

# THE BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL

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**Cover:** Robert Shetterly, Jr., "Moon Shells," ink drawing, 1980.

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### THE FARTHEST-NORTH SOUTHERN TOWN

My hairdresser Frank's own hair's cut punk  
today, livid as a ruffled bird.  
He tells me about his brother-in-law  
on the police force who tells him how  
the cops punch out the punks on Main Street,  
and get away with it, too. They got  
these leather gloves, he says, with brass  
*inside*, so no bruises show, and even  
if there are some, they're gone  
by the time the trial comes up, or the judge  
will say you might have fallen down  
stairs. This town is the farthest-north  
Southern town, Frank says, switching scissors,  
and nobody wants to argue with the mayor,  
who appoints the police chief, and so on,  
like a ricochet bullet, down  
to your basic level of cop who takes  
his shift to count the number of times  
the same car cruises Main Street  
in an hour. Three time's the limit.  
Then out he comes, his cruiser flashing  
red and blue. They mostly nail  
the ones with racing stripes and mag  
wheels, not the little Subaru wagons,  
Frank says, spraying mousse in his palm,  
lifting my hair to an elegant panic.  
We are squared off in the mirror.  
What's more, the law says, they can still  
hang you, here, he goes on, for stealing  
a horse. I won't, I say. I won't.

Fleda Brown Jackson

### THE DOCKS OF NEW YORK

After the film by Josef von Sternberg, 1928

She wakes in an iron bed in a bare room  
 above a bar. She has slept through dancing and brawling,  
 the door being opened, a duffle bag dragged across the floor,  
 the near steps of the stevedore as he opened the bag, unfolded  
 the clothes he bought for her: a dress, a skirt  
 and a blouse with a ruffled collar.

Each of them will fit perfectly,  
 as if he had slept beside her, with his cheek  
 on her shoulder, so perfectly did he know her body  
 as he lifted her to shore.

She is sitting now, smoking a cigarette,  
 clothes draped from the headboard, the closet door  
 and the windowsill. She hugs her knees to her chest, pulls the  
sheet closer
 and looks up as she did when she turned her face toward the  
moon

and she fell into the harbor,  
 let herself fall.

On the fresh waves moonlight blossomed like gardenias.  
 How could he not notice the whiteness in all the black?

He dives in. Easily, he finds her. Her arms are limp,  
 shining. If she opens her eyes now  
 she will push him away, he who bears her weight  
 without her consent. She will scream.

But she is sleeping the peace-filled sleep of those who want  
to die

as the water runs from her skirt  
and from her hair, wetting the dock.  
Already it is too late for him. He is in love with her.

She stubs out the cigarette and stands,  
pulls the dress over her flesh-colored slip.

At this point who doesn't know the story?  
Who couldn't tell it in the time it takes  
to fasten the buttons from nape to waist?  
Yes, soon the stevedore will enter, shy  
now that he is not touching her.  
When he says his ship leaves tomorrow  
she will touch her hair, and lean forward.

When they embrace they will look as they did  
when they rose from the water,  
the moon swimming toward them  
though the waves would carry it to sea  
if the waves had their way.

**Suzanne Cleary**

### Three Poems

#### A MYSTERY

Beyond that indigo. Beyond the power  
Of the Peregrine, the Gyr. Beyond

The difficulty and accomplishment  
In finding them: the night-walking,  
Miles of listening in spartina marsh  
The second and third moons of summer  
To find Black Rails. To do this  
As if in a blue dream, self-mystified,  
Years on end. And then to find one.

They prepossess us with their otherness,  
Whether planned as ritual dawn observance  
Or as astonishing as Arizona hailstorms —  
It rests in them, beyond our effort  
Finding them: the otherness  
Of wings and nest-weaving, the grace  
That holds them hidden, still  
So easily mortal.

They live beyond our circle of desire,  
A thrush, horizon-braiding shearwaters,  
A crane in mist, red eyeshine:  
Sometimes an unremembered afterimage.  
The thing we seek flies elsewhere,  
Remains as music, a dark silence,  
Becomes water, branches, open sky.

We live alone in us. We look around.  
We focus on what often fears us close.  
We choose as home an empty unfamiliar.  
We learn to know what isn't understood.

**A SNOWY OWL WITH A NORWAY RAT**

It moves upriver to the edge of vision,  
Hunting rats, methodical, crisscrossing  
Low over the sunken quonsets. We wait.  
Soon it drops into the brittle wreckage.  
Snapping tripods. Lens caps unclipping.  
Up again: a Snowy Owl with a Norway Rat.

