

BPJ

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WINTER 2005/2006

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COVER

Abby Shahn, right panel, "A Field of Blackbirds," egg tempera and mixed media on paper, 1999. For more of the artist's work, visit www.abbyshahn.com.

Mary Greene, design

→

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

BPJ

THE EDITORS OF
THE БЕЛОIT POETRY JOURNAL
ARE PROUD TO AWARD
THE THIRTEENTH ANNUAL
CHAD WALSH POETRY PRIZE
OF \$3,000

TO
KARL ELDER
FOR HIS GROUP OF POEMS
FROM "Z AIN'T JUST FOR *ZABECEDARIUM*"
IN THE SUMMER 2005 ISSUE.

HONORING THE POET CHAD WALSH,
COFOUNDER, IN 1950, OF THIS MAGAZINE,
THE PRIZE IS THE GIFT THIS YEAR OF
ALISON WALSH SACKETT AND PAUL SACKETT.

CARL ADAMSHICK
Valentine's Day 1955

Bobby sits in the back of the room
balancing
a small board on his knees.

The teacher lumbers through discourse.

Some students take notes.
One is watching the corn snake in the terrarium
gain enough speed to lose its skin.

Bobby pushes the blunt head of a pawn
and stares down
at the beautiful contention to survive—

everything with its response,
its inherent statement it is driven to say.

Sun warms the windows, half the globe.

A girl has just passed a valentine to a boy.
He is afraid to open the folded heart,

its red ink,
its cotton paper thick in his hands.

Bobby is sunk, deeply, in the mesh of pieces.
He's astonished
by the purpose and identity

of each move. The teacher circles a point.
Wind pushes through trees

clustered with acorns. Cars
line the gray pocked street. It's so peaceful

at eleven a.m. he sees how everything

must happen, how there is no freedom,
no awful necessity to choose.

ADAM CHILES
Free Write, Period A

for Sean

The rain outside: tremors at the blind. Periodically, they look up,
the sound reaching some mineral center in them.

They are still asleep, still negotiating the avenues. Still asleep,
their pencils glide ahead, each leaning into its own gray calligraphy.

At times, a murmur as though someone has awakened,
the sentence below, a voice chiming through the blood pillow.

Others, struck by the hymn of understanding, drag on their pencils
like nicotine. Period A. The clock is the devil's drum. Ceaseless.

They feel it echoing, buried in the truancy of their wrists.
Period A. Genocide. A photograph of skulls. Skulls stacked neatly,

one on top of the other. What do we make of this? The pencils
continue their ashy discussion. Someone offers a mint. Someone

closes her eyes. Carlos is an artist. He is shading foreheads,
quietly and with great concentration, darkening each scalp with hair.

BETH SIMON

Dinner and After Dinner

He's lost in his own house. I wish I had that excuse.
Dirt outlines the path to the furnace. She eats ice cream
anyway. He sees himself as a Buick Regal. She knows
a battery sheet with a beer back as if English isn't his only
language, but she can't stop doing the laundry, sponging
the mirror, washing her hands red as stop signs
and just as cold.

Tonight he plans to wind the grandfather.
She ought to check the fine print on the Allstate policy,
spade the garden, sweeten with lime, but prayer is a queen
treading the wheat field she intends but does not own.
Whatever you call it, chutes or ladders, all roads are vertical,
all lines lead here, and here again, the trail of crumbs.
She is fingering the dead bolt, freezing.

BETH SIMON
Fossil Walrus Calculus

[be] an isle for those who seek landfall
—Santideva

The cold room is my room. Yes.
The secret word for cliff, “release.” The worm of surface,
steppe or strait, is invariability swallowed whole. Out
this far, chalcedony is the annointed’s gold luck gift

and the rest of us can go fuse oxygen to iron
for all the good it will do. Try it. Prop open the portal, lower
the ladder. Listen. Prayer is nothing but a foundered contralto,
i.e., melisma, *parfum*, kelp.

Cigarette? Each *lied* yields the stalactite
kiss, water charmed to abstraction. Circumference, Federica,
is possibility perfected and thus I’m afraid we are left with salt,
a raft, and the stupid, stupid stars. Ash abounding.

Check the astrolabe. Yes. Just like that
old god promised. Every body bordered by sand. Indifference
in the ten directions. Leaky bireme and manganese omens.
Landfall remains always behind. Ahead is night. Pure night.

MARGARET AHO

Meister Eckhart speaks High German

to my mother. And even
the nonagenarian hair
at her nape [nacken]
scant/spent/marcescent
stands up, trans-
fixed in already loosening
follicles. As if some dogged
watchfulness [*Woman, the hour
is coming . . .*] let down, let go, let
be through these fiber-
optics: palest silver. And
he, as if to demonstrate, acts
out: stick-out-your-neck-
without-a-why [ohn'
warum]; limber,
he fingers his own . . . [niht]:
his scripted flimsies.
He's rubberman, a hairpin
turn: he's nose-to-knees
before her. Yes, before
her. As if this deep bow, this
obeisance toward her wifehood
[ehestand], her noble-gift-
that-must-give-back [gebern]
:10 live births, 13 pregnancies:
her love lived out [gewürke]—
working welling . . . as if all this
disclosed him, too: virginal:

→

him & her & God: the shared [grunt],
the world, wandering, the dart-
ing identical . . . there! . . . bristling
now not only from her skull's
stem, these medullary rays, but from
her WombBreastHeart, her dangling
arm, her pinned hip/leg, her hands
(rhizomes), her green-with-dark-
gold eyes, her neck . . .
outstretched with hackled volt-
age. Is all this a play . . .
a [spiel] the Godhead gives
itself? [. . . Ursprunc!
. . . Nu!] Now: Un-
bracketing . . .

