

BPJ

BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL VOL. 54 N°1 FALL 2003

**Editors**

John Rosenwald, Lee Sharkey

**Editor for Reviews and Exchanges**

Marion Stocking

**Editorial Board**

Ann Arbor, Brian Hubbell, John Rosenwald, David Sanderson, Lee Sharkey,  
Marion Stocking

**Editors for This Issue**

Ann Arbor, Henry Braun, Brooke Halgren, Brian Hubbell, John Rosenwald,  
David Sanderson, Lee Sharkey, Marion Stocking

**Supporting Staff**

Al Bersbach, Karen Hellekson, Anne E. B. Stocking, Frederick B. Stocking

**Web Manager**

Lee Sharkey

**Subscriptions**

Individual: One year (4 issues) \$18 Three years \$48

Institution: One year \$23 Three years \$65

Add for annual postage to Canada, \$5.40; elsewhere outside the U.S., \$13.

**Submissions**

are welcome at any time, but must include a self-addressed stamped envelope.

Address submissions,  
correspondence, and orders to

*Beloit Poetry Journal*  
P.O. Box 151  
Farmington, ME 04938

Send review copies to

Marion Stocking  
24 Berry Cove Rd.  
Lamoine, ME 04605

**Retail Distributors**

B. DeBoer, 113 East Centre St., Nutley, NJ 07110

Media Solutions, 9632 Madison Blvd., Madison, AL 35758

Ubiquity Distributors, 607 Degraw St., Brooklyn, NY 11217

*Beloit Poetry Journal* is indexed in *American Humanities Index*, *Index of American Periodical Verse*, and *Poem Finder* (Roth).

Copyright 2003 by The Beloit Poetry Journal Foundation, Inc.

ISSN: 0005-8661

Printed by Franklin Printing, Farmington, Maine

**BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL**

**Fall 2003, Vol. 54 N°1**

**Kasey Jueds**

The Bat 5

**John Diamond-Nigh**

*Cadavre Exquis* 6

Fear 7

Descendents 8

**Bernadette Higgins**

Nothing missing, nothing disturbed 9

That is all 10

Saddled, Al calls 11

Two if by sea 12

Powder rooms 13

**Eleanor Stanford**

Conversions 14

Letter to Jessica from Madison 16

**Corinne Lee**

Fulgent 17

His Soul, Hirsute 19

**Maura Payne**

He Asks 22

**Marjorie Stelmach**

Triptych without Angels 24

**Nicole Cooley**

Dear Madame X— 28

**Weston Cutter**

Salt 29

One Water 30

First Republic 31

**Dawn Potter**

Coal 32

## CONTENTS

### **Scott Topper**

Success	34
Investment	35

### **BOOKS IN BRIEF, by Marion K. Stocking**

<b>Poets on Poetry</b>	36
Edward Hirsch, <i>How to Read a Poem and Fall in Love with Poetry</i>	37
Louis Zukofsky, <i>A Test of Poetry</i>	37
John Haffenden, ed., <i>Berryman's Shakespeare: Essays, Letters, and Other Writings by John Berryman</i>	38
Maxine Kumin, <i>Always Beginning: Essays on a Life in Poetry</i>	38
Adam Zagajewski, <i>Another Beauty</i>	39
Kenneth Koch, <i>Making Your Own Days: The Pleasures of Reading and Writing Poetry</i>	39
<i>The Poems of Dylan Thomas</i>	40
Seamus Heaney, <i>Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001</i>	40
Baron Wormser and David Cappella, <i>Teaching the Art of Poetry: The Moves</i>	41
Harry Thomas, ed., <i>Talking with Poets</i>	42
Kim Stafford, <i>The Muses Among Us: Eloquent Listening and Other Pleasures of the Writer's Craft</i>	43
Theodore Roethke, <i>On Poetry &amp; Craft: Selected Prose</i>	43
W. D. Snodgrass, <i>To Sound Like Yourself: Essays on Poetry</i>	44
Allen Grossman with Mark Halliday, <i>The Sighted Singer: Two Works for Readers and Writers</i>	44
Alice Fulton, <i>Feeling as a Foreign Language: The Good Strangeness of Poetry</i>	45
Susan Stewart, <i>Poetry and the Fate of the Senses</i>	47

### **COVER**

Design by **Mary Greene**

from photograph, "Writing on Water," 2003, by **Lee Sharkey**



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

**KASEY JUEDS**

**The Bat**

First dark, then more dark  
smoothed down over it.

First sleep, then eyes  
open to the ceiling  
where something circles. For a moment,  
you can't name it. And for a moment

you're not afraid. Remember

Blake's angels, how they leaned  
toward each other, and balanced  
by touching only the tips of their wings?  
Between their bodies, a space

like the one just after rain begins, when rain  
isn't rain, but the smell  
of dust lifted, something silent and clean.

**JOHN DIAMOND-NIGH**

***Cadavre Exquis***

Three folds. The small page divided in four.  
At the top, Breton's pencilled head, which is mostly  
a large lurid eye that descends to Man Ray's elongated  
breast swooping to the right like a tubular pink balloon.  
From there to Yves Tanguy's torso, a square cage  
containing a Conure parrot. Down to my own  
modest addition, a dragon's hind legs and scaled tail.  
We had gone to a small restaurant beside the Seine,  
recommended in our guidebook for its rustic *canard aux  
pruneaux*. At eight o'clock it was still not open. Glancing  
around, not sure what to do, I caught sight of a large  
Chinese vase in the window of an antique shop, a beauty  
with two peach-colored dragons coiled around  
the circumference. Because I was huddled inspecting  
the dragons I missed the sudden spectacle that captured  
front page on all the French papers. Felt the tremor,  
a sizzle of breeze, but when I turned around there was  
nothing out of the ordinary. Only that dumbfounded  
look on your face and the chef in the doorway,  
a towel in his hand, shrieking.

I wake and there's Anne  
clubbing poor Sylvia half to death with a long pink stalk  
of rhubarb, both laughing, squirming blindly,  
my frivolous wives. Neither came  
to bed last night, opting instead for a run in the rain  
along a deserted railway track then into the woods until  
they were lost, frightened by something and finally  
trapped. As always they struggle, at last make free with  
a breast torn, an eye bruised. Along the railway they slow  
to a saunter, drag themselves home and dress  
their wounds, play cards in the bedroom and watch me  
sleep. Nobody *talks* about death anymore, our three slow  
deaths in a cave in Egypt. Sylvia first, then me, then  
Anne. Or of thirst so bleak we bit our wrists. What  
would we find if we ever went back? Three bodies,  
of course, partly decayed. Anne's flashlight, my keys,  
maybe my Nikon, the pictures we scratched on the walls  
of the cave, a dog for atonement, ostrich for anger,  
camel or was it a peacock for fear.

Inside the walls of the City of God a mosquito could hardly turn around, yet the miniscule dome, belltowers, turrets, even a bird are painstakingly drawn by some master illuminator working as they all did then for a Medici pope or Florentine prince.

