

THE BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL

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Cover: Robert Shetterly, Jr., "At night, in winter, the old trees dance and sing," pen and ink with wash, 1989.

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THE STUBBORN CHILD

after Grimm

His mother had taken him into her grave
where he continued to fidget. Quiet down,
she yelled, or we'll get no peace here too.
But his arms kept lifting and falling
and his legs moved back and forth in perpetual dance.

The boy wanted to please his mother who loved him,
who always gave him the best of what she had.
But he could not find comfort in her grave
and continued to mander through those sleepless years,
his skinny chest surging as if it were still a home to breath.

You're not dead yet, are you little boy? she screamed
and smacked him with her bony hand and chased him
with a kitchen knife around their small compartment.
She shoved him with her thin right arm so hard
he popped right out of that grave

he had been trying to live in, and lay weak
half blind and covered with earth.
The dead smells of his skin made the small boy dizzy.
When he tried to walk, he fell, and he cried
each day for years to live without stumbling.

He does not mention any of this to his daughter
who sleeps her stubborn sleep each night
as he stands in her room and prays through her
restless years, waving his arms above her,
sweeping and stirring the immaculate air.

Peter E. Murphy

Three Poems

INTO THE STADIUM

Something new has come over
the young men of this town.
They pick up a stone, raise it
high, in one hand. It lights.
How can stone burn, we asked
ourselves in the better cafes,
in the town. Then we remembered
the comet, Elijah's chariot.

And the young men, some
still in their leather shorts,
like torchbearers then run
through the streets. Every night
you see a few. We used to think
it strange, we suspected a cult.
But now it's accepted; in the
cafes, in the parks, people say
they're running for us.

We're out for a walk,
you, I and our son. We stop
at a jeweler's shop, where pearls
are draped across barite roses.
Our son is missing. Then
I see him, through the window,
in the shop. He's pale, gesturing —
the jeweler knows, nods, gives
him the amethyst geode. Our son
holds it, high, and I see how
small he was, and how now
his time to run has come.

THE SENSUAL LABORATORY ASSISTANT

The carrot-
haired student
came and said: My acid
is 2° hotter than my base, so
how can I do my heat of neutralization
experiment. But then I watched her technique:
the acid bottle's ground glass
stopper stuck, she held it
close to her breast
to work it free.

What I try
for in my own work
is to remove the human element
from analysis. It's the automated lab,
tubes clicking around in programmed sequences.
Their round bottoms have no spikes, so they fall smoothly
into place for sampling, a leak-free fit.
Even specimens contained in the most
aggressive of solvents
can be handled.

My physicist
friend, who's building
the electronics for the new storage
ring, she says there is an old tradition
in the accelerator community, that in the night
before the ring is turned on, a couple must make love
at its center. Or it won't work.
It must have been cramped,
I bet, in those old
cyclotrons.

Aaron Klug
lectures on the way
proteins have with nucleic
acids, how they turn on transcription
of genes. It's the zinc fingers that do it:

(Stanza continued)

Zn bound to S and N of a special
amino acid sequence shaping
a loop that is the finger
of a hand that touches
DNA the way you
touch me.

HERE'S WHAT THISTLES CAN DO

spread
with a natural vengeance
like a shantytown,
like a fire
whose blue flames
burn through the summer light.
In the slow bang
of the green world
they create
inviolable space
yet serve
as a floret feeding
niche
for hoppers, bumblebees,
a spiked perch
for hunterflies.
I've seen thistles
bent by herbicide
into treble clefs
and ampersands and
surmount that.
Elsewhere,
I've seen an old thistle
sway under a finch.
And the other day
one forced me
from my path,
closer to you.

Two Poems

INQUIRIES INTO THE TECHNOLOGY OF HELL
AND CERTAIN RUMORS RECENTLY CIRCULATING

“The snowball arrives in hell every morning at 7.”

— *Jack Spicer*

And so they come up on us after we thought
we were free, better or not, after we thought
we had almost settled things. And they say:
We don't expect sympathy. We don't expect
trust, faith, any of that, we know how long
we made our gestures and you yawned, as bored
and unpersuaded as we were ourselves, needing
a new sign. You won't believe it. But here
it is anyway, the truth being a wall sometimes
for comfort and regret, some sort of answer.

It happened in hell, they say. That place.
You don't have to believe. But that day
it happened that a little boy was up
and roaming the great halls. Despite
the old sermons they were dim and almost
cool those mornings, waiting for the bell
to bring the fires back, the monotonous,
earnest screams. And there it was, you know,
they said, don't ask us why or how, it was,
white and eerie in that world of red
and black, steaming just a little, ready.

The technology of hell was barely medieval,
let alone postmodern. Enormous clumsy pipes

(Stanza continued)

and hoppers, dirty yellow flames, everything clogged and filthy with centuries when security had never been a problem. So there was the little night burn in an alcove, not even fenced off. So there was the ball in the child's hands, dripping, so cold. Why not? He was still young, somehow. He remembered the year after Kennedy died, how three boys with a bucket found the flame on the grave that was advertised as eternal. Play is a wild teacher. Of course he panicked when the flame hissed and died. No matter. In hell the gas had no metaphors or mercaptans: it slipped into low spots, trying to think, to remember. Who could have thought.

And so the staff awoke cold and confused, and so hours passed as they blundered through the blueprints, and so some ordinary devil lit the match.

And so.

