

BPJ

BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL VOL. 52 N°2 WINTER 2001-2002

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BOOKS IN BRIEF, by Marion K. Stocking

"MAKE IT STRANGE":

Robert Haas, Ed., with David Lehman,

The Best American Poetry 2001 46

COVER

Liddy Hubbell, brush ink drawings, 2001:

Buddha (front)

Buji: No Action, detail (back)

→

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

BPJ

THE EDITORS OF
THE BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL
ARE PROUD TO ANNOUNCE
THE WINNER OF THE NINTH ANNUAL
CHAD WALSH POETRY PRIZE
OF \$3,000

TO
GLORI SIMMONS
FOR HER POEM
"GRAFT"
IN THE SUMMER 2001 ISSUE.

HONORING THE POET CHAD WALSH,
CO-FOUNDER, IN 1950, OF THIS MAGAZINE,
THE PRIZE IS THE GIFT THIS YEAR OF
ALLISON WALSH SACKETT, PAUL SACKETT,
AND MARGARET AHO.

GARY J. WHITEHEAD
Swimming in the Dark

If the end comes as a cool, black seeming,
an imponderous suspension, a breathless
kind of displacement like the beneathness
of a comma blotted out by spilled ink,
I think I will have gone there once, swimming
in a lake at night. Curious to sink

as deep as I might, or deeper, I'd hauled
a skull-sized stone out into the middle.
A father of dark, my arms a cradle,
I wrestled that weight, heavy as my fear,
out to where no one would hear if I called.
There was no moon watching. I'd swum too far.

The shore was a wide ring I could not see.
I paused long enough to drink the air deep,
and deeper, and then let that stone drop
me as I emptied breath. I fell for hours.
I fell for years. I still feel it nightly—
that sleep, that death, that splashing into stars.

JANA HARRIS

Prison Diary: Broomshop Regulations

Duke Deneke, Rawlins, Wyoming, 1889

Dear Ma'am,
Just to inform you
I have four more months
to accomplish my end.
Here I tie brooms, not the best job—
which would be working
the tailor shop or kitchen.
Today: we had plenty of drinking water.
Back when the first tints of green
began to show despite cold nights, I cursed
all sheep and anything to do with their evil
smelling wooly puff faces, then eloped
with a saddle, coming back
for a different man's horse;
a long heavy contraption of Colt make
essential to my future.
You often basted me about whiskey, but
one drink turns me top heavy for hours,
though a square pink bottle of hatchwood rye
—rat poison really—good health
insurance against snakebite.
And if that don't work, mix it with coal oil
kept for building fires in wet sage during
lambing time. Always open season
on horse thieves and herders—a hot metal
slug passed so close to my face it rendered me
deaf, dizzy, and common as these
rust coated eating utensils here

where even the broomshop is dusty
enough to bring on quick consumption.
Tying, not such hard work, but
tiresome standing all day.
So hungry by ten sometimes I eat
broom corn. Others eat soap to get
out of tying their quota which
never works and I've never known anyone
to return from the veterinary's infirmary.
Bet the skeleton that decorates the corner

→

of your schoolroom came from here. I've started
to chew tobacco with the good effect
of it making me so sick
my stomach forgets to gnaw. At night
if unshackled, we're permitted
to make horsehair hackamores by lamplight.
We're permitted paper and ink once a week.
We're permitted to talk at meals
three times a year:
Thanksgiving, Christmas, Fourth of July.
Ma'am, if I am overly weary of anything
it is of hard crusts and ends of loaves,
stew one morning, hash the next,
thin soup at three. Every Monday
I carve my brand into an old bread heel,
on Friday it's still in the bread pan.
I heard a guard tell a visitor we'd be
uncontrollable if ever
we got enough to eat.

You often said I'd be hanged
before I turned twenty-one.
I'm writing to say
I've four more months
to prove you wrong.

CAROLE STONE

Hardy's Love

In intermittent sun, a woman sits on a park bench
reading Thomas Hardy's love poems,
the wind making piles of leaves the snow will bury.
Or is it only the breeze in its listlessness?

For years Hardy and his wife slept apart.
In his novels husbands and wives groped
toward each other like high wire artists inching

across the tight rope through space.
Wife dead, Hardy began to love her.
Woman much missed, how you call to me.

Last night in her recurrent dream, her husband,
wearing heavy tweed, shoveled the driveway's snow
before it climaxed in ice.
Can it be you that I hear?

"Have you nothing to say to me?" she asked,
and then morning came and she woke to marriage.
Or is it only the breeze in its listlessness?

KARL ELDER
Logo Rhythms

+

Judas's cockeyed
kiss or sniper's four quartets—
hoarder's crucifix.

√

Check out the spoiler
on young Road Runner. Rootster?
Or rototiller.

∞

Complete with caption,
here is the cartoon for which
time wears its goggles.

∞

Open Form, Closed Form—
which is which, these Siamese
twins whose names got switched.

Σ

Some sure-fangled clamp:
certainty snakebit—though not
swallowed—jaws still hinged.

—

Ingot of lead or
of ink, entropy's ally,
plenty's enemy.

~

Ought one not doubt doubt,
a likeness caught here as if
an eyebrow, mirrored?

≅

What is turbulence
to one third is the bottom
of the flag unfurled.

=

Teeth tracks like ski tracks
in the white icing and/or
Oreo itself.

≠

Nothing is nothing
except when it's not something
that crosses the mind.

≡

Ichimi shizen.
Poetry and zen are one.
Shizen ichimi.

×

The times you've sensed how
the straw through the lid might be
like sex with an ex.

||

O pair of l's, you
who, covert captain, are true
to the rank and file.

⊥

Whenever heaven
plays croquet they borrow from
Euclid his mallet.

π

Bad ass attitude
in coat and hat. Stonehenge pimp
stroll in the abstract.

Δ

So then the voice found
Adam, said, You want I should
draw you a *picture*?

÷

Whose lagoon, what sky
is this reflection of moon
and solar eclipse?

#

Your call: Italian
ticktacktoe or weighty case
of too much *vino*?

&

Am per *sand*? Even
the eldest of the monks must
have rice in his bowl.

%

Lest you look down on
the blind, know impunity
is a scent its own.

\$

His serpent's tally,
Satan's monogram: Snake, one.
Adam? Love. Zilch. None.

