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Cover: Robert Shetterly, Jr., *Opening*, pen and ink, 1980.

**THE MESSAGE**

Dry September weekday morning,  
time indolence equates to sin,  
I was outside, eyes closed over coffee  
thinking some things I think when  
a grasshopper flew in a certain fury  
arcing off the desiccating asters  
and affixed itself sharply to my upper lip,  
returning startle with a compound stare  
a ceaseless green on green.

Buttoned in its urgent grip  
words came as plain as under  
a falconed pigeon's ring  
or in a half-corked bottle;  
surely the heart of sadness is this knowing:  
each embarks a gulf alone, each with  
his fractured bit of seeing and a need  
but not the tools to tell.

## Five Poems on Etchings by Rembrandt van Rijn

### TWENTY SELF PORTRAITS

The hair seems sometimes  
more detailed than life,  
etched strand by strand.  
Larger than life, that's it –

For a frown, a frowse;  
wild curls for shadow.  
There he is, there again.

He's looking for something new:  
a hat, sword, feather,  
but the nose is always  
B flat in the key of C.

And one thing more, the eyes,  
like faces we've all made  
for mirrors, smile or sneer –

however turned the skull,  
the eyes can't help showing  
how much it costs to see.

**THE RAT POISON PEDDLER (THE RAT CATCHER), 1632**

Here's a peasant with a tub fixed to a tall stick,  
 dead rats hung from it, and more improbably,  
 live ones, one on his shoulder, one atop the tub.  
 He has a tall hat, too. A sword hangs from his side.

His helper, perhaps a dwarf, holds a wire cage,  
 and the turbaned householder reaches out from his door  
 a coin or two. A broken barrel decorates the foreground.  
 The village and trees recede delicately behind.

The shoulder rat (a pet or half-poisoned?)  
 has the only sweet face in this tableau,  
 and from under the wooden arch that caps the doorway –  
 darkness, the smell of onions, damp stone, ashes.

**CHRIST AWAKENING THE APOSTLES  
 ON THE MOUNT OF OLIVES  
 (DRAWING, c. 1648-49)**

Christ's in the center standing  
 in a robe that's left unshaded.  
 The darkness is all for Peter  
 who has been drawn over with sticky lines  
 as if wrapped by a prudent spider.  
 He's tangled in his dreams, can't attend.

The others are also slow to wake.  
 It's jagged where they are.  
 Their open eyes see nothing.  
 Christ says what he says. There's  
 a tree, a garden wall behind him,  
 figures stirring; these lines are drawn in haste.

**DEATH APPEARING TO A WEDDED COUPLE  
FROM AN OPEN GRAVE**

Death's got on his best bones.  
The couple have their backs to us,  
but they are shocked, stunned.

This is the sort of thing  
that's bound to happen  
when on your wedding day  
you say, "Honey, let's you and me  
go check out that open grave."

**A MAN MAKING WATER**

Here's a full length portrait,  
a fat man with a tall hat  
and a basket strapped to his back.

He's got his thing in his left hand,  
and he's making a concentrated whiz.  
Taking account of the vertical format,  
he's making water perilously close  
to his shoe . . . bowlegged, baggy trousers,  
feet turned out, thoughtful, practiced.

A little treasure, this, no bigger  
than a playing card – the diagonal  
from top left basket through the stream  
splashing inches from his toe  
at bottom right charms the eye – no need  
to worry he can't lean that far  
without falling on his back.  
He'd cry, "It's bigger than it looks.  
Art alone has unbalanced me."

NOTES FROM EAGLE ISLAND

1.

The trouble was the trouble  
always faced in paradise – so much

*other*

and, how to enter?

2.

The mailboat captain rows us  
from his anchored ferry to a cusp  
of sand at shore

where you and I and our ballast  
of cartons are hoisted  
overboard.

He shouts at us, into wind,  
pushes out before I hear  
his warning.

So, already it's us  
pitted against the incoming tide –

rushed lugging what we belong to  
off the beach to the door  
of the farmhouse

up through sea-cliffs, hedges  
of sea-rose, purple thistle,  
grass waist-high.

3.

Imagine, instructions.

There's a sheaf on the kitchen table.

Uncovering the well, where the kerosene's shelved,  
a pencilled sketch of countless paths.

How rain rattles from the roof  
down to fill the cellar cistern.

What not to bury... what to bury... what to burn...  
what not to burn.

Didn't it all appear more  
frivolous from the mainland?

Every window but one here's  
hawking its version  
of field-ridge-sea-shoals-sky.

We have come to unmoor ourselves  
from ourselves – spend days stuttering,  
*Beautiful, Beautiful,*

as if each rationed that one word.

4.

Cornered in this vastness, you can  
unpack.

But pressed between books,  
wrapped in the folds  
of towels, sleeves and socks,

are stowaways:  
your every-grief worth brooding over.

5.

I'm forging fellowship wherever I can,  
with the broken door –

its torn screen flaps, upper sash barely hinged,  
knocked clattering with every passage.

On the sill of a window, that midnight-blue creamer  
hand-painted with orange dahlias around the rim

where a hairline crack begins  
running down through to the bottom.

It can't hold on to anything for long.

There is too much to hold, but as if there isn't  
enough, we waste no time, revert

on our very first walk to longing –  
croon to see the island through falling snow,

plotting over obstacles to the next  
possible trip back here.

