

THE БЕЛОIT POETRY JOURNAL

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GRANDMOTHER'S TREE

Controlling her breathing
she listens to the yoga instructor's soothing voice
seduce her sixty-eight-year-old body
into believing

IT IS A TREE.

Standing on one rocking foot
balancing.

One knee bent
with foot resting on inside
of standing knee.

Arms raised over head
hands pressed together
spire of this temple
breathing.

Filtering her family's shame.

Breathing.

Releasing her parents' religious fanaticism:
the musical tongues
the nodoorway with the swinging blanket
the love the relatives declared evil.

Breathing.

She stands this tree
balancing on one foot:
her mother.

The raised foot:

the absent father sent to the asylum:

the hidden weight that makes her body teeter.

Anna Finch

Three Poems

REAL FAUX PEARLS

the announcer promises, and we snicker:
a real falsehood with its own 800 number
sponsoring the evening news — bizarre
as those fast talking men from childhood's low
transmission channels, who used to peel, dice,
shred — anything in thirty seconds, with
a one time only, while they last, magic
kitchen device. Those afternoons, my mother
at work, I'd rearrange her diamonds and
pearls, opals, aquamarines. I knew where
each one came from, and which would be mine when
she died — as if that's the price. And how else
to appraise my grandmother's humongus
ring, but by hours of laundry taken in,
steps paced in the shoe store, by the music
and books they didn't have, not to mention
the mines back then. Now in a crusted leather
case on my dresser that ring sits glowering
and silent, like my grandfather refusing
to lift his legs while she feels under the sofa,
sticks her hands in crevices between cushions,
her tears magnified by thick lenses
until finally she catches its gleam
in a tangle of hair stuck to the broom.

Those old days, miners went down before sunrise,
came up after dark. A man would be sent
in alone to test the air because mules
were expensive. Now, they could wear masks,

make black lung a thing of the past, but they don't.
And as if they need an edge to keep from getting
claustrophobic, they even carry butane
lighters in their pockets as they lie

on their backs rattling through the dark,
straight down. On Sundays, the same men sit in
church, shoulders hunched, faces pale as feet, necks
in tight collars — grown men at the altar

dropping pearls from their eyes for a lost friend,
a bad marriage — *faux* maybe, Sunday pearls,
because it takes a long time to really
mean it when you say you'll change, to really

see how false things are, like my own precious
hide, for instance, the way I was taught to
hold back, contain myself, cast nothing before
swine, and see swine everywhere. A pearl

could be somebody's eyes, it's possible,
a real one at least — the wide stunned eyes of
a young diver caught in a rock chamber. Coal
comes from lungs. You can see along the tracks,

they walk stooped and wheezing, up the hill to
the clinic — thin lungless men, never as
old as they look. If I think this hard enough,
what will be precious to me? If I shut

my eyes, make myself dark and still, here, where
light through a green glass lily, a red flame,
falls onto white cloth, what will I find — down
on my knees among this coughing, these tears?

A SMALL PATCH OF ICE

If I told you we could see nail polish stopping
a run in one skater's tights, a safety pin in
a zipper, that their patch of ice was the size
of my kitchen, no room to leap or spin — you might
agree with my daughter hissing fiercely, *Let's go*.
All they do is circle to tinny music, then stop
in a flourish of shaved ice. But the little mist
that makes reminds me of the gray flickering light
in those films where you come to care about
a balding aerialist, a clown weeping back stage,
the way they'll talk later in their van, with French

or Italian subtitles, about despair.

Maybe that's why I linger. Or is it the smell
of popcorn and cotton candy mixed with machine oil
from a hand-pushed Zamboni — the smell of boardwalks
from childhood, neck jerk rides, tiered rows of teacups
you toss quarters into, those wiry barkers with burnt
cheekbones, voices snatching at your back — Hey, girl
in pink shorts. So we stay to the end.

Then while I scrape a thin crust of ice off
the windshield, my daughter says: *If you can't
do it right, you shouldn't do it at all.*

She's just seen the Olympics on TV and
doesn't like to think how far from grace things
can fall, or how most of us just circle and trudge,
like these skaters, in boots and jeans now, lugging
the heavy ice frame, the clunky machines out to
the U-Haul behind their van. Soon they'll doze,
or bitch, or razz each other about who gets the seat
by the wheel well. Someone will let out a long sigh
settling in by the window, longing for what
we call "the real thing" — the kind of ice you need
to work out fast and hard. In those movies, sometimes

the hard pressure of facing just how far we are from our dreams, turns someone kinky and wise, fills the screen with pungent images we remember for years — the sweep of birds across a square, clown suit hanging on a line. I'm telling you this because my daughter doesn't want to hear it. She doesn't want to know those boardwalks were full of legless men, I guess from the war, and one leaned toward me, an anchor tattooed on his arm where his rolled up sleeve cradled a pack of cigarettes. A stub of a man, with apish arms —

