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Cover: Robert Shetterly, Jr., "The Fox Condemns the Trap, not Himself,"
from William Blake's "Proverbs of Hell" series, drypoint etching, 1992.

HIROKOJI PLAZA, a print by Hiroshige

Late afternoon, a muggy day,
the park, a fall of puppet-wire rain,
the ginger smell of gravel getting wet,
a nearby sky, a sign that says
No infinite longings, please.
Don't wonder past the lantern houses, sudsy trees.
You're tired; stay right here
and watch the gravel darken chip by chip.

David Campbell

Two Poems

THE BULL AND THE ANGEL

So there they are, the bull and the Messenger of the Lord,
waiting underneath the stands listening to the trumpets
blaring out the pasodoble, and the bull prances a little,
thinking the music's for him.

You know what happens next; the gate opens, brash sunlight
glares in, and our bull rushes into the arena, head high, feet
twinkling.

Well, the picadors do their thing, the banderilleros do their
thing,

and the matador does his thing. The bull, blood smooth and flat
on his flanks, blood dripping in clots from his knees, flops over
and dies.

Two old mules plod out and drag him off while the crowd
shouts

and the sun burns down into the glittering arena.

Then, in the private darkness under the stands,
the Angel of the Lord chafes the bull's cheeks
and breathes deeply into his mouth and says, "Get up now,
Paco," or Carlos, or Monstro – whatever the bull's name is –
"Get up now. They're cheering for you,"
and the bull hears the crowd and the music.

So when they're ready for the next bullfight, the gate opens,
the sun lights up the darkness under the stands, and the same
bull

swaggers out, horns high in the sunlight.
Everybody does his thing. The second matador
salutes the bull, gets the bull's head down,
and runs the sword into his bullish heart
through that perfect spot high between his shoulders
while the vast bullring of aficionados cheers
and flings roses and wineskins into the arena
as the mules drag the dead bull into darkness.

Underneath the stands
the Angel wipes off the blood, pets the bull's forehead, combs
his hair,
feeds him a bucket of marigolds floating in champagne,
and says, "Get back in there. It's you they want.
Just listen to that applause."

So now the trumpets flash out again.
Gate opens again. Sun glares in again.
And out he rushes again, a little tired maybe,
but leaping in the sunlight, triumphant, bellowing, tossing his
horns.

He smashes the picadors' horses and pushes hard
against the spears. He chases the banderilleros until they hurtle
gasping, across the barrier, into safety,
And although his head is down,
and although gaudy sticks clatter and flop from his shoulder
and sweat draws a map of the world on his hide,
he grins drool at the strutting matador who shoves
his spangled pelvis toward the horns
and hides his sword behind his cape.
The crowd cries out "¡Olé!" and the bull
thinks they're calling his name,
praising his name,
glorifying his name,
as he stands before the matador with weary mastery of horn
and hoof.

But this time the torero is young, or frightened, or ungraceful,
and the sword bangs bone, pops out, tries again, tries again,
goes slithering sideways into the bull's lung,
and blood gargles from the bull's mouth, foaming
onto the crystal sand as he totters and cries out,
then lurches over onto his left side, kicking, while dust
roars up from his hide
and all of us in that crowd
hiss, boo, whistle, fling out cushions.

In the cool shade underneath the stands, the Angel of the Lord
whispers to the next bull,
caresses his neck, brushes and combs his forehead,
kisses the ticklish spot high between his shoulders,
while the old mules trudge through the blazing gate
to pull our dead bull back into darkness.

THE INNOCENTS

All of the people who haven't been born yet
crowd against the fence
and look down toward the stock market;
they're fascinated by the sound of
convertible debentures.

They're eager to begin getting and spending.
Their hands stretch through the fence
and the light flings the long shadows of their fingers
out into the solar wind. The shadows
drift over the Thames, the Hudson, and the Rhine.
The people living by those rivers look up
on their way to work.

All of those people who haven't been born yet
peek down at beds, automobile seats, haylofts, caves,
and at high soft grass.

Their hands reach through the fence,
urging, patting, pushing. Procreation
fascinates them. They don't know
anything about sex, but they egg on
the sweaty mechanics of bedwork, hoping to get
their own dear chromosomes assembled
so cell division can begin. The shadows
of their fingers twiddle in hot river deltas:
the Ganges, the Amazon, the Nile, the Mississippi.

They've waited so long, those unborn people!
They hustle sand through every hour glass,
though they aren't sure
whether the sand should flow up or flow down.
Full of anticipation, they delight in watching gurneys trundle
through hospital corridors
toward the morgue in the basement,
especially when one wheel
wobbles and rattles. Death fascinates them,
but they can't always tell life and death apart.

stanza continued

They explain to each other: "Life is the one that eats."
They love to watch clouds
swinging across mountains because sometimes the clouds
make rainbows
and then water plummets into the river valleys:
the Yangtze, the Po, the Ohio, the Bug.
The rivers flood; water drinks up
everything in the bottom land. The unborn people
think that the rivers are alive.

They want to start living themselves. They want
us to make room for them.
They've been standing at that fence since the earth
assembled itself out of quantum mechanics
and the prosody of Genesis. Their fingernails tap
on the bars, their knees jiggle
to ease the strain of all that waiting.
Right now, they are staring down
at everybody reading poetry. They are hoping
for an earthquake. They are calling
to us; their voices come burbling
out of the four rivers that they think
flow from the Garden of Eden;
Acheron, Phlegethon, Lethe, and black rushing Styx.
They are waiting for us to wade those rivers.
"Hurry up," they say. "The water's shallow. We love you."

Charles Muñoz

DOROTHY, ALL GROWN UP, RETURNS TO OZ

1. "Of course people do go both ways."

One nail & he's off his crowcross
into her arms, fancy dancer,
til her mouth's full of straw
& her knees itch with him
lank beneath her, a fond man
thinking of a place called Kansas
& the awful problem of fire,
Dorothy sinking deeper & deeper,
holding him sharp & together
all at once.

What a woman can do
he thinks & Dorothy rocks
at his center where nothing ever was
before.

