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## CHATTANOOGA LOOKOUTS VS. NEW YORK YANKEES

APRIL 2, 1931

Virne Beatrice (Jackie) Mitchell 1914-1978

Alright, pay up. Lay those bills right here in my left palm, in the palm of the hand that just threw six perfect pitches. Sorry, Kenna, about those last four wide ones, I know you had to stretch, but hell – I've only been home for a week. This hand has been busy shooting basketballs down in Dallas, the championships, you know. Hasn't faced a batter since last season. But still, it mostly don't forget what Dazzy Vance taught it right here in Memphis. How to line up with the stitching. How to curve, how to slide, how to knuckle. How to strike out the sultan of swat, Mr. Babe Ruth himself. I ought to make you all pay double. The deal was just Babe, but I laid down Gehrig, too. Better players than them couldn't hit me. Delicate my ass. Look at these calluses. Does this hand look like it belongs under white silk? Looks like it prefers quality grade Louisville leather to me. It might not take me to the series, but all I want is to stay in baseball long enough to get money to buy a roadster. C'mon, shell it out, pay for a hubcap or two. You know damn well the Babe tried to hit those pitches. What about the gold watch offered to the first player to homer in Engel Stadium? Think he'd pass that up? You saw him swing, saw him yell at Owen to inspect the ball. And the bat – did you see it fly? Pouting like a girl, he was. Swung like one, too. But don't he just wish he could pitch like one!

**RECORDED MESSAGE**

Your call is important to us.  
Thank you for holding  
*Norwest Banks*

Your call is important to us.  
That is why, although we are not now answering,  
we will, as soon as possible, answer,  
provided you keep holding.  
If you do not keep holding,  
we assure you  
we will not answer.

Your call is important to us  
because you are holding,  
because you are the kind of person who,  
when asked to hold, keeps holding,  
at least so far.  
As difficult as it might be for you to believe,  
not everyone holds.  
Some stop holding even before we have finished  
asking them to hold. Some, we are coming to suspect,  
take special pleasure  
in not holding.

Lest you begin to doubt us, remember  
that if we did not intend to answer,  
we would not let you hold,  
as you will note we continue to do.

We thank you for holding.

We are thanking you now  
so that later, should you have held  
long enough for us to answer,  
we needn't spend time  
thanking you then  
for having held.

We know your time is important to you,  
as our time is important to us.

Unfortunately, we have none of our own right now  
to answer you.

Finally, let us emphasize that  
the importance to us of your call  
is demonstrated by our  
not answering  
in this particular way.

In fact, this particular way of not answering —  
when considered from the angle  
from which we would like you  
to consider it —  
can be construed  
as our way of answering.

We hope our answer, such as it is,  
is as important to you  
as your call is to us,  
so important  
that you are now ready  
to hear it again.

### FRAGMENTS FROM THE WOMEN'S WRITING

A Chinese linguist has discovered a group of elderly women in Hunan who use an ancient script, written and read exclusively by women, which 'uses an inverted system of grammar and syntax very different from Chinese.' The writing resembles oracle bone carvings from the Shang Dynasty (16th century BC) and writing of the Chin Dynasty (3rd century BC). Local women believe the script, which mothers taught their daughters at home, was invented by a Song Dynasty concubine to relieve her loneliness, but Prof. Gong Zhibing thinks the language, too complex to be the creation of one person, is a relic of writing systems lost when Chinshi Huangdi, the First Emperor, united China in 221 BC. Chinshi Huangdi unified Chinese writing by forbidding the use of all scripts except his official "small seal" characters. Men learned the new official writing. Women, barred from institutions of learning, kept the old script alive in private.

Most of the writing is poetry, autobiography, letters, and songs. Girls would form sworn sister relationships, using the script to document their bonds and correspond with one another long after they were grown and married. Few of the writings have survived, because the women asked that all their writings be burned when they died, so that they could read their favorite works in the afterlife.

Professor Gong met two women in their eighties who were able to read and write the language. The two, the only surviving members of a seven-member sworn sister 'family,' burned all the copies of a third sister's writings when she died this year.

— Derived from *The China Daily*, Beijing, 1992

*Fragments from the Women's Writing*

Daughter: these are the characters  
forbidden by the Emperor.  
These are the bone words,  
the cracks on the under-shell.  
This is the other grammar.

\*

Sister: I document our bond  
and correspond to you  
finger to finger, eye to eye.

\*

Unwrap the old silk very slowly.

\*

Daughter: write in milk,  
as I did. Hold it to the fire  
to make the words appear.

\*

Sister: still my sleeves are dry,  
but I saw a dark moon this autumn  
a long way down the river.

\*

My Lord was angry till I told him  
it was my laundry list.  
He laughed then, "Hen scratchings!"  
and I laughed.

\*

Daughter: learn the language upside down,  
inverted in the turtle's eye.  
Use the bones for soup.

\*

An army of men  
of heavy red pottery  
under the hill by the river  
where we do the laundry.

\*

Sister: His thighs are jade  
and his staff a stiff bamboo,  
but there's nobody here to talk to.

\*

Do not burn all your songs, mother,  
much as you may love them.  
How can I sing smoke?  
Leave me the one about autumn.

\*

Sister: This form is my own.  
I live inside these words  
as the turtle in its shell,  
as the marrow in the bone.

\*

Sisters: This is a colder mountain  
than the tiger's, and the bones  
say only snow is falling.

\*

Daughters: Keep my embroideries,  
send my life after me.  
My autobiography was the turtle's under-shell,  
the small cracks in bones,  
a silken thread, a drop of milk.  
A life too vast  
for the little writing of the Emperor.