A snowball, a child, a match, and now we come to see you, holding all this like sacks of stale groceries, inventing the questions you ought to ask: *Is it true that the maps are useless? That all the old rooms are ash and splinters? What is it that the wild ones taste in the dust that settles from the hot wind?*

We look at the floor, think of the children, harrumph. We hint that we gave at the office. And so they say, fine. Don't worry. We will be in the good room, plotting our course, laying our claims, sorting our stories. We do not insist you take this one as true. We do not require or forbid you to gather at the river, or kneel in the evening, or dust your shelves. When you want to hear, we will tell you again.

**REPORT ON THE DISCOVERY OF THE CITY INTO WHICH
THE SAINTS HAVE BEEN SAID TO GO, MARCHING**

“Heaven is dead.”

— *Mallarmé*

Don't ask how we did it. Call it fate or harmony
or tax dollars at work, the grasping that exceeds
our reach. Partly instrumental, partly mystic,
but we found it. And three days from the border,
on a wide, deserted, unworn road, the city.
The old black book had it right: fifteen hundred miles
on a side, the walls of seamless, dark green quartz,
the twelve pearl gates, the graceful buildings.
All that had changed was that everyone was gone.

We wandered far into the realm, across all sorts
of terrain, and found no other sign. The roads
all lead to the city, but moving out turn oddly vague
and hard to follow. There were a few early moments
when our instruments seemed to pick up haunting, near-
familiar songs, when we felt ourselves among mysteries.
Like most mysteries, they refused to come clean.

The press has floated many schemes for the place,
but all of them founder on logistics and supply:
the distances are huge, travel hard in the dark
and full moons. And while the city is great and glorious,
it lacks sewers, plumbing, stairways, public transport.
Some buildings are hollow, windowless husks, others filled
with tangles of shelves and pillars. No hospitals,
single-family homes, kitchens, parking lots.

And yet despite all we say they keep coming,
some with nothing but their hands, others lugging
pack frames full of nylon and freeze-dried food.
Bright tents dot the hillsides, and campstoves
glow and hiss at all hours. The climate is mild,
of course, and trees near the river bear fruit.
A pale sort of fungus can be gathered and eaten
though it won't keep. Nothing can be cultivated.

Still, if the place has defeated our usual interests,
no one has given up or died. The tourists avoid
the planned attractions and refuse to leave
when their money is gone. They walk the streets
wearing robes they bring or make somehow, talk
endlessly about truth and God and beauty. They sit
in circles picking banjos and dulcimers, singing
old gospel songs. They act for all the world
as if they mean to stay forever.

Jeff Gundy

FOSTERLING

Home, drunk,
a winner at poker,
he lifts me to his shoulders.

“Chance rules,”
he yells and we gallop
from kitchen to bedroom and back,
the woman behind us saying, “Glen,
let him down, you’re drunk, you’ll hurt
the boy, it’s past

his bedtime.” But we leap and turn and off
we go, slapping doorways, saluting
the fridge, bowing

to our image in the mirror. Who am I
when he leans into his wife,
pants unzipped, hands at her breasts,

my feet growing numb
between them, her saying, “Don’t,
Honey stop, this isn’t

play”? Head I’m head
and he’s the body, the beast
I ride. Or I’m a falcon,

flying out, circling back,
a stray lamb in my talons,
dropping to this perch

in the dark. Or a pine
swaying in the wind
above snuffling bear, rutting buck,

my arms spread out
to fall: I want to give
my own soft pulp,

say this body
is for all.

When you plop me into bed,

Father Beast, lean close,
let me feel — me too —
the warm weight of your chest.

*

Walking the trail, late June, morning dust
still moist, I can hear the falls below,
the hiss of pines above, the crunch of cones in soft earth
right here. The man who wants me to call him father

holds my hand and points out blackberry, mint,
cowslip and elk turd. He knows the rocks looming ahead
won't fall, trailing vines won't snap us up — only fears

to entertain as I scout for shells the hunters drop,
22, 40:6, the shiny brass like jewels
in the dust. He tells stories,

how rattlesnakes hypnotize their prey — mole or even
a small dog — and swallow them whole. He points to a slope
of boulders and short grass, where soon he'll leap from rock
to rock, prodding the shadows with a forked stick. He stops

and rattles start. I can see the crude head, beady eyes, elaborate
diamond-patterned body — what choice but strike
or be struck? He pins it with his boot, lowers
his pistol and shoots its head off, lifts the body,
tall as me, laughs and flicks his tongue, this man

who wants me to call him Dad or Pop or Papa.
But I go back to filling my pockets with bugs and stones
and dry husks. I'm the child-snake, coiled in the real
that's not real. I won't blink when he fires his pistol, won't take
the hand of him who blasts the breasts of pheasants.
I'll dig beyond his words to a place of moles and mice
and ants dancing with news, cling to the bottom side
of roots and never come up. Home is here where water
seeps and seeds declare their need for light, yet roots
want dark. Every day I test the light
and wait to lose this boy's skin, to find a place,
find a time, until he calls and I skip
the dream, run to the one on top of boulders. When I hear
rattles again, I hide behind him. Laughing, he gives me
the severed tail. I shake it once, twice and put it
in my pocket to finger carefully, saying, "Thanks,
Papa, thanks. It's neat."

*

The bright notch grows
as he chops the pine,
ring on ring,
a cry exposed.

