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The Editors
of
THE BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL
are proud to announce
the winner of the first
CHAD WALSH POETRY PRIZE
of \$2,000
to
Kurt Leland
for his poem
"Remedies"
in the Summer 1993 issue.



This prize, to be awarded annually,
is the gift of
Allison Walsh Sackett and Paul Edmunds Sackett, Jr.,
in honor of the poet
Chad Walsh,
one of the co-founders of this magazine.

SOUNDING

From animals you learned Animal.
Before forming the consonants for *mama*
you sang Animal in your crib, practicing
at daybreak *braak skree aow rrra* each call
learned from crickets and neighborhood toms.
Soon enough you learned *cat* and, naming it,
learned the cat says *meow*, and never sang
Animal again.

Years later I heard you cry
beyond words, swallowing playground taunts
though your mother sang that useless
ditty about sticks and stones, a chant

I could not recall when the man who vowed
to protect and cherish curled his tongue
around the syllables of my name and spat
them at me, as if their shape and pitch
scorched the soft tissues of his throat.

I didn't remember Animal until long after
he left, my howl and cry beginning at last
to revolve into words, names that build walls
between the thing and the one who thinks.

The sound of *distance* singing, a song
like breath sliding in and out of its sheath
like blood burning back into frozen hands
like Eve after Eden, unnamings everything.

Two Poems

A STATISTICIAN TO HIS LOVE

Men kill women in bedrooms, usually
by hand, or gun. Women kill men,
less often, in kitchens, with knives.
Don't be alarmed, there is understanding
to be sucked from all such hard
and bony facts, or at least a sense
of symmetry. Drowned men—
an instance—float face down, women up.
But women, ignited, burn more fiercely.
The death camp pyres were therefore,
sensibly, women and children first,
an oily kind of kindling. The men
were stacked in rows on top. Yes,
there is always logic in this world.
And neatness. And the comfort
of fact. Did I mention that suicides
outnumber homicides? the figures
are reliable. So stay awhile yet
with me: the person to avoid, alone,
is mostly you yourself.

SUICIDE ON CHRISTMAS EVE

After the doctor, the steam-cleaners,
more usefully. I drive home to bed
through intersections sequined with glass:
it's Christmas Eve, season of donor organs.

What is the meaning of life? I shake you
gently awake. What answer would satisfy?
you mumble, yawning, from Your Side.
To understand is to be bored, you say,
practising, perhaps, for Speech Night.
Knowledge is a kind of exhaustion, you say.

A child enters our room: is it morning yet?
Not Yet. In another room the lights of the Tree
wink colourfully, and when the telephone rings
again, it is almost, but not quite, in time.

Peter Goldsworthy

Two Poems

THE EDUCATION OF HAWA

Now we have the fall before our eyes,
 with a small boy as a snake in the mango tree,
 writhing out the argument, a wiry boy
 twisty like a liana. He is only about ten,
 but he seems to enjoy himself, how it's done, seduction,
 as he sibilates into her captive ear.
 You can almost see the snake's split tongue
 lick her ear lobe and her ear go prone.
 Meanwhile, the faithful flock
 is calling out to Eve, whom they call Hawa here,
 It's a trick!

The snake boy says the fruit will make her wise
 beyond any Mandingo holy man. (These men
 write on strips of paper, and while the ink is wet
 they wash the Arabic into a vial to hawk at market,
 which the buyer wears as an amulet.)
 The snake boy says, this is knowledge in the flesh,
 and once you bite,
 you shall be the book and alphabet.

All the time we Peace Corps volunteers are watching and
 applauding,
 and calling to Hawa, Try it, you'll like it.
 And my friend calls out,
 It's better under Adam's dick than God's thumb.
 One is crooked, the other nice and straight.

Meanwhile, the Father's chicken is pecking bugs by the mango
 tree,
 listening and watching, and when Hawa eats, and gives to eat,
 the chicken boy runs off with pounding wings
 to God in his hammock and gives his report.
 The old man advances like a leopard, and curses,
 and turns the pair out to a land hostile to seed.

I see her frank, upturned nipples, prinking her lappa.
I have stared at such as she
washing clothes in the river
when they sank to their shoulders and they turned away.
I have seen her giggling kind
trying on bras at the bra stall at market,
and perhaps have looked longer than they thought proper.
We have read their areolas too critically long,
we literate at our close reading, living our life of the eyes.
Wherever I look
I propagate a cloth-adjusting and eye-dropping wave, yet in
my wake
innocence recovers, still resilient.
A monk asks us to leave as Cain comes on.

THE TURTLE

I have been given a turtle,
and my houseboy is going to prepare it for dinner,
so, of course, he asks me for a match and some twine.
First, he lights the match and holds it
under the blackening breastplate. The creature
sticks its head out in a panic. Then the boy
nooses it with the twine. With a hiss the turtle
withdraws into its shell again, leashed.
The houseboy keeps the twine taut, and pulls at the crack
between the top and bottom plates. He's biting his lip
in concentration, like a fisherman who knows how easy
lines are to break. The crack widens and the head
crowns. The boy cuts the head off deftly with the blade
and the stump bleeds. The houseboy can now pry out
the meat: the muscle that normally holds its morsel safe
between the breastplate and the carapace
is relaxed. This is no place
for a man who likes to be alone.

John Millstone

WAITING FOR THE ARCHDUKE

News item, Nov 3, 1992: The
last animal at Sarejevo Zoo died
of starvation after snipers kept the
keepers from taking food to the cages.

There are no leaves at Sarejevo Zoo; the last
bear died a year ago, hunched hungry
over the bones of its brother.

