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**THE BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL**

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### **COVER**

**Robert Shetterly**, "Unexpected Kiss," ink drawing, 1999



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



**KARL ELDER**

**Ciphers**

**1**

Have you no shadow,  
Adam without an Eve, O  
thin man of Haddam?

**2**

Lest one doubt his feet  
of clay, a reminder: this  
beggar on his knees.

**3**

The unlocked handcuff  
Houdini still sports, escaped  
from the spirit world.

**4**

O cellist in midst  
of a slow, low note—how still  
your arm, string, and bow.

**5**

Surgeon's toy cannon,  
radical vasectomy  
or bad dream of one.

**6**

That swirling feeling,  
once a sixth sense, innocence  
sucked down the toilet.

**7**

The figure of one  
sleepwalking. Little Zombie.  
Baby Frankenstein.

**8**

Infinity Road,  
the good Lord God's own address,  
now closed to tourists.

**9**

Elephant—ear and  
trunk—see it lean, laboring,  
to best nothingness.

**ROBERT CHUTE**

**Reading a Note in the Journal *Nature* I Learn**

Omega, Omega-like, and Computationally Enumerable  
Random Real Numbers all may be  
a single class.

Should I be concerned? Is this the sign  
of a fatal fault line  
in the logic of our world?

You shouldn't worry, I'm told,  
about such things, but how to be indifferent  
if you don't understand?

Standing here, we do not sense  
any tectonic rearrangement  
beneath our feet.

Despite such reassurance I feel  
increasing dis-ease. Randomness is rising  
around my knees.

Remember how we felt when we learned  
that one infinity  
could contain another?

Somewhere between the unreachable  
and the invisible  
I had hoped for an answer.

**ROBERT CHUTE**  
**Stones Feel Spring**

Wild Lily-Of-The-Valley  
sends up, in single file,  
simple green sheaths opening  
to sharp upright leaves, all  
sprouting from a root that  
runs like a hidden fuse along  
a dirt-filled crack across  
a head-high glacial stone.

The fissure where these small  
green flames burn will someday  
split this boulder to its heart.  
Now it lends this solemn stone  
an erratic, festive air: green  
feathers in gray granite hair.

**ROBERT CHUTE**

**Vernal Pool**

Water in this leaf lined  
melt-water pool is still  
as ice, clear as air. In shadows  
of the fieldstone wall  
icy April snow melts slow,  
melts cold. The tops of leafless  
trees reflected here  
penetrate the frozen earth  
deeper than their roots  
and deeper still five crows  
beat north beneath fair weather  
clouds. Their raucous calls,  
meaningless a month ago, fill  
the woods with meaning now.

**ELIZABETH KUHLMAN**

**Sound of Locusts**

The day is hot and still, the twelfth still hot day in a row.  
He sits in his accustomed place closed in by walls and table.

This is where the children gather for meals, for company.  
She sits across from him. She tells him it is not a question of love.

He is family to her and will always be. But she says,  
she does not want to go on sharing a house with him,

doesn't want to watch him kill himself with cigarettes and beer,  
doesn't want to be his partner in finance, doesn't want

to go on guessing and imagining and making up  
what he thinks. He is silent. She says she loves

sharing the children. That, now that they are grown,  
she wants to spend holidays together, that she is

grateful. But wants to live alone.  
He says let's keep in touch.

She watches his face, familiar as her own,  
ageless, so like his mother's face,

so like her infant daughter's lined with the effort of birth.  
The rest of the day she worries about him

as he shops and cooks and reads his books.  
At night she goes out to the sleeping porch.

Locusts rasping in the heat-stunned leaves wake in her  
a grief so old she has no name for it. Her child self sitting up in bed.

Someone leaving. Something shed.  
Her husband is asleep on the other side of the wall.

She kneels on the thin mat and takes off her shirt.  
Air hits her back. She folds herself, face in her hands.

The skin along her spine is newborn.  
She hears a thin high keening.

**ELIZABETH KUHLMAN**

**Solange**

The soft Creole voice of Solange murmurs for hours  
as the office darkens.

They tell the white lady that Solange is neglecting her children.  
They ask the white lady to speak to her.

As the office darkens  
they say that there is something wrong with the baby of Solange.  
They ask the white lady to speak to her.  
Solange says one of those bodies on the Port au Prince street was  
her brother.

They say there is something wrong with the baby of Solange.  
The white lady asks if she takes good care of her children.  
Solange says one of those bodies on the Port au Prince street was  
her brother,  
that her mother still lives in La Saline eating rats.

The white lady asks if she takes good care of her children.  
Solange says her husband left her,  
that her mother still lives in La Saline eating rats,  
that something goes ping in her head.

Solange says her husband left her  
when the test showed the baby wouldn't be right,  
that something goes ping in her head,  
that, even so, she refused to have an abortion.

When the test showed the baby wouldn't be right,  
her husband said no damaged baby could possibly be his.  
Even so, she refused to have an abortion,  
so he left her. Still, she will always love him.

Her husband said no damaged baby could possibly be his  
it must be somebody else's baby  
so he left her. Still, she will always love him.  
Now when he sees her he doesn't smile or laugh.

It can't be somebody else's baby;  
she has never loved any man but him.  
Now when he sees her he doesn't smile or laugh  
and he never gives her money.

She has never loved any man but him  
and now she is raising their six children alone.  
He doesn't give her any money.  
Sometimes she can hardly breathe.

Now she is raising their six children alone.  
The soft Creole voice of Solange murmurs for hours.  
Sometimes she can hardly breathe.  
They tell the white lady that Solange is neglecting her children.