MARGARET AHO

Directions

Take, as is, this extra-
large twill long-sleeved
shirt: a vivid . . .

[vermilion]

A v-word. My mother's
name is Vee.

Smooth its length. Let its
frayed cuffs fall like fringe
from the ends of the table.
Scroll the deep yoke . . .

[down]

Scroll the tails . . .

[up]

:top & bottom, meeting
make a mouth.

[dense/swollen]

In the dream I'm dis-
tending; in the dream
souls

[unhive]

swarm, pin me . . .

[burn/bloat]

In the dream my lips
feel like these between
flung-out sleeves here
on the table.

Thwack mid-lip & bend
acutely, so that one sleeve
flips up & flings itself
on the other.

Like Lear
on Cordelia: father &
daughter . . .

[windbag/windsock]

finally slack enough
to hang breath-
less from these lips

→

[folded]

by them/between them . . .

Like a chevron.

[red]

Like a proofer's caret.

[wedged]

mid-text/mid-scroll/mid-
mouth . . .

[meaning]

something's been omitted,
some word about the word-
lessness of this . . .

Like a circumflex.

Like a peaked
vowel-cap.

this pointed . . .

[intone]

[intonation]

:Do thou o
v inverted
pitch a tent in me?

Now grasp firmly
to truss this
splay,

[trust]

. . . this play.

Wrapping tightly with
first the right
then

[wind & tuck]

left

[wind & tuck]

sleeve.

It should be hard
under your head,
unyielding

. . . this bound & swaddled
notch/crotch/thwacked
mouth at the ear, at the neck's
nape this muffled . . .

[muzzled]

low hum
low buzzzzzzing . . .

[volt]

. . . aaah
:a v word.

HADARA BAR-NADAV

Four Reds for Rothko

1. Colorwheel

Mix cinnabar and ochre with eggs. Then light. Where to go once red lunges into fire? *My servile edges aflame* sounds as if an end is redly near. How quickly the chemical swallows and peels: saffron, vermilion, cadmium blue tipped with teeth. Very meditative. Also agitative. Fire spins its colorwheel. Prayerwheel. Sequels of fur-lined syntax melt. The flame, a triangle with eyes at the apex and silvery feet. The body, a matchstick house. A house is always burning, breathing commonly hard. I'm advised by specialists to arrange an elaborate fish tank and comfortable leather chair. Watch every day how slowly life moves in Anotherland. Add salt and flakes. Watch every day how slowly life eats. And so full of color.

2. Paper Conversion

There was red and then there was red. *Red and Pink on Pink*, *Three Reds White Cloud* (which is red), *Brown and Black in Reds*, and even just *Red*, though in the end *Black on Gray*. Several of them. There had been *Green and Tangerine on Red* and *Ochre and Red on Red*. *Black on Dark Maroon*. Yes. I could work with some pills, some pills but not others, and then a flood of paper with paint and my heart still swollen sick but yes, there were paintings. Hundreds flying from my hands. You could see the progression. Dvinsk, Russia, to Oregon and then New York. My final resting place East 69th Street.

In the end I had to work on paper. Like some writer. It was my heart, an aneurysm of the aorta and no more canvas, canvas, canvas had held me for so long. And then paper. Roll after roll of slick surface. No teeth. Paper, like some goddamn writer, but no pen, no pencil, no keys. Dumb heart. Dumb paintbrush. Then it was mostly brown or black on gray and a skinny white border that bobbed. A skinny white seam for red to break.

3. The Art of Untitled

A period says when to begin or end but who really knows. I spend hours and days inside red trying to solve syntax. Savage. Salve. Save. My hands big as horses, as houses. Big as buildings. Does somebody have a cigarette and light? Scale has gone and the cigarettes return proportion. The size of red? Distortion. To make a sentence impossible now. No more titles or names. No more *red*.

To float one layer on top of another. How to be perfectly still. Perfectly flat yet layer one on the other. For example, *Four Darks in Red*, *Horizontal White over Darks*, or *Untitled (Brown and Gray)*, or *Untitled* and *Untitled* and *Untitled*. And then they wanted me to make a church and I did. A chapel and everything went dark.

Marcus Rothkowitz is not my name. Never trust language and words can unglue. The flatness of the picture plane. Purity of pigment. Purely flat. Never trust a name. *Untitled* and *Untitled*. Direct experience and exchange. Really, it's all very mathematical. Very spiritual. I'm not even here. Here, the paintings are made by no one. *Untitled* and *Untitled*.