Buck Rogers walks the pathways in late-autumn
haze, sidestepping peacocks grown adept
at dodging bullets; he's invulnerable himself

as heroes usually are one way or another.
Buck's waiting for a dapper fellow
decked in braid and bristling

with mustacios, who (he's heard) still haunts
this ground, awaiting history's call to spark
again that glorious clash

of sabres for the justice of some cause,
Buck can't remember which. The chap
is avatar of futures; his story makes alive

what neither Buck nor his keepers can bear to know
in other ways. Buck's task: to slay this ghost,
this spectre who incarnates all

we must deny is human, who stalks the zoo
against the day he'll prove us wrong again. Buck
wanders past the primate house, and there, in parallel

gait, grimacing back from plate glass sheen
that separates stray peacocks from rotting
monkey fur, he finds his man.

THE FORMALITY

At the Eighth Grade Prom which I got suckered into
chaperoning
the pubescent couples arrive in stretch limos that let them
out
in the play ground near the swings and teeter board.
The girls in expensive gowns stutter on heels, click their
gum,
their heads molded in permanent waves, dips, storms,
beehives,
honey doo's, as their corsaged breasts swell and flower.
One strikes a Madonna pose, pushes herself up
as if it were the next day and the asphalt were a beach
blanket and she, the darling fun girl surrounded by
bronze brutes,
each begging her to save the last wave for him.

Inside, the gym is a jungle of crepe paper which the boys
climb
to strip the balloons from their branches and put them in
their mouths,
sucking helium to make their transparent voices whistle
like cartoon drunks.
They group and push around the cooler of coke, shaking
the cans before popping
them open to spray themselves and their dates whose satin
dresses stain
like wounds. One young lady chases them over the tables,
screams
I'll kill you, you scum sucking douche bags! while the
principal gladhands
the parents who have come to tape their new men, new
women.

If only my daughter were not part of this. Streaming from
one ring
to another, whispering among the princesses, converging
on the tribe
of barbarians – she gestures to the one who wears his cap
backwards,
the one whose dirt brown shirt comes loose from his pants
as they begin to move to the hip hop, as they wrap
themselves
in its icy tubes of war music. I see how he looks her over,
jumping
up and down before her polished smile, how his eyes say,
Me hungry,
Me need to eat. Others bodies follow them into the whirl
beneath
the mock chandelier which twists the spotted light and
fractures it
over their bodies, as they rock their heads, stretch their arms
toward the flashing sky, open their mouths as if to inhale,
as if to shout,
as if to taste the honey of their June-new flesh.

Peter E. Murphy

Two Poems

CLYTIE'S RATTLING ON AGAIN

At any given time I bet someone around the world
is looking at the sun, against everyone's best instructions.
But what happens in those minutes no one is looking at it?
I couldn't let that happen, dearie. You're too fine
to be lonesome like that.

Leave it to me to go against the crowd, and in such an awkward
way.

While all the gods were falling for unwilling maidens,
here I was a willing maiden hot for an unwilling god. Damn.
I decided to stare you down, to devote myself to your searing
light,
like the sound of a jet veering overhead and low.

How can I compare you to anything, when everything shining
and bright and life-giving is compared to you, who brings
exhilaration to the sky, life to all things, truth and art
to humanity, rainbow and silver edge to cloud. I bite my
bent finger lustily to keep from groaning in your presence.

With me, it's always daylight savings time. My humor
feels like my French, gauche et maladroit, I try so hard.
Overcast days are so lifeless, and rain just reminds me
that yours is the only weather I can't taste. If snow's
so fine to the palate, what's sunlight?

But you who do all the staring don't like your own medicine.
Somebody up there got tired of my prattling and whammo
I'm a sunflower. All I do all day is suck sun and live
off lustral water, my leaves bright green as the light
from the melon water, reflected on the walls of the melon.

You're no kinder, faking me out every night,
when I'm left watching west. Dearheart,
how do you spend the night? Ever constant,
but not to me, I'm afraid. And each early morning
I move dumbly, like a tied boat, towards you again.

SILENCE DEEP AS THE BONE AT THE BOTTOM OF THE SKULL

Look at the candlelike
light from the cabin
the shadows of light on snow
my husband inside
the smoke coming up, the warmth
the fire a little machine.

This small world
how the astronaut felt
looking at earth
the only sanctuary
for as far around
as can be traveled to tonight.

to want it all back,
the heat and the cloaks of rain,
the dirt floor maternity ward,
bamboo walls that moaned,
and the faces of women pulled tight
against their pain, faces almost without eyes
that opened slowly in disbelief
before her hands and flat Chinese.
Were they dead to see a twice ghost –
Doctor Woman and so white she could not be living?
No woman worth a Doctor, they must be dead.
She pulled her body from the table, homesick
for the 31 years she wanted and did without, for all
that ate her health as though it were a feast
for they who called her ghost and yet healed grateful,
her name now characters on walls she built,
heard down the hallways as though she weren't here
in rooms over-furnished with English.
She knew, then, her life had passed as a stranger,
and so, too, she would remain within this house
that no longer knew her
from which she'd woven fantasies of comfort
in a continent of work.

Melody Davis

INSTITUTION

Weather permitting, the able women who carry their lives in pockets, throw them to the sky and bury them with pennies, broken china, strips of blanket satin. They leave the others who curl like drying leaves or sit as still as chairs, and go out to the garden where Black-eyed Susans and pole beans are the only things of reason.

The woman in too many clothes on the bench with a mound of butts beside her as orderly and small as a doll's woodpile? She's the woman with changing voices: lawyer, whore, born-again, and crazy – about baking. She doesn't think of the cellar, its earth smell rising, dusty jars of peaches, their gold hidden, the door with no inside latch. When she tries her mind scatters like these flocks of birds.

