

BPJ

BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL VOL. 54 N°4 SUMMER 2004

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46

COVER

Mary M. Shotwell, "Tahitian Princess,"

linoleum block print, 1974

Mary Greene, design



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

MEGAN HARLAN

Living Cloisters

They raise themselves around us,
sudden shelters

within the larger outpour,
courtyards sprung

from currents of a brighter
force, palmful

of another's hand, voice
rung down the spine,

stringing archways
within a space that shapes

nothing but its own dimensions,
a rhythm without song,

a corrugated darkness
hewn to colonnades and bells

by our names, meals,
momentary vows, sanctums

opening around a fountain,
its waters illuminated

like figured calligraphy
in a root, arterial language.

JOHN HAINES

A Short History of the Republic

The great migration had passed
like a dream retreating westward;
a green serpent of the wind
was sleeping in the wagon ruts.

The ocean thundered a welcome
at evening. Here and there
a lonely figure stood out against
a horizon already darkening
with the ominous shadow of myth.

1964

JOHN HAINES

Names on the Road

Shade Hollow, I know your name,
another signpost on the Athens road.

I have come to your gloomy thickets,
to know your spells and witchery,
haunted by floating owls and grinning
hawks—no songbirds nest there now.

Dark Hollow, you have taken so much:
the watered garden, the labored field,
the neighbor loved and shared;
the corner church, the lighted store.

You are the road that wanders downward,
from which there will be no exit;
everything comes to a final stop,
and there's no turning back.

Deep Hollow, you have my heart,
and I am called once more to your
gated closure; household and pasture
are in your distance lost to sight.

Your shadows hold no sunrise, no dawn,
no waking promise; nothing but night.

1998-2003

LISA FURMANSKI

Famish

despite bounty, despite the unyielding
grasses and sedge, a starvation

like drowning in air, leaf after leaf discarded
from the fig even as it strangles

a bole stretching one last branch to the canopy;
despite jackfruit dangling,

swinging, dehiscing and spitting juice
on the path while monkeys, sky-high, uncase nuts and resin;

despite epiphytic orchids gorged on humidity,
despite upward liana, gaudy spirals dropping unaltered,

and the white mushrooms, studded with small white gems, almost
confection,
crusted on buttresses—here we stop

for water, sweating and light-
headed, the scandent walls of the trail thick

with lantana and oleander, shreds of fallen
leaves, the *drip-drip-drip* of water:

only one possible path then,
the used one tunneling

into growth so rapid, ravenous, and tightly
shut that we thirst

and endure—
shadows

sharpen at noon, trunk-shaped like a narrow
door, shaped like limbs

or a throat full of water;
water is both source and shadow,

both bright exposure and its paired lightlessness—
someone dies

and someone's shadow
 blamed—all mingle in the lit

and unlit, all of us hungry,
 distracted by abundance while our shadows

sever from their sources,
 and vanish into angles of the forest

LISA FURMANSKI
Midnight Ceremony

Rains end, the season to ascend
the mountain, little girls and old women,

thorns and razor blades in hand.
All night, girls shake tassels

of colobus tails, heads crowned in fur,
familiar steps to the clearing.

Ululations shake stars in their sockets.
The full moon a cataract on night's eye.

Everything closes, darkness clasped tight,
branches stiff and creaking on their hinges.

Everything is shadow or the color of shadow,
even red mud, the ravenous red ground.

Here the snake has passed, holy groove.
Here are the drunken, calling for virgins.

The canopy gazes skyward.
Bamboo numb at the roots and hollow.

Something small will disrupt the night.
A ripple in distant, pillowed thoughts.

LISA FURMANSKI

Three Voices

Noise

I hear air warm, a warping din.

Her head hangs from the bed, fever heavy at the glaring end
of afternoon: the gravity of release

and ruin, heat's extremes. Across her chest,
bare breasts lie leaden as two hands; I listen

for cause, its arrowed voice
liminal within this swelter.

(What do I do
without cures, measures, an opening?)

We plead her name. A moan resumes, faint and bitter, a stone
dropping in wan light. There is no maneuvering within this

gauze of scratch and squall and hiss:
sounds silt, caught in old dresses strung across the room.

You sit her up, pull each arm through
a pressed blouse: blue petals, pink ones, pearl buttons.
I hold her hand (the noise a veil, a mask) as she chokes
on aspirin.

Spit crusts like amber
around her lips, eyes plummeting:
specter of a dying volcano.

A neighbor fans the stove, embers scatter,

motes of air ablaze. We wait for the coming clamor
of water, flat and cold over the coals.

Gesture

Frightened, perhaps, the young
doctor. Yet, we must effect

something, a certainty: sort
tablets, boil water, force

it all down. I will call
a priest. He too will embrace

the startle, the humility:
his awe. I dress her

in a flower-graced blouse,
but how do we know

this moment demands
anything of beauty?

Betty

voices tighten around a darkening afternoon that mzungu
talking and talking my body weighed against how much
less it has become how withered hollowed and pared
the hand forced down like a stone as sound in slivers sifts
down how unready is this cycle of sight and night

heat clambers on the roof pills numbered over and over
how long does counting last or hours promises to return
curtains tumble the door closes I hear sighing expectant
within this shadow's blank mask I wait I fragment and
cohere within the unrelenting hours promises listen!

as I break end from end do you bind me in petals in tears

mzungu: foreigner

VERONICA PATTERSON

Breath

Where from the clay pot a fountain of leaves erupts,
where by the long window a cord pleats the supple shade,
where the glass light swirls to a milky nipple,
where inside the drawer the seams of nightclothes sleep:
they are not stirred by your breath.

Outside the window, branches fling
a green net over the house. The brimming lake
shimmers beneath a thin moon, ring of bright
underwire spilling the dark breast of night, yet
they are not stirred by your breath.

