

**THE BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL**

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**COVER**

Judith Cordary, "Wheel," photograph, c. 1984



An arrow at the bottom of a page  
means no stanza break.

**JUDITH CORDARY**

**Hand Song**

Brush the silk with gold  
then stroke in  
whatever your hand hears:  
black swordthrusts for bamboo,  
anthracite eye and feather tuft  
for bird,  
soft swirls of orchid stroke, that special line,  
the rhythm of smoke rising  
on a quiet afternoon.  
Under the rock, three lines say frog  
to two called dragonfly.  
The brush lifts listening  
for the last clear note.

**JUDITH CORDARY**  
**A Green Dragonfly**

The hands of my love  
draw back baffled.  
They would attend your wrist,  
the heart there,  
shake grit from your shoes,  
stir you a cake of chocolate flowers.  
They would wash your hair  
in morning sunlight,  
in mountain water polished amber.

They touch your throat,  
the heart there,  
and you draw back—  
not so anyone would see,  
not a hairsbreadth,  
but as if the least light thing,  
a green dragonfly,  
had skimmed the water's skin,  
calling it the other way,  
the water shivering  
in exquisite aversion.

**JUDITH CORDARY**  
**A Slow Walk in Cold Weather**

The creek in three seasons  
arches its glossy back and bites  
big playful bites from the banks.  
Its broad, flecked flanks  
have thrust this clay to something serpentine,  
as dangerous, as lovely.

A path comes too.  
Angle-less almost as the water it attends,  
it's plain and rough. Few scythe or mow  
its burdock, sedges, nettle.  
Even in April, dogtooth and those purples, almost black,  
lavish their wet faces  
only on each other.

Come some November  
when a cellophane of ice  
has just begun to tame the water's leaping.  
See it stand quiet  
head bowed, curbed  
by ancient, glinting rein.

*"Here lies one whose name was writ in water."*

—John Keats (1795-1823)

Lake,  
these quivering amber lights  
too thick for thread, too fine  
for wing,  
but fleet, flying,

your surface utterly  
unruffled,  
where nothing breathes, yet there, just under,  
light weaves gold waternets  
like lines of music.

I think  
some huge heart  
stirs fire through water, filigree,  
here, there, clear to the rocks  
twenty feet down.

Did he crack like a hull,  
one last rend  
of wanting? Did he hover,  
just breathing, just  
over this water's face,

or wheel,  
as swallows sometimes, all one body,  
veer, swirl up sunshot,  
their white underface  
goldening in sun?

Lake, oh,  
millionyear, unframed, unruffled mirror,  
he lies breathing  
these amber lights  
in your blue air.

**Putting Up Ice**

In my father's home movies  
    a thirties' stake-body truck  
lumbers up to our ice house  
    through a foot of fresh snow.  
What makes you think the print is  
    poor and grainy are the streaks  
of still falling snow.

The ice cakes took their color from  
    a sunless winter sky. We  
laid them out like a patchwork  
    lake with sawdust in between  
to keep them in their hundreds  
    from becoming one again.

As summer's warm wet mouth  
    licked outermost cakes  
to smooth lozenge shapes  
    we dug, from deep  
sawdust gloom, perfect blue-white  
    blocks of winter.

*The young doctor is dancing with happiness  
in the sparkling wind, alone  
at the prow of the ferry.*

—William Carlos Williams

W. 230 Street, a narrow lane on the ridge  
at Spuyten Duyvil, and the view is east, a half mile out  
to the next hill, a fortress of apartments, layers  
of brick and glass, thick walls in shadow. It is dawn.  
Quietly the city I will enter waits.

Broadway is in the valley at my feet,  
and from here a step-street takes me down.  
Behind thin glass and under quilts  
children wait to enter the ten thousand classrooms.  
The platform of the Broadway El is filling

and I'm reciting a poem to myself, looking out  
to the hills of Van Cortland Park. A train is not coming.  
I know none of the people here, and they keep arriving.  
This year I do know 150 children's names,  
and their facts will emerge like riddles, like potholes,

like felonies, like fresh flowers, like new music  
I will have to hear and hear and hear.  
I am not young, and I am not dancing  
on the El platform. I am waiting.  
I will know the living music when it starts.

## KIP ZEGERS

### Readiness

The ceiling of this world is sagging, torn,  
and dawn is burning a hole in clouds at the foot  
of 96<sup>th</sup> Street. The first school children  
are out with book bags, soda, and they stand

in a circle, staring, there is weeping at the bus stop.  
I look and look away, as teachers learn to do.  
One girl is red-faced, the second, like a mother,  
cradles her, talks over the damp head,

the other girls creep closer, a day opening with trouble.  
Come afternoon, come airless classroom,  
students collapsed in sticky chairs, we enter  
*Hamlet*. I give them the Prince and his despair.

He faces a boy who has done nothing for months,  
a girl for whom everything is a lie. To live close in  
to the center of a book is to lead the attack—

and hands go up: "Could people understand him  
way back then?" "He says the same speech every act!"  
"He should just stab his uncle." The students think  
they have him. They talk as if he weren't listening,

but Hamlet has changed into his sweats. He takes  
a seat outside the cemetery. The students open Act V  
and might be ready to follow him in. He beckons.  
Sneakers and back packs, Hamlet's heard about them

and doesn't reject them. He'll show them white bones,  
black dirt, and this time no self pity. At 3:00 I'm back  
at the bus stop. Two students already stand staring.  
Stalled traffic grinds its teeth. Public housing,

hospital towers crowd the avenue. The ceiling  
of this world sags against them. The city goes on  
beneath it, past all seeing, enormous room  
with three small figures waiting for a crosstown bus.

