

BPJ

BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL VOL. 55 N°1 AND 2  
FALL/WINTER 2004/2005

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**Subscriptions**

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

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

Add for annual postage to Canada, \$3; elsewhere outside the USA, \$7.

**Submissions**

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

**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*, MLA database, and *Poem Finder* (Roth), and is available as full text on EBSCO Publishing's Academic Search Premier database.

Address submissions, correspondence, and orders to  
*Beloit Poetry Journal*, P.O. Box 151, Farmington, ME 04938

Send review copies to

Marion K. Stocking, 24 Berry Cove Rd., Lamoine, ME 04605

Copyright 2004 by The Beloit Poetry Journal Foundation, Inc.

ISSN: 0005-8661

Printed by Franklin Printing, Farmington, Maine

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### **COVER**

Design by **Mary Greene**

from painting, "A Basket Full of Vegetables," by **Zhu Yongjin**,  
Jinshan County, China

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

## EDITORS' NOTE

In the twelve months since we assumed responsibility for the work Marion K. Stocking performed so well for nearly fifty years, we have managed to keep our heads above the waves, not always swimming smoothly, but breathing nonetheless. In addition to publishing quarterly issues, we continued to expand the *BPJ*'s doings in directions that have long interested us. We hosted two readings in Farmington, our new home. At the annual convention of the Associated Writing Programs we met up with contributors, young writers, and old friends. We have welcomed new staff and benefited from the efforts of four interns, who participated in editorial work, but also began the massive undertaking of scanning five decades of the magazine for our web site. This project will make readily accessible a treasury of literary history. The first decade of the archives, including first or early publications by Anne Sexton, Galway Kinnell, and Adrienne Rich, as well as Langston Hughes' translation of Lorca's *Gypsy Ballads*, should be posted to our website, [www.bpj.org](http://www.bpj.org), by mid-September.

The magazine now in your hands is a thick double issue, laden, we believe, with as rich a feast as is Zhu Yongjin's bicycle on the cover. Fans of Marion Stocking's "Books in Print" will find here her omnibus review reflecting on the role of content and subject matter in fourteen recent volumes of poetry. With the spring issue we will return to our regular forty-eight-page format, which many of our readers feel remains just the right size for an evening's read. In that issue we will announce the winner of the 2004 Chad Walsh Prize.

Although the two of us hold ultimate responsibility for seeing the *BPJ* from manuscripts in the P.O. box to polished product, we depend on our contributors, editorial board, volunteers from the community, and subscribers to create a magazine that you continue to tell us warrants our efforts. To twist slightly two lines by Yeats,

Think where our glory most begins and ends,  
And say our glory is, we have such friends.

Lee Sharkey  
John Rosenwald

**FRANK STEELE**  
**The Weight of the World**

I look at a goat two hundred yards  
deep in a field  
wagging his head and the light  
coming off him in flakes  
of distance. He sees me  
through his stopped day, and behind  
the killing stillness of his beard  
some weight of prophecy—it isn't  
just me anymore but an added look  
that saw me, as if sky  
examined sky, or grass grass. I think of this  
all day and half the night  
from a room where air breathed over and over  
turns milky with sleep: what happens  
through a single look carried  
between the brass sun  
and the glass stars.

**REYNOLDS DIXON**

**Half Life**

This is not the desert where delirious  
de Saint-Exupéry followed paw prints  
to a lair, surprised *any* life still held  
his interest, his tongue filling his mouth,

not the oasis where Alexander  
wasted in feverish apostrophe  
to Pallas or the dead-redolent wind.

And no, not the highway the Bedouin  
combs for remnants of his daughter, blankly  
shambling in the DU dust (here the hand  
too small yet to learn the quanoon). Forget  
the brown runnel the children cup hands to.

Forgetting will get you here, the nowhere  
whose middle is the deep-out-of-mind,  
the mind of habit regarding sorrow  
as the blush of a distant simoon.

For a time one may be said to live here,  
owning no shadow, another absence  
from whom even the raven wants nothing.

**NANCE VAN WINCKEL**

**Channel of the Reddest Wines**

The west wind drinks to a northern  
town's victory. The south wind's  
pulling for the sea. The lions moan—  
starved and sick in the cypress fold.

