

BPJ

BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL VOL. 53 N°3 SPRING 2003

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COVER

Lee Sharkey, photographs, Hangzhou, China, 2002

Front: "Monk, Lingyin Si"; back: "Silk Market"

Mary Greene, design



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

PETER STRECKFUS

After Words

Here is a wall. The strange empty space above the wall... what is it for? Here, a little boat, a canopy of silver plastic rattling above it.

Listen to the babe-scare cry of the wind. You are in the unsteady boat and this poem is a lake.

It's too late now. You are in the boat my little skipperoo, my kitzie koodle. Look. In the other boat, your son. All the rest, the other sons, the boy you blinded and the daughter you maimed, the weapons and the armor, is film, a thin and punctured membrane, a fictitious hymen.

There's no place for that weapon here. Come on now, you have no choice. Trust me.

I'll speak nonsense. You speak truth. We'll see what comes of it.

PETER STRECKFUS

Why I Slept with Him

Let me tell you a story. A woman farmer had two she-goats.
Mornings, her old spine hurt her
and the scar across her back

sang as if missing limbs. "Ready, willing, and petrified," she might
have said, scattering the ends among the chickens.

Springs before she'd left off milking,
she always had a few kids
hopping in the yard like cupids.
The billy she penned separately so the milk wouldn't taste like sex.
Then, death approached with the rustic

twittering of juncos, the place a shambles, the tree rats
deep in the brush.

I know nothing
of goats. I apologize beforehand that they become tangled in
my story. The billy will wish it'd never had horns,
its whole life spent
licking its own penis and scratching those castles on its head
as if they were boils that needed lancing;

the she-goats will be in chains, put on a run by a well meaning city-
man who will sit on his newly acquired front porch
and wonder at
a jug of milk and crisp cherries
and how goats have short tails and sheep, long.

Tethered too closely together cleaning the city-man's brush

the she-goats will become tangled,
like a bad marriage, the city-man will think.
In the evenings he will untangle them—See? How he pulls
the black one's leg from the chain about the little

one's neck in the moon light? And how, understanding goats as
social animals, he will inevitably run them
out again the next day?

→

a single rope through both their collars,
and set them close again, and here they will continue to munch

the brush until it's clear, the tree rats and juncos
squeaking about the patch no longer.

Look now, it's the next day, he's done as we thought he would.

It's evening. Let's go down and untangle them.

We'll take their places.

Here he is with his well-meaning hands.

The pupils of our eyes are sliced off at the top and the bottom
and we've lost our voices. Have you ever seen how sad
a goat's eyes are? Look into mine.

As he runs us back, we notice the billy lying dazed
on the ground

with blood where its testicles were,

and how well cut the south field is.

Now that I've come to the end, you will want me to say

which life I want to lead.

ANNIE BOUTELLE

Cormorant

Celia Loughton, Isles of Shoals, 1851

Like a cormorant, sharp
head cocked back, beak
aimed at the sun, I ride
the surge of his presence
and forget the unseen
haul of all that lies
beneath the paddling feet.

ANNIE BOUTELLE

Mrs. Thaxter

Appledore Island, July 1864

The bird's skull is light—
soft tucks between the eye
sockets, like the folds of a white
dress hanging in a closet
far from the body's turbulence.

I keep it on my desk, next to
the inkwell and the set of paints,
and touch it often: the long extended
beak that pushes forward like the prow
of a ship fronting a wave; the slim
triangles formed by bone bridges
to support the airy chamber, looped
with oval entrances for nerves; the slight
depression, a gentle mark like an infant's
fontanel, where the skull begins its slope
back down to the life that pulses
out of reach of the fierce eyes.

I touch that fierceness, make it mine—
that smooth essential purpose, each
cell bent on survival.

When the world greets me,
it sees a white dress, a dewy rose
pinned on the breast. No one
sees this skull, this bone bridge
across which I walk,
this hardness.

ANNIE BOUTELLE

Companions

Celia Loughton Thaxter, Boston, 1888

If, as glossy-haired Mohini claims,
loss is the companion of joy

(I see them sitting placidly together
on a bench in Louisburg Square,

early September, an eager leaf detaches
from the elm above their heads, and swaying

as it floats, half buoyed by an errant draft
of air, lands on Joy's shoulder, as she turns

to Loss and asks about his nephews:
little Grief and baby Worry),

if loss is the companion of joy, must
not joy then be the companion of loss?

He turns to her, touches her gloved
hand, remarks on the angle of the light,

the frost he saw, like lace,
on the morning lawn.

SARAH AVERY

Metamorphic

No blood, and very little screaming.
Quietly, when no one's looking,
they turn into bears and shrubs
and sometimes running water,
and after Ovid there is nothing in the forest
that does not look like a raped woman.
My mother gave me this book when I was ten.
Most stories come from these stories, she said,
you might as well get them pure from the source.

LYNNE KNIGHT
The Obsessive Gaze

I loved you once.
It seemed so right, so neat.
The moon, the month, the flower, the kiss—
—Eavan Boland, “Tirade for the Lyric Muse”

Pas de Deux

When I breathe, she breathes.
When I look down, she follows.
The secrets that pass between us—

it's almost talk in code: *The house.*
The man with the strange thumb.
The lost nights, the purges.

Sometimes, though I know seven
years of bad luck might ensue,
I break her into pieces. One eye

fails, another. I vow to go on
without her, but there are so many
surfaces wherein to apprehend

this one I despise so obsessively,
love so obsessively, for being
the first and last who will leave me.