They wake half human.
Dorothy of Kansas brushes her straw hair.
The fancy dancer touches a blister on his lip.
(Does he *know*, then, for the first time?)

Crows, mindless, fly straight.

Much later, on fire, he will draw Dorothy
to the witchdeath, by chance.
Straw men are all indirection.

Dorothy takes his gloved hands, holds them
to her thighs.

How else has there been,
ever, a road?

2. Sn

No heart in tin but the axe
reminds her of wood
and oil. She wants to move
him, crazy bolted as he is,
stippled with rust, toward her.
We are all salt and Sn,
oil and fat. The elements
pop like rivets. He's smooth
and stiff, sighing into her
ears, singing and whistling
through metal cuffs, wind
over her legs, steam at her breasts.
Somewhere ahead lies the wizard
who does no more than this
and knows, just now, far less.

3. She Loves Poppies

She loves poppies and the lion falling
across her once again, that animal
softness as he feigns sleep, large dark
eyes shut too tight, implausible tail
curling shyly beneath her dress.

She wears nothing in Oz but Kansas
cotton, thin and plain in this run
of flowers, but the lion is rich
with fur and must as he settles
over her, mouth open just enough.

There is timidity here, the lion
licking down the hollow of her neck,
his paws awkward at bone buttons,
her hands drowsy on his scruff.
Where spell and song seem so abrupt
miracle is slow. The lion hunts, shy,
along her skin, afraid for himself

stanza continued

as he pushes toward her darker hair
 which is somehow, there, so like
 his, so soft. She growls.

This time, for hours, there is no snow.

4. flapflapflapflapflap

Two at her wrists, two at her ankles,
 two at her knees, two near her elbows,
 a pair at her hips, a pair at her shoulders,
 two at her thighs, two down her spine
 but never enough no never will it can it ever
 be enough to – with all their hopjack flapping
 and harness-bell clapping and snapping – get her off
 the ground? They are grabbing and pinching at fleas
 in her ears, grooming her hair, nattering snatches
 of *'bello'*, long the vines veins reins of her neck,
 Desdemoniac, and sucking her toes and her fingers
 like Munchkins, perennial, carnal, prereincarnate.
 Twister of Philip Morris caps, tangle of capes to bold organ
 grinding Offenbach and yet will she rise, will she be lifted
 above applethrown orchard and firebug cottage among all this
 underarm tugging and coupling? Others unloved skiprun into
 her

breasts, testing her lips and her nipples, pulse and pudendum,
 trying out twigs and neatly stripped branches as levers
 to raise her whole and rubied into their sabbath of clouds,
 joining, conjoining, cajoling, touchtyping, enjoining
 can't she, couldn't they, won't she come? picking each of her
 pockets with oppoaching thumbs, everywhere skin shed skin
 of bananas, starfruit, and mandarin oranges she feels glowing
 around her – womandala, whoa! mandorla – and she will, they
 could,

she can. Can. CAN, kicking her legs way up over her head,
 out past jungle sunset to Castle Kilimanjaro, her screams heard
 like street piano and sweet harmonium back in Emerald City.

5. "It'll soon be over now."

Now my little pretty
says the black whirring woman
in her high-stepped boots,
now and now at last.

Dorothy kneels to undo
the long black schoolmarm laces.
Elmira bends to be unbuttoned,
hundreds of chalkpoint buttons.

It takes days to reach skin.
There are camisoles shirtwaists
corsets longjohns garter belts
stockings thick as 3-D postcards.

Now my little pretty
but there are slips and half-slips
and Miss Elmira Gulch rubs impatient
at the hard clean schoolgirl knots

down Dorothy's back. Now.
Dorothy steps out of her own
clothes and the whirring woman
tears at the last of hers.

Skywriter, monkey-drover, now
the old priss pedals naked
on her broomstick bicycle,
Dorothy hot in the straw basket,

her tin heart all a-racket
and her eyes wide, wide,
and her fur wet. Oh! screams
the Gulchwitch, I'm melting,

melting.

6. "Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain."

A tease: ribbons & medals, papers, pocket watch
& yet in all the green ticking *pluribus unum*
only the man himself for Dorothy,
the unadulterated man, the charlatan
the sandbagged philanthroposophist, him
with his frockcoat thesaurus, his hot
air, his way with pomp & circus dance.
This dance around they leave together,
waving like clowns. Dorothy tosses her ruby
slippers out & the balloon sails up.
Out go the wizard's coat & shoes &
the balloon sails up. Out go Dorothy's
socks, the wizard's socks & gaiters,
gloves & tie, & the balloon sails up.
Shirt & collar, studs & cufflinks,
dress & panties, belt & trousers,
& the balloon, yes, the balloon sails
away. Not so fast says the wizard,
not so fast, but there is no stopping
the balloon now & Dorothy reaches
for the unencumbered truth, great
& powerful, one & only, fatskinned
anxious bumbling Oz whose shorts
billow in this high storywind, Monday's
wash caught in a cross new twister
as Dorothy closes around him in a hundred
spinning vaudeville ahs & they tumble
dry heels over heads back to Kansas
& the flat hot iron.

Say goodbye, Toto.

Hillel Schwartz

An earlier, shorter version of this poem appeared in *Aliens and Lovers*,
edited by Millea Kenin (San Francisco: Unique Graphics, 1983).

HEART-STONE

We walked into the woods, back
to where he'd found fieldstone.
We hauled three or four at a time.
The flat edges stuck in my ribs
for the long walk to the truck. Enough
for three fireplaces was a lot of stone,
a lot of walks into those woods.
One heart-shaped stone we saved
for the bedroom where a year later I lay,
home from a caesarian:

he straddled me,
held down my shoulders, gritted his teeth
without a word, swung off when done, and left.
I felt my stitches first, the knots
burning, itching. Loose surrounding skin
still heaved and pulled. I wanted to touch
the morning light across the bed,
watched it land on the fireplace,
on the heart-stone I myself had found
and carried deliberately
through the woods, needing more
than myself, needing a symbol when he screamed
in his sleep, when he insisted I rate
how *it* was: a symbol
to work some magic in the middle of the night.