\*

I crack each word of your letter  
and suck its sweetness.  
How it will sing in the fire!

\*

Sisters: burn me, burn me,  
let the snow fall in the river!

\*

Mother: I entered college as a man  
but they exposed my body  
and wrote their small words on it  
till it shrank to shadow.  
I put on the turtle's shell  
and crawled into the fire.  
In the cracked oracle  
you can read that the Empire  
will fall.

\*

Our characters  
have always been forbidden.  
Will the last daughters  
unroll the silk kept secret  
through all the dynasties,  
or turn our words to fire?

\*

Sister: I am lonely. Write.

Ursula K. Le Guin



**I AM FISHING FOR GOD**

using my heart as bait.  
It is just before dawn,  
the slightest hint of

pink bleeds into the  
night sky. I use my  
pen knife to cut the

hole in my chest,  
reaching behind the  
pocket of my shirt.

What a tough muscle  
to pull the hook through.  
The heart is astonished

to be in this other world  
and trembles and shivers like  
a moth discovered in daylight.

I try to calm it by stroking it  
by telling it that it will all be  
ok, but what do I know.

The breeze picks up and chills the cavern  
of my chest. It feels good to  
be empty at last. I cast my heart

across the water. I cast it again  
and again. Sometimes it floats on  
the surface, other times it sinks

below. Something will strike at it  
that I can't see. I pray  
I am using the right bait.

The tough outer layers  
soften in the water. The heart grows  
smaller, more pliant.

It has become a beautiful  
blue jewel. I begin  
not to recognize it.

Was this me?  
It waits. I wait.  
The boat rocks

slightly in the breeze.  
lifted and lowered  
by the tide.

Stuart Kestenbaum

## GENS DE COULEUR LIBRES: LADIES AND MEN

“As successive generations of lighter colored women were born, resentment began to appear. By 1778 these women numbered 1500 in New Orleans, most of them unmarried, all free and kept in little houses near the ramparts.”

– Harnett Kane

Was her fraction  $1/2$ ,  $3/4$  or  $7/8$   
 white, and was the word *mulatto*,  
*quadroon* or *octoroon*,  
 or was it *tieceron*, *griffe*,  
*marabon*, *sacaron* or *os rouge*?  
 And why was it when the word  
*quadroon* came up, one rarely  
 thought of males?

For there was the quadroon brother  
 as sister stepped out for  
 The Quadroon Ball. Brother  
 just might be growing tall  
 up-river where Daddy'd sent him,  
 making sure he found a woman  
 darker than himself.

And Sister went on dancing,  
spinning the ballroom floor,  
each step one more to fade  
the color, the touring Englishman  
taking note of "that peach-soft  
velvet-brown quadron, with the dark,  
liquid eyes and perfect gait,"  
remarking on "the notable progress  
she'd made toward joining  
a superior race."

Sister became superior,  
parading the city in her plumed carriage,  
feather bonnet and jewels –  
white wife glared, vowing  
*her* husband had no part in that,  
Sister swearing *her* lover  
would never, ever depart.  
So it went in the little house  
near the ramparts.  
Brother kept on writing  
from the country,  
wondering of home,  
and white wives went on  
getting redder, angrier  
until finally law forbade  
"any free woman of color  
from acting white,"  
banishing silks,  
sapphires and regal hats.

It could do little  
with those dark eyes,  
hearts that were finally and politely  
set aside, released  
"from the privilege of serving

(Stanza continued)

as a white man's mistress";  
the ladies retired, perhaps, to owning  
a rooming house "to accommodate  
tired gentlemen."

There we might find Sister, a little  
older, proprietress of a house  
full of rooms, linens  
and snowy mosquito nets.  
Mornings, she serves  
up one more smile  
with roasted coffee;  
sundown, she draws gentlemen-sized  
tubs of flower water,  
scented towels hanging on the dowel  
while up-river Brother's out of sight,  
marrying back his skin.

Katherine Soniat

## RIGHT HAND

Grandfather carried his voice in the seamed  
palm of his right hand, the one  
that had ironed countless taciturn trousers.

What an eloquent hand, it broke into grins  
and self-assured narration whenever  
it opened – how could a hand carry nothing,  
bear away nothing from its nation?  
When it entered a room, even the corners  
mumbled in Yiddish, the very dust  
had sifted from consonants' guttural rubbing.

The poems this hand had proclaimed to shirts  
as it moved back and forth like a Greek chorus  
across the stage of the ironing board –  
these poems had diffused in clouds of steam.

Grandpa himself had long been struck dumb  
by the garrulity of this hand,  
but sometimes he'd thrust it deep in his pocket  
and, straightening up, display an uncanny  
knack for spelling English words.

## SHADOW TWIN, PLAY

“Why this particular child should have felt the need for protective privacy is of course another matter, though I doubt the necessity of plumbing any great psychological depths to discover the answer.”

— Margaret Lane on Beatrix Potter’s journal code

1.

Like a double helix these letters twist.  
 Stomachache, backache. The hearth  
 hedgehog cools. In his sleep  
 she strokes him. Loves him like code: Twin language, talk  
 two children split from one egg will babble  
 as they stroke each other’s hair.  
 Beatrix strokes her hair. Kisses each page  
 of admissions — “Flowers  
 against window.” — darker parts drowned.  
 Mice, squirrels, hedgehogs salvage them  
 bit by bit, rotting and sopping.  
 In code Beatrix scrawls, “Cold does not cause  
 a creature to hibernate.” The down phase  
 drifts deeper, sleep so weighted Beatrix  
 lies still. Stomachache, backache. Mama knows  
 she’s frail. The window, the window:  
 ingesting forest so bird-full  
 she’s faint, Beatrix believes she’s ill, believes,  
 one day, tethered, she’ll venture too far, eat earth,  
 grass, wood, sky, the parents she loves,  
 then, dead,  
 let them cry  
 from her mouth.