Was this the heaven my great great grandmother saw when she died and her spirit was whisked like a hornet out of her poor snowy low-township cabin? This island in a warm green sea? This tiny gate that she entered briefly, only to be sent back to her drafty log cabin and rancorous husband for several more years. Saying nothing about *this*, how bright and silvery-steepled heaven was, a jade Chenonceau or one of Calvino's invisible cities. Only that she had a few words with God who looked quite young and handsome and who said some not-so-nice things about several women in her church that he asked her to carry back on his behalf.

**BERNADETTE HIGGINS**

**Nothing missing, nothing disturbed**

An expensive watch keeps  
perfect time on the skeletonized  
wrist resting above ground.  
Already wild flowers bloom.  
The arm of the final victim  
to enter this particular pit.  
Buried quickly just before  
the end. The latecomer.  
Squeezed in as an afterthought  
before death's shovel filled in.

The refugee returns, incredulous  
to find her home intact. Nothing  
missing, nothing disturbed.  
Still the remnants of her brother's  
birthday celebration. Unwashed  
plates, the packaging for the watch  
bought for him by their parents.  
The washing, her brother's  
white shirts, now bone dry.

**BERNADETTE HIGGINS**

**That is all**

She has been found, the child in the photograph.  
Green irises gleaming, an older woman, baker's wife,

mother of two-thirds living, one-third dead.  
One in multi-millions matched by remote clever

cold technology. Striking the same pose,  
once photographed, twice photographed. That is all,

the burqa tantalizingly framing the same sharp eyes  
but, removed, revealing three generations in the face.

Not what we imagined. Too old, not beautiful enough.  
The impostor, younger, is nearer to the blueprint in mind.

**BERNADETTE HIGGINS**

**Saddled, Al calls**

All hands and the sacrosanct cook are brought  
to bear. All aboard, all in because, as Al maintains,  
they make light work. The end part of the human  
arm beyond the wrist, beyond the dusk, a unit

of measurement of a horse's height. Spurred on  
to ride, to drive in former times, chasing a handsome  
profit margin of error. Ten gallon hat askew in what  
will be oil barrel country. Hatred careering diplomatically

into the setting sun like some clinch of clichéd pasta.  
Plain spoken men in bull session, worn leather chaps,  
chaparejos in waning years. An irony of protection,  
tanned by sun, sweat, dust and the legend of

the chaparrals. Driving the drove, the chuck to be,  
cow-lick swept back. Heeding cattle calls, deflected  
magnetic west from the sweetheart who sits sipping  
lemonade waiting for Al's cows to come home.

**BERNADETTE HIGGINS**

**Two if by sea**

Two if by sea. Nothing by mouth. Except for final frantic calls. Private goodbyes broadcast across our globe's newest terror zone. Dead voices on continuous loop. A ditch attempt, last minute equalizer. The national

pastime on hold, but flags were flying. Half mast, not by foot but mouth a second time. Paul reverses spilled light, riding on to warn. A silversmith and off the record politician. Crop duster or stunt plane, a King Kong

lack of scale. Look-alike towers dying in the early light and we wheezed on the smoke of this nation's pain, all paddling upstream in recent history's longest day, rapids ahead and the hourglass clock-drifting in this,

our home. We live there too, under this flag, fixed as good buddies in one night's congress. We would give our blood. Small comfort not allowed. No closure on this deal. Nothing by mouth. Two if by sea or air.

**BERNADETTE HIGGINS**

**Powder rooms**

It's their powder rooms I fear  
most, all that explosive power.

One way or another.  
Magazines allowed, faucets

mandatory, but definitely  
no smoking and *please wait*

*to be seated.* Much prefer  
the rest room. Can't even go out

to put something in the boot  
without being scared off by

elephants in bonnets,  
the local hoods. Cannot stand

on the pavement without  
being run over. My garden

will bloom next to my neighbors'  
yard but they are shocked

that I am forever coming out  
of our walk-in closet and that

my husband never draws the drapes  
in our powder-blue reading room.

**ELEANOR STANFORD**

**Conversions**

March enters as one species and leaves  
us as another. And so you, bent  
over a foreign alphabet, must believe

in such transformations. You still can't  
read this thorny Hebrew, its missing vowels—  
the great space between how things look and what

they mean. Your future family howls  
with laughter to see your fine blond hair  
beneath a yarmulke, to hear you drawl

the prayers in an accent nearer  
South Philly than Jerusalem.  
Look, the poor thing's an engineer—

perhaps he thought conversion meant  
equivalence, the way a pound  
can be called roughly half a kilogram.

So far, though, they haven't found  
that formula. In fifteenth-century  
Iberia, the alchemists burned

tin and scrap, but could not blur  
the essence of the thing. The Jews,  
with almost equal unsuccess, paid usury

to change their names. As if they could undo  
history's phylacteries, could unwind  
the leather harness of the text. And you've

chosen this? These people who define  
exile? My grandparents fled Long Island  
for West Palm Beach, and now resign

themselves to jarred gefilte fish and second-  
rate bagels. When I visit, my Zaydee  
and I go out early and pick the sand

for shells. He quotes Elie Wiesel's reply  
to the question, what is a Jew?  
Someone who can't sleep,

and won't let anyone else sleep either. So,  
he says, stooping to examine a whorled  
conch, this is what I tell your Bubbe, who

complains I wake her with my gargling  
at five-thirty every day. This insomnia  
is our religion. We don't go to shul,

how else should we pay our dues? I palm  
a clam that seals itself around its  
flesh. Who can I blame

for my own restlessness,  
my inability to sleep, my tendency  
to wander and to drag my listeners

along? I'm only half a Jew—tenements  
on the East Side and Ellis Island are only  
half my story. I can't renounce

the rest—the Black Hills of South Dakota,  
the flat sky of Mennonite Ohio.  
Which is why—returning circuitously

to my point—I marvel at what pious  
love compels your study. It's March. I watch  
the freezing rain change over into snow;

it gathers in a weightless bliss. Words hatch  
from their shells of sound; you find  
the vowels that give them flight, and strike the match

to light the Sabbath candles. You will sign  
the wedding contract with your adopted name:  
Baruch—a blessing. You sip the wine,

which is sweeter than you expect, a warm  
prayer gleaming on your tongue.

**ELEANOR STANFORD**

**Letter to Jessica from Madison**

In the overheated windowless lecture hall, the great Kenyan scholar is expounding upon how 19th-century European explorers invented Africa. I sink into my seat, surrounded by erudite wits that glint like knives. I think of your gated complex in Nairobi: the flash of danger in the dark street, market stalls lined with eyeless masks. *Africa is the unconscious of the West*, the lecturer says, and the professors nod. During rainy season, you write, red earth reasserts itself: the swimming pool wears a veil of algae, frogs sing counterpoint beneath the floorboards. The city's face is streaked with mud.