and I stood there absorbing his anger, his wound, letting it burn around an emptiness inside me, like those pink neon dancers flashing over the Breakers Lounge. He took a cigarette, jiggled it in my face, the way someone does with a bone to make a dog come. *Girlie*, he whispered, as I backed away, bumped something, turned and ran toward my friends shrieking, *O my God*. And what good would it do to tell my daughter there's grace in falling too, in that guy starting after me on his crutches, with huge strides like an ungainly

bird that might actually take off? He scattered us like gulls, then threw back his head and laughed — so loud I still hear it, I still see him on those thin stilts in the middle of the boardwalk flustering parents so they grab their kids and step wide around him. I was twelve then, the age my daughter is now, and maybe it isn't cruel to believe you'll never get so wounded or shoddy. Maybe to grow at all we have to pretend they have nothing to do with us, these dark pleasures, this dinky patch of ice.

DAWN

At the day camp years ago where we drove
from the projects to an outlying municipal park,
the trees were so lush, the kids didn't know
what to do with that soft filtered light,
so unlike raw sun blasting the sidewalks.
They'd glare, spin out a wisecracking jive,
or hide their faces against a trunk, gouging its bark.
One of the tough girls, 8 years old, high octane mouth,
called me *kotex breath*, then flopped in my lap.
Sweat made her dark skin iridescent. See them birds?
she asked, leaning back. She went to the country once,
on a bus, to visit her grandfather and he had
all kinds of birds, craziest racket you ever heard.
Then she turned to me a question so big I couldn't
answer,
just hoped the trees would settle it. We watched a few
sparrows fuss in and out of the leaves, catching light
on their wings, light making everything its own color,
so we couldn't tell bird wing from jiggling leaf,
and I totally believed we were all connected. Only
I wasn't thinking just then about trash in the street,
or crumbling black top, or what it's like to climb
twelve flights in the dark through that pissy smell,
the sound of feet rushing up behind you. That afternoon
while the top branches caught some barely translatable

breeze, I couldn't answer when all this poured out
and she put it to me — *bow come, bow come?* Instead
I traced letters on her back for her to guess,
this little girl who the next day didn't show,
and when she did wouldn't speak to me,
so I don't know what to say about the hardness

she came to, whether it was wrong or right,
I just remember her back shaking in spasms
as she threw those rocks, making the water fly up
and shine a minute before it disappeared, her back
which had jerked itself away from me, as if to say
you are useless, you don't know, you don't know a thing.

Betsy Sholl

THE CARPENTER'S DREAM IN NEW BURLINGTON

In the early 1970's, . . . the Army Corps of Engineers says it will flood the village to make a reservoir.

—John Baskin, *New Burlington: The Life and Death of an American Village*

Wedging sledge hammer against the locked door
 he pulls tea-stained lace curtains across the glass,
 her snowflakes before the golden dozers
 till nightfall when he dreams their jingle roar
 and curls fur-like, one bony shoulder
 breaking through shredded ribs of the crazy quilt
 and sleeps in a cave where walls sweat onto his back and
 again
 his child ears hear kinfolk voices stoke the kitchen into
 light
 while outside town their legendary bear
 still sleeps in the skeleton of a cow
 and these brittle blueprints on the cherry stand
 still show wooden walls as a cage of light
 and she creaks the corner chair and whispers *Dunbar!*
Come here! and with arms oak sinewy
 he lays down the razory ax, patinaed handle
 more intimate than his own bones
I'm coming! he speaks urgently
 pulse tripping across the fallen trunks
 quilt dragging through purple croci, *I'm coming*
 as she rocks and knits in the light-cracked clearing
 till November sun peels back his eyes
 till pine floor staggers up through his knees

I'm coming! he gropes awake for the rap
behind the door while a flash of grief
cracks his chest and his carved grapes
on the walnut door bloom to splinters
and these young men, centimeter voices
suturing their first snips of loss
grip him, his elbows pinched in pine-stiff fingers
his voice hemorrhaging *I won't leave,*
the carpet rises and swirls around his ankles
all his muscle shifts to their hourglass arms
one-hundred-eighty-year-old oak door jamb
sweeps up perpendicular to the future
weightless and amazed he glimpses the sleek van
polished yellower than frozen corn
watches chipped white home turn small then smaller
then saucer-like swim in his upturning eyes
it must be like this he thinks
this must be what she felt
her abundant smile at fifty-five dams his voice
Come here! he spurts at the stupefied men,
drowning in her face, *this must be what she felt*
knowing cupboards wiped to the mold of her hand
knowing quilts spun from the slow dance of her fingers
all this music even he would go on without her
it must be like this, he thinks,
this must be how it is.