2.

*Let them cry from my mouth.*

Mice nibble her skin.

The carriage door slams; Mama

pays a call; Papa

drinks gin; Bertram

in his lounging chair

dreams

about his bride.

*I want to be naked.**To touch someone's face.*

She reads what she's coded.

Strikes it

in angry black lines.

Bed.

A mouse on her back

as she prays.

She reaches to stroke him.

Cool, clawed feet: solace

so real

her little love opens like

sexual death.

3.

Dead at noon in her too bright room,

she surrenders the dream.

In her tangle of black hair

she's hoarded it, but mice race it away

like rotting-leaf spines. Black

bits across the room, the mice straddling them

with paws, nibbling them as if splitting

tough, fibrous wires or synapses from

her brain. Outside, a carriage rattles. Noon.

Sunlight bakes the chintz curtains

translucent as skin

veins push through

*(Stanza continued)*



when she tightens her arms. The mice gorge.  
Licorice or hair?  
She's entered their dream. They chew her elbows to bone.  
Their coal eyes glow. When Beatrix  
rises, she smells her body:  
acid: rot.

4.

So what  
if she's lonely.  
New mice  
delight her.

She loves their whiskers  
as they kiss her ear  
so ticklishly  
skin tightens  
to greet them.

Their clawed feet  
scrabble her  
when she leans to draw  
fungi,

black whorls  
steaming heat.

Like two-dimensional  
sculpture her  
drawings deepen  
brightness,  
shadow,  
chiaroscuro  
Papa  
envies.

He lies down beside her.

She shuffles her sketches.

Seeks  
Wednesday's greenest specimen

*(Stanza continued)*

as, between breasts starched  
and bodiced,  
like jewelry her newest Mouse  
dangles.

5.

How it began.  
The room brackish, black.  
On the ceiling white light  
waxy as an orchid.  
Pity for it lured her.  
Robed in blankets  
she rose toward flickering  
gone greenish now, moss-  
colored with spikes so translucent  
she eased fingers  
between them. The house  
was still. Mama slept. Papa too.  
In her nightie she felt a tugging  
like the need to touch herself.

The a snail-track silver  
streaked the walls –  
in the dark she heard skittering.  
Hedgehog bristled. Trembling,  
she dropped to her knees, belly,  
face to the wall.  
Felt the ascension as pulling  
so gradual it might have been  
the urge to draw fungi  
shoots pushing out like thick  
thumbs. Felt the pulling until  
her heart shifted beneath bone.  
When she closed her eyes, opened  
them, she was floating. Watching  
Beatrix's shocked face  
stare back at her  
shining.

6.

Like a loaf she lays him down. Knows  
he wants it. Her favorite time: dead time: the first  
shadows have a whitish cast then tint  
so slowly she almost sees black

with her naturalist's eye. At night she never  
hides. Sometimes, while Hedgehog hibernates, she  
removes every lamp shade, those bulb-suns  
so close to exploding

she loves, on her cornea, to let red and black dots dance,  
long floaters wrap each liquid  
ball. This room's so cozy he can only  
relax. As his snout quivers, as his flanks

stiffen, she strokes his bristles, skin pelleted  
with dandruff balls she rolls under her fingers.  
Defly he deflates.

A beautiful death, she thinks –

a private death: he's snappish  
if she touches him  
during descent. His eyes roll, disappear. Beatrix reflects  
what a lucky girl she is

to live here with hedgehogs and mice and fungi in a jar,  
to live here for eternity, not a frightening thought at all,  
for the world, as her mother says,  
devours the innocent.

Terri Brown-Davidson

## THE FOYER

I think people have glue on them, or explode. They put on clothes and hair and eyes like wearing furniture, and I've got a trigger on my face. I worry about people seeing my left cheek rise and fall back like it was shooting at them.

What a messy foyer with aunt Thelma and my sister Charlene, uncle Walter and Grandfather, along with fourteen cousins and some other poor relations except my mother – she never comes to visit – illiterates my Grandfather says about people like her, trash the soul struggles out of a ditch from like honeysuckle.

I don't like that. He doesn't understand what makes her and the relatives on her side dull-shiny and smooth like an old quarter, and makes them know a vending machine for sure when they see one coming.

Anyway, I know I'm a ghost in the foyer, one of those kind with a floating tongue and shocked chainless. I know where everybody is and drift to the door for Grandfather when the doorbell rings.

I boo greetings and see that look in their eyes saying *so this is how he turned out, the dope head. I figured this would happen. I wonder if he's got herpes yet, the drunk.* And I hug my relations and kiss them on the cheek.