4. Black, Maroons and White

(with a line from Wallace Stevens)

Look how red can eat in *Brown and Black in Reds* and *Four Reds*. Hungry Little Red Riding Red. Red forest. Red clouds. Clouds over a red lake. A grandmother and a wolf. I made a brick house in *Black, Maroons and White*. A bole chimney and uneaten loaves of bread. A cherry pie with forked crust and secret slivers of lemon peel. The mooncloud of God dissolves, foaming at the wolf's mouth. Sticky liver. Lover. Sliver. To eat a woman's mouth, tie her lace and cotton bonnet underchin. My chin. Trick or treat. Or meat. My little inamorata, my lithe little pumping red. I wait for you with God on my side. Who eats, lives.

Dim the light and darken the hues. A parachute taped to the sky-light so I can see the pigment glow, a hidden light source only the pigment knows. *The spirit and space, the empty spirit in vacant space*. Shallows of color swallow others. The wine-red sea opens to drown me. Only the wolfish pigment knows where the red ends and black begins, where black rises over red and red recedes against maroon, where black washes into green and green breaks in two and red is vanquished and swallows men like pearls.

BEN LERNER
from *Angle of Yaw*

HE HAD ENOUGH RESPECT FOR PAINTING to quit. Enough respect for quitting to paint. Enough respect for the figure to abstract. For abstraction to hint at the breast. For the breast to ask the model to leave. But I live here, says the model. And I respect that, says the painter. But I have enough respect for respect to insist. For insistence to turn the other cheek. For the other cheek to turn the other cheek. Hence I appear to be shaking my head No.

THE AIRCRAFT ROTATES about its longitudinal axis, shifting the equinoxes slowly west. Our system of measure is anchored by the apparent daily motion of stars that no longer exist. When the reader comes to, the writer hits him again. Just in case God isn't dead, our astronauts carry side arms. This is not your captain speaking, thinks the captain. A magnetic field reversal turns our fire friendly. Fleeing populations leave their bread unleavened, their lines unbroken.

THE ROSE has a minutely serrate margin, like a poem. There ends analogy. A dying process. At the border of the cornea and sclera, a momentary wavering. Excluded from beatific vision, but not condemned to further punishment. In the dream she told me she felt fine. Like dust. To what shall we liken analogy, if not to hypermetropia. These carpets are the color of migraine. Note to self: change your life. I assume the palmate antlers of hoofed mammals have so often been likened to candelabra I'm not even going to try. Boy, you got trouble in your head. Every time, he says, breasts are described in the poems of men, a woman undergoes mastectomy. I said *he says* to gain some credibility, which is a privileged form of distance. This one goes out to my paternal Grandma Elsie, short for Elsewhere, whom I never met. This one goes out to Grandma Rosie, who couldn't remember her first cancer by the time she died of being ready. Her ashes are on a shelf in Cambridge. Awaiting scattering. Note to self: don't publish this. Besides the half-dead and their families, everybody in the home was from the Indies. Carpets the color of. We administered music and morphine. For ninety-four years, she had performed her gender admirably. Anyway, this isn't a time or a place. But the day she died some punk nearly hit me with his bike, parked it, and got all in my face. Boy, you got trouble in your head. I started to cry. Like a woman, he said. As if to give me strength.

ANDER MONSON

For Orts

A sprinkling. Rain & yes & light & rush.
In a wink they appear. Offers. Often
they are tantalizing. Wouldn't I like larger
& more meaty X & such. & yes I such the
want it. Absolutely! Do now yes. Yes I ex in the box & want
these words & provide the information that is required
to process my application; oops. X out process—that word must be omitted
& committed to memory daily as is required by law. It is difficult
to remember now. Do this & think of me. Absolutely & I want
& want it all. Those pills by night across the border. Is there an
order, a pattern to it. Without prescriptions. Or direction. Even
better. Swallow. Relive my last year forever. Now less bitter. An interrupt-
ion. Take that one back too & now there are two new bright things
in my inbox—cut that word right out right now, as it is not yet
available to you. & Yes I desire it yes. Please send it to me now
right now right yes. I want it this Biggie in me. Then afterwards a bloom.
Predators at dog dot com, they come. What does this mean? So—
This is what you bring—not loneliness or song, or possible
solution, but Word documents & future emails re: my anger. &
possibilities re: hello, re: I am looking forever for an approximation
of love. Take me while I am willing. Or somewhat X that yes. I am
happy to hear from you again old friend. My hands. They crack
under winter light. And so: I have few old friends. Is there an
at best to follow it? It is all about the rush of Yes & its action on the body.
I see a solution. Thunder of Yes & rash, it is about the answers.
Black & black & back behind the thing that stands behind
(& in some cultures stands in for) the thing. Some nights
I am up & on those nights I wish for Teens, those lovely animals
I see sometimes on TV when I am up at night & cannot Sominex.
I think of sex & of Godzilla with the wake of detritus that trails behind
—millions of extension cords, telephone line & fiber (think
cereal, think sincere & serial addictions; repeat) optic cable (so hot,
that Godzilla, that I can dial him up, that I can give into
his new sex games, that big-ass monster Yes). I am so tight
I cannot speak. This yes this rash of it this gush. Reply, then rinse.
Repeat. I think of cream & a monster foot set down on it & thus
it is in me. I am this print fossilized in Nivea. I wait to be filled in
with whatever comes next. I hope it looks like love.

