

THE BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL

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Cover: Robert Shetterly, Jr., "Moon Shells," ink drawing, 1980.

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THE FARTHEST-NORTH SOUTHERN TOWN

My hairdresser Frank's own hair's cut punk
today, livid as a ruffled bird.
He tells me about his brother-in-law
on the police force who tells him how
the cops punch out the punks on Main Street,
and get away with it, too. They got
these leather gloves, he says, with brass
inside, so no bruises show, and even
if there are some, they're gone
by the time the trial comes up, or the judge
will say you might have fallen down
stairs. This town is the farthest-north
Southern town, Frank says, switching scissors,
and nobody wants to argue with the mayor,
who appoints the police chief, and so on,
like a ricochet bullet, down
to your basic level of cop who takes
his shift to count the number of times
the same car cruises Main Street
in an hour. Three time's the limit.
Then out he comes, his cruiser flashing
red and blue. They mostly nail
the ones with racing stripes and mag
wheels, not the little Subaru wagons,
Frank says, spraying mousse in his palm,
lifting my hair to an elegant panic.
We are squared off in the mirror.
What's more, the law says, they can still
hang you, here, he goes on, for stealing
a horse. I won't, I say. I won't.

Fleda Brown Jackson

THE DOCKS OF NEW YORK

After the film by Josef von Sternberg, 1928

She wakes in an iron bed in a bare room
 above a bar. She has slept through dancing and brawling,
 the door being opened, a duffle bag dragged across the floor,
 the near steps of the stevedore as he opened the bag, unfolded
 the clothes he bought for her: a dress, a skirt
 and a blouse with a ruffled collar.

Each of them will fit perfectly,
 as if he had slept beside her, with his cheek
 on her shoulder, so perfectly did he know her body
 as he lifted her to shore.

She is sitting now, smoking a cigarette,
 clothes draped from the headboard, the closet door
 and the windowsill. She hugs her knees to her chest, pulls the
sheet closer
 and looks up as she did when she turned her face toward the
moon

and she fell into the harbor,
 let herself fall.

On the fresh waves moonlight blossomed like gardenias.
 How could he not notice the whiteness in all the black?

He dives in. Easily, he finds her. Her arms are limp,
 shining. If she opens her eyes now
 she will push him away, he who bears her weight
 without her consent. She will scream.

But she is sleeping the peace-filled sleep of those who want
to die

as the water runs from her skirt
and from her hair, wetting the dock.
Already it is too late for him. He is in love with her.

She stubs out the cigarette and stands,
pulls the dress over her flesh-colored slip.

At this point who doesn't know the story?
Who couldn't tell it in the time it takes
to fasten the buttons from nape to waist?
Yes, soon the stevedore will enter, shy
now that he is not touching her.
When he says his ship leaves tomorrow
she will touch her hair, and lean forward.

When they embrace they will look as they did
when they rose from the water,
the moon swimming toward them
though the waves would carry it to sea
if the waves had their way.

Suzanne Cleary

Three Poems

A MYSTERY

Beyond that indigo. Beyond the power
Of the Peregrine, the Gyr. Beyond

The difficulty and accomplishment
In finding them: the night-walking,
Miles of listening in spartina marsh
The second and third moons of summer
To find Black Rails. To do this
As if in a blue dream, self-mystified,
Years on end. And then to find one.

They prepossess us with their otherness,
Whether planned as ritual dawn observance
Or as astonishing as Arizona hailstorms —
It rests in them, beyond our effort
Finding them: the otherness
Of wings and nest-weaving, the grace
That holds them hidden, still
So easily mortal.

They live beyond our circle of desire,
A thrush, horizon-braiding shearwaters,
A crane in mist, red eyeshine:
Sometimes an unremembered afterimage.
The thing we seek flies elsewhere,
Remains as music, a dark silence,
Becomes water, branches, open sky.

We live alone in us. We look around.
We focus on what often fears us close.
We choose as home an empty unfamiliar.
We learn to know what isn't understood.

A SNOWY OWL WITH A NORWAY RAT

It moves upriver to the edge of vision,
Hunting rats, methodical, crisscrossing
Low over the sunken quonsets. We wait.
Soon it drops into the brittle wreckage.
Snapping tripods. Lens caps unclipping.
Up again: a Snowy Owl with a Norway Rat.