In the corner of the room a dragonfly hovers;
its fanning cannot reach the snowfield covering
the infinite iceberg of this bed, where nothing
can melt now. In the closets, the clothes button and unbutton;
they are not stirred by your breath.

Now the ragged black birds close their rough beaks
and do not trouble the dispersing night. The amber blinds leak
a lean portion of light. This silence, hungry now
for *one* mouth, is not broken. Other tongues are still.
They are not stirred by your breath.

SUSAN TICHY

Book, Land, Night

Where trees stop and rock begins

A flow of ridges elegant
As seaweed washed by tide

A walking meditation, or
Walking a litter of broken stone

Your compass such a dark brass
It feels like the skin of your hand

On one tree the lightning
Was as visible as the wood

So we walked no farther
Twenty miles of timberline a wind

That would not lift your ashes

■

Bird nests blow down from the sycamores
Catch in the thorns of bushes

So my room smells like a century plant

Sage burns clean in a clamshell
On an altar without flowers

Vases stuffed with feathers
Of a ring-billed gull, a raven

Bowl of oranges, bowl of ash
One oval, egg-like stone

From a poet's garden
And a deer's pelvis killed one spring

By a lion at our doorstep
A lion at our doorstep

And a helicopter passes over
Circles back then comes again

On which flight was it carrying
Your body

Which body
Was what we found

Three red pillars in a gray landscape
Boy with a stick on the bow of a boat

Small square plain-
tive sail

Or city where a golden building
Rises toward its rooftop slum

Stork in a temple six feet high
Stands on a bronze turtle

Both dull green in a red rain
What did I mean by that red rain

Rain through which I search for the obvious word

■

Not book not land not night
A voice on the telephone

Speaking from that far, bombed world

And all external interval a parallel
Pull

Of moon, moon, night
Then night, gate, repent, repeat

Propitiate fact

This is the book where I open it
To say venture, dust, reverse

Splinter of bark is a splinter of lightning
I listen to birds in the walls, their dry

Fluttering I think must be
The washing of your corpse

Yes, in a drought year
Fear burns the page arrives

Letters and diaries littered with betrayal
A betrayal for which there is no obvious word

Small mirror set at an angle
So when I look toward it I see nothing

Strange headlights in the driveway

Ants came
And began to carry away the chips of bone

ALLAN PETERSON

As If Galvanic

As soon as I sweep, the thrashers put the leaves back
where they prefer them,
millipedes scattered, earwigs
 applying their calipers to gravity.
I leave a minute and the red skink enters my chair,
 an articulated sunset drawn down from the trees.
I sit only to be an Indy of flies,
 a galaxy famous only to oneself.

The minute depth was invented things began falling,
 blue light in the ocean,
the ideas of who we were, sky into the skin of book pages,
 whispers heavier than rain.
Around me the raw material, heat-induced, slippery,
 the mapping gnats, the dry and polished swallows
that cleave or shatter off like electrons.
 All this is drawn silently together,
though nothing like cellophane with its sounds
of electricity's sophisticated wrecks,
 nothing like magnets' spinning and clicking little dogs.

F. J. BERGMANN

Sky Blue

It's Blue Sky Week. There are weeks for all sorts of things, but blue sky is important even if the sky isn't actually blue during the week. It's the principle of the thing. I mean, people break up on Valentine's Day, get raped during Take Back the Night, disinherit their descendants on Grandparents' Day. You can wear one of those little loops of sky-blue ribbon on your lapel to show you care, or a dyed blue (azure) carnation in your buttonhole. Dressing in sky blue is considered tacky, though. Protesters pin a cotton ball on their chest like a small brooch, to represent a cloud.

F. J. BERGMANN
Language Barrier

I used to be ashamed of not being in touch with popular culture. It was humiliating, like wearing the wrong clothes—I did that too. Of course, I was a teenager then, when these things matter. I felt like an onlooker at an unknown game at a sports stadium in a foreign country, just sitting there in the stands, feeling uncomfortable. It's not very exciting. The players move across the turf at forty-five degree angles and apologize when they run into each other. The crowd starts to roar a slogan in a language I can't understand, chanting the same eight syllables over and over, with a rising inflection. Some of them are beginning to stand up on their seats, brandishing weapons. Any minute now, the fans are going to riot. But fortunately one of the men on the sidelines, wearing a green velvet bathrobe, grabs one of the little spotted goats I had assumed to be mascots, drags it struggling onto the field as a hush falls over the crowd, and eviscerates it on a spot roughly corresponding to the 40-yard line. On the scoreboard, the numbers are replaced by an asterisk followed by a greater-than sign for one team, an octothorp and ampersand for the other. The crowd goes wild. Some well-prepared individuals are chaining themselves together across the exits.

MATT YURDANA

The Pass

We stand in a circle, comparing sunburn stories while the snowplow
recreates the pass
and our cars sit buried to their hubcaps;

passionate burns, illicit burns, all those patterns that signaled
where we went beyond where we usually draw the line, and one guy
who tells of falling asleep on a rooftop after making love,
whose girlfriend wrote *BLISS* in sunscreen on his back, visible for weeks;

stories like the stories around a scar,
with just enough inaccuracy to help others think of us the way we'd
like them to.

And today, too, is a story, how we arrange our sudden camaraderie,
or claim the beginnings of frostbite, or tack a few hours onto the time
we sit stranded,
and how natural, how selfless we are, moving without thinking
toward the woman flagging us from the Garden City Pet Store van.

The van's heater is broken, so she kneels before the cages with a hair
dryer,
waving it in large sweeping arcs, pausing a little longer over the reptiles,
but the animals are motionless,
noses under tails, heads under wings, hunching or balling themselves
around what must feel like sleep.

