

BPJ

BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL VOL. 53 N°2 WINTER 2002-2003

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

TO
PATRICIA GOEDICKE
FOR HER POEM
“HOLE”
IN THE SUMMER 2002 ISSUE.

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

RACHEL MORITZ

Boat People/Photograph/Hong Kong, 1976

What happened? In the photograph a boat pulled into a harbor. My father was standing there, camera clutched beneath his beard. Wind

blowing. *Who was on the boat?* Throngs of them,

all of them. They were not dying yet, and they were not swimming. *Lucky*

people. The boat listed with their weight.

Did they? They were many. They came from jungle. They came from city, from jewel, green jewel, extending

over water. *Where?*
Where my father was. *When?*

He was much younger.

Why were there people in the boat? They were in black and white. They were not people, they were there. He held a camera. The boat was

listing into port. *So many people thronged*

together? Each one had a body, and yet each one was headless.

They did not have bodies yet. They had not walked on land. That's how he could

tell. *Tell?* Salt air. South China Sea. Salt air, in the boat sailed. Sir Francis.

He circled and he circled and he circled

them?

Who? The golden fleet, fleet of stars, fleet of dragons, there was a fleet then, and the men on board the fleet smelled harbor. *Did your father*

harbor? I don't know. Behind my father, a boat listing in.

RACHEL MORITZ

Self Portrait (or how the woman didn't miss the furniture)

If you are left in a closed house. If you are left, stocky chair
and sofa, left in a closed house, not like a human infant in form
to be abandoned and missed, not like an infant swaddled tightly
in blue jumper. If you are left

without strangers to unwrap you over
and over again. You are left—one chair bought in haste at a thrift store.
One chair of tartest pale green.

You are left before daylight and returned to after daylight—

flat seat pushed to table, pushed, blue Chinese lampshade
on table. If you are stiff like a lampshade each day for life

—no one,
not even a woman will notice how, no one, not
even a woman will drive over bird-empty streets home
to you, will drive in the dark

first ice slick dangerous beneath snows.

If you are left without leverage, without life—

if you try to raise a pillow and reach the doorway—*she has gone to*—
the smallest gesture, the cushion clutched and unclutched.

AMY BEEDER

Western City

That glimmer is not the dead rising from their shattered cars,
or, corpse-stiff, stumbling from ditches
but a flickering jack-light, an antler or shimmer of bone

from the river's cradle: Rio Puerco, strata of dark sand
& ash, transfigured stars, starved cattle's ditch
where the dead sip, remote in plain sight

with no woods or green weeds to conceal them:
Citizens of an indifferent wind; O modest dead, speechless
& unheeded warnings to those who come thinking

this climate some proof of election or long-desired change:
Even now they are coming, even now
holding maps up to study the distance, squinting

from nine-mile hill at gridlines; some pageant
arrival that might finally burn off the past—
the city dreamed out of darkness

but who doesn't wish it, to fall like a comet
into the future, to vanish in sparks and effulgence of light?
Here we hide bodies in plain sight: all tombs

should be of air, gully or train-bed, barren fields
where houses proceed from a treeless landscape, this
imagined city, inelegant city, but discrete

in the block of its state, standing Oz-like on the flatland
Even the ghosts rise up to it—
an island surrounded by blizzards of darkness.

AMY BEEDER
Cotton & Turnip

I freely confess my particular indisposition to be moved by [vegetables] . . . often accounted Prodigies

—Cotton Mather

When Heaven spoke through nature any cabbage
Could show a rupture in the Human sphere.
That stalk whose puny root should not have held it
Was an omen for the rot of souls, a Prodigy of sin
& *Divination*—& Still you say the blood is on us!
Friends, this was not Salem's first ominous Turnip
Nor the first trespass He answered with excess—
Did you think all dead in the flood had equally sinned?
Goody Parker, Becky Nurse & Wilmott Reed.
Martha hanged & Giles stoned for standing mute
Sarah Wilds, Sarah Good. As the powers of air
Leave barren the world, the righteous will perish
Some few, among the wicked. Though good wheat's lost
When pestilence descends, you burn the field.

MARK KRAUSHAAR

Jack

When I said don't run he ran faster.
When I said quit now and he could see up my
dress he slowed down, fine,
though as far as the view went: no way.
My name is Jill. I'm forty five
and there's things you remember.
I remember we started to climb
and I said leave off with the shoving.
I remember I told a story, counted backwards, said
a secret and what happened happened, anyway, period,
because it did, and he could have died they said,
lost an eye, broke a leg. But it's nice out,
early autumn, and I'm hanging the wash when
suddenly from up the street rolls by this
hat on its brim like a hoop,
so I picture myself as seen by myself
watching this hat as if there could be nothing
in the world so sensible and real and I think of Jack
long dead now of course, but in the plain
clarity of his absence it seems miraculous,
all of it, god or no god.
So long story short. He tripped and pitched
forward and he couldn't grab my arm because
he wouldn't let the bucket go—there's no lesson there,
not for him—god or no god it's blind chance that
lets us live, but there came this silence
and a breeze went by. And as I got to my feet.
I could see my uncle's cottage and I could see the fields
and the lake and I made this picture of all of it,
myself in my white dress making
this picture of myself in my
white dress regarding the fields,
and the lake and my friend, too, one arm
over his head, opposite leg drawn up as though
swimming in place. He could have died and so forth,
you know, but I knew he was fine,
twelve years old, you know these things—
but there came this silence as I say, and I thought,
Here I am and I'm twelve
and I'm standing here.
And I was, too, I was standing there,