Here, October strips the trees and pulls the skin taut across my cheeks. Last night Dan and I sat at the Weary Traveler drinking beer beneath walls hung with relics—4-H ribbons and unstrung mandolins—and plotted our escape. If I make it out alive, I said, I'll call my memoir *Life Among the Savages*.

*To what extent, the Kenyan wants to know, did the rescue of art objects disguise the massacre of Africans?*

In class, you help your students tear strips of newspaper, dip them in a flour-water stew. The mixture is cool against your skin. At lunchtime, the kids escape into the inscrutable heat of the afternoon. They leave their faces lined up on the windowsill to dry, winged husks in primary colors. *This is the epiphany of modernity*, declares the Kenyan scholar, and the professors sit on the edges of their chairs, ready with their pointed questions. Outside it is almost dark. Children swoop through the streets in bedsheets and plastic masks. At each door, a mother hands out sweets, asks in mock surprise, *Who are you? And who are you?* The Kenyan scholar pulls a handkerchief from his pocket, wipes his face, takes a sip of water. *We are the other*, he says, *but the other is not us*. In the auditorium packed with bodies, applause erupts like gunfire.

**CORINNE LEE**

**Fulgent**

*The poet Robert Desnos was a member of the French Resistance until the Germans captured him in 1944; afterward, they sent him to several concentration camps. The following actions saved his life until he died, still a prisoner, of typhoid fever at the end of the war.*

Separate and wordless as ellipses, the captives climb  
from their hay-matted cattle car, ascend

a ramp into peeled whiteness  
of vertical sun. Their wait outside the chamber

is silent, but a fetid-sweet stench,  
like scorched blood, roars. Moat of jackboots

contracts. Then Desnos lifts and flaps his coat  
to draw stares, a fairytale mother gathering

offspring beneath her skirt. He seizes a fellow prisoner's palm  
and speaks the man's fortune in a voice

that resonates like engine hum:  
*Your life will be a velvet Möbius strip, embroidered*

*with milky galaxies of children.* Another hand  
presses forward, twists up as if turning

a knob, opens like a heart  
to sacrament. *Your violin playing*

*will purify, evolving into drunken ether;*  
*your husband's regard will torch*

*into ardor as compressed*  
*as planet's core.* Then palms rush out

like young leaves in wind, shuddering  
but holding fast. *Volcanoes bowing*

*in praise of you, a jade-eyed Jewess in a tiara.* Shouts. *Heir*  
*to eternity!* Laughter. The jackboots,

just three sets enclosing  
four dozen bare, begin to retract and falter.

Nervous guards confer, mutter. Agreement:  
too risky to force the newly winged into downdraft

of slow gas. Later, during the march  
to camp's central dust square, the captives' hands

still escape (*ermine and gems!*  
*brash coronets!*). Reaching separately yet rising united,

singing the cohesion of light, both particle  
and wave.

**CORINNE LEE**  
**His Soul, Hirsute**

*Inside [a large white ant mound] . . . were two wild children curled up with the wolf cubs, baring their teeth and resisting capture. . . . The girls, who were not sisters, were estimated to be three years old and five or six years old. . . . [These] wolf girls . . . remain the best-recorded case of children who were raised by animals.*

—Amy Wallace, *The 20th Century*

*It's the busy, worrying mind that keeps us from acting with animal grace.*

—Irvin Tepper, title of porcelain sculpture

Reporters observing, the Bishop warns him not  
to play the fool—the Reverend nonetheless squats, frog-like,  
on the floor and plunges his lips  
into a Limoges tureen of stew. The wolf girls dilate

their nostrils like bellows, but remain  
pendulums in the corner, swaying on all fours in claret taffeta,  
snarling. Their world  
is now only bars. Each child seems to pace

around the center of herself. Days later, the girls  
become fools, too. The Reverend,  
on seeing them hunched like beribboned buzzards, snuffling  
into flowered bowls—  
de-winged, live beetles  
and raw meat, he discovered, are preferred fare—  
feels a minute and sepulchral deflation,

his zephyr of soul retreating. *Civilization/damnation*, he thinks.  
He never liked people and does not need  
them now. God, he once hoped, would provide  
distanced companionship—gemmy, pristine,  
an ethereal penpal of sorts—  
but never wrote back. The Reverend

thus took a wife. No love,  
but affection aplenty, her pre-coital embraces  
so voluminous-fierce that they often left fingerpad tracks,  
violet scallops, on his back (for a decade,  
she has yearned to conceive). Excluding sermons,  
she does almost all his conversing,

a plump teletype machine  
of gusty cheer. She teaches—switching grubs  
as if they were comets—the girls to drink from porcelain cups,  
and she talks talks talks, despite no answer

from them. In the evenings, she sometimes sobs  
into his shoulder, *If only I were their real mother*,  
assuming the umbilical would provide entry  
into the children's secret realm  
of nobles and bone. Yet she is

their mother. And here she stands, months later, with him  
in the basement at midnight, silently cupping his hands  
to her mouth, vaulting her throat up-back  
like a heron, exhaling sound  
in a siren wail. Her breath forms blossoms  
that sweeten the chill. From the girls' bedroom  
three floors above, the howl

is answered with two separate, then united,  
threads of keening. *We will do this nightly*,  
the Reverend decides, *when darkness peaks*.  
*An antidote*. (The girls have taught him  
that an excess of culture fogs

his animal glee.) He examines his wife,  
her lids closed tight as fists. *My dear*, he thinks, *at last*  
*we are wed*. The Reverend interlaces his fingers with hers,  
like the childhood game of a church  
holding people, then clasps her hand. They hold  
quiet in the boreal hush

of the parish, rapt in the mystery  
of animals that respond to the animal  
in them. Before the girls came, the Reverend  
would have nervously shattered  
the calm with a stuttered joke. But he has learned  
that wolves know what respect means. Once, the girls slipped

on a newly waxed floor, ending in a tangle  
of betrayal against the wall. He laughed oddly,  
a carnival barker. They stared back  
with onyx-eyed humiliation, strove to vanish  
for days. Wolves, he then decided, are superior

to humans. Without commentary, they accept you  
for all you are and do, and do not ask  
anything in return. They do not endlessly ponder duty,  
nor do they kneel  
to a stranger from thousands of years past. So, on the day one  
girl dies on his wife's lap—  
dysentery and worms, her weeping but mute stepsister  
coiled about her like a boa—

the Reverend writes, through tears, in a letter of resignation  
to the Bishop, *Here's the rub: The body, not the Heavens, is  
the soul's quest. Consider my spirit—of late  
grown amber-eyed, hirsute, exalted  
in the apocalypse, rebirth  
of each breath. Sometimes, the curtains*

*of its pupils slide up, and images of bodies enter—  
embracing, soothing, doing the good  
of this world so freely. Freely! Love burgeons. Bliss,  
always wild, ascends.*

**MAURA PAYNE**

**He Asks**

*Which arm are you going to offer a dog if he attacks you?*

He picks up a bag of potatoes in the produce aisle,  
looks at me for the answer. I don't understand this  
taking care, but every time I answer

Left.