SUSAN MAXWELL

Milkweed

Filigreed. When it must be blown
apart into albumen and rebar, strands
roughed down the dawn road. Umber
discs assembled to the silk and now we are rocking
in the beginning's beginning although she has
been raped and is getting up again
and the limbless furrows of *returning from a long journey*
he beheld the weightless white snakes which can be
repeated until the hem of a beast the radio
of a hand appears to ask if she is assembled
to the riddle or *to the farmhands*
he gave a quart of getting up again,
reticulate, and the world was one
sentence long, repeating, so the last chain
could sing while it murdered the first.

MARY KANE

13 Haiku About My Husband and Current State of Happiness

he has a lizard
in his mouth it flicks it flicks
seismic me he sends

i understand how
to conduct a proper love affair
on paper

medium pasta shells garlic cheese broccoli saturday dinner

i caught my husband
pretending to be a fly
buzzing around shit

i love my husband's
pajama bottoms i en-
vision his demise

wounded prehistoric beasts whine or
a husband practices trumpet

hot tea milk and honey hot tea milk and honey hot tea milk and hon

i did not paint you
while i dreamt about albert
goldbarth i did not

happy all day i have been leaping off of fat margins into
space

MARY KANE

scream into snowbanks you get
fogged glasses also great views of nothing

he smokes smells lets out
noxious fumes from his butt hole
wrinkled by much use

i caught my husband again buzzing near the trash in his underwear

he has a good face
i love him even as i
buy life insurance

MARY KANE

Woman Carrying Rock No. 1: Poem in a Changing Booth

Noon. Monday. Woman carrying rock. Why does she remove the beach?

If I can make it home without my back giving
I'll set it in the center, braided rug
or lazy susan. Let my thoughts spoke out
from there.

Large rocks, like dreams, are convenient. I have experienced troublesome love relations and gotten the strenuous ocean swim out of my system, visited the hummingbird house composed entirely of engaged voices, inhaled enough of Neruda's physicality, and woken up in flannel sheets, breasts as diminished as the day before, knowing I have all I need. Similarly, when I lifted this rock, I recalled Ellen's face regarding the sculpture of Jesus, skin puffed around his wounds, all her doors shaken open. In both instances, a slumbering bear rumbles.

Excuse me, I have grief all over my knees.

The woman carrying the rock is paying homage to her dead friend's acts of relinquishment. When she is finished rinsing it with her love, she will heave the rock back into the ocean.

When investigating the relationship between snow and heart it is best to build a room since within the architecture of feeling or the lack thereof measurable dimension is essential. If the ceilings are too low, thought shrinks in direct proportion to the limits of angle of light through windows. A rock is useful for purposes of going back.

The woman and the rock record time differently.

MARY KANE

Spiritual longing is also an expression of appetite though it is rarely depicted as wolf. Ellen reaches middle age with its accompanying linens and automobiles, craves encounters with the wolf, loses herself intentionally in whatever dark forests she can muster. She confuses desire, dangerous fur and animal breath, with prayer. When words fly to her, a blue door opens, a feeling like twilight. Encounters are made safer by the presence of a large rock.

Perhaps I'll pin down these piles of poems.

Now where was that window.

ANZHELINA POLONSKAYA

Мы идём

Не видно. Мы идём, разнявши руки,
как старики – ни жалости, ни ласки.
В одном пути уставши друг от друга,
уставившись в синеющую вязкость

декабрьских вечеров. Не замерзают реки,
и купола, как головы на шпагах,
воде и отражению не верят.
Ты слеп ко мне, как статуи богинь в садах и парках.

Луны бело, обнажено колено.
Теснее жмутся гречневые избы.
Звёзд сыплют драгоценные камни –
ты мне не кровь, не плоть, не избранный,

ты мне не то же, что кораблекрушеньё
приносит к берегу мой миф клоком изодранным.
Ты не слеза, не ось, не женщина,
что родила меня, не ода мне.

Но мы идём, как ходят все – попарно,
разнявши руки, разомкнувши звенья.
Я – дней атласных наших память.
Я – ожидание звонка в твоей передней.

ANZHELINA POLONSKAYA

We Go

Nothing to be seen. We walk, hands at our sides,
like old folks—no pity, and no tenderness.
We go together, tired of each other,
mired in the blueing murk

of December evenings. The rivers won't freeze
and the domes, like heads on pikes,
believe neither in the water nor in their reflections.
You're blind to me, like the statue of a goddess in the park.

The white of the moon's a naked knee.
The buckwheat houses huddle tight.
The precious stones of stars scatter—
you're neither blood, nor flesh, nor chosen one,

you're not my myth thrown by a shipwreck
on shore like a torn rag.
You're neither tear, nor core, nor the woman
who bore me, nor my resting place.

But on we go, as others go—together,
hands at our sides, separate links.
I am the memory of our satin days.
I am the expectation of a knock on your door.

translated from the Russian by Andrew Baruch Wachtel

ROBERT CHUTE

Aristophanes at the Woodpile

The wind-fall Maple yields
a dozen stove wood lengths,
pale gray cylinders whose
dull exteriors belie
sweet white wood inside.
Each free rolling piece upended
shows a brown bull'seye.