When it falls what comes?
Chokers' grip. Hauled to the track. Lashed
to a saw that rips it in two.
At the bottom of the slope,
log on log, we build our mountain home,
stack blasted rock for the chimney,
trowel the patio smooth,
press our palms into wet cement, proof
of who we are, where we belong. Last
we hang the moosehead over the couch,
my place to sit as she sews and he
oils his shotgun. Now let

the wind howl — her needle
pulls the buttons fast, his fingers
tighten triggers. The moose snuffles
through his sawdust mind

for the feel of soft grass
on cloven hooves. Like him
I'm stepping into a clearing
wise to the blast I'll catch in the ribs,

what happens when I fall —
scraped clean of my cloven heart,
the trauma of lost fathers and mothers and places
to belong, stuffed with bark, dirt and leaves,

stuffed to last. Sew me up. Hang me here.
Muzzle wired to a smile.

*

He tottered
out of the Jackpot Lounge,
stumbled through the gravel
parking lot, jammed down
the gas and raced
down Kings County Highway.

Chance ruled
the swerve, spin and roll
of his Cadillac. Heads down,
tails up, Chance begot
half a man
in beds and wheelchairs, eyes stalking
doorways for visitors, black eyes

flashing blame: you
the lost wife, car and business, you
the twelve-year-old shouting back,
"No, not true!" and him
shouting louder, "You, it was you."

Can you take it

(Stanza continued)

when truth shatters,
when ordered vision becomes willed
destruction, when candor
is terrified laughter? Even in sleep
his jaw still moves. Do you love him?
Can you lift the legs that will never
move, strap the bags for feces and urine
to your own small waist,
hoist the man Chance
kicked from the scales
to keep some abstract principle
intact —

the two of you
in one common shirt,
crying “Chance rules! Chance rules!” as you race
through the wide glass doors.

No one to blame. No one
to forgive.

*

Our heart survives between two hammers.
— Rainer Maria Rilke

Pound me down.
Pound me down again.
Past Fresno in August.

The asphalt melting.
The cooler dripping.
Fat flies thumping the glass.

The boy with his suitcase, waiting to go.
He won't cry, he's going
back to his original parents,

Mother Odd, Father Even,
back to their place deep in the earth
where smoke spews and a furnace flares,

where with coon claws and bobcat smiles
they pound out loss and bewildered rage.

They shave the head, part the chest,

detach the heart and rip out

the soul, pound till he's flat and pure.

Soon a man will step through the foundry doors

Let the earth be hard, the hands firm.

Let him lean toward love like a pine

leans with the wind

even when the wind's not there. Let a lover

pound him back to that other life, the original

one, before the swirl of events

made hands retract and roofs collapse, made fathers

die and mothers say,

You must go. Take him

in your furnace. Pound him soft.

Pound him close.

Pound him new again.

Don Schofield

THE BIG FISH OF THE MIND

Skin slubbed like gator hide pegged to the sun.

Sharktooth bolo strung from neck like a lanyard gone loco;

wooden beads separate sawsharp teeth from fishing tools;

snippet, forceps, saltwater fly boxes, a bottle opener

dangling like a rusting tongue. . .

Lazily, the captain's call taunts its way over water:

Fifth of Bacardi, Pop, if you find the big fish!

Old sea hunter, retired from the ocean's tenuous trail

of foam

to stalking bonefish on saltwater flats,

(Stanza continued)

climbs painfully aboard in his Panama hat
(hard to tell where sun-bleached fibers woven by Ecuadorians
out of hat palm ends and the salt-white ripple
of hair begins). Old Hemingway relic (they say he could tie
the barrel knot with two shaky fingers, drunk or sober).

O, sting, smell of his rum-steeped sea
ordered to dream up the big fish for the chartered
guest
gripping sides of the beer locker, dressed in Bonefish Scrubs,
pink perspiry flesh slick with Alos-Gator cream, terrified
at harbor chop.

Strapped, by command of the skipper, in the fishing guest's
seat, arms whippy as the boron-graphite rod, ears ringing
audible drag,
big reel hissing line, calling the big fish

*Come to me come to me hook-up to rumfire's
first morning swallow!*

O, sweet shock of the setting! Hook gulped down like
a tipped bottle; the big fish thirsting, twisting,
a silver-foil fencing, dancing and leaping,
hook digging deeper, draining strength of the run.

The big fish is netted to a chorus of dolphins, clicking
and squealing; the old hunter is humming
at his first taste of rum.

The big fish is hung like a long silver ingot,
the chartered guest stands for his picture, name on a
chalkboard, length, weight of the fish, boat, skipper,
date, place, time . . .

The old man appears to be watching, sipping, croons
to his bottle
paying out oceans and oceans of line
on a perfectly tied invisible leader, pleading, cajoling
the big fish of the mind.

SIX KINDS OF MUSIC, THE WALLPAPER OF BREASTS

I thought I'd drive the seventy miles
To see my son, slouch in a dorm room
With six kinds of music, the pleasure
Of his wallpaper of breasts. His wild hair
Was jammed down his shirt; we said nothing while
We breathed together as he looked for shoes
And I thumbed through his college catalogue
As if it were *People* at the dentist.

I recognized Tom Petty, Prince, The Who;
I heard, when another door swung open,
The Fine Young Cannibals, and I could have
Asked my son who else was singing along
That hall, but he said, finally, "That guy
On the cover was arrested for rape,"
And I closed his core curriculum, looked
Again at the student in the sweatshirt,
The name of my son's school across his chest
To sell parents, because he was seated
In the stacks, a sense of scholarship.

I felt like the fool of the worthless deed,
The lunkhead of the nosedived junk bond.
That student's slick smile had beamed at us
Through a senior year of choices; I tried
To read the titles of the books bunched on
The shelf behind him and made jokes about
The fabricated pose of study, how
Two hundred catalogues we owned had been
Cloned like the white pillars, ivy, and
The quarter-hour chorus of carillons.