The book says, awe is always some blend  
of beauty and terror, making sensible

how we invented gods  
for chaperones –

because before you can paste eyes,  
making faces, on everything here  
to look back at you,

it's all sheets draped over shining mirrors.

6.

Our eyes are nomads, but as I pace this beach  
mine are fixed on the few inches surrounding each step,  
homing in on something I'll only know  
when I see it –

like those left homeless after a hurricane  
hunt for any recognizable scrap in the rubble,  
some thing to vouch for who they are.

From that schooner in the distance,  
I could be a knick-knack orphaned on a shelf of sand,  
a stiffjointed doll that blinks.

You could only use the word *peaceful*  
if you weren't looking.

Simply standing still here at the edge,  
your bare feet can be taken  
from out beneath you,

burrowed with each departing wave  
deeper, then deeper.

7.

All afternoon, the festering argument  
between the sea and the shore,  
surf clobbering the cliffs.

How gradually you can begin to believe  
you belong here.

The tide turns its back  
on a bed of glistening stones: islands  
whittled to miniatures.

Concessions are strewn every day  
along a newly drawn margin.

8.

Hiking all day the periphery of the island,  
I can't help but fall into seeing  
for both of us –

threading every brush with the sublime  
into a rosary of details  
to carry back to you,

assembling companionship  
like this on the spot

the way we stake vines or heavy-headed  
blossoms in the garden  
to keep them from snapping at the stem  
under the weight of what alone  
is unbearable.

This is why Adam and undoubtedly  
Eve began to name things. Not to conquer –  
but to bear what paradise suggested to each  
in the other's absence.

So they could tell each other.

9.

Monks head. Ink berry.  
I am trying to see only one thing at a time –  
the preponderance of that single image  
throughout the woods: one tall pine  
fallen into the arms of another.

10.

Seams open in the sky and the sun puts down  
rays around us like tent poles.

I say, there must be a name for this.  
You say, *godlight*.

The clouds are blues unfurling blues  
on paler blues – and

this is how it might look,  
the deepening of a trail of thought.

Blues unfurling blues on paler blues  
translucent as the powder of moths' wings.

11.

From a dirt road cutting  
through a field  
at the heart of the island,  
I think I've discovered  
one renegade Chinese poppy  
full-open in a meadow  
of summer grasses.

Then, its petals disperse –  
flying up and off  
into a hundred specks  
of tangerine.

The monarchs are migrating,  
convening here to feed  
on the whitened pedestals  
of blossoming valerian.  
Our eyes are known for this.  
For making mistakes.

12.

The only reason for my ungainly plunge  
was –

you made it look possible,  
your body shouting up for me

to imagine past the cold  
of the cove  
to weightlessness.

13.

Moon as scimitar. The hour of last light.  
I scavenge for the revelation  
lurking in every form.

The darkening woods calls you to declare  
what you believe in. I took the wrong trail  
at the crossroad.

My body is torn between the fear of being  
lost, and the work of finding my way home –  
between the impulse to run and the impulse to kneel.

14.

A ship with coal-gray sails  
inches into view across that tightrope,  
the horizon.

You say, *Let it stand  
for the grace of darkness.*

I say, *The sky is falling.*

As the rips in the ozone widen –  
what will become of what we know  
as light? As color?

It's the somber woman in that fresco  
dressed in black  
critics have argued over  
for centuries. Who is she?

I say, *She knows what's coming.*

You say, *That ship's become the vanishing point.*

15.

We find what is most urgent to find  
in the dream

where you are on your knees  
on the beach somewhere behind me

holding up wedges of tumbled sea-glass  
as if they were the chipped  
points of stars,

worshipping only the light  
that passes through them

as I work my way out  
to the head of the bluff carrying  
nothing but that question –

*Who says we're entitled  
to refuge?*

Surf smacks the stone-face  
shattering a clear bottle  
into a flume of many-colored pieces.

And  
every loss is not betrayal.

That's when I let go of the invisible  
guard rail, the one I've been  
gripped to all my life,

edging back with both hands  
free to tell you.

16.

We are children of these accidental, but  
nevertheless, communions.

The loon wakes me. Sound of one voice  
and another that answers,  
tremolo saturating the August air  
for miles.

I haul myself up, wooden bucket full  
from the well.

On neighboring islands, others  
are drawing themselves  
half-willingly from sleep

to hear the wailing of birds, a calling  
we have no choice but to share in the night,

blackened as the glass chimney  
on the kerosene lamp, the wick  
gone too long untrimmed.

17.

Our friend's child said, *We are all underwater  
and the angels are fishing for us.*

And what are they using for bait?

He said, *Birds.*

18.

In that small cradle of a boat  
we wait scanning the surface in silence,  
as if keeping some appointment we once made.

We are hungry for something larger  
than the sighting of seals inside  
the sighting of seals.

That first head emerges – crowning  
dark clump of clay still dripping wet  
from the hands of the maker.

Then, the language of eyes locked to eyes.  
Our first language.

And all of us, fingerprints.

19.

All week, that unsettling odor we can't locate  
but something's rotten in paradise.

Where the pans are stored in the kitchen pantry  
we find what's left of a dead vole  
under the lid of the lobster pot  
and look at each other – ungenerously.

That's why the body doesn't just get tossed,  
together we feel obliged  
to make the time for ceremony.

We bury it in the woods behind the house  
on top of a mound, the way Bedouins  
interred their dead, to be closer to heaven.

20.

