbelievable compassion.

Among the swarm of colloquial, autobiographical, narrative poems, David Bottoms' *Under the Vulture Tree* stands out (N.Y.: Morrow, 1987, 63 pp., \$17.95, cloth). I admire the literal realism of Bottoms' world, and I admire even more the seemingly spontaneous way he alchemizes the simplest detail into the magical, the memorable, even the mythical.

I predict a long life for Philip Booth's *Relations: Selected Poems 1950-1985* (N.Y.: Viking Penguin, 1986, 260 pp., \$12.95 paper). It gathers generously from Booth's first six volumes and adds 31 new poems, to produce a rich, coherent, and beautiful volume—a major work. The first poem in the collection, "Adam," establishes the premises on which the subsequent poems will depend:

I love you by the terms

I make to give you. I wake to call
the osprey, tern, the slow-winged gull,
say all the sea's grave names, and build
with words the beach that is the world.

They are poems of very specific places, of Place. They are poems of construction—making it of wood or soil or fire or words. They are meticulously-observed, sensuously explicit. They move gravely and joyously from the local habitation and name to the deeply human. And they are crisply, cleanly crafted. Each poem illuminates and magnifies the others, so that the cumulative effect of this elegant volume is much stronger and more enriching than the parts. The whole is a major work.

M.K.S.

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