Aftermathematics

Scatter all the shards like seed.
Dim the lights.

Avoid excess of any kind.
You will still be caught wanting

your double,
your everything-the-same.

Veiled Illusions

No matter that her face, once
beautiful, on film was still.

Now it cracked and sagged.
Rotted.

She kept the drapes drawn. If she left the house,
she wore veiled hats.

If she had to look into the mirror,
she prepared by weeping

or drinking so much there would be nothing
but a blur.

“Chaplet of the Infernal Gods”

So said Socrates, because of the narcotic
effect of narcissus, whose sweet scent
is nearly foul, like perfume masking rot.

But they sway so easily in wind.
Their small white dresses call *Come! Come!*
They long to be undone. They hold still in the sun,

suffering, pale, pliant as martyrs.
They yearn for the pool where they can be
perfectly reflected, marble flowers

that sink like the dead into earth, far
past roots, stopping only at bedrock
where they shatter into useless stars.

Metempsychosis, with Star and Ash

The lover's gaze is famous for its ardency—
fire in the eyes, eyes like stars,
et cetera. The lover whispers, *Look
into my eyes*. And the strange exchange

of one soul with another occurs,
or is said to occur, no one knowing
exactly what the soul is, whether its substance
is transmissible, transmutable.

But certain laws of physics are immutable:
for want of enough fuel,
for want of enough oxygen,
fire dies. Can you feel the rival

myth creeping in? the blood-red bird rising
from ash? It too wants nothing more
than the adulating cry a despairing lover
longs to see mirrored: *You're back!*

Lost Law of Thermodynamics

At night, the stars stream fire
while other bodies, knowing they will never
travel fast enough to find
their origins, lie still and dream.

There is no room
in any bed for the quantity of dreaming
that goes on.
In this way, the universe expands.

Fractured

How many parts does it have, the self?
Are those it loves and fears included?
And what about its interrupted dreams—

Reprise with Moon and Scythe

She climbed fast, the goat-like one
behind her, bleating lust. Stones
rumbled over the earth's dry crust,
plunged into the troughs his cries

cut from air. She was too quick for
him, and disappeared. Later
he went among the shepherds,
whispering of the beautiful young girl

hiding among their herds, intent
on spells, sickness. That night
when the moon hung thin as a scythe
they climbed to find her.

She was asleep, white-limbed,
beneath a juniper. They hacked and hacked
till there was nothing but her cries,
her cries.

Alternative Reprise

Or she arranged to distract the wife while
the hot one dallied. She would be next,
he promised. So while he went off,

she kept the wife busy under the portico.
Should she wear her hair in three coils,
two looped over her ears then fed back

into a double loop at the base of her neck,
was she old enough for that? and
when a man stared too long, a man

she dreamed of with desire, should she
smile, just a trace, before looking away, or—
oh, did she talk too much? but words

were so numerous, and who knew—.
Just then the husband reappeared. The wife
saw the telltale sated glow. *Slut!* she hissed,

contriving her rival's fate: never again
would she say a word, except to repeat
what was said to her. She would fall

in love with a man who ignored her
altogether, mistaking her echo
for his beloved's strange, half-missing call.

Face, Mask

Don't think I sought this affliction.
One day I looked into water,
felt mortality seep into my veins.

That quickly. As if they were dry
cloth seeping wet. The myths
claim the reflection seems like someone

else, but they're wrong. And I'm not
in love. I stare. Even with no wind,
the face won't hold steady. Loss

fills it from behind, like a face
a mask. The phenomenon of this
absorbs me. So yes. I'm there

day after day, longing. But if
I could stop, grab a weapon,
go into the woods after deer

I hear behind me, feeding on the real—.
I'd miss my shot, to know what it is
to forgive, to be forgiven.

Weak Claim

What if I have worn out my days in weeping?
Even if I leaned over water,

my tears disappearing as the surface blurred,
I would not lose sight of you,

my love, whose portrait I carry behind my eyes,
image superimposed

on the world so I can fool myself,
I can say, *This is mine.*

Dream Mouth

The poet's narcissus, with its magenta-edged corolla,
shimmers in wind, in multiple, a whole
field of them fluttering above the sea

while bones of the dead glow white
as flowers in the shallows where sailing ships
once smashed against rocks in ancient storms.

A man crosses the field, heedless of all but time
and space. Midway, he stops: he has forgotten
something. Something crucial: his name,

his face. He looks for water, finds a small pool.
Ah. He stays there, moving off only at night,
to sleep in a bed of flowers, crushing them

with his weight, with the weight of dreams
that open like a pool yielding to a deeper
pool, where he sees his face, beautiful

but mouthless. Not so much freakish
as sad. The terrible sorrow of one who has
finally understood yet can find no one to tell.

Arms, Entreaty

There will be no resolution to this
struggle. The self longs to love
another. But each night, when it
lies down inside its own

arms, it finds itself weeping.
Out of loneliness, yes, and worse.
The body and the world: story
of separation. No matter

what else intervenes—
body, pool, cry—
there is bound to be a
severing, cessation. Otherwise:

No one gathers narcissus into her arms
without thinking death
has been hurried, all for the eye's
insatiable pleasure.

Coda: Double Jeopardy

There is no greater loneliness than this:
the image given back, untouchable,
the gaze so fragile even breath disturbs it—
everything desired losing substance.