**K. REYNOLDS DIXON**

**Spare the Rod**

For leaving a tool in the weather  
maybe, a chore undone, distraction  
and forgetfulness, because his father  
never stooped to punishing his body,  
he only got a lashing with the tongue.  
So those days when his parents fought steady,  
the words unforgettable and choice,  
the woods around their cul-de-sac  
where he went alone would quietly sustain  
and double them until they were his  
nomenclature, words he named himself  
like trees by their giveaway leaves, expert,  
a sweet gum grown on the old fence line,  
its own time taking the barb to heart.

**K. REYNOLDS DIXON**

**Stargazer**

Standing in crepuscular after-heat  
she knows it must be open, its perfume  
not spoiling but apart from,  
particular, pulling her  
behind the ell where truly it is open,  
purples alive in ultraviolet.  
Five-and-a-half months heavy with our son,  
she bends to take it in, her breath

exciting anthers on their filaments.  
I'm between boys' names, dithering  
when she turns, pollen on her cheek,  
and takes my breath, eyes peridot,  
looking past me long up where the haze ends,  
where the first star is about to show.

**K. REYNOLDS DIXON**

**Token**

Last night what spooked me  
was a flower pot toppling.  
A feral cat had caught a dove,  
one we'd *awed* at nesting in the jasmine,  
but startled let it go.  
The torn bird trilled a failing arc  
to the flowering darkness,  
the cat shadowing. The scatter  
of feathers the door sucked in  
was easily swept up and thrown away,  
except my daughter holds one now,  
the quill between her fingertips.  
She shows it off in the early sun,  
touches the down to my lips.

*Shadow, laze and spare your claws:  
She's too quick to be your prey.  
She plays with you. She coos.  
Damn you, this is joy.*

**PATRICK DONNELLY**  
**After a Long Time Away**

Everything is glad of me.  
The radio plays only flutes.  
My key fits locks all over town,  
turns them over and over.  
Plants think up fresh leaves  
and even the dust on the shelves  
has got a new pair of shoes.  
Waxy yellow peppers jump in my pots  
and cook cheaply into a thick glee.  
Churches open their double doors  
and my throat starts singing up and up.  
Trucks kindly do not grind my house apart,  
and busses watch my movements carefully.  
Curly green boys  
hide in my old cotton sheets,  
and the library has stacked all the books  
in my favorite order.  
The checks I write  
clear quietly and completely  
in and out of the twilight,  
water-cool vaults  
of my blue marble bank.  
And death is just a word like *doorjamb*,  
*magpie*, harmless—  
that twirls and worries gently.

**PATRICK DONNELLY**

**Finding Paul Monette, Losing Him**

It's just two days since I read you two days  
since your *Elegies for Rog* grabbed me  
in the stacks at the Brooklyn branch  
grief eating through the binding like dragon blood  
dripping through four stone floors  
into the charming restaurant in the basement  
I check you out and bring you home  
so I can love you and pity him  
and cry for him and you and myself  
I check you out again and again  
I think I'll steal you  
I don't want to release you back to circulation  
I study your picture on the sleeve for signs of sickness  
search the flyleaf for year of publication  
could you have survived 1987  
so long ago dangerous year  
to be a sick fag in America  
In the cafe at the gay bookstore  
I'm afraid to ask Do you know Monette  
Did he make it The boys are so young  
thumbing through pages of naked men  
putting them back dogeared The boy  
behind the counter doesn't read poetry  
I'm afraid of hope as I walk  
to the back of the store PLEASE BE ALIVE  
PLEASE BE among the M's I run my hand  
along the spines Maupin McClatchy Melville  
until it rests on yours  
I tear you open the suspense killing me  
please *please* be living with the dogs  
in the hills somewhere north of Frisco  
writing every day doing well on the new drugs  
sleeping like spoons with a guy named  
Peter Kenneth Michael or Gustavo  
Your picture is harder thinner  
face lined eyelids sagging  
"novelist poet essayist AIDS activist who died"  
My face flushes hot  
like checking the list of auditioners  
who made it into the play  
I didn't make it I'm not among them

→

I'm stunned humiliated

    You're gone then

At forty-two I made it to the future four years further  
who knows if I'll reach your forty-nine  
why bother reading your book anymore  
what difference do poems make or love  
So this is your last face a fox and rabbit kissing  
even dead your name earns a "face-out"  
guarantees those big sales  
who gets the money now  
YOU JERK FUCK YOU  
ridiculous to die so close to a cure  
renders you me us absurd  
shameful irresponsible  
how quaint to die of this they'll think in 2030  
how nostalgically sepia-toned and old-timey  
like dying of the flu for godssake or the clap  
like talking on a windup telephone or  
buying ice for the icebox

    On the net

I cruise a guy who says he knew you  
when you tried to live and love again with Winston  
I'm hungry to hear anything about you  
but he interrupts with a reflection of his cock  
in a hand mirror in a garden of red hibiscus  
so for a moment I almost easily  
forget my love my love of two days two days  
in which you were born loved wrote grieved died  
I never loved this way this long this hard  
never burned up grief or anger with such verse  
never came within two bow-lengths of the paradise  
of men's hearts open to one another

