

THE BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL
Spring, 1999, Vol. 49 N°3

Richard Foerster

Petit Mal	6
Insects at Night	7
Fog	8
Church Burning	9

Mairéad Byrne

Birds	10
The Pools	12

Herman Asarnow

Year 48—3:00 A. M.	16
Reconciliation	18

Mari L'Esperance

Trio	19
------	----

Ann Splers

Skin	20
Sandhill Cranes	22

Lola Haskins

Six Ways	23
----------	----

Robert J. Clawson

The Secret History of Rock'n'Roll	24
-----------------------------------	----

Molly Tenenbaum

Bungling the Trees	26
She Fills the Day with a Thousand Tiny Things	27

Margaret Aho

Luci fer-	28
With what	29
On a green slope: a family	30
An aging heart holds up its	31
Handel: all day the diaphanous, the elaborate	32
Can you feel, in this rain,	33

Glori Simmons

The Bookbinder—Mary Louise Reynolds, 1891-1950	34
--	----

→

BOOKS IN BRIEF**Marlon K. Stocking**

Mary Karr, <i>Viper Rum</i>	42
B. H. Fairchild, <i>The Art of the Lathe</i>	42
Martín Espada, <i>City of Coughing and Dead Radiators</i>	43
James Tate, <i>Shroud of the Gnome</i>	43
Edward Field, <i>A Frieze for a Temple of Love</i>	44
Tony Hoagland, <i>Donkey Gospel</i>	44
Seamus Heaney, <i>Open Ground: Selected Poems 1966-1996</i>	45
Arthur Sze, <i>The Redshifting Web: Poems 1970-1998</i>	45
Robert Pinsky, <i>The Figured Wheel: New and Collected Poems, 1966-1996</i>	46
Almitra David, <i>Impulse to Fly</i>	47

COVER

Wendy Kindred, "Gardener," woodcut



An arrow at the bottom of a page
means no stanza break.

RICHARD FOERSTER

Petit Mal

This is how, perhaps,
we first came to know
the gods: tiny ailment,

a sudden advent of dread,
and more dread in the shuddering
wake: how the mind hinged

open to the unforeseen
dimension, the chaotic prime,
stirred brew of all

we ever were: we
could not live there, could
not bear to have the world's

remnants we had stitched
into a coat of lights
ripped, then remade again

and again: yet here's this
swaddling aura, this nimbus
we're stunned each time to wear.

RICHARD FOERSTER
Insects at Night

...and the grasshopper shall be a burden...
—Ecclesiastes 12:5

Why this trembling at the cicada's tremolo,
at the studded black beyond the screen, why

this scuttling heart? I arc at every flutter.
Such wayward urgency afflicts the dark—

like scraps of a torn-up letter—such relentless
pulsing toward available light, a pallor

of prayers winging toward the splintered moon.
The oiled dust of their generations covers

my house. I've become a rattle of charnel
bones invaded by beetles, the tapping deep

inside the bed, the pillow thrumming a Morse
I understand too well. The cecropia's eyes

are zeroes; the mantis, a prophetic of want.
The caravans of wood lice seek only

a rotting world. Revenant cells, not souls.
O troubled void. Delusion of sleep. What

mantra must I make the crickets chirr
beyond their answering *repeat*? A method

only, then. A bending, a forging link
by link: enchaining toward some infinite.

Fog

York Beach, Maine

Gauze of morning, the hidden
world: a wound, a throb
somewhere, nowhere palpably
near. What I want's unfocused:
a stolid opposite house—
Calvinist, shuttered black;
the clapboarded white—not this

spume, not this thought-
free gull winging into mist,
and gone, the once chiseled
forms unsculpted, back
to pure Carrara, the captive
eye rolled up inside
its socket: this epileptic

sky, this dull tin-
tinnabulum, skull-deep,
phonemic, clapped, and fused.
O God, ravel me out,
let me see the merest
cinder burning through
the shroud, then . . . conflagration.

RICHARD FOERSTER
Church Burning

Already it is almost nothing, a darkness
settled beneath a dusting of stars.
An after-hiss. A braiding of ghosts.

For someone has imagined himself
watching from a crowd, staggered
along a dirt road in Georgia.

On that night he will be as he is now:
a silhouette pasted against the glare,
a cipher, an absence intermingling.

For already the steeple has collapsed
with the thunder of a single word,
and the bells have lost their tongues.

Already the storied windows are stained
another color, empty of promise
or deliverance. His mind's a rasp,

a wheel turned against flint. It wakes
with a guttural spark: *Niggers, niggers.*
His ancient prayer flares.

MAIRÉAD BYRNE

Birds

Impossible to be a poet not knowing the meaning of phlox!
I see phlegm. I see pox.
I see phloroglucinol and phloxine—
It's not enough!
Phlox colors. Phlox smells.
Phlox oils released when crushed in the palm.
Phlox thickness and texture. Phlox bushiness.
Phlox rustling. Phlox gloves.
The phloxness of phlox. . . .

Here am I in America and I have only the vaguest idea of maple.
I have a back yard but it's not mine, nor my neighbors':
I pass through it every time on my way to the library.
The yard like an old torn mat left by the last tenant.
The alley like a dirty pencil mark.
Parking lots folding one out of the other like a table-top bought at the
world's worst yard sale.
Oesophageal traffic, streets keyed high with the shrieks of children.
The city like a savaged wedding cake, already tilted toward divorce.
I have wasted my life.