The image, given back, untouchable,
almost dissolves:
everything desired, losing substance,
speaking of death,

almost dissolves.

Suddenly, knowledge comes, unstoppable as water,
speaking of death,
not with words but blurred and fleeting cries.

Suddenly, knowledge comes, unstoppable as water:
the gaze, so fragile even breath disturbs it,
not with words but blurred and fleeting cries—
there is no greater loneliness than this.

MARY MOLINARY

from Eve's Epistle to Lilith

At one point . . . the traveler stops, pauses, turns to the left to glance at some possible threat or irregularity, then continues to the north. This motion, so intensely human, transcends time. Three million seven hundred thousand years ago, a remote ancestor—just as you or I—experienced a moment of doubt.

—Mary Leakey

Headstrong and striding as only upright bipedal creatures can

I stop pause and stand on the edge of the gorge in the darkened part of night as though perched upon a single strand

of DNA searching for a sound that I can track as easily as a strange footprint in these sedimentary layers—one that (like me) mourns

sheds tears undulates on such a moonless night muttering *us us us*.

Binomial Nomenclature echoes back names for a near perfect

leg bone fragments of skull—precise but once removed: how our husband-my-father reads history with fingernails of perfectibility flips page after page asks the same question of the same residual night.

Australopithicus afarensis only begins to tell the story: Ours:

undaunted double helix numinous matrix inexact hands humbled & holding Adam our root feet braided in *origin* misshapen under country. (Dear polygenesis peals of nightfall kind surgery of stars graft the cleft

palette of difference between and among things?) And here we are: sad little

epistemes apocalyptic poems (& I'd promised you a letter)

Dear Lilith there's another: she has two names times the two of us

times geography times cacophony—

seems she has no script, no devil to pay.

She is called Lucy, her African name is Dinknesh and I want to be illuminated by reason comforted between the nations of Homo and sapiens but I'm not a simile—like part white

like life black like girl under. No. Say sun and hot and day—then say

Homo ludens: at play, I am a nuance: these feet this hair these weakened

knees that mole on my belly the ringing in my ears what I dream what I say.

But I'm not telling you anything you don't know—fortunate one:
born part dust part Medea wearing your exile like necessary
injunction never showing—in any version—a moment of doubt in
haircut cuttings or apples left to hang or your role in
the Earth's perpetual fear. Identity is not an issue for one
who comes from dust—that one goes through the world alone.

I'm learning: that one is free to see things in relation:

So then, *all becomings are molecular: the animal, flower, or stone.*
The only difference is sound I think: in things waking
or preparing for sleep. . . . And through it all in all the muck
I find time and again an incredulous and naming part that plays back
like a recording teeters on the edge of evening stripped to its
barest bones.

I, at Olduvai. And I don't know which sounds more gorgeous:
to take one's place in the gorge or to take pause, refuse to.

MARY MOLINARY

Ashes of burned manuscripts adrift in the wind, so

wind down. Mind your time around the limb,
then limn toward lemmings eating lemons at noon:
No one dare *susurrus* us in florid orb of day—
Decorum! *Nostra culpa*, but we're just sounding
sonnets in un-sonic ways—all twang and timbre.
So timber calls us home with a mute click.
Crack. Split. Yet, stronger than fricative,
fricare and friction for sure, if not fully bang. Boom.

Without adumbration, beckoning, or embrace,
I can understand the yearning, I'll admit, to tear
all of it asunder! Down the crass brick, the smooth
scatting stone, the rusting nouveaux porticoes,
screeching moldings. Even vacant lots—all this
blathering history—replace it. With hang. With haunt.

EMILY ROSKO
Small Containers

Why we're fascinated with the band playing
as the ship slid under the ocean,
I can't say. The wreckage will dissolve
in a few years, the museum guide explained
at the Titanic Exhibition. Spectacles,
hairbrush, cufflinks, diary—the force
of simple things.

In another room, I found butterflies
preserved under glass, Red Admiral,
Blue-eyed Sailor, Moon-marked Skipper,
a hairline crack in one case. The wings'
final shudder, a Brazilian swallowtail
pinned dumbly. I stood there

with the thought of breaking someone's neck,
on my mind the Russians who suffocated
in their submarine. Words are never enough
to explain, if only I could be graceful, the way
animals bow their heads to eat. There's forgiveness
in the neck of a horse in a yellow October field.

I would show you this if I could. Forget the box
of books that never arrived, Stevens can float
in that oblivion for a while longer—I'm tired
of worrying. One hand holding another

hand makes a small container, a vessel
for the sacred—a shark's tooth, tiger's
eye, or the compass I found in a pawnshop, the one
with a magnifying glass the size of your thumb, scratched,
tarnished, with the needle broken and pointing south.

EMILY ROSKO

Raw Goods Inventory

Oh, clouds that do not look like cherubs, move over! My heart
isn't big enough to include you. The crows shit on
my car every morning, such

gratuitous little fellows—the things I never asked for. Oh, unrecognized
genius, the modest beauty wasting from
illness, the good-kid-turned-bad. Failing

grade, summer heat. Oh, row of desks I loathed sitting at. In
school, we hatched chickens from an incubator, eggs
in rotation, the chicks deformed. One

with thin chest skin and no ribs—the organs sludged
and its cheep-cheep cries. The animals my mother made me
return—the rabbit, the toad, the slug. Oh, child

tossing a ball alone! The dandelions are systematically doused
with chemicals—the chemicals you'll sniff
as a teenager, the brain the unrepining side-kick.