LANCE NEWMAN

Joe Hill: Up Past Hanksville

Joe ran up on that famous bison herd
coming around Henry Mountain one day—
calves nuzzling for teat in an aspen bay,
one old bull set to charge, big as a Ford.

Low ground—the Waterpocket Fold, the Swell—
pinned them on the laccolith's scrubby flank
like catfish in a swale spring runoff dammed
with driftwood, duff, and silt. Joe said, "My hell,

Earth gets much warmer, desert'll rise up
and starve them on the summit, leave a cairn
of raw pelts to mark when the bosses learn
they like car profits better than the hunt."

That old bull pissed, chuffed at the straggling calves,
and turned his herd toward saltbush and big sage.

LANCE NEWMAN

Joe Hill: Down by Socorro

Joe, bored and hot, patrols Trinity Site,
rambles down the eastside perimeter
road. It cuts sand and greasewood straight as light
a mile out from the fenceline. He measures

the madness blowing through rusty chainlink.
He stops and squats and stares. What the hell's that?
Four legs, large ungulate, with warpaint streaked
black from snout-ridge to brow. It hung its flat

face forward like a retiree peering
through bifocals. Yard-long horns, one brushy.
Loose mutant? No. A fugitive oryx,
gone from some president's Texas game ranch—

undocumented, heart pumping red blood,
geigerling saltbush for water and shade.

RANJANI NERIYA

Biorhythmia

i

The quietest one rose from blackness
a distant train's wheel of passage
a coal-dust involucre
dissolving in a fizz of bees,
a pool of rain fretting
my sandaled feet in
Dr. Adappa's garden wild,
as grandfather, grayish homespun
hand resting on a knurled cane,
dozed in a chair, waiting
for the nurse to call my name.

ii

The varied tumble was all about
the tile-roof home I grew in,
from slivers of skylight
to the portico's shadow-veils,
lattice-worked allamanda
bougainvillea, wafting in the
chicle-tartness of sapodilla,
hog-shapes of the jack-tree's
honeying fruit, my father's
endless giving and all the
people who went and came.

iii

Venkanna's shirt stayed on
a nail on the wall
of the cattle shed, infusing
the patient grassy breath
of animal hide, through the
uneven toil of his long day,
while tooling around I imbibed
the wisdom of his vernacular
soft-tinted, tinkled fine
as temple silver, fine as the
minimal ping of the rings
along the curve of his ear,
a total hymn, holy sinew
humble sweat, walking
the tireless dream of earth.

iv

Sloe-eyed Chandana, sundry help,
came to us for just a while
tinsel'd like a doll from
the rubble of life on a ragged edge,
her hands torn, gutted
churning meal for a man
who savaged her in
his drunken hell, for
three little girls she raised,
like weary vetch, waiting
to be weeded away,
her deadfall by her door
a heap of screaming tortured flame.

v

When the crowd gathered
in the pipal's shade
to hear the minstrel
pluck arias from
twine cross-strung on
the bowl, scoop-dried,
of an ageing ash-gourd,
I was not far behind
the silk of his eyes
moving into the starlings'
luminous swirl, till
one day he touched
and sank into the
nearness of its ravishing cloud.

vi

I can still scent
grandfather's gravelly hand
closed over mine, his beard
audible on the nape of my neck,
as he guided the
slate-pencil so long ago, how
my tutorial began
with the intonation of *om*;
emerged from blackness

→

the quill-deep sprinkling is
differently amber at every faltering step
but the end of all beginnings
is that heart of country
that old enchantment of
a wide-awake sky.

HOLLY HUNT

He Said that He Dreamed Deep-sea

and came to her wooing
like white sails blowing
against the middle
of the black night
and they stumbled
through a moonlit door
dragging a bedsheet
onto windsweep hill
dark ocean the backyard.
They tied the corners
to their ankles
held the other
corners high
a whipping bowl
set on its side
and lifting up with wind
they shifted to and fro
across the world awhile
before the morning came.

1.

Never step over a sleeping baby

Why was that?

If a child lies asleep on a rough-planked floor,
on a pallet, on red earth, do not step over,
shortening its life. Go around.

This is a black child. Do not step over.

In our footsteps, red dust,
the dust of place (Alabama,
cottonfields, a cast-iron bed,
the kitchen—where day begins
in a woodburning stove, a dough
board and a beating fist),
the dust of flour and smoke.

In our footsteps, red dirt
broken under a yella man's plow,
and his girl, yella like her daddy,
walking beside him as he turns
the rows. He'll grow cane,
or cotton, and the yellow-clayed sun
will drop its dusty light, and the heat
hang its traces upon their backs,
and the day will hallow its way to evening,
and a long walk home,
and a bath in a ten-gallon tub.

In these footsteps, all that we've carried,
the blackened skillets and mason jars,
the madagascars and pillow shams,
the quilts, the feather ticks,
the crooked bones and good hair.

The footsteps of what we know,
that tobacco juice will cool a wasp's sting,
that you rub soap on a red bug's bite
and give your wounds to a dog to lick.

What falls on a child,
its mother's dust, the weight

of a dusty world, choking dust,
four colored girls on a church
pew shaking the dust
from patent leathered shoes,
or a Greyhound bus beside
a red dirt road, dust
settling on empty seats.

The weight:
that she has believed
or not believed, the dust
inhaled.

2.

Never leave your hair where others will find it

Lonely,
hair seeks entanglement.

Slattern,
it does not care where it lies.

Larcenous,
it will steal anything—dust, spells, smoke, odor, seeds.

Glutinous,
it reaches and wears the world as a dangle.

The ebon-haired night
and its starry pins.

And my love's hair
silver and gray.

And my grandmother's snuff tin
filled with the hair of all our women:

Pearl,

Paralee,

Palestine.

These fine strings black and straight.
Our keepsakes.

3.

Never leave an ax or a broom in the house overnight

Because the broom will beat you.
Because the ax will chop you
and a wise woman always knows her assailants.

Because of the banal misogyny
of all we've constructed,
can you trust a plate?
Is the rug lying-in-wait?
At night, each thing admits its nature.
When you're naked and alone, or not
alone, roll over, extend your hand
into the emptiness. Wait.
In the kitchen, something will move,
a hem of straw, and then a blade's footfall.