Or the woman kneeling in the dirt, her skirt perfectly tucked around her knees, and her pale, tentative hands in zinnias and tomatoes. She's smiling, (her lips do this same trick in sleep) as if she were never burned and broken into by an uncle who, when in public with her, lit matches. She has learned to kneel for hours, steadying her hands on green stalks and leaves. She has learned these are her hands beneath the gauzy absence she'd wrapped herself in. They are becoming as near and real as the maple leaves that shadow her.

That woman in the hot pink dress, pacing
with her face in her palms, won't look up.
If she does, you'll be looking down
two dark holes where silent bullets wait.
She says it's like looking through cracked
glass, no edges align. She says the world's
a conspiracy, and if she lets go
of her head, she'll disappear.
You'd never believe by her fingers'
slimness and pearly, curving nails
that anyone could break them in a vice,
one by one, but beneath her skin
her bones remember.

If it weren't for these eyes and hands
this could be all flowers and birds.
You'd be willing to believe
that bees are singing tiny ballads
in your ears, but you're hearing words:
"loony, insane," and who could blame you
for believing this is not your garden?
Just remember, you could look at it as beautiful,
the way the psyche wraps itself and hides
or breaks apart to survive, the way
a starfish grows from the lost arm of itself,
or the way a bulb divides, how life goes on
far from where we start, or how you too,
could forget what you've lost.

Elizabeth Tibbetts

Two Poems

BABYSITTING TO THELONIOUS MONK

My niece wants eggs, now, please, and I swirl
hot water around the poaching whites
so they won't fray into cloudy blurs.
She's centrifugal too, black in a family
of white, thick scowl the other kids love to tease.
So she spins in her own dark skin like the water
bucket she swings overhead to see

if the force is real. But her arm gets
tired and the pail dumps itself in
one plop on her head, a private cloud
always threatening to spill. Now she's spinning again,
eyes closed, slow, a tiny Thelonious Monk,
who also turned like this, on bandstands,

in lobbies – comforting himself, or
keeping in the demons. Or maybe
it was his fine-tuned ears scanning for
a new sense in dissonance, the way a beat teases
itself, melody flits like a butterfly, settles,
takes off, no need to pin down. A grownup taste, unlike
this child who wants more, more, now, little

sister of something missing from long
ago. It's what she knows, checkout line's
hot gimme and grab, racks of candy,
empty coin slots. I put on Monk to settle us down,
and she whistles back what she hears – his last recording
before the grim silence of crack-up, as if music
can outwit it just so long. She's fed,

but how can that be enough? Spinning
again, on the lawn, arms spread, she wraps
the neighborhood around her till she
is the core. Then gravity takes over, her engine
sputters, she's banking, ground coming up slanted
in her face. She's down, a green consultation
of maples swaying above her: Yes,
she'll live, she'll pop up, do it again,
fall dizzy, watching trees, lamp post, house
swirl a minute before they stiffen
to gridlock – same minute Monk expands, slows down to
one note at a time, picks up again like water
pooling in her small dark hands, spilling through fingers
till spilling, Child, is what it's about.

DIFFERENT PORCHES

"I don't want to hear it," an old woman shouts to a youngish man on the train platform. Covers her ears, cries LA LA LA LA, while he slaps his forehead, walks off. I'm jiggling tips, so my fingers can smell like money

instead of the drunk who wouldn't quit kissing on them as I sponged down the bar. Waiters were upending chairs, the moon oozed down steamy windows. "Let's move it," my boss said to the creep, "you seat-belted or what?"

"What?" the young man stalks back, tie loose, hair thick as the mafia, shaking his up-turned palms. Then softly he pleads, "Ma," "Come on," and the old woman blinks like the air just snapped cables and plopped down a son.

Now, what can she do but vaguely push at the buttons on his shirt, trying to soften his terrible mentholated eyes? Nights like these, who can be saved? Just being alive breaks a rule – you talk, you feel, you trust something,

as the train rises above ground, arcs through the factory district's gorgeous synthetic clouds. Back home, I toss, my own thoughts mixed with the gravelly play-by-play of a Celtics rerun next door. Outside, in what should be

the real world, a car clatters over trolley tracks, two men step out of an unlit doorway, checking their flies. On triple decker porches up and down the block, work clothes freeze-dry in triplicate, names scrolled in oval patches –

Sonny, Lenny, Bill. They can't sleep either. That's why our windows all flash the same score, why we step out between stiffening pant legs to gaze at the night's neon cardiogram, and find this moon sailing through clouds, like an old woman unhinged, cut loose from her three-piece son. Different porches, but it's the same long sigh. Somebody smells smoke, somebody feels a cable snap and clicks on the light. Me, I hear a dream preacher cry, "Open your Bible to Matthew 29."

Betsy Sholl

THE WIFE OF THE MAN OF MANY WILES

Believe what you want to. Believe that I wove,
If you wish, twenty years, and waited, while you
Were knee-deep in blood, hip-deep in goddesses.

I've not much to show for twenty years' weaving –
I have but one half-finished cloth at the loom.
Perhaps it's the lengthy, meticulous grieving.

Explain how you want to. Believe I unravelled
At night what I stitched in the slow siesta,
How I kept them all waiting for me to finish,

The suitors, you call them. Believe what you want to.
Believe that they waited for me to finish,
Believe I beguiled them with nightly un-doings.

Believe what you want to. That they never touched me.
Believe your own stories, as you would have me do,
How you only survived by the wise infidelities.

Believe that each day you wrote me a letter
That never arrived. Kill all the damn suitors
If you think it will make you feel better.