I wasn't sure what it meant to have
A rapist on that cover, see my son
In his sweatshirt across the lawn from
Where a new library was being built.
For all I knew, the girl lived in that dorm,
Had a copy of this catalogue
Among her books. "He's history," I heard.
"He's expelled," and one of the stereos,
At least, was softened, turned off, or the door
Of its owner's room was so unlikely
Thick it shut the sound inside like a hand
Insistent over an astonished mouth.

Gary Fincke

CAMPAGNANO, ITALY, 1921

I want to be far from the werewolves,
which I have never seen, though I have heard them.
I want to be far from the dust
that rises in the town square
and settles in our throats.
I want to forget the crumbling stone fountain
in the square, where the wolf-men cool their thirst
on the nights when fear
keeps the town locked up.

When I met my husband, after the war,
he had already crossed the ocean.
He says things are not so old in America,
so there is less dust.
Our infant son will make this journey with us.
Our other children will find us there
if they wish to be born.

Last week, my father went to bed
and pulled the starched sheets to his chin.
He squinted at the ceiling
as if glimpsing Heaven
and announced,
“Giovannina, if you go to America,
then I will die.”

But I folded more linens into my trunk,
and now my mother lies beside her husband
in the high white bed,
her eyes clouded with pain.

I sent for the doctor.
He examined them,
searching their faces with dim eyes,
then turned to me.
“If you leave,” he said, “your parents will die.”
It is true.
They will both die —
no, soon, and not from my leaving,
but we will never meet again.

Tonight the moon is full; it fills the sky.
Inside the house, the lamps cast shadows.
We have bolted the heavy door against the night.
I tend my grieving parents in their bed
and listen through the quiet.
When the cries of wolves, or men,
come drifting over rooftops
to creep like dust through the cracks,
I will know I am hearing them
for the last time.

Joanna A. Piucci

HEROD PIPER

Squirrels' flat-foot, supernumerary dance in our attic matches the migraine throbbing blind behind a sullen eye, keeps time with my dark pulse (shhBOOM, shhBOOM) and the roar, polysaturated, mute, and sore (as sounds are) of the room. Above our bobbin heads they trip, trundle: Fred Astaire or some troll taking toll, nimble and astute, at Goat Bridge over our bed: who goes? aloft to loony tune, while we sough down the televisionary drain, sag at the end of the day, drift on the flood of remote control. The squirrels' polka stomps above us, spooky and pseudohypertrophic — ah! mind's eye: gorgon, gargoyle, dragon, Kong.

Also mice play, superficially, in the walls. Nomad squatters, they trestle, pitching their exact tense treble in alt or alp. The brick house (tiTUM, tiTUM) hums of a metensomatosis: O my friend! He has come on swift feet, acute and rodent, to be song piping and precise. — The pie was opened, then . . .

Arnold? — I consult with sighs a yellow page: we can not allow these rodents to scratch the house down. So, prototypically pert, with curls round a pied bald patch, the man from Ace Pest Control descends on poison pellets, ex machine or Hamlin, an involutory hail, pea green patter, Peter Piper's peck.

Ashes, shelved in Menemenehatta, wait out the winter. Waiting for Arnold's ashes, we exude a writing on the wall: small feet tap out (deDIT, deDIT) a still, stale indistinguishable word, cross road of two worlds: we clap and command that Herod and the mad piper ride again. A day's dull slaughter dawns.

Four Poems**WHERE NO ONE SPOKE THE LANGUAGE**

From the blanket over the mother
screams have reached us.

What will be born?
The children cry cold, cold, the whole
tongue of the village
stuck to the ice.

Father walks after curfew.
He mutters, swipes

the hot soles of his feet.
The words inside him,

the quills scalded in the pot
when he was a chicken,

a young rooster dancing,
telling the cook

everything he knows.

CONTINUING EDUCATION

I drive into the stretch marks
from the campus. The cardboard boxes
of beer and plastic disposable diapers
disappear under my headlights

with the thud of a hit and run. Office hours,
I talk with a student, his latest translations
from one street of America to another.
By the time you call, I am already drunk.

The class tonight went as well as expected.
So many immigrants from day jobs, so many words
with trouble clearing customs. So many times I came close
to leaving but didn't. I look out the door
to see where I am, an unpainted porch with no porchlight,
the steps not cleared from the most recent
small snow. If someone slips I'll slip with them.
If someone shouts I'll correct their grammar.

AN ILLEGAL PHOTOGRAPH IN *AMERICAN POETRY REVIEW**

There I am with my moustache from '86, fat jowls,
a Russian cruiser hugs the gray line of the far harbor.
I squint like a spy, around me the waters of the Baltic port
soiled by the pale runoff from the black trees of Siberia,
but also from the lodgepole pine in Idaho
making flesh my appearance in *APR*. But this
is not the fault of Gdansk, sad queen of rust
at the end of a century of iron. Karen my black
clad wife stares at me through the view-finder, Chernobyl
stirring in her uterus, the black sixty four crayons
our children will scribble with at school. Yes, this
is where we are. Poland, the smoldering rag in everyone's mind
as they turn the page to see what fish
is the spoil of the day. The necessity of mercury
climbing to you at the top
of the delicate chain of news.

*Until recently it was illegal to make photographs in Poland of ports, bridges, train stations or other transportation centers.

HIDING THE KNIVES

Hefty Clarence, our neighbor, got drunk and went blind on wood alcohol when he was young, a cook at the state hospital in Anna. Now he kept getting sent back there. Brick wall and stormy, roaring down the road he'd go, white cane ticking the gravel. "Hide the knives," my mother would yell when Clarence's son Raymond came loping up bloody-nosed and whining, "Pop's gone crazy again."