4.

Never eat fish with milk

In Alabama,
at the supper table
these blessings:
cornbread, stewed tomatoes,
okra, possum patties, fried
corn, potlikker, fatback,
fried pies, buttermilk.

And these warnings:
mason jars with swollen lids,
bent cans, lockjaw,
mold, mayonnaise—left out,
hot sun, going bad—
scald your dishes, smell it first,

never eat fish with milk.

5.

Do not bathe during your period

My mother stands
bewildered.
I have not died, her girlanimal,
new breasted and sealwet.

My lungs uncongested,
breathing freely. A feral child,
amphibian.
The water carrying its pink taboo,
whirlpool spinning
down the drain
with its one mouth pursed round, oh.

6.

Never let your girlchild whistle

My mother loved to whistle,
to call the wind into her mouth,
its world-whorling hiss and hush,
sharp sounds sheared through thin lips,
pursed and blowing, a whistle.

It was not permitted.

But her husband whistled, short and long,
calling their children down store aisles,
from the backyard to supper, short and long.

Calling forth with thin sounds,
drawing his will out of the world
on a thread of notes.

And my mother
working the nightshift,
stands beside the bed
of an old woman.
Listens and waits.

For an old woman,
yellow as bone,
rasping,
squeeze-pulling
air
from a valise of lungs,
tight
wheezing,
and then one,
long,
gasp-
ing, shrill,
a breath,
an act of will.

KAREN MACEIRA
What I Offer This Valley

Far from the rivers of my home,
from the one lagoon
where my brother took his life,
I have come. Yet he is here.

To soak the ground,
to breathe through alfalfa leaves and dust the tasseled corn,
I bring his despair.
To root with pigs half-caked in mud,

and wander with loose calves near the dangerous road,
I bring his despair.
To fill the silos, cling to moth's wing
and span the valley fog.

In this quiet, the least voice clamors.
In this bliss, the great unhappiness.

JAMIE ROSS

Las Hijas del Brujo

So good to be a turkey, outside
our house. Hot in the house. Shrinks
you like shrink wrap. Remember

the heads they sell from the Pacific?
In our little *casa*, we can do them too.
Such a fine turkey, even this small.

When it was you—
Now *there* was a problem.

MARY KANE

Invitation from Cezanne's *the House of the Hanged Man*

Picture a terribly ordinary desolation—three small dark rectangles
Inside a broken-faced rectangle of a house. A doorstep on which the day
Will not happen. A tree whose branches scratch at the measly blue
Top rectangle of sky. A little in the distance, far enough away not to feel
This stone foundation silence, a town; a few more rectangles,
Red, black, white, just enough so that the heads, hands, cracked feet,
Jackets on hooks, the talking and thinking that need to go on beneath
 roofs,
Get imagined without anyone noticing their own imagining. Down there,
Among those rectangles, the day happens. Back here, up on the hill,
The windows remain dark. Bits of slate. I see your room, it could be
At the back of this house, upstairs and away, a green couch against the
 west wall,
A desk by the one window, a glass-doored bookcase filled with poetry.
You are in your room and your room is in Cezanne's painting and all of
 us
Looking at the painting have no idea that you are there. That in your
 room
And the space surrounding it, the day is also absent. That a terrible
 family
Has moved into the house of your body. Its members sit on the furniture
And leave dark residues in the tub. Someone is preparing a large meal in
 the kitchen
And you might be feeling condemned. Or maybe, like the hanged man,
 you feel
The absence of the wood beneath your feet, a crowd marveling at your
 strange,
Dangling body. And then I think he must have done something enormous
To have been hanged for it. I want to knock on your door and say, come
 out
Into the happening day even if your body is failing you. Let's walk down
 the hill
Towards town. Let's do something enormous, my friend.

MARY KANE

Yellow Chair

Setting: summer. Long rain. Grief on a barn roof. Beneath a square, south facing window, a yellow chair.

Red Riding Hood wakes, collects
her limbs into manageable systems
and faces laundromats and driving.
Somewhere her wolf enters its forest.

Morning: Cold, gray. The chair lights the corners of novels. A mouse.
Scent of moth balls.

An old woman up on the hill, presumably
Red Riding Hood's grandmother, pours
bourbon in the afternoon and pulls crab grass.
The wolf sets to work, gnawing bone.

Night: Cloud curtained moon. A child falls from bed. BAM. Silence.
Wails in the dark. Someone trips, on the way to the child, over the
yellow chair.

The old woman's car breaks down. Repeatedly.
Trashman comes. Red Riding Hood sets out
wine bottles in blue recycling bins.
The wolf continues eating, distributing pain.

Outside the window, a garden. Drenched green, day lily orange,
balloon flower blue.

Red Riding Hood strikes up a conversation
with the wolf, outside the post office, something
concerning hard boiled eggs and salads. She is startled
by sudden ideas about absence.

Someone stares and stares at the yellow chair.

The wolf devours every last bit of organ,
blood, voice, breath. The only sounds
are mosquitoes through a torn screen
and Miles Davis, long dead, following his trumpet.

Can a chair shed its shape and dance?

All that is left of Red Riding Hood is left
in the wolf. She hasn't any pain any longer.
Her grandmother and friends wander in and out
of the post office, waiting for imagined letters.

Leap out of windows, mad from rain or weeping?

Several of Red Riding Hood's family members
gather about the wolf's charred body,
doling out piles of ash. I've no idea where
they plant them, what grows from what's left.

In the distance: the yellow chair.

MARY KANE
Tea and Cake

Scene: *The painting is called The Doorway and has never existed. It takes place at a kitchen table, and there is no doorway visible, although a large window takes up more than a third of the canvas, and two dark haired women in their mid thirties sit in mismatched chairs, at the table, before the window. They wear light dresses, floral designs. Brand new sandals. Because I recognize the room as a room from many years ago, I have no idea how the women got back there or who (was it one of the women?) baked the exquisitely iced cake they are in the middle of eating. Neither of the women has yet spoken of the phone call. And because the painting does not exist, how could they have. But clearly, they have received a phone call. It might be that their father has died. They must be sisters, and I am certain it was a significant male who died, but the tea cups' soft tap against the saucers suggests that the dead one is their friend. They do not look at the tea spilled in their saucers. They listen to the absent heart at the center of their three-way friendship, a raucous hunger, the clock tick that keeps them from speaking.*

The Action

Red Riding Hood Explains Confusion To Her Wolf: Confusion, you see.