Zeus wields his axe. Split
by well-aimed blows, the right,
the left halves fall away,
each with its streak of broken
heart wood. Each no longer may
roll free but lies where chance
left it in the crisscross piles.

Each half stacked neatly but alone.
For each the other's lost among
similar, indifferent sticks,
each with its emptiness,
helpless—unless chance matches
their desire and Eros
joins them in a single fire.

BRIAN TEARE
To Other Light

*Of persons outside Windows—
The Entering—takes away—
—E.D.*

At the end of mourning : a bookstore
where you begin to read your own life as a story
without plot or drama, self a sky pale with drought

and time passing like that : cloudless, ground
a wide flat span without shadow, sun
occluding the garden in a bright stun of months. . . .

After mourning : the scour of hours
at work on the mind. Not what comes clean,
not the enigma of mourning, nor the enigma

of his beauty, its diminishing finish : not to suffer
more, but finally to suffer a clarity in language sufficient

to pain : not in itself the world : the thought of it.

i. Used books & records : *Mourning and Melancholia*

Lining the storefront, two plate glass windows,
enormous. As if upon a screen, what occurred outside
a quotation, a version : not quite experience. As if

the real had happened once in the past—
the wind a repetition without sound;
trash in the gutters; the clothes of passersby;

the word “passersby” only something thought
while watching. Strange to leave the store
after closing. Looked at from the street,

through glass : the life of the interior
a descent of light into lateral shadow : your life
removed from consequence until it darkened.

ii. Used books & records: *The Lives of the Saints*

The boredom of being made an example :
saints, their bodies, offered blade or flame :

exemplary. A rhetoric of hallowing, harrowing
unto death, pages of gilt haloes flaking,
what should've been grotesque, gorgeous :

pierced/hacked/gored with sores : all poreless
artifice. Porcelain : the bloodied/breastless/flood-lunged

skin : an effigy of skin : though he too wasted
suffocated/sarcomaed/thrush-tongued/blinded

in one eye/as if all the world's affliction
his : *no saint*, he said, *no exit to heaven* : still

no grimace without God in it.

iii. Elegiac action : to meditate

To follow in thought
the beloved into death?

To stop. At panic?
At limit? After words.

Un, non, null, knowledge
of death, late spring gone

beyond missing : a mind
to push through image?

Flawed, to attempt
the visible. Not one man ever

dead into sight. The mind
intended toward this, his

shape : how strange,
to proceed without vision.

iv. Used books & records: *The Gnostic Religion*

A summer totally allegory : brownouts, drought,
energy fraud, water rationing.
Customers startled by the back room—

lined to the ceiling with shelves—
suddenly lightless. Then : crappy flashlights
dimly drifting aisle to aisle.

The story the Gnostics told?
The “soul” : in the material dark : just light
to other light. If the ideal soul is

indeed wisdom. If nothing more
than the lit pittance given,
flickering. What knowledge they,

desiring. What rumors to be Truth.

v. Elegiac action : to wait

The mock orange : failed blossoms, a weakly fetid smell.

April : jasmine by the back door; nasturtiums turning
in wind. Wilt, wither, and burn, June, and none of it
metaphor. Fourth month without rain, August : awful
powdery texture drought lends everything.

Heat's immense lens : to suffer summer
like that. To pretend to find it meaningful.

vi. Used books & records : *The Nag Hammadi Library*

A theological vision :
seeing through lack to what lies behind it,

in gaps of gospel as beyond glass :
summer trees leaning
true : behind the world :

his words, some sweet semblance of himself?

Or what the Gnostics said? : a veil
between wisdom and the world.
And no voice saying.

vii. Elegiac action : to eclipse

Drought : to seem dead
especially. September :

the tongue a loan of dust;
candlelight more true;

the shadow in matter
more evident; being

a darkness forced upon us.
The primary text : doubt

or death? To candle
the shadowed moon;

to tinge and flicker
there hugely? Or

to camera?, as in
September : aperture

and hinge and seeming
swinging shut.

viii. Used books & records : *Writing the Disaster*

In the deep meanwhile
of your life, what was wordless, what passed as fact :
late summer outside the windows :

dim doors struggling shut; wind
an umbrella open against dull sun;
to keep them clean, all the small dogs in sweaters;

all the theories of the real :
a ruin somehow intact. Meanwhile
light might or might

not have; the door; its metal bell.
Meanwhile : the spectacular disaster
of the actual.

ix. Elegiac action : to fuck

Yes, the world
there : mattress

on the floor,
candle in a dish,

his thighs whiter
for their dark hair :

a surfeit, that surface :
his glasses, water glass,

shoes ordered
by the door.

One thing : how
lyric lets memory

BRIAN TEARE

into the present—
his khaki pants

twisted in sheets
like *that*—

another,
where elegy leads.

The world : never.
Never his hands

forcing your back
to follow its own

arc; muscle looser
under thrust;

his cock rocking
like tide caught

in a lock and
rising for passage—

coupled : as light
to light, so

the touched
to the touching. . . .

x. Used books & records : *I and Thou*

Sensation of time passing
without him : moth wings' gray powder
on the fingers, regret

the understudy of capture, its dun
brief stain. . . .