Our intellects take in the incongruity  
Of this prey and predator. It's just  
The common ordinary local food chain,  
True, but serendipitous — dual symbols  
Of plague and power, cloacal effluvia  
And Inuit horizons, their meadowlands  
Unscarred by any haul road or pipeline.  
The creatures have converged and split,  
Continuing. And some survive as myths,  
As data of the arts and life sciences:  
An archetype will eat a dead exemplum;  
Pavlov's boxed maze, Melville's white;  
Vermin and a violent end. It's natural  
Yet alien too, grotesquely mesmerizing,  
In the end an image wakening as poetry  
(As was, last week, that Falcated Teal  
Fast asleep on an island of gas masks).

We've all seen, birding coastal Texas,  
Ospreys bearing taloned fish to nest.  
But an owl, rat in beak, recalls a cat  
With limp prey dead, or playing dead,  
The tiny tail distastefully dangling.  
And we know all too well the tailings.  
A daily chore of ours is wiping feces  
And rat hair from the cans and counters.  
We've seen fatter rats in Central Park,  
But here we bait the trapline nightly.

But they are impressive little beasts,  
Replenishing the earth by craft, quick  
Breeding, and grit. Rats somehow know  
Which storage drums contain spare parts,  
Which ones contain granola, flour, rice.  
Consider how, to thwart starvation, rats  
Gnaw on bicycle tires or plastic tubing,  
And will drill the walls of everything  
With perfect circles, leaving no space  
Uninvestigated. For millions of years  
They ate termites, eggs, seeds, tubers,  
Burrowing in bogs and mossy streambanks.  
When they came into our houses, hungry,  
When they invaded towns and grain-boats,  
Our spades and plows had cut the turf.

The owl. Flying in, unfurling lucent  
Slow wing-beats nearing her, her nest.  
He lands at the far edge of the circle  
Of owl down. The female gazes at him  
As he dances, swaying, his fresh gift  
Offered as ritual food, with singing;  
We come to it then, how we have never  
Heard a Snowy Owl form sounds: eerie,  
The deep double note of a Tantric monk  
As he dances now, surrendering the rat.

Still, we wish it were a vole, a smaller,  
Ahistorical, and entirely natural prey,  
This accident of war or exploration—  
Do we even know if it's a Russian rat,  
A Japanese-American rat, or a US rat?  
We do know that they don't belong here,  
That, in fact, no endemic land mammals  
Live here. So, clearly this means that  
The island's breeding Snowy Owls don't,  
But for our agency, belong here either.

Of course we realize the owls care less.  
To them it's neither natural, grotesque,  
Nor anything like poetry. Like us, owls  
See, and they like us watch other beings,  
But differently. To us, they seem to be  
Unblinking, opaque ghosts, the predators  
Indifferent to us, as to our incongruity.

#### **AIRSTRIP AT ALEXAI POINT**

Filling the circles in the runway matting  
Like done muffins in a battalion kitchen  
Sit hundreds of clumps, thousands: purple

Flowers so minuscule you crouch to see,  
The beauty of them fathoms future warmth.  
Interspersed, the fat Siberian dandelions

High as your calf, Saxifrage, Nootka Rose,  
And the nearly hidden stands of moonwort,  
Thought rare in America till we found it

Abundant. They laid this Marsden Matting  
Working twenty-four-hour shifts, fitting  
Tooth to tooth the serious puzzle pieces,

Iron, three-men-long. The snow had stopped.  
They had hot coffee, cigarettes, and songs.  
Only the few oldtimers feared the Japanese

Survivors gathered east in Abraham Valley.  
Conversations started up about elsewhere,  
The girls back home, the range of bombers,



And could Intrepid Airmen taking off from  
Here find Tokyo? How soon? Who can see  
Through brass, a Corporal Schoenfeld said,

But this airstrip is, repeat is, priority  
Urgent from what I've been receiving today:  
And they took six days, an Aleutian record.

Today the Golden and the Mongolian Plovers  
Appreciate it. We do also in our own way.  
And these endless formations of flowerpots.

Here and there rises a forty-year willow,  
Thick-stemmed, less than three inches high;  
Branches cling onto the matting like roots,

The way summer snakes dart from an egg-berm  
Or how a mandala will swirl. The willows  
Speak about tenacity, a recovering of time,  
The experience of winter and spring winds.

Macklin Smith

## Two Poems

## HOME STAY

Domain is what I see when I walk out,  
cup in hand, on the green-gold silks the sun flings  
through the grass. The zest of coffee blends  
with the mead of phlox, white phlox,  
man-high here in the sun, the bolls tight  
and loose as cloud cover, immense with coolness.  
I stand on stone — a terrace — and watch the shards  
in a ruined English border brood  
back on the seasons: peonies have passed; mourning bride  
hangs dark with tatters; globe thistles quill  
steel blue inside a round of goldfinches' wings.  
The hues I have restored bloom out loud  
in the fresh sweep of spaces; some glee  
now but the June favorites I shall not see  
until a Sabbath year. As I veer the lawn  
past apple gnarl behind new windflower pink,  
the man in the house looks out at me across a bed  
that will go starry when I leave and break into seed.