It was waiting to pour on 94<sup>th</sup> Street and inside  
I was sweating from 5 classes. My words  
wrung out of me. I'd tried everything  
I'd try again on Monday, but this was better  
than loading trucks. It was the same sweat,  
but kids lived here and I was being paid to be  
the grown up. I sat at my desk, Rm. 318  
empty but still crowded, chairs warm,  
faces gone to subways and the difficult streets.  
I was waiting between is and was, moment and memory,  
word and echo, full and finished  
for the week. Slowly the pale room fell silent.  
Outside the hall was sticky with spilled soda.  
Thunder coming and rain streaking the glass behind them,  
two kids stood at a far window kissing,  
stood as on a screened front porch  
not looking out, their privacy complete.  
School house in the rain,  
place of chances, second chances, sweat.

arika.

**BETSY SHOLL**  
**Elegy with Trains**

My friend loved the story of the two men  
who don't know where it's going  
when the train stops in grotesque imitation  
of a real journey, so they run to climb back on  
as the boxcars gather speed, heading

for Bergen-Belsen. Hard to talk after that.  
Though once pushing strollers we respun the facts,  
made vodka-numbered Nazis chuckle *lucky*  
*bastards* and shrug as the engine chugs on,  
so the two dapper young men race

then gasp, slumping down on the tracks  
at the start of their spared lives. That's where  
it always broke down, my friend's head full  
of ghetto stats, the true story of trains—  
*Spared?* I can still see her stop and glare.

*You call that spared?* Twenty years  
the conversation ran: *Scratch a gentile*  
*deep enough, and you get a Nazi;*  
*Even you can't say you wouldn't*  
*collaborate.* Then this turned up

in her parents' safe deposit box:  
a photo marked *Poland*—grandparents  
she thought had died in a trench they dug  
themselves at bayonet point, but here  
they are grinning while sunlight beams

on a sleek finned car—hidden all these years,  
as if it had been heresy to her folks  
that someone came through willing to drive away  
from those trains in a such big fishy car—  
her folks, who lived through the war in Brooklyn,

as if in shame, vowing never to find life  
sweet again, never to wait underground  
without staring down the track's long perspective  
into that vanishing point of bitter graves...  
*I was suicidal,* my friend said,

*until I got cancer.* We were walking  
a steep hill, ice cream cones in our hands,  
stopping every few yards to rest,  
her unshaded eyes staring at rose vines,  
jet trails, late sun on brick—drinking them in.

She died on the longest night of that year  
struggling for breath, alone in her apartment,  
just those grandparents framed beside her—  
my friend, whose silver loops now hang  
from my ears, whose two young men won't stop

racing after that train, so glad when it slows  
and the guards reach out to pull them on board.  
Once she called them fools, crazy not to know  
where the boxcar screech will end, what fuels  
the smokestack drifting down its gritty ash.

Later she said, no matter what comes down,  
they know where they want to be: there,  
with the grieving body, even if that means  
psalms in the gas chamber, or—this is what  
she wanted to know: could it be Brooklyn,

could you be laughing, walking down the street  
as trains rumble underground, then stop and think  
of those two young men sweltering inside,  
so no matter where you die, they are there  
waiting, the whole unspared naked choir.

—for Shirley Roses

In Italian, it's *cervo volante*, flying red deer. In French, flying stag. In Germany, it's the same word as dragon. In Japan, octopus. The Spanish *cometa* suggests the stars, and *fengzheng*, in China, is the wind's stringed instrument. *Kite*, for us, is a predatory bird

from the Old English *cyta*, for which "no related word appears in the cognate languages," though we know now that kites were once used by virgins, midwives, and surviving twin sisters to hang their laundry up to dry.

Perhaps the Dutch *wouw* really means A kind of bird that blooms; the Finnish *tulppaanikonen* is a tulip turning itself as wide as possible, just before its wings fall off; the Thai *wan-we* is Comfort that the moon comes back;

and the Latin, *miluus*, A toy for the Festival of Rise Towards the Sky. In Afrikaans *voilvlieg* must be The unlikelihood that a bird seen once on a tree would ever return. In Esperanto, I believe *milvo* may capture most concisely "an elevator that can be steered."

More words are needed:

*Kitarsis*: the flying of a kite soaked in one's bad luck and illness until it disappears; the letting go of the string of such a kite.

*Kitekin*: a miniature kite flown at the fetes for conceptions of royal successors.

*Pismo domine*: a letter to a deceased relative, flown at the end of a string.

*Requete de l'aire*: marriage proposal made while flying a kite hung with small colored candle lanterns; alternately, a kite flown with the question, "What is the nature of my future?"

But stop. Enough.  
Word is to string,  
page is to kite,  
as snail is to butterfly.

**Blue Thread: An Elegy**

*A discovery ship...had to go long distances in unfamiliar waters  
and had to be able to sail into the wind.... Its important cargo was  
news, which could be carried in a small parcel, even in the mind of  
one man....*

—Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Discoverers*

**Wooden Spool**

Two girls playing at death.  
One's mother died the month before,  
and when she kneeled at the coffin,  
she watched the strange skin for signs.  
*I'm going to make you a shroud*, she says  
to her friend. Pulls a blue sheet from her bed.  
Stands holding it, looking out the window  
where late summer leaves weave another  
kind of shroud. Torn, like the last light  
from her mother's eyes—shreds of sky.  
*You're not being still enough*, she chides  
her friend, though she has made no move  
to bend and wrap the body like someone  
winding blue thread around a spool.

**The Waters of Memory**

Something wrapped by the water,  
its shadow moving like loose-rooted reeds.  
Grass leans to the wind,  
a kind of song.  
What lies hidden might be bones,  
the whole skeleton or only the skull.  
Sometimes the sky is pure blue,  
but even then the thick reeds keep the water  
the color of mud,  
keep what lies wrapped there  
closed off, as in a tomb.  
Sometimes there are streaks of blue,  
quick, like moving veins.