Nika Helmer

Two Poems

TO FIND THE STANDING STONES AT KENMARE, GO

1

not far along a tilting terrace row
all flaking stucco, stipple-patches
of pinkish grey, verdigris-scaled
pale salmon, even still
some burnt-gold glowingness
unpeeled from the shadowed walls,
housebacks turned against the sun's
plunging past crooked Kerry 's end –
rust-frozen gates mishung,
roses gone wild as cats,
jags of broken windows polished
by winds unslowed through empty rooms . . .

2

and beyond the inevitable potter
(this island surviving as crafts fair),
children held up like cameras
to see her at her wheel,
fondling mind to mud to shapely
emptiness, slicking the spinning
hole to hold the tourists' sugar,
teabags, cattails, sneezy potpourri,
pocket change, or shiny stones –
but never for them the proper
misty brew of cider and poteen . . .

3

then on by the hall with its ancient
 blazonry – CINEMA – lost across a cracked
 concrete front, overlaid by the
 fading HAND-LOOMED CARPETS AND RUGS,
 where in back now in dim light,
 below a screen so torn and stained
 a moment's riffing fills it again
 with magical embodiments, flourishes
 the current avatar: some sort
 of mini-car chopshop, thicker shadows
 muffling steel-on-steel shrieking and
 the hissing of the cutting torch –
 so even tearing engines apart
 and body-fender hammering seem scenes
 in an eroding sculpture, earthen art,
 funerary lore passed down, bone
 to bone, by the bog-giants' guild . . .

4

now right at the green garage door,
 bright-beaded (rain the only newness),
 where the signpost's arrows point
 back and up and there and there,
 salt-eaten runes driven anywhere
 by the berserk coursers of the air,
 right before the once black and white
 terrier, mongrelized by time, watcher
 since the invention of plaster –
 but *not* five paces farther where
 the Lost end up in the missus' tearoom,
 fire-soothed, dry, delecting a tray
 of recumbent scones, breathing slow
 into a smoking cup, butter melting,
 gooseberry jam dripping, legs easing,
 true mission entirely forgotten . . .

5

but, no, that escaped, take
the hoof-churned muck-track
beginning just beyond the long
cross-barred gate (for wet cows
to slick their heads through)
behind the green garage (the lock's
never locked, nothing says "Keep Out"),
and follow the path down into
a sudden lumberyard where, swung
high above the timber piles warping
from weight of their own sweetness,
chain-muscled claws at winch's end
drop and close on four, no three,
now two, or one log luckily
dangling from the teeth, airborne
away toward the saw-sound rising
from an unseen mill toward which
the track is sluicing all debris . . .

6

and end it here, if that's sufficient
foolishness, for one person's stone
circle is another's God-cursed field,
and, after all, most of the starred
celebrity lithic sites, dolmens, barrows,
portals to ashpits, have been checked off
in *Michelin*, neat as velvet ropes –
and were these Kenmare "monoliths,"
nameless in all the guidebooks,
literally stumbled across in what was
a previous lifetime, ever really *here*? –
or just imagined, saved like a crow's
bent feather in an old cracked-spine
journal book at the page that tried
to hold how Skellig skewered the sky
and shocked it blue beyond thought,
or just *needed*, a reason for returning? . . .

7

so enough of this slogging, slipping
and pulling each other down slithering
in the too-fertile mud, boots sucking
and squishing, shivers setting in,
the thick odor of sawdust mounds
jelling – enough to climb one of these
pulpy humps and peer through rain
and heavier water rolling off
hopeless hats (perhaps the whole island,
the day's run west, the sour cheese and
iron bread in the one-pub village
that no one had ever left or returned to,
their sullen, embarrassed silence hard
at the stranger until the first dumb question
is ventured and then the stories and laughing
flow with the Harp and it will cost
the new friend a bloody nose to buy a drink –
perhaps this entire journey
is a chimera or will be: some postcards
of impossible vistas, some antique poems,
absurdly musical, recovered from
an improbable tongue, a journal full
of lies), enough just to see the path
accelerate down the bruised gleaming
of the machine-gouged slope, gathering rain
and speed into a newborn torrent, force
spent spuming over a low cliffedge,
purpling the whisper-wide, deep-cutting
River Finnerty, wind-clean and black
with pitch of the island's last pines . . .

8

yes, turn back, salvaging the image,
 for memory only cannot disappoint
 while rain's aiming little steel fishes,
 and clamber on powerful flipper-arms
 up the cutbank slime to gain
 solid purchase, short retreat
 to the car – but this rotted barbed wire,
 this ruined stile do seem familiar,
 and the stench of sheep shit, density
 of winter fog, lifting from self-made bowls,
 overwhelms all the rest, like memory,
 forces up the eyes to the near horizon
 a nose away, and there they are . . .

9

the stones,

corpse-gray but lambent, sculpted by
 five thousand years, here tumbled, scarcely
 non-random but for anything like a circle's
 rarity outside the brain's corolla or
 the galaxies', rest half-buried, fallen
 as from the sky, like the hacked parts
 of a dismembered god, flesh turned to rock,
 veins to roots and lichens, but shoulder,
 neck, buttocks, thigh and knee, heel, tongue,
 breasts, eye-holed head still thrust and
 arch and shrug and swell around the center –
 the lowest stone, a smooth convexity like
 a baby's belly but really the perfect curve
 of vulva or glans – and the sheep, dumb sheep
 at a kneel taking the silvery wind and rain,
 make breathing stones too, perhaps a square,
 or a sprung rectangle of Sleeping Sheep –
 except for the one that's straying near
 what must be the fist, the youngest
 spring-shorn one, now rubbing its naked

stanz continued

green-striped rump joyously
against the cracked knuckles, as if
to scrape off the dye, to mark
the coupling sun and moon, or zenith
of a white-bearded star, or just
the traveler's final stumble – the ripe
and plumply scrawny one, with sheepchild eyes,
head lifted, waiting for the sacrifice.