STUCK

I'm stopped on red at a crossroad
two miles out from town. It's late,
so late the dark is bleached. I wait,
gripping the wheel like a race driver.
It's a long light. How long is it set for?
I ought to know. I ought to have timed it.
It's stuck on red – it must be.
Do I think the sheriff's idling with his lights out
ready to hit the siren if I move?
Do I imagine a gravel truck will ram me
if I run the light, here where high beams
probe for a mile as they swing over the hill?
Still the good child keeping off the grass –
is that it? The light is stuck – I know it.
But what's the rush? No car lines up
behind me. I'm alone on the planet.
No one at home who'll chew me out
for coming in late. I'm the parent.
Roll down the window, take time to smell the night –
the musk of corn, fresh manure on the fields,
smoke off the dump – to grope for exact words
for this sky, these inkblot trees,
for the unreality of the hour. For the damned light!
I floor the accelerator. As I go under
the light changes. The intersection's green
as long as I can see it in the mirror
all the way up the hill, breaking the speed limit.
I don't suppose it's really stuck on green forever.
It's almost dawn. I don't suppose I did that either.

GROUND ZERO

It was the West and burst of times.
Milk was in the air, warm as strontium
in forspacious skies, clouds whiter than white.
Madmen smelled of mouthwash, crones of Camay,
hoods of Vitalis and the oldest Old Golds.
Beggars wore fedoras, formal, single-minded
as long distance, polite as Chiclets.
Chuckles came my way, chocolate kisses,
and chewing gum flat and pink and dusted
with faces like Veronica veils: Mickey,
Minnie, Moe, Walt, Willie, Warren, Stan
the Man. Greatness was eat and Swayzey then.
There were perfect games, pom pom, huge rockets
smackdabbing into South Specific islands
no one could remember ever after, all
the zillions sporting black masks, black ears,
three-dee goggles for plutopia.
I ran numbers then, compound interest
on my nine dollars – how much after fifty years? –
the suburbs teeming with fractions and half-
lives, pulse and prospect of geranium,
counter intimations of forever and a third
thousand years, world impeccable as Ipana
and Johnson's Wax, good and pure as Gerbers
but strained, waiting for us hopalong to choose *Life*
or *Look*, Quakers or decathlon champs,
Cowboy Bob or Doctor Dan the Bandage Man.

(stanza continued)

Everything there was came together
at breakfast – rice shot from cannons, sugar from diamonds,
milk from talking cows, china from Japan,
decoder spoons from cardboard boxes,
fleetness and sight, wheatness and might, sweetness and light.
The land was radiant, you too could be
thirty-eight or thirty-nine and never
age like the old violinist with his LSMF'T
L.S. – M.F.T., L.S. – M.F.T. rising like Morse
code from dew, hams listening for that
first strike, second strike, hair raid siren,
Benny whining he is not bald, it's the style now,
all the rage, Lucky Strike Means Find Tobacco,
me and Geiger and every other prospector
but where? where? and what will happen when I do?

Hillel Schwartz

THE ROAD TO GIVERNY

Each petal
is distinct, the cool light does not vibrate;
if I am about to walk
into a painting, it is not

Monet's. His fierce dismantling of air. . .
inviting me into a world that exists

but not among these lindens, these
iris, any place the hand can touch.

I stop three women walking together
to ask if the path does in fact
lead to Giverny, and they tell me
not to let my *sac* hang loosely from my shoulder,
but to clutch it in both arms.

We are given more than resides
in the trees and shrubs, in the iris
leaning, stretching into the path,
and, riding the water beneath
the Japanese bridge, the flowers
the French call nymphs.

This happened later, at the station.
A breakneck jamming against me from the rear,
slam of a stocky body like a pistol. Then

he was gone, my wallet with him.
Not much in it, but I can still feel
how his body pitched me hard
against the turnstile. Anything

can come down out of the flies at random.
It may not mean a thing.
I put my hand in my pocket
and find

a hand there. Or sipping a drink
wonder what's wrong –
Scum on the water, dirt in the
beer. . . ? I look at the glass,
and it's the rim broken off
in one clean sharp

ring, I'm leaking
blood, tongue and lip, broken
glass in the mouth. Simple

disasters: I catch myself thinking, falsely:
the tax one pays, a tithe. A sign.

As I looked back
I saw him, angry-looking, short, beefy.
What can keep us from harm –
you, me, him.

From the bridge multitudes of flowers
like cupped hands curve upward.

This is as far as we've come.

Hannah Stein

INTO THE NIGHT

Some nights we could sense
the red hot beast of his anger
by the set of his shoulders walking in,
by the smoke of his silence, by the way
our mother's eyes never met his.

After dinner, we'd head for the river,
the evening winds splashing us with sounds
like yells from a distant stadium,
some game in progress. We'd imagine
the blowtorch of sudden fiery breath.

In five minutes, we were at the bend
where amber water slowed, dropped its larder
of clams on coarse sand. We'd strip
to our underwear and plunge feet-first
into cold water, shading darker
until we couldn't see our hands, thinking
this is how the clam must feel settling down,
the dark wet all around it. On the bottom,
we'd grope for the clams, our breath stale
and dying inside us. Bubble by bubble,
we'd let it out, propel ourselves
on the last blast into moonlit air,
where the river now was black onyx, all surface.

The ship's bell on the porch called us home
to silence that was new green, fragile.
We'd tiptoe in, barely breathe until bedtime,
not wanting to set off vibrations, not wanting
to waken the beast that was sleeping now
in some deep cave within that unknown continent
of our father. Some nights, living
in that house was like swimming under water.
The air inside was all you had.

