

# THE BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL

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COVER: *Knightsia* fossils, brown in white sandstone, Eocene Period, Green River Formation, Warfield Springs, Wyoming. From the collection of Dan Bennett, Down to Earth Gifts, Belfast, Maine.

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### I FOLLOW AN AMBULANCE THIS MORNING

I follow a panicked ambulance  
into Cambridge this morning

follow the whorled siren's bloody whine  
as the screaming closed wagon switches lanes  
forcing the polished traffic  
off the clogged parkway

I follow along the Mystic Lakes  
in an aluminum rain, wipers  
saying NO NO NO NO to trauma in lonely places,  
wiping and wiping tears,  
clearing the windshield view

so six signal lights can blink back red-eyed at me  
from crisis, and I sympathize and speed up  
as close as I can behind the reckless medic  
because I want to see  
how he  
carries woundedness to harbor

and now he leads me, tugs me, draws me  
(the driver seems to be someone I know)  
into closer and closer contact  
with the rapid pulses and thin squeals  
of his narrow wagon

wailing toward the hospital  
with me lurching behind, bumper to bumper,  
wanting almost to be caught up in the ambulance  
that brakes in terror and skids to a left U-turn  
off Memorial Drive

but I keep going along the inbound river.

Joanna Byrne Cavitch

**HISTORY**

There was light across the back field  
Making the yellow grass white  
And giving block-long tree shadows.

Someone in a white coat was waiting  
For a dog in the far corner. Birds  
Made strange songs balance in the cold.

For a moment I stopped and plotted myself  
In the graph — halfway — my feet warm  
On the cold earth and stone my relatives

Have left me to stand on, their bodies  
Flattened, or dissolved, compressed  
Into the works of earth. I breathe

Them, ancestors. We share the chemicals,  
Or, as it occurs to me, standing in  
A cold horizontally lit field, in the last

Birdsong of day and season, we are one  
Curious spirit, born and reborn,  
Out of the same element, never,

Except in the most haunted, useless moments,  
Remembering — Ages of you, ages of myself,  
And the light, now, quite darkened.

## HISTORY BITES

That night, in his room, complaining, my son  
Sat to steal his report from the World Book,  
List the Kent State dates and dead like fractions  
To be reduced. "History Bites," it said  
On his paper, "choose one, taste, and swallow,"  
And I surprised him with slides, his father  
The student who'd sampled his fresh mouthful  
Of wartime after class. Monday, May 4,  
Returned on his wall, and he worked the crowd  
For someone familiar from the Dark Age  
Of flared pants, long hair, and armies. Though I  
Was faculty by now, standing in front  
Of students with the rifle of language,  
I wanted to show myself on his wall  
Like some shadow animal of the hands —  
Rabbit of the fingers, the knuckled dog,  
Decorative pain of the headstone past.  
Look, there I am then, I said, repeating  
"They should have shot you, too," what my uncle,  
Who'd wished me dead or drafted, had volleyed  
At my complaints. Twenty years was whirring  
In that projector's fan, and my son said  
"So what were you doing?" and I managed  
"Watching," followed silence with "I don't know"  
As if he were asking why I'd never  
Left college or written one word on

*(Stanza continued)*

History as it happened: some roar of oaths  
Striking the raised oaths of rifles; some pop  
Of gestures freeing the pop of gunfire —  
Like fireworks, one platitude for anger,  
And what I told my son was "Write this down":  
We thought they were blanks; we stood ignorant  
As some lost tribe staring at sticks that smoked.  
Which is the way these histories happen,  
Somebody saying "Never," "Of course not,"  
Or its thousand variants. The crowd scene  
That follows, the jostling forward of faith.

Gary Fincke

#### IN THE PICTURES

all the Japanese are dead  
    overexposed  
the afternoon glare  
    tramples  
        across their faces

I hold them in my hands  
I am seven  
I have found a shoebox  
    stuffed with photographs  
        under the army blanket  
            far back in the closet

their bodies  
    jump up at me  
one from a ditch  
    another  
        by two sickly trees  
across a third  
    a string of numbers  
        marks the date  
  
face down the soldier (a dark-haired boy)  
    has a bayonet  
        stuck in his back  
standing over him  
    a G.I. is smiling  
        as if he had bagged a moose  
large wet spots  
droop  
from his underarms  
    another man squats  
        behind him  
            his eyes rolled up  
to the shaved top of his head  
  
(Where is my father?)  
Is he hiding  
    in the woods  
        the way he hides  
            under the table  
                if he hears a shot  
curled there  
white as a rabbit?

**Francine Sterle**

**Five Poems from *Storyville*****PURGATORY**

In the first photograph the clipped ears of the black boxer on her lap are blurred, though the dog's legs have found footing on the white cloth that covers her knickers so the nail-sheaths shine.

The woman's fingers crisscross beneath its panting belly and she leans forward, placing their heads in the same plane, smiling up through her falling hair so her dimples match the dog's creased cheeks.