### **Architectural Thread**

Before books, when the forgotten was forever  
 lost, Quintilian discovered he could link  
 ideas to objects in the rooms of a building,  
 then walk through the rooms in his mind,  
 recalling the ideas in order. Centuries later,  
 Peter of Ravenna decided a deserted church  
 would better serve. The world meant grief,  
 but empty stalls might open to devotion  
 or atonement. If, during one's meditation,  
 a bird happened to fly through the torn roof  
 and flutter to rest in the choir,  
 all movement in the mind should cease  
 until the bird disappeared into sky.  
 In this way memory would know  
 how it felt to lose touch with itself yet keep  
 going like the thread of the infinite,  
 blue, or shifting to blue.

### **Ordinary Blue Sea**

When Prince Henry the Navigator  
 sent his mariners from Portugal into the  
 watery unknown,  
 each one spinning out from him like a thread  
 into the Sea of Darkness,  
 the first of them were afraid to sail their caravels  
 past Cape Bojador, where red sand  
 ran like blood from the cliffs  
 and the sea boiled at the shore.  
 Then, in 1434, Gil Eannes sailed through  
 the shadow of fear into the Sea of Darkness.  
 It was blue, ordinary sea blue.

### **"Bavarian Gentians"**

The first time she heard the poem  
 she thought they were actual torches.  
 She had never heard the word *gentians*.  
 After that she carried the torches with her  
 wherever she went. Fringed gentians  
 and closed gentians. She chose only blue.  
 The root of the yellow was too bitter,  
 like sunlight on the day a loved one dies.

### **Tongued Bells**

Linnaeus had to speak of the stamen and pistil  
in ways that would not offend.

He could not say *sexual organs*.

So instead he described  
the *bridegroom* and the *bride*.

The *bridal bed*.

He himself was unable to look at a woman  
without thinking of flowers.

The moist parts.

The faint blue veins.

When he named them, putting  
the species name along with the genus,

he said it was like

*putting the clapper with the bell*.

### **Transubstantiality**

One morning the delphinium,  
still belled with night, shook her  
as wind might shake her,  
down to the root.

So slight!

If the spirit survived the body,  
it would be like the blue of this  
flower passing to sky,  
its roots adrift.

### **Blue Thread**

Whole cities lay buried  
under earth, and with them  
the bodies of royals,  
their faces preserved beneath  
gold masks. At Mycenae,  
when Schliemann dug slowly  
to what he thought was  
Priam's tomb, the gold lay scattered  
like little suns. He took up  
the gold death mask from the figure  
of the king. There was still a face.  
Instantly it began to disintegrate  
from the force of air, mere air,  
blue thread of time.

### **The Sleep of Birds**

Sometimes when she heard  
the blue-hued voices of the birds,  
she knew that grief came to the body  
like a kind of sleep, to give it pause  
from the harder occupations of love and faith.  
Meanwhile trees held on at the root  
and birds went on pressing the air  
from their feathers like the vows  
a lover might seem to begin  
but never finished.

### **Morning in the Scriptorium**

The monk's robe is stained with broth  
and sweat from summer  
though now his hands numb with cold.  
He has to keep laying the pen beside the fine vellum  
to blow on his fingers. There can be no fire  
for fear of everything going to ash.  
Now he picks up the brush, dips it into the inkpot,  
draws the form of a tree. Takes another brush  
to apply blue sky, stares down  
while it dries. Is he dreaming?  
The blue keeps unbolting like silk.  
No, like the word of God.  
On his lips like a tongue, but no  
alphabet for it.

### **Grass Tongues**

She knelt in blue-eyed grass.  
If she stared long enough at the flowers,  
the tiny irises, she could feel herself  
shrinking, little bitty hands and feet,  
little berry mouth.  
Her dress no more than a pocket.  
She needed to go inside, not the house  
but the body, needed to slip through  
one of the passages, pupil or ear,  
to see what she kept hiding.  
Probably it was many-eyed like the grass.

→

Not a monster, but many-eyed.  
 Like the self. Going out every day  
 and being recognized, called to,  
 while inside the eyes were whispering  
 like grass in wind,  
 codes she could get to if she were resolute,  
 if she kept from flinching  
 when the truth spread before her  
 like the grass, many-eyed,  
 many-tongued.

### **Pacific Dream**

The water was a blue breast.  
 There were only three ships left.  
 They had threaded the maze—  
     *the narrowest, most devious,*  
     *most circuitous of all the straits*  
     *between two great bodies of water—*  
 managed not to wreck against rocks  
 as they emerged from the fjord—  
 eaten biscuit that was nothing  
     *but powder of biscuit swarming*  
     *with worms—*  
 and now this body of water, blue,  
 and veined slightly by mild wind—  
 veined like a breast. A fluke:  
 for three months and twenty days  
 over twelve thousand miles, they saw  
 no storms. So they named it what  
 you would expect men to name  
 a breast they learned to dream on.

### **Sky Gentians**

The word *sorrow* was blue.  
 Words had colors.  
 she had known this  
 since the beginning,  
 red of cartwheel,  
 green of sleep,  
 brown of sick room.

Sorrow was blue,  
and death. Blue death  
had entered her mother  
through the feet,  
blue feet cold as sky.

#### **Azure**

Giotto used lapis lazuli for the sky  
and sometimes for the robe of the virgin.  
It was an extravagance.  
First the grinding and mixing of the stone.  
Then the risk of making  
a mistake with the quick-drying fresco.  
To calm himself he imagined he was painting with sky.  
With amplitude.  
If doubt came to him, even the least thread,  
he broke it off between his teeth.