BOUNDLESS KINGDOM

In the dream my father did the forbidden
so I would know the difference between
"the prince of light and dark"

What darkness would allow such betrayal
of a father twelve years dead

What darkness would allow me to wonder
if the dream were memory speaking
when I know he'd have given his life for me
Did give his life for me, forsaking art
to buy me coats, shoes, bread

The bed in the dream was narrow as a vein

I awoke to my own cries and no one
there to soothe me as my father would
if he could come back from the dead
though he would need to gather his ashes
from the sea where we poured them

and fuse to one of those fish that seem
fluid glass, blue streaks for bones
moving toward me as I stood at the shore
to call and call my sorrow at betrayal
He would hear me and leap for the air

shattering the surface as if it too were glass

I would wade in, bend toward him, my long hair
dark with water, my hands empty of all but the weight
of water moving with the constancy of blood
through my wrists up my arms to the heart contracting
with the effort of keeping track of him

as he slipped deeper off, untouchable as light

CABLES

From the wool card in the kitchen
they ravel him out to sea
in a jumper of bluest black,
color of mussel-shells
and rain squalls.

This is sharing: all humble roads
pull both ways, taut
intersections of morning's out spin
and evening's wind in. The knitters
treat the wool with oil

to slap off spray's ice hands.
They insist on an even trade.
The light hours he frays
in the currach, knotting air to sea,
sea to air, nets and fish.

At supertime he lopes uphill
to the young woman, her chowder,
a child, a talk under the quilt.
She is learning to knit
his family name without letters –

crossed ropes, honeycombs,
smoke phantoms on stone walls,
a tree on each sleeve.

His mother sits in the cane chair
and counts out stitches with her

every afternoon until a coarse skin
appears in the shape of her man,
practically waterproof and unmistakably his.
She invokes the yarn against cold,
storm and anonymous drowning.

Even after years a body comes home,
drifts into the bay
with a face as featureless
as kelp. They drag him off the beach
and can still discover his name

in the salty tangle. He is Nora's man,
they say, and she claims him,
pointing to the sign for sea birds,
three on each shoulder. They bury him
under a stone in the churchyard.

At the hearth she was taught
of the intricate and endless pattern:
the women's diligent needles
tying strand to strand,
and the sea, remorselessly tugging
the loose end of the skein.

Kate Chadbourne



GU CHENG
(1956-93)



XIE YE
(1958-93)

IN MEMORIAM

I will belong to the sea. I will belong
To those pure lives. In the company of sea foam
I will dedicate flowers. I will love the coral
Sacrificing itself.

Xie Ye
from "At Last I Turn My Back"

I got my dark eyes from the dark night
But I use them to seek for light

Gu Cheng
"One Generation"

Many branches reach up
Holding the nests of danger
Holding all the eggs of fear
Through their fear, those eggs
Grow safe

Xie Ye
from "Witness"

Murder is a lotus blossom
Once done Hold it in your hand
And the hand can't be switched

Gu Cheng
from "The City"

Just once – I want
To drink the honey dry

Xie Ye
from "Wish"

PEACE LANE

I always hear the most beautiful sounds
The lights in the corridor Could be turned off

Gu Cheng
from "The City"

GU CHENG and XIE YE were among the most important Chinese writers to emerge during the late 1970's in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution. Work by both of them appeared in the first widely-distributed anthology of the new Chinese poetry: *Meng Long Shi Xuan*. It was from this collection that we took their poems published in the *BPJ* chapbook *Smoking People*. Gu Cheng published his first two volumes in conjunction with Bei Dao and Shu Ting; the three of them have received wide recognition as the pre-eminent poets of their generation. Xie Ye published numerous poems and at the time of her death was working on a series of prose sketches of their four-year-old son. Gu Cheng had just finished a fictionalized autobiography of his recent life and had by his own account completed approximately two-thirds of a major new poem, "The City," similar to "The Waste Land" in scope and power, and perhaps the most significant single poem from China in the past two decades. An English version has just appeared in the new British magazine *Talus*, translated by Chen Yanbing and myself, with the help of other members of the Beloit/Fudan Translation Workshop.

During the past two years Gu and Xie travelled widely, spending a year in Berlin, visiting the United States for the celebration of young Chinese poets sponsored by the Academy of American Poets in May, 1992, and then again briefly in the fall of 1993 shortly before their return to New Zealand, where they had established a simple home.

On October 8, 1993, Gu Cheng apparently murdered Xie Ye, then committed suicide. Accounts of the fatal day vary widely; what matters is that in nearly an instant, two of the most powerful and significant young artists of their generation had ceased to exist.

John Rosenwald
Beloit, Wisconsin
27 November 1993

BOOKS IN BRIEF

With over a hundred review copies to choose from, at least a dozen really excellent, why am I settling in on A. R. Ammons' *Garbage* (New York: Norton, 1993, \$17.95 clothbound, 121 pp.)? Ammons needs no review from me. *Garbage* just won the National Book Award for poetry and will have its full share of attention. So many other poets need reviews. My only excuse is that I haven't been able to tear myself away from it. Even now I'd like another week or so to prowl through, colored pencils in hand, exploring for even more treasures in the garbage.

So: what kind of a poem is this?