Our intellects take in the incongruity
Of this prey and predator. It's just
The common ordinary local food chain,
True, but serendipitous — dual symbols
Of plague and power, cloacal effluvia
And Inuit horizons, their meadowlands
Unscarred by any haul road or pipeline.
The creatures have converged and split,
Continuing. And some survive as myths,
As data of the arts and life sciences:
An archetype will eat a dead exemplum;
Pavlov's boxed maze, Melville's white;
Vermin and a violent end. It's natural
Yet alien too, grotesquely mesmerizing,
In the end an image wakening as poetry
(As was, last week, that Falcated Teal
Fast asleep on an island of gas masks).

We've all seen, birding coastal Texas,
Ospreys bearing taloned fish to nest.
But an owl, rat in beak, recalls a cat
With limp prey dead, or playing dead,
The tiny tail distastefully dangling.
And we know all too well the tailings.
A daily chore of ours is wiping feces
And rat hair from the cans and counters.
We've seen fatter rats in Central Park,
But here we bait the trapline nightly.

But they are impressive little beasts,
Replenishing the earth by craft, quick
Breeding, and grit. Rats somehow know
Which storage drums contain spare parts,
Which ones contain granola, flour, rice.
Consider how, to thwart starvation, rats
Gnaw on bicycle tires or plastic tubing,
And will drill the walls of everything
With perfect circles, leaving no space
Uninvestigated. For millions of years
They ate termites, eggs, seeds, tubers,
Burrowing in bogs and mossy streambanks.
When they came into our houses, hungry,
When they invaded towns and grain-boats,
Our spades and plows had cut the turf.

The owl. Flying in, unfurling lucent
Slow wing-beats nearing her, her nest.
He lands at the far edge of the circle
Of owl down. The female gazes at him
As he dances, swaying, his fresh gift
Offered as ritual food, with singing;
We come to it then, how we have never
Heard a Snowy Owl form sounds: eerie,
The deep double note of a Tantric monk
As he dances now, surrendering the rat.

Still, we wish it were a vole, a smaller,
Ahistorical, and entirely natural prey,
This accident of war or exploration—
Do we even know if it's a Russian rat,
A Japanese-American rat, or a US rat?
We do know that they don't belong here,
That, in fact, no endemic land mammals
Live here. So, clearly this means that
The island's breeding Snowy Owls don't,
But for our agency, belong here either.

Of course we realize the owls care less.
To them it's neither natural, grotesque,
Nor anything like poetry. Like us, owls
See, and they like us watch other beings,
But differently. To us, they seem to be
Unblinking, opaque ghosts, the predators
Indifferent to us, as to our incongruity.

AIRSTRIP AT ALEXAI POINT

Filling the circles in the runway matting
Like done muffins in a battalion kitchen
Sit hundreds of clumps, thousands: purple

Flowers so minuscule you crouch to see,
The beauty of them fathoms future warmth.
Interspersed, the fat Siberian dandelions

High as your calf, Saxifrage, Nootka Rose,
And the nearly hidden stands of moonwort,
Thought rare in America till we found it

Abundant. They laid this Marsden Matting
Working twenty-four-hour shifts, fitting
Tooth to tooth the serious puzzle pieces,

Iron, three-men-long. The snow had stopped.
They had hot coffee, cigarettes, and songs.
Only the few oldtimers feared the Japanese

Survivors gathered east in Abraham Valley.
Conversations started up about elsewhere,
The girls back home, the range of bombers,

And could Intrepid Airmen taking off from
Here find Tokyo? How soon? Who can see
Through brass, a Corporal Schoenfeld said,

But this airstrip is, repeat is, priority
Urgent from what I've been receiving today:
And they took six days, an Aleutian record.

Today the Golden and the Mongolian Plovers
Appreciate it. We do also in our own way.
And these endless formations of flowerpots.

Here and there rises a forty-year willow,
Thick-stemmed, less than three inches high;
Branches cling onto the matting like roots,

The way summer snakes dart from an egg-berm
Or how a mandala will swirl. The willows
Speak about tenacity, a recovering of time,
The experience of winter and spring winds.