#### **Arachnid Legacy**

Weaving is the art of lacing threads together  
at right angles. After a while, the fingers  
move the threads from memory.

#### **Dust Hieroglyphs**

She dreamed another Blue Nile,  
narrower, more even in its flow  
through the veins of mothers  
who pleaded to the blue length  
to be granted the dispensation  
of death before their children  
so as not to be left with a wound  
nothing would fill, not the moon,  
not the sweet nights of the body,  
not even the beauty of the world,  
which would be as dust to them,  
dust, the least vein, dust.

**Last Things**

Each time she thought of her mother  
moving among the dead  
she shuddered to remember the passage  
where Mme. Defarge, asked what  
she is knitting, answers *Shrouds*.  
She made her mother's shroud of blue thread.  
That way, though the blue might fade,  
it would still resemble sky or water,  
be part of the world  
that goes on without us.

**HANNAH STEIN**  
**Lapsed Agnostic**

I want no bargains with life, I demand  
no miracles, and therefore  
will not file my soul for safekeeping  
among banks of lilies, among choirs of seraphim  
that promise the leaves off the jacaranda trees.

Yet how I love  
singing processions, moments  
of transfiguration on the faces of the religious  
as they kiss their prayerbooks,

love the madonnas of Botticelli  
with their assailable lips, azure mantles  
falling in broken scallops from room to room  
as they offer the lofty, moon-round breast,  
an imaginable white drop blooming at the nipple—

How I love all  
who lay their gifts on altars, love  
all parting with oneself for love—

following, or not, a weightless cord  
into the infinite. Contracts with gods  
are not that different from those  
with the devil: pay

at the beginning or pay in the end. Caught  
between straight lines of the old duality—  
they may be ornate, handcarved, rubbed  
with gold leaf; they may frame the face  
incomparably, but anyone can toss rings at you

and win a plush duck. Imagine  
stringing all the birds of the mind  
on a thread of belief—

Yet I too yearn

for Piero's frescoed light, his saints'  
smooth limbs—the way I yearn,

standing in a field of rustling grasses,  
for that sight, that sound, to fill me,  
lusting after beauty as though I were a god.

"The name's from Proverbs," the woman says, pulling my clothes from a bag. She turns a shirt inside out, inspects the neck and underarms, prods seams. Who wants to own up to desire?

At six, hands clasped behind my back,  
I'd learned not to take the last cookie,  
the orange crayon, not to touch hair,  
nose, or ear, begun to say, "I don't want any."

I'm not surprised when the woman,  
her left hand still feeling the frayed lining  
of my husband's jacket, stuffs our clothes,  
rough fabrics as well as smooth, into the reject bag.

How did I learn to reach for him? My hand  
drifts around his belly, palm rubbing  
along his thigh, feeling its ridge of muscle.  
Such luck, this unlearning.

*from a book of photographs by Andre Kerstetz*

The cathedral is one thousand years old but the horse's fall  
is more ancient and harder; I see him now, or her, a blur  
in the foreground, her tail painting the sky, crisscrossing the rim  
of the overturned cart, and the man, a blur, too; he is old,  
his jacket ripped and the color of mud, and with him, nearby,  
a woman whose apron falls to where ground swells roots and well-  
water, that apron with the bountiful pocket, the one worn

over the same skirts year after year. "See my skirts," she says each  
day to no one, to God, to the morning, "See the way I hold  
them together, the pieces I've sewn, ripped, and gathered, see what  
I've done," and the cathedral is silent, the dome like a woman's  
breast, but alone, points to the sky, the village crouching beneath,  
a scared child hiding. And I watch the rutted road, how mud  
gathers knots of weeds together, how the man's hands, crusted, cracked,

hold the rope around the horse's neck and pull, pull—but the horse  
won't budge, she lies flank-side flat to the ground, nostrils wide  
and swollen, ears slack, fallen back, her mane mud-caked, tangled.  
Above them, from the road's edge, trees twitch branches, the horse's eyes  
mimic, convulse, shudder, and now the cart's back wheel collapses,  
bends beneath the shifting weight of kindling, root clods, heaps  
of rotting turnips, potatoes; from under leaves, from under

gnarled limbs, rise the musty scents, dank, earth-bound, sweat of beast,  
man, and soil co-mingling, the oldest breath exhaled each morning,  
the age-old story I read in your fields, Esztergom, in your cathedral,  
one thousand years old, but, here, now, paper that bends with the weight  
of my hand—I take your dome and smear it under my thumb: pale  
and sweatless, the nuns are singing beneath the clerestory,  
the priests are mumbling, I hear them, while outside, the horse no longer

is stirring, but the old man keeps pulling then falling, over and over,  
his wife kicking into the animal's soft, upturned belly,  
pleading and begging; steam rises from the horse's stilled limbs, circles  
her flailing arms, weaves through her fingers; the dome, once a breast  
cupped by the sky, glares its sunlit ribs, shines its fist  
against their faces; the earth demands a wage, it says, your bodies,  
aged, worn, and soiled, beat and broken into shades of gray.

**The Evil Tongue**

A worm inhabits the ear of Eden,  
whose routes are a labyrinth we thread,  
unwinding as we go. We cross and recross  
the same path, until the way is a web of lies.  
We long so for something corresponding  
to ourselves that the rustle of trees  
seems a language we half recognize.

The law was laid down to Adam,  
with the reasons withheld, so the serpent  
passed to Eve the germ of blame,  
which kept getting shifted from one to the other,  
all holding hands and crossing their fingers.  
Not a one would step into the center  
of the circle they had made and be "it."