Oh God in whom you never for one moment believed  
will I still have time

**VIRGIL SUAREZ**

**The Soviet Circus Visits Havana, 1969**

They pitched tents on the grounds of Lenin's Park,  
in the wind like a giant's green belly. We heard  
about it at school because the Ringmaster, a man

with a thick mustache and bushy eyebrows, came  
with a translator to tell us all about it. He wanted  
us to inform our parents. My father took me,

though he came home tired from work. We found  
our seats in the back rows because my father  
was a dissident and, as such, we couldn't sit up

front with the rest of my schoolmates. The Russian  
clowns marched around the stage in glittering  
sequin uniforms, frowns on their painted faces, make-

believe AK-47s over their shoulders, the one-legged  
unicyclists behind them, keeping from falling,  
for if they fell they'd get trampled by the elephants

in their camouflaged banners that read *Cuba y La Union  
Soviética, Patria o Muerte!* The big animals blew  
their trumps, stormed about like tanks, defecated

on the hay on the stage floor, sweepers in bumble-bee  
striped uniforms swept up the paddies. Jugglers tossed  
human heads up in the air. The heads, one said, of Cuban

dissidents (*gusanos*, like us). The tongue in each mouth  
stuck out in mock slobber. Each man had confessed  
too much, my father wanted to say. A lion tamer in tight

General's pants whipped the big cats into a frenzied  
revolutionary song. My father carried me up high on  
his shoulders, tall and proud—above us trapeze artists

fell, plummeted, as though shot out of the air, one after  
another, like dead quail, fallen, broken, caught like big fish  
on the billowed safety net—the crowds cheered when the riot

police demonstrated by releasing rainbow-colored canisters of tear gas, shouted in Russian for everyone to go home, *a la casa*. At that moment the armless tightrope walker lost

his balance, grabbed on to the rope with his teeth. He bit hard, hanging on, while we all held our breaths, long enough for his heartbeat to thunder inside the tent. One of the knife-

throwers aimed and shot him down. After that, my father carried me back home on his arms. I fell asleep listening to his quickened breathing, his heartbeats like the hooves

of those Russian elephants, the lost rumbling of a man, his son.

**VIRGIL SUAREZ**

**When the Great Chinese Papermakers Came to Cuba,  
the Great Poets Followed**

because of the great stillness, a silence so deep it made the pink carp  
rise to the pond's surface in hypnotic slumber, because an egret's crest

is blood red, a clenched fist, lips mouthing the air in Os, a tiger's  
stealth among the bamboo forest, a hummingbird's delight in hibiscus,

dizzied by the flashes of sunlight echoed in its petals, because back home  
the rain riveted the roofs over old lovers, a rumor of anguish,  
unreciprocated,

in Havana, one look at the harbors, beyond them toward Regla, the way  
boats  
took on an air of oak leaves strewn on the horizon, an act of forgetfulness,

into the pulp go their memories of a homeland, people, animals, scenes  
of far-gone childhoods, a training of the spirit to hear everything;

they've come to speak silence into paper, the lost language of cranes,  
a parrot's repetition for beauty, the way so many yearn for smooth, clean

surfaces, this heavenly paper upon which to write a first, lasting word.

**ROY JACOBSTEIN**

**What It Was**

Often, at Strong Memorial Hospital,  
I'd guide a 15-gauge needle into the center  
of a child's lower back. It was so easy,  
any time I wanted I could slip it in,  
between the vertebral ridges of L2 and L3,  
blindfolded even, feel the pop, and presto!  
cerebrospinal fluid dripping out. I never once  
fooled the nurses into believing the kid—say, Mona  
or Phil—didn't have acute leukemia. They knew  
the drill: slap on the purple label,  
call the *stat* messenger, console the parents  
waiting for the test results, a flotilla  
of 100,000 deranged cells per cubic centimeter  
pouring from Mona's marrow or Phil's spleen  
into the bloodstream. After my latest 36-hour day,  
sun risen, set, risen, set, I'd arrive home,  
smelling of night rattles and slow clocks  
and sodden scrambled eggs, and slip  
into my then-wife's arms, wanting only  
to be told what it wasn't. But all she said  
before I went under, swimming her reefs  
without aqualung or mask, was what it was.

**KURT LELAND**

**Epitaphs from "New Mexican Cemetery"**

■

In Nam's heat I was sullen and spiteful.

Each night I prayed, so they called me *the Nun*.

Was it fever I sweated and shook with—  
or fear?

What kept me alive was a myth  
called *Home*:

That mine made it less of a lie.

After what I went through,

I'm grateful

to be free of guns, grenades, chains of command,  
the hierarchies that attempt to deny  
which is guilty:

skilled brain or blood-spilling hand.

Here it's the wind's fingers that tear, the sun  
that erases;

I've only to revile  
each afternoon's brief violence—

the storm

that shakes this wooden cross I'm nailed to,

while

it spits on my photograph in uniform.

■  
Just call me *Sister Madge*.

I was given  
*Magdalena*, but gave it up.

If you spin  
the years back far enough, I was born in  
Chihuahua.

Up here, though, the greatest sin  
is to speak English like a Mexican  
pidgin.

*Reject your past*, I taught—correction  
a relentless mission.

My intention  
was good, I thought, worthy of discipline.

Few students now visit this fallen Virgin:

How could they better themselves when their skin  
proved them wrong?

I was sharp-tongued, uncertain  
I rapped the right knuckles beneath my school's tin  
roof.

Repeat this, class—my final translation,  
for what good it does you:

*In Christ we're all kin.*

■  
My congregation was made of wood—thin  
and dry, with faces deeply gouged.

They heard  
nothing when I spoke, though kept watch for sin  
with wide unweeping eyes—

and said no word  
against it.

I wore them down with constant  
devotions, taught their lips to curl in mild  
reproach.

Their dress's every measurement  
they took from me.

Was it wrong, Lord, if I smiled  
as I hoped you would, on their gilt-brushed beauty—  
slightly tragic, like all intended  
saintliness?