Sprawled at dawn in the adirondack chair beside  
the house, I'm waiting for the sun to lift up  
at the opposite side of this island, casting a strip  
of first light on a shoal out in the bay  
before making the ever-slow crossing toward us –  
sweeping tide, with no intention of stopping  
at the tideline – up the beach, ledges,  
reaching my cold bare outstretched feet.

When my ankles are taken, so are the stones  
we arranged yesterday in a ring on the grass.

A crow paddles air overhead as light's cupped  
to kneecaps.

When the heat settles above my thighs in the pool  
of my lap, it makes a mirror out of the window  
to the room where you're still sleeping.

Light splashed, a shawl drawn across bare shoulders,  
and the wings of an opened notebook  
on the weathered table.

I once knew someone who would say, *So –  
what's the point? So what?*  
So, I'm always braced for this question.

The point is – grace is indiscriminate. Or,  
sensual pleasure has its own brand of intelligence.

The point is, anticipation. Or, light is shed  
gratuitously on the wing, the body, the chair.

When my hips were taken, two cormorants flew  
in tandem with each other and their shadows.

The point is – I made nothing more of it.

Or how everything can be moving unself-consciously  
through light, while you sit outside that rim  
in the chilled observing shadow.

The point is bees dive into the opened mouths  
of roses, noisy as infants to the nipple

and the moon's a bleached sand dollar  
still swaddled in ample blue.

Contingencies.

The point is, light gathers up the dispossessed  
and soon I have to move or this heat will be  
too much for me.

Or, well, what is it *you* worship?

The point is a stony ledge with an ever-changing  
face.

21.

Once a day the herring gull rises in a chute of air  
above these ledges and drops its sea urchin  
over and over again. Every day, to get to the meat,  
it shatters Aristotle's lantern.

22.

No one would believe how we went on  
praying for that fog, that emblem of soured  
vacations on the summer coast of Maine.

We needed a reprieve from our  
record-breaking stretch of perfect weather,  
the daily demands that we relate or not  
to every surface and its reflection  
and its shadow.

It wasn't only the chill it would bring,  
justifying a fire in the wood stove.

I knew we shouldn't want this  
but we did

– all foreground, a world  
where everything out of reach  
had to be taken on faith  
still existed.

Raking clams on the mud flats of low tide,  
I turn as if hearing the fog bank approach.

It rolls in thick across the Penobscot,  
baptising blindly, even more even-handedly  
than light.

23.

Slack-water. The sea performing its impersonation  
of quiet. Unruffled acres turning the color  
of mulled red wine.

All day the light hangs as if evenly dissolved  
in a solution of air, then falls at dusk  
from the sky out of its mysterious suspension.

We watch the sun shrink toward the horizon,  
rayed nimbus hovering just above the head of a saint.

It floats for an indisputably long time in a nest  
of spruce on the facing island, opaque  
and tiny as a porch light. Then appears to disappear.

We turn away toward what one of us absent-mindedly  
refers to as *home*. We say, *It's all over*.

But the sun rises again for seconds, thrown up  
for an encore, hesitant as anyone who has trouble  
saying goodbyes.

24.

The book says, *The self is no mystery,  
the mystery is that there is  
something for us to stand on.*

The stone embedded  
in the dirt path  
shifts beneath my foot.

From the bluff at the end of this road,  
the mainland's a decoy  
in the distance we'd fallen for.

25.

Wanting to surprise you the way the sun did,  
throw doubt on what we call endings,

I left you packing alone in the house  
knowing you'd forgive me later,

and snuck out down the path to the lighthouse  
where I found what I was looking for,  
but also the unexpected – those raspberries

we thought wouldn't ripen until after we'd left,  
fat and dropping almost uncoaxed.

I stuffed my mouth with that sweet-tart fruit,  
and my jacket pockets with what

I'd come for – handfuls of sea-rose petals  
that gave themselves up as easily.

On the way back, I met the snake in the road  
slithering through its own unmoving curves  
off into the brush.

This is why I was late and you were already  
loading the boat when I got there, too busy sighing  
about leaving to mention it.

26.

Half-way out that bay to the mainland, I was too busy  
too, brimming with that uncomplicated affection

it's only possible to feel saying goodbye  
to a place. Busy forgetting, until I caught

my hands stained from fruit the color of roses,  
and pulled them out, squandering

roses into wind toward the island dwindling  
behind us. So I surprised myself too –

petals swirling and landing on the surface water,  
swooping at the boat like gulls trailing fish trawls,

petals blown with spray back up at us, planting  
badges on our sleeves and pasting

kisses to that look of disbelief on your face  
that says both, *How do we come by such pain,*

and *How do we come by such pleasure?* It was a kind of toast,  
wasn't it – grace spoken at the end of one meal

and the beginning of what we hope might be another?  
We're like the shipwrecked in that story, who wait

and wait for the message that doesn't come,  
then comes, from a great blue heron

who could mean anything calling down to them,  
*Hold fast. Hold fast. There's more.*

L. R. Berger



## PHALLOID

In Latin it's *Phallus impudens*,  
in Anglo Saxon, stinkhorn:  
and what did Cotton Mather say  
spying the fleshy white egg  
in the woods, the penis emerging,  
shaft, glans, meatus –  
the head green and sticky  
and stinking of death,  
coated with spores  
the flies carry off – and the mushroom  
stripped white, shrivels.

It is not – we know it's not –  
a message from hell,  
that faint gleam in the fallen leaves:  
nature recycling form  
and function – something we assumed  
was human, and private,  
aroused in the dirt.