WATCHMAN OF THE NIGHT

“I used to think,” Nora said, “that people just went to sleep, or if they did not go to sleep that they were themselves, but now—” she lit a cigarette and her hands trembled— “now I see that the night does something to a person’s identity.”

Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood*

Night’s muzzle tightens
as he sits on a porch
under one bare bulb
that burns like a vigilant moon.

Soon, someone sings
his name while crickets
chirr beyond the porch.
Bruised by the shade
of promiscuity he stuffs
his guilt into the o-shaped
mouths of blossoms, rediscovers
mounds of ivy breathe.

As moon glints off the birdbath
and dogs howl two doors down,
his newly-startled wife
lifts her hand to the phone

before it rings. When he
burrows in bed beside her,
he listens for the sound
of fences coming down,

the end of the safe world.
As a child, he wilted after dark.
Voices would call his name,
offer love, a lit haven

in an open-ended nightfall,
but he could find no comfort.
Preparing to sleep in the
arms of his wife, he wonders:

Is her hand, her face,
the same hand, and face,
he spurned in this afternoon's sun?
Remembering the other woman,

he knows he is responsible
for everything. He will be
someone else, be awake, forever.

Donna Baier Stein

A VOICE FROM PORK CHOP HILL

The wounded speak
Like dolphins to one another, miles off. The language
Is sea perfection. As if through the medium,
There is some
Tripwave of goodbye. Borges says
The ocean is the effigy of Poseidon. What the wounded
symbolize,
They lie down on.

The pierced die
On battlefields like red dust floating out of sunlight.
What seems clear air never is, and the wounded
Even on cooler mountain slopes
Fill those gaps where nothing rushes down.

Bury me here, in these dark hills.
Here I shall watch eternity made visible,
Hear the last trumpet which is not Taps but a melancholy
cornet,

A shofar, a bugle, cupped hands, all grunting the chords
Of an innocent music. Here I shall breathe oblivion
And place it on stones.

Now I have abandoned disgust. Nothing about my body
Repels. Nothing in morality prevents. There is such excess of
forgiveness
That forgiveness spends its seed. Malice has outlived its children
and gone howling
Into the wilderness, past Lincoln. I am alone, a Taos-disbeliever.
I disbelieve in god-adorned buttes, enchanted mesas,
legends of saved
mothers,
Dough baked and become body. I hear with Neruda a red
noise of
bones.

With Singer I see the power of darkness mimic the power of light.
But like a Navajo, I count my wealth in songs.

Edward Locke

KOUSSIPSKY

Koussipsky's a dialectical demon —
by day his domed forehead imposes
light on darkness, darkness on light.
The words of his argument pirouette,
whether on paper or in person,
with merciless aplomb. He wrings
the neck of the chicken of illogic.

But at night he becomes an insectival
harvester of human dreams,
a fluttering victim of paradox.
One minute the stubby hand is resting
on the monograph, the next a bee
poises its pellucid wings
above the justified right margin,
lured by the sweet and minty odors
of whole communities of illusions.

Homing in over miles of midnight,
water and woods and blotches of houses,
he zig-zags across the chemical plumes
billowing like invisible silk
and traces the spoor to a host of sleepers.
Buzzing from brain to brain he extracts
the pollen of their promiscuous thoughts.

At dawn he returns to his highrise hive,
performing a waggie dance to show
how far and in what relation to
a dark sun the stamens lie.
Then as the light blazes from windows,
blanking them out, he removes his wings,
picks them in a violin case,
and raises his hand like a conductor
assembling silence —

NIGHT DRIVE

Tonight the trees are tossing the clouds around
and the moon in her wedge of white make-up
leans back to hold us in her spotlight of hair.
A dog barks. A garage door lowers and locks.
And every building freezes for the portrait of the world.

Where is defeat on such a night as this?
Each pebble on the side of the road
shouts a victory in the flash of my headlights,
for I have come to the end of fifty-five years,
each one the eraser for the last, each one
a newly sharpened pencil jabbing me awake
to this picture — here and hung — on this night's
black wall.

And I am driving, driving for Jimmy Wonderland
down the white line of my own intentions,
glancing in the rear-view mirror with a stone's cold eye.
And I know I have never been here before
for I've thrown the old key out the car window to lie
in a ditch somewhere in a broken spill of trash — its
crockery,
its egg shells, its unloved dolly clutching at the dirt.

Imagine what you like: say this film
is a loop played round and before or I drive
a winding hill passing the same sign on repeated rights.
But it is night. The dark surrounds, presses, then
slides off. I see no sign but this white immediacy
quickenning in the brights of my car. And nowhere
beyond the reach of my eyes is more sweet than here
when marrow blooms in the bone and starts to speak.

