

# THE BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL

Volume 35 - Number 4

Summer 1985

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Cover: Robert Shetterly Jr., *Day Lilies*, ink drawing, 1981, from the Stocking family collection.

NOTICE: We are pleased to announce that our next issue, Fall 1985, will be Chapbook Number 18, a sequence of four story poems about detective Chuck Wade. This 72-page special issue, entitled *Wade's Wait*, is by Jonathan Aldrich. It will come as part of every regular subscription.

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### SNAKES DO IT

I've always wanted to know how snakes do it.  
Make love, you know.  
I mean, they seem all of a piece.  
It's hard to imagine a protrusion or a hole.  
I asked a vet from the zoo. He didn't seem to know,  
just said, "they do it, don't worry,"  
in a smart-ass, knowing way, as if to show  
he was superior to my question.  
I asked another vet, this one does research  
on animal reproduction at a major New York hospital,  
and he didn't seem to know either,  
just muttered something about a cloaca.  
I looked that up in the dictionary:  
"The common chamber into which the intestinal,  
urinary and generative canals discharge."  
Also a word for sewer.  
He seemed to think that would satisfy me.  
It didn't, of course. I was longing  
to imagine the scene. Two snakes, you know.  
Then while I was reading Cosmo at the gynecologist's  
I came upon a fascinating article on love  
in the animal world. Not only, it said,  
not only does the male snake have a penis,  
he has two penises. It seems one's a spare,  
in case he loses one, or goes over a pothole, or something.  
No wonder those guys didn't want to talk about it.

Anne-Marie Levine

## SPEECH PROBLEMS

*Then shall the tongue of the dumb sing: for  
in the wilderness shall water break out.*

Isaiah

## I

I hurry my son through the black and blue  
racket of crow calling to crow,  
caws pelting sharp as rain  
drops. Hand in hand, we pass  
the tall spruce, and  
are swallowed into the school.  
The doors croak behind us —  
escape now would be useless.  
High windows at each landing  
on the stairs face the shrinking  
spiral of the spruce. We  
Seem to be climbing the tree.  
When we've reached the top, a room  
where chairs and table are dwarf  
size, one crow flaps and jeers  
soundlessly from pine's peak.  
Smiling, my little son  
points at him and speaks  
in voice liquidly sweet  
but no more human than a bird's.  
I cannot understand a word. His face  
falls blacker than the crow.  
He clamps his jaw, then turns away.  
In perilous silence, we three  
balance on the point of the tree.

II

In my own childhood, a boy I knew  
climbed up a pine and caught a fledgling crow.

I clamped its head, while he forced wide the beak  
to split the tongue so it might learn to speak.

The crow screamed at the knife, but cowed, grew tame  
enough to beg, to swear, pronounce its name

a name I have forgotten, though I still can see  
blood welling from that slice, green hatred in its eye.

III

A speech instructor lines  
her blackboard with veins  
of trees, tangles, snakes,  
mapping the jungle of the brain.  
A reptile curls beneath the hemisphere  
soundless, but swift to react; among vines,  
parrots and monkeys chatter, trying to ape  
the explorer meditating from his lookout.

The roof of his hut hums with words  
meaningless to animals:

Time, Memory, I Am....

My small son listens fiercely  
hoarding wordlessness. Turns away  
when spoken to, watches the crow.

What snake inside me has betrayed  
some sworl, blocked a path  
in the brain of my child  
engendering silence and fury?

Kissing his face, I taste  
salt of unsounded tears  
and escape into the rain  
past naked trees

whose fingers jab nowhere.  
Crow screams warning  
dumb things of my running.

## IV

One day, brighter, I'm back in the treetop  
lookout, still refused a word from my son.  
But Teacher springs open a pine box, home  
of "Jim Crow" — black bird-puppet in a tophat.  
This buffooning Mistah Intolocutah shocks  
me, though delights my child; his treble  
replies to dumb questions hold each word a pebble  
balanced smoothly on his tongue. I eavesdrop,  
amazed that this monster out of nightmare, who tries  
to mask menace beneath banter, can free speech. Back  
into the box drops Jim Crow, and we walk home.  
Slowly, Spring thaws out: though still bare, trees  
are clenching new green fists. Somewhere, a black  
bird's warble whorls like water over stones.