Dear sister whom I cannot relate to, I surrendered my popsicles
to you! Friend who kept my videotapes. Ex-lover,
you fall so clumsily through old poems. Book, you

looked better on the shelf! Oh, the philomaths are paraphrasing
other people's theories, the same dribble! Numbers and words,
teleological trinkets that can't retain the world. Over

a thousand monarchs frost-nipped in Mexico—untranslatable
odor. Oh, sex-drive that won't be active forever! Oh,
old woman I will someday become! Take stock now, I say, use

your flexibility. Stomach stay flat, breasts don't droop any time
soon. Oh, body, you were once small
and resilient—you could shimmy through

tight places. Mind, you were sparked; heart, uninjured. I am
such a thing. Lazy day. Oh, wizened hickory,
I too grow out of myself.

BRIAN HENRY

Wreckage (II)

Have reduced lonesomeness to

Fragment of heartsickness for

Bartered a common scent before

Her chapter in static air

The sun instilled a desire like

Scratching the paint off the door

Forget the porcelain's crack in

Ass-swept field parade inside

Search party fruitful describe

Such dust the likes of which

BRIAN HENRY

Wreckage (III)

Separate () the words.

Separate the words, please.

The end of *the end of*s
brings I where?

here on the cusp of *as*
and *like*, between

all this fucking
is.

BRIAN HENRY
Wreckage (IV)

By chance ensconced
()

BRIAN HENRY

Wreckage (V)

Digest what causes

pain, in

pieces

what flutters your chest

and forces you onto

your other side, the muscles

around the heart hurt

the weak knee swollen

to the shin

break it in

flag the pain as it moves

through you

arrest it before it

do you in

digest

in pieces

are swollen

flusters

broken

BRIAN HENRY

Wreckage (VI)

To what I will say ()
what will I say ()
past the how () of its howl
I will say what ()
has been said ()
but not said () by me:
what I say will be un-
said () un-
derstood as unsaid ()
by me () nothing like silence
() this nothing like silence.

BRIAN HENRY
Wreckage (VII)

what if there is no continuing the disturbance
I feel in the air around me would collapse like
so many cardinals dropped from the sky
by weak persistence and abandoned in the fog
of midday the turd in the dog's mouth
it won't let go of its grip on what is
loosening the calling home to check in
to what abnormalities persist on time
and again the ants resurface ten
feet further into the yard's distracted
ground a series of stumps requiring an-
nihilation by scattered pellets the ants
will carry back to their babies the queen
two cats at either corner of the property
back a third into the third before each
takes a rock between the eyes

BRIAN HENRY
Wreckage (VIII)

two shelves moving create a third shelf an in
 between
ice in ripped halves gropes toward water in
 stead
an animal covered in animal fur bleats in
 human
sounds the land worried lets go of what's un
 said

the placenta dragged into the moraine's in
 constant
stretch the animal forgets what it is and in
 vites
the sky's falling through water's weak in
 stant
glorious so glorious this birthscene this un
 scene

BRIAN HENRY

Wreckage (IX)

Obscene fortune trust fund baby bunker whom to feed
when you're the king of feed banter frolic as if grass
had no feelings hourglass physiques belie stuporous
mothballed pockets glitter on your lashes crawlspace
fuckspace everywhere a shitspace everyone a shit
lashed to the foremast no sailor would pardon undone
sphincter muscles unloose your seed upon the sea
doctrines wet wit dis moneyshot riddled like cheese
dreams halfchewed and spit onto linoleum to lick clean
come morning the lightbulb dangling sees though broken
every flaw in the structure every zit on your chin
the mole you carry so richly to the security counter
wait for the door behind to close before you reach
for the door in front the camera needs a minute to size

BRIAN HENRY

Wreckage (X)

Execute the stump and the termites emerge
as the thread,
grass tufts violent as bricks against bone.

Call forth the energy to cut the gatherings
down, call forth
call forth, your voice so your own.

BRIAN HENRY

Wreckage (XI)

A semblance of seriousness settles into the patches you've laid in the
concrete

Domestic bravura showcasing your freckled muscles encroaching on tan
lines

Foreign accents are welcome especially when the subject is coffee or
futons or wine

Donations accepted in the parking-lotted dumpster twenty-four/seven
no receipt

The tree with the vine-covered base must be felled before winter and its
winds

A retaining wall to keep the clay from caving in

Woodchips and mulch and weeds and gravel vines and ties and fence-
posts and wires

The squirrel's nest attracts a dog a bird the pot-bellied pig its nose in
the dirt

A lesson in erosion brought to you by the land the treefort's termites
pinched by ants

The widow in the house behind you has placed a pipe to drain what she
sprays

The angle saturates your hands

BRIAN HENRY
Wreckage (XII)

The vines, let them rain their sap on me,
raise welts, blister.

Wrists, forearms, triceps, chest, stomach, thighs
all itch to a burn.

To peel the skin away, scrape it into bits,
scald a normal skin.

The scars, too, will itch.