Two Poems

SHAVING DAVID

I took on the task with a promise:
never to nick the back of his neck, never
to scrape the blade at an angle that cuts
skin instead of his tenacious hairs, this
black undergrowth of curls, spiraling down
behind his head in disobedience of his stare.
In the mirror, he watched his face react
to the razor's path from base to nape.
His arms fixed to the sink, he may have
lowered his eyes onto my arm, reaching around
him, washing the stubble from the blade.

I hated shaving David.
Spreading my legs against instability,
closing my free hand on his throat,
I dragged the razor up his neck and saw
how easily I could slip or he could twitch
and we would fall onto a wet, non-negotiable
red tile, feeling around for the white
porcelain to sustain us while we resumed our places,
since his neck would not cease to need shaving—
the hairs declaring his collar uncomfortable
and me trustworthy only as long as his neck was clean.

DREAM OF FLYING HORSES

Night crouched over you like a child with her skirt raised.
She was trying to urinate. Inside fall's last cornfield,
you knew
the stalks shifting under the wind, the heavy cobs
nodding,
your fingers plugged into stiffening earth and your mouth
too open when again his smoke-colored sperm broke.
Jamming hand to jaw, your father shut your teeth against
your tongue.

Now you fling yourself through the hours it takes to cross
Kansas,
chase the pulse of white lines on a highway with your
bellyfull of fists
opening/shutting like the mouths of gossip in St.
Elizabeth's.

You are cramming yourself back into the town marked by
your long ringing
scream and seven years of viscous silence to coffin him
in your gift of quiet, to stand out loud in your firm pain.

You cannot resist the threat of your eyelids falling,
by the twenty-third hour, your dream of flying horses
overtakes you
on the road. The carousel's gray mare beckons
you with her popping eyes, obscenely dry nostrils,
harnessed wood mane. Child's beast, she is sculpted in
struggle,
stuck with a pole, going again and around around.

You must mount this horse without the music beside
walls of faces
wrenched in laughter. The girl in the sky is pissing. The
sun is bleeding
across your shattered windshield. The town's police have
found you:
your neck childishly broken against your chest
in the position of apology or prayer. Your mouth lies
forever
sliced open with silence. Your eyes see your sweet father,
waving.

Kate Fox

THE UNPRONOUNCEABLE FACE OF GOD

My friend
a former Torah scholar
still could not bring himself
to crumple the paper
on which he'd written
the ancient name of God.

I did not recognize the shape
of the letters, and he
would not pronounce the name
even with the addition
of the blasphemous vowels.

God's name looks like a face,
with half-hooded, slitted eyes.

He has a freckle above His left eye.

He has a beauty mark near his left cheekbone.

The right eye of God's face looks to the left.
The left eye looks askance
at what could be a bird
flying over God's sinister temple;
are these eyes other birds also seeking
escape from the orbits in God's face?

I become unsure of my lines.
This is no toy to be playing with.
Tomorrow, I will press my friend
to write the face of God in wet sand.
We'll let the ocean bear the tidings away
to where the mystery deepens,
to where there is room for doubt.

Two Poems

YOU HAVE THE FINGERS FOR IT

That's what the birth control counselor tells me,
long and narrow, good for barricading my cervix
with a small plastic cap, good for unscrewing bolts
from unlikely places, good for finding things
in the dark; like last night, when the candle
burned itself out, and I refused
to turn the light on, while you sat happily
imagining my fingers as they rummaged
through every gloryhole: drawers and cupboards
full of paper, spice bags, or tea, making
animated conversation with every edge
they could find. Until they fumbled upon
a small box of wooden matches, pulled one out,
struck its rough tip across the window sill
and in a sudden burst of sulfur, that tiny flame
put all the magic out . . .
wait — watch, while I let it go
to the end, without burning my fingertips.

THE SHAPE CHANGER

Your width measures
just the wideness
of my finger.

Your length
slides between,
as you stretch,
then coil
in my hands.

Your head
remains calm and poised,
above the dark curves
and hollows you create
with your overlappingness.

Your brown scales,
tinted red,
their jeweled arrangement
is velvet soft and smooth.

I could eat you
or feel I've already
known that intimacy,
as if I *am* you —
this stretch, so insidious,
this coil, so elusive,
evasive; but now I see
a streak of blood
where the cat clawed
your gentle armor,
still intact, but weeping
here, and over there.

Beneath,
an ivory belly, pearled —
like the ear shell, protection
for vital places.

Is that the murmur I feel
when you move?
Is it the sea in you?
Where is it in me
that I've known you?

Your stealth
electrifies my fingertips
with this braille reading, reverberating
in my womb: you are the one
who sheds your own skin. With no beginning
and no end, you must move
and make a new shape.

