

# THE BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL

Volume 4 - Number 1    Chapbook No. 2

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## INTRODUCTORY NOTE

This Chapbook is the result of a deceptively simple request. These poets were asked to fill twelve pages of space for us. Instructions were minimal: **they** were to make the selections both from their unpublished and, contrary to the usual policy of the magazine, their published works. Then they were to evaluate their choice.

The results make up this issue of the **Journal**. Its implications, we feel, are interesting.

Three poets (all of them technically "conservative") present three radically different approaches to their work. Three poets (all of them tremendously interested in their relationship with the creative process) hold serious reservations about their relationship with the critical process as it applies to their own work. Three poets (all of them sure of their work) hesitate about their selections.

The reader must draw his own conclusions from this strange (but common) series of seeming paradoxes. We present the material only as further evidence of the restless and provocative workings of the poetic mind.

**The Editors**

## "ONLY MEANING IS TRULY INTERESTING. . ."

**I** move in this brief poetics from the periphery to the center. First is the matter of poetic organization. Each poem develops in a tension between an abstract "meaning" and its living details. The problem of structure, of architecture, is the problem of reconciling these two into a poem. If this is done successfully, the various details emerge from the process properly subordinated and informed with the meaning of the whole.

Structure in another sense includes considerations of stanza, rhyme, meter, etc. Some such formal constant is needed to set limits on otherwise unmanageable problems of composition, but a slavish obedience to them can be as deadly as the diffuseness attendant upon their neglect.

These are not new notions, by any means. They now receive, however, less attention than they deserve. At least the problems of structure and meaning appear to be less successfully handled by modern poets than the problems of achieving specific effects in individual lines and images. Sometimes the meaning is even thought of as a peg on which to hang the poetry—the dry and ironic on the one hand, or the free and magical on the other—that impressive language of modern verse.

But when the beauty of a poem is chiefly dependent on the separate effects of its parts, then odd language and startling imagery tend to become ends in themselves. Instead of thinking of language as expressive of meaning, poets search for language that is novel, or shocking. But only meaning is truly interesting; and this explains why the so-called experimental schools are the most boring and imitative of all. Concern with the brilliance of discrete parts, without a deeper concern for the structure and meaning of the poem as a whole, is likely to produce verse that possesses only a verbal cleverness.

There is another danger, too, illustrated by all but the best of modern poems. That is that the poems, by oc-

cupying themselves with their discrete effects, lose real connection with nature itself. The reader's interest is fixed at the verbal level, on how a thing is said, and seldom seriously on the thing itself. Socrates remarked: "Don't imagine that we ought to paint the eyes so beautiful that they don't look like eyes at all, or paint any of the other limbs in that manner. You must consider if, by giving each part its proper colour, we make the whole beautiful." For the very effort to beautify a single description can remove the reader another degree from the thing described. The poem is then more an imitation of language than of nature.

There is nothing wrong with not imitating nature except that language does not serve another use. Words are signs, and to take lightly their significance is simply to abuse language. Signs are meaningful as they refer to something else.

This is my second remark about my own poems. In varying degrees they all rely for their effect on the action or idea which they describe, rather than on the descriptive language itself. Of the poems included here, "Spring Oak" is perhaps the simplest illustration. Reading it should be like opening a window on the thing it is talking about. It is written in a style that is almost the absence of style, a bare rendering of a symbolic action. The meaning and interest of this action are merely discovered by the language, not created by it. "Spring Oak" is moving, if it is, only because it describes clearly an event that itself is moving.

The degree of transparency proper to a poem depends on the kind of poem. Subtle, nervous, or complicated things require a corresponding surface. For instance there are more verbal effects in "Trial for Fire" and "In the Glade at Dusk" than in the others. The danger is that the language will act as a blotter rather than as a glass, and absorb the poem into its own flat surface. The effort, therefore, is to write as transparently as the subject permits.

So I have made two remarks about my poems. First,

that they organize each part according to its "proper color" for the sake of the meaning of the whole poem, and second, that the language, like a window, merely opens on the action or idea in which the meaning of the poem resides.

But there is no need to organize a poem strictly around a meaning unless the meaning is important, more than a "peg." And unless this meaning does really reside in ideas or actions it is pointless, even folly, to refine the style "out of existence," or to decline the temptation toward superficial verbal effects. So that behind these two remarks is a belief of another order, style in the sense of human attitude toward personality and nature: a belief in the meaningfulness of human actions and insights, and a native trust in the meaningfulness of natural things and natural events. The conviction that such meanings are moving and important prompts those two more literary principles and limits my application of them.