HALLOWEEN: AN ONCOLOGY

1 Inpatient

So I've become, at last, "my kind of thing,"
 irony sharpened to the decimal
 (seven-point-four, in fact). Visitors bring
 metallic LUV balloons that pray GET WELL,
 prayer coffee mugs and praying daisies; then
 my prayer joke: the mumbling kid who stands
 like Bartleby, lank seminarian
 on his first training mission, dangling hands
 from hairy wrists too long for cuffs, black hair
 thick below knuckles, starveling boy of God,
 remote, preferring not to take a chair,
 deep into "vigiling." I try to prod
 the Lord out of him. "Tell me, Reverend,
 do you enjoy your work?" He nods awake,
 moves, haltingly, bedside: "There is one friend . . .
 your *best* friend . . . wept, bled, died . . . all for your sake" –
 my cue to turn the TV up. My Show
 is on, my marathon romancer: one
 life to live, children all, restless, they know
 they're young, too beautiful for cancer. Fun
 forever is their plague; they swell, sweat, seethe.
 Whether their play stars Lust or Hate, they must
 endlessly lubricate and heavy-breathe
 since bold electrons don't mutate to dust.

One dear friend smuggles in a Siamese fish –
 "a *fighting* fish," she whispers hard – a red
 prostate-sized glob. It vibrates like my wish
 this weren't happening. By week's end it's dead.

And so much more – oh, such well-meaningness! –
 ten self-help books (subtext: *it's your bad choice*),
 five crystal amulets, one noxious mess
 of Chinese carry-out, the confused voice

of my mother 3,000 miles away
 asking should she come out and help (no, *please!*),
 an orange styrofoam cacti display,
 and pamphlets laying odds on my disease.

(*Not* on this list: a pretty nurse's shy
 and tender cleansing 'round my catheter;
 the friend who reads me his new work – we try
 always for the perfected; my wife, her

mere presence *all* the gift, what frightens me
 to lose.) But one last lump of anti-cheer –
 close pals, knowing my “thing,” all guarantee
 the payoff: “Dave, you've got a great poem here.”

For I've achieved some minor ill-repute
 as sentimentalist of the grotesque.
 Deformity is my ideal of *cute*;
 sweet Pity chains me to my writing desk –

but not this time. I won't take any notes,
 and painkillers I hope obliterate
 all images. Words uttered by white coats –
 entering, exiting – encode my fate.

2 Outpatient

My language, like white coals, dwindles, burns out,
 and I don't give a shit, except to swear
this thing is not what I will write about.

Which resolve holds until a festive air

vaguely illuminates the lab where now
 I'm laid for radiation. Disbelief's
 suspended low, gut-shooting me: *pow, pow!*
 I'm supine on a slab, in jockey briefs,

belly tattooed down to my hairless groin –
 my magic runes, my hexes, blue bullseyes
 to burn and burn again 'til all dots join
 across the killing field I visualize

the bad cells dying in (the good, the true
 survive their wounds). The great gray Zapper whirrs,
 rattles and wheels: vesicles turn to goo,
 bowels thin, nerves numb. Deciding faith endures

if one believes it does, I'm naked, spread
 taut, as if mounted by my anima,
 open to any god's hot thrust, from head
 to toenails rigid with desire. Then the

weird vision of a skeleton begins
 to form – yes, pumpkin-colored dancing bones –
 then broom-borne witches, demons, ghosts, all grins,
 and jack o'lanterns, R.I.P. tombstones.

Some morbid retinal freak? Some spectral joke?
Can they be celebrating Halloween?

Of course, they're offering up, these gentle folk,
 macabre conjure-toons, thumb-tacked between

signs warning DO NOT ENTER – LETHAL ZONE
 and DON'T FORGET TO HAVE BLOOD DRAWN. All read
 like glyphs deciphered from Cro-Magnon stone:
 "The earth that fed you, now will eat you." *Need*

is shrinking to but one demand: climb down
 off this table. The buzzing quits, red eye
 clicks out. Modestly in my half-sheet "gown"
 I thank the youths who set my dosage high,

and touch hands with the quaking turbaned boy
 who's next. Ah, now a host of kids arrives
 from Pediatrics. Some can walk. Their joy! –
 They're trick-or-treating, costumed in their lives.

ORIGIN

Moon through fog. At eye level, a dissonance of gray
among grays. Then a scramble:
a band of boiling white lengthens.
Falls, fades.

Breakers. The world set at such an angle
that only the hurried signature shows
of the whole, the boisterous wave.

Befogged. My knees feel
the slope toward the waves, slight. The sand firms and cools
toward the watery scree, toward the invisible rush
that dissipates with a hiss.

A different light, a widening, a color
that invents color. The sand glows blue, orange,
gold. The sprawled plants in the dunes
show red in their leaves, which are lightly furred,
veined. Dry black birds with crooked necks
creak overhead. *Oh, what? What for?*

Pamela Alexander

Two Poems

DEFENDING WALT WHITMAN

Basketball is like this for young Indian boys, all arms and legs and serious stomach muscles. Every body is brown! These are the twentieth-century warriors who will never kill, although a few sat quietly in the deserts of Kuwait, waiting for orders to do something, to do something.

God, there is nothing as beautiful as a jumpshot on a reservation summer basketball court where the ball is moist with sweat, and makes a sound when it swishes through the net that causes Walt Whitman to weep because it is so perfect.

There are veterans of foreign wars here although their bodies are still dominated by collarbones and knees, although their bodies still respond in the ways that bodies are supposed to respond when we are young.

Every body is brown! Look there, that boy can run up and down this court forever. He can leap for a rebound with his back arched like a salmon, all meat and bone synchronized, magnetic, as if the court were a river, as if the rim were a dam, as if the air were a ladder leading the Indian boy toward home.

Some of the Indian boys still wear their military hair cuts while a few have let their hair grow back.

It will never be the same as it was before!

One Indian boy has never cut his hair, not once, and he braids it

into wild patterns that do not measure anything.

He is just a boy with too much time on his hands.

Look at him. He wants to play this game in bare feet.

