THE BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL

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MERMAIDS

Today at South beach, a little girl is lying in the sand.
Her legs are buried in a mound which has become
a mermaid's tail, and on her chest poise two small breasts
which she is fluting into cupcakes with her fingers.

She molds them as she speaks to her older brother,
caresses them casually, watches the shapes rise
beneath her fingers, smoothing them just so,
as though she were her own first lover.

All along the beach, women are turning to watch,
wondering if they dare.
Until slowly, the surface of the beach begins to shift,
the women are going underground.

They are shaping the bodies they have always wanted,
legs long and slender as fronds,
bellies taut, curving barely to hills,
and breasts, their breasts rise in waves along the beach

triumphant. They cannot resist. They touch themselves
as children would, as though no one else were there,
taking the beach with their bodies,
laughing and sighing with pleasure.

The child scatters her body when she grows bored
with the weight of all her beauty, but the women
are buried so deep, they cannot move.
They hold their breath

knowing the slightest shift would give away
how perfectly these bodies they have curved
and stroked into being, how perfectly,
how naturally, these bodies lie.

Jane McVeigh

APOLOGY

i.
On that day when the clover blooms
and you're crossing your old high school
football field with a boom-box playing Hendrix
through one speaker and the phase
isn't coming through and two juniors
look down at you from the bleachers
where they're tanning and shake their heads
because it's not their music and it's not
your music either, not by a decade,
then perhaps it's time
to press STOP and scale
the highest structure in town,
in this case the water tower labeled
"Roseville," and look down yourself
and re-think just what the hell has happened.

ii.
This is a poem in three parts.
This part, the middle part, is about others,
about your two best hometown friends,
both of them fucked-up beyond the place
where fuck-ups lead to any rich trove
of revelation. This part is about Sal,
the Chicano kid who loved the Rolling Stones

(Stanza continues)

and the New York Dolls and snorted crank
after band practice to stay awake, to talk talk
talk about music, his passion,
arguing about who played the baddest, sloppiest
leads — Keith or Johnny — and singing Iggy
so loud the neighbors in the duplex
called the police three times a night.
This part is about Sal coming back from an afternoon
at the lake, drunk, the driver drunk, the kid
in the back seat drunk and — you know it's coming,
the scene right out of a MADD commercial —
the darkness, the parked car on the shoulder, the
swerve, the red and blue lights, the hospital,
the cousins in the waiting room, the mom in tears,
the dad smoking outside, talking about boxing,
talking about baseball, talking about fucking taxes,
talking about anything but Sal up there
with the skin on his cranium peeled back
and the surgeon removing the useless parts
of his brain with a delicate scalpel.
This part is about Sal in the wheelchair at home,
getting fat on ice cream — his personality
that of a twelve-year old, "Fucking Michael Jordan
is bad, man" — and staring at the TV
and blinking, blinking — the bits of glass
still in his eye — and smiling
about nothing.

This part is about Mike, the calm one,
the one who would drink a twelve-pack
and drive — for hours — perfectly, the one
who would encourage you to keep writing,
"Shit, you're the best writer I know," the shy one
there in the corner of the kitchen, returning
to the keg every fifteen minutes
and not showing a trace of jealousy
when the girl he has been talking to all night suddenly

(Stanza continues)

slurps the tongue of a guy who just walked in, a guy
she doesn't know. This second part
is about voices in the next room and shadows
in the safe suburban streets and joggers
following cars for miles and networks
of spies and dark reasons for the rising
of the sun. This second part is about disease
walking into Mike's apartment on his twenty-fifth birthday
like the friend of a friend you can't
treat rudely. This part is about pills and no sleep
and daily fear
and self-control and clinical madness.

The last part is about you.

iii.
But the part you get isn't a big one.

Up there on your water tower, looking down
on the town of 24,347 — on the mini-marts and
the Dairy Queens and the rows of clean new cars
and the used furniture stores and the gray
stone City Hall with its green dome and inert
flag — you might as well be a tuft of cumulus
cloud, distant and transient,
for all the good you are.
You might as well have nothing
at all to do with the two lives which begged, "Take
care of me, define me," because your hands,
like clouds, are immaterial

forgive me, my friends

whatever
they try to hold

I was not there

slips through.

David Starkey

POSTCARD FROM THE GLACIER

> "By the hand of God ice is given and the broad waters are frozen fast." — *Elihu*

This is the blue beast, heaving, star-chained,
Who fronting the vaulted deep calves with a birthing
Thunder bergs and brash ice, blue-black hills launched
On the waste's unease, who self-encumbered,
Cloud-ragged, marshals the cold-charged waters
Like iron filings about a magnet and whose dead heart
Is filled with those otherworldly lights. An agony
To think of, its sheer bulk looms in the mind,
Domed mosques of green marble, flying buttresses,
Chase of rainbows over molten ice, gothic
Arches rising from smoking waters. Many a mariner
Has seen, under the fierce light of an arctic
Moon, its herds move in mute procession, their white
Slopes raging with insomnia, and having stood
In their magnetic silence felt an inward shudder,
The depths shifting underfoot, a foreboding
Of thoughts pitched on the reefs of nightmare
In the uncharted waters of sleep, only to wake
In the smoldering pewter of dawn to find them still,
Smoke-filled mirrors, barbaric spires, gray silent
Fragments of a gray silent world.