Behind their chair a white cloth screens out the cross-hatched flagstones, weighted clotheslines, and rain-gutter's flared mouth, though Bellocq stood back so they square off the cloth like a frame.

In the second photograph the dog and its cloth are gone, the woman's arms are folded tightly under her shirt, unbuttoned and pulled down off her shoulders,

and the photographer has moved so close only one edge shows blurred bricks. A rope clasp hangs open over her shadowed breast and an oval mole graces her right arm. In this one she gives you nothing

but her bared profile. She stares out through the wet sheets as if she never cracked the stone of her face, as if she were not the same woman who held the boxer. Something's changed.

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These poems are from a series based on the photographs of E.J. Bellocq, who photographed prostitutes in New Orleans early in this century. Some of the photographs appear in E.J. Bellocq, *Storyville Portraits: Photographs from the New Orleans Red-Light District, Circa 1912* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1970).

I remember driving to work over the green swells of New Hampshire hills, red leaves like crusts of fire on my windshield flamed alive in my wake, and cresting I saw them waiting for the schoolbus:

a girl poised in plaid knickers, a younger brother circling, scuffing the leaves. It must have irritated her, because she struck his cheek so hard the boy fell back on the asphalt, elbows jarring.

I braked, rolled down my window as I got closer, but she was older than I'd thought, pimples splotched her high cheeks, and her look said — none of your business, you drive on outa here — and I did.

I drove the same road back from work. Rain had lain its sheen across the blacktop tempting small frogs to risk the passage. Most made it, others exploded beneath my wheels with shallow pops.

### **DON'T LAUGH**

The man on top of her shows one dark, veined hand. It presses her bicep, touches her laughing lips with a finger, steadies his unseen body so he can rock into her.

She faces the photographer, eyes as tightly drawn as the penciled brows, pulling a smile for me, or for the customer, or because something he said or did to her ear amuses her.

She still has her shirt on, her exposed arm clutches the curtain down around her face where one pink nail matches the cotton creases printed for a child's bedroom. It repeats its lesson

in rolling block letters: A is for apple, B is for boat, C is for cat, D is for duck, E is for elephant — then A again.

The prostitute in Bellocq's plate poses on a divan in her high heels, stockings, and carnival mask, her eyes reduced to slits, nose hidden behind a black beak.

She twists forward, bracing her buttocks with the right arm while supporting her torso on the other elbow. Her stomach muscles are taut, she cannot hold this pose long.

She makes me uncomfortable. A parody of the sexual before that big bed, leaning forward with no negligent arm to interrupt my taking in her body, her face masked and smiling —

but the smile has stayed on too long, no laughter left in it, not even derision, just a game played for those who would use this photograph. She gives them what she wants to.

I don't want to moralize these pictures, give the women names, or pretend this is an act of fidelity any truer than a man's masturbating, I want to tell you a story.

I remember a circle of fists in a playground in winter. All in until the chooser slapped one open and said what you got there? The one without mittens said bread and butter.

We all said where's my half? He said cat got it. Where's the cat? Dog ate it. Where's the dog? In the woods. Where's the woods? Water sank it. Where's the water?

Ox drank it. Where's the ox? Butcher killed it. Where's the butcher? Rope hung him. Where's the rope? Knife cut it. Where's the knife? Hammer broke it. Where's the hammer?

Upstairs cracking nuts. Then through the plumed air we chanted A is for apple, P is for pear, first one to laugh grin or show their teeth gets a box a pinch and a pull of the hair.

I bit back my cheeks' insides until somebody broke.

## THEY ARE FRIENDS, NOT LOVERS

Off a one-lane bridge over a muddy stream that fed the  
Ompompanoosuc Andrew and I would throw our  
gangly bodies, twist the world into a somersault and  
smack the warm water

which we had to enter at an angle or be wrenched by the  
shallows. When a car came down the oak-hung road  
we'd wrestle, snag each other's long necks and fall  
together,

parting before the warm water drowned our laughter. The  
only time two women share a plate of Bellocq's they  
seem to inhabit different worlds; one is dressed for  
church or the camera,

the other sleeps at the edge of the frame. My friend who  
worked a house says she took a female lover because  
the men began to sicken her and were so simple to  
satisfy.

She saved a spot on her neck she'd let no one else kiss. In a  
photograph by Mary Ellen Mark two Bombay prosti-  
tutes are united by the stretched flesh of one's cheek  
the other tugs with her teeth.

The larger smiles at the camera, a rose in her hair shadows  
the free cheek. The other woman turns sideways,  
laces her left hand into the clasp of crossed arms and  
pulls them together

with the hand that hugs her shoulder. The gold across their  
bare chests sets off the patina of their flesh. Under-  
neath: Lata (right) and Asha. They are friends, not  
lovers.