They served you in their dumb way—  
even if, as I've been told, you're offended  
by graven images.

If people pray  
to these, they're in need:

For that, *you're* guilty.

■  
Drought spawns its share of pagans—whether  
we thirst for love, rain, the divine.

In this

waterless soil our roots spread wide in order  
to catch what they can of God's brief dis-  
pensations—we pray to whoever's  
on duty: Cactus Kachina, Krishna,  
or Christ.

Forever seems closer out here:  
Somehow we're *in* it—

as if me and Maria

had met in the clouds,  
agreed to submerge  
ourselves in the badland's storm and stress,  
to course down separate canyons,  
eager to merge

our turbid pasts,  
wanting nothing less  
than to carve together our own long surge  
of rapids back to the demiurge.



■

What you called me was never far from your lips.

At first I contained you, no union  
more intimate.

Later you brimmed over  
with the steaming things I served up: *More, more,*  
you were always demanding.

Why did you shun  
my yearning voice, shrink from my fingertips?

For you I made stewed pork and posole,  
ground up chilies and chocolate for mole:  
How you loved my stove's oral tradition!

Though you bounced on these tortilla-floured hips,  
avoiding my kisses, I kept your soul  
simmering—an ancient recipe you stole  
and passed on.

What *am* I, now that I'm gone,  
but this spelled-out MOM in plastic tulips?

■  
What poet's not a mirror's quicksilver  
backing,  
                  a hot social thermometer,  
indifferent to profit,  
                  a prophet's stare,  
love-wounded beyond Mercurochrome's repair?

Here lies a heel winged with wit,  
  whose ancient  
Mercury lies elsewhere—  
  rusted out, spent.

As if words were my silver, Pisces my sign,  
I could make a fish scale vocalize its shine.

My work lies too—I won't say where.  
  Bodies  
aren't finished, only abandoned:  
  Which of these  
still gleams with something of value?  
  Pick through  
them.

Leave a spray-painted stone if it's true  
this miner's life of shaping either ore—  
silver, quicksilver—  
  conducts to the core.

NOTE: The odd-numbered poems in the sequence "New Mexican Cemetery" were published in *The Beloit Poetry Journal*, Volume 47, No. 2 (Winter 1996-7). The present selection of "Epitaphs" completes the sequence with the even-numbered poems. The sequence is intended to be read antiphonally, alternating between the odd-numbered choral sections, with their dialogue between the young poet and the voices of the dead, and the even-numbered "Epitaphs," each for a single member of that chorus.

Ferdinand Victor Eugène Delacroix Conducts His Interview

The last visitor of the night,  
born a Scots laird, now third mate, stork-thin—  
a gut, a bone, a tooth—  
the painter's jug of jade wine  
meant to calm him, though the rain  
had turned to snow on deck, and back  
to rain, and this the fifth watch,  
they paced together, circled,  
shoulder to epaulette, a sea apart.

The mate wanted to tell Delacroix  
about pear blossoms, white, blanch, blank,  
stunning white as a thousand moths,  
and the deep green willows,  
a blizzard of springs flown by  
like a mare's mane, fallen  
like goose feathers, all night and past,  
they hummed *Um a Dunya*,  
Mother of the World,  
by the cold lamps,  
their eyes awash and blurred.

He wanted to say something about wilderness,  
this laird—the hard infertile soil, exposed rock,  
even as the drums pounded from the bow  
as the water stiffened in the morning wind,  
he wanted to pin something down,  
one thing down—  
the name of a star, a burst of light,  
the odor of jungle off Sudan,  
the way a certain fruit glows on the tree  
in its own soft nimbus,  
the moss covered mouths of caves.

From the remains of his pocket  
the laird produced an ostrich-feather-fan,  
soft inner feathers of the bird  
bound by a thin length of string.  
For you, he said to Delacroix  
and as they couldn't find  
a single farewell song between them,  
they took the short way back.

**JEFFREY LEVINE**

**Liturgy**

*If there must be a god in the house...*

*Let him move as sunlight moves on the floor*

—Wallace Stevens, “Less and Less Human, O Savage Spirit”

All this year our weather happened indoors.

All light, borrowed light.

The lake, the predawn glow of cabins on the shore,  
an anchor lamp, the incandescent moon.

All burned a taller, darker twin on water.

Endless, our gift for complicating simplest things.

A breeze lifts the curtain of an open window.

From some other room, bright, crystalline bars,

and then low bars of a piano, some old air.

Slight acrid scent, astringent polish, rubbing alcohol.

I enter the small chapel at San Juan Capistrano

where Junipero Serra celebrated mass,

kneel to say a prayer for my brother,

a prayer that pleads like a scalpel, or should,

but a camera flashes at the rear.

Tourists examine the crucifix; one laughs.

They come to feed the birds.

This day I make for the sun-stippled cloister.

Confluence of earth, cut of land, or its fold,

bleaching sky, swath of wind, length

of shadows. One has only to love

what ripens: Yesterday,

the sweet corn wasn't ready, tomorrow

will be too late, today it's perfect.

Light the fire beneath the pot.

**GEORGE LOONEY**

**We Call It Hot Blood and Hum It**

Fox squirrels are driving the common grays out, the local news says. In a commercial, pink ebbs down a stomach of clear plastic. This is the way, folklore says, to a man's heart. Not for Laetitia, the hottest woman in the world, my friend says. Blood gives up the heart for women like her. And the stomach, bloodless or not, is just a cave with the best acoustics in the body.