BRIAN HENRY
Wreckage (XIII)

A door kicked into its jamb

Fire ants cross the walk

Pleasure exists only in mulch

The roots will not dissolve

Careful of run-off and sick

The road though paved is rough

I track my tongue along a nail

Gasoline settles the garage

I pump pesticides into my half-acre

This is the gardenia's week to shine

BRIAN HENRY
Wreckage (XIV)

Dark so dark and never so dark as this
Light so light and never so light as this
Wacked so wacked and never so wacked
Weight so weight and never so weight as this
Stink so stink and never so stink as this
Locked so locked and never so locked as this
Retinue so retinue and never so retinue
Slow so slow and never so slow as this
Stuck so stuck and never so stuck
Dick so dick and never so dick as this
Dial so dial and never so dial as this
Yes so yes and never so yes
Partial so partial and never so partial as this
In so in and never so in as this
Ghastly so ghastly and never so ghastly as this
Tree so tree and never so tree as this
Ass so ass and never so ass
Red so red and never so red as this
Dimebag so dimebag and never so dimebag as this
Vain so vain and never so vain as this
Polygon so polygon and never so polygon
Dead so dead and never so dead
Never so never and never so never as this
Certain so certain and never so certain as this

A Transcript

"In the matter of *Dictyrrna v. Kosmic Krypts, L.L.C.*,
Is counsel prepared to proceed?" "We are, your honor. My client,
The Moon, in addition to mental anguish—" "Objection:
The mind of the Moon's a presumption, scarcely un rebuttable—"
"—Has suffered grievous physical harm—" "Objection also to counsel's
Claim to be retained by the Moon at all. The Moon's a thing,
Not a person, a demi-semi would-be planet, an out-of-plumb
Scrap of insentient rock—" "The Moon is the friend of lovers
And lonesome dogs and Yeats and Keats and—" "Your honor, please
Discourage opposing counsel from needless driveling."
"Thank you, counsel, I'll decide who is driveling
In my courtroom, and when." "If I may have the Court's
Indulgence while I quote a little Sappho—" "I'm sure
Your opponent will stipulate to Selene's pull on the blood
And senses of us all, counsel, so let's move on.
The Court doesn't have all day, much less a lunar month."

"It's hardly germane if I'm hired by Luna or by Next Friends.
It's She who's sustained the damage, and my opponent's clients
Who've inflicted it." "What damage?" "Crashing—" "No,
Let's let defendants' counsel answer." "Your honor, my clients
Take the remains of the dead—" "The *wealthy* dead,
At twelve thousand dollars a pop—" "—and when a suitable stack
Of these are stockpiled—" "A/k/a a sleazy heap
Of easy lettuce—" "YOUR HONOR, MAKE BOTH PARTIES SPEAK
SLOWER
AND STOP INTERRUPTING EACH OTHER!" "You heard the lady."
"Madam Court Reporter, your word of course is law.
They load. Them on. To a rocket. To be. Crash-landed—" "Well, where?"
"Um, well . . . on the surface of the Moon, your honor.
Solely to gratify their customers' highest, most sacred wish.
'Fain would I fly away if I had the wings of a dove' and so forth."
"How do they know? Do the dead reawaken somewhere beyond
The Van Allen belts and radio back 'We're gratified!'"

"Objection! Argumentative. (And snide.)"
"'Highest wish' is unsubstantiated. It's also obscene."
"Withdraw 'obscene!'" "I won't! Obscene, obscene, obscene!
Obscene as a stretch limousine. Obscener. There's neither scintilla

→

Nor shred of proof the Moon enjoys things whacking into her side."
"And what in the Constitution stops our shipping our dear
Departed to other heavenly bodies? According to some accounts
That's where we come from." "We do?" "Trailing clouds of glory, your
honor."

"Oh." "Your honor, the proper functions of the Moon, here grossly
Compromised, were established in the days she bore
The name of Nanna, prior to the Code of Hammurabi:
'To travel the air in a boat bringing light to the lapis
Lazuli heavens'—" "Objection: hearsay." "Exception: reputation;
Customary use." "Sustained." "Your honor, we
Are in Southern California—" "Thank you, counsel;
Anyone hearing this case would know where we are."

"—Bound by statutes that stringently regulate what we deport
Beyond state borders as well as out of the country."

"But not off the *planet*, for corn sake, your honor. Sheesh. Plaintiff's
Counsel would challenge the right to compete in the open
Market for an entrepreneur's fair share of consumers,
In this case consumers of endless repose, and also impugn
My clients' sensitivity. They too, after all,
Are not unmindful of Phoebe's feelings—" "Applesauce, your honor.
Mere corporate wind. Despite his unctuous tone
And labored rhetoric, opposing counsel's clients
Have never been mindful of anything since puberty
Except their hormone-flow, their bellies and their bank accounts."
"Objection! Argumentative, anatomical, and speaks
Derisively of bank accounts." "Must I hand the bailiff my gavel
And have him apply it directly to your skulls?"

"SPEAK ONE AT A TIME, YOU TURKEYS! AND CORK THAT SHOUTING!"

"Madam Court Reporter, muse of juridical balance,
Witness me whispering, witness me whispering *slowly*.
So what if the wounds of the Moon lie outside the jurisdiction
Of this tribunal; the corporate offices of the launchers
Of that assault lie well within it." "And that proves what?
Only one rocket has landed to date, your honor;
We have no evidence of any lunar wounds."

"Liar! Pants on fire! The sudden red patch thousands saw
That night: was it a bruise? Or was it, as we submit, *shame*?"
"The Moon doesn't blush." "Does too." "Does not." "Does too."