No, that

isn't it. Confusion is what

I, Red Riding Hood, carry

in my basket, or it is

on the menu at the hospital, and even then

you have a choice between it

and scrambled eggs.

In The Mind Of Sister #1: And what kind of choice is that? Two names
for the same thing. Disagree,

one you can get

to the bottom of.

Still In The Mind Of Sister #1: (A large woman wearing a blue dress
stands in the doorway) That is why this painting is called *The*

Doorway?

It ought to be mentioned

that she just appears. And appears as though

she won't be moving for a long time.

In The Mind of Sister #2: She
might be the answer.

Chorus: Huh? *(Everyone stares at the covered tray.)*

Sister #2 looks around the hospital room, still believing the Blue Woman
might be the answer. Did you ever understand anything so clearly in
your entire life?

*(The large Blue Woman continues to stare.
Light emanates from her ears.)*

Chorus: So this is what it looks like,
(everyone swallows at once.)

*(The words crawling around the baseboards
are not at all afraid of
being sucked up.
No one has heard the sound
of a vacuum in a very long time.
Sweeping poses no real dangers.
If, however, they happen to be dumped
into a dry creek bed
That
might be cause for concern.)*

Chorus: Why *(everyone looks as though
they might ask.)*

The Blue Woman: *(without speaking)* You are,
all of you,
a dry creek bed without
even noticing it. And do you think
what you think of
as a dry creek bed is aware of its own
situation?

Of course not. That is why I stand here and glow
and all your words keep crawling around the periphery and can't get
out. They
never will. *(She goes on and on.
No one ever finds out*

→

*What is on the lunch tray.
It remains covered forever.
Most likely, everyone stops wondering.*

*For a moment everyone's minds overlap.
Each has glimpses of blue
in the corner of her eye.*

*It might in reality be the sky
outside the window in the painting,
mid afternoon, May, this day
and many other days just like this one
from so many other years, meteorologically speaking.)*

BRUCE BOND

Vigil

Nights I take my lost sleep to the one lamp
left burning in this house and thoughts of the man
hospiced in a room next door, when, not knowing
where to turn, I am hanging on by a thread of music,
the last stitch closing a heart in its crypt.
Just what binds me at the other end is unclear,
though slowly as my hands work the frets, they take on
their life, like pigeons in a magician's vase—
which is part of the thread's resilience, piercing
everything and silence, part of why, having come
so far, I hesitate now to snip it with sleep.
It simply melts, the way the green line melts
in a heart monitor, slicing through its box
and melting, though I like to think it follows
something, that my neighbor where he lies, slack-jawed,
amazed with damage, offers up the needle
of a kindred music; for his curtain is no less
troubled with lamplight, and as his pulse flits
about in its cage, the same thread of air goes
through him, holding nothing going in, nothing going out.

ELLEN BASS

I Love the Way Men Crack

I love the way men crack
open when their wives leave them,
their sheaths curling back like the split
shells of roasted chestnuts, exposing
the sweet creamy meat. They call you
and unburden their hearts the way a woman
takes off her jewels, the heavy
pendant earrings, the stiff lace gown and corset,
and slips into a loose kimono.
It's like you've both had a couple shots
of really good scotch and snow is falling
in the cone of light under the street lamp—
large slow flakes that float down in the amber glow.

They tell you all the pain pressed into their flat chests,
their disappointed penises, their empty hands.
As they sift through the betrayals and regrets,
their shocked realization of how hard they tried,
the way they shouldered the yoke
with such stupid good faith—
they grow younger and younger. They cry
with the unselfconsciousness of children.
When they hug you, they cling.
Like someone who's needed glasses for a long time—
and finally got them—they look around
just for the pleasure of it: the detail,
the sharp edges of what the world has to offer.

And when they fall in love again, it only gets better.
Their hearts are stuffed full as eclairs
and the custard oozes out at a touch.
They love her, they love you, they love everyone.
They drag out all the musty sorrows and joys
from the basement where they've been shoved
with mitts and coin collections. They tell you
things they've never told anyone.
Fresh from loving her, they come glowing
like souls slipping into the bodies
of babies about to be born.

Then a year goes by. Or two.
Like broken bones, they knit back together.
They grow like grass and bushes and trees
after a forest fire, covering the seared earth.
They landscape the whole thing, plant like mad
and spend every weekend watering and weeding.

HAL MARTIN

The Diesel Mechanic's Woman

She once had a fiancé who was a mathematician. She asked him what he did and he told her that he had two specialties, Knot Theory and Dimension Theory. "Knots, like my shoelaces?" she asked. "Sort of, except you'd have to scotch tape the ends together. Knots don't have loose ends." She switched to dimension. "What do you mean by *dimension*?" she asked. "Well," he said, "a line has dimension one and this table top has dimension two and, of course, the set of all square summable sequences is infinite dimensional." "Of course," she said. Somewhere she had once heard of the empty set. "What's the dimension of the empty set?" she asked. "Minus one," he replied. The engagement didn't last. The cosmos is a very strange place and a year later she was engaged to a theoretical physicist. One day when she entered his apartment she found him quite preoccupied. She went to the kitchen and fixed a pot of tea. When she brought him a cup he distantly said to her "You know, if you were a photon you would not experience time." The cup gave a little quantum jump and landed in his lap.

J. L. CONRAD

In the Midst of Reading Ammons

Bird-beak and tree-tether;
crusts of boulders hold to ground,
folds of soil clinging roots

into themselves. O improbable
essences, bear me to ground—
shape the unaskable

intransigence into birches, or ash-
trees, whose branches (brittle)
even now are crumbling

making earth more
than it was, the bodies borne
changing back into new

growth, boulders'
rock spines caving
letting in the light last.

χ

Can be cause for misunderstanding: the work done towards
the end & the end
called indistinguishably *the work*. Opus
Magnum. In Sanskrit look
how smoothly *apas*, work, turns
into *apnas*, possession. In the windmill,
the outcome is all indoors: ground meal rising to conditions capable
of combustion and subsequently flame-like
licking up the sails.