It is said the rule of ice never left, that
We live in the lull between two breaths of the same
Winter, a winter which lingers still in the thoughts
Of certain fish, the chill of spring shadows and the remote
Corners of sleep. If so, one must marvel at this blue beast,
Minion to whatever gods of ice and sea-change;
It has sculpted the skull of the world, drunk
From the seven troughed sea and scattered the bones
Of mountains, this bull with no mind but a mind
To move.

John Lindgren

DEATH OF CEZANNE

1.
Pressing his palms to one
of the elders' houses — cliff-side,
anemic terra-cotta cracking
in summer's kiln — he stands

in the garden surrounded by irises
nodding like skulls on flimsy
spines, under pears burning
in their darkened palatial trees.

One cloud steers slowly
as a freighter off the sun.
Pitch pines teeter like old women
into his view of Mt. Saint-Victoire.

Returning to his easel from a day
of wandering the foothills alone,
he carries what he's gathered,
the familiar objects of waking:

2.
Peaches in a wooden bowl, blue
as the day-old dead. A worm

blossoms from an apple — its crowned head
devouring the globe-world territory.

A tar-dense Burgundy, uncorked
in the porch sun, sours in oriental glass.

As Provençal tapestries dissolve
into evening ash, peppermint oil spills

from a cracked Majolica pitcher.
Oranges levitate among lemons

lit with inner light. A chrysanthemum
holds its bloom for centuries.

The table slumps under the absolute
arrangement of things.

3.
Standing at his easel in the cold,
he awaits the first fires of daylight
to spring from dark's smoky fleece.

Last night, he says, they came for him
as bathers; stepping from the lake,
they baptized him in trees. Sprinkling

fig sap over his beard, they fed him
from the ram's horn: the marrow
of slaughtered evenings, azalea's

purple eye-grass, the bone-white ruins
on the terraced slopes. Fed him
crushed tubers of cobalt, the path

cobbled with acorns and shale,
blackbirds and small goats gathered
in pasture. Fed him the blizzard

of pear blossoms, rain of mayflies,
those farmhouses like sailboats
stranded on the horizon. Fed him,

stone by stone, Mt. Saint-Victoire.

Christopher Seid

Three Poems

ORCAS ISLAND

A woman writing thinks back through her mothers.
— Virginia Woolf

1.
That summer
I met the warder
of my mother's
fear: she
stood right
there, you could
put your hand
through her

2.
I don't know if that old shack
endures
on Orcas anymore;
the land's long sold.
Even that summer
no one had been out
for many years.
What it meant
to her
to see it once more
with her mother,
to show it
once to me
cannot be so easily
disclosed.
But I still see the door
swing open,
the dark drifts
of silent bodies
everywhere, as if
it had been snowing flies.

3.
I sleep, wake up
in a chair, head fallen
to the side,
hair gone white
with thoughts.
A woman writing
thinks forward
through her daughters,
wanders
in her mothers,
pauses in her travelling
to dream again
with them
of what's been lost,
forgotten, falsely
laid to rest. . .

THE CROW ON THE CRADLE

And I will cast thee out, and thy
mother that bare thee, into another
country, where ye were not born. . .
— *Jeremiah* 22:26

Strange comfort to believe
she chose her madness, chose
her pain. Look down the long hall
into the room where she is suffering
and know there comes a time to turn away.
What Father could not give
will not be given. That is the emptiness
you'll build your house around.
The little sack of bones she nursed
is broken. She chose her madness.
Now you must choose your own.

TUMBLING DICE

I thought all your walled cities
would fall
to rock & roll,
I thought no suffering was safe
when Smokey sang.
If Otis
could not teach you tenderness —
Aretha sweet love —
then I was wrong.

Do roses push
up through the streets
of Spanish Harlem,
is "Ooo Baby Baby"
still the melting point of ice?
Will we always find
some rooftop we can drift on
to the roll of the tumbling dice,
sweet darling
the roll of the tumbling dice. . .

Rachel Loden

Two Poems

LEARNING TO DROWN

Hydrocephalus: an abnormal increase in the amount of cerebrospinal fluid within the cranial cavity that is accompanied by expansion of the cerebral ventricles, enlargement of the skull and especially, the forehead, and atrophy of the brain.

— *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*

1.
I used to go with my big brother
to a place on the Spokane River
where he and his friends dared

each other to swim
all the way across
to the opposite shore.

I would watch them,
some too scared to swim
past the shallow

water, most making it halfway
and coming back, coughing
water, a few struggling

in the middle
of the river, treading
water, my brother

swimming beyond sight.
I remember watching
water. I remember

waiting for my brother,
wanting to follow him
and recover myself again.

2.
"Water on the brain"
makes the definition easier
to understand, anticipates

the questions always asked:
"What kind of dreams did you have?"
"Was it like drowning?"

I can still see my reflection
in water, my face
flooding the banks, a body

of water erasing boundaries,
changing the distance
between past and present.

3.
I remember the reservation girl
with Down's Syndrome,
weighing over 300 pounds,

wading in Benjamin Lake,
feet tangled in weeds,
falling facedown

into six inches of water.
My cousin, ten years old,
trying to lift her,

trying to turn her over,
trying anything
to make her breathe.

4.
My mother tells me
the doctors would not believe
my skull was growing,

swelling, until my cousin
dropped me from a swing.
My mother tells me

I measured
the size of your head every day.
It grew an inch in one week,

but the doctors said no,
it was a mother's imagination
growing. I had nightmares

you were pressed against walls
of our house, breaking through,
that it would never stop.