Henry Juniper-Berry for sure knows what phlox is
and Dwight Clover owns his own back yard
why not he deserves it all those poems.
Magnolias morphing into the front covers of books.
I bet he knows tubers like Agatha Trotters
knows the flight paths of birds.
Migrant tubers on transatlantic flights
blind-drunk in the aisles, seat-belts still clunking.
And you just know they'd be grinning, if they had mouths.

Even poets from Ring-a-Ding City or Kennefleck like Geoffrey Noodler
get to stand knee-high in zinnias or dahlias, peonies even.
They get such radiant wives. Me, I have no wife and if I had
he'd be a poet, but not David Ratsnake, no.

Or Vyzyzgny Zygymbygznsna who needs two translators
and still comes up trumps with maple.
Make that cicadas please.

Me I'll stick to the monkey-puzzle tree
made out of fuzzy pipe-cleaners
and lemurs' tails. Parked on the front porch
of the dew drop in, dunroamin, by the dooryard bloomin
the old there's no place like, no poem should be without the *de rigueur*
list of homes. Or a hummock in the yard or its own huruburu bird.

MAIRÉAD BYRNE

The Pools

I was let out.
And before I was let out
there were flags, green and pink tags.
Pins.
What the hell am I talking about?

I am talking about dusk,
how it bit like ink into blotting paper;
night was a big soaked wad.
It was as spongy as that.
I could chew it.

And the yeasty air rolling
north from the Liffey
was nothing. Mine was the greasy
Tolka and the stars,
hanging like cauldrons.

Doors opened like tabernacles
and women were standing there
scooped mildly over purses,
the great belt of light at their backs
haloing sweet such outlines.

My God, this was their carpet,
broken strip of lino, their stairs
leading where, to what bedrooms
with what must and candlewick spreads?
And wound round their ankles
one cat, staring with owned eyes.

And smells. Of cabbage or fries.
Who knows what newspapers,
what men, were crackled over tables,
hunched in her kitchens,
in cardigans, their little bellies
seeping surreptitiously,
hands rosaried or nicotined.
And the solid little coal fire spurting,
And sometimes, straight into the sky,
the red gush of chimney flame.

In this evening hour, streets
shuddered to the hurry
of round-shouldered women,
heels bashing, just freed from
Benediction, or Devotions, or
whatever holy thing went down
in the granite church
tucked up in its own wide grounds,
skirts gnashed by shaggy-headed trees.
The jackdaws had shut up.

I still hadn't grown.
My sister's uniform hooped about my hips,
I stood watching, waiting.
My father was still alive.
Perched on the porch step
letting the door-bell rip
knowing small stirrings, a light,
must come or not,
annunciation of life.
The Pools is all I had to say
to see all this. *Pools for the Blind*.
It wouldn't work now.

On the whole northside
a low voice was murmuring.
So-and-so had a knife.

Always the tumultuous rain.
Upside-down street lamps staring fuzzily up
out of shiny black streets.
Wind gusting. It was always
November or February or March,
the city folded in a great wet leaf,
rancid, or
the fainter smell of snow.
Cast iron shores molten again, rain
pelting. Railings and gates
paint-flaked in summer now
sodden as metal can be
and shivering, worn necks fragile.

→

like shorn poodles or clean old women
in hospital gowns.

This was misery and I
moved through without effort,
slipping through gables of dark
swinging in racks towards me,
I almost flew.

Out of the dark the stacked bus
charged. Out of the fog,
Out through the drops.
Like a rhino. Like a river-boat.
Like a drunk waiter buckling
underneath his load of lit
windows, empty seats.
And the driver and conductor
spooled in the dim cab,
tunics loosened, one leaning,
fingers paddling in his deep
leather bag, and the other
nodding, looped about the wheel.

Like an island, like a law,
the sealed bus swung
out to the main drag,
the southside already
elliptical about it,
dark falling down.

I too had my haul,
coins tarnished or brilliant
heaped on the cleared table,
their oily smell and taste
bringing all the hands
that had palmed and fingered them
home. Within the cathedral
of my arms, poring face,
green slick and smear of pockets,
lint, blessed prints and spatulate
thumb and finger rubbing,
lipstick, and the smell of ham,

→

tired hands touching hair:
my minuscule profit and loss.

Then it was Saturday.
All frost, starch and crunch.
Maybe a blue sky. Standing
straight up on my bike,
relishing the ache of thighs,
white breath billowing
above the white road,
delivering my envelope
of change, my cache
of cash, of names,
to St. Joseph's
School for the Blind.
As if guilty of some thievery.
Like a penitent
relinquishing my stock.

Then wheeling joyously—
(not having met anyone)
(not having had to say hello)
to see the blind boys,
their peanut faces dipped
into cheap nylon shirts,
wine sweaters frayed,
faint wrists at cuffs,
glasses thick as goggles,
white hair, poor knees,
and the gestures of their mothers
all about them yet
oh the fright

Time of the newspaper's thud.
The terrier growls, but still the body
in the middle of the night
is the one true clock,
reveals what few
in the daytime world admit.
I have learned to sit before standing,
swing the legs slowly to the floor,
for while the oblivious mind
accelerates in an instant
into time's passing lane,
the flesh cannot so easily merge,
cannot unlearn each second's
dissipation of its stuff.