Sometimes, the acoustic guitar a street musician plays familiar ballads on for tips gets rained on and swells into a kind of cave music dies in without so much as an echo. I've seen it happen. He coughed and apologized. No money was enough. Later that night, I held a woman in bed and scooted down to listen to her stomach. Whatever was playing, it wasn't classical.

More like the frenzy of Monk on the piano. Loss is, after all, a cliché. But you can't long for what you have, though often we think that is what we're doing. And Thelonius knew that song, a second set of ribs, the hottest music he could play. It's been too long since I listened to that woman's stomach. Loss, at its best, is a music no voice keeps up with,

that hums in the air, and the gray hands that were all Monk had left moved, rabid, over the keys. The blood we hear in love, we call it hot blood and hum it to ward off loss. Even Laetitia will not be Laetitia forever, beauty the first hint of loss we'd deny. Jazz relies on this, music, no matter where it comes from, the ache we can just bear.

A Parable of Dust and Color

*Every angel is terrible.*

—Rainer Maria Rilke

Caravaggio, did you yell *Color's a jealous god* as you opened Ranuccio's body? Did you want to crush it from raw pigments, that color a soldier cursed when his friend became red mist beside him in a field in the south of Korea? Which is more jealous, the body or the soul? You were jealous of how light touched the flesh of a woman or a street boy you had seduced with the promise of color. Your St. Jerome sacrifices one language to another, his open robe a seduction, almost the color you believed Ranuccio saw. Are entire histories sacrificed to a word like *Sonora*? I've lived in that desert, where history's personal, and jealous. Where a man on a city bus spoke in Spanish to a woman who said nothing, cursing her with words full of dust, Spanish a language of parables of dust and water. Your Italian is more a language of fables, and the water that ran in your veins, now dust, carried passions that could curse the flesh. In Tucson, the man who cursed in Spanish needed to be touched by an angel in any language, but the heat couldn't bless him any more than it could bless Anita, who walked into the desert with a pain she had no word for. When the water left her body, the angels who came for her were black rips in the sky, the bodies of crows. Now, everyone you touched is a ghost. Raised from the dead in your canvases they haunt words like *flesh* and *dust*. History is the body of stories told by the dead, and the dead aren't reliable. Maybe you didn't kill Ranuccio. And maybe you'd have understood the anger that cursed a man on a Tucson bus enough to embrace him and call him *mi hermano*. To paint him and the woman he cursed and loved, and reconcile all languages. Caravaggio,

what is this confusion called flesh, this desire  
in the down on a woman's arm you sketched  
as she bent to wash you out of her body? Desire  
is always an issue. Even for the saints, though  
they give it a name that sounds less of the body  
than it is. *Beatitude*, they call it. In Tucson,  
the man wouldn't have said the woman's face was  
*beatific* when she came below him, though  
saints have the same expression in those paintings  
where they look to the sky. Is heaven a red  
mist? the place her sweat cools to? Is heaven  
different depending on what word names it?  
Is it a place at all? Are you a place, Caravaggio,

or a word the body whispers? The body which  
holds enough memory of pain and loss, enough  
blood, to drown the sky of color in any country.  
In Korea, a woman still asleep has whispered  
a foreign name she doesn't know, your name,  
Caravaggio, and it hovers over her body  
like a lover, or a red mist. In her dream,  
she's holding the hand of a uniformed man who  
speaks of how love, like pain, rises through us  
in unexpected ways. In Tucson, a woman  
believes she must choose between curses and love,  
between bruises and the knife she holds over  
a man's body. She imagines the stain, how  
it would color everything. Any choice is lost  
in how it would even change her. Caravaggio,

how has turning to dust changed you? Is it true  
dust renounces things the flesh believed? This  
woman, walking into the foothills, wants to  
learn the word for love in another language.  
Maybe Italian. To stop having the dream  
where she's you and her husband's Ranuccio,  
the hole in his flesh glowing with what could be  
the angel released as a body dies. Caravaggio,

did you love light because it was the only proof  
the world was worth loving? And did Ranuccio,  
drunk, laugh and say there was nothing in the world  
worth saving? Say this is how it happened. Say  
you led him from the tavern where those you had saved  
in color laughed and toasted what they could feel.  
Say when you had thrust the blade in to silence  
the curses he shouted at the world you knew,  
a world of angels who wear the suffering of flesh,  
the blade felt like love in your hands, a holy relic  
blessed by the saints, who love the world in ways  
most can't. You never met a saint, Caravaggio.  
Yet your bodies formed of color speak of forgiveness  
in the language you gave them out of a love  
which forgives me as it forgives you. Which forgives  
everyone who listens. Even the jealous angels  
who bruise our sad bodies trying to get out.

**ROBERTA HILL**  
**Hubert Moon's Dilemma**

Snakes wiggle out the strict mazes  
of their skins. Grackles cover trees  
cackling messages, flying  
on a single groove they follow  
through the field. Hubert never found  
his song, even though some rhythms  
are easy to latch onto. Not for him,  
torn from day and night,  
living a permanent evening at the home.

Once he wanted to bay at the gibbous moon,  
to go where he could settle  
in cool sheets, but he couldn't fathom  
the direction. He kept his arms close  
to his chest, just in case. Who can say  
what word arrests an earthquake?  
What sound could sunder wind  
long enough for him to find his way?

Everywhere he heard that word—  
rotunda. This world was a rotunda,  
and the closest he could come to the feel  
of its meaning was a box canyon  
he played in as a boy. Its orange walls  
sifted globs of sun. The shadows  
chained to leaves were dark enough  
to bring on shivers. He wanted  
his old days back when autumn ran  
ragged over rolling hills.