5.
Driving all night, I hear a story
on the radio about prisoners
of war in some foreign country.

Their captors had no room left
to house them, nearly 600 men,
so they marched them down

to a nearby river
and drowned all of them,
one by one, while the other

prisoners watched
from the river bank, silent,
bowed into themselves.

THE BUSINESS OF FANCYDANCING

After driving all night, trying to reach
Arlee in time for the fancydance
finals, a case of empty
beer bottles rattling our foundations, we
stop at a liquor store, count out money,
and would believe in the promise

of any man with a twenty, a promise
thin and wrinkled in his hand, reach-
ing into the window of our car. Money
is an Indian Boy who can fancydance
from pow wow to pow wow. We
got Vernon WildShoe to fill our empty

wallets and stomachs, to fill our empty
cooler. Vernon is like some promise
to pay the light bill, a credit card we
Indians get to use. When he reach-
es his hands up, feathers held high, in a dance
that makes old Indian women speak English, the money

for first place belong to us, all in cash, money
we tuck in our shoes, leaving our wallets empty
in case we pass out. At the modern dance,
where Indians dance white, a twenty is a promise
that can last all night long, a promise reach-
ing into back pockets of unfamiliar Levis. We

get Vernon there in time for the finals and we
watch him like he was dancing on money,
which he is, watch the young girls reach-
ing for him like he was Elvis in braids and an empty
tipi, like Vernon could make a promise
with every step he took, like a fancydance

could change their lives. We watch him dance
and he never talks. It's all a business we
understand. Every drum beat is a promise

(Stanza continues)

note written in the dust. Money
is a tool, putty to fill all the empty
spaces, a ladder so we can reach

for more. A promise is just like money.
Something we can hold, in twenties, a dream we reach.
It's business: a fancydance to fill all the empty.

Sherman Alexie

RUMPELSTILTSKIN

As scattered rats and clumps of claw
  Flushed through the stubbled hutch,
I spindled and I snipped each smutch
  To nudge and slub sleek gold from straw;

Then gorse of summer smudged its green;
  The hazel maiden wed,
But nine months after snubbed me bad,
  Grutched me my snippet, my stub son;

To twitch my heart, she filched my name
  Blabbed in the trading stands,
Mocked my blunt height, scrunched these brash hands
  From whose deft thumbs such spinning came;

Like skeins of geese bereft of brood,
  I squalled, then scudded crags —
Her skalds who moot this yarn to hags
  Scrub from snug lines my child's gnome blood.

She warps my thatchless bones| I'd kept
  My word| Plucked, old, fell scree,
I lie, stretched in new *dignity* —
  That Latin crutch all shall accept.

Edward Locke

FIRST MEMORY

The afternoon sun slices through blinds.
You lie on the table, waiting to be changed,
your mother's face bathed in light above you,
nearly as beautiful as the one you'll gaze at
through the dead hours of childhood:
a schoolgirl, her strawberry blonde hair
tied with bows, fixed in the family album.

She draws her face so close, you can feel her breath;
her fingers strip the soiled cloth,
and she washes you shamelessly
in a time without shame.

It's not long before that face contorts,
before her raw voice grates your ears: *If I die,*
it's your fault. What boy wouldn't long to know
that schoolgirl as he pulled his mother from the floor,
too drunk to stand, undressed her, put her to bed?

Once she told you how her brother died
of a clot that grew like a thought in his brain,
and her mother shipped her to strangers,
though she was five, and he was her best friend.
Gretel without Hansel, she waited till her mother
came for her, changed, bitter as the woodcutter's wife
who abandoned her children in the forest —
that woman rubbed your back when you were sick.

And her father — his hand still grips yours
from a nursing home bed — he'd punish his strap
against his children's skin, the taut flesh
snapping at its fall, and, who knows,
might have slipped one night into his daughter's room,
his wife turning over in their bed from a dream. . .

In your first memory, your mother's face draws near,
and the child you were unclutches his fists;
but who is that other, crouched beside the oven,
teeth bared to a sharp grin, stoking the fire?

Daniel Tobin

FLAG BURNING (a prayer)

The Sherente of South America
believe the stars
are their dead children
who have climbed into the sky.
Let each star
be a hundred children,
a thousand,
and let their innocence
keep on rising above us
so we may remember
who we are, how we came here.
Let the clear, cold air
be filled with them
because their names have fallen
off the old pictures,
and the newsreels have faded
staining the years
like the first leaves
pressed against the roadways.
And as another fall
turns toward winter
and we pause to look
skyward, hoping to glimpse
Orion's belt, or Cassiopeia,
let us remember again
the lies we've lived with
for so long, in such earnest.

Gerald McCarthy

TWO HOURS AFTER MY BROTHER CALLED

beaten up and arrested for writing
down a badge number of a sergeant who was beating
up a black kid who was standing with his hands up,
the sergeant handed me the personal
effects they took from him — a satchel and shopping bag
full of books, mostly — so "nothing would get lost"
while they held my brother handcuffed to a cell full of other
people,
mostly black and threadbare, handcuffed to the cell.
As he lay curled on his jacket, spread on the filthy
tile like a dog's mat, the cuffed hand above his head
like that of a person waiting
to say something, I wanted to grab the gun
from this phony polite bastard of a sergeant, I wanted to start
cursing all of them, their ridiculous
story that he "interfered in an arrest"