Hide the knives in my bedroom, old Clarence never climbed our stairs, wouldn't know where they were if he kicked in our flimsy backdoor. "We'll take off through the field," we said, "if he

turns up our lane." It was just a game but later on the bus Raymond would get even tossing my cap out the window for hiding the knives till we all got too old to act that way and I

bought a hand-tooled wallet from Clarence for ten dollars for my Dad to unwrap on his last Christmas, when Jim and I bought Micrin mouthwash and drank it behind Krogers' trash bins but didn't go blind

or crazy but still there were plenty of knives to hide the sharp ones to end the dull waiting to hide either under the mattress or in the junk on the floor till in one dream old Clarence finds his way upstairs.

"It's a dream," I shout. "No knives in here, just like love, they go away." But Clarence mutters, "They're just hidden, boy. Give me time, give me time, and I'll find them."

NAPI

“To abort or to be born,” he said,
“That is the question.” He hummed —

the women in gowns like gulls
in a dream of desert —

little dawn-light-colored man,
her boyfriend

sitting next to the window,
not looking

at her — the doctor humming “Yes Sir,
That’s My Baby,” hands on a metal

contraption for vacuuming the baby —
“He’ll just take a little nap,

for eternity,” he said—“then through
the tunnel of this nozzle —”

(all of them preparing her for
the littlest death —)

“Let me tell you a story,” he said,
“about your Blackfoot ancestors”

(his hands adjusting her gown
above her rounded belly)

“It’s about Napi,” (little dawn-
light-colored man) “a trickster figure,

sometimes benign — he tied light
in a knot so Kokomikeis, his wife,

could give birth to light — she
was the Moon, you know — terrible fate,

when pelicans ate all their children,
except for the morning star —”

He was doing something beyond the veil
of her gown, adjusting.

“Amniocentesis it should have been,
her name, don't you think?”

(His hands moving in loops) “Christ
was a pelican too, but that was

a different legend — worse really,
feeding the faithful with blood

from His own breast.” A sudden pain.
“Did that hurt? I'll be more careful.”

Her boyfriend watched through a square
of light. “Anyway, as I was saying,

Napi made the first woman and man
out of clay — feet of clay — but forgot

about death. The woman, said, ‘Napi,
will we live forever, just go on

as we are — or will we cease to be?’
Well, Napi had forgotten, so he said,

‘What do you think?’ ” His hands
were dances of the spirit — her father

when he danced the ancient dances,
the fall of a bird, no matter what kind.

Her boyfriend crossed his legs, as
the machine came on. “‘We must decide,’

said Napi, ‘I'll take a chip of wood
and throw it in the river — if it floats

when you die, you'll come back in four
days — if it sinks there'll be no end to death.’ ”

The nozzle sucked the air from the room.
“Now just a little vacuuming,” he said.

She imagined her baby floating into space,
a little fleck of star, or mica.

“You won’t feel a thing,” he said.
“Well, of course, it floated, and the woman
said to Napi, ‘We’ll throw this stone
into the river, and if it floats

we’ll live forever, and if it sinks
we’ll die.’” She could feel herself

vanishing into the machine — no pain —
just a passing — and then she was free —

they had taken her baby — “There, easy
does it,” he said, “A little spring cleaning
is all — nothing to be concerned about —”

Her boyfriend came and held her hand,
a nurse pushed a cart, gull in the wind,
shirt rising and moving. “Love restored,
Paradise regained,” said the doctor.

“And of course the stone sank —

and Napi said, ‘You have chosen.’ After
her baby died she realized what she had done.”

Stephen Perry

THE RUINED COTTAGE

Women and men from whom all had been taken away
he tried to show me, and so took me up the stony mountain
into the first world. Wind inhabited the fog,
there was the howling wraith of his own childhood,
as the sun rose, burning the world clear and laying bare
the naked height, suffering its own love of the dawn
among scraped rocks, a few twisted shrubs, the sparse
but greenest grass, and flocks that blew at random
on the slopes. He pointed to cairns, inscriptions, names
of people who were forgotten, to two foundations —
for a sheepfold never finished and a house
crumbled — and to dreary places along the road
where once a dying, silent, blind old man had trudged
and mouthed and dropped his bread. Then I looked up
and it was all gone. Dawn was stabbing from the west,
a subvitreous dawn in the green mirror facade
across the street, and in this fast-food place,
the vistas of polished floor and ceiling tiles
and orange and lavender arborite, two scabbed drunks
are arguing. The few other persons scattered through
the acidic light look around or stare into their coffee
or empty styrofoam: afraid now to walk up the blocked aisle
and ask for another cup. Beneath the incoherent violence
of the men's loud words, the rest all lie like mummified
berries under a tree putting forth spring growth:
something about whether the city knows how to pave its roads,
and whose are some dimes and quarters. One sits, the other
tries to stand over him but staggers, runs sideways
to save his balance, falls against two ragged girls
feeding pancakes to two infants, and lies unmoving

in the spilled syrup, plastic forks and screams.
Don't you have any respect for women and children,
says an old man, almost in tears, don't you have
any pride, any manhood, are you men? The sprawled man,
insulted, lunges for him, and falls again, cursing,
against the young mothers. And soon it has all
been swept away: the manager has put out
the drunks and their antagonist, and the two girls
have mopped the coffee from their clothes,
quieted the children, cleaned the spilled food from the floor
as if this were their house, and pushed their strollers
into the snow starting to swirl and drive. And I know —
when they first came in I looked up from "The Ruined Cottage"
and saw them pool all their money to buy that food.