When the cup's empty, the jug tilts  
by itself. Every captain wants a cannon,  
every god a tank. Someone sticks boys,  
like brass tacks, up and down the borders.

Lowercase & pillowcase—it's the oldest  
game. Who's done whom. The world  
around two soldier-lovers more gone out  
than their Minnie Mouse night light.

Slowly, like the dregs of a small fire,  
the lees darken and harden and clarify.

**DAVID WILLIAMS**  
**"Hunter Mountain" (1863)**

*after seeing the painting by Jervis McEntee*

The light remains.  
Swift cloud shadows brush

across so much inside us  
we can neither name nor deny.

Then, now, war years,  
the fallen, distant,

ours, tear at their  
clothes to find

where they're hit,  
if they've got

half a chance. Between  
stubblefield ranks of

milkweed and  
far mountains,

glimmering,  
obscured,

windrows survive  
the cleared forest.

October's austere glory  
burns down to black trunks,

branches, roots.  
Chimney smoke

blown low rises  
eddy through

the invisible.  
One plain farmhouse

might keep this world  
from flying apart

like smoke or milkweed.  
The light remains.

**ALBERT GOLDBARTH**

**The Salt Mine**

Thank you for asking.

In shaft, 640 feet down.  
*the whisk of an ant isn't heard at the bottom,  
a photon won't survive this fall*

In years, 230 million.  
*uranium, even, couldn't make  
a single click across time like that*

Taste of the ocean, scent of our sexual seam,  
ghost trail the teardrop leaves.

*this is how deep our salt is*



In winter it was worst.  
The men would wake before it was light,  
and work all day beneath the crust of the Earth  
—entombed in their labor, carrying like coolies  
for their pay in a darkness as absolute as that  
beyond the death of the physical universe—  
and then they'd reemerge to a world already  
blotted of light by a January or February sky.



It was started in 1922.  
Some of the miners represent  
a family's third generation:  
over eighty years of a bloodline  
dedicated to working these subterranean combs.  
The men are large  
and impressively muscled, of course.  
And even so, if they turn off the frame of portable lights  
and the battery in the helmets,



they can feel themselves begin to dissolve  
—*like any other salted treat*  
*in the mouth of the darkness*—to nothing.

■

There was a bar on their side of Hutchinson.  
A dingy place, sooty: as if the land there  
offered up coal, not salt. “But every table  
had a glass with a stubby candle in it. . . .”  
after working all day  
in the underworld  
“. . . we’d go to this bar like people  
whose religion was these flickering gods.”

■

Say a ray from outer space,  
or say a version of “the Rapture” appears,  
and everyone vanishes upwards . . . all of the meat of us,  
the whole of the pulp and its juice,  
the complete electrical net of our thinking . . .  
vanished, *whhht!* And what remains of everybody

is the salt alone, in the shape of us  
for a moment: all over the planet,  
billions of delicate crystalline doilies  
in the shape of us, in the pose  
of every activity of us,

for a moment, until they crumble  
into a musical powder that rides  
the winds of the world with the sound of chimes

—our infrastructure no longer.

■

This was my dream: a lick  
had been freshly set up, in a glade,  
and the deer were drawn there, it called  
to its sister self webbed intricately in their bodies,  
and the bears were drawn, and goats,  
and heavy carriage horses, and lions,  
simultaneously: and as it was licked,  
the white stalk grew; and every animal  
rose in the air and hovered, still darting out its tongue  
for a taste, I swear no different  
than the hummingbirds in the garden,  
drunk and translucent and antigravity.



Amin helped there as a waitress  
on her off-nights from the processing plant.  
“You should of seen them—big men,  
men like boars, all beard and belly  
and these big hot animal laughs.  
But then they’d get to the little candles on the tables  
. . . they would turn silent,  
shy, they would flutter like moths.  
It was after the work shift: everything  
was amazing to them. Sky  
instead of rock: it was amazing to them.  
Do you want to know how many times I heard  
I was the most gorgeousest thing they’d seen?  
It’s only because I wasn’t stone  
or pitchblende or petrified root.  
So I didn’t get too puffed up over that.”