Miracles repeated are no longer miracles, but inconsequential as faces in a passing bus, so lust becomes a parody one performs and Lata teeth Asha's cheek to show affection.

Andrew and I crawled beneath the bed, scared his sisters would see if we did it in the open room, and brought our faces together above the cold tiles to kiss. Eyes closed we cracked our teeth;

then shook with laughter until my hair caught on the springs and Andrew had to untangle me. He worked patiently, touching his lips with his tongue as if memorizing what we'd done.

## TERI

This woman, seated sideways on a dark, lathe-turned chair is fat. Not grotesquely, but enough so that her chin and belly are folded twice and her breasts are sand-bag weights.

Her extremities are overmodeled like Michelangelo's marble statues, a big veined hand wraps round the seat's front corner, and one foot, angled towards the photographer, displays chipped nails.

She wears a mask, one wide lip visible beneath the silvery edge almost smiles. The eye slits are covered in gauze and behind roll the opaque eyes of a frozen fish.

I have avoided describing her because I knew I would do her presence injustice, mark her with my metaphors the way the plate scars her arm with a burn of spilled emulsion.

I remember dancing with Teri Alf at a Christmas party; no one else would ask her to when the music slowed, and I wanted to overcome my revulsion at the fat folds that circled her chin.

She was cynical as hell and spared no one, least of all herself, her thunderous laughter, but she guided her obesity through the embarrassments of each doorway with a whispered forgive me.

I held one hand high and pressed the palm of the other against her back as lightly as I could because her flesh collapsed around it, and we turned our clumsy feet in a simple circle

until a button on her blouse broke open and she turned towards the wall to redo it so we could begin again. I held her closer than I wanted to, felt her cheek spread against mine.

When the music finally halted I went to wash, my shirt pasted to my heart's beating. The others before their mirrors chided me, said I was drunk and trying to take advantage of Teri.

But that's too easy. In Bellocq's photograph the woman's long hair is compressed by the mask's band, then overflows her neck and shoulders to ride over her breast and on down.

Behind her a formal photograph encases a woman in the shimmering light of a photographer's retouching brush, her chin smooth as sanded marble, hair pinned tight in a restrained bun.

In its frame is stuck a snapshot of another woman, grinning beneath an outsized hat, her chin doubled by the loose strap. Blurred, half the hat cropped out, its taking never stopped the woman's laugh.

**THEIR LETTERS WERE BAKED IN A STERILIZER**

A woman faces a wall, her feet ride the molding and her hand pretends to hold a chalked butterfly. The face that looked at it has been shredded by the sweep of a blade.

Half the plates have the heads scratched out. A hurried flurry of lines tears the thin layer that held their faces but never breaks their bodies. A violation that missed the stray eye.

There are no personal records. Like the lepers shipped to Point Clair above New Orleans where they were not allowed to marry, vote, or have telephones, they are only bodies in someone's count.

Stewart treed the girl who wore the first short skirt we'd seen. Recess was over, balls rolling to rest, and Linda above us hugging her knees to a branch of the pine she'd climbed; Fuck you!

Lift it bitch! He kept repeating, leaning against my pull. After school we met Linda again, between the pine and the church, where we'd agreed to show her ours if she'd show us hers.

When she'd lifted her skirt and pulled her panties down, the scratchy mound wasn't anything like the pictures. Stewart cackled and ran yelling Come on! but I stood there.

For the rest of the year she chased me every recess. These photographs are like a cache of baked letters, abandoned cicada shells clinging to branches, their backs split.

## MAYBE NOW YOU KNOW

My friend, the disappearance of Mary  
was a serious serious matter  
I sensed you couldn't paint your watercolors  
not in the way you wanted to at least  
because she was lost without a clue  
(she left her fish like shining knives)

there was certain gladness in this moaning house  
to find this morning the police information  
Mary well in Nova Scotia well in Nova Scotia  
I rushed the news to you you can paint go on

life returns to a perfect sphere  
you will paint  
I will write  
(or I will paint you will write)  
we will do both things well, more or less,  
we will talk over whiskey and birds  
you will tell me it's hard to rhyme serenely  
serene I will insist to you  
the difficulty of a bowl of fruit  
we will discuss insects and linguistics

I knew that feeling  
(long ago I could not write for sorrow)  
now I share your jubilation  
you have immaculate talent  
go on paint your paintings you're free  
the disappearance of Mary  
was a serious serious matter  
(once I could not write  
not in the way I wanted to at least  
because the woman I longed for  
was missing in your arms)

**THE QUEEN OF THE FARM COURTYARD**

She is back from the fields  
and smells of the fragrance of grasses;  
pure dew drops have soaked the hem of her coat;  
her face shines with jewelled beads of sweat.

For her kitty, she caught a string of grasshoppers  
and pinned it high on her straw hat;  
for her little daughter, she has picked two wild flowers  
and nicely fixed them on her head at the temples.