The whole void-ridden mesh of language  
seems now a hammock of slender strings  
and excuses, slung between two trees  
and one of them always falling,  
so the net we thought would lift us  
above the ground closes around our bodies  
and hoists us like rabbits in a snare.

In my life, for instance, the sixth grade teacher  
yanked four of us girls out of the fourth grade room  
into the hall where the checkered asbestos tiles  
were ranked green and white, up one way  
and down the other. She demanded to know  
if we had spread the story that some sixth grade girl  
(I'll call her Brenda) fucked a boy in the boy's bathroom.

She did not say fuck. She asked what we heard  
and from whom, and what we told and to whom.  
My heart was a jungle drum and I said I heard the girl  
did something nasty. I did not say fuck because  
it was a word I had spoken only once, to ask  
what it meant. And when somebody told me  
it meant a boy sticks his penis inside a girl  
and pees in her, I could scarcely believe it,  
because that was worse even than a girl being

→

in the boy's bathroom, a million times worse.  
But I did believe it, for who would make up such a thing?

Poor Brenda. All the little liars swarming on her  
with their tiny ropes of talk, and I was one of them,  
pegging the rigging down, gullible. All I could think  
was, why would two people do that? So we crawled,  
four of us, inside the gray curve of an abandoned  
concrete sewer pipe, hardly thinking it might be  
God's nostril to sniff out sin, so cool it was,  
and whispered, shrugged, winced, and hid our eyes  
in the days when fourth grade girls did not know fuck.

When we ended up in the green and white hall,  
we were full of shame, and the teacher loomed  
with her hands on her hips, and her winged elbows,  
her glasses flashing light and her hair the color  
of a fired brick, wound up and pierced with a pencil.  
She rose high, a tall column of burning,  
and brandished her finger like a sparkler writing my name  
backwards in air, so fast it left a trail of gibberish.

"You have an evil tongue," she said, and I felt my teeth  
vibrate like a voodoo rattle and knew it to be true.  
Even as her finger retreated into her fist and found  
her hipbone, I could feel the soft offending lump fork  
in my mouth and flit back and forth between the wet  
insides of my cheeks. I hardly felt my legs take me back  
to my desk where I bent and coiled around my pencil  
and swallowed, to squeeze down the knob of dumb  
gasping that might hiss from me, might bear  
witness to my rubbery writhing, my glassy scales.

Back then I thought that language was for saying  
what you knew and what you had heard tell of.  
But I was wrong. We will do anything  
to make the world take the shape of God,  
and language is one way. Even this  
is a fabrication of rags knotted together,  
holey with forgetfulness. Yet I hold it out to you,  
with its self-justifying perforations, its guilty pocks.

Maybe it is only a crocheted doily, laid down  
to cover the threadbare arms of an easy chair,  
a limp ruffle on the bony wrist of the knowable.  
Or it may be the only bridge hung across  
a canyon between us, and you must take it up.  
You must attach it to the ground you stand on.  
Pretend that, inside the rocking and creaking  
of the ropes, the rotted lashings, the gaps of the slats,  
the heart-stopping sway, we may cross to each other  
on words—that, slack though they are, and frayed,  
they have not yet utterly failed us. Between sentences,  
our silence gives on the bright ribbon beneath,  
which seems not to move, though it is a torrent,  
and we must not look down, or we will fall.

Tumors

The stairs fall from her  
like groceries from a busted bag.

Who then, she wonders, could be in love  
with these last days of fall? a few leaves

left stubbornly on a pin oak  
for the niggling brutalities of winter?

She's going to paint whatever light comes  
through a marred brain,

a mind atop the stair,  
clutching the rail.

Seeing stars becomes a matter  
of the right vertigo, of curving the world

into light falling  
through gravity. What else

can she tell about the way we die—  
our arrangement with color? the flux

of composition? the absence  
of center? Everything we know about

predication's straight line is the moon's  
difficult white, neurological dark.

Only my heart's weaving  
could construct a prayer to keep  
you from forgetting our once quiet lives,  
to remember when walking  
was pleasure and mountains were green  
before fire, when the bed was built for dreaming  
and brothers made winter warm,  
when the wind traced God's hand  
from first to sixth string  
when laughter followed evening meals  
not the stern lip that knows  
hard bones beneath the breast.  
It is the task of an impossible loom.  
The last of the priests has been killed  
trying to escape through the church window  
so he cannot write this,  
even if we knew where the fervor has taken you.  
Mostly, the town receives no letters  
at all, the mailbox only announces dead  
leaves and a few insects looking for perhaps  
the same thing: a dark corner to build a quiet home,  
air uninterrupted by change.  
I will think of you, son, offering your life  
for what books have taught you  
about our rights to the earth.  
I will find what bread I can for what is left  
of my body, your sisters who may never learn  
to tell time.

We are strings of sun and artificial light. Longing stretches wall to wall, rooms connected in their insistence. Everywhere the weaving takes place, our bodies could be speaking. Everywhere, we are orange and red, skins lined with secrecy, mouths of uneven decision, hands mistaking frames. The Chilean trees are as difficult as my history in this city. Here a needle: failed experiment. Here sharp leaf: your head in my hands. Could I plant our late-ness beneath my tongue, remedy for my parting. The almost full moon on exhibition and I cannot identify all the components of your garden. I am a great lover of train stations and iron railings, my back interpreting arches and closes, the brown bricks of the old town. But I prefer to be over grown—Rosa Canina rising above the Castle's profile, a piece of sky you could point at. A body that hovers, limbs creating music, arousing grass. Or very small, perhaps, a wasp lost in your house, swept up in autumn. My veined wings you delicately examine