Memento mori.

Who would have thought
the death's-head
would be one's own self?

No fresh-faced paperboy
but nightbird with cowl
of black feathers
that scratches still tighter circles
around us, the hours before dawn
deliver the news.
Mind finally hears
what dog and body knew,
needed to tell.
Halfway to the toilet, a strange
yet familiar sound, an old man
shuffling feet across carpeted floor.

Yes, we may adorn our changes,
tell ourselves stories
of Ovidian splendor,
but in the stark blue light,
the moon gone
with its shifting dreams,
we walk inches behind



and can hear (if we dare listen)
a scuffling outline,
parched, panting,
not quite yet us.

Reconciliation

Translating from the Spanish,
I asked what word she'd use
for patching up a lover's quarrel,
for the poem's "*tregua ardiente*,"
ardent truce,
the singular, sweet passion
forgiveness sometimes distills from anger.
At home in abstraction,
she replied, "Reconciliation"—
a good word, not in that poem's
spare voice, yet so much in

her voice it distilled from me
a wide smile, set surging again
an ardent river
I have labored to keep
diked and apart,
lest its unruly energy
arouse a quarrel, a flood
from which reconciliation
could flow only after bitterness,
irreconcilable differences,
the death of a love.

In the dissection lab the cadaver
of a man barely sixty lies on the cold
aluminum table—looks good for his age,
testicles like ripe figs between well-
muscled thighs, long limbs proportioned,
not yet betraying the warp of decay.
As you attempt to cut, the resistance
is unexpected, almost a protest. When
the skin finally gives way, the reek
of preservative is sudden and sharp,
like an admonition.

...

At the fish market they are weighing
the morning's catch. Stacked in ice,
silver ingots, the most perfect specimens
are displayed at the top of the heap.
The buyers' choices are heaved onto
the big scale, red needle dancing.
The purchase made, a knife enters easily
below petaled gills, slices clean along
the length of the body, the crimson
egg sac spilling from the cavity,
a disembodied tongue.

...

It's not quite night as she washes vegetables
under the tap: bright carrots, a tangle
of long beans, purple onion in its
papery casing, a fan of snow peas.
She admires the smooth heft of an eggplant
in her hand, its lustrous teardrop shape,
the firm flesh enclosed in its glossy
sheath. For a moment she thinks
of sparing it, this outsized jewel. Outside
in the garden, last light casts shadows.
Oil snaps and smokes in its pan.

i

Through a plastic tube,
I force-feed the indigo snake
a mix of hamburger, Cheerios and egg.
He thrives, soon shedding his skin,
his scales upgraded from dull to ebony.
The skin rests in the cage,
a coil split for his lovely emergence,
a trophy to tack above the bed.

He was mailed up from Texas.
We opened his wooden box in the living room,
his self slithering across the tattered rug,
up over the television set
where he entwined the rabbit ears
forever into good reception.
He proceeded into the dining room,
climbed the vacuum cleaner's hoses,
journeyed along the knickknack rail,
and dislodged my mother's tea cups.
Each broke delicately.

This was my father's snake, George.
This telling is in no way a metaphor.
I prized that skin, my ability to make the reptile eat.
My father also taught me about the stars:
the dog of summer nipping at the warrior's heels,
and the warrior raging against the bull.
Orion and his menagerie has use as metaphor;
but the snake and skin are mine, real and exact.

ii

I know where to find them—her father's gardening gloves.
I dig the pair out of the wooden box by the cabin door,
the box filled with rubber boots and clam trowels.
I slip a hand in each glove, fingers easing into their proper spaces.

The leather palms are softened,
and the cuffs' ribs embrace me gently.
I open and close my fist and watch
the back hand's pattern of red stripes

→

curve and straighten. These gloves please me
so much that I leave them on for an hour,
make myself a cup of tea.

This is the nearest I can get to her father,
my hand's gestures restrained by the good habits
that shaped these gloves bought
in the forties, maybe even the thirties,
by a man who fluffed soil, who never lost
a pair's match, whose children's children
also garden and keep things together.

iii

Good Friday's full moon hunkers over the plain, full of new water.
Oaks host the woodpecker masked in yellow and red.
At Mission Santa Ynez, bats fly the stations of the cross.
Herod calls forth Christ into the rose garden,
and under the far arches, youngsters bang
hip to hip, festive, giggling.

First in Spanish then English, a bullhorn teaches us
the tale, although we all know the script. On cue, we deny Christ.
He picks up his cross, of course. He avoids eye contact.
Under the weight of his cross, he falls three times.
Barabbas helps out. They rip off Christ's garb.
His nakedness, among all us clothed for church,
secures our attention. He climbs his final cross.
My sister fusses that everyone is so short and dark.
The parishioners do not nail him up;
already hammered in place are the spikes.
He grabs them; guttural cries spiral from his mouth.
He asks his father why this is happening.