## SEASONS

Bear: beware, from the last days  
of August far into November. You  
too, you Rails, Gallinules, Snipes;  
and from brightest October on, you  
Scoters, Eiders, and Old Squaws,  
stay clear of blinds and gunboats until  
new light lifts you into next year.  
And you upland targets for gentlemen  
who prefer to shoot rather than hunt,  
you alder Woodcock, cornstalk Pheasant  
and deepwoods Grouse, keep your cover  
as maples bear gold and go bare; wait out  
the sky until the last Canada Goose  
has gone over. You, too, you Deer,  
spooked for a moon's month in backlots  
and hardwood groves grown thick with  
riflemen bright with blaze vests. About jack-  
lights and treestands there is, in truth,  
no truth you will ever know. But you,  
Fox and Bobcat: you loners know your times  
to lay low, to leave no sign for dogs,  
nor tracks in new snow. As for you Crows,  
Skunks, Raccoons, you'll soon feel  
in what small regard you're held: mere

target-practice for small-bore men, or  
boys not yet within range of Rabbits.  
Yet after new Christmas guns, even after

the year turns new, it's you Red Squirrel,  
you quick Coyote and Coydog, and you, slow  
Porcupine and old Woodchuck, with whom

I most wish to reason with human reason:  
as housewives without blaze vests have fatally  
learned, hanging out, like you, in their own

backyards, the laws we keep reinventing  
aim for what we most or least value: on you,  
on your common kind, who have no reason to know,  
the law still says there is *No Closed Season*.

Philip Booth

## INTERVIEW

*Hi. Do you remember me?*

Sure, I remember you.

*What's my name?*

I don't remember.

*Do you remember your name?*

I don't remember.

I changed my name.

Now it's lost.

\*

## THE PEOPLE AND THEIR LAND

The mild climate and abundant air favor the rapid growth of cypress, pine, and other tree species. Here, history is a living entity. The hospitable populace spares no effort to make visitors feel at home.

\*

Morning-glory –  
dew-starred  
tobacco sheds.

\*

hes always a problem mama said  
an worse n that  
never made no effort to right hisself  
and taint like it caint be done  
luke works in fields  
matthew mark and john works in fields  
taint like it caint be done

\*

All right, damn it, it *can't* be done.

I can't continue this without  
myself interpolated here  
(in bumpity tetrameter)  
after the imaginary  
brother's imaginary speech.

The snide embellishment between  
the bits stolen, stumbled upon  
and half-fancied in the half-hour  
before and after sleep: Myself,  
who heard a man on NPR,  
drawling, crapped out in New York's streets  
but spouting wild poetry.

\*

*Can you tell me what year you were born?*

I was born the year the President fibbed.  
He wasn't sorry.  
I think I was born yesterday.

*Can you tell me how you've been feeling? Have you been  
eating enough? finding a place to sleep at night?*

I ate a Ouija board.  
But it was smashed.  
Yeah, it was smashed.  
I had a little insomnia.  
I couldn't sleep because of the cement.  
They poured it down my mouth.

*Who did? Who poured cement down your mouth?*

I don't know.  
But they were green  
with boils on their noses.  
Wearing flowers.

(Stanza continued)



Some kind of honeysuckle.  
Confederate daisies.  
Maybe from across the river.

\*

Creaking chair,  
rain-bent porch –  
evening crumples.

\*

Need I go on? You've set the scene  
already yourself, I hope. The way  
brief winter browns the lawns, spring flares  
azaleas, then summer catches  
and burns and burns into autumn.

Tenant farmers, they scratch it out  
and move on in a year or two.  
His daddy's drunk, his mama's fat ...  
God knows that the particulars  
are within anybody's reach,  
so let's presume they all assume  
that something awful's wrong with him.  
The day he wanders off into  
the pine forest, no one is out  
all night looking. Red puddles  
in the red mud dry. The soil cracks.

\*

*How's your cough? Have you been coughing up any  
phlegm?*

No, no phlegm.  
Only a memory over on eighty-first street.

*You coughed up a memory?*

Two of them.  
Still alive.  
They both had beards.  
And little birds on their shoulders.  
Do you hear the birds?  
Don't you hear them singing?

*What sort of birds?*

Song birds, of course.  
But don't talk about them.  
They're very sensitive.

\*

Needles shiver.  
Silence, roar.  
The wind is ocean waves.

\*

*That eye infection seems to be getting worse. Can I take a  
look at your eye?*

No, I don't think so.  
It went away.

*The infection went away?*

No, my eye is gone.  
It had to be at a party.  
Over on eighty-first.  
It's Mama's birthday.

*Your mother's birthday? How old is she?*

Oh, she's dead.  
She died before I was born.  
Daddy saw to all that stuff.

\*

I'm picturing him forty-five  
 but looking like he's seventy.  
 He's maybe got a shopping cart  
 or just a plastic garbage bag.  
 A doorway in some vacant shop.  
 Foul skin – a stench to choke a hog.  
 Let's say he spends his days drowsing  
 in the library reading room  
 over a volume of Whitman.  
 Let's say his illness is a gift.  
 Let's say he's always shit-faced drunk.

\*

*Can I look at your eye? It's very red and puffy.*

Sure, you can look at it.  
 It just got back from vacation.  
 Bahamas. Yeah.  
 But it misbehaved and it got punished.  
 Bad eye. Bad, bad.  
 I don't think you'd better look at it.  
 It might get in more trouble.

*Can you sit still for just a minute? Let me put some  
 medicine in there.*

I don't think so.  
 I don't like medicine.  
 It makes me sleepy.  
 Sometimes it makes me very mad.

*This is medicine to make your eye feel better.*

I don't think so.  
 I have to go now.  
 There's a strong tailwind.  
 Maybe I'll fly.  
 I used to fly before my rudder broke.  
 Then I crashed into the sea.

*(Stanza continued)*

It was so cold I put on my sweater.  
 The one that Mama made.  
 She could sew anything.  
 One time she sewed a prison and put me in it.  
 But it was warm.  
 I like warm.  
 Excuse me, please, I have to go.

\*

"Excuse me, please, I have to go."  
 He's so polite. And why the hell  
 would he read Whitman? Dirt farm boy  
 with a celestial education:  
 received, no doubt, from angels fallen  
 to the vetch and rye, the Tidewater  
 and country epitaphs. Someone  
 should take a photograph of them  
 explaining their philosophy  
 as, dumb, he gapes at their nimbi.