→

and I remember the sky was a white bowl,
and through the leaves I could see our cottage
and the winding road, and how the bucket lay beside him
and sunlight wobbled the puddle it made.

KARL ELDER
Nocturnes

(Urania)

June, and in millions

of jewel-like drops of dew

 dwell diminutive moons.

This is how heaven sends its scent

 so in the morning you

 use your hands to wash your face in it.

(Euterpe)

June, strewn white petals

 on the sidewalk cement

 where now splat raindrops,

a worn denomination of coin

 so thin there is only its luster—

 not the white of the white

but clear, an invisible thing distinct

 as the difference between looking at the yard light

 and at blossoms *in* its light.

(Clio)

June, and the boom of backyard fireworks

 like a tree that has suddenly bloomed

→

on the horizon across town
has shocked the light out of the fireflies.

Now they travel more slowly, silently,
stupidly,
like the particles of darkness
they mostly are.

(Calliope)

June, and the juvenile great horned
is the sound of a rusty hinge
as the doors of its hunger open
at inexact intervals
on the solid geometry of the dark
where the parent owl waits
in silences long and several.

(Erato)

June, and with the speed of a hummingbird's wings
a bead beats the walls
of a plastic whistle
calling kids playing Kick the Can in.
The stars blink.

→

Doorbell lights link the houses in the dark.

Bedsprings, bedsprings, bedsprings.

All night

crickets sing.

(Terpsichore)

June, midnight.

The bugs have taken their last bite.

A neighbor's compressor

metallic as the cricket

shudders and falls asleep.

Parked under the streetlight,

Shawn's black pickup still ticks.

There is reason his shadow is quiet.

Who in his right mind

bounces to bullfrogs

plucking their fat rubber bands?

(Polyhymnia)

June, a day begun when the goldfinch

skipped the length of the lane like a stone.

When mayflies danced in place,

→

an erratic whirl of electrons heated by the sun.

When the form of the oak, the ash, the linden

turned amorphous in the breeze.

When in the afternoon a lost squadron of geese

flew so low overhead

their wings whipped up sound

not unlike dime-store balsa-wood planes,

their rubber bands wound and released.

When the only sign of now, the night,

was crow, sitting warily but still for his portrait

on the ball of a flagpole—shadow lord of all,

at once magnifying and soaking up the light.

(Thalia)

June, a delicate rain.

You don't mean to look up her skirt,

but now as if afforded a periscope,

you slowly focus upon the asphalt

turning from drab to patent leather.

(Melpomene)

June, and the funeral home lights

are on in the basement.

There has been an accident,

a little girl.

It is how the undertaker

will afford the hall

for his daughter's wedding.

Suppose in midst of preparation

he freezes, looks to the ceiling

as if standing under

the dumb thunder of a dance floor.

What love has joined

let not grief put asunder.

Should we take the bride's hand

to find the only step she knows

is the danse macabre, it is no wonder.

ANNALIESE JAKIMIDES

Reunion at the Vietnam Women's Memorial Dedication

She leans into my body.
Hotdance enters my stiletto heels.
"Teri, is that you?" she asks.

Her eyes insist I must remember how to
bandage raging arms
stitch emptied eye sockets
dam up blood rivers
wipe the spit.

She waves her thin arms into the night.
Timedance slows me in its coopered circle.
"Teri, is that you?" she demands.

Her hands steady me as I
lift the jack-knifed torso
shift the limp penis
soak up the soup of urine
stroke the crusting skin.

She breathes her words into me.
Slowdance spears me to the hardwood boards.
"Teri, is that you?" she whispers.

Her voice requires me to
hum the fucking Beach Boys
lie in the knuckles of that one thin sheet
reread Siddhartha
accept the sweat of her hand.

Nodance slithers down my aching spine.

JENNIFER CHANG

I remember her, a bowl of water.

Here in *Uktion*, thirst
is currency. I have wealth

and I have greed, my head
a pool of waves I drown in daily. I see

the walls wave too, fretting
ignorant sheets

of light. Reflection, nothing
but

a different way of looking,
I think. Or, isn't shadow

a black water, the shallow ink
we can't dive into

but want to? I remember her,
a bowl of water

I spun my loose
buttons in—a sort of

tiddlywinks—until
she spilled out and broke

the bowl. A burst
that rang like bells. Who

wiped her off the floor?
Where did she pour? Jars,

thimbles, a porcelain basin.
She ended the game. But couldn't she,

like me, have been a band
in the spectrum? A violet murmur

to my red haze? O,
she swam and she swims, treads

against currents I can't find, to the deep
where even light drowns

and water's the one uncertainty
to count on. Somewhere deeper

we will forget our faces. Sister,
here's the dress

I hand down to you—lace of algae
and brine, a sea urchin's

limy shell—hand it down
farther.