His gut crusted by doubt and fear  
he wondered how wolves discovered  
the moss-colored star that made them sing  
or how they taught their cubs  
to respect the pack.  
No one he loved ever came back.  
Why he could not say. He watched years  
turn in his hemisphere of quiet,  
wishing for fences and bright stars.

**PAULANN PETERSEN**  
**Under the Sign of a Neon Wolf**

In a fur shop's triptych  
of mirrors, I watch a girl  
watching herself try on coats

of sable, ermine, mouton.  
Her hands stroke  
their ripple of hidden seams,

then wrap a string  
of whole pelts snapping  
jaw to tail around her shoulders.

She draws the mirrors around her too,  
making a three-sided room.  
Its walls are eyes reflecting her eyes—

animals lie in its corners.  
At night when she's gone,  
and the wolf's systolic light

flows through a window,  
the soundless animals rise and move  
to the edge of a red pool.

I was that child born  
under the sign of a neon wolf,  
one who learned to see

in a mirrored room where  
eyes of glass watched every move.  
I stood by a furrier's side

as he matched bundles of mink,  
as his thin knife  
broke into the gleaming pelts.

I learned the indelible  
weight of an animal's  
skin on my skin.

Through air thick with dander,  
above the whirl of needle machines  
stitching together those

tatters of hollow bodies,  
I heard the wolf outside  
high above the street—

silently howling to city traffic,  
head thrown back  
in a curve of neon tubing.

**BOOKS IN BRIEF**

**MARION K. STOCKING**

**Beyond Dialectic**

**Zbigniew Herbert, *Elegy for the Departure and other poems***

(Hopewell, New Jersey: Ecco Press, 1999, 144 pp., \$24 hard-bound, 0-88001-619-1)

**Constance Hunting, *Natural Things: Collected Poems 1969-1998*** (Orono, Maine: National Poetry Foundation, 1999, 352 pp., \$19.95 paper, 0-943373-60-3; \$49.95 cloth, 0-943373-59-X)

**Heather McHugh, *The Father of the Predicaments*** (Hanover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, Wesleyan Poetry Series, 1999, 85 pp., \$19.95 cloth, 0-8195-6375-7)

**Adrienne Rich, *Midnight Salvage: Poems 1995-1998*** (New York: Norton, 1999, 85 pp., \$22 cloth, 0-393-04682-6)

**Derek Walcott, *The Bounty*** (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997, 90 pp., \$18 hardbound, 0-374-111556-7)

**Baron Wormser, *Mulrone & Others*** (Louisville, Kentucky: Sarabande Books, 2000. 100 pp., \$20.95 cloth, 1-889330-38-8; \$12.95 paper, 1-889330-39-6)

These are books I recommend enthusiastically to all libraries, all teachers of new poetry, and all readers open to the wonderful diversity of our contemporaries. In this space I cannot pretend to review even one of them in the depth it deserves. Instead I am going to explore a question that seems important to a review of the poetics of our day. These books will be the resources for my investigation.

Donald Hall, in a recent *Harper's* Forum archly titled "How to Peel a Poem" (September 1999), asserts that "[i]n logic no two things can occupy the same point at the same time, and in poetry that happens all the time. This is almost what poetry is for, to be able to embody contrary feelings in the same motion." That is, logic's thesis and antithesis theoretically lead to synthesis, superseding—not embodying—the dialectic. But Blake's clod and pebble coexist, contraries defying resolution—a source of the Energy that is Eternal Delight. In the *Harper's* Forum Heather McHugh replies to Hall that "the tribe" doesn't necessarily appreciate this complexity. It craves a united front. She makes me think of Longfellow's "Psalm of Life," memorized in my childhood as a "philosophy to live by," and still so honored by the clergyman who selected it for Robert Pinsky's *America's Favorite Poems*. Here the anxieties of mortality dissolve in a single-minded triumph of meter over matter: "Lives of great men

all remind us/ We can make our lives sublime./ And, departing,  
leave behind us/ Footprints on the sands of time.” How com-  
forting, if you don’t let yourself think about the metaphor.

I intend to explore in these excellent new books what Hall’s  
assertion may mean, and in the process to illuminate some  
qualities of these six exemplary poets.

Start with the nature of the language. Each word has a history.  
The old philology of my graduate days may have retired to the  
academic attic, but a new philology, a literal love of words,  
informs the work of our strongest poets. In this they are sup-  
ported by the *American Heritage Dictionary* (Houghton Mifflin),  
with its appendix of Indo-European etymology. McHugh mis-  
chievously ends her book with a little “Etymological Dirge”  
beginning: “Calm comes from burning./ Tall comes from fast./  
Comely doesn’t come from come./ Person comes from mask,”  
and ending: “We get our ugliness from fear./ We get our danger  
from the lord.” A sense of the multiple possibilities of language  
leads at the simplest level to puns (e.g., Rich’s “Someone, I say,  
makes a killing off war.”) Beyond this simple wit we enter the  
maze of post-Empsonian theory of ambiguity, which has at its  
heart not a tower of metaphysical clarity but a swamp of  
deconstructionist “undecidability.” Nevertheless, a careful  
reading of some of our most interesting poets requires that we  
enter. Take, for one, that poet distinguished for her intellectual  
and musical elegance, Constance Hunting, whose poems are  
now collected for our delectation. We may start with her wicked  
wit:

Gulls turn on autumn’s  
wheel, we are all  
gulls, no matter what season,  
but some are more nobly gulled than others.