And summer nigh to autumn
only early dimming sun
posed just so above brick

and verdigris; awnings furled
and green hoses unrolling slo-mo; sting
of bleach bringing tears; the clean tile floor;

just before closing, a man's face leaning
into the darkening window as if squinting to see

or speak :

xi. Used books & records : *Elegiac action : to listen*

"When I was your age
I thought about death

constantly New York
I had just moved I lived alone

My job was difficult

and I would sleep on the subway
to and from work Sometimes

I would miss my stop

and wake up as if in the middle
of a dream somewhere I had no

BRIAN TEARE

name for I thought about death
the way people do at your age

sleeping on the subway so often

I dreamt about it Harsh light
cars rocking the dim

anonymous crush of people

A year of this alone So I read
books like the one you're reading now

thinking on the subway home

I was not am not
a religious person

I was visited by a vision

All noise ceased and though
the car continued to sway

we did not stop It occurred

I was not inside
my body could not feel

though I knew things
the way one does in dreams

It was no dream Across

from where my body
sat a woman slowly

flickered her handbag
her flats expressionless

when she disappeared

I knew she had died

BRIAN TEARE

and the same thing
would happen to each passenger

and the car would keep going

Its back-and-forth
like a cradle

is what time feels like

No one was alarmed

It was quiet
and pleasantly warm

I was not surprised
when my own body

began to flicker

I was not surprised

I was not

there”

TONY BRINKLEY
from *Gomorra*, a sequence

15

Gomorra like a crystal seed accumulates
its facets, its vanishing assumptions,

coaxed out of hiding. Angling mazes—waiting
for rain through the sun's window—fraying

strings, the sounds of a nerve in root—
returning our faces to water. Like widows,

three angels fish through the faces,
vaporizing colors, hiding in the light.

Submerged, Gomorra, offering its blessings,
welcomes the strangers who never arrive.

16

The softness is a sign they are alive,
implausibly, a reflex, less than nothing,
negative perhaps, beneath the sediments

of deadness, apprehended as about to be
on fire, vague because not yet. . . .
To enumerate by threes—three angels,

gleaners, strangers pausing on the route
to their destruction. Only two arrive
to find us waiting at the destination.

And two cities, one arrived at, one
collateral—submerged without a word—
a dove the Elbe turns to salt. When

you grew up in the residue
of flames, did you know you
were Gomorrah, that the lindens

were Gomorrah, that the North Sea
was the Dead Sea? Co-factor the rivers.
Rationalize the fire. Water is water.

Air, air. Rise in desolation. Texture
the water. Gomorrah is a wave
about to name its offering.

MARION K. STOCKING

BOOKS IN BRIEF: Play for Mortal Stakes

The Best American Poetry 2005 is here, guest-edited this year by Irish poet, now at Princeton, **Paul Muldoon** (New York: Scribner Poetry, 2005, 208 pp, \$30 hardbound, \$16 paper). I always turn first to series editor **David Lehman**'s foreword, where he assesses the state of poetry in this our time and place. After noting the flowering of poetry in the media, online, and in anthologies, he turns to an evaluation of changes in *Poetry*, as it evolves under the weight of the \$100 million-plus Lilly bequest. He worries, as do I, at the expansion of the prose pages, now over half the magazine, with special features that appear to invite people, in Lehman's words, "to go public with their peeves" and the encouragement of letters to the editor, often "expressed with all the sensitivity and thoughtfulness of a midnight blogger." Lehman thoughtfully and sensitively evaluates the latest in these "poetry wars," *Poetry*'s invitation for contrasting reviews of Garrison Keillor's anthology *Good Poems*: an appreciative appraisal by Dana Gioia followed by August Kleinzahler's vitriolic ad hominem attack on Keillor for his "execrable" *Writer's Almanac* on National Public Radio. "Bad art is worse than no art at all," Kleinzahler explodes, and goes on (jokingly, but all the same—) to proclaim that poetry not only "isn't *good* for you, *bad* poetry has been shown to cause lymphomas and, in extreme instances, pancreatic cancer." What is the function of art? "Its exclusive function," Kleinzahler asserts in *Poetry*, "is to entertain, not to improve or nourish or console, simply to entertain." Lehman considers that such arguments "tend by their nature to be defeatist and somewhat self-fulfilling," concluding slyly that "it may turn out that the enlargement of poetry's community of readers depends on a toleration not of bad poems but of other people's idea of what constitutes a good poem."

In editing this series, now in its nineteenth year, David Lehman has contributed significantly not only to expanding the community of readers but also to enlarging our ideas of what makes a good poem.

It is, therefore, with keen anticipation that I turn to Paul Muldoon's introduction, in which he expresses no patience with dreary discussions of "Us and Them, Cooked and Raw, Languish and L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E" but celebrates the variousness of American poetry today. In this year's harvest he notices great sex

poems as well as poems concerned with “the dailiness of life,” with loss, and with implied social content.