NILS MICHALS

The Ambulance Came & We Know How That Goes

a hand moves
& is the world
& flaming a little in the detective's grasp
in the light of late fall, the leafed-through flipbook—
stray dark strand
milligrams
the collar flushed (wings)
who is this Buzz character?

He says the drug peacefully blinks
one to sleep. Painless, he says.

(& look, from the Latin, *ambulare*, to walk though the word
made French as they were dying & they were
dying in trenches.)

So often it is another night & I feel the block
verging on sleep—
a siren reaches its red anchor,
city sounds return.

(With speed Godspeed, Merci
a shell, the flicked splinter of a shell
& Monsieur have you ever—
some blood & the skin heats like a shame.
Ambulances volantes. Travelers, flying.)

The hand moves
& is the world
& flaming a little in the hand
the polished instrument vaguely in error & wait,
a slight ping & the skyscrapers shoot up
overnight like corn. Bullets are insects.
How one must work to fly or run
in a dream, the fish
bathypelagic.

(The word made French as they were dying,
the wounds under a sunned hand, in it
fresh, white gauze.)

Of visible light, that light cycling for the eye, red is the most languorous
wave.

Ambulance. Traveler.

Whose touch is a film, & seamless.

Part for me it says, let me go I have somewhere to go.

All looking is looking for

the dispersing thing—

Oh, it is quiet after—

CHRISTINE GARREN

Shift

The garden floats its asters. Its border muted now.
All of the garden tilts towards the east,
the heavier flowers leaning on the western side, in,
the frailer, middle flowers opening like the sense
of a language. When I lean into the garden, something occurs
as in something nearly mended shifts again
into its torn part

that feels like a palpitation, though it is more than that,
beyond that, in deeper tissue, in the most embedded
cellular energy, a shock that continues.
For a long time, I thought the shift was related to death.
Though it was beauty. It was too much
to look at the garden's beauty,

the leaning dead flowers beside the still live ones.
The light across them, like water. The soft cloud passing overhead
as if passing for the garden. The leaves on the black earth.
The crescent shaped outline of the husk
of a dead cicada. And its ventricular cusp
above the jointed legs, and the roped spinal column,
brown, violin-like, hollow, in rhythms, with grace, wasting
at the flowering center.

CHRISTINE GARREN

The Mother

The dahlias were in bloom and the birdbath-water shifted

with small lifts against
cement its world of leaf

that I have run to see, run quickly out the door to see

and the minor shape of the moon was over the yard mid-day

curved and almost absent

and there was not
the noise of insects as they were

stopped mid-sentence

which is how I knew you had returned.

CHRISTINE GARREN
The Steps Remembered

There was the earth, then the
I do not remember seeing the
Broken, staggered, with shadows
and found the sun on their granite.
in the distance birds lifted. The house
the gardens, the fruit-trees razed. The
to the field for more foraging. The steps
they come to mind now—door not there—

steps, then the earth again.
steps originally. I recall them.
of thistle on them. I looked up
The steps led to field-air, where
had long been torn down, the arbors,
birds turned westward, then circled back
led nowhere. With nothing at their end,
thought (leading up) to the hollow of the clouds.

MOLLY TENENBAUM

Clothespins

What do your shadows look like, clacked against the fence
Stitches on a wound
A smile with teeth
A rope bridge swaying
Stick-feathered crows
Each beak a different direction

Why is it quiet here, just the grass breathing
No people, only the ripple
Like cloth that wrapped around them
Someone used to sit
Here at a table perhaps
Think of the steam from the tea
Not steam from tea but where
Tea was once, steam was once, the air
Shines now and doesn't remember

What could you clasp there, pinching to the ropes
Air in the shape of baggy shorts
A nightgown
A transparent shirt

Why is the backyard alone, why is the grass long, why in this corner
Does a mossy board fall inward
What do I know about coming and going
My light is all in this
Little square, I stay and the sun
Continues, stay and the fence cuts the sun

Who invented you, who squeezed to make an end open, who
Let go and it closed
Someone who needed to hold something
Who had no extra hands
Who'd had it with pricker-bushes, leaves in the folds
Rasping the underarm ever after
A whittler, a man good with springs
Someone just trying to help
No one, I was here always
Always a string ties across
A space and a wavering
Cloth hangs to dry

I needed you without knowing, why didn't I know
I was out of fashion
I was dangling rubber gloves above a sink
I was in a camping kit put away wet
I didn't hear when they called dinnertime
I slickened my stems in drizzly rain
When I woke up, gray flecks were ingrained