Macklin Smith

Two Poems

HOME STAY

Domain is what I see when I walk out,
cup in hand, on the green-gold silks the sun flings
through the grass. The zest of coffee blends
with the mead of phlox, white phlox,
man-high here in the sun, the bolls tight
and loose as cloud cover, immense with coolness.
I stand on stone — a terrace — and watch the shards
in a ruined English border brood
back on the seasons: peonies have passed; mourning bride
hangs dark with tatters; globe thistles quill
steel blue inside a round of goldfinches' wings.
The hues I have restored bloom out loud
in the fresh sweep of spaces; some glee
now but the June favorites I shall not see
until a Sabbath year. As I veer the lawn
past apple gnarl behind new windflower pink,
the man in the house looks out at me across a bed
that will go starry when I leave and break into seed.

THROUGH THIS WINDOW

Through this window I cannot gaze across my fields
 into the break in my woods
 where the lair of the deer is.
I cannot hear the foghorn's woo! and woo!
as the sea sighs toward the shore its mists
 and the mists walk the river
 and waver on the edge of my land.
But I see mountains in fleet, their sharp sails raked
breaking the sky, and I see the eighth-hour mist
spinning up onto the sun's spools from last night's drench.
I walk and sing but my song is heavy with the past
and does not lift. I am happy with my new terrain,
 but it is not home. The hills peak
 raggedly in cypresses;
 the birds are brisk but they have no names;
 even the moon, that follower, is odd,
 too milky and much too mild;
 it is not the moon of home. An artist
of this place would paint me dense and dark and small
against bare room, and I would fit his boundaries,
but I do not belong. I want to live large
and very bright. I want to be where my heart is.

Roger Finch

COUNTRY MUSIC BLUES

Six o'clock and the hormones in this house
are having a party. I close two doors
between me and the kids, the drums, the phone,
the pool table. On the radio someone's
crying her heart out—Billy's left her for sweet Sue—
and as her words rise above vague pounding
from the basement, I cry
as if it were me. As if Billy had been drinking
all these years and I put up with it,
dinner on the table every night,
not saying a word when he walks in at ten,
and then Sue. As if Sue
were my best friend, and she didn't breathe a word,
kept on coming for coffee
as if it were all the same between us,
as if her hands hadn't been places
that were seriously off-limits, no
parking, tow zone, don't even think
of parking here. As if he were gone
a week, a month, God knows what
I tell the kids, and then
he comes back, begging, the tune so mournful now
but it doesn't fool me, the guy
doesn't deserve me, and when
my husband walks in the door, steady,
reliable as ever, and kisses me on the cheek
and asks, *how was your day?* it's all I can do
not to wish him dead on the floor,
no, dying, looking up at me and gasping
for help, as I turn on my heel
and turn the music louder.

More tapping. Then as if a pin
 is pulled, my occipital
 opens like a bomb hatch: something
 in me dropping
 down, down

A child squats beside you
 who, having dismantled the brace,
 now yank at my heels, now
 divide the air with gestures
 above my head. His sac of sex
 distends from the delicate fork
 of his limbs, dusky as egg-
 plant, hard behind the soft ochre
 spout of his cock. Gravid, he wiggles
 belly down in the trough you've dug beside me.
 Your hands sign: one on top
 of the other; like a lid then, my body
 covers this child.

When he's drawn out by his legs, dislodged
 from my breasts, does his head like a poppy
 pod on the stalk of his
 neck, bob to your words: *Dreaming*
is suffering, dreaming is also
suffering, dreaming is. . .

Is this your body,
 this gravity, this land lowering itself now
 on my spine, banking the bulbs of my bones
 like a dark palm pressing? Is this
 your mouth behind my ear, your words:
Did I heal you?

Two Poems**BUTTERFLIES**

Sleeping, I lean toward
half sleeping,
as if I were some
summer yard harassed
by butterflies.
My mind's firing
becomes those tossed and crumpled
creatures swashbuckling
in flimsy air by the dozen.
I see them,
squadrons of them,
the flat yard,
its dandelion stubble
lunging up,
flopping over. They
must see it
without my astonishment.
And as many
(this is the sleeping part)
perched,
coiling, uncoiling
that lasso tube.
I have felt them,
their black legs holding on
with the confidence
of a child's
hand,
that long tongue sucking sweat.
Even the plainest of them
touches like
a diamond shines.

So I wake and sleep
with them
glittering over me.
And tossed in the empty field,
in my room, in my mind,
touching everything,
they flutter against
anything.
And I hold sleep,
my trusting feet
like touched fingers,
and I drink it
until it froths empty,
and I touch —
What do I touch?