of a stranger, and "risked a policeman's life,"
that he "resisted arrest," that he was "assaulting an officer,"
when they tore his arms back and crunched his wrists;
I wanted to tear up the stickers
on the sergeant's desk phone with numbers
for *Free Phone Sex* and help my brother to his feet,
drive him home, take him to a newspaper office, to a bar,
even as I left him there,
bewildered, beaten, tired. . .
But this is a lie — I didn't
have a brother to call that night
though I spent most of it inventing one —
the assured, stubborn rage I couldn't
feel any longer, the refusal to leave

quietly with my books. . .
My father did come, and he argued
with me about moving my car,
about the comments I made to the sergeant. . .
He told me he'd have a lawyer at the arraignment,
though "they don't come cheap," and I was broke
then, and still am. But this loneliness. . .
like the dust I closed my eyes in, the
hopeless, bold chatter that stayed on with the white lights
over both sides of the bars — 2 hours,
4 hours, 24, 42. . . the cell more stripped
of familiar presences than anything I know
how to write — this last loneliness,
it just is, and it is, and it is.

Andrew Kaufman

VISION

The barn burns, I dream.
The animals scream
I'm to blame.

Next day I tighten caps
on gas cans, slide my hand
in a bale.

In the thick of it
I find a thing, flat out,
I mowed last fall.

Blank eyes cross-haired
with hay,
it has me in its sights.

Rennie McQuilkin

Three Poems

SWIMMERS

I am the beachcomber
the one in my own poem,
driven to the edge —
the strand at the end of the world.

Not without my own consent.
I signed on for the job.
But the storm was great,
the surge of waters overwhelmed my shore.

I thought it was my end,
drowned in that black winter sea,
when I heard another one
like me calling out of the white foam.

I reached to find, to save,
and found my flailing arms could swim!
Remembering I knew from childhood
the way to stay afloat for hours,
to turn my body on the waves,
to roll with the white surge,
the white upon the black.

I think I felt a passing hand
somewhere sliding down a wave —
another swimmer, strong
as I am strong,
arms ready for the long
pull to shore, to shore, the long
vanished shore.

FISH WHOSE EYES ARE NEVER CLOSED IN SLEEP

Fish, whose eyes are never closed in sleep
Are clothed in water, and what they see, they see
Dimly through the rings of blue, the deep
Blue that dimly sheaths them — And what are we?

Our star-bound eyes grow heavier in vision's mass.
We grow sleepy by the looking glass—
Those galaxies of thought that brace and bind us

Where we swim
Gaping dreamily like fish
Who cannot see the silver on their scales until
Wrenched, lost and gasping, into still
More deadly and revealing light.

POETRY READING AT THE GERSHMAN Y

Sunday afternoon, clear sky after the storm,
David Slavitt, professorial demeanor, reads
translations from the Latin: Ovid. Almost
moved to tears, he wipes an eye

. . . all those years, Naso mourning on the Black
Romanian shore, only poetry to save him
from the savage tribes, his curses —
like brass bells — ring

Down Broad Street. A siren wails

Across a stretch of time so vast
the irony
is almost lost — Before us

Jacob weeps for Edom in galut!

Jacob Rusel

Galut is Hebrew for the Jewish diaspora that followed Rome's destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C. E. *Edom* is the traditional name for *Rome,* as *Jacob* is for the Jewish people.

VARIATIONS ON A THEME FROM *PETTICOAT JUNCTION*

"And there's Uncle Joe.
He's movin' kinda slow
at the Junction.
Petticoat Junction."

Behold the Joe and porch conjunction.
Ain't a whole lot of motor function
at the Junction.
Junction.

There's Joe the uncle
Bet his no-go lay-low funk'll
send him down.
Junction town.

And there's Junction Joe.
Same old slow-mo' rockin' show.
You KNOW where.
You nowhere.

The unction chez Junction is extreme.
Let's go, Joe!
"No"? Whadda you mean?
Not keen on that scene, not part of that team.

Have a looksie at re-rack Joe.
He musta snorted up some blow.
Shun that junk shun that junk shun that
Junction.

Olha só o tio Joe,
aquele velho rocker fleumàtico.
Entroncamento.

Tala kuna noko Joe
Alingi kotambola malembi
Mpenza! Oyobi wapi.

Fellas and Ladies, if you look
You'll see the Joe who wrote the slow-movin' book
Uncle Junction. Uncle Junction.

Porch-lollin' porkbelly wearin' his hat
Spits, only later does it come out spat.
Juncle Jo-eetion. Joincle Jootion.

Joe has left the race
to move at his own pace.
Junk-TIE-on. Junk-TIE-on.

Get it down t' old Joe
cuz he can't if don't wanna go
Nowhere. At the. . .at the ju'. . .at the juhaha.

Hey, y'all, check Unc Joe's
slow-rockin' junction show.
ju'-JU' ju'-JU'
ju'-JU' ju'-JU'.

I. . . I want. . . I. . . I want
for there to be an Uncle Joe,
a kindly, cranky porker bringin' on his own
opinions, beefs, and wisdom.

Peripheral Uncle Joe.
He'll be offerin' his two-cents.
Train town, small one.

Viddy the avuncular, Josephesque, recumbent one.
Junction.

"And there's Uncle Joe.
He's movin' kinda slow
at the Junction.
Petticoat Junction."