χ

Wagner, likely a descendent of our engraver,
Waghenaer, penned combustible *operas*.
The captain is on deck, drugged and vocally
amorous. See her flame-like
planted in the mirroure, four arms freeing
up the wind. . .

χ

A mirroure takes possession of?

χ

I have long wanted a Claude lens—
not so much to see landscape tinted & dwarfed into the pictur-
esque, as to see through a visual i-
deal, because looking *at* a painter's painting is more than
one value displaced from looking *through* the eyes
that _____ it,
isn't it?

χ

edualC ne eiv aL La vie en claude

χ

One is free to view mountains as painlessly stalled (perhaps sedated)
whales. This spectacle is more comforting than
imaginative. The two so rarely over-
lap.

χ

There is the coming
and the outcome, both *things*. And the measure
and the quality. There is the coming and the outcome,
both *kind* of things.

χ

Both gesture and gesticulation stem from *gerere*, to bear,
or carry

χ

Gesticulation is a diminutive form of gesture which is
where if you ask me the indignity creeps
in

χ

A merry spectacle this making bread. Finished,
it begins
again. A swoop of pigment. A flourish. A quixotic
getting at. Admittedly,
I have tilted at windmills.

χ

The cooing I lavished on its sails!
Sword point dagger point first reef—
bone-slipper
lobe-sling

quatrefoil	lunulate	wallower
cream	milk	chalk

scissors, scissors, scissors

χ

In what contexts () might the phrase *uncouth gesticulations*
be redundant?

χ

I was partial to words with words with the postfix *form*:
gemmiform, bud-like; nubiform, cloud-like. And always to *rood*,
a splintered version of?

χ

See Purbblind Doomsters. The eyes, or some eternal happening
between the eyes. **Inter-**

est
pose
cept
fere
mission

χ

Monocular despots & desperations. Of atombattle we might deduce
that this-
ness is a syn-
aesthetic seizure. Gesture?

χ

Assorted phenomenological proverbs, versified:

*The [O] form of a fold
in linen or cotton[,] shows us
the resilience or dryness of the fiber;
the coldness or warmth
of the material. . .*

*In the jerk of the twig
from which a bird has just
flown, we read
its flexibility or elasticity. . .*

*I hear the hardness and unevenness of
cobbles in the rattle
of a carriage*

χ

-ness: forming ns. expr. a state or condition, esp. f. adjs.
ness: a promontory, a headland, a cape

χ

-ous: forming adjs.

having many or much, characterized by, of the nature of

porous

nervous

Strung-up in trees, in endings better to feel

χ

A faint, rustling congress. Bohemian moonlight, collage underfoot. Our
vessel-

tree, he tells me, when the eye is caught

working through its own shadow

image (see

Purkinje, J.E., physiologist)

χ

Art Critic adds:

Form coordinates diversity, it does not pile up facts.

That is why form comes from the artist's looking for chaos.

χ

And look how vaguely Old English embraces the spirit

of opus: *efnan*: carry out produce put to work

exercise practice celebrate per-

form

χ

Gothic cathedrals, coordinated versions of?

Windmills, dislocated versions of?

χ

Throw factoids to the wind (art critic enters

again):

The Gothic man left wholeness [Opus Magnum] to God.

x

operon: a unit of coordinated genetic activity in the chromosome.

Synopsis: carry out produce put to work

exercise practice celebrate per-
form

x

(enter poet with prescription)

*They say the cause of revolution is hunger in the inter-
planetary spaces. One has to sow wheat
in the ether.*

x

Then tell me at your leisure, where are you going?

When the word escapes you,

what is remitted?

x

What is the task—as in tax—of love?

x

1530. In the Tyndale Bible: *taskmaster*

x

Who does collecting?

Who does permission?

x

Assorted E.V. Lucas theories, coupleted

*With blacksmiths we can be
on terms of intimacy;*

*millers are distant
and aloof.*

Blacksmiths are at our doors;

millers mean a climb. . .

*It requires influence and
rare gifts of persuasion and charm*

*to be invited up the steps of a mill
into the terrifying a-*

*bode of thunder
and whiteness*

χ

Commandments 11-∞
Thou shalt step outside of the body

χ

pneumatic: pertaining to or operated by means of wind.
pneumatic dispatch: the conveyance of letters, parcels,
etc., along tubes by compression
or exhaustion
of air

χ

For you as yet but knocke, breathe, shine, and seeke to mend

χ

Dispatch from Waghenaer. Captive in his mirroure,
the captain *gestures*—let's give him that dignity—wildly

χ

Sails thunder lilies in reflection

χ

Enters the spectacle, uncertain as to which of us is moving

Notes:

the art critic: Fairfield Porter (from *Art in Its Own Terms: Selected Criticism
1935-1975*)

phenomenological “proverbs” drawn from M. Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology
of Perception*

E.V. Lucas quotation from C.P. Skilton’s *British Windmills and Watermills*
the poet’s “prescription” from Osip Mandelstam’s essay, “Word & Culture”

THEODORE WOROZBYT

Her Thoughts

A plait of geodes: her thoughts, of smoke and of melons
grown from vines of pure air, are sky.

(I have named these holds of quartz and work
for the journey of a pearl along her shoulder.)

Unknown without her the coagulated dark
on muscles, droplets sliding along glaze, waste
of sheared, luxuriant years burning like coffee
in my mouth: unknown the scoop of yolk-colored light

that runs a green river through hidden tigers' eyes,
the bestial planet where my atmospheres
raise tongues from a winding sea in the whirl of breath-
making. Unknown, the anaphoras of bald-toned miseries

and their dream of a final despair. Unknown,
and unfinite, the questions dragged like sour dirges
out of puddles, the hearts corded with staves,
the dulled orchids, ratty drain-hairs leached.

Her tresses stretch on intimate damp scissors,
her sunflowers spatter the dry beaks of cardinals.
My hunger for the brightness of such knowledge
slides a blood ruby down my throat,

and these are hours I have dug from the earth
cast and moist, smelling of fresh iron.