**ROSA ALCALA**

**Nudes for the Industrial Revolution**

*for Cecilia Vicuña*

This is my shop where the black wheel turns with greasy knob and heavy glove

My waist is never this circular and insistent, it stops whenever you stop  
whenever you leave to check water-pressure that rises  
with the Passaic coming down faster after a good storm's  
protest, claiming the world its own

My chest is always uneasy with clouds  
of filament seeping through clenched teeth  
to form tightly woven bandages around air that bursts when I cough  
breaking my lungs' thin tissue

Must this happen when I love you  
more than the strength of chains pulling bales of cotton  
when I become lost in the ecstatic spools that spin spin  
like an underground press writing love poems to the long-faced regime

Who over sees the over-seer and must I cut my hair

Semi-roused this revolution I begin is for desire

So that the daily aprons are replaced by the seamless mechanics of the sun  
entering and leaving all parts of the city, a national manufactory of bodies  
turning away from the wheel and towards each other until they explode  
with frayed ends like that sudden rupture from mother's stare

And you glossy-tipped enter my room with dust in your mouth  
smoky hair and skin with brown oil, a gray lover  
never clean enough for the white sheets we never cease weaving  
searching for the quiet origins of the piston and the smooth interlocking of teeth

I am flax with cracked shell, I am being pulled through combs over and over  
perfectly shrinking through the eye of the machine's miracle needles inching in  
and out in and out of braids, becoming smaller to wind myself around bobbins  
the product of post-colonial water application

I must keep you above the clamor/inside the endless motion/on the tips of my  
fingers

My fertile imagination conceives a great manufacturing center

My legs and your legs forming twine that never snaps  
independent of the process, faster than the eye, tight and fiber-less  
repaired instantly between waxy digits, forming tapestries never to be worn  
thin in the usual manner: no cloth for daily needs, no rag for the usual forehead

You would be water-power to turn the mill wheels and I the navigable river to  
carry

string	us back
thread	to pre-woven
fiber	earth language
filament	of knots
twine	heaven-tied
cord	nature flexible
yarn	interpreting
linen	our looming
cotton	bodies

Lying face to face, irrepressible and shameless along these Great Falls of  
Paterson

So there we were one hilarious afternoon  
Dumping buckets of water on each other  
No one around to tell us what to do for once, a violet hour  
Come not a moment too soon for some  
Who might have ended up like the boy from Tennessee  
Losing it one day on the grinder: barking like a dog  
He stayed on all fours even when kicked and kicked again.

Those days. When they shaved our heads, stripped us  
Marched us ran us chased us slapped us by God kicked ass,  
By God remade us and delivered us new to ourselves fresh as babies,  
Then cursed us and worked us over in the sun  
Until we dropped at their feet  
Tough enough for orders and the oceans of boredom  
That came in endless barracks of card games and cigarettes.

But this is about water and the tricks light plays,  
About the day's slow turn toward evening:  
Each of us bucket in hand whooping and whooping,  
Charging then washed back, laughing insanely  
Because we knew our lives depended on it, moving  
Together entirely free and of ourselves,  
Dancers perfectly balanced, falling without motion.

Charade

Some time after love has gone,  
grief puts on love's clothes and struts around.  
And when you see grief standing there in love's attire  
you throw your arms around his middle.

Grief puts on love's clothes and struts around:  
How else could grief expect to be embraced?  
You throw your arms around his middle:  
*It's love! It's love!* you cry.

How, otherwise, could grief hope to be embraced?  
The sound from your chest is like young wood, bending—  
it's love, it's love, you cry—  
like high, thin wind off the mountain.

The sound from your chest is like young wood, bending  
and you turn away, touching your cheek.  
Like high, thin wind off the mountain,  
grief sighs a cold secret through your hair

and you turn away, touching your cheek.  
Grief asks you to dance with him,  
he sighs a cold secret through your hair,  
still, love's shoes pinch grief's toes.

Grief asks you to dance with him,  
to step off the mountain into the wind.  
Still, love's shoes pinch grief's toes,  
the collar chafes, the pants are too short.

To step off the mountain into the wind  
means closing your eyes to all you know  
(the collar chafes, the pants are too short)  
and praying the wind will hold you against the mountain's side.

Means closing your eyes to all you know  
as grief steps quietly out of love's shoes,  
(praying the wind will hold you against the mountain's side)  
and in another minute will stand naked once again.

As grief steps quietly out of love's shoes  
you see him standing there in love's attire,  
and in another minute he'll stand naked once again,  
some time after love has gone.

Dried To...

*Dried To...* the package said,  
All I could read at least, except  
The words *Product of China* and *Weight 5 Oz.*,  
In the bag between the knees  
of the Chinese woman on the Brooklyn-bound Q.  
The rest of the word  
folded in on its plastic self—  
Red letters on clear cellophane,  
Tall wrinkled ochre stalks clustered inside.  
Dried what? I bend my head to see—  
Dried tofu, dried toenails, dried tongues:  
Things that are so dried must be forgiven  
For not seeming much like themselves.  
Dried tomatoes, dried tortoises, dried tomalley...  
But I want to know—dried tortellini, dried tonsils...  
I must know—dried tokay lizard, dried toadstools...  
The train pulls into my stop, dried toreadors...  
And I have to get off, dried toast, dried torpedoes...  
Oh please, I pray, don't let me die without knowing!

Trying to select which to discuss from the hundred or so review copies stacked in front of me, I am again struck by the richness of today's poetry in English. There is the richness of vision and music within individual volumes as well as the wealth of diversity among the poets. I can only sample this bounty. Here are two books that truly put me in thrall. Both are "new and selected," providing a long view of each poet's developing esthetic.