\*

Southern poets learn your craft:  
 Mythologize the poor and daft.

\*

*Stop. I just want to put this medicine in your eye.*

Don't touch me.

*If you can't calm down a little, we're going to have to take  
 you with us.*

Don't touch.

*I just want to help.*

Don't touch me.

The bad men touched me in the park.

We had cocktails

and they touched me with their tools of torture.

*(Stanza continued)*

Afterwards I was so thirsty  
I drank up the duck pond.

*You've got to stop walking away. If you don't stop, I'm  
going to have to put you in the van.*

The bad men touched me.

*Do you want to come to the hospital?*

I'm an integrated circuit.  
I might get wet.  
If I overload I'll kill the world.

*Please.*

If I eat my eye will you go away.  
I'll just take it out and eat it.  
If it's down in my throat it won't see anything.  
Then you can't get mad.  
I'll keep it in my stomach.  
Okay?

*I'm going to need some help here, fellas.*

\*

GOVERNMENT

None

EDUCATION

None

TRANSPORTATION AND COMMUNICATION

Erratic

PLACES OF INTEREST

None

\*

Was that an error, ridiculing  
*Compton's Encyclopedia*  
again? The hick haiku don't work,  
and brother's definitely best

*(Stanza continued)*

left back there in part four, chewing  
his two-dimensional 'baccy  
with yellow, two-dimensional  
teeth. And so...what else? – but me,  
thinking already of ground roast  
coffee, a slice of pecan pie.  
And what can I say that's not pure  
rhetoric, that doesn't de-  
construct (I *hate* that word) my lie?

\*

Tell those men to leave.  
I promise that I won't explode.

*Just come with us. We're going to help you relax, and  
we're going to take care of that eye.*

Mama told me to stay here.  
The bad men told me.  
They all said stay.  
It's geometry.  
If I leave the street will collapse.  
There'll be a great big hole where I was.  
Someone could fall in.

David Starkey

**BEWARE**

Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves.

(Matthew 7.15 A.V.)

Inwardly, beware.

Beware of wolves in sheep's clothing,  
for inwardly they are ravening.

Beware of sheep, inwardly,  
they are false prophets.

Beware of false prophets, inwardly  
they are sheep.

Beware of prophets' clothing.

False prophets come ravening  
in sheep's clothing.

Beware prophets which come  
to you in sheep's clothing,  
inwardly they are false wolves.

Beware prophets,  
inwardly, they are false.

Beware prophets, inwardly,  
they are ravening.

Sheep in clothing are false.

Wolves in clothing are false.

Beware.

Come in clothing, beware of wolves.

Come, inwardly, you are  
wolves.

Beware clothing.

Beware false sheep.

Beware of wolves,  
inwardly, they may be prophets.

Robin Furth



## Two Poems

### HOME

As a child you asked – how did I ever get into that  
spidery place, how could I ever get out.

Knowing more about food than sex, the child answered –  
she ate me in the broken shapes of meat

chunks, bone sticks, blood mush, then cast me out  
through that disturbing door

to the universe. It grew no clearer, even after  
searching your own pink folds.

You keep the child's dream – that if you do something  
right, just be tall enough, strong

enough, wise enough, you can fill the grown woman  
three times your size. The joy – to enter

again the warm clear pool where each move is met  
by resilient muscle as you float

upside down along glossed surfaces in that one safe  
place in the galaxy, the first

home, where you could exist inside your skin and  
not be alone. So you strive

for this heart of the world and just as you think  
you'd be able, then comes the fear –

if you penetrate this black gullet, the center,  
you'll dissolve. Swallowed up

in the thick mire of her tubes and guts, you will  
be, not near her, or like her, but her.

**THE FEAST**

What kept you safe in that muscle-bound, pear-shaped  
nursery, where you simmered, one large  
delicacy, arranged in rosette folds, more precise and  
improbable than those carved radishes and  
Chinese carrots cut by pinking shears? What protected you  
from the caustic enzymes of her spit, her sharp bile,  
the water-sucking loops of her bowel? The frail wall  
between you, a cellular veil in the placenta's  
segments, where coils of your vessels baste in pockets  
of her blood, could collapse at any moment,  
like the highway's concrete slabs crush cars and bodies flat  
amid fumes, sirens, burnt plastic and metal smells,  
where, if you call, alone in the dark, after the sky  
and ground have merged, no one will come.  
How can you escape the sticky mesh of her grasp when  
the imprecise curls of your fingers can't push her  
away as she enters your thorax, surrounds the red lobes  
of your small struggling heart? Her black milk  
curdles your stomach. Her acid breath clouds your corneas,  
so no light can break through as she blankets you.  
Bound here, you can't break out, there are no doors  
but those she controls and her only desire  
is to swallow and swallow, for the joy, the fullness,  
as her rounded prow cuts a swath through the world.