BOOKS IN BRIEF:
"MAKE IT STRANGE"
Marion K. Stocking

Robert Hass is the guest editor, with **David Lehman**, of *The Best American Poetry 2001* (New York: Scribner, 2001, 287 pp., \$30 hardbound, 0-7432-0383-6; \$16 paper, 0-7432-0384-4). As poet laureate, Hass worked—through conferences and newspaper columns especially—to realize Lehman's idea that "excellence in poetry is not incompatible with the pursuit of a general audience." But there are problems with words like *excellence* and *best*. In his introduction Hass acknowledges the historic unreliability of contemporary opinion: Emily Dickinson, four hundred of whose poems he considers to be "among the four hundred best poems ever written in the English language," would not have made it into a *Best American Poetry 1862*. Toward the end of his selection process Hass began to mistrust his eye and so asked four young poets (named) to go through the whole pile of candidates and make suggestions. This editorial failure of nerve is understandable, considering the iconoclastic programs of many influential experimental poets. Even Donald Hall, editing the Fall 2001 *Ploughshares*, confesses to experiencing a deteriorating confidence of taste and discrimination, attributable, he imagines, to advanced years.

Taxed with boxes and boxes of marked-up magazines and photocopies, Hass turns taxonomic. First he distinguishes Lehman's predilection for poetry of wit from his own for poems a little "spiky or raw, and intellectually demanding." Second, he discerns three traditions in our present poetry: 1) metrical verse, "classical in impulse," 2) free verse, either inward or outward turning, and 3) experimental work, "usually more passionate about form than content, perception than emotion, restless with the conventions of the art, skeptical about the underpinnings of current practice, and intent on inventing a new one, or at least undermining what seems repressive in the current formed style."

Hass's final classification turns out to be generational. He'd have organized the volume, had Lehman permitted, by opening with the two dead poets, Elizabeth Bishop and James Schuyler. Then he'd present the youngest poets and proceed, decade by decade, back to the fathers and mothers of his own generation. Lehman had to insist on the alphabetical arrangement standard in the series, but the generational idea has me interested, and I'm going to try to read the volume the way Hass conceived it.

Elizabeth Bishop's "Vague Poem" wanders like a random memory-journal until it finds itself and focuses darkly, accurately, on sex. It feels to me like a first draft, dramatizing a process of composition. I appreciate that. The Schuyler is not much—a monochrome linear sketch of a place. As I leap forward to Rachel Zucker, one of the two poets in their twenties, the generational difference is striking. Zucker's "In Your Version of Heaven I Am Younger" presents a self portrait in a collage of "versions": jump cuts in her controlling metaphor of film. When she turns from the various cinematic "versions" to the "real," the perception is even more confusing: "In real life, I am on a small bridge over a small creek./ Then it isn't a bridge but a stadium. Then a low table." By the end this process of deconstruction obliterates the whole series:

In this version the camera has a tiny light leak and the film, after reediting, has no blond and no plane and no preservers. No metaphysical struggle, no hero, no chance for financial success.

The poets in their thirties embody many of the same qualities as the poets in their twenties: dreamlike leaps, disjunctive organization, complexity and multiplicity of character, an obsession with the process of composition, unreconcilable contradictions, the evaporation or dissolution of the self. Look at Claudia Rankine's "A short narrative of breasts and wombs in service of Plot entitled." Rankine explains in her note that two conflicting opinions on childbearing, aired on the *Today* show, "had something to do with her writing" this poem. It begins:

Liv lying on the floor looking at

The Dirty Thought

[The womb similar to fruit that goes uneaten will grow gray fur, the breasts a dying rose, darkening nipples, prickling sickness as it moves toward mold, a spongy moss as metaphor for illness.]

Key words in the prose stanzas that complete the poem are *fear* and *but*. The dominant syntax is the question. What music it has comes from the rhythm of the stanzas' uniform shape, the beat of the sequence of questions, and the echoes from word to word: *sprained/ sprayed, answer/ cancer*. The poem ends "She

tosses a but against the wall, // she tosses: boom, boom.”

The word—an ugly word—that comes to mind is *conflicted*. Ninety-two percent of the *American Heritage Dictionary*'s usage panel objects to this “pop psychology” verbal. But it seems to me the only way to describe the uneasiness of at least half the poets in this age group in the face of the apparently irreconcilable forces they encounter. In “Meteor” Larissa Szporluk furiously (and gleefully) chooses “To leave,/ to leave. That’s the verb I am” because “my space is crossed/ with fear and hair and tail and hate,/ the bowels of the lioness,/ iron in her roar.” One way to handle such confliction (not really conflict) is simple contradiction (almost a formula in some recent poems). Here’s Christopher Edgar in “The Cloud of Unknowing”:

White-tunicked

Waiters with jet-black hair served us cannelloni
And Chianti yet at the same time did not
Serve us cannelloni and Chianti.

And later: “The Pakistani woman at the gate was very helpful/ But could not help me.” Another approach is to retreat from “content” to word play. Here’s Mark Levine in “Wedding Day”: “She was a pristine evasive gesture./ She was a prissy evasive jester.” Like amusement park rides, such work is entertaining, even exhilarating. But a sub-subject haunts all such poems: a mind-set or world-view that assumes the impossibility of extracting meaning from experience or from the slippery language that would express it. If the reader can extract a meaning, well, more power to her. It may be glib to target such sources as deconstruction and post-postmodernism, though they are part of the picture. I have to assume that this stance has appealed so profoundly to so many of this generation because it expresses their experience in this era of disjunction and exponential change.

I recently heard about a poet who had just returned from Bread Loaf with “the word”: “MAKE IT STRANGE.” Heather McHugh, in a letter to the editor of the *New England Review*, explains that the “STRANGENESS of existence, not its essential comprehensibility, seems to me most eminently ponderable.” And strangeness is, in the generation of poets in their thirties, more than a field to ponder: it is a principle of composition. Joshua Clover is good

at it. His “Ceriserie” begins:

Music: Sexual misery is wearing you out.

Music: Known as the Philosopher’s Stair for the world-weariness which climbing it inspires. One gets nowhere with it.

Paris: St-Sulpice in shrouds.

Olena Kalytiak Davis manages it differently, and more engagingly, in “Sweet Reader, Flanneled and Trulled” which begins:

Reader unmov’d and Reader unshaken, Reader unseedc’d and unterrified, through the long-loud and the sweet-still I creep toward you. Toward you, I thistle and I climb.