■

**Eleanor Wilner, *Reversing the Spell: New and Selected Poems*** (Port Townsend, Washington: Copper Canyon Press, 1997, 345 pp., \$16. paper, 1-55659-082-2). Tracing Wilner's work from her first book, *Maya*, in 1979, I find at once a richness of allusion to art, film, architecture, religion, philosophy, geologic time, and world myth and literature, both Asian and Western. And to history—of art, of writing, of politics, of the relationships of men and women. All the resources of our culture are at her command. Although she is skilled in the satiric and conversational modes, her preference is for the lyrical narrative. She rarely employs the first person singular, though a generic *we* appears early and persists. Do not come here for confessional exposés but for what Alicia Ostriker accurately calls Wilner's "visionary amplitude and revolutionary intelligence."

The book title comes from "Coda, Overture" in *Sarah's Choice* (1989), which seems to mark a turning point in Wilner's vision. The poem conjures up a woman, "she who can't be seen// except in spaces between wars, brief intervals// when history relents, reflection/ intervenes, returning home/ becomes the epic moment...."

As if

an ancient spell had been read backwards:  
 though what we'd seen—the burning cities  
 at our backs—had stopped us  
 in our tracks, a frozen chorus, colonnade  
 of salt, pillars like the wife of Lot,  
 the sight of her restored us  
 to ourselves. How else explain it? The way  
 she walked among us as we lined her path,  
 her gaze intent on us till we returned  
 her look, and then, like embers caught  
 in a sudden draft, our hope blazed up  
 again, the flush of blood crept up  
 reviving limbs . . . [...] it was as if

→

the interval of stone had gone  
from memory, or it had never been.

Here we achieve the vantage point of poetry—poetry with the power to cleanse and restore vision. From this vantage we *can* reverse history, move away from the wars, reconsider the confining myths, and reconceive them in a new light. From here on, many of Wilner's poems reverse the vision—reimagine the old stories—of Eve, Antigone, of Shiva and Nandin, Sarah and Isaac, Penelope, Leda, many more. What a fountain of refreshment for the spirit, this redirection of the old spells! Beyond that, I read many of these poems as part of a profound prosody: meditations on the mission of the poet.

Wilner's new poems (1993-1996), under the title "Up Against It," begin more grimly (with an ironic grin) than anything earlier. They are so varied in their approaches that I despair of reviewing them in so small a space. The first poem, in a section brilliantly titled "What Goes On," is "*Trümmerfrauen* (The Rubble-Women)," which first conjures up the silken old paintings of the Virgin and child, who form a perfect triangle, "God in Euclid's arms" (irony one); the baby "fattened for sacrifice" (irony two); blood running in the streets while "skinny dogs/ prowled the greasy cobblestones" and "monthly,/ women wore, then washed the red-stained/ rags" (irony three); and (ironies two and four) church candles flickering

under the bloodless Lady with her lovely face,  
under the nailed-up man, the body's long disgrace  
impaired naked on the crossroads of the grid.

In the second section the rubble-women in a bombed-out city sit at the apex of piles of rubble (more triangles), "whatever the weather," hammering the mortar from the broken stones, making them "ready for the mason, the architects/ of a future that none of them can bear/ to conceive—alone as they are, and cold." Wilner's exquisite command of prosody (worthy of an extended critical essay) makes it easy to overlook how deftly she draws the reader in to the power of her icy vision.

The vision of our contemporary world is penetrating and bleak. The second poem, "Abstraction," is an allegory that recalls Auden's "The Quarry" ("What is that sound that so thrills the ear"?) and ends as chillingly as a poem by John Haines. "Killing the Grubs" turns the scalpel inward, in a courageous first-person dissection of the mental processes of the speaker furiously (and futilely) attempting to annihilate the grubs in the roots of her garden plants. "They are so obvious a sign," she says, "of what we cannot see, of what devours us,/ what

gnaws there now, and at/ the roots—my god!"

Another splendid verbal attack on the ineffable is the dazzling *ars poetica* "Filling in the Blanks." In a chain of dynamic metaphors Wilner moves from the "power line" of blank verse to this:

Word after word, the climber feels her way  
 along time's ledge. The wind is strong  
 on the face of it; what we can know  
 is only the feel of rock, the bite of the pylon [*sic*, for *piton*]  
 into the unforgiving wall, and the rope  
 by which we know that there are others on  
 the line, as we crawl across the huge blank  
 face—roped together by the words,  
 the line that is our writing on the wall.

The third section of this poem plays with other nuances of *blank*, leading to the confrontation between the delicate game of poetic composition and the "incommensurate truth." *Incommensurate*—lacking any common quality on which one could base a comparison. The truth is in the almost inconceivable distance between the point of plenitude from which the poet speaks and the bleakness of most lives, from time immemorial. At least that is how I read the images of the poem's last five lines:

Here: corn, alfalfa, wheat—  
 and there: Ruth gleaning the empty  
 rows, and nothing, nothing  
 but hunger, rage without words, and  
 overhead, the circling, screaming birds.

Nevertheless, over and over Wilner's poems, recasting the ancient spells, affirm and illustrate the time-defeating power of the poet. They dance us from the failures and silences, through the ineffable and wordless, to the light of potentiality, without which light we do, indeed, perish.

■

Very different is **Theodore Enslin's *Then, and Now: Selected Poems 1943-1993***, Mark Nowak, ed. (Orono, Maine: National Poetry Foundation, 1999, 432 pp., cloth \$34.95, 0-943373-53-0; paper \$19.95, 0-943373-54-9). Enslin may well be the best-kept secret of our contemporary poets, since he has eschewed the self-publicizing athletics of some others, and his eighty or so books have appeared in small editions from small presses. Moreover, his editor cites the poet's

“resistance to the usual critical approach to his work.” This should disqualify me at once as a reviewer. And I am further disqualified by my musical illiteracy (my sister got the piano; I got the typewriter). For Enslin is a musician. He studied composition with Nadia Boulanger; he has said that he wants to be considered “as a composer who happens to use words instead of notes.”