■ After having worked hard on learning to read many of the poems in Lyn Hejinian’s *Best of 2004*, then on the challenge of reviewing four thousand years of poetry in translation, I relaxed into Muldoon’s collection anticipating a holiday. Knowing his own poetry, I expected a ludic spirit. He did not let me down. Sometimes it erupts in the play of the imagination, as in Matthew Yeager’s “A Big Ball of Foil in a Small New York Apartment,” the ball accumulating to fill the available space. Yeager in his note calls it an oral poem, “most enjoyable when sounded aloud, at a good clip, pausing at the ends of the lines. Then you get the momentum.” Then there’s James Richardson’s “All the Ghosts,” imagining the science by which ghosts catch up with us, finding that “among death’s consolations, few enough, / the greatest is, to be mistaken for what happens.” I also enjoy Richard Garcia’s “Adam and Eve’s Dog” and Donald Justice’s wickedly playful “A Chapter in the Life of Mr. Kehoe, Fisherman.” Add a pair in which the poets invent games in which they get to create multiple personalities and careers for themselves: Stacey Harwood’s eight invented “Contributors’ Notes” (“Ever since foiling a hijacking attempt during a transatlantic flight, STACEY HARWOOD has been a motivational speaker”) followed by Terrance Hayes’s “Variations on Two Black Cinema Treasures,” in which Hayes imagines for himself roles in two classic films. (His note asks: “Are the two pairs in dialogue? Does their juxtaposition create a clean singular meaning for the poem? No . . . I mean, yes, but who am I to tell you how to read?”)

Some of these poems are themselves simply games. Play Maura Stanton’s “Twenty Questions” in a sonnet beginning

Who wrote *Heart of Darkness*? And what’s the name
Of Dale Evans’s horse? Why did thieves steal
Charlie Chaplin’s corpse? Can you explain
Hieroglyphics in shells? How do you feel?

(If I read the hints, the person addressed is about to “fwow up.”)

Catherine Bowman’s “I Want to Be Your Shoebox” (based on a misprint in a song transcription) romps on for fifty-four lines

such as “I want to be your paradox / I want to be your pair of socks / I want to be your paradise // I want to be your pack of lies.” Every publicist and reviewer I’ve seen quotes the first stanza of James Cummins’s “The Poets March on Washington,” the first of three identical-appearing stanzas:

What do we want?
 Immortality!
 When do we want it?
 Now!

A close look at this very playful poem reveals two tiny omissions in the final stanza, doubling the fun of the game. (No. I’m not going to tell you.)

Language play is another delight in Muldoon’s selection, as in Clayton Eshleman’s “The Magical Sadness of Omar Cáceres”: “I’m a whittled id” and “I am neither aft nor fore, for hereafter, / nor ever to be aforementioned again.” But Heather McHugh is the ludic linguistic queen in her “Ill-Made Almighty,” where one word’s sound suggests the next word’s sense and nearly every word strikes in more than one direction. The more I played with this poem the more I came to enjoy it, both on the twitchy surface and (if I read it right) in the plight of a God beset by those rapture-positive pious who “don’t know nows [*nous*?] as you do.”



In reaction to the dominance of the first person in recent American verse, Ron Offen scheduled a whole issue (#33) of his *Free Verse* for poems with no vertical pronouns. I did a quick count of Muldoon’s selections and found that about two-thirds of them, from Charles Bukowski’s “The Beats” to Charles Wright’s “A Short History of My Life,” either speak through the persona of the poet or appear to be writing unmasked autobiography (Lyn Hejinian, Mary Karr, Susan Wheeler, Cecilia Woloch). I could spend a whole review on the taxonomy of this species, but I’ll just ask you, when you acquire this delightful volume, not to miss A. R. Ammons’s profoundly moving “In View of the Fact,” Linda Pastan’s “Death Is Intended,” Mary Karr’s “A Blessing from My Sixteen Years’ Son,” Beth Ann Fennelly’s “I Need to Be More French. Or Japanese,” and Gary Snyder’s “Waiting for a Ride.” The genre may be under attack, but it still

thrives.

Beyond the poems I have room to mention here are character sketches, ekphrastic poems (mostly on film), sex poems, poems of wit, of reportage, of intimate fiction. Here too prose poems, *ars poeticas*, neat little lyrics, two abecedarians, one perfect pantoum, and many poems of engaging colloquial immediacy. If you believe with August Kleinzahler that the sole function of art is to provide pleasure, prepare to luxuriate here.

And perhaps this is the place to say that I have fretted in past reviews about poems that eluded me completely until I read the poet's note in the appendix. Only rarely in this edition did I find such notes essential. After reading the note to Charles Simic's "Sunlight" I could only quote him in the poem: "If you did say something, I'm none the wiser." Jason Schneiderman's "Moscow" is totally incomprehensible without the note. Some notes pleasantly satisfy my curiosity about the background of the poem, but several allow the poet to ramble on into a self-indulgent essay that another editor might have abbreviated.

■

In his concern for social context, Muldoon reads a response to 9/11 and the "body count from the Iraq war" into more of these poems that I do. Kay Ryan's note to her vividly imagined "Home to Roost" explains that she wrote it before 9/11 as an image of "how your choices can gang up, turn around, and go bad on you" and was horrified at how 9/11 "robbed" her of her poem. She is mistaken, I think, in hoping that by now no one would make that connection. Her image is so vivid, her renewal of the cliché so skillful, her conception so universal, that this little poem will properly continue to haunt our larger landscape.