I remember, I almost remember
You ran zig and zag among the towels
There used to be a piney-smelling soap
The old dog lay on the packed dirt and finally
Couldn't get up
The neighbor's trees' plums went plop
I sang to you when you were a baby, but you forgot

MOLLY TENENBAUM

What He Wanted to Be, My Father Used to Say

was the man who, when the opening door
tipped a bell, would set down the broken part
he was holding, wipe his hands on his blue
canvas apron, and step from a back room
to see who had come. He'd lift from their hands
what they'd brought, brush dust off the underside,
check connections, wiggle a loose peg, press—
do they fit?—jagged edges together,
run a hand over their box, their housing,
their cantankerous, kinked-up old favorite.
He'd write their name on a tag, a paper
tag on a white string winding, unwinding,
that twirled as they left, door breezing shut
behind them.

Days later, the very day
named on the slip, they'd tingle the door, work
the crumple from their pockets, almost speak,
but he'd be so quick, they'd see the lumbar-damp
back of his shirt, then he'd reappear, smiling.
See, slapping a chair-seat, *That'll stay put*,
or with polished bakelite gleaming, chrome
warm as cream. Only his shoulders would show
as he hunkered behind, *See, now the knob
clicks right*, now the yellow light's on, now no
blue flash, but silent trust power is pouring,
no raveled escapes, to just the right place.

They'd leave, pulling the weight to their chests.
Silly, he'd think, after all the trouble
of dropping it off, to take it right back,
but china chips, chair-legs, worn cords, sprung wires
drag like wedding-cans behind everyone,
might as well admit it, he'd think, and return
their beautiful, burnished, hairfine, oiled, their
own, their very own, waving so long, for now.

He'd wipe his hands, new prints smudging the old
on his sawdusty apron, turn as the steel tang
grazed the bell. Had he changed? The leftover
parts on the workbench would blur, shining worms,
coiling turds—the filings jounce his allergies,

→

who do they think they are, barging in, they
don't know what it's like to be called
every time a goddamn bell rings, what am I,
a cuckoo clock, in, out, in, out—distracted
by cuckoo clocks, their pine-cone gold bobs,
verge escapements, pallets, arbors, pipes.
Safe among small things. So much for the sweeping
ups and downs of gods, he'll dodge their big
stomping feet, glue back the pieces they break,
bang the hammer till crescendoing racket
covers him all the way up like stove-heat.

Why isn't he the one bringing a broken
thing to the shop and leaving with a fixed
thing under one arm, hero jaunting off?
He's got a wife and two kids, his favorite
foods are pickles, onions, Hungarian peppers,
horseradish, herring, cheese sliced thin
as yellow glass, and he will die soon
of poisons in diet soda, of love
for crocus cloth, tack cloth, emery paper,
Titebond, Tru-Seal, epoxy, Slip-free
Elastomeric Patching and Caulking Compound;
for cracks, as in Great-Aunt Eve's pitcher
he fixed before I was born, and my mom
tells it as a miracle, Eve finding it,
whole, at breakfast, Christmas day; of love
for the woodblock he gave me to pound
nails next to him as he worked—I smashed
each one crooked but that was my real
self pouring through the hammer, sideways;
of love for the butter he wasn't allowed;
and even for those he waves goodbye to,
who tramp off, plug ends flapping, good luck
to them, poor saps, as he turns back
through the doorway, evening a powdery
gray-gold as his outline dims, and he's no
longer a burper, farter, snorer
(we now know he had apnea, never slept
one full night), but a figure intent
on intricate parts, someone lost

→

in fitting them together, a plump man
in glasses waving before burrowing
down to the clamp, solder, dust, pot, glue.

MOLLY TENENBAUM
Motions for the Nighttime Cat

Wait for the water-splash and the twitch of the tail of the towel.
Wait for the mouth to bend low and *shush*, singing mint.

Wait for the pant-legs to wrinkle in rolls,
the scrap of white cotton to fall.
Wait for the folding-down of the wool.

Wait until legs disappear, and arms disappear,
until at the top is a plumped puffy landscape of hair.
Wait until the book has fallen.
Wait for the click and the dark.

Now you can tread the high places.
Now you can curve in a curve your back presses to match.
Now you can turn and face the other direction.

You might ride all night on the shadow-draped slopes.
You might rest in the drawers where gray-black, blue-black, transparent
black all pour together.

You might wake wanting water, you might
descend through the streetlight's one splash on the stairs,
step through a square that flaps—
combing through grass, you'll set the wet leaves swinging.

We are not legs, but long ledges.
We are hunched hunkers and lumps.
With us, slow clicking and heat from a place near the floor.
We are a feather at your ear, your ear, your ear.
We are small holes blowing air.

You're a hot kettle; you're lick-tipped and dried points of fur.
We are a room with walls, in and out, in and out.
We are a room growing lighter, lighter.