A.F. Moritz

NEUROANATOMY

The fog over Grizzly Peak,
a thick cerebral cortex;
I enter its folds, its sulci and gyri;
the canyons beneath me,
like ventricles; dusk
seeps from them like dark fluids.

*

On a stretched canvas,
8 brains neatly arranged.
Over each, a cartoon cloud
emptied of image or speech.
Whose brain was this
that I weigh in my hands,
heavy, dense as bread dough,
but porous?
We lift orange stick
and scalpel, begin
our dissection.

*

Memory is probably stored chemically,
in the synapse,
microscopic gap that is Lethe's antithesis;
molecules ferry across
rivers of remembering,
reversing Charon's way,
between axon and dendrite.

*

What we loved,
where we have lived, lost
in the layers of white.

*

Where Grizzly reaches Shasta Gate,
the fog is so thick:
memories encountered in my office,
lives under shifting layers
of opacity. Images,
as when the sun rises
and a gray house, a white fence,
the branches of an oak appear;
or on a foggy street, suddenly,
a woman in a raincoat . . .

*

Folded within the neocortex
are the gray masses
regulating impulse and feeling;
as under the recent hills,
tectonic plates and magma;
the dissection proceeds but not
to the layers we dream from.

*

While it was whole,
before we had peeled off
the blood vessels and meninges,
and prepared to invade the cortex,

(Stanza continued)

I held it up; whose brain?
peeled off the cranial nerves:
olfactory, optic, oculomotor . . . ,
to the tenth, the vagus,
meaning wanderer.

*

There's a party in the lab;
parts of the brain
are scattered on my lap, my jeans,
among chocolate cake crumbs and icing;
smelling of formaldehyde,
we sing Happy Birthday,
eat cake, resume our dissection.

*

I plummet through the folds
of the cortex;
thought, poem, terrors
and longings murmured in my office:
electrical charges across the thin membranes
between inside and out.

*

The professor, a woman, says,
"The *massa intermedia*,
one of the nerve bundles that joins
the left and right hemispheres,
is absent at autopsy from 85%
of the male cadavers,
and 15% of the female cadavers;
nothing whatsoever is known
of its function; no funding
to solve the mystery of what it does."

*

Over our dissecting trays,
the women laugh, the men
look bewildered.

*

Where fog is as thick as fatty sheaths
of myelin over axons,
I go deeper in. How different from maps,
from procedures by daylight;
the studied structures, unrecognizable;
of what use, atlases of anatomy
when what in the text seemed merely complex,
turns out to have neighboring and overlapping structures,
idiosyncratic convolutions,
no color codes or little plastic flags with names?

*

In the lab, the familiar mass,
 lifted from its plastic bucket
and wet cheesecloth, menaces;
 later on Grizzly, the familiar road
 turns odd under the winter shadows
of what I'd imagined once
 to be merely eucalyptus and pine.

*

Susan Kolodny

Two Poems

ALL YE NEED TO KNOW

for Tess

So the super said Yes, it had been a woman,
but getting her number from him was worse
than root-canal work, and when I reached
her answering machine, I told her who I was
and that forty-eight hours after she'd moved
out I'd moved in, and what a beautiful job
she'd done keeping the place spotless
and perfect, except for a single rectangle,
inside the broom-closet door, about the size
of my thumbnail, that someone kept cleaning
around. I said I hoped her machine didn't
hang up before I finished talking and
that I worked for Shearson blah blah in the Big
Apple blah so she'd understand I wasn't any
old jerk, and I explained that I just had
to know: was there some reason she left the tiny
pair of penciled X'es in that little rectangle?
Because if she didn't tell me, I was going
to obliterate them with a blast of Four Oh Nine.

Three days pass, mind you, three bloody days,
and although no one could tell me if she was a fox
or man's best friend (her forehead might
have been tattooed with the Marine insignia
for all the super had observed), I knew and
I mean I *knew* she had the kind of looks that
fell strong men at fifty paces: I could hear it
in her sweet recording on the answering machine.
Three days pass before she finally returns

(Stanza continued)

the call at Shearson and says, in tones smoother than Myers Rum Cream, that she can't tell me what they mean, but please, don't wash them off, it's a silly sentimental thing, and of course it's my unit now to do with as I please, but please, if only in thanks for the way she kept the place, don't wash the X'es off the broom-closet door.

So I told her thanks for calling but I was a compulsive cleaner — Ha! You've seen my sink! — and if she didn't let me in on the secret, off they came. "How about lunch?" she asks. Her treat, no less, if I just keep the Four Oh Nine inside the broom closet a bit longer, but I couldn't get away for lunch. We had dinner, instead, my treat, and I don't think I ate a dozen bites: she had a face right off the cover of *Vogue*. My teeth ached when I gazed at this woman. It's the kind of thing where even if you possess her you will never ever possess her, where feminine beauty, in a hundred-and-six-pound parcel, is such a monstrous, huge entity that it cannot be contained by the beholder or the beholdee, and however close you may think you get to it there is the steady realization that your cup runneth over so much that what spills on the ground would satisfy another ten mortal men, and that if you'd paid better attention to Keats' great odes in college maybe you could get a handle on it, on this perfumed, heady, overpowering and ethereal beauty. But probably not: no one can. Not you, not Keats, not anyone.

We had dinner every night for the better part of a month, and I took her to all the plays, the most expensive seats available, and every Italian opera you've heard and some they may not have heard in Italy; and you must remember that no woman had ever dragged me to the opera.