Broader than the social and political context is the philosophical foundation of most of the poems Muldoon has selected. I could give at least a paragraph to these rubrics: disjunction (Wilbur, Hejinian), ambiguity (Harley), and dislocation (Rich, Hacker). I find an almost universal absence of absolutes. Linda Pastan and Edward Field (in his engaging "In Praise of My Prostate") are delighted to live in the present. But Time's winged chariot rumbles in the wings, and I sense in many of these

poems an extrapolation from the disorder of our day to the darkness of the unknown.

■ Two poems in this collection stand out from the rest for the scope of their vision as well as for their prosodic virtuosity. Most of Muldoon's choices are accessible on first reading, but Adrienne Rich's "Dislocations: Seven Scenarios" and Marilyn Hacker's "For Kateb Yacine (Algerian playwright, novelist, poet, and activist, 1929–89)" demand and reward the closest attention. Rich describes her works as counterpoising "various displacements/disjunctures, of place and time, individual and collective, details from a larger fresco, or, perhaps, frames from a longer film." In the first section she describes the "useless anger" of an individual displaced from a rural home to the city; by the seventh section it expands to suggest deeper psychic displacements. In section three the poet (outraged almost to cynicism) attacks the "infection" that "sucks at the marrow of selves,"

defeating
the nurse's long knowledge of wounds
the rabbi's scroll of ethics
the young worker's defiance

Rich concludes bitterly: "only the solipsist seems intact / in her prewar building." Section four begins:

For recalcitrancy of attitude
the surgeon is transferred
to the V.A. hospital where poverty
is the administrator
of necessity and her
orders don't necessarily
get obeyed

The initial shift in diction, the slippery lineation, and the angry irony in the following rhymes (*obeyed, paying, patients*) eloquently imply the reverse of all the destabilizing, dehumanizing forces abroad on the globe. This poem is a masterwork, where the inventive, eloquent prosody informs the indignant protest.

Formally, Marilyn Hacker's "For Kateb Yacine" contrasts with Rich's inventive versification. It is a crown of seven sonnets, each taking as its first line a version of the last line of its antecedent. The rhyme scheme and line length sometimes vary to

special effect. The first sonnet, for instance, follows two *abba*'s with a *cddc*, and circles back to an *ab* couplet, elegantly defining the burden of the sonnet. On first reading of this complex poem I was drowned in the orchestration. Here's the sestet of the first sonnet. Listen to how iambic pentameter has evolved for our time:

A gender and a nationality
 implicit in the ululation rise
 from a long throat to claim or compromise
 privilege; responsibility
 in texture, in that wound of sound, that vexed
 surface, which could detonate, could drop.

It was only when I had luxuriated in the quality of the composition that I could go back and trace the steely intellectual structure of this poem, "have time / for rhetoric as logical as rhyme," a rhetoric constructed of a reticulation of image and paradigm. Hacker conjures up a meeting of exiles from various conflicts, "the gaunt Algerian / asynchronous, among them." She longs to be there, to share their response to dance, to music, and to our violent history. "There were the exile's words in Arabic / anathematizing any deity / if slaughter is sanctified in its name." By the end of the poem the rhetoric is clear, pressed out—expressed—by its versification.

Moved by the exquisite elegance of Hacker's handling of her form and grateful for her articulation of a message I profoundly share, I wanted this to be one of the unquestionably best poems not only of this year but also for our century. The ending, I'm sorry to admit, let me down. I'd have liked the passage in sonnet six beginning "We all had pseudonyms" to have been one unit with the initial lines of the closing sonnet. What is now the beginning of sonnet six might then introduce the final lines:

Yes, war will come and we will demonstrate;
 war will come and reams of contraband
 reportage posted on the Internet
 will flesh out censored stories, secondhand.
 Tire-treads lumbering towards its already-fixed
 moment jump the interval: this war, the next.

I appreciate the prophetic note (though it was already clear enough in the "premonitory pillar" of smoke rising from the ranch in Texas). I appreciate the switch to the long alexandrine

lines in the concluding couplet. I can at least justify the dramatic dissonance of that couplet, following the colloquial regularity of the preceding lines. Still, I crave for our moment in history an image equivalent to Yeats's memorable "rough beast, its hour come round at last, / slouch[ing] towards Bethlehem to be born." By using *towards* Hacker makes the allusion unavoidable. And perhaps Yeats's "The Second Coming," written just after the Balfour declaration calling for the partition of Palestine, may stand as the prophecy of our terrible time. Marilyn Hacker's poem moves through the hard-won wisdom of her assembled exiles to a broader protest, one Yeats would probably not have espoused, against the terrible human cost of all the wars of our dark days.

Without these strong poems and a few others this *Best* might have given historians of the future an impression of our point in time as a playful era, sexy, confused but amiable, with poets talented but self-absorbed. These poems by Rich and Hacker, fortunately, indicate that we have among our American poets some who merit consideration with the strongest poets of the rest of the world, poets struggling to find language to diagnose the infections that assail us.