## THROUGH THIS WINDOW

Through this window I cannot gaze across my fields  
    into the break in my woods  
    where the lair of the deer is.  
I cannot hear the foghorn's woo! and woo!  
as the sea sighs toward the shore its mists  
    and the mists walk the river  
    and waver on the edge of my land.  
But I see mountains in fleet, their sharp sails raked  
breaking the sky, and I see the eighth-hour mist  
spinning up onto the sun's spools from last night's drench.  
I walk and sing but my song is heavy with the past  
and does not lift. I am happy with my new terrain,  
    but it is not home. The hills peak  
    raggedly in cypresses;  
    the birds are brisk but they have no names;  
    even the moon, that follower, is odd,  
    too milky and much too mild;  
    it is not the moon of home. An artist  
of this place would paint me dense and dark and small  
against bare room, and I would fit his boundaries,  
but I do not belong. I want to live large  
and very bright. I want to be where my heart is.

Roger Finch

## COUNTRY MUSIC BLUES

Six o'clock and the hormones in this house  
are having a party. I close two doors  
between me and the kids, the drums, the phone,  
the pool table. On the radio someone's  
crying her heart out—Billy's left her for sweet Sue—  
and as her words rise above vague pounding  
from the basement, I cry  
as if it were me. As if Billy had been drinking  
all these years and I put up with it,  
dinner on the table every night,  
not saying a word when he walks in at ten,  
and then Sue. As if Sue  
were my best friend, and she didn't breathe a word,  
kept on coming for coffee  
as if it were all the same between us,  
as if her hands hadn't been places  
that were seriously off-limits, no  
parking, tow zone, don't even think  
of parking here. As if he were gone  
a week, a month, God knows what  
I tell the kids, and then  
he comes back, begging, the tune so mournful now  
but it doesn't fool me, the guy  
doesn't deserve me, and when  
my husband walks in the door, steady,  
reliable as ever, and kisses me on the cheek  
and asks, *how was your day?* it's all I can do  
not to wish him dead on the floor,  
no, dying, looking up at me and gasping  
for help, as I turn on my heel  
and turn the music louder.

## DREAMING THE SOUND OF YELLOW

Shadows of the others  
 char the wall like petroglyphs: wrought, gaunt  
 as a group by Giacometti. Of these  
 I'm to go first.

You've already fastened a brace  
 around my brow, tightening it with an awl and  
 small silver hammer: this tapping the only sound  
 in the cave where I lie on my back  
 and you hunker in the dirt beside my head.

Is this my brain  
 ballooning: doughy, tranquil, ample? Ample enough  
 to caulk fissures skittering like bright  
 lizards across my skull? My tongue  
 arches in its shoe of teeth, blurts  
 one word: "Careful!"

*Don't do that again.* You say this so  
 gently that for the rest of the dream  
 I don't speak; you say, *Close your eyes.*

Your needle: this jolt, this sting  
 behind my right ear. *Hear that sound?*

Yellow! Electric; as if one chomped on foil.

I recall this same skirl each spring from the south  
 end of the garden: alyssum?  
 asylum?

More tapping. Then as if a pin  
 is pulled, my occipital  
 opens like a bomb hatch: something  
 in me dropping  
 down, down . . . .

A child squats beside you  
 who, having dismantled the brace,  
 now yank at my heels, now  
 divide the air with gestures  
 above my head. His sac of sex  
 distends from the delicate fork  
 of his limbs, dusky as egg-  
 plant, hard behind the soft ochre  
 spout of his cock. Gravid, he wiggles  
 belly down in the trough you've dug beside me.  
 Your hands sign: one on top  
 of the other; like a lid then, my body  
 covers this child.

When he's drawn out by his legs, dislodged  
 from my breasts, does his head like a poppy  
 pod on the stalk of his  
 neck, bob to your words: *Dreaming*  
*is suffering, dreaming is also*  
*suffering, dreaming is. . .*

Is this your body,  
 this gravity, this land lowering itself now  
 on my spine, banking the bulbs of my bones  
 like a dark palm pressing? Is this  
 your mouth behind my ear, your words:  
*Did I heal you?*

**Two Poems****BUTTERFLIES**

Sleeping, I lean toward  
half sleeping,  
as if I were some  
summer yard harassed  
by butterflies.  
My mind's firing  
becomes those tossed and crumpled  
creatures swashbuckling  
in flimsy air by the dozen.  
I see them,  
squadrons of them,  
the flat yard,  
its dandelion stubble  
lunging up,  
flopping over. They  
must see it  
without my astonishment.  
And as many  
(this is the sleeping part)  
perched,  
coiling, uncoiling  
that lasso tube.  
I have felt them,  
their black legs holding on  
with the confidence  
of a child's  
hand,  
that long tongue sucking sweat.  
Even the plainest of them  
touches like  
a diamond shines.