Martha Carlson-Bradley

## HEAT WAVE IN CONCORD

“Dancing and laughing along the beach  
came the twenty-ninth bather...”

## I

Farmers working the fields quit early,  
as much for ox or horse as for men –  
one old man had already died; exhausted  
by heat, wrung out, wrinkled  
like dried fruit.

Their women, buttoned, laced, strapped  
under petticoats, skirts, sleeves,  
sit and work, work and sit  
in the dim, dead heat  
of parlor, kitchen, and shed.

But one, an exceptional one, in  
a windowless storage room, stands,  
naked and white in a wash tub's cold ring.  
Her cast off clothes spilled  
like dried discarded flowers.

The tinned dipper lifts water, still cool  
from the well, again and again. The water  
passing over her body like  
unseen fingers and back  
to the tub again.

Perhaps one of them also dreams of the river,  
of young men who float there,  
pale bellies tempting the sun.

## II

From houses on opposite sides  
of the elm-roofed main street Henry  
and Ellery, leaving dishes and scraps  
of cold dinner behind,  
meet, retreat to the river.

A man stands in a barn door, his shirt  
stained with sweat, hat hanging slack  
in his hand. A woman in the shed's  
dark cave churns the morning's milk  
the heat would soon sour.

They shake their heads. What beside envy  
do they feel as these renegades slip away?  
Do they imagine how it feels to peel  
close, sweaty clothes away,  
let the waters have their play?

At the river Henry explains that banks have  
a gender, this one, for example, being  
convex, alluvial, gradual, and  
feminine; the opposite, concave,  
undercut, and masculine.

Ellery makes some comments that  
Henry's Journal will never repeat.  
They strip and wade in.

## III

Soon, by the opposite, masculine, shore, up  
to their chins, they face the current.  
The heat of the day is carried  
down, away. They wade upstream,  
wearing their hats against the sun.

They hold their bundled clothing high.  
From deep holes to shallows  
the water falls, rises again.  
Chest, ankle, knee, belly,  
chest, and down again.

Rounding a bend they see the plank bridge.  
Boys, their work done, race and strip  
and plunge. Boys breaching  
and splashing; marble boys riding  
imaginary dolphins.

On the bank one boy sits, lifting a foot  
to examine some bruise, fixed  
in an instant as an engraving in  
an antiquities book; but subtly  
colored, sunburned, bare.

The two men put on shirts now, feeling the sting  
of the sun. Bridge rails bleed pitch,  
the planks shrink.

## IV

The drying tails of their shirts stick  
to their buttocks and thighs. Perhaps  
because of the shirts they feel undressed,  
retreat to the water. The water, like  
unseen fingers, passes over them.

They wade on into a shaded, shallower reach  
of late afternoon, hear the clang  
of a distant bell. Some farmer's wife  
signaling an early supper. They climb out  
on the feminine side.

They wait for the air to dry them. How long  
this single mile of fluvial walk  
has seemed, passing from present  
to pastoral to classical,  
back to the present again.

They dress, turn toward the world of women  
where mother, sister, or wife waits. The day  
slides toward evening and the moon.

Robert M. Chute

NB: Thoreau records his "fluvial walks" in the Journal for 1852. He read Whitman's *Leaves Of Grass*, including, we assume, the song of the "29th bather" in 1856. His comment: "As for the sensuality in Whitman's 'Leaves of Grass,' I do not so much wish it was not written, as that men and women were so pure that they could read it without harm."

## six poems

## titled

for an eternal moment i was so still  
 that i almost saw the word *still*  
 standing there still  
 with its motionless l-like legs  
 and slightly waving s of tail

for an eternal moment it gazed into my soul  
 quizzically, with a face long and narrow  
 until i gave up and galloped away –  
 being, of course  
 outstared by a beautiful black horse

## neigh

nay, what I've seen and run away from  
 is not a horse ordinary and real  
 but water ink brushes  
 subtle and skinny, hazy and hairy  
 that the mane-master draws  
 upon a body of airs, with untroubled zeal

remember? the final stroke  
 is its sweeping tail  
 where the drying brush empties its ink  
 into numerous whiteness of ray  
 and moves on into the wind  
 the backward neigh

( )

(my siesta is nothing but a dream  
of snow-white snakes  
swimming in bamboo shadows, cool, green

my dream is nothing but a poem  
about the female lines of snow snakes  
weaving through words, of bamboo leaves clean

*my poem*: nothing but a nap  
that floats on wavy dreams  
on watery faces, kisses, lakes  
that turns the long afternoons  
into a single snow night, murmuring  
bamboo snakes, bamboo snakes, *bamboo snakes*)

**fantasy, in past tense**

you came, as sudden  
as i expected  
and began to undress  
so skilfully that all your shyness  
was covered by your naked skin

o those revealed and revealing  
lines! o those hidden  
rhymes  
i watched, with my fingertips  
touching nothing  
but your breath  
and, deep inside me, something  
mysterious was aroused:  
the purest, tenderest feeling  
of impotence

it's now again, always so

it's now again, always so  
i feel dizzy and happy, like her face  
smiling on the water  
among the lotus' nods  
hear the sound? a feather  
is striking a dream  
*open watermelon, open watermelon*  
*sweet potatoes want to sleep*  
*why don't you metamorphose?*  
it's now again, always so

my epitaph, in winter, a draft

you are reading the testimony  
of a past existentialist  
now thoroughly convinced  
believe me, there is nothin  
down here, only he  
( the rest  
is covered wit  
snov