Your head, a tiny wedge,
guides you back
into the dry blonde field
of early spring; your dark
tongue alive again —
searching out all narrow
and immeasurable places.

My eyes still hold
the ripple of your return
to earth, remember
your unblinking eye
hidden in the palm
of my hand.

Nancy Devine

THE BODY OF LOSSES AND LIVES

3 August
—for my mother

Before we went sledding—my father, brother
And I —, Mother dressed us in layers: cotton,
Then wool, and coarse mufflers wrapped twice around

And knotted behind our heads. It felt strange.
I was wider than I was tall. And walking
Was surreal: they were not my legs that waded

Away from me, out into the fresh snowfall.
Back and forth, I rocked sideways up the hill
Behind the church. The snow, still untouched, lay

Like the entire world before me. It gleamed.
I was walking into another life—
This was 1949. I was eight.

When Alton and I married, I was slim,
Slimmer than ever before. I have never
And always felt this way. It, too, was strange,

In time too short and too long, Father walking
Me up the aisle, up to my future husband,
Up to my former husband. I can still

See it all, but from the outside. A woman,
Just a girl, nearing the altar and Alton
Waiting for her. The stained glass colors them.

Last Christmas, at my parents' home, my son
Sorted through old photographs and discovered
One of me alone, wedding bouquet still

Abloom in my hands, the background, though, dark,
Out of reach. Today, my birthday, I woke
Just before dawn, in mid-dream, like a child

Impatient with the vast patience of time:
Once Father had led us around the corner,
Our sleds leaving their twin-trails behind us

So we would not lose ourselves, once we were
Out of Mother's sight, Father pulled his muffler
Down from his nose and scratched his cheeks until

They turned the brightest red. When Brian, though, pawed
With his mittened hands at his scratchy muffler,
Father knelt down and wrapped it round again.

When you grow into your time, Father said,
Then you may choose for yourself. I have learned
What he meant: endure for now what you must.

I could see the steeple and, behind it,
The hill rising away into the clouds.
I had everything to look forward to

And it all seemed to rise away from me.
More snow fell and fell, and I sometimes wonder
Who I would be had I not married Alton.

In his Air Force uniform, he was handsome
And he charmed me from one life to another.
I seventeen, he twenty-one, we knew

Only that we wanted to run, as in
Some slow dream, breathlessly, into what we
Could become. This sensation that cannot

Last and does not cease. This expectation
That remains unfulfilled because it is
Fulfilled completely. The day we went sledding,

Father called, Time to go home, and I ran
Away, stumbling, my sled bouncing against
My heels. I fell and rose from an impression

Of myself, snow filling in. Then I was
In bed, a quilt pressing me into sleep,
Into that small death from which we recover,

Into the hours we cannot. When I woke,
It was almost dark. I sat by the window
And watched the streetlamp sparkle on the snow,

Each sparkle mocking me: too late too late.
When I woke this morning, Leonard kissed me
And I forgot that today is my birthday.

I forgot that I should feel somehow older.
All I thought was, Our anniversary
Comes in six days. The horizon grew brighter,

But street light still flickered into our room—
On the ceiling, the ruins of a dream
Turned dark and rose out of reach. As a child,

I wrote down all my dreams, then at sixteen
Lost the book. I cannot imagine living
Without some body of losses, regrets

To endure. A marriage that failed. A son
Who once teased that World War II began with
My birth. I said nothing and did not cry

In front of him. But I felt older then
Than I do now, and for one faint heartbeat,
A moment, I hated him. I cannot

Let go of this. Someday I may tell him
And we may share regrets. There must be time.
Before Leonard and I married, I felt

Fear. When Alton and I married, it was
Just the two of us, hopeful, ignorant.
With children, though, I was afraid for them

And for me. I had, as Father would say,
Begun to grow into my time, my choices.
I called them, one by one, into my bedroom,

Where Leonard and I had loved, and I asked
Their permission. I said, He makes me feel
The church bells call to me again. I said,

Every day brings us something new. My mother
Had told me this, Mother who is always
Beginning something new. And still I feared.

I want to believe that I have the courage
To choose my life. I wonder whether I have
Just one, really, if all the layers form

A whole, or if each will fall away, shapeless.
Sitting in the back seat as Alton drove,
I watched Julie—she was two then, or three—

Stand up beside me, watched her press against
The far door. Somehow her hand or the tie
Of her pinafore pulled the handle and

She fell forward, with a cry of delight,
Of wonder. I guess we fall into death
As easily as we fall into life,

But I caught her by an ankle, the rest
Of her tumbling out of my reach. Unlike
My childhood impression in the snow, hers

Remained somehow framed in the open door,
In reach. I cannot recall her age, but
These years feel less substantial than the fear

And life I felt in that still long moment
Before my fingers touched her skin again.
I will not have another child, I thought,

Never again. And I pulled Julie back
And Amy was born in less than a year.
What are the years now? Just so many chances.