So I wake and sleep  
with them  
glittering over me.  
And tossed in the empty field,  
in my room, in my mind,  
touching everything,  
they flutter against  
anything.  
And I hold sleep,  
my trusting feet  
like touched fingers,  
and I drink it  
until it froths empty,  
and I touch —  
What do I touch?

#### PORTRAIT OF ME PLAYING THE FLUTE

I am seen almost from above and behind  
and through a luminous mass of twigs and leaves,  
as if through the eyes of some crouching arboreal monster.

Yet such a monster must be listening before he spring.  
I am tousled, sufficiently engrossed in the music  
to have already become the best of victims.

The hands make unpredictable, protective angles  
around the flute. The arms are thin and unattached.  
There is a line of strain, or perhaps absorption, in the jaw.

It must be a portrait of my head and hair. I fear  
constantly for that unprotected spine, standing  
self-consciously in some rich person's garden,

holding a flute more mechanical than musical.  
It seems I am drawing from it something which protects me  
from the monster. It watches patiently.



## HORSES

*For John & Alex*

1,000 ponies, The United States Cavalry stole 1,000 ponies from The Spokane Indians, shot 1,000 ponies & only 1 survived, shot 1,000 ponies & left them as monuments, left 1,000 ponies falling into dust, fallen, shot 1,000 ponies & only 1 survived.

\*

At the last Spokane Tribal All-Indian Rodeo, I remember an Indian cowboy, I remember an Indian cowboy rode a horse through a fence, I remember an Indian cowboy rode a horse named Custer's Revenge, the horse named Custer's Revenge broke through a fence, broke through four-by-six boards, after the bell, the horse broke through a fence, I remember the Indian cowboy was thrown into the air, I remember the horse named Custer's Revenge threw the Indian cowboy,  
after the bell, the Indian cowboy was thrown into the air, broken by the horse named Custer's Revenge, I remember the Indian cowboy rode a horse through a fence, after the bell, through four-by-six boards, I remember the horse named Custer's Revenge broke through a fence, I remember an Indian cowboy rode a horse named Custer's Revenge.

\*

The United States Cavalry shot 1,000 ponies & only 1 survived, she was found, someone found her, she was found in Montana, giving birth to a colt, born running from The United States Cavalry, born running into The Kentucky Derby, giving birth to a colt named Spokane, the colt named Spokane running in The Kentucky Derby,  
born running into the mile-and-a-half, from The United States Cavalry, the colt named Spokane won The Kentucky Derby, set a record for the mile-and-a-half, the colt named Spokane was born running.

\*

My cousin rode his horse in a reservation cross-country race,  
my cousin rode his horse to the top of Wellpinit Mountain,  
my cousin was miles ahead of the nearest horse at the top  
of the mountain, my cousin was miles ahead of the nearest horse

but his horse would not go down the mountain, my cousin whipped  
the horse, kicked the horse bloody, but the horse would not go  
down the mountain, my cousin cried and whipped, kicked the horse  
bloody, but the horse would not, would not go down the mountain.

\*

Last night, I woke to the sound of gunshots,  
1,000 rifles, last night, I woke to the sound  
of gunshots, 1,000 rifles, last night, I woke  
to the sound of gunshots, 1,000 rifles, last night,  
I woke to the sound of gunshots, 1,000 rifles,  
last night, I woke to the sound of gunshots.

\*

The Plains Indian rode her horse 18 hours a day, The Plains Indian  
rode under her horse's neck into battle, The Plains Indian shot  
seven arrows consecutively, The Plains Indian had seven arrows  
in flight simultaneously, The Plains Indian rode her horse 18 hours  
a day.

There are witnesses.

\*

After I heard the story on the radio,  
the story I had never heard before,  
I wanted to steal it all back, steal  
1,000 ponies back from The United States Cavalry,  
steal the ponies stolen from The Spokane Indians,  
steal the horse named Spokane, steal  
The Kentucky Derby, steal the mile-and-a-half,  
steal every pony in my life.

\*

My brother, the bingo caller, made five hundred in tips one week,  
my brother went to the horse races, my brother bet five hundred  
dollars  
on the daily double, in the first race Grammas Luck won by a length,  
my brother's horse won by a length in the first race, in the second,  
my brother lost it all, in the second race Go Fast lost a photo  
finish,  
my brother's horse lost a photo finish, my brother holding ten  
tickets,  
ripping them into halves, my brother holding ten tickets, ripping  
them  
into halves, my brother strangely in love with himself.

\*

1,000 ponies shot  
& only 1 survived.