“The first time Mackie asked me out  
it was really that: *out*. We left the bar  
and walked around back, and he looked up  
at the stars as if he’d never seen them before.  
And then he looked at me as if he’d never seen  
a woman before . . . him standing there



fresh out of the earth.”  
—*A mineral himself*



*With their clothes off, here  
in the field: open, is what it felt like,  
to anything. Just lying there  
raw to the wind; and the stars  
burning into them for a seasoning.*



It turns out that the fossil of an ocean  
is the land. This state

was once a sea, and the waves of shale and salt  
below its surface are the hardness that remains,

the endoskeleton of water.

In Arthur Conan Doyle's *Sir Nigel*,  
the man of the court recalls a story:  
“The town was down yonder by the sea, until  
one night the waves rose upon it  
and not a house was left.  
Under the blue water  
lie tower, cathedral, walls and all,  
even as my grandfather knew it.”

A kind of Atlantis,  
down in the mine.  
A kind of prehistory.  
Salthenge.



Some Facts:

The elevator in use  
is still the original one, from 1922.  
As it descends or as it rises  
you can stretch your head over its side  
and inhale a darkness  
that was already old when the protocockroach  
struggled onto land.

This elevator shaft is the only source  
of incoming air for the gouged-out hollows below.  
To this extent, it's the trachea.

If it's a trachea, there's a body.  
That might make these miners from 1922 to now  
the predecessors  
of nanobots. Their busy, tiny upkeeps  
in the arteries and over the walls.

Furniture isn't necessary.  
Here, you can see where a man has set  
his thermos of coffee, a blanket, and a book  
on a rough, sufficient shelf  
hacked chest-high out of the salt itself.



*The photograph of two young children, smiling,  
displayed on a ledge of pure salt.  
Eventually the glass in the frame  
takes on the sheen  
of being enclosed  
back in the planet's body.*



They were married for forty-seven years  
(she died at seventy-two) and in that time  
they had a world of opportunity  
to think of love's tough travel  
in the metaphorical terms the mine provided.  
After all, who hasn't—consciously  
or not—considered a lover's skin,  
its quickened saline greeting to the tongue,  
as a foretaste of death?

"The first time I undressed her,"  
Mackie said once, "it was after the bar  
had closed. The room was dark  
except for one of them candles we left  
at a corner table. Anyway,  
I thought of that when I looked at her  
for the final time this morning.  
Then they shut the lid  
and we lowered her into the soil."

*He was seventeen. He'd been down here  
with the beams of a headlamp  
feeling the way like a blind man's cane  
a hundred times already—his father  
had brought him. With the coarse jokes  
and the crunching walk and the prickly smell  
of the dynamite in its cartons. But this  
was his first day as a full-time worker,  
attempting a shift on his own. The dark  
was a living, touchable thing. It started  
here at his nose and lips and it circled  
away to goddam China without a rest  
and returned to stare from over his shoulder.  
The dark: he was owned by the dark.  
Fondled by the dark. Diminished.  
And when the shift was over, he left  
—in violation of policy, but this first time*

→

*he couldn't not—with a pocketful  
of rock salt for a souvenir. As soon  
as he got back up to the surface,  
he spread it on the ground. The moon was out,  
its light was amplified a thousand times  
in this granular body. And since he was alone  
—the other guys were already  
out at the bar—he let himself weep  
at something this unearthly and common and naked.*



When the spirit Salt Mother enters a Zuñi house, the people who live there tell her: “We hope you will visit here many times.” Of course: we would die without her ministrations, we would die if we didn't regularly replenish our inner sea. She is also known by this name among the Sia, Isleta, and Cochiti pueblos. Among the Hopi, Salt is a male, Salt Man, and his presence there is equally necessary.

The Zuñi say the Ahayuta Achi stole salt from the animals in the first of days, and brought it into the human world. These two are the male children of the Sun and Falling Water, and are legendary inventors, benefactors, and mischief-makers. They ordered the directions of the four quarters of the Earth. They killed the dread Chakwena giantess, tearing her heart from where she secreted it in her gourd rattle. They are associated with lightning, comets, shooting stars, and they founded the curing societies.