By chance, I caught a cold the day I ran
From Father. For three days, Mother nursed me.
I slept, dreaming I rose out of my body

Into the cloudy sky where everything
I longed for was kept. When Leonard kissed me
This morning, this morning's dream vanished. All

I saw was him waiting for me. I was
Walking up the aisle. I felt Father's arm
Wrapped around mine and I heard Mother humming

In time with my steps. And before: my children
Telling me, Yes, yes. And me, hopeful, thinking,
I want to run into another life

With him, to take this chance. So many choices.
So much that rises and falls into place,
And when I hear Julie's small cry of wonder

—I still hear it and feel myself still lunging
Across the seat—when I hear her, I feel
A small cry leaping from my lips as I

Run and leap onto my sled, always shiny,
Brand-new, and the snow falling on me as
I rush into the body of my lives.

Jeff Mock

Two Poems

THE PHYSICIAN'S LESSON

"...a power over the motion of the heart, to a degree yet unobserved in any other medicine."

—William Withering, Physician
An Account of the Foxglove, 1785

From Old Mother Hutton, the Shropshire
witch, he had learned
the secrets of the foxglove. He had followed her
four foot tall and round as a penny bun
into her garden
where a sunny corner was purple with bloom. She
recited a litany of praise
to flatter them
as she cut the stalks
and lay them bleeding in her basket:

Foxglove, fairy gloves, folks' glove, ladies' glove:
do the vixens slip by late in the day,
harvest them for evening wear,
pushing the soft skin of bloom down
carefully between their claws? Purple
gaudy in the light of candles,
stars—a fashion statement. Bold,
young, daring. Ah romance! Ah seduction!

Fairy fingers, dog's finger, finger flower,
digitalis. Caressing the heart
like a wife. Quiet now, calm yourself.
Let me rub your back. See how when you slow down
you become strong, steady,
a friend, a husband?

Lion's mouth. Bees enter with pleasure.
The pendulous jaws. They bathe there,
play there, a frantic dionysian banquet
upon a spotted tongue. I applaud.
Their courage thrills my heart. What gold!
They carry it away, feed their young
and return for more
tomorrow and tomorrow.

Dead man's bells. Swaying
in wind, silent
above black earth,
the mass grave,
bodies extending down,
down.

THE CORPSE

An empty place.
A convenient table by the door
where these people, family and friends,
can dump their coats and luggage,
their sad histories.

Histories written and produced
in synaptic fog. He, it, plays
a supporting role in a dozen different films.

Skipping school to go fishing. Wrestling
in the front yard, clothes stained green
from the new grass. Signing up
for the army together, 1944. Stumbling
home from the bar. Peeing under the full moon.

Flesh and blood and bone
transformed, as if by magic,
to bioelectrical energy,
like the light moving from projector
to screen in an empty theater.

In each person the image billows in midair now,
ghostly, and gathers more shine.
The make-up artist enters, adds a touch
of Baby Pink to the bald head. Wisps of hair
are gently combed into place,
with just the right touch of casual.

And the producer rewrites the script,
because memory is art
and can always be perfected.

And now here's a new memory
to rise up unbidden in dreams: a corpse
in suit and tie, thick make-up,
almost youthful again,
lying so still
it can't be allowed.

So each person has to look again and again
very closely
because for a second
they could swear
he, it, seemed to breathe.

Theodora Todd

Two Poems

GODMOTHER'S ADVICE

Sweetheart, the world
and everything in it
and the backward spinning forward
while the chips fall and the blue fruit
consumes us: All

will be later and nothing, too,
where the branches blacken the trees
like winter and winter then suddenly spring:
The men will be angry, and
the blood clots, and
the gallstones

but don't cry: Listen
to the hum and the drum for omens —
for everything happens when we
are just about to relax, and the pigs
are snoring swinely in their pails:

Try to stay alive until you die.
Some night you will find yourself soon
singing in your car
on a street too far from where you live
and the radio on, and your eyes are tired:

Suddenly the street is a river of ice
and you are spinning in both lanes and learning
these simple laws of physics:
All the trees grow in the path of the wind
for a reason, and a billiard ball will roll

at the exact speed of the ball
that hits it from behind: The click
and spin of balls in the dark
and a truck whirls to you like a scream
and the windshield will kiss you

and laughter, and clapping. Remember:
The world is vulgar and everything in it:
The sweet of the melon
and the meat pie steam of being alive.
You will be crying

for just a bit more of that: The clock
will rant in the waiting room
while the pallbearer stumbles in his shoes
and you will be stunned
and stillborn into the street.