PORTRAIT OF ME PLAYING THE FLUTE

I am seen almost from above and behind
and through a luminous mass of twigs and leaves,
as if through the eyes of some crouching arboreal monster.

Yet such a monster must be listening before he spring.
I am tousled, sufficiently engrossed in the music
to have already become the best of victims.

The hands make unpredictable, protective angles
around the flute. The arms are thin and unattached.
There is a line of strain, or perhaps absorption, in the jaw.

It must be a portrait of my head and hair. I fear
constantly for that unprotected spine, standing
self-consciously in some rich person's garden,

holding a flute more mechanical than musical.
It seems I am drawing from it something which protects me
from the monster. It watches patiently.

HORSES

For John & Alex

1,000 ponies, The United States Cavalry stole 1,000 ponies from The Spokane Indians, shot 1,000 ponies & only 1 survived, shot 1,000 ponies & left them as monuments, left 1,000 ponies falling into dust, fallen, shot 1,000 ponies & only 1 survived.

*

At the last Spokane Tribal All-Indian Rodeo, I remember an Indian cowboy, I remember an Indian cowboy rode a horse through a fence, I remember an Indian cowboy rode a horse named Custer's Revenge, the horse named Custer's Revenge broke through a fence, broke through four-by-six boards, after the bell, the horse broke through a fence, I remember the Indian cowboy was thrown into the air, I remember the horse named Custer's Revenge threw the Indian cowboy,
after the bell, the Indian cowboy was thrown into the air, broken by the horse named Custer's Revenge, I remember the Indian cowboy rode a horse through a fence, after the bell, through four-by-six boards, I remember the horse named Custer's Revenge broke through a fence, I remember an Indian cowboy rode a horse named Custer's Revenge.

*

The United States Cavalry shot 1,000 ponies & only 1 survived, she was found, someone found her, she was found in Montana, giving birth to a colt, born running from The United States Cavalry, born running into The Kentucky Derby, giving birth to a colt named Spokane, the colt named Spokane running in The Kentucky Derby,
born running into the mile-and-a-half, from The United States Cavalry, the colt named Spokane won The Kentucky Derby, set a record for the mile-and-a-half, the colt named Spokane was born running.

*

My cousin rode his horse in a reservation cross-country race,
my cousin rode his horse to the top of Wellpinit Mountain,
my cousin was miles ahead of the nearest horse at the top
of the mountain, my cousin was miles ahead of the nearest horse

but his horse would not go down the mountain, my cousin whipped
the horse, kicked the horse bloody, but the horse would not go
down the mountain, my cousin cried and whipped, kicked the horse
bloody, but the horse would not, would not go down the mountain.

*

Last night, I woke to the sound of gunshots,
1,000 rifles, last night, I woke to the sound
of gunshots, 1,000 rifles, last night, I woke
to the sound of gunshots, 1,000 rifles, last night,
I woke to the sound of gunshots, 1,000 rifles,
last night, I woke to the sound of gunshots.

*

The Plains Indian rode her horse 18 hours a day, The Plains Indian
rode under her horse's neck into battle, The Plains Indian shot
seven arrows consecutively, The Plains Indian had seven arrows
in flight simultaneously, The Plains Indian rode her horse 18 hours
a day.

There are witnesses.

*

After I heard the story on the radio,
the story I had never heard before,
I wanted to steal it all back, steal
1,000 ponies back from The United States Cavalry,
steal the ponies stolen from The Spokane Indians,
steal the horse named Spokane, steal
The Kentucky Derby, steal the mile-and-a-half,
steal every pony in my life.

*

My brother, the bingo caller, made five hundred in tips one week,
my brother went to the horse races, my brother bet five hundred
dollars
on the daily double, in the first race Grammas Luck won by a length,
my brother's horse won by a length in the first race, in the second,
my brother lost it all, in the second race Go Fast lost a photo
finish,
my brother's horse lost a photo finish, my brother holding ten
tickets,
ripping them into halves, my brother holding ten tickets, ripping
them
into halves, my brother strangely in love with himself.

*

1,000 ponies shot
& only 1 survived.

*

The Indian was measured before
by the number of horses he owned,
the wealth of an Indian was determined
by the exact number of horses

he owned, I own no
horses, I own no horses,
my next door neighbors own
a dozen horses, my cousins

own more horses than I can count,
I own no horses,
the Indian was measured before
by the number of horses he owned,

the exact number, I own
no horses, I own
no horses, I own
no horses.