I crawl, Reader, servile and cervine, through this blank season, counting—I sleep and I sleep. I sleep, Reader, toward you, loud as a cloud and deaf, Reader, deaf

as a leaf. Reader, *Why don’t you turn pale?* and *Why don’t you tremble?*

Well, actually, I do tremble, unseedc’d as I am. Are all the poems in this decade stretching to make it new by making it strange? Well, no. We have Amy England’s entertaining prose-cum-verse “The Art of the Snake Story,” a herpetological hootenany. And I admire Rachel Rose’s pair of poems on “What We Heard About the Japanese” and “What the Japanese Perhaps Heard,” a shrewd and subtle anatomy of cultural stereotyping—wit with teeth.

Among the poets in their forties I recognize some of the elder siblings of the conflicted and make-it-strange generation. The strangeness of Nin Andrews is playful. Her “Notes for a Sermon on the Mount” begins:

1. Pussies are not gods. They are created beings.
2. Unlike god, they do not always exist.
3. Dignified, majestic, intelligent, we must attend to them nonetheless.
4. Like all spiritual beings, pussies cannot be seen with the human eye at just any time of day.

The poet’s note (slightly longer than the poem) assures us that if we suspect she meant *pussy* anatomically, we are right. Many of these poems of the poets in their forties seem to say very little, though their notes insist on their seriousness. Brenda Hillman’s “The Formation of Soils” begins: “For forty million years a

warm, warm rain—// then the sea got up to try to relax.//
 Vulnerable volcanoes had just melted away.// He worked below,
 translating the author's imps and downs, his ups and
 demons—;/ pines grew skyward though the pines were not."
 Hillman explains in her note: "In relation to something like an
 era, love or insight seems like air, and human times of making
 (or as we sometimes say, *having*) experiences are so brief com-
 pared to how long it takes for rocks to crumble. All the kinds of
 significance are layered in an unknown order." This not very
 fresh notion is supposed to account for the friction and the
 function of the strangeness.

Perhaps Dean Young speaks for this generation of poets when he
 explains that in "Sources of the Delaware" he was "trying to get
 a bunch of disparate material to fly in some kind of formation,
 weird art-world events, pseudo-myth, something I'd written
 about a phone conversation with a friend." (The friend who
 haunts the poem is Tony Hoaglund, who is mysteriously other-
 wise missing from this anthology.) I can extract a poetics for this
 generation from these poets' comments on their poems—a
 valuable service of this series. And the notes do assure me that I
 am reading as the poets wish, not trying to wrench them into my
 own procrustean bed. I can now go back and enjoy or loathe the
 poems for the verbal carnival ride, without any irritable reaching
 after "meaning."

There are two poems by poets in their forties that are outside
 this poetics of strangeness. One is the hilarious "I stopped
 writing poetry. . . ." by the many-talented Bernard Welk. When
 this verse-essay appeared in *The Antioch Review* I photocopied it
 to send to poet friends. Here's the opening:

I stopped writing poetry
 When I was just starting to get good at it. First
 I got good at rhyme, so I cast it away.
 Then I got good at line and stanza construction—
 So good I hardly needed to say anything at all.
 My meanings emerged

In the spaces in between.

So I got rid of that, too.

For six pages Welk lampoons the whole spectrum of contempo-
 rary poetry and the excuses for versifying. I'm still laughing. It
 will never make the Norton anthologies of the next century—too

many footnotes required—but it's a great work for today's readers.

The other heretic in this decade is Lucia Perillo, whose "The Ghost Shirt" balances loose terza rima and meditative free verse, reconciling what Hass describes as a "split between the impulses of an inward and psychological writing and an outward and realist one." The poet pays close attention to the actual ghost shirt in the New York Museum of Natural History, ponders its history, and then applies the same sharp observation to her descent into the subway underworld and the Dantesque journey out to the far suburbs, all during the protest against the acquittal of the officers who assaulted Rodney King. The poem is tense with conflict, historic and present, external and psychological. Perillo enacts these tensions in the process of composition yet never seems "conflicted," since she is experiencing and pondering the conflicts from a firm foundation of humane conviction. This is one of the very few political poems in the anthology. Of course Hass and Lehman are generous with poems that are political in the Language Poets' sense of the word: rejecting the syntax, prosodic traditions, and linear thinking that are the language of the economic and political corruption of our day.

Now for the poets in their fifties. Here we can trace the genealogy of the make-it-strange school back another level. Consider Mary Jo Bang's "Crossed-Over, Fiend-Snatched, X-ed Out." Here is the word play that liberates words from any pre-existing meaning: "The outrageous dawning/ of opinion—swayable, swayed. Suede// brushes against the train/ as it enters the opening, a napkinish ring with a we [sic] portrait/ of the wedded couple." Lyn Hejinian's rompy "Nights" flits from Gilbert-and-Sullivan-esque nonsense ("I thought I saw a turtle-dove nesting on a waffle/ Then I saw it was a rat doing something awful") to scraps that seem to announce a poetic stance ("I saw a juxtaposition/ It happened to be between an acrobat and a sense of obligation/ Pure poetry") to what seems to be a judgment on the whole enterprise ("It is just this kind of ridiculous language, banal but lacking even banality's pretense at relevance and sense, that I hear in my sleep; I wake, feeling irritable and depressed."). Exactly! Alice Notley's selection is five pages from a manuscript of over three hundred pages "intended to show the

words
 swaying and stemming from my
 saying, no
 echo.

Twenty-five verbals in twenty-one lines dramatize the stress of expressing an inward process. Graham taxes syntax almost to its limit. Periods give way to colons. Everything in flux. Antecedents become a puzzle. The first person disappears, and a mysterious *they* take over the stage. *They* have to be words, twisting, dreaming, slithering in and out of metaphor, and finally “the gazing straight-up at the reader there filled with ultimate/ fatigue,” drained, it seems, of all accumulated meaning.