(“Homage to Robert Lowell”)

But soon we are spelled into the syntactic ambiguity that is one  
of Hunting’s most sophisticated enchantments. Consider the  
phrase “abandonment of desire” in this section of her exquisite  
“Hawkedon”:

‘Death brought to each her fate,’  
but it was time  
and his repeated stroking of her brow  
that gave both pleasure, each saying, “Stop,

stop here," and he  
 not stopping, saying, "No.  
 Not here, not yet," until  
 he judged the time was right  
 and in abandonment of desire  
 bestowed again on earthly things  
 remembered habit of unearthly wings.

The ambiguity of the phrase leads to the larger and more deeply interior ambivalence that strains the erotic against the mortal, the mortal against the immaterial, time against timelessness.

Another route to "contrary feelings in the same motion" is through oxymoron, its extended family paradox, and its larger species irony. A master of this double way of seeing the world is Baron Wormser. Emily Dickinson's smile is "beautifully homely." Paradox doubles and triples into irony in his "Melancholy Baby." Looking back wryly at a figure of himself (distanced to *you*) in a bar:

You peer into your drink. It's no Sargasso Sea  
 And you're no diver. There's something akin to joy  
 In being so world-weary.

Behind the obvious paradox in the last sentence is the ironic figure of the poet, addressing his self-conscious sentimentality with comic distance, yet paradoxically sympathizing with the self who, in the context of the poem, is on his way, first, to a funeral where "Grief wants some air freshener," and then to a poetry reading where

A woman is throwing exquisite  
 Knives at her hapless childhood. It's not so much  
 Enlightening as recklessly appalling.  
 You can respect that.

That twist of the tale is representative Wormser. The title of the poem reenforces the multiple vision. This delicate fusion of wit and humor contributes to the complex humanity of his portraits of others. In the book's title poem, Mulrone, who "didn't know anything except/ Eat, fuck, sleep, ski," is making a few extra bucks packing honey jars with crumpled newspaper.

We were wadding up the wedding notices—  
 Young lawyers in love with account executives.  
 Their fathers were surgeons and vice-presidents;  
 Their mothers were psychologists and counselors.

[ . . . ]

Where the hell do these people come from?  
 He asked me.  
 Mulroney, you dim honkey ass, I said.  
 They are groomed to run the show  
 And he looked down at the crumpled vivacity  
 Of the young brides in newsprint  
 And he broke into an almost lovely smile  
 And he said in a voice that could have  
 Passed for thoughtful, How sad.

That sense of the incongruities of the world, enabling that poetry of the double vision Donald Hall admires, may produce the Horatian satire (including self-satire) of a Baron Wormser (or of Hall himself in some of his recent poems). Or it may play out on a different stage. Either way, it dramatizes what Yeats meant: that from the quarrels with one's self comes the poetry. In language and tone, image and music, Derek Walcott is a pole distant from Wormser. But the double vision is there, though it may be easy to overlook in the gorgeousness of his richly orchestrated lines. *The Bounty* is a wonderfully appropriate title. But the poet's voice under the luxurious "bells of the tree-frogs with their steady clamour/ in the indigo dark before dawn, the fading morse/ of fireflies and crickets" is an ambivalent elegy for his dead mother: "the astonishment: that earth rejoices/ in the middle of our agony, earth that will have her/ for good." Another strong chord is the poet's attempt to reconcile the language and the world of Dante and Clare and the Bible with the language and the world of island life. In "Homecoming,"

[t]he blades of the oleander were rattling like green knives,  
 the palms of the breadfruit shrugged, and a hissing ghost  
 recoiled in the casuarinas [ . . . ]

"We offered you language early, an absolute choice;  
 you preferred the gutters of low tide sucked by the shoal  
 of the grey strand of cities."

The poet replies that he has tried to serve both, but the trees denounce this as betrayal. "We remain," they cry, "unuttered, undefined." The reader of Walcott's work may rejoice that he does, indeed, serve both, that his poetry does "embody contrary feelings in the same motion."

The example that Hall selected as "the most beautiful poem in the English language" is Thomas Hardy's "During Wind and

Rain,” a lyric that achieves its double voice not only from contrasts of language but from the very structure of the poem, alternating as it does images of happy, sensuous life with refrains lamenting the ravages of time. Turning to the work of Adrienne Rich, I admire the use of syntax and structure (the architecture of the poems) to achieve her emotional impact. Rich is a consummate artist, and in this new volume her lyric virtuosity serves a discipline of retrospection. As the title *Midnight Salvage* implies, the work aims to salvage fresh insights through an examination of the poet’s past—a courageous endeavor. These poems are double by intent: the wisdom of the mature artist brought to bear on the raw material of her history. “Seven Skins,” which I reviewed when it appeared in the *Best American Poems 2000* (Vol. 50 No. 2), opens with an expository account of a dinner with a handicapped veteran and then breaks into a complex lyric imagination of what it might have meant to shed the “seven skins” between them had she accepted his invitation to go back to his room. The process of memory hinges to the process of imagination in the structure of this fine poem.