Long. A hundred and eight pages of text, eighteen chapters, in unrhymed couplets (well, actually one is rhymed), looking at first glance like pentameter. A bit of reading aloud reveals that although most lines can be read with five stresses, there are certainly no feet. Ammons himself describes them accurately as "nonprosodic high-tension lines." Indeed, they carry a lot of voltage. There are not many unstressed syllables. The poem is as compact in texture as it is expansive in its reach. Prepare therefore for paradox, irony, and oxymoron. Let's look at a sample. The poet is describing a mountain of garbage off I-95 in Florida:

this is a scientific poem,

asserting that nature models values, that we
have invented little (copied), reflections of

possibilities already here, this where we came
to and how we came: a priestly director behind the

black-chuffing dozer leans the gleanings and
reads the birds, millions of loners circling

a common height, alighting to the meaty streaks
and puffy muffins (puffins?): there is a mound,

too, in the poet's mind dead language is hauled
off to and burned down on, the energy held and

shaped into new turns and clusters, the mind
strengthened by what it strengthens:

Look at the compression: "black-chuffing dozer leans the gleanings." Energy under pressure like a piston. Compressed sound: *dozer/loner, lean/glean*, then *read*, then *meaty streaks*. And *birds/circling*. Keep going. Ammons segues from one phoneme cluster to another throughout the poem. This is solid poetry. It's tough, and it's also playful. Words pop up and hit the dance floor, improvising wildly: *puffy muffins* makes *puffins* irresistible.

This passage also introduces some other distinctions of the poem. It is not afraid of flat assertions: "this is a scientific poem,/ asserting that nature models values." We will learn exactly what those values are and how they reflect scientific knowledge. "Millions of loners circling/ a common height" suggests that the knowledge will be not unparadoxical. We see here also evidence that *Garbage* is, in the profoundest sense, a religious poem: the dozer operator is *priestly* and comes to seem very like a persona of the poet. And we recognize that this is going to be a poem about the process of poetry: by analogy to the rubbish mound, the poet's mind contains a mound where dead language is composted and incinerated into "new turns and clusters," with a transforming effect on the poet. The key word is *energy*. Quite a burden for twelve lines, and quite a programme for a poem!

So, how does it work?

Consider first the language. Ammons follows Coleridge in conceiving a poet as one who liberates language from "the lethargy of custom." He romps with language: *appropriations, disjunctivitis, embranglements*. He compares poetry to "an installation at Marine Shale," it "reaches down into the dead pit/ and cool oil of stale recognition" and brings up "hauls of stringy gook which it arrays/with light and strings with shiny syllables." He recognizes the irony that "poems themselves//processing, revitalizing so much dead material/ become a dead material concentrate." This concept throws me back to Shelley, who discusses in his *Defence of Poetry* how time dulls metaphor until, instead of marking "the before unapprehended relations of things," the language becomes abstract, mere "signs for portions or classes of thoughts instead of pictures of integral thoughts; and then if no new poets should arise to create afresh the associations which have been thus disorganized, language will be dead to all the nobler purposes of human intercourse."

Poetry, Ammons claims, again like Shelley, isn't logic or knowledge or philosophy; "it is action and/ action's pleasure." I started discussing style, form, poetics; but I soon discover that in Ammons the style is the content, in action.

The language of this poem is sizzling with energy. The process of typing a word seems to inspire Ammons to reuse the word immediately in a slightly different intonation, much as Carver does in his title *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* He makes a game of such mercurial redundancy: "you have an unaccomplished mission unaccomplished"; "the wildlife around here gets to be *pretty wild*." The effect is an intensified colloquialism, a colloquialism that erupts engagingly in many guises throughout the poem. Take a look at the first page of *Garbage*, where Ammons, presumably having wound a fresh spool of adding-machine tape into his typewriter, appears to be addressing Donald Hall:

Creepy little creepers are insinuatingly
 curling up my spine (bringing the message)
 saying, Boy!, are you writing that great poem
 the world's waiting for: don't you know you
 have an unaccomplished mission unaccomplished;
 someone somewhere may be at this very moment
 dying for the lack of what W. C. Williams says
 you could (or somebody could) be giving: yeah?
 so, these little messengers say, what do you
 mean teaching school (teaching *poetry* and
poetry writing and wasting your time painting
 sober little organic meaningful pictures)
 when values thought lost (but only scrambled into
 disengagement) lie around demolished
 and centerless because you (that's me, boy)
 haven't elaborated everything in everybody's
 face, yet)

The poet proceeds first to make a case for not heeding the call – for withdrawing to a life of "elegance and simplicity." But by the end of the chapter he has apparently written himself through a

little treatise on values and then on, via an extended arboreal metaphor, into an agitated discourse ending with a pair of unanswerable questions:

how can we intercede and not
interfere: how can our love move more surroundingly,
convincingly, than our premonitory advice

Thus Ammons welcomes us aboard for his adventure. He establishes a presence that is humorous, modest, playful. The self-reflexive voice invites the reader to share in the workings of a mind in the process of composition. If we play along, we must expect to be teased. In imagining the tape as a showboat headed down the Mississippi, another elaborate metaphor for the process of composition, he writes:

shouldn't you nudge the bow
a touch starboard: and such like: such
as, why is she doing this; where did
she, and when, acquire this sense of mission:
I know boats don't have senses of mission;
but you were going along with it, weren't you:

This is a danger; it's easy to ride this showboat down the river, enjoying the effervescent alliteration, the subtle oxymorons, the sparkly epigrams, the parenthetical parentheses, puns and paradoxes, and not notice the powerful currents the poet is navigating. But he does explain: "I just want you to know I'm perfectly/ serious much of the time: when I kid around/ I'm trying to get in position to be serious."

What, then, is *Garbage* seriously about? Well, obviously it's about the creative process. And it is, as the poet tells us early, a "scientific poem." The vision is both microscopic and telescopic. His dedication announces how the poetic processes and the biological processes coincide: "*to the bacteria, tumblebugs, scavengers,/ wordsmiths – the transfigurers, restorers.*" Elsewhere he declares that the job of this poem is to proclaim "the perfect/ scientific and materialistic notion of the/ spindle of energy":

when energy is gross,
rocklike, it resembles the gross, and when
fine it mists away into mystical refinements,

sometimes passes right out of material
 recognizability and becomes, what? motion,
 spirit, all forms translated into energy

In some of the most important lines in the poem Ammons then continues:

so, in value systems,
 physical systems, artistic systems, always this
 same disposition from the heavy to the light,
 and then the returns from the light downward
 to the staid gross: stone to wind, wind to
 stone:

In imagining the "finest issue of energy in which/ boulders and dead stars float," Ammons comes close (the "nothingness of all the poised somethings") to something like the Hindu Atman.