Alice Jones

## Two Poems

### TRANSCRIPT

How old I felt that day—  
that's what I was. '01. '03.  
What's figures got to do with me?  
You write so fast, like  
chicken-tracks! 'Born and bred  
in Eatonville?' Now that's a lie!  
I hated Harris and his cutie-talk:  
Tar-Baby wasn't sticky, 'cause  
he's black. But the 'briar patch'?  
That was fine. I grew up everywhere  
I moved. The slash-pine camps, Atlanta,  
Harlem, floating easy anywhere. Sure,  
I had a houseboat till it sank.  
You got that down? Don't  
frown, 'cause that's a lie.  
No story's got the whole round truth,  
so I tole lots. That Marjorie, she tried.  
She lied about them deers and things,  
like Harris. But Cross Creek was the whole  
round little world, like Eatonville, and then  
that honkie woman *sued* her ass! White folks  
can sue. Real people got to go to jail  
to see a lawyer. Write this down:  
I'd sooner stick a dirty finger  
in my mouth. We both got off,  
that Marjorie and me. That's more or less  
got off. Now write this down: Jews lied  
about King Herod. He never hurt  
them babies none. And white folks lied  
about me too. Let someone do you wrong  
it never stops. Remember that, young lady.  
Lord, you write it all out—don't you?  
No matter now. You got your book

still open. Jesus got his too,  
and he don't sue. It's open flat  
like this Eau Gallie land lays flat  
and then the ocean eats it. Herod  
didn't eat no babies. That's what I tell  
the Doctor. He be comin' every three,  
four days and bring me food. 'Round him,  
I talk real white. Oh, I can speak as lovely  
as the Harlem niggerati! That's a mean  
Italian joke, you hear? Doctor's even  
read my stories some, and Shakespeare too.  
I tole him, "I am dying, Egypt, dying,"  
and he laughed and quoted me, "I wish you  
all joy of the worm." Oh, that man!  
If I was younger, now, I'd bed him down.  
You write that too, 'cause it's the truth.  
I ain no Uncle Remus and his talkin  
bears. I ain no fluffed-up Harlem nigger  
cluckin like a broody hen. You spell it right,  
I'm an-thro-pol-o-gist. I wrote it down.  
I tole so many lies, the truth come out.

**Zora Neale Hurston**, novelist and folklorist, wrote and spoke in a rich range of dialects. Disgraced by charges of child molestation in New York, she retreated to her native Florida, where her friend Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings was charged with defamation of character. Hurston suffered a stroke which curtailed her revisionist history of biblical King Herod. Soon after this interview, she died—in poverty, in Eau Gallie, 1960.

**ACCORDION POST-CARD, FOR SHARON.**

(Variations on a Theme by Wright of Derby)

Detail so rich, my fingernails  
 could chip the paint—and pull  
 two rabbits out! Under the bell-jar  
 they huddle. Two bags of blood and fur.  
 Alive.

The lab is sufficiently somber:  
 three curious gentlemen have dressed  
 as if for a train-ride to London—coats,  
 cravats, no gloves just now. It's time  
 to prove the truth,

'All life needs air.'

Capillaries rupture. Inside the rabbits' eyes  
 a brighter pink. Evacuation's  
 well under way.

Slush freezes even  
 on the chimney of your sister's  
 mobile home. She loves her tarheel hubby  
 and his belly. She loves her three kids, sealed  
 in twelve-by-forty flat steel walls.  
 Oxygen seeps under window frames  
 as if God cared.

Its air-pump squeals.

Old varnish hangs a scrim  
 in this proscenium of gilt.  
 One rabbit hoists his foot.

He'd claw

his way out like a drowning cat.  
 Each girl turns her face away.  
 Their dresses fall diaphanous  
 and white. Four little tits show through.  
 'How innocence averts its eyes,'

*(Stanza continued)*

old Wright of Derby thought, and stripped them  
for his kiddie-porn parade.

Aquinas  
counter-argued, "God allows  
evils to be. . . . Hence He does  
permit them."

How's that for logic,  
kid?

But evil, Augustine confessed,  
is "only the absence of good" and hence  
not to be feared.

Both may be wrong  
not right. My homily ends here!

This picture sticks in my head like a tumor.  
Let's do be nice to animals. Eschew  
the cruel Experiment. Clasp all  
your girls in Maidenform bras!  
Turn insults over? Read no fucking  
more philosophy! Be nice to your sister?

Inhale. Exhale. Breathe.

Love,  
Jack

A. McA. Miller

## IN MEMORY: JOHN BENNETT

*So now, Old Father...  
stand gently at the center of my skull  
and chant your early metaphors of love  
and set their joy against  
the bent world's rage.*

I  
write  
for love  
and loss a  
song for one  
who caught the  
delicate eternal  
beauty of an eden  
in a weave of iambs  
wise enough to give  
my way you would not  
relentless death had  
net of merest flesh of worldstuff hope to hold  
that too-hard-loving too-long-drinking proverb  
of an Irish soul? it had to prove how it is death  
to be a poet death to love a poet and most surely  
death to insult a poet flinging knives of bitter  
rage at trousered apes who mocked the public  
trust or that first great command in Eden  
Watergate as well as whales could move  
your soul though sometimes to a caustic  
wit unworthy of the love that prompted  
it o voyager with Ahab Flask Ishmael  
is your farthest journey done?  
sweet minstrel celebrant  
of peace may you  
know your  
vision  
now

Jan D. Hodge

John Bennett (1920-1992) was an editor of this magazine from 1961 to 1971. The epigraph is from his poem "Old Adam, father, poet, priest..." in *Echoes from the Peaceable Kingdom*, (William B. Eerdmans, 1978). Used by permission.

## BOOKS IN BRIEF

Since I did a major survey of contemporary poetry anthologies for these pages in 1987, I've paid particular attention to the new ones. Here are three that seem to me significant.

*New American Poets of the '90s*, edited by Jack Myers and Roger Weingarten (Boston: Godine, 1991, 464 pp., \$16.95 paper) presents 95 poets, mostly, I'd guess, in their forties or fifties. It's hard to tell what "new" really means, since Gerald Stern (born 1925) qualifies. The only information about the poets, beyond acknowledgements, is a note of their most recent book.