Theft is a famous specialty of theirs—a lark, a caper. They stole the four magic staffs (snow, hail, frost, and lightning) from the Direction Chiefs, they stole masks from the kachinas. They seem to carry off these dangerous heists with an easy zest: fleet-footed, laughing, never breathing hard.

The gift of salt is clearly one of their prime accomplishments. I imagine their having the rakish charisma of Robin Hood distributing gold to the poor—but tinged with the even grander aura of Prometheus as he stands there with the illicit brazier of

flame. I imagine a woman in her doorway accepting this gift on behalf of the Zuñi people, looking at her children where they sit in the yard near the pots, and thinking, “Now we will never need again to slip away under the silver moon on all fours with the beasts, disguised in snouts and fangs and inappropriate hungers, just to approach that hidden column in the wilderness.”

We know now these are degraded times. The high gods of the ancient myths exist for us as superheroes. Like Buddha or Jesus or Thunder-Roarer, they also are born in impossible ways and are here to save us from evil—although the capes and the tights and the happy-meal action figure deals say a different sensibility from the older, earnest, universe-establishing worldview. This is the stuff of freshman college courses; everybody acknowledges it.

So I think that these are the Ahuyata Achi now, in 2003, and the Hutchinson Salt Company is the temple for their exploits. You can telephone this place yourself, 620-662-3345. You can stand at the edge one night, and witness the men emerge from their deeps, and see the little struggle in their faces as they move across the threshold—back to the world of their own, from a sojourn in the element world. These are no gods: although they perform one of the functions of the gods. Perhaps we all perform some functions of the gods: we have to, now that they’re gone, although we’re small and clumsy. When the men step from the mine, we can see that they do breathe hard: they aren’t the nimble Zuñi boys on a spree. There’s a beauty in this, of form allied to function: under the night sky, coated in sweat.

يَحْتَارُنِي الْإِيْقَاعُ، يَشْرُقُ بِي  
أَنَا رَجُوعَ الْكِمَانِ، وَلَسْتُ عَازِقَهُ  
أَنَا فِي حَضْرَةِ الذِّكْرَى  
صَدَى الْأَشْيَاءِ تَنْطِقُ بِي  
فَأَنْطِقُ ...  
كُلَّمَا أَصْغَيْتُ لِلْحَجْرِ اسْتَمَعْتُ إِلَى  
هَدْيِ يَمَانَةٍ بِيضَاءِ  
تَشْهَقُ بِي:  
أَحْيَا! أَنَا أَخْتُكَ الصُّغْرَى،  
فَأَذْرِفُ بِاسْمِهَا ذَمْعَ الْكَلَامِ  
وَكُلَّمَا أَبْصُرْتُ جَدْعَ الزُّنْزُلْحَبِ  
عَلَى الطَّرِيقِ إِلَى الْغَمَامِ،  
يَحْتَارُنِي الْإِيْقَاعُ، يَشْرُقُ بِي  
أَنَا رَجُوعَ الْكِمَانِ يَحْتَارُنِي الْإِيْقَاعُ  
أَنَا فِي حَضْرَةِ الذِّكْرَى  
صَدَى الْأَشْيَاءِ تَنْطِقُ بِي  
٥١.٥:

**MAHMOUD DARWISH**  
**Cadence Chooses Me**

Cadence chooses me, chokes on me  
I am violin's regurgitant flow, not its player  
I am in the presence of memory  
The echo of things pronounces through me  
So I pronounce. . . .  
Whenever I listen to the stone I hear  
The cooing of a white pigeon  
Gasp in me:  
My brother! I am your little sister,  
So I cry in her name the tears of speech  
And whenever I see the zanzalek trunk  
On the way to the clouds,  
I hear a mother's heart  
Palpitate in me:  
I am a divorced woman,  
So I curse in her name the cicada darkness  
And whenever I see a mirror on a moon  
I see love a devil  
Glaring at me:  
I am still here  
You won't return as you were when I left you,  
You won't return, and I won't return  
Then cadence completes its cycle  
And chokes on me. . . .