Two Poems

THE CURVE OF FORGETTING

I
When the saw zinged, angular and grating,
through his knuckle, the boy watched his
fingertip stumble through sawdust, noticed
its nail was ragged. No blood spurted;
there was no white-flashed pain, but the
starkness of the shorn bone startled him.
Now, as he sands a car, bandages gone, new skin
pink as rose-hips assumes its patient disguise.
In a month the stump will thicken to calluses;
in two he'll stop tracing the nub with his
thumb whenever he's testy. It was not
the sort of disfigurement that engenders pity;
he won't forecast cold by its incipient
aching. And yet — on his closet shelf, tucked
behind sweatshirts and a box of candles, the tip
floats in a jar of formaldehyde. It dreams
of the thwack of a baseball on a mitt, of pushing
back bangs in warm rain, of scooping peanut butter
off a spoon, of the hymn the veins sang through it
while the boy, tired as day itself, lay sleeping.

II
She cried, "I'm unlucky. First,
they beat me, a knife pressed
to my cheek. The one who held me
wore rings; his breath tasted of brandy.
It was strangely quiet: even my voice
left me. I remember their faces,
how I clutched the red-bristled rug.
I am so unlucky..."

We rocked her, brewed almond tea.
Finally, she slept. We tried to keep
her shoulders covered, but the afghan
slipped from them as if
their bruises were dark satin.

Dawn roared through the shutters
encasing her as a glacier might.
The shadow of her wet lashes stretched
until it suffused her in a light
so fierce that we understood it to be
impenetrable. When we left her,
she lay curled toward morning, the mark
on her cheek a blossom unremitting
in its fragrant outpouring of grace.

III

If, one morning, you turn toward someone
you've loved for years whose routine's
familiarity is a subtext of wakefulness, like
blinking — if he's shaking French Roast
into the grinder, but that simple act
becomes horrific: the rustle of the bag,
the tumbling beans transform into
teeth rattling in a trophy sack;
if his thumb pressed on the Braun dial
clutches your neck so that pain
swizzles your spine, and if the sun on the
counter bursts aflame — come, take my hand

If, to calm yourself, you forego the table,
waffles cooling on plates, the *Times*
sectioned, ready in separate piles —
your *Week in Review,* his *Magazine* —
if you pause to loop the curtain ties to their hooks,
but the day washes over you with a shock of sorrow
colder than March surf and your breath gasps
away; if you clutch the shade as at a tiller but its
white sheet reels out, clatters off the dowel, and you're
left with its tatted pulley dangling
from one finger — come, take my hand

If you fold onto the stairs,
lean your cheek against the balustrade
while certain things happen:
What are you doing, he asks,
You're being melodramatic.
Light bleeds out of the railing
as afternoon warms some distant room.
He steps across the crinkled vinyl, passes
you, and is gone. If you
imagine what you could have said:
such as, This isn't a dress rehearsal;
such as, I am frightened by us;
such as, Something has come unfixed.
If you think about what you might do:
drop your vitamin back in its bottle,
clean the parrot's cage, build
a fire then wait for something
to render the evening merciful —
come, take my hand

IV

He removes nonessentials: the baby
book, which anyway did not record
his first word; Scout badges; her scarf,
still issuing ghosts of Lily of the Valley;
letters bound in ribbons slim and blue as veins.
He pours away vinegar, Marsala, Shalimar.
For a time, our pictures still rim the mantle,
then they, too, vanish. By the stove bulb's
varnished glow, he eats what we left in the cupboard:
a handful of cashews, applesauce, Three Musketeers.
The carpet is taupe — he rolls it up; the curtains of
champagne ice he folds away. Beyond the deck,
a half-smile moon which had been caught in cedars
slips free, drifts to the roof, soundless as snow.
Barefoot now, he moves through the rooms, their tiles
like clean water, pausing only to flick on a CD:
The Gypsy Kings. He dances downstairs without us.
He is dancing the night away.

V

From the sledding hill, we used to wave as grandfather
climbed back from the iced pond, his creel
strung with pickerel, his breath
preceding him in brief explosions.
We'd encircle him at the porch table
where he'd slit the fishes' bellies whose
loosed scales were shaken into flight.

One after the other he'd shoulder us to bed,
first Raphael, then me, and he'd call
out duck, duck goose as he dipped us
safely past the hallway chandelier
and swung us laughing onto
the forgiving cover of our eiderdown.

Each December he hung glass ornaments;
they shimmered above us among the tree's bubble lights
as we strung the simple ropes of popcorn
and listened to him hum.

The year the angel shattered in his hands,
its slivers swirling to the carpet,
he handed us the box of tissued stars
and seemed content to orchestrate their placement,
his arm's shadow so huge and dark against the wall.

Grandfather comes down on Christmas only;
Raphael and I make a cradle of our arms.
We ease him into the wingback by the picture window
where he watches cardinals swoop to our porch:

He marvels as hunger beats their wings to flame, ponders the
source of his lost desire.