And when she begs us to take them, to drive as many animals as we can
to the pet store in the valley below, no one hesitates;
we make promises, write directions and the phone number on the backs
of our hands,
then stand in a line beside the van's door, ready for whatever we're
handed:

an African gray and a bowl of hermit crabs go to the woman with the
Camaro,
two ferrets and three fire-bellied toads for the retired couple from
Billings, and the guy who fell asleep on the rooftop
walks off with a young whippet, a skink, and a pair of peach-faced
lovebirds cradled in his oversized mittens.

I hold out my arms, and she hands me a spectacled caiman,
three-and-a-half feet long, writhing in slow motion, its yellow-green
scales surreal against the snow I'm now running through,

back to my car, and it might not die if I'm fast enough, if I can just crank
up the heater,
remove my jacket, unbutton my shirt to its cold plated belly while its
teeth rest gently against my neck; if I can pull it off, this is how I'll
begin.

KWAME DAWES

Henna

These days I walk through crowds
naked, letting strangers read the swirling
hieroglyphs of the henna lines
you drew on me while straddling me,
making the loops of your signature
tickle me—naming me yours—

I have not washed for days.

I let strangers read the legend
of our compact and I grow
to love you the more. Woman,
I worry when clouds gather these days
that the lines will be washed away,
and when it rains I dodge and dart
for shelter in the dark holes of the city.

MAR MONTÁS
dove sta amore (to lawrence, unsent)

l i k e an

o c e an

v e ry

eve ry where

MARY MOLINARY

The very idea of 2 legs

the lower
part of the body, an idea pressed thin,
wrapped in
black tissue paper, put in a shiny box,
waiting
where all ideas wait. A running-up-the-back
seam glosses the stocking more titillating
than the leg itself—the thought tastier than the thing.
If you're thinking here about pantyhose, don't.
Stockings tell terrible lies.

■

Reflections thin like stockings:
—Why do you wear stockings, Mom?
They help me keep warm.
—They don't look warm.
They aren't.

■

The stockings have aspirations of silk.

■

Stockings remember:
Imagining.
Playing parts,
practicing being women,
rehearsing being, smoking
cigarettes, listening
to evening, smelling
the future, interrogating
fireflies.

Beauty was positioned
in-between: twilight
furies cupped in hands
of faint longing,
uncorrectable histories caught

→

in the grip of muggy Shenandoah
evening. My sister & I,
her/me. Nieces.

We were always nieces, great-
nieces, descendants.

 In the garden,
under branches of osage orange
and black walnut, next to rank
ailanthus, I slip the genealogical
moment off a young leg,
become bare-limbed, flawed,
burnt in the full range of seasons.

■

Left hanging to dry in the moonlight's yellow ennui,
nylon shapes on the clothesline beat against violent air.

And in the dark somewhere a woman softly sings to me:

in the soft singing somewhere a woman darkens

 the luminous song:

in the luminous woman somewhere a song singly

 softens the dark melody

of our age in a universe of negligence

 and violence, *negligence and violence!*

until the dark edge of the song fine-tunes the ear:

Negligees and violets beat the samesay rhythm

 against the air in a gesture of sheerness.

■

My great-aunt lived with what can only be called the resignation of
butterflies: Flit.

Flit. Flitting about believing utterly in the possibility of a beautiful leg.
Despite.

She knew *just enough*. No more. The stocking separated the leg from the
woman

and when she stood, it gestured toward freedom by wrinkling-folding
loose into the space where knee used to be.

A fitting oblation.

■

I can say *stocking* in at least four languages and mean it.

The idea of an overly intellectual woman was linked
to the color of her stockings: *bas-bleu*. Poor, aged, addled
or insane women in this century are often depicted

with thick nude-colored stockings around their ankles

which is meant to imply folds of skin

without elasticity with nothing but memory.

Two legs never touched by silk.

■

A gift. A pair.

Packaged elaborate in pink satin appliquéd with gold

stars and miserable half moons and he meant the post-

war gesture of seamed nylon and she meant the gratitude,

but never unwrapped the stockings.

■
This is the same story.
What I'm telling you, I've told you
before. Listen. When *las muchachas*
migrate north to work on the border,
in the factories, they are machines, are
slang: *las máquilas*. They wear stockings
and high heels to work
believing utterly
in
the
possibility of
a
beautiful
leg.

■
With the initial pull of a single thread, I saw my mother
once unravel
an entire leg talking on the telephone. Her gentle, diligent
undoing!
Exposing nothing less than azure illusion of stocking.
What was
left after the conversation, in a quiet pile on the floor,
was
singular and blue-dyed: A desire. An excretion of worms.
Glimmering.

1. Road Trip

*It's a good idea to collect as much entropy as possible
before using a system.*

—Jon Callas, cryptographer

Because the horizon is not a number line,
because distance is an absolute value,
I use the atlas as an *I Ching*, a rune,
my calculations point to the Midwest,
as good a place as any.

Here in the disappearing prairie
I finally understand
how some infinities can be larger,
others smaller; how certain endless
quantities move closer to no end
faster than others.
Aleph Null—countable though infinite:
grass, sun, treelessness.
Aleph One—uncountable and infinite:
dust, wind, fire. The distance
between here and God.

And this I did not expect,
that the loneliness would be countable.

My son wants a tumbleweed for a pet,
now one is buckled in the back seat.
What a clever boy, choosing to love
a thing already dead and rootless.

At the motel, he watches me
lower the blinds against
the white noise, the presence
of all possibilities in the night.
"It's such a lovely dark, Mama," he says.

2. Devices of Chance

*Definition of Randomness: an inexplicable misfeature;
gratuitous inelegance.*

—www.gopher.quux.org:70

Two Definitions of Randomness, Each Necessary but Not Sufficient:

Numbers in a string are random if they cannot be expressed in an2y shorter form.