Oh, my homespun wife,  
queen of the farm courtyard!

No sooner back home and she lays down the rake and takes up a broom;  
chickens swarm her and geese gabble around her;  
big grey rabbits salute her with fixed eyes;  
in the pen, the little pigs scramble ahead of one another.

She exercises her sacred powers,  
runs back and forth joyfully.  
She carries heavy buckets of fodder  
and brandishes an iron ladle like a baton.

Oh, my capable wife,  
queen of the farm courtyard!

She is tied to the primitive kitchen  
and composes musical dishes full of feeling every day.  
In the stove dry wild grasses burn  
and corn buns are steamed sweet and fragrant.

Every day she roasts tobacco leaves for my father;  
each mealtime, she sets hot food before my mother;  
every night she rubs and twists moonlight into cords of longing  
and throws them from afar upon my window.

Oh, my virtuous wife,  
queen of the farm courtyard!

**Liu Xiaofang**

**Translated by Li Xijian and Gordon Osing**

Liu Xiaofang (1944 - ) from Heibei Province, had only ten years' schooling. He did farm work for seven years and then served in the army for nine. He began to publish poems in 1975. Since then he has published over 400 poems in various literary journals. His set of poems in "My Country Wife" won the Award for Excellent Poems for 1981-1982.

## SMOKE FROM KITCHEN CHIMNEYS IN MY HOMETOWN

Its horn  
takes the ship far away from the shore,  
and the figures of the people who saw me off become blurred.  
The only thing which is looking at me in the distance  
is the smoke from kitchen chimneys above the edge of my village.

My sister  
perhaps is still standing before the bamboo grove.  
Dew drops have already soaked through her shoes,  
and she bites her little pigtail.  
Tears glisten in her eyes  
but she tries to keep them from dropping  
in order not to wet the handkerchief I gave her . . .

Smoke from kitchen chimneys in my hometown  
is like a handkerchief waving good-bye . . .

My aunt  
is still leaning on the sheep pen at the back of the house.  
It's time for sheep to come back,  
but her dear one is going farther and farther away.  
Lambs are bleating  
and she is so annoyed  
for the first time she whips at her lovely lambs . . .

Smoke from kitchen chimneys in my hometown  
is like continuous calling . . .

My old uncle  
is, perhaps, still strolling at the edge of the fields,  
and though the tobacco has already stopped burning  
he still sucks his long bamboo pipe.  
He is looking for something,  
but he himself can't tell what he has lost.  
His eyes are dull and without luster . . .

Smoke from kitchen chimneys in my hometown  
is like continuous longing . . .

. . . The horn has long since died away in the night air,  
but the smoke columns from making dinner  
still show on the fluorescent screen of my soul.

Good-bye, my dears and kin!

Good-bye, the Ba Mountains!

Forgive me for my not having left behind too many good wishes,  
but I carry with me smoke from kitchen chimneys in my  
hometown . . .

— Please remember,

when you see the sun rising mornings

it is the red burning coal

that I throw into your stove

from the depth of my heart!

Yang Mu

Translated by Li Xijian and Gordon Osing

Yang Mu (1944- ), from Sichuan Province, began to publish poems at 14. Among his many books are *The Green Star*, *Wild Roses* and *The Setting Sun* and *Z*. His poems "I'm a Youth," "Stand Up, Uncle!," and "The Faith of Spring" won national or local awards for excellence. He is a member of the Chinese Association for Writers and Editor-in-chief of *Green Wind*.

**WITH DIFFICULTY THE POET DISSOLVES  
HIS LOVE AFFAIR WITH PROSODY**

There is another woman.

I say this first, knowing  
it will break  
your inclination to argue.

No, she is not comely,  
not in the classical sense  
like you. Nor can she effect  
the glissando of gestures  
you perfect. She'd rather  
listen to the Babel of traffic  
than a dusty quintet or the movement  
of water slipping over rocks  
beneath the engorged stars  
of mountain nights. So what?

Everyone else approves.  
Our friends like her  
for her, how should I put it,  
eclectic keeping up,  
her daring, her unaffected  
nakedness. She swigs  
Milwaukee from a can  
and with unapologetic gusto  
burps. How natural!

More changeable than petulant,  
she tries on moods  
like a woman in a dressing booth.  
No silk kimonos, French perfumes,  
candle-lit dinners, or courtships  
of centuries spent kissing  
for this doll.

Extended foreplay, like conjuring  
up the muse, she likes to say,  
is a waste. She's so direct!

You call it middle-age crisis,  
the lure of short skirts  
and perky breasts.  
Call it what you like.

You'll get over it. There are still  
plenty of young men taken  
by the solid charms of older women.

I'll be back, you say?  
Don't hold your breath!