BEN LERNER

from The Lichtenberg Figures

'Gather your marginals, Mr. Specific. The end
is nigh. Your vanguard of vanishing points has vanished
in the critical night. We have encountered a theory
of plumage with plumage. We have decentered our ties. You must quit
these Spenglerian Suites, this roomy room, this gloomy Why.
Never again will your elephants shit in the embassy.
Never again will you cruise through Topeka in your sporty two-door coffin.
In memoriam, we will leave the laws you've broken broken.'

On vision and modernity in the twentieth century, my mother wrote
'Help me.' On the history of structuralism my father wrote
'Settle down.' On the American Midwest from 1979 to the present, I wrote
'Gather your marginals, Mr. Specific. The end is nigh.'

I wish all difficult poems were profound.
Honk if you wish all difficult poems were profound.

BARON WORMSER

Commune

“Energy Parcel Passing Through” was how
Arnie Elfman, also known as Cosmo,
Designated himself—as in “I’m just
An Energy Parcel Passing Through but I think. . .”

We bore with it, as all of us were indulging
Some species of spiritual Quixotism
But one evening after a typical day
Of fixing broken machines, petty squabbling,

Whole grains, and weather prognostications, Kate
Schraft told Arnie/Cosmo/Energy she was tired
Of his self-conscious unconsciousness: “Who
In the name of Vishnu do you think you are?”
Arnie smiled cryptically and left the next morning.
He’d never been much help milking the goats.

JEANNINE HALL GAILEY
Remembering Philomel

*Plagued by the nightingale
in the new leaves
with its silence—
not its silence but its silences,
he says of it:
“It clothes me with a shirt of fire.”
He dares not clap his hands
to make it go on
lest it should fly off;
if he does nothing, it will sleep;
if he cries out, it will not understand.*
—Marianne Moore, “Marriage”

*The professor asks, what is the scene here, class?
The writer (ah-vid, not oh-vid) here is so spare, implying violence and
drama in so few words.
Who do you think this character is? You can’t write about a character
without imagining her surroundings in vivid detail. Tell us
the story, from her point of view.*

I can’t. After the scene, I can’t remember
anything. Why do I have to do this? I’m fine with it. It’s
over.

I do remember six—
my favorite library book the fairy tale of the nightingale.
It had pictures of the jeweled robotic bird the emperor
preferred, and the gray bird, who never sang
a waltz and refused all command performances.
The emperor almost died for the song
he could neither enjoy nor possess.
So dreamy, so beyond his grasp, that little bird,
I loved the sense of triumph

Listen: I used to be exquisite, cool—
A brightness of skin, an affected grace,
appropriate beauty of a vapid princess—
but see, diminutive in drab gray now
I sing

Anger hung like plumes of smoke in my home,
between my mother and my father. At six
I knew—I tried to pet her yellow hair
smelling of nicotine and toffee, kiss her
read her my fairy tales to make her smile.

I loved my older sister Procne, who
seemed smarter, better than me at all the games
we used to play. At her wedding, I tried on
all her silk dresses—I wanted to be grown-up, like her.
After she left, I used to
walk the ocean every morning, barefoot
watching, and when I finally saw her ship
slice through the horizon, there was no warning,
no cold horror clenched my stomach like a fist.

I thought my sister's husband elegant,
with a thin mouth. How grand he was, and I
not a little dazzled. What I could not
see was that he had already devised
his possession of me. Light, thin,
a wisp of sea blue eyes and a cloud of hair
a softness of limb and mouth—just beyond his reach
I suppose this is how I appeared to him

*We need the actual story about what happened to you, says the
professor. What are the details?*

I can't remember exactly. I remember that night,
when my parents told me they were going
to a party together, I felt happy. They left me
with a favorite sitter, a neighbor—he was
friends with all the older girls around,
they'd say how cute he was, looking back I guess he was—
lanky and tan with a slow slack southern drawl.

Not a little afraid, when he took my
hand too tight, and told me to trust and follow him.
“Where is my sister?”
This is where I stop remembering in sentences.
Only fragments because growing up

→

in the right kind of family meant you
had no words for what he was doing

*I don't get the drama here. Class, do you have
a clear sense of what is happening?
Is he raping her? Is there penetration? Come on, you
need to give us a story. This wasn't a poetic event—
don't sound so dreamy.*

Of course not uneasy, when he locked the doors,
asked me if my brothers were away for the night.
I told him I was cold, the basement clammy and
it smelled moldy, I complained. At six much
too young to suspect as he carefully switched on
a too-loud TV, as he began undressing

he told me to take off my pants. Thin little jeans, with
sunflowers on the pockets, a T-shirt to match, and
tiny pink underwear he was impatient with.
I was scared, crying quietly, and he told me to shut up.
I remember rough hands but that's it

No details. Only the raw chafe of his body crushing me,
his rutting moans, the smells of salt and rotted fish,
the grating of unknown soil beneath me.
Shoving himself into me until I bled,
a red, frightening blood that seemed to excite him.
Forcing his flesh in my mouth as my jaw ached.
I thought he looked like a dying sheep.
I thought of dying, then—floating away from him, from my
body—and so
I did not taste the tears and bile on my lips

Many years away from six, I wonder
why when I finally told her, my mother
simply said, "It is something
we women bear in secret"
and her eyes were big with silence.