But that is just poetry.

Numbers in a sequence are random if there is no pattern to them.

Is that disbelief or its absence?

Ways to Generate Randomness/Pseudorandomness:

throwing dice, casting lots, flipping coins, drawing balls from
hoppers, drawing straws, picking numbers from 1 to x, playing rock/
paper/scissors, consulting random number tables, spooling
algorithms through computers

getting out of bed in the morning

A Short History of Devices of Chance:

Casting lots (ancient beyond history): objects, cast to the earth, or
into a receptacle and then drawn out—pebbles or die, nuts or
barleycorn, twigs, bones, coins, cards, yarrow sticks, precious gems.
Once believed to reveal the will of god(s).

Dice (circa 2750 BC, ancient Mesopotamia/the Indus Valley):
fashioned from clay and passed through fire, dotted with pips much
as today's.

The astragalus (earlier than 1320 BC, Egypt): dice-like bones with
four faces, each different in shape.

The quincunx (1823–4, Sir Francis Dalton, cousin to Darwin): the
theory of errors modeled by pellets, dropped through a vertical
maze of pins, landing in a bell shape that echoes the normal curve.

The ancients, too, wanted to live as though there wasn't enough randomness in life, as if it had to be sought out like a buried family secret, or something feral; as though it wouldn't come looking for you in the night.

These days we know the sources of pure randomness are few. We measure cosmic ray flux, light emissions from trapped mercury molecules, thermal noise from resistors, the decay of radioactive material.

Trapped. Resist. Decay.

3. Grasslands

And Aaron shall cast lots upon the two goats; one lot for the Lord, and the other lot for the scapegoat. . . . And the goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities unto a land not inhabited: and he shall let go the goat in the wilderness.

—Leviticus 16:8, 22

We haven't passed another car all day,
just the grasses undulating,
the winds ululating,
oceans of air drawing us.
In every direction
the startling sameness—
easy to get lost,
impossible to be lost.

Here in the New World
everyone wanders.

39787637

Fold the nation in half
lengthwise, endwise,
and the intersection,
the pivot point, the spot
where the map would crack first,
dead center, black hole,
is not far from here. 0

Perhaps from that spot, southwestly,
a tornado is headed this way—
a conical tumbleweed,
a vortex, an altar,
a lot cast on the plains



5touching down here, ta9king
this one, leaving that one.
The sky turns briefly gre07en,
e9xplodes with missi9ves of ice,
the soun9d of ten thous58and waterfalls,
white noise, maskin7g our sounds,
chaff in the whirlwind40440.

Enter pure ran l l domness:
708015impossible to be
lost; where pointle7ssness
is the po36int.

4. C7ounting Backwards

White noise frequently isn't.

—Jon Callas, cryptographer

05181261

The Tall08 Grass P5rairie States:

Nebraska, th0e Dakotas, Oklahom3a, Texas, Wisco5nsin, Missouri,
Kans1as . . . Staring at the para6l1el rows of parallel 01 cornstalks,
I remember that over h14alf of all Americans liv7e in the state in
which they were born640.

Behi3nd me, my son begins co8unting backwards.

Co2mmon Uses for Counting Bac36kwards: 9684996263
to test for a6ging-related declines, dyslexi6a, and, in Texas, drunk
901272dr3iving; to increase concentrat4ion, to fa9ll asleep, in meditation;
to hei8ghten anticipation, as in annou9ncing beauty pageant
winner8s or rocket launches

to connect w7ho you are with where you are

17683

How to Dis6tinguish a Child from 6an Adult:

For a child, countin06g backwards is as easy as counting
for76ward9s.

An adult says, "Anything could happen," but is surprised when it does. Or doesn't; the future as sure as the past. Counting backwards is impossible: between any two numbers there are infinitely many more.

Counting forwards is worse.

How to Tell If You Are a Mathematician:

If you think randomness is desirable and too rare, like rubies; if you chase entropy, like a butterfly once thought to be extinct, you are a mathematician.

86357

If you think randomness is as ubiquitous and welcome as dust, the common cold, tract housing; if you would run from entropy if only there were anywhere to run, you are not a mathematician.

Over half of all Americans are not mathematicians.

73548768095909

1173929274

1705

5. Crop Circles

There are several ways not to walk in the prairie, and one of them is with your eye on a far goal.

—William Least Heat Moon

Left, right, straight—
each crossroad seems momentous
yet insignificant. I

69572

0699

have long since lost
the atlas, let go fistfuls
of yarrow sticks out the window
of the rental car, like dandelion
dander in the dry wind, cosmic
ray flux, light
radiating from something trapped.

5116877121

128

I am c8oming to the Am3erican m44id-
 point, the 056epicenter,
 0111668014groun9d zero, the cal4m 76867
 8at the eye of the s94torm.
 Colle8cting entropy 155as I go.

Nowh7ere I have ever been 0100
 is any different fro6m 2here. 5023760
 The buffa4lo grass and wild bergamot,
 spiderwort la83sting only a day0858—
 the 03prairie could be a latticed cit8y,
 2962ragged mou2ntain, roofless de4sert, or 04020082
 what it is.

I am b5ecoming th8e center of some circ5le,
 all p9oints equi05distant from72 me,
 interc2hangeable. I a2m zero-
 ing in on random355ness.
 4037206361 2916650842268953
 533476435080

My so4n has said noth19ing
 for fi3fty-three miles3.
 In the re6arview mirr792or
 I see him asle533ep,
 his f3ace pressed 4into the tumb5leweed 093032320902560159
 I will have to soo7n let go
 019like a scapegoat in the wil4derness.
 2428426290833 68353

6. 015Random N6umber Tab8le

We know what randomness isn't, not what it is.