## V

Summer has come: the puppet, outgrown,  
is no more than a rag inside his black  
box now. My son and I stroll, hand in hand,  
talking beneath the pine's sharp-tongued shadow  
whose branches still jeer us in the voice of the crow.  
"Mommy, what does he say?" my child demands.  
I don't know. We've lost the feel for its moods. My boy  
shouts, "Fly away, birdbrain!" and crow flaps heavily  
towards the middle-distance to lose itself among  
greening humps of leaves that to my eyes  
form a pale cerebrum, tangles burying  
voices that twitter and warble in strange tongues.

Phoebe Pettingell

**STAGHORN FERN**

Think of us as antlers. Our green thoughts  
horn their way out of kidney-shaped fronds  
the way a deer or caribou's young nubbins  
break through cranial bone, taut tawny hide.  
We too would rub off the peach fuzz of youth  
against rough bark and standing dead heads.  
Epiphytic, spatulate fronds; notched,  
gnarled, twisted as only antlers twist;  
our broad leaves suggest nothing so much  
as the fine rack of a full-grown bull moose  
come upon suddenly in some primeval swamp  
of your dim imagining. Ours is the prehistoric  
twining of tree bark and root, the doctrine  
of symbiotic bliss; interpenetration of godhead  
and host. We proliferate like fungi or books  
on a shelf; mutter genetic imprecations to ourselves,  
while you hang us like overgrown epidermis from one  
of your special curlicue plaques: a wall trophy  
bragging of the big ten-point silhouette you bagged.  
Do you forget so soon the characteristic brow ridge  
of other hominids: Or is this spot in the bisected  
pot you keep flush against the wall above your  
fake fur, plush-covered toilet supposed to conjure  
up dim memories of our sphagnum moss and cedar bogs?  
Squat and stink then, fart-sack. We dream the  
cartoon that grows hindquarters right through the wall.

Richard Stevenson

## HAKA

(after the Mauri war chant)

the insult

Hey, you, Bart, Lefty, Slade,

I see you in my mind's eye, you off-duty module-men  
bellying up to the salad bar, dairy bar, singles' bar

And you there in the shadows, Lash,

you sneaky fast, cost-effective, penny counter  
easing your red, felt-tip derringer  
out of your plastic pocket guard,All you clock punchers, number crunchers,  
paper pushers,  
time-study men.

I know you

know your names, your little games  
know all your haunts and habits,

I know you

Knosher, Fresser, Juicer, Doper,  
Martini luncher, Trail-mix muncher,  
Bench Presser, Iron Pumper, Boober Tuber,  
Golfer, Gulper, Goofer, Gofer,  
Tax-dodger, Fraternal-lodger,  
Jogger, Flogger,  
Hiker, Biker,  
Fast Track, Laid Back,  
Headhunter, Hatchet Man  
Hit Man, Miss Man.

the boast

Watch out, boys, I'm Slim Slingslanger,  
fastest fingers in the Middle West,  
I worked my way up haking on the old Daisy Wheel spread,  
but I'm all laser printer now,  
and my ROM's as big as my RAM.

I'm lean, mean,  
a green-screen word machine  
I'm big brain,  
hardwired to the main frame,  
I'm white hatted, formatted,

In a small work space,  
I global search and replace;  
I hunt and I peck  
Only when I spell check.

I'm megabucks, megabytten,  
I'm a fifth generation, self-replicating,  
double driven,  
inspiration riven,  
justified and  
dedicated word processor now.

Michael Holstein

THE ULTIMATE RESOLUTION OF  $\pi$ 

*In mathematics, it is easy to pose questions which will probably never be answered, like, "Does the decimal expansion of  $\pi$  contain a string of ten zeros?"*