That was, let's see, five, uh, six years ago, now. She moved in with me, she moved right back to the same unit she'd cleared out of, and again she kept it spotless and immaculate and damn near civilized me in the process. She dusted, she washed, she cooked, she kept working for Aetna, and this woman made love like no goddess before or after. Through her I learned to appreciate opera and came to understand the wisdom of Mark Twain when he said that Wagner is better than he sounds.

I cannot hold on to these lovely creatures when I'm married; I cannot keep them when I'm single. It's the tragic flaw I inherited from my father: I suffocate them. When she left in the cab that Saturday I wept so hard my cheeks ached for the entire month of September. When I smile, I still feel the ache right here and right here. And No, to answer your question, she never did tell me what the X'es meant, she just kept cleaning around them. I've had endless theories on their significance, but they were just that, theories. She softly but firmly rejected all questions about their meaning. She asked only that I not erase them. Some nights now, when I can't sleep, when I smell her hair beside me on the pillow, her voice implores me not to erase them. For her sake, I'll never erase them, but every time I pull something out of that closet I stare at them, and sometimes I touch them, lightly, like this, until my fingers seem to burn. A thousand million times I wished I'd erased them and never made such a stupid call. But what the hell. *C'est la vie*. You want to listen to the new Verdi recording?

CAUTIONARY TALE

Let me tell a cautionary
tale, my wife of sixty years:
*This film may cling
to nose and mouth. Keep away
from children.*

After all the love
and hate, the children
you have borne, and whatever else
we may reveal when both of us
are consciously alive, again, if just
in filmy spirit —

Let me say that once, as children,
we thought in childish ways — that there
was nothing worse than death — better
to wither over time than fade,
at once, from multiple injections
from a vial, left here, beside
your bed, by the evening nurse.

But we grew up and put away such
childish ways — and see, now, if this
fluid's not enough, then may I see you
through a film of tears or other
films before I see you in the sun,
three college books clutched loose
against your breast, your back
erect, and all the world before us.

Ross R. Whitney

BOOKS IN BRIEF

Lola Haskins, *Forty-four Ambitions for the Piano* (Orlando: University of Central Florida Press, 1990, 70 pp., \$16.95 cloth, \$9.95, paper). Not being myself a pianist, I first saw this exquisite book as a Ravenna mosaic: the impact of the dazzling, carefully-set tesserae much more than the sum of their parts. On re-reading I learned to appreciate it as a single piece of music, playing through the pages like the Bach *Sarabande* that runs across the seven chapter titles. A magician of metaphor, Haskins composes these forty-four compact poems on the performer's work so that the whole book becomes a glowing metaphor for the relationship of art and life. Here is, entire, "The Pianist Who Keeps a Loaded Gun on Her Piano When She Practices":

The children know not to knock.
 Double-sexed, I use both hands.
 I tease seriously. The notes
 tantalize, approach explosion,
 fall back. It is the brink
 that thrills when the high
 walker sets her pink foot
 on the rope.

The children know
 I would shoot, but not at whom.
 I am not certain I know myself,
 only that this deep readying,
 this fierce first step over
 air, is worth dying for.

Galway Kinnell, *When One Has Lived a Long Time Alone* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990, 70 pp., \$18.95 cloth). Readers who reach for this book because of its gorgeous jacket will find even more splendid poems within. And a rich diversity. The opening poems examine, through the imagination of memory and attention, the world of work and then segue into the world of the poet's father. Next are poems that break new ground, exploring the complexities of characters on the frontier of despair — most memorably in "The Massage." Many of the poems in this volume are religious poems — the religion of *eros* and *agapé* — in a language that exhausts the conventional vocabulary of traditional religions and conceives new forms of ritual, liturgy, and myth to express webs of love and fear that have hitherto lacked a voice. Among these new poems is some of Kinnell's

most explicitly erotic love poetry (see "Last Gods") and some goofy comedy (to learn the art of eating oatmeal when one has lived a long time alone, see the wonderfully funny "Oatmeal"). The masterwork of this book is the title poem, eleven thirteen-line stanzas that recapitulate the long time alone. It may well be the best poem in Jorie Graham's *Best American Poetry of 1990*. Like the book as a whole, it could have been titled "Metamorphosis," and perhaps Ovid, more than Whitman, is the tutelary genius behind this volume. Like the snake's eyes, these poems

look back
without giving any less attention to the future,
the first coating of the opaque, milky-blue
leucoma snakes get when about to throw their skins
and become new — meanwhile continuing,
of course, to grow old.

Jorie Graham is the editor, with David Lehman, for *The Best American Poetry of 1990* (New York: Collier Macmillan, 1990, 284 pp., \$19.95, paper; also available in a Scribner hardcover edition). This series is required reading for anyone interested in the directions of contemporary American poetry. Still, I found this edition somewhat puzzling. There are poems of great power here (Kinnell's and Donald Hall's, outstandingly), and I had something to learn from each of Graham's selections. But are these really the best poems Ammons and Ashbery and Bell wrote last year? And is so much of the "best" poetry really so hermetic? If the answer is yes, then I am more disturbed than puzzled. I have one more small protest: for some reason Graham broke with precedent and declined to include any of her own work — a pity, since in 1989 she published a substantial number of poems stronger than many in her anthology.