HAWK

Dark-rumored inkling of air-chills,
pulsing pupils, the whole hill
monastery-still, a tilting
cliff's edge empty
reckoning — blue water, blue sky.

Ponderous, as if in chains,
attended by black birds, he rises
out of the tree-fringe
hoisted by huge shoulders, granite facemask
blank as an angel's —

over the flapping canopy of lake
unwavering and undeterred, past lake rim and horizon
into miraculous high noon
when he who owns nothing, not shadow or hunger,
absolves utterly,

becomes nothing — all shadow, all hunger —
the eye-scorching sun unmasked in its bottomless plummet.

Two Poems

AGREEING TO IT

He climbed over the stone wall
as if no one were watching him strip
to almost nothing, unpack
the flute from the case —
and that would have been enough,
right there, if he had stopped
and let us look at him, imagine
the cool of it under his fingers,
the sun on the whole length
of his body, the knowledge
that anytime he wanted to play it
he could, and wouldn't be playing it
for us, but for himself or for some
private god, it didn't matter.

But he played it,
gave it to anyone
who happened to be there,
happened to notice him,
just a man practicing the flute
in the park on a summer day.
I was seventeen and I took
the obviousness of his body,
the music, the sweep of the sky, and
I decided I would do it:
I would be the sort of person
who wanted this, who would live for
the heat of it on the skin,
who would do what was necessary.

FRESH FIG

Never having seen
or even imagined one,
I brought it home —

soft, pendulous,
a seeded teardrop,
so unlike

what we were used to.
We ate in small bites,
suspicious

of anything that new,
daring each other to
like it first.

And then our mouths
took to it, our tongues
fit around it

and wanted more:
we were bold
as lovers,

choosing such a
ripe, globed thing
to eat, to own.

Susannah Sheffer

ALBUM OF EIGHT LANDSCAPES AND EIGHT POEMS

“The moment you meet a teacher, you should leave
the teacher, and you should be independent.”

— Shunryu Suzuki

“For what care I who calls me well or ill,
So you o’ergreen my bad, my good allow?
You are my all the world, and I must strive
To know my shames and praises from your tongue;”

—William Shakespeare

1.

Too much, *too much* —
 all this yellow in early
 October, the way the yellow light
saturates
 all of the
 not-completely-degreed
leaves,
 saturates
 even the air *between* leaves —
the red sandstone promontory
 oranged out,
 yellow-gray for the gravel —
I swear
 the sun’s on the road
 and just about every
wildflower that’s late
 says yellow
 millions of times
and leaves.

2.

How will I find it?
 equipoise in tumult —
 balance out of plunge —
 I don't see how, how,
 for you may not be but you seem to be
 all thought,
 a migration of butterflies in autumn
 bright all-of-a-sudden gestures . . .

We correspond.
 We correspond.
 I can say
 any word,
 can it
 correspond?
And,
 too,
 the ducks, the geese,
go or begin
 to go
 before the swirl and fall of . . . But
 not every
 leaf
 is finished.

3.

In the whitening
 now of November,
 I know, of *course*,
I know December in-holds
 something firmer
 something root-stocked, something
after.
 But how many years will it take me? —
 what years multiplied by what seasons
take me? just to reword,
 to enclose,
 finally to
release
 just this one hour of you,
 this one-of-the-last I'm allowed
to write to your knowing —
 my pages flown to
 your lap, that *far.*

4.

This hour and too
the lake hour in September,
also alone, but you *were*
the water, you were,
the glittering white-light leaf-shapes
on that wondrous surface, laid over
the blue depth . . .
your eyes . . .
how could you see this:
You were *there*,
in the reeds in the cattails
green going to yellow to brown
in the wind in the wind
that was you it was you
and you bent —

5.

Christ, I've had it with this fucking elegy

I want these fucking photographics

DOWN!

And I don't mean

leaf down in yellow or

aflame, afloat on pretty

blue ponds in New Fucking Hampshire!

I mean not even brown but gray

and shriveled, shrunk

or better, sunk

to bracken, rot:

I want

that pond

iced up.

If I can't have you coming, then

I want you gone. I'm Grown — I *don't*

want this —

HUGE LOVE

scaled

down.

6.

What good does it do
to note

aqua-gray sky, oak leaves

soaked *orange* —

deep *copper*, the sun declining . . .

then the sky a momentary *paler*

aqua still, trees forming

wrought-iron silhouettes out of

dullest orange, in the last rays.