This cosmic view poses serious questions; one response is a kind of fatalistic cynicism:

actually, the planet is going to
 be fine, as soon as the people get off: and
 why bother with carcinogenic residues – one
 solar flare (nova) will recall all to light:
 I'll tell you: I'm just not worried: in fact,
 there is a saying that should be repeated in
 piano interludes – don't worry, be happy: hold
 that thought, it is life's best protection against
 thought:

But this mindless misanthropy is only one winding of the spindle. There are other impulses to contend with. Ammons reads the news and sees ontogeny recapitulating phylogeny in Somalia and Serbia and the streets of our cities.

this kind of ape will join his fellows in a
 dirty street and hack another fellow who has
 done ungroupliness to death, axe him right
 in the pleading face and let him bleed reconciled:
 purity of cluster will override good or bad in

us: I have a low view of us: but that is why
I love us or try to move to love us:

because, as the existentialists have already told us, "if there is to be any regard for/ human life, it will have to be ours, right regard/ for human life, including all other forms of life." We are, the poet knows, for all our atavistic ruthlessness, a special species – capable of elegant equations, of an infinitely renewable language, and of real feeling. "Real feeling," says Ammons

assigns its weight gently to others,

helps them meet, deal with the harsh, brutal,
the ineluctable, eases the burdens of unclouded

facts:

However far into the intense inane this poem soars, it keeps returning to the human and humane dimension, where love, however improbable, is a given.

What we have here, it appears to me, is a major religious poem for this century, although it proposes a vision that rejects religions, has no place for divinities. The aesthetic, the moral, and the scientific are all organized energy in the same cycle. Eternity, as in Blake, is in love with the productions of time. This isn't pantheism, exactly, but "everything is marvellous." Much of the language of the poem is religious: a "priestly plume" rises from the purifying fires of the garbage mounds, and the birds "as in a single computer-/ formed net plunge in celebration, hallelujahs/ of rejoicing." The end of chapter 16 is a wry and complex prayer (to "the gods or appetitive ganglions"). And the last few pages of chapter 13 are a voice out of the whirlwind: a great lyric paean to process – a swirl of gerunds and participles, *burning, sidling, skiddling, creaking, spinning and humming, reaching, hollowing*, "a weaving, a shuttle, a/ fabric, a going staying where you are," and the "streams' yielding bending fathers my winding." *Garbage* is a scripture of a uni-verse, where the process of poetry is a metonym for the redemptive cycles of the cosmos.

Toward the end of chapter 13 Ammons piles metonymy on metonymy:

the rabbit's
 leaps and halts, listenings, are prosody of
 a poem floating through the mind's brush: I
 mix my motions in with the mix of motions, all
 motions cousins . . . cousins, not silent, either,
 communicative, but not with human sound,
 communicative motions making sounds, much mutual
 glistening in a breezy grove of spring aspen speech

In this, Ammons' *Defence of Poetry*, one of the functions of the poem is to celebrate the abundance of what we are used to calling creation:

song's buoyance underlofts
 anything and plays, sways it, puts it into play,
 sheds the rigor of its stasis, makes forms wash
 and even, playing, forms washes: anything,
 anything, anything is poetry:

He modestly acknowledges his inadequacy to this large order,
 but still tries to imagine

what it would be like to get
 every word in, to trickle every rhythm in and
 the overrhythms curling, lagging, eddying along
 a network of motional obbligatoros:

The poet's imagination and attentive observation expand to the challenge in the very act of regretting their inadequacy.

Ammons returns over and over to the question of meaning in poetry. It's hard to lift passages from their comic/cosmic contexts, but here are samples:

life, life is like a poem: the moment it
 begins, it begins to end: the tension this
 establishes makes every move and moment, every
 gap and stumble, every glide and rise significant:

And, accepting that no teleology is discernable in the universe, he consoles us that "art makes life, just as it makes itself," and

life, too, if it is to have
 meaning, must be made meaningful: if it is to
 have purpose, its purpose must be divined, invented,
 manifested, held to:

In a passage on the meaning of meaning, he dismisses Big
 Meaning, but asks, is there

really any meaninglessness, isn't meaninglessness
 a funny category, meaninglessness missing
 meaning, vacancy still empty, . . . space, the terror of the
 unimaginably empty and endless, distances stars,
 for example, not to mention the core-fire of the
 galaxy, so we cellular brushfires can burn cool
 in a way-off arm: there is *only* meaning

He pokes a little fun at certain contemporary poetic stances:

it is
 fashionable now to mean nothing, not to exist
 because meaning doesn't hold, and we do not exist
 forever; this *is* forever, we are now in it: our
 eyes see through the round time of nearly all
 of being, our minds reach out and in ten billion
 years: we are in so much forever, we pay it no
 mind, we'd rather think of today's shopping or
 next week's day off: but we will not be in
 forever forever, that is the dropout: is it
 too much to be in forever a while: dead we are
 out of time and forever, both: I want to get
 around to where I can say I'm glad I was here,
 even if I must go:

If, as Shelley believed, the imagination is "the great
 instrument of moral good," because it enables us to "feel that
 which we perceive, and to imagine that which we know," and
 if, as he thought, poetry strengthens our capacity to internalize
 and *realize* that perception and knowledge – whether it's the

position of our little blue-green globe in the swirling fires of the galaxy or the suffering of any least inhabitant of that globe – then poetry is the highest moral force. It need not teach or preach. It has only to expand our capacity for imagination. And this it accomplishes by what M. L. Rosenthal calls “aroused language.” By such criteria Ammons has here given us what Donald Hall has called for: a great poem.