(so I can punch him with my good hand)

In junior high there were specific words for punching

stole "He stole him in the face"

glass "She just walked up and glassed him"

slide "He got a slider—fell back twenty feet"

most of which were performed upside-the-head.

I got out of all my fights by not making my presence known. In 7th grade, a big girl didn't want me and Alexa Schatzow changing up in her locker room because *we was so fugly and nasty*. I agreed and took a D in PE. My gym uniform said Rodriguez in magic marker on the front, under the viking. I bought it used for two bucks off a 9th grader. *Rodriguez, say you fugly and nasty*. . . . I, Rodriguez, am fugly and nasty.

He continues with the bear drill.

Pushing the shopping cart I repeat:  
I'm to get under the vehicle.

*And don't try to help me, got it?*

Yes.

I, Rodriguez, will watch shoelaces, asphalt,  
and paws while you are mauled to death. Yes.

I imagine blacktop.  
I suppose a bear attack would take place  
on dirt. And why does he think the truck  
would be so nearby? Why wouldn't  
we just both get in the truck and drive away?  
This quiz takes place in the frozen food  
aisle. My hands are full of 39-cent burritos.

*Give him plenty of room.  
Resist the urge to run.*



Against a tradition of outlining figures in leaded white,  
he brought to her skin a borderlessness  
so pure that today  
our X-rays pass unimpeded:  
*this* angel's face on the screen is as blank  
as an angel's face—  
a disquieting annunciation.

At her back, a landscape bleak as a sink,  
a world of abrasion outside all tradition,  
tangled, unlit.  
Only the plate of her halo draws light.  
And her face.

What was it he knew of Wilderness that he could paint the path leading up  
from that river?

II.

In the tangle of weed tree and brush out back,  
lie patches of old snow like dryer lint  
and leaves in decaying layers.

Rancor's colors:  
color of coffee grounds washed toward the drain of a porcelain sink,  
rat pellets lying in cabin dust,  
a stubbled grief.

Ah, but the rain loves it,  
sings in the brittleness, sinks through the snarl,  
settles into complexities  
as softly knit  
as the bone of an old woman's hip.

*For a study in grays:*

Sever, on a porcelain sink with a tarnished knife,  
a pewter bead of mercury.

→





**NICOLE COOLEY**  
**Dear Madame X—**

In the museum I unravel stitches from your black dress in  
Sargent's portrait that refuses to name you, hook my finger  
under the beaded strap dividing silk from skin, edge the half-  
moon out of your hair.

Because one body prophesies another.

On the Bronx stairwell, Girl X is bruises fingered through her  
skin. She is all outline chalked on the tile. Girl, age 12, time of  
death unknown. Girl no one reported missing.

NICU: Baby X who might not survive outside my body, eyes taped  
shut inside the incubator's hotbox.

Because I am afraid to name her.

Your black dress unraveling. When your mouth knocks against  
mine I believe there is no child. I tell myself one body can replace  
the next. I tell myself.

Girl who cannot be missing.

Night by night I take myself apart.

**WESTON CUTTER**

**Salt**

*for KRR*

here's the summer night with the  
prowling wolf of light's absence  
proving something about beauty—  
it's here, it's on the way, it's nothing  
versus darkness—as grackles squawk  
to remind stars where phone lines block  
the ground, where the world is cleaved  
between sky and earth, what's shining  
and what's shone upon, even with the day's  
eye shut these splits and delineations exist  
because naming things makes them safe,  
so when you ask for salt no one passes  
your failed pop quiz from sixth grade when  
you couldn't name the dead white guy  
who killed everything dark 500 years ago  
because you'd just learned that your  
heart stopped every time you sneezed,  
which proved the math of existence is  
one part glow plus one part disaster and  
it's never clear which is which, every  
heart is just one more farmer anxious of the  
sneeze of the explorer always on the horizon  
under the dog bone constellations and  
there again go the birds calling their  
reminders, after even eons of darkness  
something still has to call it dark because  
nothing's ready for the name we give it  
and something's constantly being proven  
about beauty, for example: here is the  
soft edge of my love's hand and, past that,  
all I can imagine of oblivion.

**WESTON CUTTER**

**One Water**

You know seeing her touch you  
and herself at the same time that  
this is something no one forgets  
but breaks, batters—the art  
of erasure is what you're being  
taught nakedly—because  
you'd see the same thing now  
if you had a flashlight or a  
flare gun, and when she says  
everything edgy needs smoothing  
you smile and think she's talking  
about you until you see she's smiling  
too, she's talking about herself  
and she's said dangerous things  
before: *think how unlocked the  
doors in a perfect world would be*  
and you've been so human so ready  
to nod, to think she's been talking  
to/about/for you but the next time  
she calls the roots of trees *manacles  
of the earth* look at the string of  
broken seashells she wears around  
her neck, those she broke by drilling  
holes through them and the ocean  
they once held now laps silent and  
lobotomized inside each and there  
may be eight shells dangling there  
by a thread, each less than an inch  
above all that blood she's made of,  
but there's only one ocean, every map  
is clear, no one can tell you there's  
some line where one water differs  
from another, no one can say why  
you've stayed in one piece all this time.

**WESTON CUTTER**

**First Republic**

All you need is a skillet,  
oil and some plantains to fry  
to learn there are secrets  
your skin carries, like those  
trees whose seeds only  
germinate in a forest fire,

like the true story of who  
muttered the first *we*,  
how that first republic  
must have bloomed when  
some heat touched some skin  
until the first blister rose,  
something neither flame  
nor skin, just a note left  
for the body to remember

that love is location,  
is where we're warm,

and every new love is an  
apology to an old self and  
a candle you craft from the  
disused wax of last year's model  
and even if there's a bit  
of that first green crayon  
you melted into a Dixie cup  
in every candle you'll ever make,

if there's always some  
misunderstanding between your  
skin and any splash of oil,  
between you and the one with  
those arms lips and eyes,  
it's always subtlety  
that's lost in translation—

love is locution,  
how we say burn.