AFTER MY LITTLE LIGHT, I SAT IN THE DARK

After my little light, I sat in the dark
a long time. The dark was studded with ash
and it had no taste and it sounded
like the snow of the radio floating
between two stations: my little light
and this dark.

I sat in the dark all night and the morning
reeled up darker than the darkest
closet or cellar or secret except now
merciful mushrooms (black-capped
and milky in the mouth)
introduced themselves into the world
and their thousand voices clacked the static
like the circle a jump rope clacks between
two little, white-haired girls.

The night was much darker when it came back
but my eyes were beginning to focus.
And the moss crawled over my shoe
and I saw that in the dark
many things can exist. A worm
sang in the earth like the breath
of a clarinet, and tears screamed
in my eyes. Fur
passed my ankle, and I could taste
a murky oyster mold itself out of shadows.

The next day was dark, dark
as the center of a wall of a home
where the termite chews in blindness
and dreadful lies but to me
it seemed like twilight. I
was used to this now.
It knew me. I
was familiar among familiar things:

the mice scrambling under
the claws of the owl, the fish
blinking between the slippery stones —
especially the stones who
love nothing who
believe in nothing at all.

When night bled down again, I
had never been happier in my life. My skin
had begun to move
with the pearly eyes of flies
and my hair was sewn up black
and wet, and the black rats bred
and nested peacefully there.

Now I could see that the night
was crowded with others, and their waxy bodies
glistened and lit up the dark. By now
I could see quite well even
the moldy corners where
the devil in all of his kindness smiled.

And he bowed to me as if
I were the queen of all this supreme
among the others who'd aged here
creeping with snails in the damp. Now
the leeches sang
drunken with my blood,
and the rats began to chew
a hole dead through the center
of the place where once
my little light had been.

The devil knelt to kiss my knees.
We were so pleased to see you, he said,
so young, the adjustment will come
easy to you and in
the expanding dark I saw
that I was just a girl a girl
tied to a chair a girl
in a simple uniform (my mother
had sewn up the hem herself
and the thread danced crooked
across my thighs) I could read
my name on my pocket. He smiled.

He uncurled my legs and spread my knees
and the tongue of the devil was cold
and sharp and the pain
and the shame of it lopped
the top of the dark off.

I was a child. I had homework
to do. My clarinet wept
in its case. The dolls
gasp for breath in the doll house. When
he surfaced again
from between my thighs, still
he smiled (was he kind?
is it possible? was he even shy?)

And when I cried I was sorry: his
disappointment rattled my chains
(don't you love me? don't
you love me?) (not
anymore) But I
was quiet becoming
one of the devil's many secrets
and slid down drowning in dark,
a perfect daughter, an eager student
who had learned to turn
the anguish to pleasure learned
that many things can exist quite pleasantly
in the dark, and when
I opened my eyes I could see:

a girl with no soul floating
in a flawless uniform playing
an impeccable clarinet. She
had invented her own self smiling
out of the dark, the dark as warm
and happy as a home in hell.

Laura Kasischke

Two Poems

FORMS

Forms of virtue
are erect, plumb
as the young girl
ordered over
and again not
to slouch, neck
cords thick,
straining to
posture straight
as the bullet's
course. Forms of
virtue are erect
as scaffolding,
white poplars,
bars where men
forge edicts over
icy cocktails.

Forms of pleasure undulate —
 seaweed, eels spawning in the Sargasso Sea,
field grass, currents of electricity.
 Bodies of pleasure gush —
liplike divisions of labia,
 streams after the vernal thaw.
Ways of pleasure billow
 like the chute of water or air.

Virtues became
forms of pleasure
to the young
woman deemed
eccentric who never
drooped, slouched
or hunched, her
rectitude renowned
as her carriage
perfect; leading
from the hip,
slightly dipping
sidewise, each
foot traced an
invisible thread,
poised as the
path of a steamy
teacup to sipping
lips. By virtue of
her patience, she
awaited pleasure,
knowing any activity
can be virtuous, even

undulating, arching her back or
 bending like a bridge
to gaze between pendulous breasts,
 see a lover burrowing,
absorbed between her thighs, draped
 in rippling sheets.

RITES OF PASSAGE

Every time I pull my hand
slimy as a newborn,
fist full of innards
from a pullet,
I shiver a residual chill

as when I was a child
spying butchery from behind
the crack of the pantry door.
The smell of singed pin feathers
prickled my nose as mother tugged
at the pimply skin,
peeling off a snug glove,
cropping yellowy gobs of fat,
until clean breasts shone.