God, the sun is so bright! There is no place like this.
Walt Whitman stretches his calf muscles
on the sidelines. He has the next game.
His huge beard is ridiculous on the reservation.
Some body throws a crazy pass and Walt Whitman catches it
with quick hands. He brings the ball close to his nose
and breathes in all of its smells: leather, brown skin, sweat,
black hair, burning oil, twisted ankle, long drink of warm water,
gunpowder, pine tree. Walt Whitman squeezes the ball tightly.
He wants to run. He hardly has the patience to wait for his turn.
"What's the score?" he asks. He asks, "What's the score?"

Basketball is like this for Walt Whitman. He watches these Indian
boys

as if they were the last bodies on earth. Every body is brown!
Walt Whitman shakes because he believes in God.

Walt Whitman dreams of the Indian boy who will defend him,
trapping him in the corner, all flailing arms and legs
and legendary stomach muscles. Walt Whitman shakes
because he believes in God. Walt Whitman dreams
of the first jumpshot he will take, the ball arcing clumsily
from his fingers, striking the rim so hard that it sparks.

Walt Whitman shakes because he believes in God.

Walt Whitman closes his eyes. He is a small man and his beard
is ludicrous on the reservation, absolutely insane.

His beard makes the Indian boys righteously laugh. His beard
frightens the smallest Indian boys. His beard tickles the skin
of the Indian boys who dribble past him. His beard, his beard!

God, there is beauty in every body. Walt Whitman stands
at center court while the Indian boys run from basket to basket.

Walt Whitman cannot tell the difference between
offense and defense. He does not care if he touches the ball.

Half of the Indian boys wear t-shirts damp with sweat
and the other half are bareback, skin slick and shiny.

There is no place like this. Walt Whitman smiles.

Walt Whitman shakes. This game belongs to him.

AT THE TRIAL OF HAMLET, CHICAGO, 1994

Did Hamlet mean to kill Polonius? Diane and I sit at a table with the rich, who have the luxury to discuss such things over a veal dinner. The vegetables are beautiful! I am here because I wrote a book which nobody here has read, a book that Diane reads because she loves me. My book has nothing to do with Hamlet. My book is filled with reservation Indians. Maybe my book has everything to do with Hamlet. The millionaire next to me sets down one of his many forks to shake my hand. He tells me the poor need the rich more than the rich need the poor.

Abigail Van Buren eats corn at the next table. I read this morning she has always believed homosexuality is genetic. Finally. Dear Abby

can have all the corn she wants! I'll pay. She wears a polka dot dress and is laughing loudly at something I know is not funny.

Did Hamlet really see his father's ghost? Was there a ghost? Was Hamlet insane or merely angry when he thrust his sword through that curtain and killed Polonius? The millionaire tells me taxi cab drivers, shoeshine men, waiters, and waitresses exist only because the rich, wearing shiny shoes, often need to be driven to nice restaurants. A character actor walks by with a glass of wine. I recognize him because I'm the type of guy who always recognizes character actors. He knows that I recognize him but I cannot tell if he wants me to recognize him. Perhaps he is afraid that I am confusing him with another character actor who is more or less famous. He might be worried that I will shout his name incorrectly and loudly, transposing first and last names, randomly inserting wild syllables that have nothing to do with his name. Did Hamlet want to have sex with his mother Gertrude? Was Hamlet mad with jealousy

because Claudius got to have sex with Gertrude? When is a king more than a king? When is a king less than a king? Diane is gorgeous.

She wears red lipstick which contrasts nicely with her brown skin.

stanza continued

We are the only Indians in Chicago! No, we are the only Indians at the Trial of Hamlet. I hold her hand under the table, holding it tightly until, of course, we have to separate so we can eat our food. We need two hands to cut our veal. Yet, Diane will not eat veal. She only eats the beautiful vegetables. I eat the veal and feel guilty. The millionaire tells me the rich would love a flat tax rate. He talks about interest rates and capital gains, loss on investments and trickle-down economics. He thinks he is smarter than me. He is probably smarter than me, so I insecurely tell him I wrote a book which I know he will never read, a book that has nothing to do with Polonius. My book is filled with reservation Indians. Maybe it has everything to do with Polonius. A Supreme Court justice sits at the head table. He decides my life! He eats rapidly. I want to know how he feels about treaty rights. I want to know if he feels guilty about eating the veal. There is no doubt in my mind the Supreme Court justice recognizes the beauty of our vegetables. Was Hamlet a man without logical alternatives? Did he resort to a mindless, senseless violence? Were his actions those of a tired and hateful man? Or those of a righteous son? The millionaire introduces

his wife, but she barely acknowledges our presence. Diane is more gorgeous, even though she grew up on reservations and once sat in a tree for hours, wishing she had lighter skin. Diane wears a scarf she bought for three dollars. I would ask her to marry me right now, again, in this city where I asked her to marry me for the first time.

But she already agreed to marry me then and has, in fact, married me. Marriage causes us to do crazy things. She reads my books. I eat veal. Was Hamlet guilty or not by reason of insanity for the murder of Polonius?

The millionaire tells me how happy he is to meet me. He wishes me luck. He wants to know what I think of Hamlet's case. He tells me Hamlet

is responsible for what he did, insane or not. There is always something

beautiful in the world at any given moment. When I was poor I loved

stanza continued

the five dollar bills I would unexpectedly find in coat pockets. When
I feel
tired now, it can be the moon hanging over the old hotels of
Chicago.
Diane and I walk out into the cold November air. We hail a taxi.
The driver is friendly, asks for our names, and Diane says, I'm
Hamlet
and this is Hamlet, my husband. The driver wants to know where
we're from and which way we want to go. Home, we say, home.