He gives up his spirit. We kneel. We watch.
The moonlight eddies around us.
We touch his skin, his nipples, his genitals, his feet.
Whoever this player is, his Christ-husk shudders,
splits from crown to gut, and spills grace
on the cemetery's up-heaved lawn.
Only then are we sorry we came.

ANN SPIERS
Sandhill Cranes

This pair I have come to show you.
The sandhill cranes step out further from the cover
of tall grass. Big birds with big bodies on stilts,

straight, controlled, long neck, orange eye, and pointed bill.
Militant in stance, they tuck their tails under.
In step with the desires of the other, they move mid-meadow.

Courting, they fling bits of stick into the air.
They know what they are doing together, headed toward eggs,
roosting and flight north. I fling words about,

some at you, some at the sage and cheat grass.
You don't know to pay attention. If you can't see
the cranes out there, at least listen. As if rubbed

across a rack of big bamboo, their notes push sound
back and forth, low and woody, unmistakable when heard.

There are a thousand ways to play a staccato.

—Abby Simon, *Piano Quarterly*

Business

The beehived secretary's brisk heels
click across the polished floor.

Play

Duck Duck Duck on straight or curly head.
GOOSE! Look how Amy chases Fred.

Rendezvous

The silvery rain in the broad-brimmed hat
just lightly taps her fingers on the table.

Obsession

The water in the kitchen will not stop dripping.
Purge me of his eyes.

Hunger

Each tap grabs a grub. The jackhammer
tears the street to pieces.

Assassination

He was wondering over red or white roses. The barrage
comes so quickly it seems all one sound.

bebung...n. Mus. *A pulsating or trembling effect given to a sustained note; spec. such an effect produced on the clavichord by rocking the fingertip.*

—New Shorter O.E.D., 1993

Instead of settling the bole
of a willow, a queen bee chose
the hole of an idle guitar.
In time, she set off a buzz.

*I'll be damned, Chuck Berry waxed,
if I could bang this axe with those
drones inside, can you imagine
the reverberations? I'm talkin'
beebop to bee balm, beebop a lo,
Queenie, bah ding, show me the dough!*

So, Berry took off from acoustic
rhythm and blues by woodshedding,
first in daylight, delicate stuff
like *Always* and *Honeysuckle Rose*,
suffering the stings of nectared-up
workers, their outraged honeys.
Be-ding, be-dong, his thickening
thumb and fingers bungled through days
'til they got so sore he couldn't
play Nadine in a dim, wee-wee-
hours ginmill. *What's the beef, Chuck?*
some pale ding-a-ling shouted from
a table lush with longneck Buds.

That was it. He walked, his mitts hidden
in his yellow jacket, his head
hung until he'd cleared the marquee,
then out they flew, his fingers,
swarming, as they played the air:
be-diddly, be-doo, Johnny be good.

Back home he spooned out Epsom Salt
to soak his thumb and four fat fingers,
then lifted the possessed guitar.

→

Domino, he mused . . . Blueberry Hill. Why not? These little suckers like their sweets and I ain't got chops for nothin' better than that sappy hushaby. Can't pick that, can't play.

He plucked the bass string. Lo, no bees, yet, *bebung*. He plucked the bass and tenor string. He pressed the spoon against them, rocked his fingertip: *bebung. Shit be damned . . . tremolo. Roll over Beethoven!*

These bees sleepin'? He thumbed a chord. The buzz without the sting. He was electrified. Trembling, he rolled more chords. His eyes squeezed shut. *Maybellene, why can't you be true? Maybellene. . .*

He felt the drones and workers stir. *Be calm. Be calm*, he told himself, he told the bees . . . but no one else.

MOLLY TENENBAUM

Bungling the Trees

In this whipping wind the tree has arms wrapping unwrapping
no not arms these weighted inflections unless
they're octopus arms but this is a tree not a grasper
see when the wind cools the arms never were
and yet in the branch-tips a smoothing a tendering
barnacle feathers for food no this is a tree
trunk not seen but assumed where green
gathers black on one center line and with
branches the wrapping the whipping delayed swing
from thickness and out through the visible tips and
with contrasts the bouquets of needle-sized shadows
sharp dark tearing wild in light sky now luckily
each spitting gust erases the shape descriptions
don't hold though the curve of the branches
seems constant air folds in that same curve
each time a branch slices through

MOLLY TENENBAUM

She Fills the Day with a Thousand Tiny Things

And if one is too big
she makes the next tinier
just to the bound
of the nearest washed plate
dirty shirts sorted
to fibers to spaces
between
the fork tine
by tine and slow
as a woman combs her hair
thinking not thinking
lemon-threads spin
one by one from the strainer
and with the same yellowing
crystal as fills in
between sleeping lids
the miniature
corners and intricate
seams are sealed

MARGARET AHO

Luci fer-

vent-

ly said: When the German
and Irish

wed

you get

devils: you get a

vent

for

*I am the first to solve this mystery:
women are in love with the devil.*

—Gogol

With what

falls. Heavily. Finally. A
deafening
calving
from splendor. Some
slab of light
splitting off, blinking:
crave.
More
than crave. The blazing
plummet of this is so
much
more
than deadly. The fire's
gravity. The heart's
green
ground,
waiting to be burned.