Xiang He

## BOOKS IN BRIEF

**The Poetics of Time: Part I** (continued)

In the last issue, I examined the elegiac mode (and by extension the prophetic) in contemporary poetry. Since then I've received one more book that asks to be included in that discussion: W. S. Merwin's *The Vixen* (N. Y.: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996, 76 pp., \$21. cloth, 0-679-44477-7). The tone of the whole volume is quietly elegiac – a valedictory to the land, the culture, and some individuals in that region of southwest France where the poet lived for a period of years: the region celebrated in his beautiful book of essays, *The Lost Upland*. Time and space are inseparable in this tightly integrated volume. The spaces on the page are blocks of long-lined, cadenced (almost incantatory), unpunctuated verse, limpid in language, fluid in movement, sparse in poetic devices, but rich in sensuous observation. In some ways Time is his subject, as much as the French countryside. Merwin walks there in a consciousness of the years and the ages before him, and he is himself moving, always moving through time. His “Commemoratives” begins with a recollection of Armistice Day, “the day when the guns fell silent one time/ on old calendars before I was born” and ends in geologic time:

in that chill air  
of November with its taste of bronze I took the winding  
road up the mountain until it hissed in the chestnut forest  
where once the hunters had followed the edge of the ice.

“Other Time” imagines the ancient dwellers in the land; “The Time Before” actually conjures them up, walking over the bare stone/ carrying their shoes because it was going to be a long way.” Merwin's elegy encompasses the workmanship of past generations – the “art no longer practiced” – in harmony with the land.

The poet's own position in time is at the intersection of past and present – very specific about the time of day, the exact point in the cycle of the seasons – an intersection that is always moving, even when it seems most static. There are many poems that absorb a

moment of time into their words as if to hold on to it forever. But the very process of composition moves past the moment, as a lovely poem, "Passing," exemplifies. In "Forgotten Streams"

not far from here an unknown  
 mason dug up a sword five hundred years old  
 the only thing that is certain about it now  
 is that in the present it is devoured with rust  
 something keeps going on without looking back

and in another poem we get the whiff of skunk: "that smell of abiding/ and not staying." "Abiding and not staying" applies as well to the poet himself.

Merwin's eye occasionally catches a glimpse of the future, as in the sheep farmer Baille who has "bulldozed the upland/ pastures and shepherds' huts into piles of rubble" and will "demolish/ the ancient walls of the lane and level it wide/ so the trucks can go all the way down to where the lambs/ with perhaps two weeks to live are waiting for him at the wire." There is an occasional image of what in nature persists. In "Ill Wind" an account of a devastating storm ends:

those who have watched over the lives of things have known it  
 wherever they were and reminded themselves that always  
 it went as it came and the fragile green survived it.

There are not many *alwayeses* in these poems. Even cosmic time appears in the form of "the light of finished stars." Closer to the bone is subjective time. "The Speed of Light" begins: "So gradual in those summers was the going/ of the age it seemed that the long days setting out/ when the stars faded over the mountains were not/ leaving us," and ends chillingly:

it was only as the afternoon lengthened on its  
 dial and the shadows reached out farther and farther  
 from everything that we began to listen for what  
 might be escaping us and we heard high voices ringing  
 the village at sundown calling their animals home  
 and then the bats after dark and the silence on its road.

Whatever becomes of the ancient land and culture of Merwin's French fields and forests, these beautiful elegiac poems cheat time to the extent that any poet can – by preserving his loving consciousness of them.

## The Poetics of Time, Part II

### It's about Time: Time Past and Passing

In this second inquiry into the handling of time in contemporary poetry I aim to explore the range of ways in which today's poets deal with this formidable subject. I'll start with the simplest and most ancient of modes and proceed to temporal constructs of increasing complexity.

One of the most ancient of all poetic functions is the imaginative recreation of history – usually in episodes of the history of the tribe. Deborah Burnham's *Anna and the Steel Mill* (Lubbock, Texas: Texas Tech University Press, 1995, 80 pp., \$16.95 cloth, 0-89672-345-3) has two sections that reconstruct immigrant lives – the title section bringing an Italian woman to industrial Ohio in 1950; another, "West to Ohio," narrating briefly some nineteenth-century immigrant experiences. These poems are interesting when they are simple straight narrative: Ebenezer Merry, who each night greased his only boots "with fat from the last animal the forest/ gave him, and woke once to find the boots chewed to the soles/ by a wolf or fox who never let a meal escape. By autumn/ he could thresh chestnuts from their burrs with his bare feet." They are more than interesting when Burnham enters the imagination of her subject, as where Anna, imagining Ohio from her native Italy, considers that the gulls and terns "would laugh, but not, at least, in English." Angela Ball's *Quartet* (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Mellon University Press, 1995, 62 pp., \$19.95 cloth, \$11.95 paper, 0-88748-189-2) creates first-person poems for four women: Sylvia Beach, Nora Joyce, Nancy Cunard, and Jean Rhys. She provides a biographical sketch and a photograph to introduce each chain of open-form poems, each chock-full of detail. These are most successful when they achieve a unique voice for the speaker – as in Nora Barnacle Joyce's verses, rich with

metaphor and traditional sayings. Ellen Bryant Voigt's *Kyrie* (New York: Norton, 1995, 80 pp., 17.95), which I have not seen, is said to be a strong series of linked poems on the great influenza epidemic of 1918-19, "with overtones for our own time of plague." I am surprised to find so few contemporary poems absorbed with the experience of history, beyond the elegiac. From Homer to Longfellow, such poems served a serious social function, especially as they had overtones for their own time.