OPALS RECEIVE THEIR COLORATION

They sprawl — ten feet from the swings,
twenty yards from the poppies, ninety-three
million miles from a sun which prepares
to drop behind stones and disappear.
He flicks pebbles at her shoes; the sky
tints her cheeks. He feels the heat
of her forearm against his wrist. She thinks,
It's about to happen, a moment to carve
into the otherwise ochre screen of her memory,
like a scarlet gash. And she's right:
Into the opal is poured the red fire of awakening

It's December in Canterbury, the city all bells —
handbells ripple the North Gate, eventide bells
fall on the stones where, once, Becket knelt;
notes stream onto country lanes, empty
as the inside of a bell. At the limit
of these reverberations, dovecotes release
their birds which swerve in answer to this drift
of music; they swoop, tails spread
against the falling away of bells:
Into the opal pours the white fire of solitude

The man in the mask, naked as a garden
statue, waits on the canal's far bank,
his skin aglow against the emerald of ferns.
She skirts the hedge to avoid the startling
loneliness of his outline. Drawn to the stillness
of his outstretched arms, to their stark

(Stanza continues)

backdrop of ivy, she pauses.
Beyond the canal, the falls thrash.
Here, spring leaves open, honeysuckle
twists through stone. She turns for one clear look:
Into the opal is poured the green fire of knowledge

He touches your face
You lift your sweater over your hair
Car lights strafe the dashboard
He traces your collarbone,
you unbutton his shirt
He slides the camisole toward your shoulders,
you slip your fingers along his thigh
He smoothes his thumb
down the center of your back
Dropping his shirt on the car seat,
you unbuckle his belt then slide
your leg until your knee strokes his
He touches your neck
Outside, the highway falls away
like black water over stone:
Into the opal pours the purple fire of longing

I roll down the embankment,
sliding toward the lake which July sizzles.
Pine cones catch at my shirt, palmfuls
of needles spin away as my body hurls
off the dock, turning in the turquoise water,
and I drop, drinking the surprising clarity
of a place which urges, Stay.
And I'm happy there, away from all that's familiar —
there among dancing stems.
In a moment, I'm forced
back, lifted to the relentless
shore. Holding on, I wear
my earthliness like stone.
The letting go bears no naming:
Into the opal is poured the blue fire of regret

Consider this: there's no returning —
it's that simple. Once, a parent held
out a finger and the infant
grasped it and ceased its weeping. Once,
a child set fire to a car in the middle
of the night at the edge of a quarry.
Once, a teenager went into a room to undress
and a classmate was under the bed,
waiting. Once, everything was violated
in daylight, while couples
lunched at cafes playing jazz. . .
Once, someone followed us into the evening
turning a knife, and we forgot our last
happy moment for a long time.
Once, we walked into a church
that belonged to neither of us,
and we stood, wrists touching as coolly
as the pillars which arced
out of sight, beyond our silence:
Into the opal pours the black fire of sorrow

Deirdre Callanan

Two Poems

CLOUD HANDS

The small girl at my breast knows my milk
for what it is: all we have of time perfectly
together, first communion, father and daughter.
Implausible, yes, but not impossible.
The small print in Steward & Hale tells us
men too can work the miracle, feed the multitudes.
And she is multitude enough, sucking
in the middle of the night for all she's worth,
consuming and consumed, cradled
in my arms, that martial passage of arms
I have known before as Cloud Hands,
know now as Child at Left Nipple.
We learn to sleep at the same angles
and odd intervals, wake to the same call.
If I have not given her birth in this dark
I bear her up and she is borne on white
streams only she could take for granted.
Improbable, yes, but what nonetheless must be
between us, the feeding, the quiet pull
where I had least expected,
center — of a sudden — of being
the dad, holding the world up
to this child as too unlikely
gatherings of skin, and somewhere
(I swear) the glands, a giving away
to that Other which is my daughter's
true discovery in me. Rocking her
toward sleep, I'm sure she will keep
our secret, these several months
of uncommon kindness and fullness
that surely cannot last, my nipples sore,
the good milk already thinning,
her hunger soon as far beyond me
as I am who have outdone,
somehow and for the moment, myself.

GRANDFATHER UP A TREE

The pears hang fat and full and just
out of reach beneath the halt, slow summer
light of this late Chicago afternoon, branches
sumping in the last long hour of sun and
holding their fruit dear and still, almost
close enough to touch from the open third
story window leaning out across the hot brick
sill and stretching for all the world like Walt
Dropo at first but I will fall, I will
fall to my death she says, blotched fleshy arms
pulling me back in as grandmothers must
at penultimate instants, hers that strength
of generations my *other* grandfather sees
as he courts her day after day after
day in a wondrous drunkenness, his wife
a timid shrew, her husband a here-again
gone-again philosopher, and now if it's pears
you want, he says, it's pears you'll get
beside the shed to broken crates, legs up
over the shambles of a roof, hoisting
himself to the tarred crotch of the tree
when his son my father rushes out to save
him from himself, late lothario, whiskey-mad,
and grandmother clucks and frowns, this fool
and his son pulling him away, pears
falling about them in ruins at sunset
though later I'll swear on a stack of Victrola 78s
he scooted forty, fifty, sixty years up
to the most golden of boughs and tossed us

(Stanza continues)

pear after pear, gentle and accurate as Billy
Pierce while gandmother held me back, sinking
her too-white teeth into yellow fruit for his
sake, my grandfather, this *other* man, waiting
for us to point to the peaches the next
yard over, the apples the next, and so forth
across the plains to the Pacific and a rest
home where he would lie, as he did,
alone in a valley of lemons, oranges
and limes breathing from an olive
green tank about as tall and smooth
as she must have been, once, this grandmother
when young and single enough to be made
love to from afar by a climbing man
perhaps a little smashed, a little carried away
by the lateness of the day and waving
from a pear tree as if she'd always been meant
for him and he for her and I somehow the tag-
end of a tale mistold, how so often it is
when people nearly neighbors must cross
oceans to meet in a grandchild's arms.

Hillel Schwartz

BOOKS IN BRIEF

Philip Booth, ***Selves: New Poems*** (New York: Viking Penguin, 1990, 76 pp., $17.95, hardbound).
John Cage, ***I-VI***, (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1990, $34.95 clothbound, 452 pp. plus two cassettes).