MARGARET AHO

On a green slope: a family

of foxes. Then a sudden
taloned
dive and snatch
and one of these . . . is
airborne
and o the view, o the trying to trans-
mit, fox
code to fox
ears, cordate and cocked
below. Now the
whole
family's a blur of rust-red
on the green
slope. I think of this
dream as I walk, I
think
 fox-hole, fox-
 glove,
 fox-
fire
has been assumed
bodily, has been in-
vented.

MARGARET AHO
An aging heart holds up its

harvest in a dark
room. One
wall, beginning to lighten, receives
a grainy
imprint of diagonals
coming into focus: the verticals
and horizontals of an arbor forming
seven chevrons
above the door. Above the window
a canted vent transoms
the first quick
silver from the garden. Unchartable.
Not knowing when the liquid
line will break into
small gargled
globes. Unswallowables.
Ungarbled in the feathered throats of
messengers.

MARGARET AHO

Handel: all day the diaphanous, the elaborate

elevations, the nimblest
fingers.

Why do mine
want mud: stucco
and day-old rusks, Ritsos
and Ovid
in exile, the gnarled, the ignored
groves: black
stone.

I'm staring at that slab of
lava a younger poet
hefted, heisted
from the Snake's bank. Alone.

As if it weren't the same
stone it took a thirty-years-married
man and woman
later, to unload, and
lay before the trinity of pale
trunks—

 aspen,
 the trembler: an altar
here, in the garden.

MARGARET AHO

Can you feel, In this rain,

each whorl
of overlapping cordate plates,
convex, like upturned
talons,
bracketing
all my arterials, all my red
hopes
for self-exit, for transport, for
some inner
bolide to blast
through
and do, what this rain, now,
is doing,
 softly, steadily;
can you feel it gently
bending
each
imbricate and barbed bract
back,
 so that they
seem to be swooning, seem
supple
and greenly
curling away from the visible-now
 central
 yellow
thistle of my heart?

GLORI SIMMONS
The Bookbinder
Mary Louise Reynolds, 1891-1950

Worn Jacket & Levant

14. rue Hallé, 1950

All that was left—her personal effects,
her words—Marcel unbound
& burned,

leaving behind only the bindings:
copper-spined coffins,
back doors

with teacup handles & green glassine.
Alone on street corners, Marcel
searched

for a reminder of her, thread
to hold the fray. In his hands,
a hollow-backed casing

encased in black. Along the streets,
only the slam of shop shutters
ring clear, in tact.

Footnote

Minneapolis, 1901

As a girl, I danced as I undressed,
loosening my sash and shoelaces,
stringing them like leaves behind.

Even then I was contained,
girl in organza collecting laundry
from the line, bare feet drenched

in dew—beneath moonshine,
my nightgown's a scrim.
My legs delight in their innocent

transgression, captive's dance.

In my hands, each sheet seemed
a contraband letter, survival skill.

Self-portrait of a Mate

Greenwich Village, 1918

Beloved Matthew, what cool ground
does my letter find you moling through today?

Your whisper is a rip in New York's swelter.
A jar of sun tea browns on the window ledge.

Its sepia dissolve is time passing slowly.
We are not a match set, earrings

slandering the ear, but a shell that hums
the perfect pitch. Not two gloves

on separate hands, but one, split
at the seam, waiting for the needle's mend.

Until you return, I'll drink the tea alone,
cool my cheeks with the glass sweat.

Your Mary.

Onion Skin & Spine

Paris, 1920

She maps his death in the unhinged streets—
door knockers,
watch face, no hands,
finding comfort

in the tangible. Her husband's cough
returns in the turning
of *Tribunes* at cafe tables.
The stones of Montparnasse

*Found objects, play things,
attractions of the mere physical variety.*

you say, forgetting I salvage
everything. On our first full night,

your moan was the sob
of my dead husband,

who mourned not my betrayal,
but his own.

If I offered my hand,
who would take it?

Mornings I wake to solitude
replenished, my skin cold

as a statue under snow.
Feral Love, today you've served me

the worst no,
mistaking another bride.

Cela n'a pas d'importance.
You hand me

these condolences like pennies
to place over my eyes.

For the thaw, I'll let go three
times over. For you,

Marcel. For Matthew.
For myself.

—M.L.R.

Signature

14. rue Hallé, 1939

On the corner of *rue Hallé*, I spot
the half-shell of a broken compact,
its cheek empty of rouge. I spare

its possibility, add a window
to a calfskin door, a puff
to seduce the serif words which wake

like a music box as I open the newly
bound book.
In my *atelier*, I fashion a veneer

from lizard screens, goat skins
softened in vats by human feet.
The feet, too, subject to bind.

Skin inside the skin of another.
Patent, pointed, refined.
For Cocteau, I stencil stars

on the endpapers, discreetly lining
the covers like lingerie.
Inside each crease, my hands trace

the tree's sacrifice—bark grain, leaf
Daphne entrapped in laurel.
Nymph who dared refuse

Apollo's hold. With a knife, I split
each signature along its folds,
unsentence the page. The words

are free to be chased again.
For *Le Surmale*, I clip morocco
into Monarch wing, secure a corset stay.