—William A. Dembski

813398851119929170310601080545571824063530342614867990743923
 403097328526977602020516569268665748187305385247186238857963
 573321350532547048905535754828468287098349125624737964575303
 529647783580834282609352034435273884359852017767149056860772
 109405586069093433505007399811805054313980827732507256824829
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Br12eathe.

1. Sex and Death

Cauthard cups his hands against the glare
at the lettered glass next the turning
candy cane barberpole and sees his future
in this little town the chorus squared
to a table those old graybeards puffing
muffled in a smoky halo cutting to squint
eight eyes from fanned cards
to lockstep up his wire drawn frame
club paused to club paws stopped at rake
as he waves a furtive palm met with headnods
by old mumble men amidst their trumps
and suits this poor prodigal about to banish
himself from overall and coverall there being neither
work nor society for the wearier of a wrong
daughter a doubter whose churchpew elegance
would find her reach grasping excessive flesh in
insecure quarters behind a door too hastily propped
as successive gasps set to creak its mad rusty hinges.

And now back
as a rivulet man astalk in manifold black
toting a heavy cube of unplugged sound
backs in the door jarring a chair prop
of spent clothes whose tumble cottons
the woven bodies abed who fled a stare
only to have it now poke beneath
a broad felt brim two burning mantle
lanthorns on the porch of a sweeping
shaker roofed house of judgment.

First verse chorus bridge
second verse chorus chorus.

Two hands
come down to end the voices laboring
to come together and the backing
man of cloth and water whose
hand has held so many heads
in hallowed supplication beneath
a serpentine stretch of the Tippecanoe
River whose waters so deftly

→

accepted inconvenient Indians drops
the heavy radio its tubes popping
as does the gossamer filament of
his heart flashing through his
wide eyes which close as a
translucent red bubble seals his
mouth popping into darkness.

Our hero has not only broken
the hymen of courtly love but chased
chastity beyond the bounds of the living
to where no sword might lie betwixt
bodies sweetly sleeping since said sword
is now lowered black-clothed oaked and
swinging from four ropes into eternal
restlessness marking a man whose mettle
will take a shape thought forgotten.

Cauthard stands at funeral something
apart fiddling his watch fob with such
ferocity as to pull the winding stem clean out
of the top which he feels now as a separate
piece of this now peaceful timepiece
placing hands caught in decisive directions
to mark this event which he had rather
simply moved round the circle with
the rest but when the preacher come
down from Green Hill finishes his eulogy
with "that black day such a kingly man
struck down by so erring a night that
it spread its inky fingers into the souls
of us all" he stretches like a skinny
Moses his hands for emphasis and they
come down at level parting a sea of
mourners to reveal a reddening Cauthard
staring at his watch which points at him too.

All eyes turn to our Cauthard caught
reddening and all eyes stereo opaque
to stories playing behind them wherein
various imaginations dare to see
in flagrante where others would



shrink from the detail only to feel
the dull ache of the act which is now
as present at this solemn occasion
as the black felt hat on the preacher's
sweating head.

All eyes and thoughts are caught hard on this pillar
of what none would like to be in the presence
of in the company of kith and kin but there
is no place else to look as the father
risks averting his gaze only to have
it meet his daughter's with whom he
might share a moment of recognition
concerning facts neither would like to
put thought to as if in this knowing
moment silent thoughts become
declarations of knowledge which are
as impossible to forget as the knowing
thoughts which precede them are
to suppress.

This the Greeks called phallus and
understood its utter figurativity
as did the Romans with their traveling
bundle of kindling axe-wrapped
and so too we come to the Renaissance
where in England they have put up
their armor and are dancing round
the maypole wrapping it each with
their cotton winding sheet.

2. What Cauthard Saw at the River

We go back now as arms and the man
swing from a high branch above a deep
cut leesy curve of the river where sheeted
believers fidget in the shallows cold sheep
goosebump lovers of the Lord amen
and holding his nose another supplicant
hedges his bets by making his watery covenant
with the win place and show of the trinity
back and down and up again praise the Lord

→

and there as though the bible were an almanac
of desire Cauthard spies the last in line
that last that shall be first as he prepares
to coil his pale naked body to swing and swan
out into the unresisting air to hang oh so briefly
motionless he throws his head back spreads
his arms cruciform and the rearguard
madonna locks his eyes as he wails a faint
eloi eloi that never reaches the substance
of the plea for icy riverwater swallows him away.

Not coming up was a problem for those falling
backwards over the threshold of trust in the Lord
and the line began to break in search all simony
forgotten as the school of white clad hopeful
resurrectors plunge each billowingly
beneath brown unresisting waters to do
for this suddenly fallen stranger what
He was about to do for them *vis*
in nomine patre a search and rescue of a
not yet stinking Lazarus but up come so
many emptyhanded Ophelias deprived of
saving forming quickly their dripping line
for heaven since well we all gotta go sometime.

Cauthard meanwhile knows the river as do the slick
chattering otters who frolic in its wilder parts goes
deep and kicks and pulls himself into the fast current
just beneath the scissored legs of that last to whom
he momentarily clings as the holy ghost to its auricular
port of entry and then it's kick down again
and the current pulls him round the curve to come
up beneath a cottonwood deadfall replete with a fat
green watersnake sunning its flattened body and
flicking its knowing tongue laughing at the short
memoried fools in the river.

What Cauthard sees next is the girl being bent over
so reedy so lithe a swan's neck a green sapling
she parts the water without disturbing it and is held
down down and the shouting preacher whose shell
hard from daily use eases his daughter's golden

→

head back up like found treasure like a rinsed idol
like what the golden calf aches to be and he swears
to himself that she glows like all the Marys on all the
thick pages of all the old bibles in the stiltlegged church
off Sharon Chapel Road and from the midst of this glow
she orbs him over as if she had just overbid on him
and her eyes say do not disappoint me I cannot afford this.