I thought it might be enlightening to examine two works from the opposite ends of the literary spectrum — one from the cutting edge of the lyric/meditative tradition, the other from the anarchic and aleatory avant-garde.

The complete title of Cage's work, delivered as the Charles Eliot Norton lectures at Harvard, is ***MethodStructureIntentionDiscipline-NotationIndeterminacyInterpenetrationImitationDevotionCircum-stancesVariableStructureNonunderstandingContingencyInconsistency-Performance —*** fifteen aspects of Cage's work in musical composition. These words form the vertical spine of his "mesostics" (like acrostics, but with the key word down the middle of the line). For each mesostic string there is an anthology of source texts (from Thoreau to *The New York Times*), all helpfully included in an appendix, from which the horizontal "wing words" were drawn by aleatory techniques (from *alea*, dice) which free the composer "from memory, taste, likes and dislikes." But Cage reserved the right to excise words from this mosaic assembled with the help of a computer, such as words that might seem to contradict his anarchistic and anti-military views. Since the aim of the work is to stimulate new ideas in the performer and his audience, Cage also deleted words that he thought would not stimulate the generation of ideas. The result looks like this:

what you have doesn't help ' less Is more ' feathers pulled out '
khomeiNi's
heAring takes
Consumption we sought '
six ' six being the center horizontallY '
she's so devoted to then I
maN's internal metabolics the army
misleD him though '
population ' art ' imitation of naturE in her manner of
vision ' no dusT ' has
occupiEd
heading foR cottage
payMents to thousands of consumer
representatIves '
feed the eNtire world '
for otherwise the words would hAve no meaning '
image whiCh
i frequentlY had to look up at
of Israel for
exist amoNg
relateD data
arE yours
i **can'T**
arE men '
official Recognition of israel for tuberculosis
and custoMs
radIo had

In this sample the mesostic spine is INDETERMINACY. Boldface words are syllables not normally accented but here to be stressed. The apostrophe signals a breath. The reading is enjambed, so the performance is much more fluid to the ear than to the eye. The printed words are thus a script for performance, and the accompanying cassette of Section IV is spell-binding. Cage is a brilliant raconteur, and his voice — soft and dreamy here — creates an illusion of ideas swirling up from the language in some incomprehensible but still somehow meaningful syntax. Flowing in unpunctuated small type along the foot of each page is a selective transcript from the question periods that followed the formal "lectures," with excerpts on an accompanying cassette. I find no development in

Cage's theory here, but his anecdotes and quirky responses are disarming as ever. Harvard has outdone itself in producing an elegantly-designed volume, and the price — no more than a good seat at the opera — seems moderate.

Still, I am ambivalent about the work as a whole. I enjoyed it enormously. The old master is as sharp and seductive as ever. And perhaps audiences encountering his work here for the first time will be jolted out of complacency as shockingly as we were in the sixties. I hope so. But this work strikes me as more predictable and less stimulating than I had anticipated. When I heard him read his "Diary: How to Improve the World (You will only Make Matters Worse) 1965" at its first performance —billed as a "concert" — at Beloit College, the chance-generated passages from McLuhan, Buckminster Fuller, Basho, *et al.* bristled with ideas that struck showers of sparks off each other. The "concert" certainly defeated our expectations and shook us up. Later in London, I attended a "lecture" in the huge old Piccadilly Theatre, where, distorted by chance amplification through batteries of enormous speakers, the same text emerged fragmented into occasionally ear-splitting bursts of sound, generated from the wired-up body of Cage, who sat on stage in an easy chair, reading in a simulated living-room. (The audience reacted to the defeat of its expectations of a "lecture" by disruptive and insulting rudeness beyond anything I have ever experienced!) At Harvard there were apparently only two mild interruptions; the audience was well-informed and deferential. And the readers of ***I-VI***, armed with the now-familiar texts from McLuhan, Thoreau *et al.*, will find nothing outrageous in the "language poetry" of the mesostics. To a question from the audience Cage replied (echoing Beckett): "these lectures are a continuation of my having nothing to say and saying it and considering that to be poetry as I need it."

• • •

Cage in his art seeks mechanisms for erasing the personal self from the creative process. Philip Booth transcends the self to *Selves.* Epigraphs from Hopkins and Stevens suggest the range: from "Binsey Poplars," "Strokes of havoc unselve/ The sweet especial scene"; and from "Esthétique du Mal," "out of what one sees and hears and out/ Of what one feels, who could have thought to make/ So many selves." The "I" in Booth's poems stands up courageously. And courageously it exposes itself to the hazards of empathy; in "Game" it takes the enormous risk of empathy with entropy. In the poems of old age, such as "Fallback," he runs the less fashionable risk of being considered sentimental by those who are too reserved for empathy, too cool for strong feelings.

Like Cage, Booth provides room for some of his source texts and also for an introduction that provides a theoretical basis for the poems that

follow. Before the four main "chapters" of Booth's poems he sets "Reaching In":

> Reaching in to measure momentum,
> the physicist alters the photon's position.
>
> Reaching through midnight into the bathroom
> my feet displace the shape of the dark.
>
> My hand remembers a poem I gave you:
> I made a poem I drew from the planet.
>
> Reaching in, I trembled the landscape.
> Where my words began is no longer home.
>
> Weigh each word before you believe me.
> However you read me you enter the story.
>
> The rates at which our twined lives close
> make waves in probability theory.