**Jane Ellen Glasser**

## Two Poems

## SHAVING AGAIN

Shaving again after five years  
the face in the mirror of another  
love affair broken by perhaps too much desire,  
I want to break — mirror, face, desire,

but instead the foam and whisker clogged blade  
discovers my old face new and childish.  
The image breaks like a lake's surface  
and reforms, and I see *her* face, 1969,

“witch” we called her — a girl,  
longfaced, plain — mean, we thought,  
deep as the secretive self, image  
masking our strangeness.

Hedged round by friends, I argued,  
her face hovered before me,  
wicked, before the dare of the simple act:  
with long reaching fingernails I scratched  
her face, the terrible face of a child.

I finish shaving. Studying my face, slow-  
approaching, the mirrored man, like someone  
I knew well, seems to recognize me,  
hesitates before calling me friend.

**WHAT IS AN EDITOR?**

A mind. A machine. A maniacal  
reader of anything minutes on end.  
A judge of anonymous numbers.  
Jury member, who sits long to hear  
case after case contended by kooks  
claiming guilt for the same crime.

I was one. I munched erasers,  
drank ink to stay awake. Literalist.  
Figure-doubter. I was a stone.  
A gun couldn't have convinced me.  
I felt like writing to you all,  
Give it up, give it up!

Really. What do you think you are  
doing? Don't you know they have no  
feelings? Oh, there is nothing dear  
about an editor, dear poet. Confirm  
your fears. All along you were writing  
to no one. A machine. A machine.

**Joseph Chaney**

## MUSIC AS IT IS

1. *Choirs in the countryside*

They cut out a shallow nick in the ground  
They also made a hole  
in time  
before their time  
was due  
And they sang . . . kept on singing . . .  
Then the place slowly  
filled  
with water  
and light  
They bathed in it . . . kept on splashing . . .

2. *A choir-boy and a chorus-girl*

Bathed in gentle singing  
they danced together  
— a choir-boy and a chorus-girl  
Her fingers  
— so slender and long —  
enclosing his back  
(skinny but manly)  
like extra ribs

3. *Altos and basses*

Among the naked blondes — altos  
crawl black figures — basses  
shiny like precious gems  
and naked as well  
(though somewhat grotesque  
because transformed into beetles:  
when hairpins fall from the altos'  
hair  
the basses will crawl on all fours)

4. *Conductors*

It must be a reflex  
that one of them flared up  
at something  
or someone:  
a landslide of gestures  
was left for later  
an avalanche of words  
slid down  
across his sticking-out belly

5. *A reviewer's thermometer*

I had a musical dream:  
I saw a reviewer in the woods;  
next to him, propped up against the trunk  
of an oak-tree  
was a thermometer  
made of bark  
it was used for measuring  
the harmony of the tree's life:  
it had no graduation  
no scale  
nor a column of mercury  
eager to crawl  
up and down:  
only by a change of color  
of its wrinkled surface  
did it indicate how much the sun  
could achieve  
with respect to the music of the oak-tree

6. *The reading of music*

Explain to me how it is possible  
(but in one word only)  
that one event  
comprises such a multitude  
of minute explanations

7. *Drummers*

We are pushing the block of the drum  
we are tied to it  
with our backs instead of a cord  
(we are pushing it backwards,  
our feet stuck in the sand;  
underneath someone's paw is trying  
to grab us by the feet:  
if it as much as touches  
one of us  
his body  
rumbles  
and trembles)

8. *A flute-player*

We saw there  
in the dark  
a shining ray, wider and wider  
On the streaks of light, under his fingers,  
statuettes swarmed  
unclad they turned white

9. *Before a break in their voices*

Choir-boys growing bigger and bigger  
but still deprived of what  
was to give them  
the seriousness of adulthood  
They don't allow the seed to grow  
into a reign over the field

10. *A diamond benefit*

The brave singer  
had a hard, diamond mouth,  
He wasn't afraid of anything  
when he was singing  
At the end he used his notes  
to brand the iron  
of an approaching scythe  
because it is so insensitive  
and severs heads from necks

11. *The tenor*

We have run afoul of the mushroom — the great tenor  
a stocky fellow  
with no face or neck  
his head  
rolling over his fat belly  
He only wanted to roll downwards  
in the river-bed of the stream of sounds  
Paying no attention to obstacles  
he made fun of us  
'cause we  
stayed put

12. *The bass*

He will not close his mouth  
but place a harp in the eternally open gap:  
only then will the space  
fill it with music:  
provocative, tough,  
bursting the bones

13. *From a labyrinth of notes*

From alleys, narrow side-streets  
of the labyrinth of notes  
a crowd showed their heads —  
black or white inside  
If only it could expose  
its body  
it would become suddenly  
a hundred-headed dragon

14. *Treble clef*

A mermaid, girl with a fish tail,  
her innocence concealed with flakes of silver,  
now she is exposing herself, shedding the scales,  
it's a show:  
her long hair falling in tresses  
gives us a brilliant idea  
— to comb out this radiance

15. *A monumental concerto*

Let us not injure the houses  
which music inhabits  
if we want to recreate them  
yes — let us erect the walls  
once again  
but let's be tender about it!