Shelley understood that we often lack the power to imagine what we know and saw it as the poet’s job to *realize* this knowledge. In “1941” Rich sets out to imagine and make real—for herself and for the reader—what we know about the Netherlands during the Nazi occupation. Again, the structure is in two parts. The first is intellectually and syntactically controlled, alternating, as in the Hardy, the sensuous images with a qualifying conceptual framework. In the first lines Rich establishes her credentials. The poet is emotionally both there and here, then and now. Pain has enabled her rapport with the past, but her keen mind precludes a sentimental identification. Imagination is on a tight rein. But in the fourth stanza the poem slips into the past tense; the effort crumbles into conditionals, and the last line stumbles into ambiguity, a broken syntax where several completions—or none—are possible. The emotional impact of the poem, finally, is in the silences that come to surround it. Here it is, complete:

In the heart of pain where mind is broken  
and consumed by body, I sit like you  
on the rocky shore (Like you, not with you)

A windmill shudders, great blades cleave the air and corn is  
ground  
for a peasant century's bread and fear of hunger  
(Like that, but not like that)

Pewter sails drive down green water  
barges shoulder following fields  
(Like then, not then)

If upstairs in the mill sunrise fell low and thin  
on the pierced sleep of children hidden in straw  
where the mauled hen had thrashed itself away

if some lost their heads and ran  
if some were dragged

if some lived and grew old remembering  
how the place by itself was not evil  
had water, spiders, a cat

if anyone asked me—

Hall in discussing his Hardy poem admires the way the sensuous surface of the poem “is in conflict with its melancholy paraphrase.” Thus art entices us to follow the poet into dark realms we might otherwise be inclined to avoid.

Which leads us to what Hall, “for lack of a better word,” calls content. Though emotional ambidexterity appears to be a hallmark of a great deal of contemporary poetry—certainly of the poets I've chosen to review here—it has been a gift of poets from the earliest times (e.g., *odi et amo*). Today many poets, like Rich, explore their emotional ambivalence in the contemplation of time. Time, attended by Memory and conducting to Elegy, is a central character in many of our strongest poems. Zbigniew Herbert's recent volume offers a retrospective of thirty-five years of poems not previously in translation in books and includes all the poems in his 1990 *Elegy for the Departure*. “A Ballad that We Do Not Perish,” from his first collection (1956) begins:

Those who sailed at dawn  
but will never return  
left their trace on a wave—

and concludes:

but those who leave behind only  
a room grown cold a few books  
an empty inkwell white paper—

in truth they have not completely died  
their whisper travels through thickets of wallpaper  
their level head still lives in the ceiling

their paradise was made of air  
of water lime and earth an angel of wind  
will pulverize the body in its hand  
they will be  
carried over the meadow of this world

The poet in this sadly sweet poem balances his attachment to the material world with his longing for some sort of immortality. Thirty-five years later in his “Elegy for the Departure of Pen Ink and Lamp,” he apologizes for not remembering “either the day or hour/ when I abandoned you friends of my childhood.” He then recreates them verbally in exquisite detail, not without gentle irony: “O silver nib/ outlet of the critical mind/ messenger of soothing knowledge/ —that the globe is round/ —that parallel lines never meet.” The poem darkens as it proceeds:

o ink  
illustrious Mr. Ink  
of distinguished ancestry  
highly born  
like the sky at evening  
for a long time drying  
deliberate  
and very patient  
in wells we transformed you  
into the Sargasso Sea  
drowning in your wise depths  
blotters hair secret oaths and flies  
to block out the smell  
of a gentle volcano  
the call of the abyss

I would love the space to quote all six pages. (The attentive reader would find even more evidence of a source of Baron Wormser’s serious humor.) But here’s the conclusion, the mature poet’s last word, not only to his youthful implements but to his youthful self:

I have  
very little left

objects  
and compassion

lightheartedly we leave the gardens of childhood gardens of  
things  
shedding in flight manuscripts oil-lamps dignity pens  
such is our illusory journey at the edge of nothingness

pen with an ancient nib my unfaithfulness  
and you inkwell—there are still so many good thoughts  
in you  
forgive me kerosene lamp—you are dying in my memory  
like a deserted campsite

I paid for the betrayal  
but I did not know then  
you were leaving forever

And that it will be  
dark

I'd like to end this brief survey by going back to the poem that, among all the moving elegies in these six books, most moved me (*moved*: relocated, stirred, advanced, excited, even to tears). This is the first poem in Heather McHugh's *The Father of the Predicaments*, the sixteen-page "Not a Prayer." The poet here is tossed on a storm of conflicting considerations and emotions and rides out the storm with all the conflicting emotions on deck. The initial irony is in the situation: the poet, who happens to be our dean of word-wizards, attends the dying and death of a beloved friend who suffers from an excruciating difficulty in expressing what she needs to say. The poem is in thirty short sections, some just a line long, tenderly recording the drama of the last days. The occasion is appalling, but the poem never for a syllable palls. The responses of the poet are mercurial. She longs to understand her friend's wishes. She suffers from her inexperience as a caregiver. She resents the husband-doctor's insistence that his wife is not in pain. She knows he's wrong. She agonizes with him over his failure. She

responds to the beauty of the dying woman, draws calm from her. Surprisingly, she feels no terror or revulsion—more reverence. She is devastated when the woman fails to recognize her:

It hurt my heart it horrified my head, that blunt

“Who are you?” spoken to my face.

And so: “I’m not myself today,” I said.

And here we see why all this misery is for the reader not only bearable but profoundly engaging. The whole poem is transfused with McHugh’s radiant spirit and humility. Her sense of anecdote, her use of flashbacks, her puns and salty jokes, her candor (*candor* from *to glow*), her ear for dialect and dialogue, her neat inversions (“The glass stopped looking for her”), her eloquent metaphors, her perfect timing in telling a story, her refusal to take herself seriously as she takes so very seriously every detail of the action. It is powerful drama. It is one hell of a strong poem.

I am tempted to extrapolate from this quick survey something of the spirit of our age. Instead of a rage for order, for single-mindedness, for “Truth,” our poems embody an epistemology that welcomes complexity, doubleness and tripleness of vision (if not, usually, Blake’s fourfold vision). It reports on the mysteries and the inconsistencies of the human mind and makes music of what it finds there.