→

And Houston reported a cry like 'Ouch!' from somewhere out there
The very same time." "You're making that up." "Am not." "Are too."

"Am not."

"Objection, then: pure hearsay!" "Exception: excited utterance!"

"Overruled!" "Your honor—"

"Your honor—"

"YOUR HONOR—"

BOOKS IN BRIEF: THE MEANING OF MEANING
(with apologies to C.K. Ogden and I. A. Richards)
Marion K. Stocking

Some students, I hear, learn to hate poems because teachers impose the “right meaning” on them—them the poems and them the readers. Others hate being required to hunt out “hidden meanings.” When a student asked John Ashbery whether he had put a hidden meaning in a poem, the poet replied that he wouldn’t dare because someone might find it. T. S. Eliot confessed that “meaning is the bone you throw a reader while you do your real work upon him.”

Meaning—what does it mean? In recent reviews I have found myself wrestling with this angel. For some poets today *meaning* is a dirty word, following Rilke, who asks not for *Aufklärung* (clarification, elucidation), but *Unterwerfung* (submission, Robert Creeley’s “being there”). Others follow Wittgenstein’s “If you give it meaning, it has a meaning.” Aha! A meaning, not *the* meaning. *Meaning* for these readers is significance, not intention.

■
At the simplest level, “meaning” can mean what the poet is saying. Let’s start there. First we have to know the language of the poem. Reading the London *Times Literary Supplement* (TLS) on American poetry has long reassured me that our languages have not yet melded into a mid-Atlantic amalgam. An anonymous reviewer in the issue of 25 March 1960 delighted me with this critique of Cummings’ “Elegy” to Buffalo Bill:

All we are told here about the subject of the elegy is that he rode “a watersmooth-silver stallion,” that he could shoot pigeons and that “he was a handsome man.” There is no physical build up . . . so we are somewhat shocked to discover that Buffalo Bill had blue eyes, and as for his being a boy—we just do not believe that, because we know that he was not so very young at the time of his death. Or does Mr. Cummings wish to suggest that the dead are reborn in death, so that old men become boys? But that would make the whole poem meaningless. . . . Either way the author would appear to have perpetrated a confidence trick of the kind usually called sentimentality—for what can be more moving than the image of a dead child?

Far be it from me to absolve Cummings of sentimentality, but this critique is so deliciously wrong that I couldn’t resist sharing it.

And now in the 7 November 2002 *TLS* an editor with the authoritative initials J. C., in his column “NB” [*nota bene*, note well], serves

up an analogous interpretation for our delectation:

Poetry-lovers will recall our puzzlement over a book called *The Makeshift*, which seemed to be composed in a private lexicon: “Fractures of grackle/ & phone wire angle”, etc. We asked: “Is there a world out there in which people speak approximately like this?” (NB, September 6). Well, apparently there is, and the Ohio-based poet Mark Halliday lives in it. Mr. Halliday is a past winner of the American Academy’s Rome Prize, and his new book, *Jab*, is published by the University of Chicago Press:

All the fedge and the drammel, the fedge
and all the drammel—there is
all this up the middle of the fedge
and this drammel, such that I wizen,
I wizen and waf-waf unflashly . . .

The conclusion sums it up: “the various fraddel/ is overloadedly multiplexly only shoof shuff,/ mere waf-waf”

What’s it all about? The publishers leave it to Cathleen Calbert to explain: “These potent poems are packed with their fair measure of cheddite (kaboom! blooey!), and the concatenation of quixotic questions leads to the dark but delightful derealizations of this generation’s Doubting Thomas.” Ms. Calbert (whose own books of poems include *Bad Judgment*) is obviously an inhabitant of Grackleland. And others out there are invited to get in touch.

Now there’s an invitation I can’t resist. Let’s excuse the earlier reviewer for not knowing that in his wild west show Buffalo Bill picked off the skeet-shooter’s clay pigeons “onetwothreefourfive . . . just like that.” And J. C. would not be familiar with our *Quiscalus quiscula*, the handsome Common Grackle, here seen perched at angles to the phone wires. Vividness and precision of observation condense into those seven words, “Fractures of grackle/ & phone wire angle.” And this is a land where *fractures* and *grackle* and *angle* make a sharp music (and if you live in Grackleland, as I fortunately do, the words are also onomatopoeitic). The *TLS* critics have created their own meanings. We judge their “meanings” by readings we have by other routes achieved but, no, not by any ultimate, abstract, absolute “meaning.”

It surprises me that J. C. didn’t recognize (or chose not to mention)

the distinguished parentage of Mark Halliday's verses: Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky." Read Halliday's lines aloud. The language is invented or demented, but the "meaning" is clear—a meaning for which I can think of no better words. "Overloadedly multiplexly" may require familiarity with American shopping malls with their multiplex cinemas, but you don't need that to understand the wizing surfeit the poem enacts and laments. Well, perhaps it does help to have visited an American shopping mall between Thanksgiving and Christmas. J. C. is excused, but not for missing the satiric exhaustion of the Halliday verse and the ebullient playfulness of Cathleen Calbert's blurb.