*That doesn't seem realistic, like something a mother would say.
Perhaps you could reword it?*

But I couldn't push the story out,
it was like my mouth was filled with blood

I rearranged my dress and hair.
As he approached me when he was done
I choked. If there were any gods in heaven. . . .

He grabbed me and the knife he put to my face
smelled cold. You won't be telling anyone he said

Growling as if unsatiated, inexplicably he let me go.
I chewed on my hair, as You better not tell your parents
when they get home he said. Why not I asked

Kill me, I was sobbing over and over
when he cut my tongue off violent and quick.
It danced a little, the blood filled my mouth like a song

I'll kill you if you tell anyone he said. So when
he smiled and accepted money from my dressed-up
mother, I told them I had had a good time.
For the first time my mouth was my enemy

Unable to speak, I wove the ugly scenes shrunken, diminutive
on pillows and coverlets,
over and over, scenes no one could see.

*But Philomel's crime is eventually avenged; the gods did witness the
crime,
had mercy on her; she is saved by the gods.*

Not saved—changed, it's not the same thing.

Unseen gods let me live
no longer as myself, but metamorphosed,
ripping the chrysalis that was me
the good daughter
the pretty girl

I was freed to sing of secrets.
If they clap their hands it will not matter.
In the silence a song of the new leaves.

My victory is small and grey, but it sings.
The hawk and the king, the gods and the memories—sing them away,
On a river of blood, on a sea of song, until they dissolve.

MURIEL NELSON

L'Acoustique de la Divinité

After Olivier Messiaen, 1908-1992

How can I conjure silence—
find sounds with the strength to turn
and die as directions?

I want to drop through this page with such a crash
that you hear the marvelous white
and a little way through.

I'd raise the white to high and humming columns
named *Anaximander*, *Jaimini*, *L'Oiseau Chanteur*, *Messiaen*—
full of pneuma.

There, in their center, in vertical space—in vibrant
rest—unplayed tones play
while ancient numbers ascend and ascend.

MURIEL NELSON

As Machinery

If your wheels

are wheels indeed
if they're geared in some mysterious way

then let the monkey or wrench in me fly
let this Gossamer Albatross buzz sphere-music
or pedal me furiously eyes whirled wide

I'd make just a tiny ding
if I rode in your act with elliptical rims
the one with the loose axles
where Pluto and Neptune keep getting reversed

I won't beg for your double Ferris wheels
though they must have been brilliant when night was clear
(too bad concentrics went out—they didn't make anyone dizzy)
when your show was so close that Ezekiel could stand here and stare
and *see* and *hear*

MURIEL NELSON

In Tense

O Ancient Eye Starred Question Mark

O Exquisite

Machine your elasticity
into me, then I'll balloon

trailing messages gassed
by your laughter, blimpride
out without waxwings wormcast
to reaches where you hide

O Suicide Suspect Landlord
Dad gone away
this place is mad the rent's absurd
the power's out *Say*

now or then or soon Come
round before these eyes run
out Make light again of time
Be for good (words forget to mean)

BOOKS IN BRIEF

“SOMETHING HAPPENING. . .”

Marion K. Stocking

Robert Creeley is the editor, with **David Lehman** series editor, of *The Best American Poetry 2002* (New York: Scribner Poetry, 2002, 232 pp., \$30 hardbound, 0-7432-0385-2; \$16 paper, 0-7432-0386-0). Creeley in his Introduction shrugs off the notion of “best” and presents these modestly as poems that strongly engaged him. He asks that the reader share with him Coleridge’s “willing suspension of disbelief,” enabling “all and any reality to be the case.” And beyond this openness, the reader should recognize that the poets, whatever other lives they may have, here exist only “as these words, and structures of words, allow them to be, neither more nor less.” This rigorous standard recalls an interview with Creeley in *American Poetry Review* (September/October 1999), where he confesses his boredom with poetry “that had always to be resolved by going outside of it, whether it was looking up the meanings or the references.” He would agree with Coleridge that the poem must contain within itself all that the reader requires. As for that slithery word *meaning*, he quotes in that interview Wittgenstein’s “If you give it meaning, it has a meaning.” You’re on your own. In his Introduction, Creeley assures us that “understanding is not a requirement. You don’t have to know why. Being there is the one requirement.” Listen to the sound, he says, to the music of the words, and remember that music is “an *activity*, something happening.”