Gentle

Occupied France, 1942

When they send the composer away,
the alley quiets
to one cart's cobbled plucking.
She salvages what she can—

old spectacles, wigs,
blurred passport photos. She resists.
Answers only to *Gentle*, binding the living
in garments of the dead,

plucking stars from coat sleeves,
nailing francs into shoe heels.
After so much scrapping of landscapes
& last minutes, she doesn't open the door.

Visitors come the way of dead hornets.
She resists.
Refusing to answer the farewells
from Marcel's New York.

No one understands
the *ruliere's* need to shut herself
from the world. When Marseille's red tiles
warn no,

the Pyrennes open to pages
of snow. With Man Ray's *Lips*
rolled in paper like a gypsy babe,
she walks away from the light.

They charm the skies. The stars suggest
an earlier Paris that falls
toward her, a staircase
descending from wax threads. She resists.

Endpapers

No interest (age).—Major S.W. Little, Office of Strategic Services, 1944

Dear Sirs:

My application states the following—
brown, gray, 53 years gone by. To this you add:

Sorry, no bronze wings, no special detail today,
ma'am. I'm familiar with its hollow meaning,

its take away. Under its fact, New York grows
simple & small. I frequent empty like a cafe.

Go away gentle, Mary, you taunt, forgetting
I have resisted more. There is nothing else.

This limp is a buried limb beneath the Spanish snow.
Still I arrived. Officer Small, I've memorized

your answer by heart & know well how to pick
its lock. Sincerely yours, Gentle Mary

Body Valise

American Hospital, Neuilly, France. 1950

This knot inside me is my undoing,
a key locked in baggage.

It's here in the Minotaur's drawer, tucked among
toad skins, roses dried & quartered.

I'm familiar with the Lady Thing—
its deckle-edge,
its double entendre.

No invitations, it just arrived.

Like arias in radiators,
armies pouring across borders.
Like forgiveness.

Drink still keeps me warm.

I'm well over the times you left me,
sugar cube solid on my spoon "to puzzle the chessboard"
& more. My Colophon.

Now you'll be the widow, Marcel.

The maps you papered
to the walls still allow us our lonely, but the studio
is a yellowing heir.

Keep the boxes & casings together.

It's always a privilege to listen in when an artist is talking about art. Three of the poetry books I have before me include substantial prose essays. Let's hear what they have to say.

☞

Mary Karr's *Viper Rum* (New York: New Directions, 1998, 96 pp., \$19.95 hardbound, 0-8112-1382-X) includes "Against Decoration," her controversial *Parnassus* article. There she inveighs against such excrescences as obscure historical references, "linguistic intricacy," elaborate figures of speech, and poems as scholarly games, read for the sport of decoding. The true aim of poetry, she argues, should be "emotional, rhetorical, and sensory clarity." By recording the "human and sensory data that ultimately prompt emotion" (objective correlatives, presumably), the poet avoids producing work technically flawless but lacking relevance to human experience. (Her primary though not exclusive target seems to be the "new formalists.") Metaphors must serve not for decoration but for illumination. Her own poems portray largely autobiographical moments of personal emotional climax (sexual, familial, religious). Here is the end of one her poems: "Darling, // remember: our faces in proximity make / a pure small space—a vessel or goblet / that could hold the whole Atlantic. Always // I stare you-ward: come spill yourself in me." It's not exactly the plain style, but the simple emotional message—longing—is certainly clear.

We do not have to look far for examples of the undecorated clarity Karr calls for. One very appealing example is **B. H. Fairchild's *The Art of the Lathe*** (Alice James Books: Farmington, Maine, 1998, 80 pp., \$9.95 paper, 1-882295-16-1). Fairchild is at home not only in the worlds of the Loeb Classics and the *Dichterliebe*, but of Patsy Cline and Wurlitzers. Most of all he knows the gritty reality of the machine shop and honors it unsentimentally. Here is all we hear and all we need to know of the end of a yard hand's work day:

the world
stretching away in its one last moment when the chain
makes that odd grunting noise, and sighs *click*, and then
click,
and sings through the eyes of the block as it slams the
ground
and the earth takes the thud and the men freeze

→

and the woman strolls out to see what has happened now
in the system of which the body is one part.

I honor Fairchild for his transformation of the unique and personal
into the universal, through the utmost simplicity.

Another poet of the undecorated style, another with a strong feeling
for humanity, is **Martín Espada**, with ***City of Coughing and Dead Radiators*** (New York: Norton, 1993, 90 pp., \$17.95 hardbound, 0-393-03555-7). Espada, who has been a legal aid lawyer, sees himself, like Neruda, as providing a voice for the voiceless. He is an activist poet with the faith that by portraying the hard facts of human life he may encourage change—if not political, at least perceptual. This may sound like a recipe for a rhetorical bludgeon, but Espada's authority in the world is so sound, his language so clean, his imagination so delicate, that what we get is more like this:

Every night
the ex-mental patient,
forgetful of the medicine
that caused him to forget,
would climb to the roof
of the transient hotel
with a flashlight,
waiting for his Martian parents
and their spaceship,
flashlight beam waving
like the baton of a conductor
firm in the faith
that this orchestra
will one night
give him music.