sometimes the figures were revealed to him, sometimes he dreamt them, or they condensed out of the air like dew on a watering can originally, a Van Eyck canvass, the Mary's at the tomb of Jesus in the Boymans museum in Rotterdam: robes red, blue, green — three of them, "3" — but that digit everyone knew next there was the sunrise on the Grand Canal: he saw one all-engendering sun, presiding over everything that day a "1" was entered in his diary then he dreamt he was fishing and on his line, shuddering as their eyes congealed with oxygen, four trout, "4" — "1 5 9 2 6 5 3 5" — sometimes they came double or triply or even in a flurry, like ledger sheets being tossed about by a crazed accountant and so subtly the moment of arrival was imperceptible, like the affirmation of constellations at dusk diary after diary was filled and was retired, each figure obediently checking against the known soon the tables were exhausted: he was being led where none had gone before a surprise sequence of 10 zeros appeared on an arctic dreamscape, graved in the hoofprints of starved migrating herds another nine digits he found in a newspaper photograph: the tattooed wrist of a Buchenwald

survivor he sometimes wondered: was he creating  
the number as he discovered it? was he the  
sun? or was he the instrument, the  
windharp, the arctic waste — defined  
only by doomed beasts in their  
final passage north?

Jet Wimp

## TWO POEMS

### Coming In

Williwaws chew the flesh of sea  
white as powdered bone;  
our boat, like a valorous lover follows  
her deepest plunge —  
we cling to the johnboat, cold hands join  
with nippers on  
praying for a lull in the snowdrift wind:

Sweet God a dally comes!

Swift as gull to shore, a tunnel of whiteness  
opens  
to a tickle, narrow throat,  
single strait from sea to land.

In sucking crush of combers  
 we see a solitary flirrup winking  
 over water,  
 stroutes shaking  
 the long gray wooden finger of the wharf;  
 familiar smell of salmon on the flake,  
 on to the kindest sight of all:

Old Cozzo, belly rolling in his bloody barbel  
 (fisherman's apron stiff as sailcloth)  
 Old Cozzo, ankle deep in scod, lantern  
 in one saltbitten hand, his bottle of Madeira  
 in the other  
 like a friendly uncle on a porch swing  
 waving us in.

### The Garimpeiro: A Translation

*. . . The prospector —  
 along the Rio Madeira River rushing  
 below the Brazilian shield called  
 the long cemetery . . .*

Sun, a suturing surgeon splitting a thousand s's —  
 stench/stuporous/servitude/a thousand *gurimpos* —  
 (prospectors, *Señor*)

a thousand sons-of-bitches housed in dark jungles  
 roofed in green  
 listening to atabrine-yellow parrots  
 squawking *bamburrado!*

(we struck it rich, *Señor!*)

Radio's relief. Snooded against the sun snake. Daily fix  
 of London gold, all watched over by *Curio*

(beautiful black bird of destiny, *Señor*)

amused by theft, murder, claim-jumping,  
 sitting in skittish light

branching to sweetsmelling darkness, tumescent overseer  
 of domed scandals  
 not unlike the city's cycle of birth, dying, decay . . .  
 a whore flown in with an aircompressor,  
 she sweats, works hard as the *garimpeiro* on his rafts,  
 gravel pumps —  
 someone to quiet earthmovers in the brain.  
 A world of flaming *formigas*  
 (we are like ants, *Señor*)  
*gurimpos* wearing greenstone belts of volcanic rock,  
 washing gold from navels, always scouring,  
 scourging, searching for *fococo*  
 (fresh gold, *Señor*)  
 like a French pig taught to sniff and snout out the truffle —  
 deep in the swamppit after *fococo*, in the dark hole  
 where corpses remain to the end of shift,  
 taming the smoking cobra filling the sluice box,  
 brains seeping earth, mined pits washing the *Serra Peloda*,  
 babbling *lost gold, lost gold* . . .  
 Curio knows. She knows where it all goes, *Señor*.  
 Perhaps to a banker — or a bum on the bowery of your  
 New York City. Poof! Lost gold. Plucked  
 from empty wire  
 crowning stumps on an old alcoholic's teeth —  
 but, what the hell, that's life, *Señor* —  
 would you like to own one percent  
 of a good *barranca*?  
  
*Señor?*

Ray Clark Dickson

ACADEMIC LIFE ON AMERICA'S BRANCH CAMPUSES:  
AGAIN THIS YEAR, ESTELLE AND HARRY GO TO THE  
OPERA IN SANTA FE

## 1.

Last year, women in the audience  
wore Indian jewelry on orange and pink  
hand-embroidered Mexican gowns.  
The men dressed in blonde silk jackets,  
pale ties. Intermissions  
they arranged themselves in the courtyard,  
bunches of tropical blooms  
displayed in a lighted hothouse.