Sherman Alexie

THE WHITE VASE

Your mother sweeps away the pieces
While your father rests his anguished hands
But you tell yourself, it's nothing
Anymore, just a white vase fallen and the edge
Of the shelf where it stood now ever
So slightly plain. Because breakage gives way
To liberation, you last beyond what divides you
From yourself. But small slivers
Of the world still seem large: birthday shopping
At the stores downtown, car trips to the coast,
Backyards and porcelain. The shard of each day
Pricks to the bone. The foggy sound
Of your father's breathing hasn't yet begun
To fade. Your mother still curls
Into her own arms like a chrysanthemum
After frost. When your father packed
To leave, they both claimed what was theirs.
Your father folded up the sea
With its enormous boats while she dragged aside
And kept the city, every blinking light.
You wondered, while they talked, in which pile
You belonged. They still argue
Over who gets you when, hugging you for hours
While they twist your arms to discover
What the other has said. Each keeps you
In the dark about things no one needs
To know, maintains the other's day is night,
Tells you that you're theirs, that they'll never
Let you go, then points at you when you fail,

stanza continued

Alleging you're the other's son.
You can't stop remembering the smash
And whoosh of air like someone's gasp
When the white vase fell and the awful silence
That came afterwards as always comes
When consequences happen: their voices
Far away, themselves again, tender and subdued,
As if relieved over one less thing to lose.

David Moolten

THE PRISONER OF CAMAU

1.

It was the rustle of nurses that brought him back,
touch of their hands that astonished.
Their voices lulled.

Officers explained his right to counsel.
He told them he starved five years in a bamboo cage
no longer than his body.

Sky fell each night through bars,
bruising like fruit.
A hungry moon pecked the seeds.

Guards dragged him to a hut to sign their papers.
A radio screeched
like an orchestra of crickets.

They cut three fingers off each hand,
leaving two to hold a pen,
two to hold their paper.

He told officers he'd written
an epic of the moon,
plotted an escape through constellations.

An officer asked about weapon dumps,
tunnels beneath the camp,
secrets he may have told.

2.

When he flew to Charleston,
the moon wore a phosphor crown.
Sun smoldered all day on molten streets.

Black smoke plumed from buildings on the news.
His fingers twitched like ghosts
from snuffed wicks.

The local papers got his story wrong.
For months
he lived in another time.

Mortars flared
in ducts above his bed.
Geysers of mud spouted from the marsh.

He woke on a cratered dike.
Shapes flapped like crows,
shouting "Mau di! Mau di! Mau di!"

They bandaged his eyes with a rag,
buried him beneath a tarp
in a sweltering boat.

A pole knocked like a broken clock.
When it stopped, a goose
squawked in a hamlet near Camau.

3.

In the bamboo cage
fungus etched a map
of jungles on his thighs.

Guards bowed and smiled,
pushing cups of rice
and fried minnows through the bars.

He told himself a story
is a poultice
for shrapnel beneath skin,

retraced the cold canal,
the night march to the paddy,
pigs rummaging beneath the sentry.

Bullets scooped divots
as they ran from rice shoots
toward the smoking huts.

It ended with peonies of flame
on thatch, the platoon
stalking footprints

through banana groves and pineapple fields,
tossing compasses into air
when the mortars hit.

4.

After they wired his hands to a board
hammered the machete through knuckles,
flinging stubs to pigs,

he lay on bamboo poles,
watching ants carry torches
of rice into soft brown bunkers.

A tree shrew entertained
by gathering fish spines into a nest,
until a guard shot it off a mangrove branch.

The moon was delirious,
scratching its skull
to a gray knuckle.

He signed the guard's story
so they would unhook
spotlights by his head.

He plotted stars into a Scheherazade,
composed episodes of radiance and dust,
strolled through the Zodiac.

On old roads in heaven
God gave him ideas
and maps for his journey.

5.

Unwrapping his hand,
he saw his father's ghost,
his palm's crossed life-lines.

A week before his father died
they watched a juggler
on the Ed Sullivan Show spinning plates.

One wobbled
like a gyroscope
and the others crashed.

His father said: "Think of it;
the man disgracing himself
because he couldn't keep his plates up!"

As if planets
had fallen from circuits,
God stumbled from cloud.

He didn't question.
He had been trained
to keep the plates up.

Staring at gray stubs,
he saw his father's hands
on a stage of broken plates.

6.

When the monsoon hit
the jungle flickered,
an old, grainy film.

He lay on a slatted mat
wondering how to hang
from a noose braided from straw.

Would the bamboo break?
Would a guard cut him down,
pare off thumbs?

He decided to build
a *hacienda del sol*
night by night.

He spent days
planning every room,
every picture and plant.

In principle
it was a sun dial.
Shadows climbed the walls.

Every morning he built new walls
between the cage's bars
from gathered stars.

7.
To celebrate its completion
he scratched a baseball diamond
on the bottom of a tin cup,
marked first base,
second, third, and home,
poked a hole for a bamboo splinter.

Spinning the dial
to determine hits,
keeping score with rice grains,
he played two full seasons
before guards decided he prayed
to a battered chalice.

He invited them to his batting cage
filled with stars:
Mantle, Williams, Cobb, Ruth.

They took front row seats
for the World Series,
razzed him through bars.

During the final game
he faced each batter
until all the stars struck out.

8.

Practicing his knuckle ball,
he saw a helicopter
scattering guards into elephant grass,
signaled to the pilot
who swooped toward the baseline
outside his *hacienda del sol*.

He wanted to forget
like the river
sloughing its brown skin in trees,
forget the candle stubs
of hands,
his name on the guards' story.

At the hospital he drew a blueprint
of his *hacienda del sol*,
its rooms reserved for stars,
confessed ants and a tree shrew
had saved him,
and his epic of the moon,
that his father's ghost
had spoken
of fallen plates.

9.

In Charleston
pushing a cart
through a frigid Piggly Wiggly,
he heard a boy:
"That man has lobster claws!"
He dropped a milk jug into lettuce.

In the parking lot
wandered in a haze of sweat
unable to find his car.

That night he woke in a bamboo cage.
Fingertips crawled
like slugs through fishbones.

He reached for them
scribbling dust
beneath the tree shrew's whimper.

At dawn he rowed from the Battery,
ghosts of planters
rocking on porches.

He held up his hands,
stared at pink and gold mansions
rising from the stubs.