3. Eustacia Wheeler

Cauthard's house down Sharon Chapel Road
perched above the flood plain where only burrs
and melons grew with frequency since stood
but soft sand between them and the devil
who the Lord had kept only buying for their
souls from the swamp down beyond that
old Indian fort its blockhouse wood and its
woods full of shards and old bones and
the talkative ghosts that the oak trees say
hush to in the restless summer.

The house does not analogize right well
but it is like an old whore who looks good
from afar but far from good up close since
getting taken care of is a luxury though the
outbuildings they come in for a coat of white
paint to keep out the moisture and the house
it is after all well built and sturdy though the
porch looks like all the hound dogs in the county
had sat together all at once on one end and it is
here that we find Cauthard sitting in an old
spindlebacked granny rocker with his head
thrown back onto the windowsill in part
to feel the cool marble on his neck and in part
to hear the cool clear voice of Eustacia Wheeler.

Cauthard's daddy had three possessions
that were guarded by his left eye which grew
out all goggled whenever anyone got near one
and these were his copper and chrome still in
what folks thought was the smokehouse
his invented machine for making buttons

→

out of mussel shells which he told everyone
who braved his eye was still under devilment
and his gramophone record playing machine
which sat on its own walnut stand in the front
parlor under a genuine New York City poster
of Eustacia Wheeler herself dressed up like
the Queen of England or some such thing as
a knight in armor stuck a smoking dragon at
her feet while she managed to sing and hold a
pretty yellow fan.

Cauthard heard an ocean aquamarine
languid pooling gently over rounded stones
his neck along the cool gray marble
while the titter of sparrows and a wren
poked their muted cymbals in accentuated
ornithomusicological accompaniment
until a searing pain leapt across his throat
and he looked into his father's eyes one
goggling as if ready to itself fly out on its tether
to smack him wetly as the old man having
shut the window its weights banging diatonically
in a way Cauthard thought quite pretty
before returned to the pressure on his wind
and his father's spittle emphasized
what boy did I tell you about putting your
hands on my phonograph record playing machine
much less touching the delicate black 78 rpm
record disks of Miss Eustacia Wheeler?

Later Cauthard placed himself in the frame
of the cracked and crooked mirror
to adjust the long white linen aviator
scarf he wore in imitation of the cropduster
pilot he sometimes watched across the river
finding himself dashing he does so his neck
covered now with its red father born marker
burning purple under civilized cover.
Floating his boat into town he thinks that this
is his father all over a man who cannot appreciate
that his son shares his love of something beautiful
and would rather compete with the strength of his
boundless anger than love his weaker flesh.

4. Goat Song

Tragedy always begins innocently enough
since drama lies coiled inside possibility
and the girl at the river has her teeth in the scruff
of Cauthard's linen scarfed neck tied
round as it is with dashing picture show
elegance for the one whose father saves souls
by the dozen and with a thump this reverie stalls
in the eddy beneath the cottonwoods at town's
edge and our hero walks along the towpath
like a gunfighter a newly accoutered knight
a painted pony sitting brave a conquistador in white
linen and heads for the barber shop where all
can be known just by staring out the window.

Well if it ain't Rudolph Valentino hisself chorts
Larky O'Connor as Cauthard takes the first red
metallic flaked chair next to the door and thinks
yep like a very bird singing without sense you
are old man but smiles since his father is in the
chair peering with one good eye from beneath
steaming folds of white linen and the son wonders
if the father notices their similarly clad upper
regions and is interrupted by the jangle of the
door as in backs a man in black carrying some
heavy object as the gap toothed smiling Larky
gets up for the first time that day to help the
man settle himself at a right angle to Cauthard
balancing a squat Emerson radio on his knees.

Do you get any music out of it that way preacher
starts Larky who feels as though he cannot but
say something funny and appropriate as if the silence
reminded him all too much of scissors and compulsion
and the man replies daubing his high forehead with a
white handkerchief no sir it is broke and I am on my way
to Ledbetter's to get it fixed and all in the room think
quickly of Clancy Ledbetter who wears thick glasses
and fixes all manner of things and never leaves his shop
where he sleeps on an old army cot in the back and how
once he electrocuted himself so that his hair was
singd off and he smelled for a week like bacon

→

and then the preacher asked to the general room those card players and sitabouts who knew all that happened and spared not judgment nor what they felt to be helpful comment whether anyone knew where there might be found help scraping and painting the window frames of his congregation provided house.

The chorus turned as one choreographed toward Cauthard all the heads coming round in a row like so many mailpouch signs along a familiar road and from beneath his linen shroud Cauthard père says the boy yonder and the preacher follows the signs and says well how about it young man and as Cauthard's mind wanders toward payment and purchase and whether this might be one of those good deeds that cannot be traded for earthly pleasures he is struck with a bolt every bit as electric as the tissue desiccating burst of electrons that ran through myopic Clancy Ledbetter as a vista of the vista opens up in his picture show brain of a reclining figure reading a glossy magazine on a hastily made bed in the house of a preacher with peeling paint and a radio that has for the last time failed to pick up the Saturday Night Barn Dance.

As they walk back toward Sharon Chapel Road with some dry goods and some kitchen staples Cauthard smells his tonicked and hairless father and as he finally sets into a gait that allows him to set his thoughts into a picture clear enough that he has the control to get the figure on the bed to lick her index finger slowly to turn a glossy page he is cuffed in the back of his head realizing that he missed the turn and has been walking in the wrong direction as his father says boy your mind is not on your business you best corral yourself by tomorrow as you got a job to do and I expect no direption of that man's hearth and home and here the old man fixed him with the eye that said there may be a fourth object now on the list and you had best not lay hands on it or a mark on your throat will be the least of your worries and Cauthard studied for a moment that word his father had used that sounded like a limit not to be crossed yet marking a place that could no more be ignored than it could be thought to be someone else's and Cauthard sensed that where two worlds and times came together there was often a challenge that cloaked the forbidden like a hastily drawn curtain.