\*

The Indian was measured before  
by the number of horses he owned,  
the wealth of an Indian was determined  
by the exact number of horses

he owned, I own no  
horses, I own no horses,  
my next door neighbors own  
a dozen horses, my cousins

own more horses than I can count,  
I own no horses,  
the Indian was measured before  
by the number of horses he owned,

the exact number, I own  
no horses, I own  
no horses, I own  
no horses.

**HAWK**

Dark-rumored inkling of air-chills,  
pulsing pupils, the whole hill  
monastery-still, a tilting  
cliff's edge empty  
reckoning — blue water, blue sky.

Ponderous, as if in chains,  
attended by black birds, he rises  
out of the tree-fringe  
hoisted by huge shoulders, granite facemask  
blank as an angel's —

over the flapping canopy of lake  
unwavering and undeterred, past lake rim and horizon  
into miraculous high noon  
when he who owns nothing, not shadow or hunger,  
absolves utterly,

becomes nothing — all shadow, all hunger —  
the eye-scorching sun unmasked in its bottomless plummet.

## Two Poems

## AGREEING TO IT

He climbed over the stone wall  
as if no one were watching him strip  
to almost nothing, unpack  
the flute from the case —  
and that would have been enough,  
right there, if he had stopped  
and let us look at him, imagine  
the cool of it under his fingers,  
the sun on the whole length  
of his body, the knowledge  
that anytime he wanted to play it  
he could, and wouldn't be playing it  
for us, but for himself or for some  
private god, it didn't matter.

But he played it,  
gave it to anyone  
who happened to be there,  
happened to notice him,  
just a man practicing the flute  
in the park on a summer day.  
I was seventeen and I took  
the obviousness of his body,  
the music, the sweep of the sky, and  
I decided I would do it:  
I would be the sort of person  
who wanted this, who would live for  
the heat of it on the skin,  
who would do what was necessary.

**FRESH FIG**

Never having seen  
or even imagined one,  
I brought it home —

soft, pendulous,  
a seeded teardrop,  
so unlike

what we were used to.  
We ate in small bites,  
suspicious

of anything that new,  
daring each other to  
like it first.

And then our mouths  
took to it, our tongues  
fit around it

and wanted more:  
we were bold  
as lovers,

choosing such a  
ripe, globed thing  
to eat, to own.

**Susannah Sheffer**

## ALBUM OF EIGHT LANDSCAPES AND EIGHT POEMS

“The moment you meet a teacher, you should leave  
the teacher, and you should be independent.”

— Shunryu Suzuki

“For what care I who calls me well or ill,  
So you o’ergreen my bad, my good allow?  
You are my all the world, and I must strive  
To know my shames and praises from your tongue;”

—William Shakespeare

## 1.

Too much, *too much* —  
all this yellow in early  
October, the way the yellow light  
saturates  
*all* of the  
not-completely-degreed  
leaves,  
saturates  
even the air *between* leaves —  
the red sandstone promontory  
oranged out,  
yellow-gray for the gravel —  
I swear  
the sun’s on the road  
and just about every  
wildflower that’s late  
says yellow  
millions of times  
and leaves.

## 2.

How will I find it?  
     equipoise in tumult —  
                     balance out of plunge —  
 I don't see how, how,  
     for you may not be but you seem to be  
                     all thought,  
 a migration of butterflies in autumn  
     bright all-of-a-sudden gestures . . .

We correspond.  
     We correspond.  
                     I can say  
 any word,  
     can it  
                     correspond?  
*And,*  
     *too,*  
                     *the ducks, the geese,*  
*go or begin*  
     *to go*  
                     *before the swirl and fall of . . . But*  
 not every  
     leaf  
                     is finished.



## 3.

In the whitening  
    now of November,  
                    I know, of *course*,  
I know December in-holds  
    something firmer  
                    something root-stocked, something  
*after.*  
    But how many years will it take me? —  
                    what years multiplied by what seasons  
take me? just to reword,  
    to enclose,  
                    finally to  
release  
    just this one hour of you,  
                    this one-of-the-last I'm allowed  
to write to your knowing —  
    *my pages flown to*  
                    your lap, that *far.*

## 4.

This hour and too  
    the lake hour in September,  
                    also alone, but you *were*  
the water, you were,  
    the glittering white-light leaf-shapes  
                    on that wondrous surface, laid over  
the blue depth . . .  
    your eyes . . .  
                    how could you see this:  
You were *there*,  
    in the reeds in the cattails  
                    green going to yellow to brown  
*in the wind in the wind*  
    that was you it was you  
                    *and you bent —*

## 5.

Christ, I've had it with this fucking elegy

I want these fucking photographics

DOWN!

And I don't mean

leaf down in yellow or

aflame, afloat on pretty

blue ponds in New Fucking Hampshire!