Henry Hart

Two Poems

INSTRUMENTATION

Your fingers are wonderful! Their least movement
makes my muse leap up as though from a deep well,
and every muscle in my body mimics an instrument,
dark violins that could charm even the celestial bears.

The marimba of my teeth knows the songs you play,
and my stomach in the manner of a tetrachord lyre
rises and falls with those same delightful melodies,
more exquisite than the rotundities of figs and pears.

O, toxic banquets! When I docked at your orchard,
you filled me with the choral *fortissimo* that drives
even the sea-green vision of possibilities to the wall.

You have launched me in a dinghy with black sails,
setting my course for a masochism of deviled eggs
and whipped potatoes, much that's mere cleverness.

1871

"Instrumentation" is a pastiche of four sonnets written in whole or in part by Ernest Raynaud, and published in Paris over Arthur Rimbaud's name in *Le Decadent* between 1886 and 1888. The title poem is dated 1871.

LINES

In more veritable doldrums
 than this day's.
the old hands on a schooner
 lowered a kedge
to the tender pulled alongside,
 so the rowers
could bear it out
 almost to the end
of the line, drop anchor,
 then row back
under full sun to the vessel
 lying becalmed.
On board, the ship's crew
 windlassed in
the line, pulling them up
 to the anchor
lying hooked on shoal ground,
 before the sailors
sang out loud, running the line,
 as they raised
the anchor over the yawl boat,
 hour after hour
warping the vessel
 down the long shelf,
raising the anchor
 and then lowering it,
speaking the words,
 bearing the stone.

Jay Meek

Two Poems

OCTOBER 1994

The maple's shuck flies
off, lies
down on my neighbor's lawn like a million
dumplings, thumblings, asleep under amber and
red capes. Which my neighbor with his
rake scratches at. And shouldn't.
Being, like them, like you, on death's
door. I can't revolve. The
leaves stick to my shoes.
Today in your letter:
panic. This word, in your own script,
is the oculist's
sudden machine-burst of air against my
pupils. Which only widen. Won't
blink. Float like dark
discs. From the kitchen I watch black
swallow the last yellow
rounds of the aspen.

LOVE AT 50

The last two times: a
loud, prolonged
grunt when I come. It's the same
sound of sustained
straining
as when our sons' soft
spots shoved through with
seizure. Now the deepest bearing down
pleasure
while this grunt drones
drains the last pearl
parcels of air
from my lungs, tightening my
temples, clamping
like a cap so hot I'm
torched, tonsured. Beneath this
burning, my skull plates part
like elevator doors, like iris exposing her own
pupil: a dark two-way
sluice with all gates yanked, lifted. This
funnel/ font
takes in, gives out
gold.

Margaret Aho

BOOKS IN BRIEF

The Best American Poetry 1995, Richard Howard, editor; David Lehman, series editor (New York: Simon & Schuster/ Touchstone, 1995), 304 pp., \$27.50 hardbound, \$13.00 paper.

Richard Howard has invented some new rules for this eighth volume in the series. He has eliminated from consideration any poet who has been a guest editor or has appeared in three or more earlier volumes. Out with the Ashberys and Ammons. The aim is not an anthology of confirmation "but of surprise, even astonishment." "Energy," Howard declares, "is our immediate stipulation, and the rest, as James's odd hero says – the rest is the madness of art."

Lehman comments on the increase in the number of poems in strict form, and indeed there are many, including three sonnet sequences, a couple of villanelles, one shaped poem, two sestinas, two runs of terza rima, at least four blank verse narratives, including one in twelve-line blank verse stanzas, one of heroic couplets grouped in linked chapters, several elaborate invented stanzas, and a flock of two- to twelve-lined unrhymed stanzas. How I wish I could say that I found here an explosion of new energy in the old forms. I did find some good solid work. Two of the sonnet sequences are strong: Stephen Sandy's "Threads," an exploration of the impact of the poet's memory on his insight into the rag trade apprenticeship of his boyhood; David Wojahn's "Homage to Ryszard Kapuściński," a moving tribute to the career of the Polish journalist who recorded with unblinking eye and heroic compassion the bleak history of this half-century. Alan Shapiro's colloquial blank verse stanzas in "Manufacturing," like Sandy's "Threads," examine boyhood memories of the world of work and help fill the gap left by the ineligible Philip Levine.

Sad to say, too many of the formal poems supply fodder to those who sneer at the "new formalism" and declare the honorable old forms outworn. Jacqueline Osherow's "Late Night Tête-à-Tête with a Moon in Transit" rambles on for eleven pages of terza rima, pages which she confesses, in the commentary allowed each poet in the appendix, became the repository of "every memory, every obsession" as she enjoyed "the delusion that all could be held together by a peculiar paste of terza rima and the moon." Her account of the poem's genesis is ingratiating, but the poem, alas, is tedious. Jay Wright demonstrates in "The Cradle Logic of Autumn" that he can construct an iambic pentameter stanza rhymed ababcdedcde, repeat it using the same rhymes, and then do two more with another set of rhymes. But to what end? Here's the end of the first stanza: the price of each instant is

the river's chalky white insistence as it
 moves past the grey afternoon toward sunset.
 Autumn feels the chill of a late summer lit
 only by goldenrod and a misplaced strand
 of blackberries; deplores all such sleight-of-hand;
 turns sullen, selfish, envious, full of regret.

A different critic might find much to admire here: its ekphrastic disjunctions, its signification asymmetries, the resumptive and transumptive relationship between the *definiens* of the poem and the *definiendum* of the title, its algorithmic rhythms, the cryptic emblemizing of *chalky*. I could laud its enantidromic obliquity. I hope Mr. Wright and his editors will forgive me if I settle on his poem to express my disappointment in not finding the energy and "surprise, even astonishment" I was promised.