As one schooled in the Romantics and in the old New Criticism, I appreciate Creeley’s position. But in approaching this review, I have to acknowledge two forces that expand his limits. One is personal: my greediness to know everything that will move me more deeply into a poem. The other is the policy of this series to append biographical information together with each poet’s statement about what lies behind the poem. I’ll come right out and admit that although I have never found the former helpful I find the poet’s statements valuable, often essential. Every year, as much poetry appears frustratingly cryptic, I welcome the poet’s extra-poetic assistance. I need no such assistance with most of the poets in this collection whose work is familiar—Glück, Goldbarth, Hall, Kumin, Merwin, Olds, for example. Some, like Creeley, like Goldbarth, scorn any appendages to the poem. But I was too baffled to respond to Adrienne Rich’s “End of the Earth” until I read her note explaining its origin, and the statements of several of the unfamiliar poets helped teach me how to read their poems. Now that I have made myself at home

in many (not all) of the poems in this collection, reclining shamelessly on the poets' notes and on some outside reading, I want to say how profoundly I admire Creeley's ability to respond to the most difficult of these poems simply as verbal constructs—what W.C. Williams called machines made of words. Moreover, I respect and honor his response to the effect of the "machine": *affect*—the glorious range of human emotion.

One distinction of this year's anthology is the selection of poems from magazines I never get to see. Forty-four of the seventy-five poems are from journals with such flavorful names as *Bombay Gin*, *Can We Have Our Ball Back?*, *Deluxe Rubber Chicken*, *Hambone*, *jubilat*, *Mungo vs. Ranger*, and *Skanky Possum*. I plunged in, hungry for introductions to new poets and unfamiliar prosodies. I am not disappointed. Many are of the generation glibly tagged postmodern (or post-postmodern). Since Marjorie Perloff (in her *21st-Century Modernism: The "New" Poetics*) has recently traced the lineage of these avant-garde poets back to the early moderns (especially Eliot, Stein, and Khlebnikov), I now think of them as Ultimate Moderns. I can indeed recognize the continuity in the new experimental poets—their rejection of the personal voice, their experimentation with disjunction, dislocation, fragmentation, layering, all their word-ways of expressing multiple and often conflicting responses to their universe. They share with their predecessors a world-view vacated by the old certainties, and each one sculpts language to express that ultimate rupture from essentialist rapture.

■
I am not knowledgeable enough to attempt a taxonomy of this rich explosion of innovation, but let me start with an ABC from this anthology—Ashbery, Bernstein, Coolidge. John Ashbery needs no introduction from me. Many poets have thanked him for authoring and authorizing poetry that mimes the mercurial movements of the mind. In this passage from "The Pearl Fishers," the sun, in my reading, suggests the poet in the process of composition:

The sun smiled wanly on the Cimmerian landscape,
which stirred. It seemed as if it was at last about to take an
interest

in rubber goods,

piles of filth,
gossamer undies,
potted hyacinths,
stumps no tree would own up to,
casinos rattling till three in the morning.

Roland Barthes has said that “incoherence seems to me preferable to a distorting order”; no one has accused Ashbery of a distorting order. His narrative disjunction is gently comic, fertile, unembarrassed by contradictions (of a salt-ball rolling toward a glacier: “It melted and did not”).

Charles Bernstein’s “12²” presents a dozen twelve-syllable tercets, with a couple of variations, isolated from each other by margin-to-margin rules. These verses range in content from “counting now to five/ next to three/ then up till four” (the *till* provides the only launch from the obvious). A more cryptic example: “like flies in summer/ switching tenses/ touched absence.” In his note Bernstein offers this: “A motto might be detoured from Mallarmé:

Not the desert clarity of my lamp
But the blanched consequence of my intransigence.”

Blanched is a helpful word. The little stanzas contain occasional heat but no color.

On to Clark Coolidge’s “Traced Red Dot,” composed of twenty lines like these:

they burst it all slims down to a point
a golden gingerale of rockhewn source
buy Grotex it helps your cusp
always thought a corpse would tell me what to do

I know how to respond to the comic spirit here only after I read Coolidge’s note that it is “from a series of poems written with eye, ear, and backbrain on the satellite movie channels.” Ah, so.

If we flip to the end of the anthology, we find much the same poetics. Here is the end of John Yau’s “A Sheath of Pleasant Voices”: “I am one of the last// computer chain errors/ to become illuminated// I tell you there are rooftops/ on which the moon stops// being a cold jewel/ and one by one// the mountains begin their descent/ from the chambers of a lost book.” Yau informs us that “I (whoever that is) write (do I write them?),

I want the line, stanza and word-next-to-word placement to go in unexpected directions (think of Jackson Pollock), to break off and begin elsewhere. Finally I was also reconsidering Stephane Mallarmé's belief that the world exists to end up in a book." In reading from Ashbery to Yau, by way of the ubiquitous Mallarmé, I am reminded of John Cage's intent always to frustrate the audience's expectation.