I mean not even brown but gray

and shriveled, shrunk

or better, sunk

to bracken, rot:

I want

that pond

iced up.

If I can't have you coming, then

I want you gone. I'm Grown — I *don't*

*want this* —

HUGE LOVE

scaled

down.

## 6.

What good does it do  
to note

*aqua-gray* sky, oak leaves

soaked *orange* —

deep *copper*, the sun declining . . .

then the sky a momentary *paler*

*aqua still*, trees forming

*wrought-iron* silhouettes out of

*dullest orange*, in the last rays.

Looks like Tiffany *lamp* light.

So what?

My grandmother gave me

a pair of *glass* candleholders —

*turquoise blue* —

“Depression Glass” — telling me how,

when my father was a little boy,

he thought they looked like

his eyes.

Once in a *fiery* spell,

I smashed those things with a board,

then cried

inconsolably,

picking up pieces . . .

putting them in that *brown paper* bag . . .

a brown not unlike *these oak-leaves*.

Big deal. I hate all mirrors,

like myself in you.

Brown paper bags,

candles set inside them

in sand at Christmastime:

*Luminarias*.

## 7.

I love you I love you and that's the truth.

Sometimes I dream I'm in  
the landscape,

mountains,

steep blue-black, for

miles and miles —

mountains —

mists — slowly rising, slowly settling —  
over depths —

*The bell and its necessities:*

*time and a hollow body.*

And underneath that sound a sound

a drone

under the wind. And wind is always  
skyward . . .

## 8.

Absolutely forced  
     to love absolutely  
                     forced to this ending,  
 I find myself in your words:  
     “*the double-edged nature of all  
       profound encounters,  
   revealing and confusing,  
       regenerating and  
       destroying.*”

My heart feels  
     like an animal, a mare  
                     lying on her side in a cave,  
 brooding, sick.  
     And yet I cannot help but set my eyes upon  
                     beyond — the grassy plains —  
 being what I know:  
     those undulations . . .  
                     I'd like to show how *different*  
 the yellows are — the winter grasses —  
     some brass-colored,  
                     some a near-white chartreuse.

I will show you this:  
     my deepest bow,  
                     for you have taught me  
 the inside and out  
     are *just the same*. I bow —  
                     before I dash — in your honor.

Mary Leader

## Two Poems

## OCTAROON

Darkness, two raveled sneakers blur  
against the queen palm.  
Sayeeda, princess of Abyssinia,  
Kool-mo-dee t-shirt,  
hair pulled back in a ribbon  
like Nefertiti the Lioness —  
what deal's going down  
right now? Have they told you  
another time and you're gone,  
and are you maybe  
sneaking another line  
anyway? Your brother's  
skinny as a lightning rod,  
I saw him last week  
trying to sell some college boy  
a gold chain — yeah, a gold chain.  
He might not know it,  
but the Man is wise to him.  
And they're probably hip to how  
your Aunt Vashni's putting on  
matinees so she can ice down  
with Jose and Spam  
at the shooting gallery.

I want to tell you something,  
something black that  
rolls its hips and coaxes  
the Carolina Shuffle  
out of an old washboard.  
But I've got my collar, my tie,  
I trim my fingernails,  
don't smoke, drink Ginestet Margaux.  
These brothers aren't my brothers  
any more than he was my father —  
the half-creole wingback

who split a Stavanger maiden's  
prim uprights, and shot  
his dumb homunculus  
toward the color-blind sun.

The one who eloped  
with a bus to Baton Rouge,  
left her with a baby growing  
inside her and a pile  
of unpaid bills.

Nobody believes he was the reason  
for my frizzy hair, long flattened skull,  
arms that drag too low. Once or twice drunk  
I told. And they nodded, embarrassed,  
not knowing what to say.

Sayeeda, I'll leave it that way.  
Because what use is color  
when it's just a whisper  
in the blood? When it  
only buys the knowledge  
that you don't belong  
on either train? Sayeeda,  
why do I want to tell you  
what those crack-heads never will,  
how Lester and Bird  
heard music in the noise  
of steelyard rimshots  
and the stillness of women  
before their mirrors?  
Why do I want to take you  
to a porch in Mississippi,  
make you learn  
at some old Juju man's knee  
how good is blackness,  
how tall the gods of Africa?  
Me, with my pale skin  
and eyes of chilly blue,  
who have my place insured  
against the likes of you.