16. *Studying the figures of music*

What lovely figures! (In the shape of waves for instance)  
Oh! These are virgins from the ages past!  
Up close, as if on an enlarged photo,  
their skin seems cracked  
(we've used lenses)  
When they grow tired of bathing in the glass  
they'll become famous for their escape  
through the width of the singing  
they're swimming as if in a lake  
(submerged up to their chins)

17. *With headphones over our ears*

The snail was swimming  
holding onto its shell  
filled with air  
Our heads floated  
(air in our hair)

18. *Intermission*

Crows over the smooth water opened up their beaks  
though no sound emerged  
they were choking  
on red apples  
showered by the sun

19. *A darkened sound*

A small statuette made of soot  
— sitting on a beam of light —  
reached out her hand to touch you  
May I help you?  
That is: Would you mind getting dirty?

20. *The sentiments*

And so  
they will pull you out  
from among the sentiments,  
from currents like weeds,  
pull you out of the lazy water  
in which — swimming — you've become soft  
(but in the sunshine you'll grow strong again)

21. *Before the concerto's end*

At the station of waiting  
in front of a closed hill  
you're standing in a crowd of onlookers  
you'll find a way out, however:  
see a tunnel  
and a train coming  
from the other side of the hill  
to fetch you

22. *A musical toast*

It's enough to raise your hand in an open gesture  
give a sign to the sun  
standing guard over you,  
and wait:  
in a minute  
out of the blue  
a glass will appear  
with golden edges  
it will clink  
in front of your mouth  
(so you can open it)

23. *A rotating stage*

We need events!  
No scenes will shock us!  
(Even those occurring on a rotating stage)  
In summer we'll walk  
in circles  
surrounded by a crowd of naked women  
scorched by the sun  
(So they're insensitive!  
Fenced in  
with bricks of skin)

24. *A string*

Why does an arrow fly, whizzing?  
Shot out of a vacuum  
as if from a bow,  
thicker or thinner  
in various points  
of its length  
but when it strikes the ear  
it will be smugly embraced  
by the red pipe  
of the blood flowing  
from the open wound

25. *Whispers*

Will they whisper  
whose alien opinion  
one must follow?  
And whose words are worth renouncing  
— our own?

26. *Opinions*

Crushed and overwhelmed  
he barely managed to creep out  
from under the heavy arguments  
thrown at him by the crowd  
— and fell silent

27. *The concerto's beginning*

It was born out of nothing:  
they brought wagons of silence  
and emptied them onto the strings  
Even the deaf will be convinced  
that something is playing  
and the skeptics will have  
their ears chopped up  
by the music

28. *A girl with a cello*

The letter "C" (for Cecylia)  
was branded  
into the benumbed sound box  
and the cello case —  
it was like the sinking of an iron,  
red-hot virgin  
into the wooden sea  
in which the depth is not important  
but the number of layers;  
and the smoke  
— has it already reached  
the bottom?  
Or is about to do it?

29. *A music reviewer*

He went into the countryside, took a knife with him,  
cut himself off from the city,  
spitting out one former friend after another  
like cherry stones  
(getting his teeth blunted  
on many a bony figure!)  
And how much he tasted  
of the flesh  
of bitter-sweet-sour acquaintance!  
At this thought the smile  
ceased to spread:  
became numb  
resembling a grin

30. *Coagulating phrases*

Something soft, amorphous  
was sitting on the alert  
squatting  
ready to jump  
to reach their mouths  
(become available  
like a chewing gum from an ad)  
But then — it turned into wood!  
Remained motionless in a corner  
something in-between  
an empty stool  
and a waste-paper basket  
made of planks

31. *A harp on the look-out*

Wait with your happy music!  
Don't release the harp strings!  
Maybe it's not paradise yet?  
Nor the time  
to listen to heavenly melodies?  
And if it is paradise?  
Then you'll have to watch  
so that the strings don't pierce  
the apples ready to fall  
Thus, in every place,  
be it the earth or paradise,  
watch out for the music!

32. *Clanging of the cymbals*

Take a good look, think  
and forbid yourself  
to visit someone  
who will lock you in his fat jaws  
and flatten you

33. *In a crowd of listeners*

I probably know a few good words  
but those summoned  
from rigid notes  
are not good  
they collide with each other  
clattering  
like a beggar's hobble  
on crutches  
He cannot pass by me  
because people are sitting all around  
What people? What do I know about them?  
They are neither bad nor good  
indifferently they have filled the space  
as if under some kind of obligation  
And what was bound to happen  
happened:  
I tasted music  
it was dry  
— the rhythm of driving stakes down  
(though no one said "Amen")

34. *An instrument of the crowd*

The musician thought  
he was God  
let the instrument of the crowd  
slip out of control from under  
his fingers and mouth  
and it played  
cruel music  
all by itself