Or I envision my grandmother sinking
her elbows in a tub of flopping flounder.
Scrape scales,
scissor the tail, fins,
insert thumb in gill, snap,
remove guts, rinse viscera
and lift out the skeleton,
fine as a girl's comb.
Rolled and bound for baking,
the fillets were testament
to the men's sport on the ocean.

Grandma was last to the table she set,
calling us all to eat
from the reflection of the bathroom mirror,
flaking opalescent scales off her arms,
scrubbing at the fishy odor with a nail
brush, sweeping coral powder on her cheeks
like rubbing butter on a flounder, applying lipstick
she will kiss into a napkin before eating.

Derek Walcott, *Omeros* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990, 325 pp., \$25. cloth). *Omeros* is Homer, and here are a Helen, an Achilles, and even (out of Sophocles) a Philoctete with a stinking wound. But the narrator confesses never to have finished reading Homer, and the chief parallels between *Omeros* and Homer are that both celebrate cultures that live by the sea and that such cultures, observed freshly by a poet, reveal similar patterns.

Let me describe the poem briefly: sixty-four chapters, each divided into three sections, the whole making up six books. Each section is about a page and a half long, and all but one are in tercets that look at first glance like Dante's terza rima. But no, the meter is much more flexible than Dante's and is quite wonderfully Walcott's own — a voice of many voices. The normal line has twelve syllables, suggesting classical hexameter, but the sound of the line is often five-stress, suggesting the English norm. Ah! but it does not divide easily into feet. Sometimes it sounds like *Beowulf's* alliterative beat: "and he, at the beck of her beak, watched the bird hum." It makes lavish use of rhyme: external, internal, half-, slant-, eye-rhyme and more. It is as if all the prosodic traditions met and grew in harmony here, making a new sort of symphonic concord, and perhaps that's a good metaphor for Walcott's whole amazing genre-defying creation.

The hub of the narrative is Walcott's home island of St. Lucia, with spokes out to Africa, London, Boston, the Great Plains. It opens in the present (as we can tell, since the wound of Philoctete is healed), but consider the handling of time in the opening lines:

"This is how, one sunrise, we cut down them canoes."
Philoctete smiles for the tourists, who try taking
his soul with their cameras. "Once wind brings the news

to the *laurier-cannelles*, their leaves start shaking
the minute the axe of sunlight hit the cedars,
because they could see the axes in our own eyes.

Wind lift the ferns. They sound like the sea that feed us
fishermen all our life, and the ferns nodded 'Yes,
the trees have to die.' So, fists jam in our jacket,

cause the heights was cold and our breath making feathers
like the mist, we pass the rum. When it came back, it
give us the spirit to turn into murderers."

Onto the literal present, Philoctete piles the historical present: the cutting of the trees occurring before our very eyes. But it is also the present of all-time: here is how it traditionally is. Within the narrative there is a sequence of past actions, "and the ferns nodded 'Yes.'" Throughout the book there is this tension of times: events happen sequentially in the braid of plot lines, but they also happen in all time, as Hectors and Achilles fight for Helens. Walcott appears torn between the classic desire for "stasis" (a frequently recurring word) — the unbroken vase that tells us all we know and all we need to know — and the romantic acceptance of the inevitability of change. The force of cyclical stasis — of love defying time and death, of birth always ready to renew — seems the strongest undertow in this oceanic poem. But Walcott's clarity of vision warns that it is sentimental to want a poor island to remain poor and picturesque, alike for the loving pen of the poet and the soul-stealing camera of the tourist. He cannot overlook the sinister and potentially irreversible nature of the changes that threaten the island: of overdevelopment on land, turning fishermen into waiters and jitney-drivers, and in the sea as the factory ships and pollution threaten the oblivion of the *mer/mère* from which life comes. Walcott's integrity in managing this tension is impressive.

Within the micro-cosmos of this extraordinary book is a web of characters and forces, interlocking into a symbiotic relationship. Ancient, African, and Judeo-Christian religions co-exist without competition. Black fishermen and white fugitives from colonialism support one another. On the island many cultures — Arawac, French, Congolese, English, Irish, Greek, biblical — flower together. Fathers and sons find common ground. The language is resonant with this diversity: *manicheels* and *myrmidons*, the *ziggurat* and the *calabash*, *allamandas* and *secateurs*. Walcott moves from consciousness to consciousness and voice to voice with a delicate ventriloquism. Yet there is a disturbing suspicion that something in humanity cannot stand too much of Eden. The harmony of the island is always threatened: by competition — of men for a woman, of the wars of classes and nations; or by exploitation — of one African selling another into slavery, of one race subduing another, of one species ravishing the planet's wealth. Only in the civilization of the poet's imagination are these forces comprehended, and in *Omeros* Walcott preserves forever the complex life of his island — so freshly and sensitively observed that it enters "that light beyond metaphor."