## CIRCUMCISION

when i was nearly thirteen  
they decided to do the operation  
because the smell (stale casein,  
rank narcissus) kept coming  
through my clothes

the foreskin being tight  
and the doctor so old and cranky  
he couldn't stand again  
to loosen it with steaming towels  
and vaseline

and anyway they said, if we don't  
he'll have trouble later, cancer  
and it will fall off completely

the palo verdes shook  
in their crowns of bees  
when they took me up  
to a private room  
of pale green walls, no TV,  
the picture of Jesus  
with hair like a cornfield

the nuns and nurses liked me, and  
we played low stakes blackjack  
all afternoon before the doctor  
came and led me away  
to a secret place where a  
brittle, grey-haired woman  
took pictures of it  
fearful and limp as a  
shucked clam

that night i ate  
salisbury steak and  
instant potatoes, milk  
and jello, and slept  
until a fat mestizo nurse  
came and woke me

drew a curtain around the bed  
and pulled the gown up to my ribs.  
Carefully as a priest  
he lathered me with yucca froth  
from navel to buttocks,  
shaved my scant hair with a  
long straight razor,  
and rolled the patiently unsheathed  
blue acorn between his soapy hands  
like a lump of masa  
or a sugar skull  
to give to a child  
on Dia de los Muertos

his eyes motionless, interested  
in a way that made me  
burn with shame

before i felt  
the grey mice flee  
their sour cupboard  
and emptiness roll in  
sweet as desert rain

later when i showed  
the puckered scar  
to johnny and rick  
hiding in the aloe patch  
at sundown

it was nearly as good  
as coming through the fire unburned  
taking your first deer  
surviving the curandero  
and his bitter datura

## Two Poems

## NOTHING ON PAPER

Birth and death, three cuttings of hay,  
Kept me from writing for a year.  
But the hay kept leaf on leaf a long time in the barn  
While the winter yahooped outside.

It was a clean year.  
We quenched that womb  
And left the flocked placenta for dead.  
In the celibate time around the birth,  
We learned the other, older purpose of the bed.

That is the way it must stay afterward.  
Sex now in the mowing and the mow  
And the studded orchard  
Where all the apples are gendered with stars  
And the nipples buzz big as bees.  
And in the winter?  
Freeze to me,  
Til we burn out, cold as the searing stars.

There was another bed  
A family stood around  
And whispered goodbye  
And shouted let go.  
Oh, breath like a bull high in hump,  
It's coming.

Leave the bed for the child  
And the bad child in the dying.

It was a clean year.  
We made the hay we roll in,  
Nothing can unmake that bed.  
It was a clean year,  
Nothing on paper.

**MEN**

We stand in damp barns that the wind bangs.  
We turn our backs to piss, but not to spit.  
More of us love our wives than you would think.  
Few will admit it, none wants to talk about it.

How big are we:  
Across the shoulders, in our jeans, in our hearts?  
That is a fear we might talk about,  
But it isn't what we look for  
In the eyes of the other talking  
As we listen pushing back our baseball caps  
Hitching up our pants  
Loafing and leaning on a pickup,  
What we want to know is,  
Is he dangerous, would he laugh?

We see the face of rock and the water running down it  
We feel our feet echo on the ledge  
And the well runs through it,  
And we nod, brothers.  
Bullshit like that.

We like a little death  
And carry some around  
In a smoke or a bottle.  
This is what we are in love with:  
Being man enough to do it slowly.  
Get the kids grown, first.  
And what about the wife?  
This is what is wrong with a woman drunk:  
She shouldn't hunt, especially not herself.  
It ain't natural if she dies first.

We look into the match,  
Its sharp play across the tobacco  
That comes up to meet it  
In the sweetest prairie surrender.

Some love to hide from fear.  
But love is where we learn fear.  
And fear can count the sands til love runs out.  
The kids board the schoolbus  
And clamber into our worst imaginings.  
Their rubber bones, their rooted hearts  
Can't last in our cheap novels  
Where preverts roam and furnaces rage  
And any brake can ooze into fatal limbo underfoot.

Where is comfort?  
In that same world, when we let it,  
Just let it, a little.

Pockets full of scratch, pockets full of seed.  
Buckets full of sap, buckets full of feed.

Stop. A man stops, a woman finishes,  
Can bring to term, can bear  
Can bring milk, can bring blood again in a month,  
Has a flock of eggs and a breast for two generations to pig.  
What is a skinny and downstream sperm to that?

Stop  
Short  
Halfway up the stairs  
See yourself go by  
Watch your thoughts rise  
Looking up their skirts from underneath.  
Stop now hawk now turn now  
Plow down. Get grown, get gone.

Go now  
Remember the noses of all creatures.  
Along the hammered flank of the bull  
Remember how the calf nuzzles  
And the rubber noses of lambs, how they butt and the  
bag bunts them.  
Hogs root and foxes, how they twitch the air in an agony  
of knowledge.

*(Stanza continues)*

Children run clear streams all winter.  
Go now.  
You have the day and can go naked.  
You have the night and can hide.  
You have life if you can make it.  
Wear it inside, go on, bake it.  
Wear it out, to show you tried.