The first thing that impressed me about this collection was the homogeneity of its contents, consistent with the stated aim to pick poems "provocative, timely, important, and accessible," with a bias toward work that "more closely aligns itself with the spoken word." Working on a radio program on poetry for several years and editing a magazine that makes its final selection by the editorial board's reading aloud, I am especially sensitive to the colloquial cadences of most new poems. I understand the tension between the pauses imposed visually by the line ends and the syntactical drive around those ends. Read aloud, the typical poem in this anthology would sound like a graceful, sometimes witty, prose essay. With no difference between the language, syntax, sound patterns, or subject matter of poetry and well-crafted prose, there remains only the lineation to commemorate the traditional distinction. I appreciate that most of the poems in this volume do demonstrate the poet's respect for the integrity of the line, though few are in regular stanzas and I spotted almost no metrical regularity. The "New Formalism" has apparently subsided back into the old. Ashbery's endorsement of the language of journalism, advertising, and even the cliché is clearly in vogue, so that I read along waiting for "Have a nice day" to appear, and sure enough, Jack Myers himself obliges, on p. 269, with scarcely a whisper of irony. Perhaps not surprisingly, the most uncolloquial diction and syntax appear in the few prose poems in the collection.



Just as this time I encountered an editorial titled "Doing Away with Poetry" by editor Mark Rich in *The Magazine of Speculative Poetry* (Spring 1992), in which he pleads for a return to the non-pejorative term *verse*, as in the 1920 *American and British Verse from the Yale Review*. I suddenly wondered, when did *Poetry* stop calling itself *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*? Rich argues that *poetry* has become a pretentious term for most of what appears in our periodicals and anthologies; *verse* says it better. I agree.

And much of the Godine anthology (a few lines of unforgivable sentimentality – indeed, bathos – aside) is good solid verse. And considering that most of the poets included are teachers, I am tempted to speculate that its virtues are qualities that *can be taught*: thoughtful lineation; attention to the language and syntax of the breakfast table, the bedroom, and the bar; alertness for the striking anecdote, the poignant recollection, the outrageous climax, the vivid perception. I doubt that the electrical charge of imagination that raises verse to poetry can be taught. Nor can it be forced by the teacher whose promotion and tenure depend on regular publication and appearance in anthologies. Perhaps that is why I feel such a sameness among these poems, despite all the personal and pedagogical attention to "voice." I am wickedly tempted to scramble the authors' names and see if anyone can tell the difference. Who, for example, wrote these lines:

Your sister,  
Phyllis, had been unkind. It was hot.  
Our towels floating in the tub upstairs,  
We lit candles  
And you poured the iced tea.

Peter Cooley? Gail Mazur? Mark Halliday? Norman Dubie? I don't want to sound reactionary; if this is where *fin de siècle* poetry is, I'll draw from it all the sustenance I can. And believe me, Myers and Weingarten have selected some memorable poems: a chilling anecdote in Robert Haas's "A Story about the Body," a heartwrenching transformation in Garrett Hongo's "The Legend," the many-layered music of Elizabeth Spires' "Sunday Afternoon at Fulham Palace," Li-Young Li's magnificently rich and brave "The Cleaving," Alice Fulton's wicked "Self-Storage," Jimmy Santiago Baca's pungent "Green Chile," Kate Daniels'

merciless "Bathing," and more – more than enough for me to urge you to buy it. But in all but a few I miss the gorgeous music that poetry is capable of – the polyphony and harmonic chords that resonate from only a few of these "new American poets": Deborah Digges' "Rock, Scissors, Paper," Albert Goldbarth's two poems, and Jorie Graham's "What the End Is For." I allow myself to hope that these are more representative of what the new poetry will accomplish. I hope the future promises more poems like Heather McHugh's modest "Place Where Things Got," in which attention to the object of the poem becomes the subject: the process of contemplating the object – a drowsing cat, "all intelligence, no thought" – moves the reader with the poet through a marvelous expedition to the root of the imagination in language – a quietly radical poem.

Turning to *The Best American Poetry 1992* (series editor David Lehman, and editor for this volume Charles Simic, New York: Collier/Macmillan, 1992, 352 pp., about \$13.), I'm delighted to find much more diversity than in the Godine anthology. Not limited to "new poets," Simic can include the Kinnell-Rich-Carruth generation, though actually he has many quite young poets, like Thylia Moss, not in the Godine anthology. There are more downright bad poems here than in Myers and Weingarten (no, I'm *not* going to tell you which; you should have the fun of spotting them for yourself). But there are also some powerful and ground-breaking ones, such as a section from Allen Grossman's "Poland of Death," and some real romps, including Robert Pinsky's "Avenue," Liam Rector's "The Night the Lightning Bugs Lit Last in the Field and Then Went Their Way" (homage à Hayden Carruth?), and Robert Haas's wild and wonderful "My Mother's Nipples." For all its unevenness and its omission of some of the best poets writing in this year, this annual collection remains essential. It gives great hope for luscious diversity in the poetry to come.

Jay Meek and F. D. Reeve have assembled a different sort of anthology in *After the Storm: Poems on the Persian Gulf War* (Washington, D.C.: Maisonneuve Press, 1992, 129 pp., \$10.95 paper). The 65 contributors represent the whole range of contemporary poetry, from the expected Bly, Ginsberg, and Levertov, through Bell, Booth, Hall, and Olds, to Levine, Lux, and Clampitt. Since it took so long for the poems of World War

II and the Korean and Vietnam wars to appear, I was curious about how so many poems from strong poets could surface so suddenly. I soon realized that, whenever these happened to have been composed, they were largely poems thrown on the wheel and centered by the Vietnam war, built and matured in the intervening years, and finally fired in the kiln of the conflagration in the Gulf. Often the overt political reference is in an epigraph or illustration ("You know, politics has been very good for us, as a family" — Barbara Bush; "Defense Secretary Weinberger fears acknowledging genocide by Turks will offend them"). Many of the poems do not refer directly to Desert Storm. Still, their appropriateness is clear.