### Time Present

Far and away the majority of poems in the review copies I receive – and in the submissions to this magazine as well – exist to translate the immediate experience of the poet into living language. Such poems seek to put "time out of mind" – to pin the butterfly present to the page. When successful, this process enables the poet both to gain insight into his or her own life and to protect it against the obliteration of time. In these poems time is generally quite shallow, though the insight may be profound. Most cover only the time of an occasion. At most they extend back through the ego-time of the poet's life. An engaging instance is Andrew Hudgins's *The Glass Hammer: A Southern Childhood* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1994, 96 pp., \$18.95 cloth, 0-395-70011-6). Hudgins recalls with embarrassed nostalgia his growing up in an environment choked with racism, death, militarism, fundamentalism, Oedipal trials, and the ambivalences of sexual awakening. His voice in these sixty-five sharp anecdotal poems is both comic and warmly understanding.

Another unputdownable instance of the narrative in ego-time is Sharon Olds' *The Wellspring* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996, 94 pp., \$13. paper, 0-679-76560-3). This psycho-sexual autobiography presses back beyond the ego to the ovum waiting in the mother's body and in the "curved chamber of the balls." Part I is a series of memories (often "dirty memories") of childhood – grimly candid. In "Christian Child" Olds recounts her writhing through the annual three-hour film on the crucifixion and then receiving "the chocolate rabbit for the end of Lent."

I would start with the ears, solid, something to  
pierce with my canines and grind my molars  
against, and then come to the hollow body, one  
bite and it exploded.

Subsequent sections contain similarly explicit and unsentimental accounts – of emerging and flowering sexuality, of motherhood, and a final series beginning with the death of her father – itself the subject of another whole volume, *The Father* (Knopf, 1992). These poems, every one wickedly honest, finely honed, explosive with energy, exemplify the best of this quintessentially contemporary genre. The one life they portray is unique; Olds does not presume to speak for others. But in the self-absorption, the ruthless candor, the command of language capable of embodying a passionate humanity, she achieves the ideal to which many of her fellow poets aspire. In the last five poems she seeks to express an almost mystical sexuality, in lines that use metaphor to explode the limits of language. These are not, for me, the most effective poems in the book, but for others they may flame out and inspire.

Even more distinctively contemporary in their handling of time are those sons and daughters of Gertrude Stein who embrace her concept of the “continuous present” (at this point, dear readers, please reread her “Composition as Explanation”; you’ll be glad you did). They would, I’m sure, agree with her statement in *A Novel of Thank You* that “today is most of the time.” In some odd way this poetry moves in analogy to music. The last sung line of Jonathan Larson’s rock opera “Rust” is “No day but today.” Elliott Carter has explained that “one wants to catch the lived present and the presence of the present” (*New Yorker*, 30 October 1995).

Among the artists of the continuous present are some of the canonical masters of contemporary poetry. Consider Galway Kinnell in *Imperfect Thirst* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1994, 84 pp., \$19.95 cloth, 0-395-71089-8). “Rapture” begins: “I can feel she has got out of bed.” A little later: “The hypnopompic play passes, and I open my eyes,/ and there she is, next to the bed.” Like a seventeenth-century French play, the poem creates the illusion that it is happening in

real time. Kinnell seems to gather energy with his years; this volume is full of wonderful funny, sexy, thoughtful poems. One of my favorites is "The Music of Poetry" which begins its account of a moment in the poet's public lecture:

And now – after putting forward a "unified theory":  
 that the music resulting from any of the methods  
 of organizing English into rhythmic surges  
 can sound like the music resulting from any other,  
 being the music not of a method but of the language;  
 and after proposing that free verse is a variant  
 of formal verse, using unpredictably the acoustic  
 repetitions which formal verse employs regularly;  
 and after playing recordings of the gopher frog's  
 long-lined warble sounding like glottal stops  
 in an empty stomach, and the notes the hermit thrush  
 pipes one after the other, then twangles together . . .

You'll have to get the book to enjoy the cascade of delicious images that interrupts the lecture-language at this point. But I'll skip ahead and reenter this forty-one-line, one-sentence, blank-verse poem, with recordings of

Neruda of Chile, Yeats, Thomas, Rukeyser,  
 to let the audience hear that our poems  
 are of the same order as those of the other animals  
 and are composed, like theirs, when we find ourselves  
 synchronized with the rhythms of the earth . . . .

Finally we arrive at this delectable consciousness of space/time:

. . . here in St. Paul, Minnesota, where I lean  
 at a podium trying to draw my talk to a close,  
 or a time zone away on Bleeker Street in New York,  
 where only minutes ago my beloved may have  
 put down her book and drawn up her eiderdown  
 around herself and turned out the light –  
 now, causing me to garble a few words  
 and tangle my syntax, I imagine I may hear  
 her say my name into the slow waves  
 of the night and, faintly, being alone, sing.

Robert Creeley is another poet whose poems, even more often than Kinnell's, move through real time. Here's a sample from his latest, *Echoes* (New York: New Directions, 1994, 116 pp., \$17.95 cloth, 0-8112-1263-7). It's "Waldoboro Eve."