Estelle in her tan summer suit, Harry  
in his navy blazer and camel slacks  
said to each other, "We came  
for the Rossini," and (privately) felt  
like Ms. and Mr. Dowd, like  
faded milkweeds in a flower shop.

## 2.

In December, after grading exams  
Estelle orders a Mexican dress  
from Imports Internationale.  
Christmas, Harry gives her  
turquoise and silver beads.  
Spring Break, he logs off the Vax,  
buys an apricot jacket and tie.

## 3.

July. Estelle packs her Indian jewelry,  
her hand-embroidered orange dress  
(never worn) for Santa Fe.  
Harry takes his silk jacket,  
ecru shirt, and tie.  
They look forward  
to *The Magic Flute*.

This year at the opera  
women dress in natural fibers:  
beige linen skirts, unbleached undyed  
cotton coats. The men all wear  
twill jackets and olive shirts.  
Intermissions, they group themselves  
like stones laid on raked gravel.

Estelle in her orange Mexican dress,  
Harry in his apricot coat and tie  
say *they* came for the Mozart  
and (secretly) feel  
like Ms. and Mr. Garish,  
like K-Mart peonies  
in a Japanese garden.

4.

Traveling north from Santa Fe  
Estelle thinks she'll buy  
a khaki shirt and linen coat  
from the summer-sale catalogues.

Harry plans (to himself)  
to shop the August sales  
for a twill jacket and grey pants.

Harry and Estelle talk  
about the limits of the Mozart.  
They have hopes for the Verdi  
next year.

Janice Hays

**OVERTURE**

When I raise the baton I consider  
how silence might be extended.  
How long would those poised violas  
wait, how long will an audience  
settle for merely breathing, the music of heartbeats?  
But someone coughs, a chair seat slaps  
in the balcony; the restless body continues.  
Does my father in the front row  
lift his head or is he still sunk  
in his evening depression?  
Listen, old man, let this allegro  
enter your bloodstream.

No one else in our family would have him,  
too far away or full of their lives.  
*He can't be left alone*, I told them,

and the mocking silence of distance,  
that hissing of space came back through the phone.  
*Well, what can we do?* they would cry,  
and follow with cadenzas of justification.  
My wife rocks her cello, her bow sweeps cleanly.  
My eyes trace her line's syncopations,  
and only the three of us matter.  
What do you hear, old father, hands in your lap?  
When you sink beyond us,  
even beyond eighty years of living,  
is memory only the turning of pages  
where photos come unstuck  
to flutter and pile at your feet?  
Last night we woke when you stood by our bedside,  
a stark form staring down with hands loose  
by your sides. Your glasses had slipped  
on your nose, tufts of hair were the crest  
of wild headdress. But your face when I led you  
into your lamplit room was mild.  
*What did he want?* she asked me later.  
We whispered in dark like children.  
I could not speak, my grief  
like his, that weight without words  
because nothing explains it.  
I listened to night turning and turning  
in treetops, I listened in pauses of wind  
for an answer. *He said he came to see  
if he knew us.*

We leave the exposition in a tangle  
of woodwinds. We'll come to such strange  
transformations of themes we thought we knew.  
When I told my friend the flautist  
something about this despair he said,  
*I read about a mental disorder  
where you lose your memory backwards  
starting from where you are, and once*

*an old man wandered back to the age  
of nineteen and had no idea he was sixty-seven.  
They tried to shock him forward again,  
stood him up to a mirror and said,  
'Look, if you're nineteen why  
is your hair gray, your face so lined?'  
But he only wept and said to them,  
'Something dreadful has happened to me.'  
When they took the mirror away, he forgot.*

I bring him to all my concerts,  
hoping Mozart or Brahms will fill the woods  
of his enchanted isle before once again  
it all turns to stone. He has taught me  
not to expect more than what we are living —  
quick moments of grace. We return  
to old themes, but the instruments differ,  
and we won't go as far from home anymore.  
In this brief coda hear how the phrase  
we thought was a useless scrap is lifted  
and shimmers, descends into unbroken light  
of a cadence. I hold my hands still  
for the final beats, giving the silence  
its due. Last notes are never sounded.  
A rest fills the measure.

T. Alan Broughton