■

Before we go too far, my reader deserves from me some sense of my own critical position, since I jolly well have one. The two excerpts from *TLS* reinforce my conviction that the more one brings to a poem, the closer one may come to the poet's intent. I am fully aware of the "intentional fallacy," in which the New Critics rejected consideration of a writer's intent in favor of close analysis of the autonomous work. (I do understand what scholar/critics like William Wimsatt were reacting against; I did well in a graduate course by memorizing the biographical introductions to my Eighteenth-century anthology.) Close reading will always, for me, be first. But a scholarly lifetime of deepening my response to the poets of the English Romantic Period through a study of their education, their journals and letters, their reading in world literature and theory, their engagement in the political and economic currents of their age, their experience of art and music, their passions and friendships and animosities has brought me closer and closer to a sense of what their works might "mean." Beyond that, I bring my own baggage of intellectual experience: without creating a hotel full of Procrustean beds, I enjoy looking at texts through all the lenses at my command—Marx, Darwin, and Freud, for starters. As a teacher I understood my job to be helping my students find their own ways into the works we read together. I tried to suggest that the possibilities were virtually unlimited. I taught "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" as "Thirteen Ways of Looking at an Albatross."

As a reader and reviewer, I am forever wrestling with the problem of understanding difficult new work, always aware of the poem as an action in which the reader participates. I am accustomed to studying the impact of thought on a poet's language and, reciprocally, the

influence of language upon thought (e.g., Luke Howard's nomenclature for clouds in 1814 provided Goethe and Shelley with a language that enabled, first, their accurate attention to cloud formations and, then, the concepts that found form in their poems).

■
 In my recent reviews I have attempted to penetrate or puzzle out various obscurities of much new poetry, seeking to find my way through the difficulties of the new poetics toward something that means something to me. One sympathetic reader sent me this paragraph from an article by Thomas Bever and Mario Montalbetti, "Noam's Ark," from *Science*, 298 (22 November 2002), 1565, asking whether substituting *poetry* for *syntax* (sentence structure) in it would help explain the apparent "meaninglessness" of some new work. Let's give it a try.

Chomsky's first great impact on behavioral science was his notion that sentence structure [read *poetry*] can be studied independently of meaning. His notorious demonstration of this is the sentence "Colorless green ideas sleep furiously." Although it is nonsense, it is nonetheless recognizable as a well-formed English sentence (compared, for example, with "Ideas green sleep furiously colorless"). The first step in the new linguistic science of sentence structure [*poetry*] was to become more abstract, leaving behind meaning to study the pure laws of syntax [*poetry*].

I understand what Chomsky means: the youngest English-speaking child recognizes the sense in the nonsense of "The frumious Bandersnatch" but can make nothing of "Bandersnatch frumious the." We do seem to have in our genes this recognition of abstract syntax. It is tempting to think here of Plato's *forms* (ideals), those eternal abstract realities of Justice or Love to which we instinctively compare our human approximations. Are the pioneering poets whose work seems to avoid obvious "meaning" reacting against or aspiring to some abstract or innate "form"? Is it the "scientific" critic's mission to ignore mere "meaning" and seek out the pure laws of poetry? That's a place to start, and from there I'll investigate what "meaning" means to some influential poets of our day.

To undertake so huge and multifarious a project in so few pages, I'll limit my investigation to one book, an extremely interesting one: ***American Women Poets in the 21st Century: Where Lyric Meets***

Language, edited by **Claudia Rankine and Juliana Spahr** (Wesleyan University Press: Middletown, CT, 2002, 451 pp., cloth \$65, paper \$24.95, 0-8195-6546-6, 0-8195-6547-4). First I'll describe this collection, unlike any other I know. The editors have selected ten women of substantial reputation: Rae Armantrout, Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, Lucie Brock-Broido, Jorie Graham, Barbara Guest, Lyn Hejinian, Brenda Hillman, Susan Howe, Ann Lauterbach, and Harryette Mullen. In her introduction, Spahr explains that these otherwise diverse poets have in common a lyric impulse that "means the use of agrammatical modernist techniques such as fragmentation, parataxis [juxtapositions without conjunctions], run-ons, interruption, and disjunction, and at the same time the avoidance of linear narrative development, of meditative confessionalism, and of singular voice." She concludes that "while there is a clear difference of intent between a poem written for investigating the self and one written for investigating language or community, it is more and more the case that the techniques used might be similar. In other words, form is no longer the clear marker of intention that it was thirty years ago." Look! The editors assume intention. That's a helpful start.

For each poet the editors have selected a poem or short group of poems to anchor the discussion. Then follows what for me is the most valuable feature: a statement by each writer of her poetic theory and/or practice. Finally we get an extensive critical essay for each by a scholar (sometimes scholar/poet)—an overview of the poet's work and theory. I had not realized how substantial (and fertile) a scholarly field experimental poetry had spawned. These essays are documented meticulously, footnoted lavishly, with bibliographies of the poet's books, selected prose, interviews, criticism, translations, and references, as well as brief biographical sketches. The appendix, notes, and bibliography for Lyn Hejinian alone claim twelve pages. The language in these articles is the language of the academy (most of the poets, like their critics, hold academic positions); a good dictionary is helpful if you don't speak the language and need help with *apodosis*, *nosographic*, *metapoesis*, and *iatrogenic*. A footnote will help you with *exophoric*, *anaphoric*, and *cataphoric*, and you will add new meanings to words like *singularity* as you read. The publisher wants this to be a text in courses in contemporary women's poetry. I, pedant that I am, found it extremely helpful in learning to read some of these poets whose poems had up to now resisted my efforts. Any serious reader who cares about this

direction in our poetry can have the benefits of such a course by studying this book and adventuring out to further works by these poets and others of their literary community.