**DAWN POTTER**

**Coal**

Beneath houses and mountains, the coal seam lurks,  
snaking under markets and factories, under churches, farms,

soda fountains, and garages, under railroad tracks and the hotel  
where drunk old men sleep. The woman walks over the coal,

tracing an aimless map onto the earth—trailing, cigarette to lips,  
through the ragged yards and alleys to the matinee minstrel show,

where she sits alone and watches the red-lipped white men mop  
their black brows, cough and sing in the rising smoke from a hundred

women's cigarettes, thick enough to choke the light; where she waits  
for the piano player to seek out the chords of a darky strut,

for two black white men to stomp their feet, one two one two,  
bow, and disappear into the empty wings, into the hill-bound town

where the chimneys hide behind the smoke and the riverbank  
flares like a forest, where new leaves are painted in dust that sifts

onto the woman wandering home across the yards and alleys,  
under the sooty trees, up the buckled, heaving streets to home;

where soon the man also walks, swinging a lunch bucket, not fast, not  
slow,

but quiet, stepping one step after another to where the woman sits,

smoking and silent in the kitchen where the kettle boils on the stove,  
fogging the window where the child writes her name in careful script

on each little pane, index finger black with the coal that seeps into the  
house

that the woman has not dusted for weeks, for months, for years:

the glass-faced cabinets, the letters sloping onto tables, the newspapers  
jaundiced with age, the scarred legs of couches draped in sheets,

the end table swathed in shabby linen where a once-gilt lamp perches,  
throwing a saucer of light that never reaches the dark creeping

up the streets and alleys, the yards where black clotheslines streak the  
shirts  
black and the trees shake black pollen onto the roofs. In the quiet house

the man takes off his boots and peels down his sweat-stiffened socks;  
and the child gapes at the white hairless feet, soft and puffed, cramped  
toes

bending and stretching helplessly under the lamplight while the woman  
smokes in silence, while the little kettle coughs and sings on the fire

and the minstrel show rises like steam in her memory, a slow vapor  
that bends and frays. Ghostlike, the black-faced men mouth their songs;

crimson seats fold up over wraiths; invisible hands press the silent keys  
of the piano. Smoke vanishes into ceiling, and ceiling melts to sky; the  
clouds

dissolve to pinpoints of light, and the light fades to nothing, not even  
black;  
night descends on a town where the smelters burn and rusty bridges

hang over the creek like mothers staring into an empty crib.  
For the child has flitted away into the darkness—a moth, velvet and  
brief,

wings brushing the soot-stained air, her shadow painting an eyeless  
window.

**SCOTT TOPPER**

**Success**

I walked out of the desert sipping  
gin from platinum glasses, my nails  
glittering with stones. Sat down at a low oak table,  
bowed my head, led in prayer by a well-dressed man  
with turquoise eyes. He said, *hold on tightly*.  
I countered, *let go lightly*, and released my fist,  
a new pair of dice, I smiled up at him and rolled.  
His mouth was sticky, hung with threads.  
The dice looked up, bones on every face.

**SCOTT TOPPER**

**Investment**

Nice-Cheeks, you have promise and I like your face, kiss kiss. Now  
take a seat.

Have you had anything to eat? Help yourself, Fast-Hands, that's  
what I'm counting on.

It warms my heart to make this possible, Big-Eyes, to set you free,  
my little

Quick-Tongue, my hearty Thick-Dick. Have I told you? In this light,  
you'll make us rich, you're luminous, I can see right through you,  
like a newly minted

baby, like a three-wish fish, like a perfect alibi, you'll put us in the  
right place just in time.

**Poets on Poetry**

When the faculty at Mt. Holyoke discovered that I was planning on graduate school, they insisted that I drop my honors thesis on that upstart W. H. Auden and switch to Spenser. I dove eagerly into the luscious “poet’s poet,” covering page after page with colored-pencil close analysis, and when I read that Spenser’s “The English Poet” had been lost, I set about recreating it, following the dialogue form of his “View of the Present State of Ireland.” I created one character to mouth what I expected Spenser might have written—a summary of Renaissance-accepted assumptions about poetry. The other voice argued that Spenser’s actual writing was wonderfully more complex and imaginative than the theory of his day comprehended.

I recall this now as testimony to the depth of my interest in what poets write about poetry.

We go back today to the writings of Horace and Dante and Sydney on poetry not so much to gain insight into their own poetry as to absorb the critical theory of their various eras. But when we arrive at “my” period—the Romantics—we are in our own era. The 1800 Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* introduces the Romantic poets’ two revolutionary experiments: Wordsworth’s composition in a selection of the language as actually spoken, taking as its subject persons and events from ordinary life, and Coleridge’s poetry of the supernatural, valuable in enlarging the emotional capacities of the reader. Both aimed to expand the reader’s experience of the mind. Keats in his letters provides a wealth of valuable concepts, such as the image of the selfless “chameleon poet.” Shelley in “A Defence of Poetry” undertakes a comprehensive consideration, first, of the elements and principles of poetry and, then, of the power and social function of the poetic imagination. These poets still speak to our day. Most of my readers recognize “emotion recollected in tranquility,” “the willing suspension of disbelief,” “negative capability,” and poets as “unacknowledged legislators.” (You do, don’t you?) When we come to that era of the modern age we have labeled, too broadly, Modern, we find more poets, Eliot and Pound for example, who have much to say to us—poets and readers alike.

With all this wealth in the bank, I turn to contemporary poets’

prose books which have come to me for review. My first responsibility is to visualize you, my reader, who today not only wishes but needs to know what the poets say about their art. The audience for the 1800 Preface was the few readers who wanted to understand what these unknown experimenters were up to. Keats addressed only the recipients of his personal letters. Shelley expected his treatise to appear in one or another of two friendly periodicals—both of which expired before they had a chance to publish this work. In contrast, the more than two dozen volumes before me today are all by established poets, all from well-known publishers assuming paying audiences. So extensive is the genre “poets on poetry” that even selecting the strongest works I have to be brief, giving you not much more than descriptions—but enough, I hope, to lead you to the ones you want and need.

■

Ah, but who are “you”? Who is the audience for all these attractive volumes? I’ll start with people who want help reading the poetry of our day—the equivalent of a course. Labeled a “national bestseller,” **Edward Hirsch’s *How to Read a Poem and Fall in Love with Poetry*** (San Diego, CA: Harcourt/Harvest, 2000, 372 pp., \$15 paper) might as well have been titled *My Love Affair with Poetry*—and Hirsch’s affection is indeed infectious. For those who desire an introduction, this may be a book for you. It has a generous and well-illustrated glossary, an ample list for further reading, and, for teachers who might be tempted to let Hirsch do their work for them, two pages of questions for discussion.

At the other extreme is **Louis Zukofsky’s *A Test of Poetry*** (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2000, 166 pp., \$15.95 paper), which first appeared in 1948 when the influence of I. A. Richards’ *Practical Criticism* had crested. Richards presented “protocols”—poems with no poet named, no context—for evaluation. The first poetry text I taught, in the forties, old Thomas and Brown, made one hunt around in the fine print at the back to discover whether the poem under evaluation was by Milton or by Eddie Guest. The popular New Criticism demanded what Coleridge had asked: in Zukofsky’s words that “a means for judging the values of poetic writing [be] established by the examples themselves.” His Part One presents for comparative

evaluation two to five poems similar in content. Many I encountered here for the first time—wonderful discoveries. I felt stimulated and challenged to test my standards on them, resisting the temptation to sneak a peek at the small-print identifications at the back. Part Two adds up-front identification, with dates, plus Zukofsky's Comments and Notes. Fascinating! Part Three is much like Part One, but we come to it with our criteria sharpened. And once we dive into the Chronological Chart at the back we can begin to appreciate the brilliantly complex organization of the book as a whole—like one great superpoem. I cannot imagine a poet or a serious reader of poetry who would not enjoy, as I have, the challenge of so much amazing poetry and the humbling stimulus of interacting with Zukofsky in our evaluations. As Robert Creeley says in his Foreword, "Much as one might go to college, we put ourselves to school with Zukofsky."