Here Booth provides an atlas to guide us through the poems ahead. Like Shelley, he writes on a cosmic scale, drawing his assumptions from the best that contemporary scientists can tell us about the nature of the universe. Cage (or Ammons or Allman) would agree. (And in these assumptions we can measure the gulf of knowledge that separates us from the Romantics.) As Wordsworth projected, the poet now follows the scientists to make their discoveries accessible to the senses of the general reader. Though he knows some terrifying facts that the Romantics could never guess, Booth can still write in the romantic tradition — concerned with becoming, time, and change ("Where my words began is no longer home").

Booth understands, moreover, that "a work of art is not finished until it is observed or listened to" (Cage, p. 220) and respects the impact of each reader on the poem: "However you read me you enter the story." Like Emerson he demands great readers, who will "weigh each word before you believe me." One of the distinctive qualities of a Booth poem is the way it rewards the reader who weighs each word. No room for chance operation here. Look at the three *reachings* in this poem: first metaphoric, then literal and external, and finally simultaneously internal and cosmic. Watch too how the *you* of the poem moves from a single person to the individual reader and beyond. And his words can do this standing in place: consider the resonances of "*drew* from the planet," "*trembled* the landscape," "twined lives *close*." Then go on to read the rest of the book this way.

And as you read, entering the various selves the poet introduces, take time to enjoy the elegance of each poem's form, because Booth is a consummate master of contemporary prosody. In "Reaching In," listen to the symmetrical rhythm of each couplet — opening with a line of falling meter and then rocking in each second line into flexible iambics. Then against this rhythm, hear what happens when he recognizes that "Where my words began is no longer home." Booth has moved through a command of traditional meters toward the compression of much contemporary poetry which seems to be wringing the unstressed syllables right out of each line. "Reaching In" appears to be moving toward such condensation at the close: "twined lives close/ make waves," but then shudders into the virtually unscannable "probability theory." This is witty writing, but it also achieves a depth of response that can shake a reader to the marrow.

Let me say something about the book as a whole, resisting the temptation to talk through it poem by poem. There is humor here: the wit of language so intently selected for its colloquial and etymological rightness that it becomes metaphysical in its punning; the delicately playful ode to excrement, "Civilities"; the satire of aging males fantasizing in their pickups:

> They talk low-end power,
> desert radials, Hooker roll-bars,
> the whole catalogue. Everything's far
> except here: the glow of the panel,
> the surge of the tach as they diddle,
> idle, then back off.
> There are girls
> out there, from here to Iowa,
> waiting.
> ("Pickup")

There are love poems here, both public ("Counting the Ways") and intimate ("Directions," "Longings"). And there are poems with political assumptions, sometimes explicit ("Provisions") and always implicit in the poems that portray unsentimentally and unjudgmentally the mind-obliterating grind of rural poverty ("Poor," "Lights"). And this poet sees with a cold eye where he stands:

> Immaculate floors, ceilings broken
> only by skylights. The insulated
> walls, the soundless heat; and hidden

(Stanza continues)

everywhere, a fan for every odor.

Of our two nations
that is one.
And you who will not
read this
presume you know the other.
("United States")

Though *Selves* is rooted in the same glacial soil as Booth's recent work in *Relations* (1986), these poems show the poet moving deeper into his subject: into other selves, as in the moving poems on old age (over some I confess to literally weeping; others were indeed too deep for tears), and into the self (as in the extraordinary tribute to the power of family, "Thanksgiving").

John Cage and Philip Booth would probably agree on a good deal: on the essential interrelationship of science and art, on the involvement of the audience in the creative process, on the need for concentrated attention to the language, when language is the medium.

I suspect that they would agree that one of art's highest functions is to command the attention of the reader/listener/viewer so as to open the doors of perception to the energy that is eternal delight (thank you, William Blake). I remember coming out of an exhibit of Robert Rauschenberg's collage work in the East End of London and suddenly seeing "Rauschenbergs" on every hoarding and in every gutter. Listening to Cage's "4′ 33″" (four minutes and thirty three seconds of "silence," a chance-determined period), I became intensely aware of the symphony of ambient sound. By chance-generated words Cage hopes to get that same rapt attention and the ideas it generates, whereas Booth, by selecting his words for the maximum precision and resonance, hopes to direct the reader's attention to the "still sad music of humanity," to the song of the earth, and perhaps even to what used to be called the music of the spheres. That I need to use a renaissance term to approximate this concept shows that the poets still have work to do: to renew the language so that it can express what we know and what we can imagine.

Beyond that, we have what Cage replied when asked about "language poetry" and the poet's role in society: "Poets have as many roles as there are poets" (pp. 97-98).

Hurrah!

M. K. S.

Cover: Jack B. Yeats, "In the Train," from *Cuala Broadsides,* October 1908, with the permission of Michael Yeats. In the *Cuala Broadside* it accompanied the following poem:

IN THE TRAIN: PORTRAIT OF A NAVVY

His cap, his pipe, his corduroy,
The little gold-ring in his ear,
His cave-man's jaw to make you fear
The half-burnt feast that should employ
Those teeth of iron and ivory,
Cracking a bone like biscuit there,
And that strong hand to harry the bear,
Look brave in our pale company.

His smile is great: his road lies home
Across a thousand quarts of beer;
For him, the Caesars are in vain,
Rome, Pharaoh, Cnut, are still to come;
The river-marsh blinds Westminster,
And Lincoln's Inn is fields again.

Ernest Rhys