Yeats' assertion that "of our quarrels with others we make rhetoric; of our quarrels with ourselves, poetry" has long shadowed writers with a national or global concern. It was not so when I was in school, where we memorized as models for poetry such verses as "Breathes there a man with soul so dead..." (which today sound like something from the Republican convention). Whether rhetoric or poetry (or some of both), this anthology makes Yeats' dictum sound glib. Though the general voice against war and violence is virtually unanimous, the individual voices are gloriously various. Some miss being pure rhetoric by only a breath, as in David Ferry's

The gulf drinks air, fire, oil, and lamentation.  
The surface of the water winks and glitters,  
sparkling with a thousand points of light.

Others are of imagination all compact. Some address the roots of war, such as Tom Lux satirizing the bloody global tribalism, so suddenly re-erupted, in "The People of the Other Village." Diane Der-Hovanessian brings the Turkish-Armenian history directly home in "At Mt. Auburn Cemetery," much more directly home than when we were urged to eat our vegetables and "remember the starving Armenians." Some of these poems are satiric scalpels, probing the reader's complacency, such as William Stafford's sarcastic "Old Glory" and — more subtly — J. Kates' "English as a Foreign Language." Perhaps the strongest poem, as poem, is Philip Booth's "Places without Names," condensing into a tightly woven lyric the sorry epic of history's battles. So musically wrought and emotionally controlled a poem must have been in composition since before Desert

Storm. It balances well some more occasional poems in which the anger spills over in furious metaphor – take for example the bitter revulsion in Henry Taylor's "Speech."

I'd like to congratulate Meek and Reeve for compiling this collection, praise Maisonneuve for publishing it, and urge my readers to order it, order copies for their libraries, and spread the word.

### FROM THE SCHOLAR-POETS

These books should be mines of inspiration to anyone interested in poetry. Moreover, they should be in every library.

W.S. Merwin, *The Lost Upland: Stories of Southwest France* (N.Y.: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992, 307 pp., \$22. cloth). Merwin's prose, like that of any major poet, is inseparable from his poetry. Anyone seeking to fully appreciate Merwin's poetry and to enrich insight into the relationship of the artist to the land and its culture should read these strong, funny, moving narratives.

*Haiku of Issa*, trans. by Lucien Stryk, with the assistance of Noboru Fujiwara (Athens: Swallow/Ohio University Press, 1991, 141 pp., \$24.95 cloth, \$14.95 paper). Sated with the inanity of most haiku written in English, I turn with relief to the pure springs of the Japanese originals, translated by one of the most trustworthy of poets. Stryk has written an extraordinarily graceful and informative introduction – a poet's introduction weaving together Issa's down-to-earth compassionate verses with Shakespeare and contemporary humanity. For me Keats, not just Shakespeare, leaps to mind – Keats who was writing at exactly the same time, similarly entering with empathy into the natural world, and simultaneously gripped by the human awareness of mortality. Stryk arranges the poems, including some not heretofore translated, according to the seasons. E.g. from Autumn:

High on the hill  
I cough  
into the autumn gust.

Autumn morning—  
sky's fever,  
gone.

Dick Higgins, *Pattern Poetry: Guide to an Unknown Literature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987, 275 + 9 pp., \$59.50 cloth, \$24.50 paper). An astonishing volume! Higgins, best known as artist, avant garde poet, and expert on concrete poetry, here harvests a quarter century of scholarship into the virtually uncharted land where art and poetry marry: poetry composed in shapes either abstract or representational – all before 1900. This is not an anthology but a richly-illustrated scholarly work. After a lucid historical introduction Higgins discusses European examples from Greek to Croatian, then from Far Eastern, Indian, and Islamic languages. Chapter Four discusses analogues, such as mathematical, musical, puzzle, and rebus forms. Chapter Five covers Labyrinths, Manuscripts, and “Hypotheses toward a Theory.” Tantalized? You should be. The book concludes with essays by other scholars on Chinese and Sanscrit patterned texts, a glossary, a 31-page bibliography, and an index. Without reading a word, however, a poet can percolate new concepts just gazing on the illustrations.

*Love Lyrics from the Bible: The Song of Songs*, a new translation and interpretation by Marcia Falk (HarperSan-Francisco div. of Harper/Collins, 1990, 213 pp., \$18.95 hardbound). Another work by a scholar-poet, with Hebrew and translations *en face*, engaging essays on the problems of translation, the literary structure, contexts of the poems; rich notes, and much more. Much more includes elegant book design, with illustrations by Barry Moser. Isaac Bashevis Singer has found Falk’s translation better than the King James Version. I decline to judge, grateful that I don’t have to: I can have both.

M.K.S.

NOTICE:

With this issue the price of an individual copy goes up to \$4., of a year’s subscription to \$12. We still won’t break even, but it will help. We will accept renewals at the old rates (\$8. a year, \$22. for three years) from subscribers and purchasers of this issue. Not only that, we’ll accept gift subscriptions at the old rate, including gifts to libraries. Remember the holidays coming up.

ALSO:

Remember that our poets appreciate your comments. We’ll be glad – nay, delighted – to forward them on for you.