Like Cage, many of these poets are less interested in meaning (whatever that is) than in the process of composition, and that concern with process is what engages me most in this interesting anthology. Some poems are striking for their novelty. Jenny Bouilly's "The Body" consists of nine blank pages with prose footnotes (21 of 'em) at their foot (feet? foots?). Here's a sample: "One thing the great poet confessed before biting into her doughnut: a good poem writes itself as if it doesn't care—never let on that within this finite space, your whole being is heavy with a need to emote infinitely." Footnote 6 has footnotes on footnotes to footnotes. Genre walls fall. Bouilly explains fragmentation and incompleteness as "the manner in which a book and a life are put together. . . . I knew I was writing some sort of fragmentary subtext to some life or other." "Le style," yet again, "c'est l'homme même." I confess myself charmed by the aphoristic wit, the colorful quotations, and the fertile imagination of this "lyric essay." Juliana Spahr's "Some of We and the Land That Was Never Ours" opens with a paragraph of journal notes and follows with four solid prose-looking paragraphs, actually a musical score in which she works through variations on the words of the journal. At first I thought the music very like Gertrude Stein's. On second reading I thought I recognized the minimalist techniques of early Philip Glass. Here's what it sounds like: "We are all. We of all the small ones are. We are all. We of all the small ones are. We are in this world. We are in this world. We are together. We are together. And some of we are eating grapes. Some of we are all eating grapes." In her note Spahr informs us that she came home and "used a translation machine (<http://babel.altavista.com>) to push my notes back and forth between French and English until a new sort of English came out, this poem." Harry Mathews in his "Butter and Eggs" also aims for novelty. We are offered (the whole work is in the passive voice) six elegantly detailed recipes for cooking eggs and preparing butter. The long lines look and sound like prose: here

is the most “poetic”: “with surpassing gentleness the butter oil is poured/ into a jar.” How in the world is this a poem? Believe me, it is; it has a luscious freshness, and it generates its own music, and I’d be glad to hear his and Spahr’s poem in performance.



In this welter of compositional experimentation, the persistence of the lyric tradition especially attracts me. I respond emotionally to the various musics, the generative homophonic happenings, rhythmic repetitions, reticulations of assonance and alliteration. One delicious little three-part poem, Theodore Enslin’s “Moon Cornering,” epitomizes the wedding of acute observation with translation into lyric form:

How the corners of the moon
 replace themselves.
 It is difficult to see
 or if I see to say
 that this is what I have
 seen. Many chances in the lattice
 of the winter branches.
 Well I’ve said it and
 perhaps there were no corners
 after all.

Two other lyric poems that richly reward my attention are Peter Gizzi’s “Beginning with a Phrase from Simone Weil” and Forrest Gander’s “Carried Across,” both too long to reproduce here and both too richly-organized to excerpt. Gizzi’s fugue form, with its “repetitions and recapitulations,” composes a web of sound and suggestion as rich as an Elizabethan mutability canto. Nearly every word, nearly every phrase resonates with every other to illuminate the encircling language: “No better time than the present.”

Of all the poems in this absorbing anthology, Gander’s “Carried Across” (i.e., trans-lated)—seven pages, seven “movements” in open form—is the one that most thoroughly engaged me. Here’s the beginning:

Through vidrio, a riot of birdsong. Whose face
 the stranger? High cheek bones, stout chin,
 skin the color of cantaloupe rind.

How continuous, erosions in my grammar. Long
 negra-azul hair rivering to the *ahh* of her back. Glackety-
 grack, a mortar wagon crosses

tile patio.

At first reading this seems to have all the qualities I've noticed in the other Ultimate Modern poems: openness to strangeness, rich sound, an activity ("something happening"), fragmentation, discontinuousness layering of disparate elements, constantly frustrating expectation, concern with language, a flicker of humor, an emotional response. Whew! If we stopped reading there we'd have a teasing farraginous lyric. But not so fast. Something *is* happening.

Gander's intense attentiveness moves in at least three directions: outward, to involve the reader in the adventure of exploration; inward, to investigate the mysteries of the self ("Whose face the stranger?" with its double reading); and outward again, toward that slithery concept, "meaning," and its ultimate ethical implications (Gander's word is *responsibility*). None of this would work if the poet did not command the words, the syntax, the choreography of lineation to engage the reader actively in the scene.

Blotting out vision, breathable air, a carbonized foulness
 mushrooms

behind the bus.

Musics mix "paratactically along cobbled streets," and parataxis (the juxtaposition of verbal units without conjunctions) is the syntactic structure of the whole poem. Acute sensuous impressions overlay or butt up to the poet's inquiry into identity and responsibility. Gazing at a pre-Columbian figure in a museum vitrine (remember "Through vitrio"), "my reflection splays,/ my obsidian-/ pupiled eyes." This experience serves as an icon for the psychological heat of the poem: the recognition of the self in the other. The other may be the grackles whose "long-voweled croaking/ inflames me. By the throatful" or the dog, "[t]orqued grotesquely/ and biting its own rump in the park. A form/ of meditation for me." It may be an ancient or immediate human image—a 69 A.D. glyphic script or Eulalia Prado's prayer. As in Enslin's lyric, the reader shares both the experience of observation and the epistemological implications.

In working through this anthology, I became sensitive to how