■

Many of you reading this are already committed to reading poetry, have already discovered poets who set your standards. You will welcome their writing about poetry because you want to know more about them—their lives, the poets that influenced them, their views of poetry as a whole.

Perhaps you are a John Berryman enthusiast. You know the poems. You've read Eileen Simpson's splendid *Poets in their Youth* and Paul Mariani's biography. You have their word for his profound engagement with Shakespeare—more profound, it would seem, than that of anyone else in his century. You will then welcome **John Haffenden's** wonderfully exhaustive ***Berryman's Shakespeare: Essays, Letters, and Other Writings by John Berryman*** (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2001, 444 pp., \$16 paper).

**Maxine's Kumin's *Always Beginning: Essays on a Life in Poetry*** (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2000, 242 pp., \$17 paper) is a generous gathering of journal entries, autobiographical essays, appreciations of individual poets, crisp analytical studies, notes on her own poems, talks she has given, and a valuable conversation with Enid Shomer. I especially welcome her keynote address to the Sandhill Writers' Conference in 1998, "Premonitory Shiver," in which she tackles Shelley's question of the responsibilities of the poet in a dark world.

**Adam Zagajewski** in *Another Beauty*, translated from the Polish by Clare Cavanagh (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2000, 215 pp., \$23 cloth), speculates whether “anyone who composes a defense of poetry in prose neglects the writing of poems in the process. Can you really defend poetry that way?” My answer is positively Yes. He is gracefully doing it, as Sir Philip Sidney did it. And I’m grateful. Zagajewski’s book is a bildungsroman of his education in philosophy in Krakow, interleaved with verbal snapshots, aphorisms, meditations on poetry and poets, shifts of perspective, bouquets of unanswerable questions, comic splashes, and a running commonplace book. Some samples: “If only philosophers could learn a single thing from the poets—how not to have opinions!” He contrasts the epitaph on the tomb of the playwright Friedrich Hebbel: “If a tree wilts, if only at the crown, it’s just because the roots aren’t deep enough. The whole world is its possession,” with Hölderlin’s “Aber der Baum und das Kind suchet, was über ihm ist” (But the tree and the child seek what is above them). Not either/or, but both/and. Of the fragmentation of much contemporary poetry that frustrates our expectation of synthesis, he beautifully suggests: “But discontinuous texts resemble at times the segments of a curved line; at first nothing suggests continuity or wholeness. Only later does it turn out—sometimes, at least!—that these fragments are the slices of a circle, and with a bit of luck and attention one may trace the radii extending to the center.” I like that. Not the circumference but the radii!

■

Now my categories of audiences have begun to merge. The audience for the next three books includes not only the wise ones who want to be better readers of poetry and those already devoted to a particular poet’s work, but perhaps even more those who in the privacy of their metaphorical garrets or the society of the poetry workshop want to be better writers—of prose or poetry, but especially poetry.

**Kenneth Koch**, whose books on teaching children and folks in nursing homes are brilliantly useful, has designed *Making Your Own Days: The Pleasures of Reading and Writing Poetry* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999, 317 pp., \$15 paper) “to say some clear and interesting things” about poetry. In the first part he approaches poetry as a separate language with a chapter, “The

Poetry Base,” on how this language may be learned. He tells us what he knows about how poems are written, understanding that this helps both readers and writers. More than half of the book is an anthology of illustrative poems.

The new edition of ***The Poems of Dylan Thomas*** (New York: New Directions, 2003, 352 pp., \$34.95 cloth, with a CD of Thomas’s eloquent readings) has been edited with delicacy and scholarly authority by the poet’s friend Daniel Jones. It contains one hundred ninety-two poems with textual variants, published in the order of composition, a biographical chronology, and a fine little essay on Thomas’s use of verse patterns. New Directions has done itself and the poet proud with the volume’s rich, deckle-edged text paper and elegant endpapers, its cloth binding and gorgeous wrap-around dust jacket of Turner’s “Abergavenny Bridge Near the Usk.” I’ll not review the poems except to say that “the daughters of darkness flame like Fawkes fires still.” Here I want to recommend to all readers and writers of poetry Thomas’s preface, “Notes on the Art of Poetry.” In 1951 a Laugharne college student, needing help, asked Thomas to answer five questions. The poet took the request seriously and replied with what has to be one of the classic statements for his age. *How did you begin to write poetry, and which poets or kinds of poetry were you moved and influenced by?* He speaks of how he had fallen in love with words, words with no “meaning”—nursery rhymes, ballads; “Banbury Cross” and later “mandrake root” were magical without one’s knowing where that cockhorse was headed (or even what a cockhorse might be)—or what a mandrake was. Then he learned to treat words as a craftsman’s medium, making patterns, making forms. He read everything, “with my eyes hanging out.” And wrote imitations that he thought wonderfully original. *Does he deliberately use such devices as rhyme, rhythm, and word-formation?* Yes, yes, yes—every device there is, for the joy of it. And (“God help us”) *What is his definition of poetry?* “All that matters about poetry is the enjoyment of it, however tragic it may be.” Joy and celebration. Thomas’s answers make a lovely exuberant preface to a perfectly splendid volume. I wish I’d had it for my students when I was teaching poetry.

Another book I want to recommend warmly is **Seamus Heaney’s *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001*** (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2002, 452 pp., \$30 cloth), collecting new works

with a selection from earlier books. Heaney quotes from an earlier introduction: “How should a poet properly live and write? What is his relationship to be to his own voice, his own place, his literary heritage and contemporary world?” The first seventy-five pages approach these questions autobiographically, beginning with “Mossbawn,” his own place, where the fields gave way to the scary marshland:

Scuffles in old leaves made you nervous and always you dared yourself to pass the badger’s sett, a wound of fresh mould in an overgrown ditch where the old brock had gone to earth. Around that badger’s hole there hung a field of dangerous force. This was the realm of bogeys. We’d heard about a mystery man who haunted the fringes of the bog here, we talked about mankeepers and mosscheepers, creatures uncatalogued by any naturalist, but none the less real for that. What was a mosscheeper, anyway, if not the soft, malicious sound the word itself made, a siren of collapsing sibilants coaxing you out towards bog pools lidded with innocent grass, quicksands and quagmires?

I’d like to quote page after page, so wild and fresh are the revelations of the poet’s growing into his art. I’d like to quote his pages distinguishing craft from technique, on how politics and religion find home in poetry, on the influence of Eliot (“when his nerves threw patterns upon the screen of the language”), on the impact of his contemporary poets. All this is as helpful for the young poet today growing into a calling as for the reader eager to understand deeply and truly the poetry of Seamus Heaney. Most of this volume is Heaney’s fresh and generous reading of other poets; he has won me toward several poets I had previously not known how to read. He gives a new reading to even a poem as familiar as Elizabeth Bishop’s “The Art of Losing,” concluding: “She does continually manage to advance poetry beyond the point where it has been helping us to enjoy life to that even more profoundly verifying point where it helps us also to endure it.”