Since my ignorance has not kept me from responding passionately to music, and since I respond powerfully to these poems, my only critical approach must be to allow myself to be the ignorant instrument on which they are played and to try to explain and illustrate their effect.

Here’s a poem, complete, from an early volume of mostly love poems. I found that I was reading it aloud to myself and dancing it with my right hand: my hand moving spontaneously in a space like the line-spacings of the poem. Somehow this dancing controlled my voice, its pitch and pace and intonation. It was a delicious experience, and one that served me well in the later poems where the linear content is transformed. My reading is complexly physical, and if that sounds erotic, so be it. Here’s the poem (untitled):

so that  
                   if I wanted  
to  
    I could go to  
the window  
                  and look out  
where you have been  
                                  see  
you there  
                  why is it?  
we are sitting quietly enough  
with books  
                  two cups of tea  
nearly finished  
                                  (if you like  
i’ll heat more water)

What could be more simple? What, more evocative? Here’s what I discover that defines Enslin’s work, within its music: the immediacy of it. Enslin’s poetry from earliest to latest responds moment by moment to the immanent person or world or enquiry. And the dynamics of it; the mental traveller moves—moves here from an outer moment to a curious inner moment, and then back out at the end, but the question

remains open. While not “intellectual,” it enacts an interesting intellect—an enquiring mind with no irritable reaching after closure. I like the gap at the end between the *water* and the period, suggesting an action resonating onward in time and space, as the opening lower case *so* suggests all that comes before. Silences, in Enslin’s poetry as in all the aural arts, define the art. (Of course I also hear what I conventionally anticipate in a lyric: the vowel and consonant music, the *wanted to water*, the *so/ go*, the *to/ to/ you/ two* and the *been/ see/ tea/ heat*. But that’s the sort of thing I look for later, when I pause to try to understand the effect a work has had.) Reader, do you want to try performing from an Enslin score? Start with one of the poems from the delicious “Music for Several Occasions,” perhaps the luxurious “Passacaglia.”

I very much enjoyed the dynamics of this book as a whole, which, by being chronological, condensed for me and shared with me a lifetime of learning. For a reader venturing into new poetic territory, the early poems are welcoming. And Mark Nowak has helped by substituting for the usual introduction a generous interview, in which the poet talks poem by poem about the background of his work and his evolving esthetic. Like Frost’s science, his work “goes self-superseding on.” Early on, when an editor sensed that there must have been a prose gloss behind “New Sharon’s Prospect,” Enslin generously provided that gloss, in the form of a journal of his relationship with that upcountry community and a woods-wise family “as biblical as the name of their town.” The result is a small masterpiece of tough, sensitive portraiture.

Thereafter, except in Nowak’s interview, we’re on our own. In the *allegro assai* section of “Listening to Mozart” Enslin says:

I have often thought of this music  
in certain ways:

That its means  
are what it means,  
and no one  
should ask more.

Yet the means are words, and each word carries its own non-musical history. There are lovely surfaces here, which do not preclude “the dark of inwardness,” or “[t]his thinking’s labyrinth.” Enslin wears his intellectual knapsack lightly, but it is richly packed (his father was a biblical scholar and his mother a professor of classics). In the wry “Fanfare for the Common Man” he condenses a critique of contempo-

rary shallowness:

The absence of an aftermath?  
 As likely as no antecedence.  
 They are clamoring for what is new,  
 as if contemporary roots were shorter  
 than a thousand years.

For all the depth of his cultural roots, Enslin's language is the vocabulary of immediacy, whether abstract (*delight, grace*) or sensuous, as in the rollicking "Summer Song":

in fields of flowers flower fields  
 fields of tansy fields of asters fields  
 of day lilies fields on fields of  
 flowers tansy asters day lilies  
 fields of coreopsis ringed with  
 trees

and so on for thirty-three more lines ringing (dare I say it?) the changes on "the summer in flow/ the summer in flower." Here and in the equally immediate, equally splendid "Baldwin Head," as Enslin acknowledges in his conversation with Nowak, the poet/composer moves in the direction of minimalism, "in which there is this apparent repetition which is not repetition in the least."

As Enslin moves into his more recent explorations and discoveries, he continues "[a] dialect of thought/ between the languages." He commands many languages: of music and silence, of love and friendship, of the natural world and the composer's honed awareness, of the immediacy and the range of human response.

Not to say stop as stop's arrhythmic  
 cannot find an end to end it.

### Editor's Note

A shift in our method of layout led to our omitting the last line of two poems in the Winter 1998/1999 issue. Here are Margaret Aho's "Lucifer-" and the final section of Glori Simmons' "The Bookbinder" as the authors intended:

**MARGARET AHO**

**Luci fer-**

vent-

ly said: When the German  
and Irish

wed

you get

devils: you get a

vent

for

fire.

**Body Valise**

*American Hospital, Neuilly, France, 1950*

This knot inside me is my undoing,  
a key locked in baggage.

It's here in the Minotaur's drawer, tucked among  
toad skins, roses dried & quartered.

I'm familiar with the Lady Thing—  
its deckle-edge,  
its double entendre.

No invitations, it just arrived.

Like arias in radiators,  
armies pouring across borders.  
Like forgiveness.

Drink still keeps me warm.

I'm well over the times you left me,  
sugar cube solid on my spoon "to puzzle the chessboard"  
& more, My Colophon.

Now you'll be the widow, Marcel.

The maps you papered  
to the walls still allow us our lonely, but the studio  
is a yellowing heir.

Keep the boxes & casings together.  
Burn my private things.