5. Direption

Later Cauthard would swear that there had appeared to be glass just before he plunged over into her room and he would at least privately insist that such an experienced river swan diver could never have so clumsily entered such a blissfully anticipated bower and here we must go hastily past a period of waiting through toss and turn while limbs sought and found flesh upon flesh pressed and impediments there were none and then morning came lark pushing up past proverbial dove and our man is up and dressed and out the door as his father's paper comes swiftly down to loose his eye upon such a hastening pistol so loaded but ocular inertia does not find him so swiftly mercurial he skips the steps and hits the gravel and finds himself at a white eventoothed fence that seems verily to be grinning him welcome.

The front door opens before he has located the knocker and the preacher's back meets him as he finishes saying to someone inside and I hope you feel right better and turns and smiles ushering his young charge round the side of the white clapboard house to an old low shed sagging precipitously containing painting materials and clinging to which like counterweight a long wooden ladder all of which the older man indicates with a sweep of the arm as if he had brought a master to his leaning atelier and selecting the least brittle of horsehair alternatives our Michelangelo with Rapunzel features readies himself for fenestration beautification gathering sandpaper utility knife buckets and one small hooked tool about whose function he is completely ignorant as the preacher lets himself out of the gate and walks whistling up the road hands interlocked behind his back having left his house in order.

If the chorus of barbershop card shufflers briar puffing solid citizen bellwethers could be present here at events unfolding they might be heard to say that young Cauthard has gotten himself poised at the brink of an abyss about to look into him for the meek whose earth inheriting properties are well known cannot be so well kenned as a country boy thinks and behind that honey hair and angelic glow there might be some serpentine depth and cunning whose ophidian purpose colds the blood of one by burning that of another and the chorus blows the leaves of the book open to genesis as in this quiet bird chattered backyard garden where green thoughts in green shades abide unscathed a tree of knowledge goes up and Cauthard climbs



its purposeful rungs and our chorus fades returning to where
they do sit with a clear view of the town square as old Bud
Cadwallader points the stem of his pipe at the glass and says now
there goes the preacher to fetch his radio as all turn to look upon
the black clad figure removing his hat to greet a group of
choristers as he backs into Clancy Ledbetter's shop.

Steadying himself against the eave at the end slope of the shaker
roof line he leans his chest into the top rung and sees that he
cannot reach to the big dormer window set back from the roof's
edge and so he must go head first over the end of the ladder and cling
perilously to the slope putting a foot into the trough for leverage
moving up toward the glass he stumbles his shoe caught fast
in the trough he loses balance and before his weight takes him
earthward he is hauled through the window by force and finds
himself in a heap on a sheepskin rug tangled up with his savior
whose angelic figure is covered only in pink silk and whose face
seems aglow due to his head hitting the windowframe and around
which emanates a sound so familiar and forbidden its siren call
stands the short hairs hackling him frozen there as he recognizes
like a soft piston resuming its motion in his soul the melic liquid
sound of Miss Eustacia Wheeler.

I was afraid you'd start at the bottom she says as Cauthard's eyes
come back to stereo and her figure transforms coherent and he says
excuse me wondering whether she meant with the painting but she
helps him up and she says do you like my camisole and he considers
not knowing whether she means a body part or a whole area or some
feature of the room's feminine landscape so he goes with its fine
with the accent on fine meaning like bone china as there is a general
porcelain whiteness to things here that starts an ache in him from
her skin to her cream duvet cover to the small animal figurines on
the chifforobe and the word alabaster comes to him like a gift
his hand is taken and he sits on the bed next to her and she smells
exactly like the little white bells secreted in the fronds of the lily
of the valley and she is saying as Eustacia Wheeler ends and the
needle of the RCA gramophone record playing machine sticks
in the infinity of its oiled groove like it was trying to cut the heart
out of things I saw you that day at the river when you flew off
the bluff and when our eyes met there was so much electricity
my hair stood up even there in the water and I thought the Lord

→

was upon me and I have been waiting to see which is redeemer
the angel swooping fleshy or my father's unstained messiah.

There was a moment of silence broken only by the scratch of
the needle on coarse vinyl the hill it climbed sighing each time
round and Cauthard smelled the lily felt the soft down saw
the flower of her mouth moving toward his and then everything
went still in his head as bodies took over and he shed his clothes
and saw the pink puddle of silk roll off her and then flesh pressed
flesh and friction was pleasure was heat and skin changed from
limit to beginning and Cauthard was lost in little moans and electric
arcs of joy as she led him into places by routes he had not been
and all was suddenly in unison and he thought briefly of sitting
a small boat at sea or a horse at perfect canter or the perfect bifold
motion of the wooden unicorn on the county fair merryground.

The world receded and was not real and so when a sound found
that coital space it had no opening to enter and so remained unregis-
tered

and if we pan from the bed with its writhing toward the door we
find a chair draped with a cast of work clothes scarecrowing ineffectively
the rooklike presence about to enter a place he had not imagined
and so unprepared for anything except approbation at the newly restored
Emerson Hi-Tone the father backs into the room and sees a sight
which causes him to throw his hands into the air like a stricken choir
master

the radio falling at his feet and cracking open its tubes shattering
at the same moment as his daughter screams and as the pale faced black
clad

figure freezes his heart shocked by this tableau he tries to speak
but all that emerges from the broken gossamer of his heart is a bloody
bubble

that covers over his mouth shimmers briefly and pops in dead silence.