Margaret Gibson's *The Vigil: A Poem in Four Voices* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993, 116 pp., \$19.95 cloth, \$9.95 paper) was one of the five finalists for the National Book Award – a polar opposite, in some ways, to Ammons' *Garbage*. The contrast between these two fine book-length poems dramatizes the fertile variety of today's poetry. A tightly-organized work of fiction, *The Vigil* tells its story through the interior voices of four women – three generations of one family, each consciousness distinguished by its own verse form. The eye can tell immediately who is speaking, and a genealogical chart maps the relationships.

A generational saga may sound like a novel, but one of the most arresting successes of this book is the skill with which the poet compresses her novelistic material through techniques usually associated with the short story. As Frank O'Connor told us many years ago, in a seminal essay “And It's a Lonely Personal Art,” the novelist allows the narrative to establish its own majestic rhythms. Indeed, O'Connor maintains, in any novel the central character is Time. Time in this poem is rigidly confined. On page 1 Gibson announces: “we overhear the events of a single day in late October, 1986, when Sarah, a potter, holds a wood-kiln firing at her home in North Stonington, Connecticut – an annual vigil which draws the women in the family to Sarah's house to help out.” In O'Connor's view, every great short story represents a struggle with Time: “to reach some point of vantage, some glowing center of action, from which past and future will be equally visible.” In this, Gibson smashingly succeeds. The visible “glowing center” is the kiln; the poet has, as she tells us straight out, “looked fire in the eye.” The narrative center is the knot of

four women through whose minds, translated into their various verse forms, the reader learns the story.

For me, much of the pleasure was learning the secrets of the plot, as the poet carefully releases the clues. I won't, therefore, say more about what the story reveals. It is not for the plot, however ingeniously woven, that this story exists, but for the four women and their complex histories, their interrelationships among themselves and with the rest of their families, and in their imaginable futures. Gibson communicates all this without directly reporting any encounters among them: we hear all the dialogue through the screen of this or that character's mind. The poem is all in action – the intense activity of a single crucial day – but all the reader knows is the action of each character's response, to the immediate scene, to detailed memory, even, finally, in dream.

I appreciate and take keen pleasure in the richness of the resulting fabric. Perhaps because they are all so closely related, all four women think in vivid images, and all are intensely self-aware. As a result, the four voices, clearly distinct to the reader's eye, nevertheless are remarkably similar to the ear. Even Jennie's prose poems and Kate's long lines break down into the varied but mostly four-stress lines that distinguish the grandmother, Lila. And the potter, Sarah, thinks in her mother's four-stress lines, but often truncated to half that. This psychic rhythm reflects the deep blood-relationship of the women, but it would be more interesting, I came to think, if each woman were more clearly characterized in her diction and syntax. Gibson's model for this interior monologue, shifting from person to person, appears to be Virginia Woolf. Here is Sarah, cradling her injured son:

Drawn too near the fire,
he must knit – must learn to be
complete, and so my hands hover
over, they trace tendrils in the light
air – they soar and curl,
lowering gently, finally
to a touch that translates, *I'm here,*
we are both safe,
we have not perished.

But Woolf's diction is more intense, more freighted. In narrative, Woolf is expansive; Gibson contracts and anneals. Comparisons are finally not very useful. The virtue of *The Vigil* is in its structure, as it draws four troubled women together to resolve, or at least confront, their histories. The result is an epitome of the family's whole existence: a remarkable achievement.

Lola Haskins' *Hunger* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1993, 85 pp., \$9.95 paper) is a cabinet of crystals: each one with a cutting edge. Some are strung into loops, each lyric telling a part of someone's story, such as "Six Cairns for Mary," six little lyrics condensing the life of Mary Peake from 1830-36, and "Xtopher and Elizabeth," eight chapters of a marriage, 1712-24, wrenchingly poignant. This has long been Haskins' distinction: to enter empathically into the lives of people in other times and places, so that they glow before us, illuminated by the external lights of their environment, by the inner light of their realized selves, and by the strong language the poet conjures to embody them before us. The masterpiece in this genre, thus far, is "Exteriors: A Self-Guided Tour," one poem for each of eleven paintings, from Mexico in 1969 to London in the seventies and New York in the eighties. As in a gallery, the artist guides the reader through his work so that we see the paintings, vividly; enter into the creative process, vicariously; and share in the development of the painter's eye and mind. It's a wonder.

Here, complete, is one poem, not part of a sequence, to illustrate Lola Haskins' musician's ear, the spare accuracy of her language, her control of the reader's senses, including, here, the kinetic; and, most of all, the freshness and sharpness of her imagination:

Employment

Every day I suck a little marrow.
I can feel my bones hollowing.
Sometimes the empty spaces ache
like a limb that isn't there.

Sometimes the air gets in
and I can't control the tune
it sings. I am doing the best
I can. I know the fine hairs
that grow along my arms are not
feathers yet. But I never sleep
without saying the prayer,
never forget, even in dreams,
what I am to be. And I practice,
lifting the right muscles,
doing wind sprints, everything
you say, understanding
all this time that my pay
can be no more than your own.
Which is nothing more than
my light self, surging in
the air, then going down.

Hunger is a co-winner of the Edwin Ford Piper Poetry Award of the University of Iowa Press. That the three books I had chosen to review have risen to the top, or almost to the top, in national honors goes a way to redeem my lost faith in the award system.

M.K.S.