The current issue of *Abraxas* (38/39, \$6., from 2518 Gregory Street, Madison WI 53711) may go a good way toward explaining what appears to be hermeticism in so much recent poetry. Sixty-three of its 144 pages are devoted to the first translations ever from the first edition (1922) of César Vallejo's seminal work *Trilce*. This bilingual selection is accompanied by portraits of the poet, but more importantly by an extraordinary useful introduction by the translator, Próspero Saíz. In this profoundly erotic poetry I find implied the "political" program of the Language Poets: "The true desire of poetry is freedom, inasmuch as poetry is not a means to an end but *is only an end*. Like authentic erotic desire it is a free end, an unrecoverable 'expenditure.'" And further, "codified language can only

serve as the means to one end: prohibition. Language, as institutionalized profane code, commits violence in order to protect us from violence. In the process it silences poetic transgression — *Trilce* transgresses against language itself — which is an exigency integral to poetry.” I find this position deeply disturbing, to the extent that it itself appears as a dogma, but I find it also illuminating. Anyone seeking to understand some of the most challenging poetry today (see Jorie Graham’s anthology) needs to understand its roots. Saíz’s translations, which appear lucid and musical, and his ten pages of thoughtful and well-grounded introduction make a splendid starting point.

Charles Wright offers an alternative view in “Language Journal,” one of the new poems in his *The World of the Ten Thousand Things: Poems 1980-1990* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1990, 232 pp., \$25. cloth). This retrospective volume is important and full of riches. “Language Journal” would be on my list for next year’s *Best* anthology — the mind of the poet dancing through the sensuous universe: “To be of use, not to be used by,/the language sighs.”

And in my personal *Best* for 1990 I’d also want to find room for the title sequence from **David Wojahn’s** *Mystery Train* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1990, 90 pp., \$9.95 paper), a set of thirty-nine poems — mostly sonnets — ostensibly on rock and roll, but using the music as a lens through which to project an imaginative and illuminating history of our recent culture. If the whole sequence were too long for an anthology, the editor could find excellent candidates among the other poems in this fine collection.

Donald Hall’s *Old and New Poems* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1990, 244 pp. \$24.95 cloth, \$12.95 paper) presents two hundred poems, some of the earlier ones in revisions. The twenty-two new ones range from the epigram:

On a Philosopher

The world is everything that is the case.

Now stop your blubbering and wash your face.

to the thirty-eight five-line stanzas of the monumental “Praise of Death,” which has been eight years in the making, constructing itself, as Hall says in his note to the poem in Graham’s anthology, “adding phrase to phrase like grains of sand accumulating into a hill.” This is a mercurial poem, shifting restlessly back and forth among grief and scathing irony, tenderness and obscenity, terror and longing — from St. Nihil’s Church of the Suburban

Consensus to Gilgamesh. It is less a hill than a whole coastline of living dunes. It is some poem!

Among the nearly two-hundred books I read through in selecting the books to review here, I made my way through scores of volumes by poets self-absorbed and apparently living off their fellowships, so it was a relief to find two excellent books rooted in the world of work: **Jim Daniels**, *Punching Out* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990, 94 pp., \$17.95 cloth, \$9.95 paper) and **David Lee**, *Day's Work* (Port Townsend WA: Copper Canyon Press, 1990, 134 pp., \$10. paper). Lee follows the success of his *Porcine Canticles* with another hilarious series of conversations that take place while the narrator is working with a pig farmer named John — an artesian well of wild, gross, wise, and gutsy stories. Jim Daniels initiates the reader into the facts of life in an auto factory. For Daniels as for Lee, humor is the secret of sanity. Anyone who cares about the range of what a poet can do and anyone who owns or rides in an automobile should study this book. It's humbling to think how little working-class poetry there is today; it's important to pay attention to what little we do have and to be grateful for the power of language and insight in it.

Tony Harrison, *v. and Other Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1990, 86 pp. \$14.95 cloth). The long title poem takes a step down from the world of work to the growing world of the young unemployed. The *v.* of the title is for *versus*, as in Leeds *v.* its soccer opponent — spray-painted on the stones of the narrator's family graveyard in the English midlands. Like Lee and Daniels, Harrison is a master of colloquial speech, its power intensified by the compression of the poetic line. In *v.* Harrison has a blistering conversation with one of the skin-head soccer fans who has vandalized and littered the graveyard, a graveyard subsiding significantly into the mined-out pits abandoned beneath it. Since it is unlikely that the new underclass will produce many of its own poets, those who attempt to speak for them deserve our attention.

Dorianne Laux, *Awake* (Brockport NY: BOA Editions, 1990, 64 pp., \$16. cloth, \$8. paper). An extraordinary first book by a poet who has expressed out of the experience of her own life the story of what it is like to live as a woman in the male society described by Lee and Daniels and Harrison. From a family where the mother, a nurse, arrives home exhausted, with blood on her uniform, and the father labors for authority with the buckle end of his belt, a young woman somehow emerges clear-eyed, unsentimental, eloquent and compassionate — a poet.

John Frederick Nims, *The Six-Cornered Snowflake and Other Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1990, 64 pp., \$18.95 cloth, \$9.95 paper). In addition to the elegant title poem, in the form of a dozen scintillating snowflakes, there are melodious and metrically marvellous poems by a wizard of the language. And there is an afterword, "Some Notes on Form and Formalism," in which Nims puts the case for the armature of traditional prosody as winningly as anyone writing today.

Vikram Seth, *All You Who Sleep Tonight* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990, 68 pp., \$18.95 cloth). Seth seems to breathe in epigrammatic quatrains, heroic couplets, and Jacobean lyric stanzas, so sweetly and spontaneously do these poems appear. The voice and the vision, simultaneously witty and grave, and the subjects — from the four cultures in which Seth is at home — are profoundly appealing. He seems to exemplify what Nims quotes Valery as saying: "Only form preserves the works of the mind."

M. K. S.