■

Now we come to a stack of books for an audience earlier poets could hardly have imagined—teachers of poetry writing. The one book I know that addresses the classroom teacher directly is ***Teaching the Art of Poetry: The Moves***, by **Baron Wormser** and **David Cappella** (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates,

2000, 376 pp., \$29.95 paper). The preface proclaims: "For too long the teaching of poetry has been lumped together with other aspects of literature under the rubric of teaching for meaning. First and foremost, poems are instances of art." The authors advocate reading poems aloud at every opportunity and having the students write them down "in their own notebooks (either paper or electronic)," thereby anchoring the student in the physicality of language. The teacher will find over 160 suggestions for exercises and nineteen week-long lesson plans. Each of the chapters is richly illustrated with complete poems; many were discoveries for me (compared with Hirsch's beloved old bunnies). Wormser, a strong poet himself (and for full disclosure, a personal friend), comes at his subject from both sides, with classroom experience at all levels and as facilitator of workshops for teachers. Although it speaks primarily to secondary school teachers, I recommend this book to anyone who wants to learn more about the art of poetry from an insider. (For the "meaning" of the poems you're on your own.)

Another book that should interest teachers is *Talking with Poets*, edited by **Harry Thomas** (New York: Other Press/Handsel Books, 2002, 137 pp., \$22 cloth), who for several years taught a course by that name. Here are five interviews that arose from that course. For each poet Thomas has added a biographical sketch and a book list. Here's how it worked: "Before doing an interview, the students would spend weeks reading, talking about, and writing essays on the poet's books. The poet would then come to school, give a reading, and meet with the students for an hour the next morning." These interviews are taped from those final meetings. The students' questions are sharply focused, and the results, though uneven, well worth preserving. I found the replies of Seamus Heaney especially enlightening, and I got more out of the interview with Robert Pinsky than I did from his *Democracy, Culture and the Voice of Poetry*.

■

Should a poet need schooling? Looking back to the beginning of what we call the Modernist movement (starting with Louis Untermeyer's grand old anthology, *Modern American Poetry*), we find Whitman and Dickinson, notorious school dropouts. Then come Eliot, Stevens, and Williams, distinguished for non-academic careers. But today it is hard to come up with a poet of

any distinction who has not wandered into the gro(o)ves of academe. Most have taken academic appointments; some have settled in; some exist as peripatetic authorities, doing a workshop here, a residency there. No wonder I have before me a stack of books by teacher-poets. If a young poet wants assistance but can't make it into one of their classes, at least he or she can get something in a book like **Kim Stafford's** *The Muses Among Us: Eloquent Listening and Other Pleasures of the Writer's Craft* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2003, 138 pp., \$17.95 paper, \$39.95 library cloth), which distills over thirty years of writing and teaching poetry. This poet is a storyteller, and his book is an engaging collection of anecdotes, many based on personal experience. In "Writing the Little Pieces that Please You," he illustrates modestly and gracefully how he has used his notebook as the beginning of the process of composition. His advice is sound: as soon as you have time "read what you have written aloud. Aloud. There is a line in a fifteenth-century monastic rule that specifies: 'No one shall read while others are trying to sleep.' Reading then was always done aloud, for literature is musical thought." Good. I also appreciate his advice on publishing: "If the magazine isn't good enough to tempt you to subscribe, what does that say about your desire to be published there?"

One of the most respected teachers of poetry was **Theodore Roethke**, whose earlier prose publications have been gathered into this new edition: *On Poetry & Craft: Selected Prose* (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2001, 216 pp., \$15 paper). Carolyn Kizer, fortunate enough to have been one of his students, has an eloquent Foreword, including several pages of memoir illuminating his poems. Roethke's book begins with short autobiographical observations, followed by a selection of notes on his own poetry and two selections of aphorisms from his notebooks, "The Poet's Business" and "Notes for Young Writers." Some of his sententiae (love that word) are merely sententious, but all have some interest if you care about Roethke and/or about teaching. Here are a few: "God is one of the biggest bores in English poetry," "Art is our defense against hysteria and death," "The poet must have a sense not only of what words were and are, but also what they are going to be," and a line for our day: "There's nothing like ignorance to engender wild enthusiasm." Further notebook selections brighten the

rest of the book, along with brief reviews of his contemporary poets and a few amusing but dated and ill-tempered satiric tirades by one “Winterset Rothberg.”

Next up: **W. D. Snodgrass, *To Sound Like Yourself: Essays on Poetry*** (Rochester, NY: BOA Editions, 2002, 244 pp., \$18 paper). Some years ago I read somewhere the first essay in this volume, “Pulse and Impulse,” and was enchanted by the poem “Owls,” in which Snodgrass not only observes their courtship expertly and thoughtfully, but writes in the rhythm of the great horned owls’ *hoo, hoo hoo, hoo, hoo*. From here to his concluding essay, “Meter, Music, Meaning,” he presents a teacher’s encyclopedia of how a poet may discover his or her own voice. Moreover, Snodgrass gives us all—not just students and teachers—a great holiday in the middle: “Disgracing Are Verse: Sense, Censors, Nonsense and Extrasensory Deception.” Here we romp through an encyclopedia of linguistic pranks, from children’s secret languages to wicked parodies. I recognized some from my childhood. Do you crave to know the principal characters in our national anthem, beginning with the Mexican guitarist José Canusi right through to that gay wrestler from Los Angeles, Homo the Brave? The whole cast list is on page 83. Then he tackles “The High Art of Mistranslation.” Here we find Blake’s “The Tyger” translated into iambs and then anapests, lest one doubt that meter affects/effects emotional tone.

■

Various as the poets I’ve mentioned here are, they all write in “my” language, with surprises of personality and particularities, but not, to a person as long in the field as I, really challenging. I now come to three that slowed me right down—that required much closer attention. Their audience is certainly not the beginning poet, not the naive reader. But for a person deeply involved in today’s poetry they are rich with rewards. I’ll start with ***The Sighted Singer: Two Works for Readers and Writers*** by **Allen Grossman** with **Mark Halliday** (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992, 388 pp., \$55 hardbound, \$14.95 paper). Part One is “Against Our Vanishing: Conversations on the Theory and Practice of Poetry”—a “winter” and a “summer” dialogue between the poets ending with a poem by each, poems that dramatize the differences between them that have emerged in the conversations.

The dialogues between these two complimentary but complementary poets, both enthusiastic about poetry, both respectful of each other's work and opinion, make me long for a record of the dialogues that must have occurred between Coleridge and Wordsworth or Byron and Shelley. Indeed, the very idea sets me fantasizing imaginary conversations like Walter Savage Landor's between, let's say, Ammons and Ashbery. The dialogue form dramatizes differences between Grossman and Halliday that go well beyond their differences in age and résumés to their ethical and aesthetic stances. Grossman is a self-proclaimed "high-style poetic writer." What's more, he is a transcendentalist. Of his own admittedly difficult poetry (which I grappled with in my review of *The Philosopher's Window* in the Winter 1995/6 issue) he explains that this difficulty "is like that broken countenance that has so much to say about a reality so profoundly complex, energetic, and troubling that the face is deformed and grows unrecognizable as a human face." "The function of difficult poems," he explains, "is to exact of the reader that severe and intelligent activity which is involved in the construction of the meaning of things."