Stephen Philbrick

### GRAVITIES

To be prone is to be covered  
by a man or spades of dirt  
or like a pig by its mother.  
All things fall on what has fallen.  
There crows a universal law,  
but you might take pity  
for out of memory  
all victims are judged innocent.

At the bottom of a canyon  
night comes early. You rest  
with your back against the wall  
in a decor of strata.  
The old creek, long tired in its course,  
sings the only song it knows,  
how the earth always was true,  
the sky always a liar.

Keith S. Murray

## BOOKS IN BRIEF

I would like to celebrate two books by strong poets who have made their way quietly through the throng of workshop networkers, fellowship-chasers, prize winners and circuit riders. Without promotion or competition or fanfare they have written their way through to poetry of power and integrity.

The first is **Barbara Moore's *Farewell to the Body*** (Washington, D. C.: The Word Works, 1990, 76 pp., \$8. paper). Its first achievement is the exploration of a language for expressing freshly the unique gritty experience of the individual. Moore pays surgical attention to the dependence of perception on the organs on which that perception depends: the silver jelly of the eyeball, the "brown depths of the groin," the "miles and miles of incandescent plumbing"—the "whole miraculous, tireless/ contraction, which may tire of me soon." From this body the poet looks out and recognizes "the oak on the lawn/ injected with the color of our thought." The triumph of these poems is their escape from the solecism of this self-consciousness:

What is there to talk about, except the earth,  
 its ancient freshness, grass sputtering  
 with children and new graves. Also  
 beetles so top-heavy, so drugged with thought,  
 they tip over trying to navigate the simplest distance.  
 Though it's only one day after another, never  
 the day we're after, though we walk  
 the pear-shaped earth in gravely wounded lives,  
 such afternoons arrive.

The book ends with several rich poems of gratitude for "such afternoons," in which the suffering of the human condition is not so much alleviated as balanced by a happiness beyond language.

**Constance Hunting's *The Myth of the Horizon*** (Mount Kisco, N. Y. and London: Moyer Bell/ Asphodel Press, 1991, 154 pp., \$12.95, paper) brings together poems from six earlier books in a tightly-organized new whole. From the beginning Hunting's writing has revealed a marvelous ear:

She makes her way  
 among the golden droppings of the sun,  
 the silver spittle of the snail.  
 To come to stone . . . .

This exquisite prosody conveys narratives of moving complexity and subtlety. A series of long portraits of an elegant old world in decline and fall dominates the first section of this book. One of the most brilliant is "After

the Stravinsky Concert, moving from its *Introduzione* in which a pier glass falls, "leaving us nothing to reflect upon," to its *Finale: grave assai*," with its November of: "No nonnies, no nannies, no go, lovely rose." The second section of the book opens with the unsettling magic of the verse novella, "Beyond the Summerhouse." The narrator in this delicately Gothic romance pays a visit to a mythic holiday world suggested by the luscious Vanessa Bell painting on the book jacket. Hunting here creates a realm of the imagination so sensuously and psychologically real that it leaves the reader haunted and disturbed and strangely altered. This 34-page poem is a considerable work of fiction at a very high level. The final section of the book is the whole splendid volume of *Between the Worlds*, which I reviewed here when it first appeared. That title could apply even better to this new volume, but *The Myth of the Horizon* expresses both the process by which Hunting transforms the personal to the universal as well as the way in which a phenomenon perceived may expand from percept to concept and move farther and farther out as one advances toward it, and in this way her title is a microcosm of the book—a sort of mini-mini-poem.

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*Agni* magazine (no. 31/32), with more than 400 pages, its glossy cover and \$12. price tag, looks like just another of the bloated university journals that choke the mailbox. But this double issue has two special features that justify the size and price. The first is the publication of the papers from the Harvard conference on *Social Control and the Arts*—sixteen short statements by authorities on the regulation of expression in China, the USSR, South Africa, Chile, Britain, Japan, Poland, and the U. S. Nine of the articles are on the external and internal restrictions on artistic expression in this country. Most troubling is the evidence from here and abroad of the various ways self-censorship achieves the same ends as state censorship, as Noam Chomsky has been trying to warn us. The second feature in this excellent issue is a symposium on Peter Dale Scott's enormously important poem *Coming to Jakarta: A Poem about Terror* (New York: New Directions, 1989), on the CIA involvement in the massacre of over half a million people in Indonesia in 1965. In addition to a statement by Scott, a section of a new poem by him, and an interview, are several valuable critical articles, including a magisterial analysis by Robert Hass, "Some Notes on *Coming to Jakarta*." The editors of *Agni* deserve our gratitude for calling attention to this major work. Address orders to *Agni*, Boston University, Creative Writing Program, 236 Bay State Road, Boston, MA 02215.