Marion K. Stocking

Susan Stewart, one of our most absorbing writers, has just received the National Book Critics Circle Award for her ***Columbarium*** (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003, 132 pp., \$22.50 cloth). The title refers to a promising source of metaphor for a book of poems: first a dovecote with its multiple pigeonholes, then a vault of niches for urns with ancestral ashes.

I open the book and riffle the pages, slowly. Fifty-one poems, almost every one in a verse form created for its specific occasion. Add the poems with several sections, each one again in a distinctive form, and you can imagine what an inspiration this volume could be to a writer working through the question of how the poetic imagination can conceive form.

Stewart opens *Columbarium* with two of the four pre-Socratic elements, "Sung from the generation of AIR" and "Drawn from the generation of FIRE," and closes with "Wrought from the generation of EARTH" and "Flown from the generation of WATER." AIR is a musical suite of six poems: the first with plenty of fresh air circulating among the staggered lines; the second following a wind-blown sheet of a school test to a ritual for forgetting—"it is neither evil nor good, as things are neither here nor there when they fly." (I think of the poetry of the blowing plastic bag in *American Beauty*.) The third is even more evanescent; the fourth a striking wing-shaped poem, "*in memory of happiness in a time of misery*." The fifth turns the Icarus story inside out; the last is an ingeniously airy echo poem for two voices. It hurts that I don't have room in this review to indulge my passion for verse analysis, but I'll leave the adventures in prosody to you and turn here to matters of the relationship between form and content.

Within the elemental frame, Stewart titles the body of her book "Shadow Georgics," thirty-five poems in alphabetical order, beginning with "Apple" and "Bees." I dove back into my Virgil and reminded myself that for the Greeks *geo*, the land, plus *ergon*, work, equals *agriculture*. There are several poems here that recall Virgil in subject as well as didactic tone: "These Trees in Particular," with the lines "*If the trees are unfamiliar, you're the stranger*" and "*When you recognize the trees you must be home*"; "Weather," parodying Virgilian and modern folk climatology; and "Bees," recreating the story of Aristaeus—the "horror into sweetness" of the generation of bees from the corpses of ritually slaughtered

cattle. And then there's "Pear," with at least eight startling transformations of imagery and of intellectual inquiry, a fine poem to introduce the way Stewart simultaneously involves the reader in vivid perception while dramatically enacting the process of intellectual search for meaning in the sensuous donnée.

First among the "shadow Georgics" we find "Apple," beginning with a seductive attack: "If I could come back from the dead, I would come back/ for an apple, and just for the first bite, the first/ break." Stewart then catalogs the fine old varieties ("the little/ Rome with its squat rotunda") and moves in to the core, with its symbolism of death and rebirth. By the end of this section the reader has become the apple. The stanzas of the second part begin with Virgilian pomicultural instructions, expand through Genesis and Proverbs, Atalanta's Milanion, and through various uses of the fruit, becoming aphoristic before it circles back to the opening stanza and, assuming the voice of Eve, melodiously expands its implications:

If I could come back from the dead, I would—
I'd come back for an apple,
and just for one bite, one break,
and the cold sweet grain on the tongue.
There is so little difference between

an apple and a kiss, between desire
and the taste of desire.

Anyone who tells you other-
wise is a liar, as bad
as a snake in the quiet grass.

You can watch out for the snake and the lie.
But the grass, the green green wave
of it, there below the shadows of the black
and twisted boughs, will not be
what you thought it would be.

"Apple" represents the sort of reward you will find in this book: the movement from sensuous to sensual to allusory to ethical-admonitory to surprise and myth and mystery and, all along, the prosody effecting the transformations, line by tantalizing line.

Beyond these few direct references to the *Georgics*, I find myself throughout the book more drawn to the etymological sense of *geo* + *ergon*—the work of the earth—than to Virgil. Within the abecedarian sequence the only rule I can postulate is that as I turn the page each poem should come as a surprise (even a shock) in both content and form. After “O,” a ten-line lyric beginning “Toi, toi, toi, said Peleus./ Grieving, Hecuba/ barked like a dog” (which thanks to the notes I realize refers to Dante, to Ovid, and to Euripides’ *Andromache*, as translated by Stewart herself), “King-fisher Carol” is pure music. “The History of Quiver” plays with twenty-four (count ’em) meanings of that word. “Lost Rules of Usage” runs through the punctuation marks:

quotation

one week we slept like spoons in a drawer
 the next week, the same, but in the other direction

parentheses

the condemned man dreams of his pardon
 what I think of when I do not think of you

“Wings” is a dialogue poem beginning “If you could have wings would you want them?” And ending—Oh, shut up, Marion. Don’t spoil it for your readers.

It is a privilege and joy to share the workings of a beautiful mind, and I keep thinking how much Archie Ammons would have enjoyed the orders of order in these poems—the body attuned to “nicotiana, honey-bloomer,” the “quivering moonbridge on the quick black stream” and the mind moving to explore order in grief and nightmare, moral horror, the “aspect of ecstasy,” and the “absolute form of earthly repetition.” I wish I had an audience to perform these for, to feel the physical and intellectual command of the mercurial shiftings of tone; the rippling reticulations of stanza, line, phrase, and phoneme; the Roman candles of a comic spirit; and the silences—silences “like breathing moonlight.”

If each niche in this columbarium holds a shadow urn with ashes of our literary and philosophical ancestors, I welcome them as the poet’s art endows them with fresh significance. If each is a working of the earth/air/fire/water of our multiple senses, I am more alive by that labor. If each is a pigeonhole in a dovecote, I rejoice at the uniqueness of each dove. I fly afield to feed, returning always to settle into this elegant architecture.