Looks like Tiffany *lamp* light.

So what?

My grandmother gave me

a pair of *glass* candleholders —

turquoise blue —

“Depression Glass” — telling me how,

when my father was a little boy,

he thought they looked like

his eyes.

Once in a *fiery* spell,

I smashed those things with a board,

then cried

inconsolably,

picking up pieces . . .

putting them in that *brown paper* bag . . .

a brown not unlike *these oak-leaves*.

Big deal. I hate all mirrors,

like myself in you.

Brown paper bags,

candles set inside them

in sand at Christmastime:

Luminarias.

7.

I love you I love you and that's the truth.

Sometimes I dream I'm in
the landscape,

mountains,

steep blue-black, for

miles and miles —

mountains —

mists — slowly rising, slowly settling —
over depths —

The bell and its necessities:

time and a hollow body.

And underneath that sound a sound

a drone

under the wind. And wind is always
skyward . . .

8.

Absolutely forced
 to love absolutely
 forced to this ending,
 I find myself in your words:
 “*the double-edged nature of all
 profound encounters,
 revealing and confusing,
 regenerating and
 destroying.*”

My heart feels
 like an animal, a mare
 lying on her side in a cave,
 brooding, sick.
 And yet I cannot help but set my eyes upon
 beyond — the grassy plains —
 being what I know:
 those undulations . . .
 I'd like to show how *different*
 the yellows are — the winter grasses —
 some brass-colored,
 some a near-white chartreuse.

I will show you this:
 my deepest bow,
 for you have taught me
 the inside and out
 are *just the same*. I bow —
 before I dash — in your honor.

Mary Leader

Two Poems

OCTAROON

Darkness, two raveled sneakers blur
against the queen palm.
Sayeeda, princess of Abyssinia,
Kool-mo-dee t-shirt,
hair pulled back in a ribbon
like Nefertiti the Lioness —
what deal's going down
right now? Have they told you
another time and you're gone,
and are you maybe
sneaking another line
anyway? Your brother's
skinny as a lightning rod,
I saw him last week
trying to sell some college boy
a gold chain — yeah, a gold chain.
He might not know it,
but the Man is wise to him.
And they're probably hip to how
your Aunt Vashni's putting on
matinees so she can ice down
with Jose and Spam
at the shooting gallery.

I want to tell you something,
something black that
rolls its hips and coaxes
the Carolina Shuffle
out of an old washboard.
But I've got my collar, my tie,
I trim my fingernails,
don't smoke, drink Ginestet Margaux.
These brothers aren't my brothers
any more than he was my father —
the half-creole wingback

who split a Stavanger maiden's
prim uprights, and shot
his dumb homunculus
toward the color-blind sun.

The one who eloped
with a bus to Baton Rouge,
left her with a baby growing
inside her and a pile
of unpaid bills.

Nobody believes he was the reason
for my frizzy hair, long flattened skull,
arms that drag too low. Once or twice drunk
I told. And they nodded, embarrassed,
not knowing what to say.

Sayeeda, I'll leave it that way.
Because what use is color
when it's just a whisper
in the blood? When it
only buys the knowledge
that you don't belong
on either train? Sayeeda,
why do I want to tell you
what those crack-heads never will,
how Lester and Bird
heard music in the noise
of steelyard rimshots
and the stillness of women
before their mirrors?
Why do I want to take you
to a porch in Mississippi,
make you learn
at some old Juju man's knee
how good is blackness,
how tall the gods of Africa?
Me, with my pale skin
and eyes of chilly blue,
who have my place insured
against the likes of you.

CIRCUMCISION

when i was nearly thirteen
they decided to do the operation
because the smell (stale casein,
rank narcissus) kept coming
through my clothes

the foreskin being tight
and the doctor so old and cranky
he couldn't stand again
to loosen it with steaming towels
and vaseline

and anyway they said, if we don't
he'll have trouble later, cancer
and it will fall off completely

the palo verdes shook
in their crowns of bees
when they took me up
to a private room
of pale green walls, no TV,
the picture of Jesus
with hair like a cornfield

the nuns and nurses liked me, and
we played low stakes blackjack
all afternoon before the doctor
came and led me away
to a secret place where a
brittle, grey-haired woman
took pictures of it
fearful and limp as a
shucked clam