Trees haze in the fog coming in,  
late afternoon sun still catches the stones.

Dog's waiting to be fed by the empty sink,  
I hear the people shift in their rooms.

That's all finally there is to think.  
Now comes night with the moon and the stars.

And one more sample, to illustrate this poet's technical virtuosity and the range of his subject and tone, as well as the irony implicit in his handling of time present: here's "Figure of Fun":

Blue dressed aged blond  
person with pin left  
lapel hair bulged to  
triangular contained wide  
blue grey eyed now  
authority prime minister  
of aged realm this  
hallowed hollowed ground  
lapped round with salted water  
under which a tunnel runs  
to far off France and history  
once comfortably avoided.

A significant difference between a poet like Creeley and some others writing in the present is that a Creeley poem – though perhaps at first glance baffling – is on examination linear and tightly coherent. Those of us reared on the old New Criticism are blissfully at home here. Some others, closer to Stein, are more challenging. Their aim (going back perhaps beyond Stein to Sterne) is to reproduce on the page as closely as possible the seemingly erratic continuous present of the mercurial mind. It is as though the subject of the poem is the movement of the mind: a verbal enactment of the process. It helps to approach some of the most honored of

contemporary poets with this in mind. "I write to find out what I'm thinking," says Ashbery, and many poets today would say the same. In John Ashbery's *And the Stars Were Shining* (New York: Farrer Straus Giroux, 1994, 100 pp., \$18. cloth, 0-374-10500-6) we find poems like "Pleasure Boats" (complete):

Wash it again  
and yet again.  
The equation drifts.

Wallowing in penguins,  
she was wallowing in penguins.

With fiendish cleverness  
the foreground closes in.

The four-leaf clover loses.

Consider also James Tate, whose entertaining latest volume is *Worshipful Company of Fletchers* (New York: Ecco Press, 1994, 84 pp., \$20. cloth, 0-88001-380-x). Here's the beginning of "Head of a White Woman Winking":

She has one good bumblebee  
which she leads about town  
on a leash of clover.  
It's as big as a Saint Bernard  
but also extremely fragile.  
People want to pet its long, shaggy coat.  
These would be mostly whirling dervishes  
out shopping for accessories . . .

These slight examples hardly do justice to the work of two of our most popular poets. They do represent how their tense and tension reflect an interior and surreal present.

Out on the frontier of experiment in continuous-present time is Leslie Scalapino, whose *The Front Matter, Dead Souls* (Hanover, New Hampshire: Wesleyan University Press/University Press of New England, 1996, 96 pp., \$22.50 cloth, \$10.95 paper, 0-8195-5290-9 and 0-8194-6295-5) eliminates the distinctions among journalism, fiction and poetry. She describes the work as "a serial novel for publication

in the newspaper,” though no newspaper has seized on the opportunity to present it. Scalapino’s work is all out on the surface: not intending to reflect the processes of the mind. The vivid if chaotic images of Los Angeles constitute a virtual reality requiring only the technology of the printed page and the openness of a reader to participate in the “continual series of actions.” A sample:

Writing is only to be public.

Having deities at all mirrors their government.

The ghouls standing in a crowd crying for infants to be born, their infants are free whether they’re born or don’t emerge there.

Dead Souls having been impregnated by the president is lying incubating on the lily pond when his motorcade goes by again.

Women who work as a subject is seeing them as subjects.

We can’t keep up with being reassembled.

Flies fly near her who’s floating and carp rise gently from the water catching them.

The president’s down on his knees in a car with the head of Exxon.

Scalapino’s writing is not altogether as incoherent as this sample might suggest. There is a woven fabric of recurring images (such as hyenas), characters (Dead Souls, sumo wrestlers, political figures), LA local color, and also of tones of voice (such as satire). And there is a consistency of tense: it is entirely on the stage of the reader’s consciousness in the continuing present.

Where Scalapino claims not to represent the interior life, Jorie Graham is dedicated to expressing the movement of the mind meticulously and musically. Graham has two books out: *The Dream of the Unified Field: Selected Poems 1974-1994* (New York: Ecco Press, 1995, 200 pp., \$23. cloth, 0-88001-438-5) and *Materialism* (Ecco, 1993, 146 pp., \$22. cloth, 0-88001-342-7). While for me Scalapino’s work does not resonate beyond its glittery surface, Graham’s work, in contrast (though perhaps too intellectual for some tastes – it is certainly demanding) richly rewards my time and attention. She is skillful in the use of time in the dramatic present; here is a stanza from “Relativity: A Quartet”: “She’s shivering – ”

asleep and shivering. Wouldn't you cover her  
 with the man-sized coat bunched up beside her,  
 just take it gently – (like this) – holding my breath  
 and pull it over her – (like this) – (as if to hide her) –  
 but she will waken suddenly  
 and think I'm stealing it  
 and scream  
 and will not listen where I'm trying to  
 explain.  
 She hits my face.  
 Making my right eye smart.  
 It's like a dream but it's not a dream.