Miroslaw Stecewicz

Translated from the Polish by Lesław Ludwig

## Two Poems

## WEDDING SONG

I do what I can for Hanka, daughter  
of my wife, even though her heavy  
pregnant breasts remind me of yours,  
Natalia, you wicked collector of silver  
earrings and the slim veined poles  
of our cocks. In the last pew I see

your flagrant, skillful hands on the hymnal,  
your showy gold teeth and fringed  
shawl with poppies. You pretend  
to be demure: how else to coax  
us pickle-noses under the striped  
wool awning of your skirt? Ah Natalia,

even though I have broken in a new wife —  
a good worker who carts armloads of beets  
on her bicycle, an angel who soothes the bruised  
skin under my eyes when I'm sad — I miss  
your rouged Cleopatra lips, your lovely  
nylon thighs. What I never gave you

Hanka the bride shall have: three hogs,  
a hundred flasks of vodka, a four-man band  
to wheeze out polkas and waltzes all week.  
Her groom is a handsome fool like I was.  
He parades like the lord at Cana, even though it is I  
who have paid for the music and the feast.

Oh Natalia, my wife refuses to invite you  
so I will ask the American niece to dance.  
I will gallop her over this hollow floor  
in tight, dizzy rings till her breasts  
bloom like apples, silver hoops  
appear in her ears and she stares up at me

loving and hard, the shoes flying from her feet,  
dinner plates breaking, the windows blowing out,  
every hound in this village baying and howling,  
the pale eagle of Poland sweeping off its crest,  
our stamping and whirring heard  
as far as the silver moon itself.

### **THE SPIDERS ELECTRIC**

It was Advent. You wanted to be a shepherd,  
a midwife. So you tried to melt  
a great bowl of wax for a Christ candle.  
You had already greased a soup can, cut  
the rope of wick. The soft wax gleamed and slackened.  
Then, suddenly, the bowl turned inside out.  
Flecks of glass and wax erupted like water,  
a fountain so sudden you could only stand there  
as the goo dripped down into the belly, joints  
and bones of our landlord's stove.

Your fingers are faithful shepherds,  
patient as midwives, tense  
as the day before Christmas. Just as they explored  
the walls and valves of that stove, just as  
they rubbed off all wax, I am sure they could  
divine water, sharp cards, crack safes.  
These things I think as you touch me so damnably  
my eyes smart, my skin feels like wax,

like the gallons of sap you boil down for syrup  
in the electric spider. You stir it slowly,  
slowly, watching it bubble  
and boil down, under the porch where the wind  
won't get to it, watching it darken  
along the edges, breathing in the sweetness,  
the smoke, you are patient all right, twirling the skillet  
for hours, till the stickiness  
is right and done.

Karen Kovacik

### PRAYER RUG FADING

As I watch the light  
fall on its ragged nap  
on our first real spring  
day, splayed tassels  
shredded like the flimsy  
hair of age, I remember  
well — while gazing out  
my window to a lush  
Virginia hill (with its own  
fine weave of tulip trees  
that flare a wall of

*(Stanza continued)*

oaks) — those flaming  
saffrons, hennas, umbers,  
black-bordered & sharp  
as pain in the dim light  
of a Meshed bazaar — sharp  
as the deepest human love  
I'd ever know — over  
twenty years ago, when  
youthful, in another land,  
I'd begged my father  
buy, dirt cheap, that dark  
& aging vision of the Islam  
Tree-of-Life (stall-  
draped, in my memory,  
beside the hawker's  
brighter rugs & bony face  
that spat shrill barter  
like an angry daw) — whose  
spearlike limbs & russet  
glow, not locked away  
as we'd so often done  
our "finer things," saved  
for a future day or perfect  
home — the "wall hanging"  
my mother dreamed & then,  
my wife, has lain upon each  
rented floor that's marked  
my life, & now fades beautifully  
in bronze Virginia sun  
that flows into my window  
in, this, my first real home  
in a new place — along  
with my rich story  
of a fading past: its  
years of dimming  
radiance, & mine.

## Two Poems

## S P I N N I N G

Out a finger's tip  
she drifted,  
circled the body  
in which she's lived.

This silk she spins  
out of herself  
shapes a cocoon.  
Body, breathe deeply.

The shroud complete,  
will there be a door?  
Can the spinner  
find her way back?

The hands,  
quick, silent, deft  
as a spider's hands,  
like hands on a harp,

wove this sleep.  
Inside, at the center  
of the still  
form, something

begins, some  
thing changes.  
Wait, whisper moving  
shadows of hands,

Wait.

## T O M Y M O T H E R

Your white skin  
with the heat of the grave has turned  
black, yet your body  
burns my eyes with the beauty of power.  
I believed that power rightly contained,  
rightly loosed.