Hopkins seems to be the tutelary spirit in “Gulls.” Graham begins with the intense sensuous observation of the natural world, a discipline that leads through attention to what he calls, in an early journal, *inscape*. *Inscape* for Hopkins expresses the dynamics of perceptible form. Intensified attention leads to “all things hitting the sense with double but direct instress.” *Instress* seems exactly the right word for the sensuous objective here, in “Gulls,” transformed into the dynamic subjective. For Hopkins, the transformation is to a spiritual insight. For Graham, turning at the end of the poem to the listener/reader, exhausted by her effort, the transformation is to the words on the page—a poem. There is more to this work than I have myself discovered; Graham in her note speaks of “spiritual states,” states I do not yet recognize in the poem. She considers that in this ontogeny she is recapitulating a universal psychological phylogeny. All this may well be there. At this point the poem more simply holds me spell-bound, and perhaps that is enough.

The editors also represent poets in their fifties with a good many more easily accessible poems: Sharon Olds on her father, Billy Collins on a no-school snow day, three poets with comic poems of self-consciousness about their poetry. And a really wonderful series by Yusef Komunyakaa on the seven deadly sins: a banquet of wild images, those for “Lust” especially luscious.

Of the poets in their sixties I have little to say. There are only seven of them. There are poems here that “make it strange.” There are poems about the poetic process. There are poems by

poets of substantial reputation producing lines like these:

O hummingbirds who drank from her tower of red,
know that the Queen of Red River is dead.

Her pink-haired doll, ape, and pony have fled
through the dresser mirror, as on a pick-up bed.

Then we have this:

when a man dies
or a woman dies,
the whole world of which
he is the only subject
dies without residue
(Or the whole world of which
she is the only subject
dies without residue).

You don't want to know who wrote

And you, like a late door-to-door salesman,
With only your own beating heart
In the palm of your outstretched hand.

Finally here is a stanza about rain, New Jersey rain to be
precise, in "streams and beads"

Of indissoluble grudge and aspiration:
Original milk, replenisher of grief,
Descending destroyer, arrowed source of passion,
Silver and black, executioner, font of life.

I am numb with dismay at the moist, pretentious, sentimental
stuff, the deflated language and the inflated language, from poets
who have elsewhere published some very fine poems.

Despair not. The poets in their seventies do not inflict these indiscretions on us. Granted, there is one make-it-strange poem, Robert Bly's exploitation of the illusory freedom of the ghazal to indulge in some planned incoherence—an innocent self-indulgence. A preponderance of twilit poems let the "eternal note of sadness in." But these are very well-made: Ashbery's sad little dialogue; Donald Hall's exquisite lyric, influenced by Hardy's poems on the death of his wife; Anthony Hecht's melodious "Sarabande on Attaining the Age of Seventy-Seven"; John Hollander's skillful "What the Lovers in the Old Songs Thought," a meditation on origins; Carolyn Kizer's rueful literary anecdote from the past. Most of these are formal, the good "old" formal-

ism. Most deal directly with ageing. All delight me with their lyric grace. And as an antidote to the crepuscular tone the editors give us Grace Paley's down-to-earth love poem, "Here."

Four poets of this generation have work radically different from these. Adrienne Rich laments the failure of an architect's integrity, "an artist/ who in dreams followed/ the crowds who followed him." Kenneth Koch addresses an anti-war poem directly to a personified World War Two, funny and candid and devastating. Robert Creeley has been working with visual artists for some years now, and the poem here, "En Famille," presents two quatrains for each of ten portraits by the photographer Elsa Dorfman. We may see the portraits on the web, but I felt no need to look: the limpid lyrics, each in its own form, are sufficient unto themselves. Here's a sample portrait:

We're here because there's nowhere else to go,
 we've come in faith we learned as with all else.
 Someone once told us and so it is we know.
 No one is left outside this simple place.
 No one's too late, no one can be too soon.
 We comfort one another, making room.
 We dream of heaven as a climbing stair.
 We look at stars and wonder why and where.

Mystery and clarity marry in these sturdily-centered poems, with love implicit in each.

And finally we come to Galway Kinnell's "The Quick and the Dead." Like Jorie Graham, he opens with meticulous observation of a process and finds the subjective implicit in the objective. Like her, he has to push out the limits of the language. In most other ways they are radically unlike. The subject/object here is a dead vole, jerking, heaving, shuddering "as if the process of decomposition/ had quickened in him and turned violent." A burying beetle is excavating a grave and maneuvering the vole into it, where it will nourish the next generation of beetles. To describe the process Kinnell improvises a vocabulary—participles, nouns and verbs—to express the strangeness and energy of what he is observing, words like *howking*, *drooking*, *sloom*, and *slorp*. In context these seem exactly right. He commands the reader's attention to this initially unnerving process, but finally—well, read it yourself. (By way of disclosure I should confess that my enthusiasm for the poem is not unconnected to

my having heard him read it and then two days later having observed the exact phenomenon, precisely as he described it—never before having even heard of a burying beetle.)

Now that I've read the anthology in Hass's inverse chronological order, what have I learned? Not much that wouldn't have been clearer had I read it decade by decade in chronological order. It would have been easier, if more academic, to trace the genealogy of the calculated strangeness: the generational shift from the humanist value systems of the mature poets to the "conflicted" value vacuum of many younger writers. But I am wary of generalizing from this one volume, however seductive the temptation. Another editor might have selected entirely different poems. Thinking back to David Lehman's commitment to the "notion that excellence in poetry is not incompatible with the pursuit of a general audience" I ruefully conclude that there is less excellence in this year's anthology than I would have hoped and much here that might send that hypothetical general reader running off howling.

Thinking further, I am saddened that there is so very little here—from any generation—that concerns itself with broad cultural issues. As our traditional political and economic and social certainties are being challenged and our knowledge of the universe, inner and outer, is exploding, these poets appear oblivious, except as they may be reacting by retreat into individual closets. On September 11 a reporter from NPR interviewed our new poet laureate, Billy Collins, asking how poetry could serve at such a desperate moment in history. Collins responded that one can turn to any book of poetry and find that any poem there (he mentioned Frost's "Stopping by Woods" and *Leaves of Grass*) would be life-affirming—a counterweight against everything that had happened on this grim day. Wouldn't it be lovely! But I wouldn't send a reader to most of the poems in this year's *Best* for a world view broad enough to counter our confusion. *King Lear* and *Prometheus Unbound* might help, or poets from other cultures: Paz, or Herbert, Neruda, Soyinka, Faiz, Breytenbach. We need the poets of individual and inward vision, certainly. We need play and experiment. But we also need the "unacknowledged legislators." I trust they are among us, though unacknowledged.