“The Music of Astronomy”

One poet who must really offend Mary Karr is **James Tate** (***Shroud of the Gnome***, [Hopewell, New Jersey, 1997, 74 pp., \$23. hardbound, 0-88001-561-6]), with his *Tatamagouche*, *lubberly haycocks*, and *piebald crabstick*—“a great eschatalogical ferment.” Karr demands emotional clarity. Tate gives her this: “Moments of great clarity inhabited me./ I was their anthill and they were my ants.” Those “little ants of clarity” are, alas, “blind and dedicated/ and stupid, stupid, stupid.” She objects to elaborate tropes, and so must grind her teeth at “Different Kinds of Embroidery,” a deliciously irreverent

and playful *ars poetica*, which might seem to have been written to counter Karr. So what does Tate accomplish, in addition to his ebullient playfulness? Among other things, the experience of living from moment to moment, as in “The Faults of the Mariner’s Compass” and “You Be the One.” In “Nonstop,” moreover, he plunges us into a fully imagined and totally chilling *fin du globe*.

Another passionate advocate for clarity is **Edward Field**, in ***A Frieze for a Temple of Love*** (Santa Rosa, California: Black Sparrow, 1998, 228 pp., \$15. paper, 1-57423-067-0, \$27.50 hardbound, 1-57423-068-9). The first hundred-plus pages are new poems, followed by “Silver Wings: Notes for a Screenplay.” Then come eighty-one pages of “The Poetry File,” a miscellany of autobiographical notes, essays, reviews, gossip, manifestos, quotations, a few poems, and opinion, opinion, opinion. Hard-won clarity, the spoken idiom, the priority of subject matter (even when “rash and embarrassing”) are his goals. (A bit of my own gossip: I first met Field in Paris in about 1949 and had some difficulty knowing how to read his poems. Trying to say something to him about one long obscure poem, I clearly betrayed my bafflement. I can still hear Field’s irritated, “It’s a love poem, stupid.” No, he didn’t actually say *stupid*, but I heard it. He soon saw to it that no subsequent reader would have my problem.) The forthright clarity of his mature poems—many robustly homoerotic—is liberating. Some of the poems are anecdotes, some good jokes; some are political, most very very funny—especially the witty sequence “A Man and His Penis.” Read them for the gusto, the celebration, the many incarnations of love.

Then pick up **Tony Hoagland’s *Donkey Gospel*** (Saint Paul, Minnesota: Graywolf, 1998, 80 pp., \$12.95 paper, 1-55597-268-3). Hoagland, like Field, chooses the colloquial language of his day. Like Field he has the candor about sex that can startle a conservative audience. He occasionally roars (see “Honda Pavarotti”) with the spontaneous joy that Field celebrates. He too has a comic muse; nearly every poem makes me grin or laugh. And Hoagland, like Field, writes in an up-front first person, though to my eye and ear each poet has created a distinctive persona to control the public voice.

Hoagland's voice is, for all the similarities, radically different from Field's. His poems are often haunted by a double vision, sometimes of nostalgia ("Jet"), sometimes of profound ambivalence of feeling for a family member (the astonishing insight of "Lucky"), sometimes of wry awareness of one's own indelible miseries. Hoagland's poems about sex, frank and often hilarious as they are, wrestle with problems of gender. He is a poet of self-conscious maleness. In "Adam and Eve" he confronts the issue that just breaks the surface of other poems: how to understand the narrow but real abyss he perceives between a man and a woman. He draws directly on his own experience, but he moves thoughtfully toward contemplation of the human condition. And he comes up with no easy answers. Ambivalence (philosophical, not sexual) and irony color his conclusions. Here's the unsettling ending of "Adam and Eve":

I've seen rain turn into snow then back to rain,
 and I've seen making love turn into fucking
 then back to making love,
 and no one covered up their faces out of shame,
 no one rose and walked into the lonely maw of night.

...

Until we say the truth, there can be no tenderness.

As long as there is desire, we will not be safe.

These are poems that work the difficult way toward truth, with much tenderness and desire, but not much safety.

...

Seamus Heaney's *Open Ground: Selected Poems 1966-1996* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998, 444 pp., \$25, hardbound, 0-374-23517-1) ought to be a best seller. In the small space I have I'm not going to presume to review it. But I will mention that it includes Heaney's Nobel Lecture: "Crediting Poetry." Early on he appears to side with Karr and Field: he has wanted truth to life "to possess a concrete reality, and rejoiced most when the poem seemed most direct, an upfront representation of the world it stood in for or stood up for or stood its ground against." But he goes on to acknowledge times "when a deeper need enters, when we want the poem to be not only pleurably right but compellingly wise, not only a surprising variation played upon the world, but a retuning of the world itself." He wants in his own writing to make room for the marvelous as well as the murderous.

I'd like to mention, however briefly, a few poets who seem to provide the dimension Heaney craves. Start with **Arthur Sze**, *The Redshifting Web: Poems 1970-1998* (Port Townsend, Washington, 1998, 268 pp., \$17. paper, 1-55659-088-1). In the very first lines of the first poem, "Before Completion," we sense that the world is being retuned:

I gaze through a telescope at the Orion Nebula,
 a blue vapor with a cluster of white stars,
 gaze at the globular clusters in Hercules,
 needle and pinpoint lights stream into my eyes.
 A woman puts a baby in a plastic bag
 and places it in a dumpster; someone
 parking a car hears it cry and rescues it.
 Is this the little o, the earth?