I never expect my taste to conform entirely to that of any editor. But I don't expect, in a volume that claims to select the "best," so many poems that are, to my ear, bad or merely dull – sunk by empty or pretentious diction, interminably protracted self-indulgent narratives, or by the poet's unreliable ear. Before I proceed to share some of the triumphs of this collection, let me first attempt to diagnose the problems I am encountering. One is a sort of anomie in which the poet – either in the poem or in the accompanying commentary – reveals a failure of nerve. Only one poem, "Schadenfreud," seemed to me truly mean-spirited, though the poet claims to be satirizing, among other qualities, mean-spiritedness. To her, as to about eight other poets here, I want to say *de te fabula*. For example: "We're headed for empty-headedness" (p. 48); "Little caskets of ventriloquism tell/ our plight, explain our confusion/ and generally identify our loneliness here/ on the surface (p. 73); "does this strike you as shallow" (p. 91); "a waxen// indifference, like hypothermia/ overtook me" (p. 115); "Someone whose bitterness, I want to say,/ Is even more impressive than my own" (p. 137); "Deep in the nightmare of narrative, narrating/ the nightmare, he is the author of this misery/ dispossessed" (p. 208); we "must get past the scene of an old crime/ Before we falter and run out of steam" (p. 98). It is not just the moral fatigue of these passages that wearies me, but the weariness of the language.

In addition to this dissipated mindset, which I am trying to resist reading as a synecdoche of a decaying culture, I find another problem among these "best" poems – less disturbing culturally perhaps, but equally dangerous artistically. In a recent article in *APR*, Albert Cook writes of the influence of the "personal quotidian narrative" of Frank O'Hara. In the hands of a strong poet, this genre can be splendid, as, here, in Donald Finkel's elegant "In the Clearing." But too often I have the impression that a poet launches into an exposition of a memory, a stream of consciousness, most often a journey, some sort of exploration, in the blind faith

that the process of composition will magically produce vision. Of course it's worth the try; the light may break. But when it doesn't, the result may be something like the twelve-page poem in lineated prose that contains such lines as

What's the use?

What purpose do these speculations serve? What
Mild enchantments do these speculations leave?
They're just the murmurs of an age, of middle age,
That help to pass the time that they retrieve
Before subsiding, leaving everything unchanged.

But it's time to stand back and look at the book as a whole. I found several categories of poems that interested me. All contain some excellent work. One, surprisingly, is the sermon, with about ten examples – most employing the homiletic device of the *exemplum*. Among the most convincing of these are Jane Cooper's "The Infusion Room," Robert Hill Long's sympathetically satiric "Refuge," and Nicholas Christopher's powerful "Terminus," which he aptly begins: "Here is a piece of required reading/ at the end of our century/ the end of a millenium that began with the Crusades." (I hope by now my readers will understand that I am urging you to obtain this book, despite its longueurs.)

Another category of poems includes the predictably self-absorbed and the very personal. I include here Molly Peacock's skillfully-crafted and entertaining sequence of poems tackling a few more taboos against the subject of female genitalia – "Have You Ever Faked an Orgasm?" At the other extreme is Grace Schulman's elegant and eloquent "The Present Perfect," on the ironies, the emotional nays and yeas, of a long marriage without children. These, by their art, transcend their self-absorption and enrich us with their contrasting illuminations.

By far the largest category contains poems that range in style from the clever and witty to the jokey and brittle. Even the most brittle can be very amusing. Catherine Bowman's "Mr. X" is a sestina in which all the line ends and many interior words have the X sound of "All my Ex's live in Texas." I suspect her of being the ghost that writes Garrison Keillor's Guy Noir skits. Many of the poems in this volume are jokes – some of them very good jokes. Aaron Fögel's "The Printer's Error" dances through a defense of the three kinds of errors, deftly and deliciously. Kay Ryan's "Outsider Art" is slight, but I wouldn't have missed it. Richard Frost's "For a Brother" is rather a joke, but serious. Heather McHugh is here with her trademark word play in "And What Do You Get," beginning "Excise the er from exercise. Or from/ example, take the ex out: now it's bigger." She's awfully good at this game, but even she acknowledges that it may well be self-parody. Charles North passes self-parody about ten lines into his "Shooting for Line." This is one hundred and forty lines of the genus zeugma, of the the species

syllipsis. Remember syllipsis, where a word (usually a verb or verbal) introduces a pair of objects, one of which is literal, the other metaphorical? North's poem begins: "To break the silence or your newly acquired Ming vase,/ or raise my expectations and the flag over the Brooklyn Navy Yard." One hundred and thirty-eight lines further we arrive, exhausted, at "sweep the minefield clear and all the accumulated dust into the corner."

Some of these witty and ingenious poems are extremely good. I wish William Carpenter's "Girl Writing a Letter" were short enough to quote. In a bravura display of imagination, the poet launches the reader on a wildly civilized ride that ties a bowknot in the space/time continuum. Here, at least, is the energy, the surprise, even the astonishment that the editors promise. *Light* becomes an oxymoron in Bin Ramke's "How Light Is Spent," in which a light treatment of the poet's two blind uncles is darkened by his delicate insertion throughout the poem of key words from Milton's sonnet "When I consider how my light is spent." Ramke admits that he steals "shamelessly from Milton, because there is no shame (see Prometheus) when one steals from gods." Another poem that plays back and forth between the present and the writers of the past is Albert Goldbarth's "A Still Life. Symbolic of Lines," in which the poet struggles to recall his father in language as crisp and eloquent as that of the seventeenth-century writer John Aubrey. Our appreciation of Aubrey increases step by step with our sympathy with the poet's task and our affectionate feeling for his father, for whom the poem becomes a generous elegy.

I'd like to recommend two more fine poems from this collection. One for its delicate imagination, its colloquial sonorities, its dramatic play of the mind: Janet Holmes's "Against the Literal." The other escapes my categories. Geoffrey O'Brien's "The Interior Prisoner" employs our protean language in the service of a liberating imagination. Seventeen short poems purport to be the translation of an unsigned manuscript written at Salamanca around 1902. Here are a couple:

6.

The tongue has made a name for itself,
and seeks to declare independence from the mouth.

7.

A lexicon contains words as a prison contains men.
At most I make the prisoners merry enough
to forget their chains for an hour.
What sentence would free them?

Whether or not this volume merits its title, it does include enough of "the madness of art" to reward the eager reader.

M. K. S.