Although much of Graham's work is, like this, in the present, with the language enacting the exploration the reader is invited to share, the subject of the poems seems to me not only the conflicted consciousness of the poet herself but equally the object of her contemplation. And time in these poems is not only ego-time or continuous present (though she handles that brilliantly in poems like "In the Hotel: (3:17 a.m.)". The past speaks forcefully throughout the book in passages "adapted" from Bacon, Wittgenstein, Dante, Benjamin, Brecht, Whitman, and others. And in her "Concerning the Right to Life" Graham flips between concrete and abstract (rose and choice), immanent and distant, immaterial and material, present and past. We join the poet in the immediate moment ("The clinic's layers of glass door glide open. Tiny hiss."), but the moment is not simple:

My fate

crossed out along my silly white extended arm – five  
 fingers flared  
 to somehow prolong desire  
 out past the sticky glove of  
 matter –

at which point she remembers "those locked in the cattlecars" and shortly thereafter prays that "these words have materiality." In a present-tense narrative of the watch over a fevered child, with the passionate desire for the storm to pass: "we will" (not *shall*), she writes,

fore-

see

tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow's  
 weather – I read the label on the medicine.  
 How many hours have passed (I count again) –  
 It seems the shadows of your room  
 ring round – *there is no choice* – and yet your yellow  
 lion winks . . .

How many dimensions of time explode in these few lines! How many more in the five sections of this poem – each image, each outcry, each memory, each perception, an overlay on the source situation: the protest at the abortion clinic. Without doctrine or dogma, this poem dramatises a keen mind and a compassionate heart exploring the temporal and moral complexities of the present, perceived always against the insoluble and indissoluble ambiguities of history and religion. Graham is indeed a poet of Keats's "negative capability" – "capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." Rereading the exquisite lyric, "The Surface," that closes the book, I think how purely beautiful her poems are. Yet I'm not ready to go all the way with Keats, who – in the same passage – claims that "with the great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration." Nothing "obliterates all consideration" for Graham, any more than it did for Shelley; in both, beauty inheres in the consideration.

### Contra-time

From time, as we say, immemorial, poets have labored to suspend, to slow, to reverse time's inexorable progression, and much of the poignancy of the poetry of the past has been in the revelation that time is not, in fact, exorable. "*O lente lente currite noctis equi*" cries Marlowe's Faustus, but the horses of the night gallop on. I was surprised to find among the books at hand for review so few poets regretting or resenting the wages of time. Of course a consciousness of mortality, an awareness that "the grave's a fine and private place," motivates much of elegiac poetry. But in today's poetry I find more

of an absorption in the living moment or at most a resigned acceptance of the processes of the universe. Consider the the conspicuous paucity of historical poetry, not to mention the rarity of poems with Eliot's nostalgia for a golden age. William Bronk's *Selected Poems*, selected by Henry Weinfield (New York: New Directions, 1995, 96 pp., \$8.95 paper, 0-8112-1314-5) perhaps comes closest to a wrestling with time's darker side. Some of Bronk's lyrics are obsessed with time. An early poem, "The Arts and Death" (1956) says:

Death dominates my mind. I  
do not stop thinking how time will stop,  
how time has stopped, does stop. Those dead –  
their done time. Time does us in.

On the other side of the coin, "We Want the Mark of Time," after protesting how we are constantly reenacting the anguishes and ecstasies of those who have gone before, Bronk sighs that "The present is very long and has been long," and finishes:

Oh, it is with desire we read of suns  
that some day burn themselves to darkness. At night  
we search the sky for such a sign: that there  
should be time, an ending. We want the mark of time.

Later poems record the futile longing, through myth, to transcend mortality ("The Sense of Passage"), and in a late gnomic poem, "Forget It," he packs it all into a crystal:

Don't remember; all this will go away:  
the good, the bad, will go. We'll go away.  
And something already is that still will be.

### "The secret to stopping time"

This line from Arthur Sze's *Archipelago* (Port Townsend, Washington: Copper Canyon Press, 1995, \$12. paper, 1-55659-100-4) suggests that this poet conceives time differently from the rest of the poets I've been discussing. Since the New England

transcendentalists, there has been a strong c(h)ord of eastern mysticism in American poetry, strengthened in the past decades by the influence of Zen Buddhism through such poets as Gary Snyder. This is unlike western mysticism, with its Platonic dualism of mind and body. Only in a poet like Blake, where the Prolific and the Devouring are equal portions of existence and the doors of perception open into the infinite, do we find anything analogous. The life of the senses is gorgeously rich in Sze's poems, and time appears to be like another sense, along with "the grilled shrimp in olive oil," the "bamboo slivers under the fingernails," "the yellow pupils of a saw-whet owl," the "searing headache" from roach powder, the "Anasazi/ yucca fiber and turkey-feather basket." Only in Jorie Graham's poems do I find anything like this layering of consciousness. Superficially incongruous juxtapositions yield visionary insight:

You have to reject ideas of disjunction  
and collage, reject advice, praise.

The sensuous concrete, the dream world, the cosmic, all open simultaneously into each other. Questions and colons are the distinctive punctuation here. "The world will continue/ as long as two aborigines/ clack boomerangs and chant?" And later in this section from "Oolong":

She has a dream that resembles a geode;  
if we could open it we might  
recover the hue of the first world. . . .

In the dark, the precession  
and nutation of an emotion is a star:  
Sirius, Arcturus, Capella, Procyon, Aldebaran:  
shadows of mosquitoes are moving  
along a rice paper screen.

It's worth looking up *precession* and *nutaton* if you don't know them. You might go back and read what Hopkins meant by *inscape*. Think about how many things *vision* means. "Footprints under water in a rice paddy/ and on the water's surface, clouds." Reading these poems slowly one learns how to read them, and one learns furthermore something of how to read the world – its fluid layerings of consciousness, space, and time.

M. K. S.