But the meaning of the poem does not reside in unselected nature. Poetry is a special organization. The process of organizing a poem, which I said at the outset was peripheral, is also at the center. For the meaning of the poem, though it may be dimly predicted, emerges only in the creative act. The organizing principle comes into full being simultaneously with its embodying detail. In the successful process there is a unifying light, a single vision of meaning, what might be called its tragic illumination. In the mysteries of life as well as of poetry there are these moments of enlightenment, of knowledge. All my poetics follows from the fact that such moments are to me of dear importance, for it is only natural, feeling deeply about them, to recreate them directly and sincerely, even reverently.

All but one of the poems here belong to a group centering around the life of a midwestern boy. If they are ever put into book form they are to be called **Dust of the Earth**. The poem, "Trial for Fire," is included mainly to show that I also write of other things.

**Galway Kinnell**

SEVEN POEMS  
BY GALWAY KINNELL

**SPRING OAK**

Above the quiet valley and unrippled lake  
While woodchucks burrowed new holes, and birds sang,  
And radicles began downward and shoots  
Committed themselves to the spring  
And entered with tiny industrious earthquakes,  
A dry-rooted, winter-twisted oak  
Revealed itself slowly. And one morning  
When the valley underneath was still sleeping  
It shook itself and it was all green.

**TRIAL FOR FIRE**

On the Chicago River the city's firemen  
Try their skill on the new equipment:—  
A red boat, with green doors, with shining  
Nozzles firing fountains of  
Chicago River at the drifting sky,  
Arrests the hearts of the hurriers-by.  
Perhaps it is 1812 they remember,  
When, in warm August, just here  
(It is mapped on the sidewalk)  
The Dearborn stockade sank to its knees,

Or hot 1871

When blisters and shavings were the town.

On the deck are the two races: blacks

And whites mingled together,

Splitting the boat. I think our first

Chicago dweller, Point Sable, was divided too,

Stoked from a black womb by a white sire.

(Not even skin-deep, the melting-pot years.)

Last week I watched while a color line broke:

On a South Side street, negroes and whites

Crossed brick-handed into pastry skulls,

Fists, knives, bottles, and the eardrums

Battered by mother-fouling mutters and screams.

Nor could the blood mix in the neon flames.

(Most of all I remember that boy, that

Savage afterwards heaped in the mothering

Arms of his black girl. . .What hate or remorse!)

We have rebuilt our city—swank, swag,

Industries, towers—but we secure its roots

In infested alleys, our ancestral streets.

Look from the bridge: from vertical nozzles

The bewildered river's black water

Goes towering up, a straight white gust

Away in the blue; and here on the site

Of madness and massacre, we are touched and admire

Those who shall protect it from all fire.

They are charged with this crazy mother—

To hold in her ghettos and towers, her sprawling shell,

The yolk of her millions, the brave and loved,

The tenement-haunted, the poor who ask alms

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And get pity, the unpitied rich, those lying afraid  
Behind double-locks or awake in luxurious beds.

The trial ends, and we hurry home, as the streets  
Darken. Around a policeman's feet on the giant boulevard  
In slow tumbles the discarded crimesheets  
Skid from the past, and down low sputters  
Neon. The skies darken, close down, and from a tower  
A searchlight is a simple beacon lifted in the air.

## EMIGRANTS

We followed the sun into sunset.

The swaying line of wagons resolved itself  
To a circle as dusk darkened the white sails.  
Campfires broke out, mere punk on the prairie.  
The hard, solemn wind blew eastward, omen  
To its breasters of the natural tide.

The wagon-circle ringed one wagon, as though  
That one were the ark-bearer; candlelight  
Fleshed its canvas skin. Nearby a banjo  
And voice contrived a meagre consolation,  
A thin song which the wind whisked off, back to  
Kentucky cabins and lost seaboard towns,  
The song-haunted cradles of the western search.

The coals crumbled and died. Like a loaf of light  
Stood the centered wagon, yeasting with life  
As the darkness deepened.

Then out of darkness  
It came, a spasm of sound, the Snake's cold cry—  
Too late we learned of the horse unhobbled  
And stolen,—too soon discovered the throat  
Of the late singer pouring from his heart  
A steady swan-song to the crimson turf.

The wind flared up and moaned in the wheels,  
And flapped canvas. And in the confused hour  
As the tide stiffened against our voyage,  
And men shouted, from the lighted wagon  
The first faint crying of a child was sweet.

At dawn the wagons swayed into single file,  
The human count unchanged. The wind would veer  
Or not, we hardly cared. For the god sun  
Above our wandering sailed surely west.