■
 Back to Plato and Chomsky. I am familiar with the *donnée* of some of the Language poets that the diction, grammar, and syntax of our day are so corrupted by exploitation by commercial and domineering political forces that a poet must reject these repressive mechanisms and forge a new language. The impact of this political thrust emerges throughout this collection. “Who polices questions of grammar, parts of speech, connection, and connotation?” asks Susan Howe in *My Emily Dickinson*; “Whose order is shut inside the sentence?” In one of Howe’s excerpts from *Chair* are these lines: “Splintered disjunction of form// and content swift unrelenting// change a given craftsman two// Swedish smiths who make// hatchets knives scythes *transi* [sic].” Susan Howe’s prose statement following this poem chronicles her growing up amid the violence and the censorship of World War II—a metonym of all the brutality of history. “Language surrounds chaos,” she asserts, and in this passage from *Chairs* I understand her. I understand her even better in the contexts—historical, artistic, philosophic—that this volume as a whole provides. It appears to me that Howe is detaching her words from “the pure laws of syntax” not to leave behind meaning, but to dramatize relationships of rupture and craft that prescriptive grammar and linear syntax do not express.

Nevertheless “[s]plintered disjunction of form// and content” does not go so far as to splinter Chomsky’s *ur*-structure. The closest any of these poets comes to actually violating Chomsky’s abstract syntactic form is the beginning of Lyn Hejinian’s selection from her “Writing Is an Aid to Memory”:

apple is shot nod

ness seen know I around saying

which manages to introduce ten different vowel sounds in its ten words. But familiar syntactic forms emerge immediately: “arts are several branches of life.” I have found no evidence that any of this selection of poets assumes an absolute “truth” of Platonic or linguistic structure. On the contrary, I recognize the “meaning” in their choices of fragmentation and disconnection: Mei-mei Berssenbrugge gives as one of the reasons for what she calls her “more abstract” style in *Empathy* as “a politically-based resistance to any given form

or authority.” I believe the word for that is *anarchy*.

■

In their poetics statements, only three of the poets use the word *meaning*. Start with Hejinian: “A poetics considers how and what a specific poem means within itself and its own terms and how and why it means (and is meaningful) within a community that congregates around it.” This triple function is clear enough: *what* and *how* and *why* seem like the right questions. She does imply a poetry that speaks to its own community. This is nothing new: remember Milton’s “fit audience though few.” The women in this anthology do seem to participate in such a community. Brenda Hillman sees it as a group of experimental poets who, like the alchemists, aim

to remind the world that the only value is a harmony inherent in the object’s relationship with itself, just as every word of a poem starts with a relationship to itself deep in the labyrinths of its own change In making metaphor, meaning must suffer but it comes back changed—like Osiris, meaning has its body broken to be planted.

This is a profoundly dynamic poetic whose meaning is implicit in the form, “unnatural syntax,” for example.

Ann Lauterbach speaks of meaning in her expository poem “As (It) Is: Toward a Poetics of the Whole Fragment,” with its epigraph from Barbara Johnson: “. . . it is precisely out of the flaw or excess in an equation that meaning springs.” Platonic ideas “of perfection and wholeness” dangerously translate “into ideas of/ moral/ absolutes such as truth.”

How and *what* in combination make
content, and
content, when it comes in contact with the other, the one who
listens or

the one who reads,
then informs what we hope can be construed as meaning.
It is “the operations of choice,” Lauterbach concludes, that “allow us partici-/ pate [sic] in the/ making of/ meaning, however flawed, however partial it is.”

■

The ten statements make each poet’s intent clear. More elusive than intention, however, is the aspect of *meaning* most important to Ogden and Richards in their historic book *The Meaning of Meaning*

(1923): symbolism (remember Osiris) and the influence of language on thought. Berssenbrugge suggests how symbolism might well create for the reader a problem of obscurity: "You could make a poem that would be the function of the symbol, how it separates from what it originally represented, to function on its own, an internalized symbol for the dark origin that is separate from the real origin." I may perhaps be excused for suddenly recalling this exchange in Oscar Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan*:

"Do, as a concession to my poor wits, Lord Darlington, just explain to me what you really mean."

"I think I had better not, Duchess. Nowadays to be intelligible is to be found out."

■

I have neatly avoided the necessity of explaining to my reader or to myself the meaning of any of the poetry in this challenging collection, though I do feel more confident of my ability to enjoy such an endeavor than I did when I first opened the book. The poets' stated intentions, the political arguments, a program of linguistic discontinuity, these are clear, and I have begun to organize a primitive taxonomy (self-expression and self-transformation at one pole, anatomy of an incomprehensible world at the other). The one poet here who has richly repaid my efforts in the past is Jorie Graham. But just now I will step back and ask myself what this movement of experimental poetry *means*. The political rationale for shattering conventions is only part of an answer, an inheritance from the Language poets that does not include all of these ten. Deeper than that I understand a profound alienation from any coherent, even organic, principle of order. Some of these poets emulate the *trouvères* (the finders). Others return to the oldest root of the word *poetry*, the Greek *poiein* (to make), what Ann Lauterbach calls "the ordeal of the making." Accepting the instability of knowledge and language, accepting the pollution of language by political and social exploitation, one may still hope that from the very process of making esthetic and political and linguistic choices one may effect the rebirth of—ah, what?