Once for your birthday I wrote a poem.  
I wrote it over and over.  
Hid it under a stone,  
wrote it again. Stole gold ink  
from my teacher, wrote it again.  
“Is that all?” you said. “Only that?”

In May, on the day of mothers,  
from your ears we hung moonstones  
paid out, one dime each per week, three years.  
You crossed your eyes. The silver peeled,  
the stones faded. Your laugh  
fell on our ears, a hymn.

It was not enough to love you.  
When, six years old, I first saw  
a boy naked, touched him here and there  
and there with my tongue, you whipped me  
till the world went black, till I knew  
nothing on earth but your whip mattered.

When I needed meat, you went without.  
When I needed clothes, you  
shivered in a coat thin as muslin.  
Lessons, quarters for the collection plate,  
movies, makeup: you bathed men  
in the insane asylum; skewed your back.

I'm locked in;  
down the dark hole maggots  
roll and bubble the sound of boiling candy.  
Still six years old, I hear

*(Stanza continued)*

my sons, men, groan in the night.  
I want out. Want them free.

Someone tells me you often were wrong.  
Now I must believe it.  
I know what I know.  
You forgave everyone.  
You forgive no one. Before  
you died, you clung to me like a child.

Naomi Clark

#### WINTER CATS

The strays have survived another season,  
camping out in the banked-up flower beds,  
homesteading in the roof of my neighbor's garage,  
and begging at back doors. From the kitchen  
I hear their doleful calls and wonder  
how they endure winter's demolitions  
until I think about the risks everywhere:  
a pit-bull running loose, a drunk  
gunning to ninety through an amber light,  
smoke worming into the soft lobes  
of your chest, an airplane coughing overhead,  
phone calls shaking you awake in a dark house,  
the clock like a fly thoughtlessly cleaning  
the minutes off its face while your wife  
still isn't home on a stormy night.  
Then I open the door and give them scraps  
and watch them eat while a last snowfall  
begins like thousands of soft anxieties  
drifting singly down and slowly  
building into their heavy drifts.

John R. Reed

## BOOKS IN BRIEF

I would like to praise the radiant virtuosity and the warm humanity of Brooks Haxton's *Traveling Company* (N.Y.: Knopf, 1989, 96 pp., \$18.95 cloth). At one pole he achieves an utterly perfect lyric—"The Ring," an intellectual jewel cut with a diamond-worker's precision (I quote it complete):

In what random ring of words  
Does intelligence delight?  
Fifths repair the flatted thirds.  
Dark subordinates the light.

And things brood on nothingness.  
Nothing has escaped them all.  
And to be where nothing was  
Makes their brooding musical.

Something stares into the flame,  
Wondering what the flame could be,  
While the flame repeats its name  
To nothingness continually.

At another pole Haxton performs a dizzying ballet of double associations and triple rhymes, improvising with comic gusto all over the field of the page in his wonderfully inventive "Wingnut." Haxton is a musician for the mind's ear. And with very few exceptions (perhaps he should have cut the last stanza of "Virgin") he achieves a Mozartian tightness of construction.

The intellectual and emotional range in these poems is as various as the prosody: the affectionate humor of "Dithyramb" and other domestic poems; the aesthetic elegance of "Canon"; the somber narrative distance of "Graveyard Pond, Adams County, Mississippi"; the Coleridgean lyric on the pain of poetic gestation in "Item"; the meditative lyrics of "Variations on the *Tao Te Ching*"; and the historical, philosophical, economic, personal, environmental, archaeological and aesthetic complexities of "Virgin."

And these are all songs of praise. In "Virgin," which does homage to perhaps mythical unravaged woodlands, the poet acknowledges his debt to the trees that provide the paper for his poems. His is one book that need not apologize to the forest, and Knopf has done itself credit in designing a volume worthy of its content. What a pleasure to turn the creamy laid pages and feel the old-fashioned braille of the linotype impressing them! But *Traveling Company* would appear rich and strong even on scraps of newsprint.

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Now let me mention a few high spots in recent literary magazines. *Epoch* (Vol. 38, #2) has **Lucinda Roy's** magnificent "Needlework," selected by Clarence Major for this year's Baxter Hathaway Prize in Poetry. This eleven-page poem, a sort of condensed epic of the life/lives of an African woman brought to America, may well be the most eloquent, elegantly-crafted in its reticulation of images, and — most important — humanly commanding poem to be published this year in any language.

*The Ohio Review* (#43) has a powerfully understated poem on "the end of nature" called simply "Loon," by **Roger Mitchell**.

And *Northwest Review* (Vol. 27, #2) has an important interview by Robert Hedin with poet **John Haines**. The same issue has a large-spirited letter from Haines on the state of today's poetry (occasioned by an attack by Greg Kuzma on Dana Gioia). Gently, and without rancor, Haines indicts the narrowness, the loss of energy and purpose in much poetry today and makes a serious case for more breadth of vision in our poetry and more magnanimity among our poets.

M.K.S.