## FIRST SONG

Then it was dusk in Illinois, the small boy  
After an afternoon of carting dung  
Hung on the rail fence, a sapped thing  
Weary to crying. Dark was growing tall  
And he began to hear the pond frogs all  
Calling upon his ear with what seemed their joy.

Soon their sound was pleasant for a boy  
Listening in the smoky dusk and the nightfall  
Of Illinois, and then from the field two small

Boys came bearing cornstalk violins  
And rubbed three cornstalk bows with resins,  
And they set fiddling with them as with joy.

It was now fine music the frogs and the boys  
Did in the towering Illinois twilight make  
And into dark in spite of a right arm's ache  
A boy's hunched body loved out of a stalk  
The first song of his happiness, and the song woke  
His heart to the darkness and into the sadness of joy.

### IN THE GLADE AT DUSK

I entered the pine wood where a thousand wings  
On the needled branches birred like days  
In the hive of the past, and came to a place  
Of strange quiet, glade where the grave light  
Issued on the stumps and the twining grass.

The stump was still scarred and the earth  
At the base was black, as if the ritual  
Were destined to outlast, like song or flame,  
The natural life, seasons that sink singing  
Into blazing years, where rite-makers lose their name.

Once a little pack of them lashed every boy  
To the stump, so that his toes hung  
In the developing fire, and cut him down  
When the screams came; then unshod the sufferer,  
Who wore on his feet the blisters of a man.

And one boy was hanging on a windy day, wind  
Sharpening flame, and the flame  
Biting deep in flesh, and in his throat a rush  
Of screaming blotted himself from the world,  
And experience covered innocence like an ash.

Now the grass was flickering through the black  
Earth, the ceremonious motion—  
But a thrush perched on the stump's peak  
Dumb as if he had no sense—  
I set his cold feet packing with a rock.

Yet the spirit of the wood remained  
And I stayed obedient—heard in the trees  
The days begin, and in the grave  
Light leaned my body waiting—for what,  
If not a flame to make me brave?

And the days of the suffered flame  
Forsook me, and the days to be suffered  
Ringed me around, as the sun laid its flame  
On the pines and wind raged in the teeth  
Of days the flaming day would consume.

For the glade was burning between earth and sky,  
And where the birds build nests they brood at evening  
On burning limbs. O spirit of the wood, O dream  
Of all who shall suffer in the glade at dusk—  
And grass, grass, blossom through my feet like flame.

## AN EVENING WALK

A butterfly tempted a dog up the hill.  
The boy followed after, past the dung  
Crumpled, the buggy fallen, the dinner-whetted hog  
Grumbling like a human at knots in the garbage;  
And there in the light of a yellow sun setting  
The waterwheel cycling by the worn-out mill.

And where the land was hollowed as a nest  
He had made welcomes to the mice and crickets,  
Vagrant animals, chose of all rivers  
Hickory Creek, befriended its beavers;  
Here where the sapling tree had wound its roots,  
Though always a train crying on its journey west.

Now cry again, and the meadowlark rode  
Replying from the gloomy field where was its nest.  
Day on a dwindling train was a small bright rose  
That swung behind. A flock of hobo crows  
Fastened on the last wheel and revolved west.  
The cry hung his heart on the crossroad.

But silence held him. The bee had withdrawn  
The last sweet drops and the sun disappeared.  
He turned, and all below the night's hand  
Touched already the accepting land.  
Slowly he walked back, Hickory Creek murmured,  
And a dog wagged up to him dancing for a bone.

**WESTPORT**

We dismounted and rested in the grass  
The horses stood nearby and cropped the flowers.  
The sapling maples blossomed a deep red  
And Indian apple flowered around us.  
Still on the ground the amaranth was swaying.  
The dear forest would not buoy our feet again.

From a bare hilltop we could overlook  
In all spring's directions beautiful  
The changes on the world. Behind us stretched  
The woods, that half a continent ago  
Met our fathers on the Atlantic shore.  
Before us lay the narrow belt of brush.  
And there beyond, shifting like an ocean,  
Swell after swell of emerald green, the  
Prairies of the west were blowing.

We called  
And mounted the horses, and set out,  
Small craft into an endless green. The grass  
Brushed the bellies of the horses, and under  
The hoofs the knotted centuries of sod  
Slowed the journey. Here and there the grey  
Back of a wolf breached and fell, as in the grass  
Their awkward voyages appeared and vanished.  
Of the days ahead they were part and promise.  
Then rain lashed down, a sudden storm. The whole  
Afternoon it blew us west. "It will be  
A long hard journey," the boy said, "And look,  
We are driven like weed." And indeed we were. . . .  
(O wild indigo, O love-lies-bleeding—