that night i ate
salisbury steak and
instant potatoes, milk
and jello, and slept
until a fat mestizo nurse
came and woke me

drew a curtain around the bed
and pulled the gown up to my ribs.
Carefully as a priest
he lathered me with yucca froth
from navel to buttocks,
shaved my scant hair with a
long straight razor,
and rolled the patiently unsheathed
blue acorn between his soapy hands
like a lump of masa
or a sugar skull
to give to a child
on Dia de los Muertos

his eyes motionless, interested
in a way that made me
burn with shame

before i felt
the grey mice flee
their sour cupboard
and emptiness roll in
sweet as desert rain

later when i showed
the puckered scar
to johnny and rick
hiding in the aloe patch
at sundown

it was nearly as good
as coming through the fire unburned
taking your first deer
surviving the curandero
and his bitter datura

Two Poems

NOTHING ON PAPER

Birth and death, three cuttings of hay,
Kept me from writing for a year.
But the hay kept leaf on leaf a long time in the barn
While the winter yahooped outside.

It was a clean year.
We quenched that womb
And left the flocked placenta for dead.
In the celibate time around the birth,
We learned the other, older purpose of the bed.

That is the way it must stay afterward.
Sex now in the mowing and the mow
And the studded orchard
Where all the apples are gendered with stars
And the nipples buzz big as bees.
And in the winter?
Freeze to me,
Til we burn out, cold as the searing stars.

There was another bed
A family stood around
And whispered goodbye
And shouted let go.
Oh, breath like a bull high in hump,
It's coming.

Leave the bed for the child
And the bad child in the dying.

It was a clean year.
We made the hay we roll in,
Nothing can unmake that bed.
It was a clean year,
Nothing on paper.

MEN

We stand in damp barns that the wind bangs.
We turn our backs to piss, but not to spit.
More of us love our wives than you would think.
Few will admit it, none wants to talk about it.

How big are we:
Across the shoulders, in our jeans, in our hearts?
That is a fear we might talk about,
But it isn't what we look for
In the eyes of the other talking
As we listen pushing back our baseball caps
Hitching up our pants
Loafing and leaning on a pickup,
What we want to know is,
Is he dangerous, would he laugh?

We see the face of rock and the water running down it
We feel our feet echo on the ledge
And the well runs through it,
And we nod, brothers.
Bullshit like that.

We like a little death
And carry some around
In a smoke or a bottle.
This is what we are in love with:
Being man enough to do it slowly.
Get the kids grown, first.
And what about the wife?
This is what is wrong with a woman drunk:
She shouldn't hunt, especially not herself.
It ain't natural if she dies first.

We look into the match,
Its sharp play across the tobacco
That comes up to meet it
In the sweetest prairie surrender.

Some love to hide from fear.
But love is where we learn fear.
And fear can count the sands til love runs out.
The kids board the schoolbus
And clamber into our worst imaginings.
Their rubber bones, their rooted hearts
Can't last in our cheap novels
Where preverts roam and furnaces rage
And any brake can ooze into fatal limbo underfoot.

Where is comfort?
In that same world, when we let it,
Just let it, a little.

Pockets full of scratch, pockets full of seed.
Buckets full of sap, buckets full of feed.

Stop. A man stops, a woman finishes,
Can bring to term, can bear
Can bring milk, can bring blood again in a month,
Has a flock of eggs and a breast for two generations to pig.
What is a skinny and downstream sperm to that?

Stop
Short
Halfway up the stairs
See yourself go by
Watch your thoughts rise
Looking up their skirts from underneath.
Stop now hawk now turn now
Plow down. Get grown, get gone.

Go now
Remember the noses of all creatures.
Along the hammered flank of the bull
Remember how the calf nuzzles
And the rubber noses of lambs, how they butt and the
bag bunts them.
Hogs root and foxes, how they twitch the air in an agony
of knowledge.

(Stanza continues)

Children run clear streams all winter.
Go now.
You have the day and can go naked.
You have the night and can hide.
You have life if you can make it.
Wear it inside, go on, bake it.
Wear it out, to show you tried.

Stephen Philbrick

GRAVITIES

To be prone is to be covered
by a man or spades of dirt
or like a pig by its mother.
All things fall on what has fallen.
There crows a universal law,
but you might take pity
for out of memory
all victims are judged innocent.