This is poetry of intense observation (almost praeternatural awareness, with a zoom lens), of synchronicity, and of extrapolation. The mind moves fluidly through time and space, in and out of itself. Here are a few later lines in the same section:

As the character *yi*, change, is derived
 from the skin of a chameleon, we are
 living the briefest hues on the skin
 of the world.

The next poem of this sequence asks "Where does matter end and space begin?" and "What is it like to catch up with light?" Further sections juxtapose contradictions deeper than paradox. Memory colors the present: "in memory, a series of synchronous spaces." Throughout the poems the reader must become nimble-minded, shifting focus from the most minutely-observed rustle to the most astonishing simultaneities, beginnings, and vanishings. In one section of "The String Diamond" emotions dissolve into intense colors: "the violet haze where a teen drinks/ a pint of paint thinner, the incarnadined/ when, by accident, you draw a piece of/ Xerox paper across your palm and slit/ open your skin...." Another is a catalogue of thirty of the 535 on a list of endangered species. Yet another juxtaposes images that, through complex synaesthesia, constitute waves. Enough of my futile attempts at summary! Find the book and make room for the marvelous.

Heaney's "retuning of the world" seems especially appropriate to **Robert Pinsky's** *The Figured Wheel: New and Collected Poems*,

1966-1996 (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996, 304 pp., \$30, hardbound, 0-374-15493-7). Here the world is translated into music. This is our language as centuries of poets have orchestrated it. An extraordinary poem on the desecration of his grandmother's grave is an antiphony, in the poet's own rich language, integrating the imagined viewpoint of the young vandals with lines from George Herbert's "Church Monuments." The gorgeousness of language and the liturgical rhythms lead into the dark ambiguous heart of the vandalism. Herbert's "Dear Flesh" addresses first the insulted woman but then turns to the perpetrators, the heirs to the dusty mortality they have drunkenly desecrated. In contrast, "Ginza Samba" extends one spiraling, exuberant sentence through six long stanzas, with barely a pause for breath. Listen to the first stanza:

A monosyllabic European called Sax
 Invents a horn, walla whirledy wah, a kind of twisted
 Brazen clarinet, but with its column of vibrating
 Air shaped not in a cylinder but in a cone
 Widening ever outward and bawaah spouting
 Infinitely upward through an upturned
 Swollen golden bell rimmed
 Like a gloxinia flowering
 In Sax's Belgian imagination

New in this glorious volume are subjective lyrics ("Falling Asleep" and "Waking Up"), a long anecdotal colloquial discourse (amusingly titled "Impossible to Tell"), and eloquent meditations on city life. Each has its own music, riffs and rhythms, expanding and enhancing our consciousness of our world.

Finally, here is **Almitra David** with *Impulse to Fly* (Shutesbury, Massachusetts: Perugia Press, 1998, \$10.95 paper, 78 pp., 0-9660459-1-2). It offers verbal lucidity, sensuous impact, emotional integrity, wisdom, and—something more. The first section achieves a gallery of unsentimental but vividly compassionate images of loss, failure, schizophrenia, and anorexia (the heart-wrenching "Poem to My Hungry Daughter" first appeared in these pages). Flight is no consistent symbol: for each person it is a different combination of illusion, wish-fulfillment, escape, imagination, suicide, passion. The simplest and scariest is in "Ascent," about a mother who pushed her children off the roof of a housing project before jumping after them with her infant in her arms. It ends:

Witnesses saw the children plummet,
but she watched them fly, saw each one
soar and ride the wind
then tucked her baby under her wings
and took off.

The poet has the amazing power to envision a horror from the inside and transform it with her imagination.

The second section, "Beatrice of the Cenci," is a song-cycle, twenty-five lyrics in the voice of the sixteenth-century Roman daughter driven to patricide by the powerful father who abused and imprisoned her. In Shelley's play the incest was veiled, since no stage would consider this taboo subject. Almitra David is free to envision the words of Beatrice on the eve of her execution by the Pope as she invokes the mother who had died shortly after her birth. The work defies excerpting, but it deserves wide circulation, for the exquisite poetry and for its eloquent witness for the many women used and crushed by literal and social and religious fathers.

The final section has a strong sense of place. The centerpiece is the ten-part "Skinner's Neck: A Chesapeake Bay Sequence," about an old woman integrated with all her senses into the estuarine world. This is a major work, the kind of poetry Heaney speaks of at the end of his Nobel Lecture—poetry that can

touch the base of our sympathetic nature while taking in at the same time the unsympathetic reality of the world to which that nature is constantly exposed. The form of the poem, in other words, is crucial to poetry's power to do the thing which always is and always will be to poetry's credit: the power to persuade that vulnerable part of our consciousness of its rightness in spite of the evidence of wrongness all around it, the power to remind us that we are hunters and gatherers of values, that our very solitudes and distresses are creditable, in so far as they, too, are an earnest of our veritable human being.

The three poet-critics I've discussed all ask for clarity, emotional honesty, humanity. Heaney goes farther than the others, seeing the mission of the poet more profoundly.