Mark Halliday, on the other hand, is a poet very much in this world. He wants to "have effects on how people live with each other." He is concerned that in Grossman's work of checking a poem "as an act against its own hypothesis of origins," his argument may lead "toward a privileging of professional expertise in the history of poetry and poetics, which may or may not cooperate with *the kind of wisdom drawn from experience that I say is the crucial thing for a teacher or writer*" (emphasis added).

Those attracted to Grossman's approach will find in the second half of this book, "Summa Lyrica: A Primer of Commonplaces in Speculative Poetics," 155 pages of "commonplaces" and commentaries. Here's one "commonplace": "25.6 All this is not to say that poems are about art. On the contrary, art is about experience (in the same sense that the cat indoors is 'about' the house)."

■

Kenneth Koch approaches poetry as a separate language; Allen Grossman declares that "all poems employ an artificial, that is to say, a 'poetic language'"; **Alice Fulton** has a book with the

tempting title *Feeling as a Foreign Language: The Good Strangeness of Poetry* (Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 1999, 318 pp., \$15 paper). In her Preamble Fulton takes it for granted that “the impulse to create a language commensurate to—or transcendent of—meaning is the driving force of poetry.” As a poet she espouses the *unheimlich* (see Freud) and inhabits the *ekkentros* (Greek for “outside the center”). Her chapters are “Process,” “Poetics,” “Powers,” “Praxis,” “Penchants,” and “Premises.” “Process” is a very personal catalogue of ways language can “screen the emotional loudwork”—language as screen, veil, shade, wrap, even a “prosthetic face.” Her “Poetics” chapter usefully suggests some new vocabulary for discussing what is happening in a contemporary poem. I found myself underlining much of this for future reference, for example, her assertion that the exigencies of form “foster such careful choices that each word can become a palimpsest of implication.” Like her I assume that we find ourselves in “a dynamic world made up of qualities constantly changing in time, a wealth of fluctuations.” In discussing contemporary chaos and complexity theory, especially fractals, as valuable models for poetics today, she concludes that “asymmetrical or turbulent composition may be the essence of twentieth-century poetics.” Discussing her own poetics in the “Praxis” chapter, Fulton delighted me by denying that readers should understand every poem on their own: “My response is, ‘We need all the help we can get.’” We’ve come a way since Coleridge insisted that the poem should contain in it everything the reader needed. The New Critics are not only old but defunct. For the so-called post-post-modern poetry today we need to understand the new case for abstractions, and we should welcome new vocabularies for new understandings, both scientific and poetic.

In “Premises” Fulton articulates two wishes: first, to shift the debate on the poetry of our day. Of the narrow discussions on formalism she asks, “Can we talk about something else?” Another subject she’d like to dismiss is concern with the “shape of the poet’s life rather than the shape of the poem.” Yeats proclaimed them inseparable, but I know what she means. Turning from the critics to the poets, she charges that “American poetry is relentlessly concerned with the self. Its investigations are not ontological or epistemological so much as solipsistic.” She regrets, as do I, the paucity of strong poetry concerned with

“political” issues, “diversity,” and justice. Her second wish is for poets’ “mindfulness,” for “intellectual and structural wonders of the poem” that can create emotion. She attacks the narrowness of emotional range in most poetry today and asks for the poem that “includes emotions seldom found in contemporary poetry; unsettles the limitations of genre and convention; subverts cultural complacencies; articulates emotional states for which there is no noun; enacts the reader’s sublime,” by which she means a gorgeous, “profligate, lovely feral force, barely under the poet’s—or reader’s—control.” She finds this “feeling as a foreign language” in some long poems today, by such poets as Ammons, Goldbarth, and Mitchell, and in the works of Dickinson taken as one long poem. She is, in the end, describing an energy in poetry that I have kept hoping for as I opened envelope after envelope in each day’s mail.

■

I come now to the book that most profoundly engaged me: **Susan Stewart’s *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*** (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2002, 460 pp., \$22 paper). Although her poems have been important to me, I had not anticipated a theoretical work of such wide-ranging and deep-diving scholarship (symptomatically: 112 pages of not-to-be-skipped endnotes and references). In “Against Our Vanishing,” Stewart argues like Grossman that “the cultural, or form-giving, work of poetry is to counter the oblivion of darkness.” Poësis as “a force against effacement.” Poësis as transformative. Poetry, particularly (for Stewart, unlike Grossman and Fulton) as measured language: “Keeping time makes infinity bearable.” Stewart works in many dimensions. Although she applies the whole range of western literature and criticism to whatever she touches, she roots her own theory in close analysis of poem after poem, from Homer and Cædmon to the present. For her analysis of Hopkins she goes back to the manuscripts and pays attention, as so few have done, to the extraordinary effect of reading the poems aloud as Hopkins marked them. One example: at the end of his “doomsday” poem, “Spelt from Sibyl’s Leaves,” she hears a counterpoint between the easy stressing of “*thoughts against thoughts in groans grind*” and the poet’s markings: “*thoûghts agàinst thoughts in groans grind.*” As she so aptly says: “It is as if, at the end of this sonnet, Hopkins were stripping the gears of sound.” Stewart reads not only as a scholar but as a poet, and, like Heaney,

writes a poet's prose.

I can't do justice to this brilliant volume in the space I have here. I'll just say that 388 pages have margins penciled with my asterisks, double rulings, and cross-references, as well as some corrections and arguments. I must dispute her use of *vertigo* as an effect of ecstasy or the sublime (Fulton does this as well) and her misunderstanding of *nystagmus* as a simple back-and-forth movement of the eye. (It's no visual boustrophedon. It's a rapid involuntary oscillation associated with extreme vertigo—a sensory hell.) But despite my disagreements, I thoroughly enjoyed my days of arguing with Stewart, sometimes questioning, but always excited to be so thoroughly engaged in the fresh insights she shares and grateful for her moving through “sound, voice, touch, motion, extension, and moral recognition” to confront the big questions at the end. Why is poetry so vitally important? How does it prophesy? How is an art “concerned with music and meter” dynamic? How can it alleviate the sense-impoverishment and two-dimensionality of the world we have created? What are we in danger of losing forever? These are the questions her poems engage; like them, this book is implicitly elegiac. But beyond elegy surges the potency of the creative imagination—the physical and metaphysical power of *poesis*. I have to go back to Shelley's “A Defence of Poetry” to find anything comparable.



#### **Editors' Note**

In the Summer 2003 issue we incorrectly identified the author of “The Incontinent Burglar” and “The Slightest Wind.” Our apologies to William Winfield Wright, the author of the poems.