At the bottom of a canyon
night comes early. You rest
with your back against the wall
in a decor of strata.
The old creek, long tired in its course,
sings the only song it knows,
how the earth always was true,
the sky always a liar.

Keith S. Murray

BOOKS IN BRIEF

I would like to celebrate two books by strong poets who have made their way quietly through the throng of workshop networkers, fellowship-chasers, prize winners and circuit riders. Without promotion or competition or fanfare they have written their way through to poetry of power and integrity.

The first is **Barbara Moore's *Farewell to the Body*** (Washington, D. C.: The Word Works, 1990, 76 pp., \$8. paper). Its first achievement is the exploration of a language for expressing freshly the unique gritty experience of the individual. Moore pays surgical attention to the dependence of perception on the organs on which that perception depends: the silver jelly of the eyeball, the "brown depths of the groin," the "miles and miles of incandescent plumbing"—the "whole miraculous, tireless/ contraction, which may tire of me soon." From this body the poet looks out and recognizes "the oak on the lawn/ injected with the color of our thought." The triumph of these poems is their escape from the solecism of this self-consciousness:

What is there to talk about, except the earth,
its ancient freshness, grass sputtering
with children and new graves. Also
beetles so top-heavy, so drugged with thought,
they tip over trying to navigate the simplest distance.
Though it's only one day after another, never
the day we're after, though we walk
the pear-shaped earth in gravely wounded lives,
such afternoons arrive.

The book ends with several rich poems of gratitude for "such afternoons," in which the suffering of the human condition is not so much alleviated as balanced by a happiness beyond language.

Constance Hunting's *The Myth of the Horizon* (Mount Kisco, N. Y. and London: Moyer Bell/ Asphodel Press, 1991, 154 pp., \$12.95, paper) brings together poems from six earlier books in a tightly-organized new whole. From the beginning Hunting's writing has revealed a marvelous ear:

She makes her way
among the golden droppings of the sun,
the silver spittle of the snail.
To come to stone

This exquisite prosody conveys narratives of moving complexity and subtlety. A series of long portraits of an elegant old world in decline and fall dominates the first section of this book. One of the most brilliant is "After

the Stravinsky Concert, moving from its *Introduzione* in which a pier glass falls, "leaving us nothing to reflect upon," to its *Finale: grave assai*," with its November of : "No nonnies, no nannies, no go, lovely rose." The second section of the book opens with the unsettling magic of the verse novella, "Beyond the Summerhouse." The narrator in this delicately Gothic romance pays a visit to a mythic holiday world suggested by the luscious Vanessa Bell painting on the book jacket. Hunting here creates a realm of the imagination so sensuously and psychologically real that it leaves the reader haunted and disturbed and strangely altered. This 34-page poem is a considerable work of fiction at a very high level. The final section of the book is the whole splendid volume of *Between the Worlds*, which I reviewed here when it first appeared. That title could apply even better to this new volume, but *The Myth of the Horizon* expresses both the process by which Hunting transforms the personal to the universal as well as the way in which a phenomenon perceived may expand from percept to concept and move farther and farther out as one advances toward it, and in this way her title is a microcosm of the book—a sort of mini-mini-poem.

Agni magazine (no. 31/32), with more than 400 pages, its glossy cover and \$12. price tag, looks like just another of the bloated university journals that choke the mailbox. But this double issue has two special features that justify the size and price. The first is the publication of the papers from the Harvard conference on *Social Control and the Arts*—sixteen short statements by authorities on the regulation of expression in China, the USSR, South Africa, Chile, Britain, Japan, Poland, and the U. S. Nine of the articles are on the external and internal restrictions on artistic expression in this country. Most troubling is the evidence from here and abroad of the various ways self-censorship achieves the same ends as state censorship, as Noam Chomsky has been trying to warn us. The second feature in this excellent issue is a symposium on Peter Dale Scott's enormously important poem *Coming to Jakarta: A Poem about Terror* (New York: New Directions, 1989), on the CIA involvement in the massacre of over half a million people in Indonesia in 1965. In addition to a statement by Scott, a section of a new poem by him, and an interview, are several valuable critical articles, including a magisterial analysis by Robert Hass, "Some Notes on *Coming to Jakarta*." The editors of *Agni* deserve our gratitude for calling attention to this major work. Address orders to *Agni*, Boston University, Creative Writing Program, 236 Bay State Road, Boston, MA 02215.