**translated from the Arabic by Fady Joudah**

أَمْشِكُ مَسَّ الكمان الوحيد ضواحي المكان البعيد  
على مهلٍ يطلب النهْرُ حصَّته من رذاذ المطرِ  
ويدنو، رويداً رويداً، غَدَّ عابِزٌ في القصيدِ  
فأحملُ أَرْضَ البعيدِ وتحملني في طريق السفرِ

على فَرَسٍ من خصالك تنسجُ روحي  
سماءٍ طبيعِيَّةٍ من ظلالك، شرنقةً شرنقةً  
أنا آبن فعالك في الأرض، وآبنُ جروحي  
وقد أشعلتُ وحدها جُلنارَ بساتينك المغلقة

من الياسمين يسيل دُمُ الليل أبيضَ. عطركِ  
ضعفي وسرُّك، يتبعني مثل لدغة أفعى. وشعركِ  
خيمةُ ريح خريفِيَّة اللون. أمشي أنا والكلامُ  
إلى آخر الكلمات التي قالها بدويٌّ لزوجي حمام

أجشكُ جَسَّ الكمان حريزَ الزمان البعيدِ  
وينبت حولي وحولك عُشْبُ مكانٍ قديمٍ - جديدِ

**MAHMOUD DARWISH**

**Sonnet 5**

I touch you as a lonely violin touches the suburbs of the faraway place  
Patiently the river asks for its share of the drizzle  
And, bit by bit, a tomorrow passing in poems approaches  
So I carry faraway's land and it carries me on the travel road

On a mare made of your virtues my soul weaves  
A natural sky made of your shadows, one chrysalis at a time  
I am the son of what you do in the earth, son of my wounds  
That have lit up the pomegranate blossoms in your closed-up gardens

Out of jasmine the night's blood streams white. Your perfume  
My weakness and your secret, follows me like a snakebite. And your hair  
Is a wind tent autumn in color. I walk along with speech  
To the last of the words a Bedouin told a pair of doves

I palpate you as a violin palpates the silk of the faraway time  
And around me and you sprouts the grass of an ancient place—*anew*

**translated from the Arabic by Fady Joudah**

## HILLEL SCHWARTZ

### *Amidah*

Fifty, half-lives leaving your bones to their tumors,  
half of you no longer firebreak to the other,  
once again your daughters & friends the multitudes  
storm in through your studio with gifts & good  
company—dogs, cats, pratfall romances,  
paints, mangos, mandalas, pomegranates,  
blueberries for clearest mind—such a collage  
of what's best for & about us in this age  
of predicament, medicament, self-hope  
& radiant survivors. Enough glad rope,  
the hangman loses track of the gallows,  
or is it versa vice? All I know is  
not enough. Oh-so-tentatively I've fallen  
in love with someone certainly not you, someone  
meant never to be you, no blonde, no composer  
of tunes, no maker of mandolins, no tender  
of mares, walking sticks (*Phasmidae*) & small  
weeping children but someone older & fearful  
of snakes on mountain paths, whose grey-blown hair is thin  
with passage of years, not nuclear medicine.

Morning, Yom Kippur, 5763:

that's twelve syllables across the line, & I keep  
counting them, each ragged doublet jagged rhyme  
holding me accountable for twelve months' time  
though it's eleven to the day that sticks in  
my dry throat. What is it must be forgiven  
through the *Amidah* but that which takes the heart's  
breath away, the inconfessable, blurted  
out only by slips of tongue, the warm French kiss  
between new friends, insensible divestment, missed  
occasions to . . . but here I am still standing,  
back turned on the Pacific, nodding & bending  
eastward toward your blue & white apartment  
from these short sands, this cliff, gulls & fall tides sent  
to urge me past each dense page of what I was  
supposed to have done, which sin, what injustice  
or adultery, when it was just a question  
of getting on without you, so why am I letting  
the couplets close in on me, why do I linger  
at each stanza's indiscretions, soured desires,

→

unseemly passions, inattentiveness, false pride?  
I need only understand what happened at your side  
when, the day before you passed, I leaned over, bending  
toward your scarcely open mouth brown with morphine,  
my ear an inch from your dry bruised lips, & I heard:  
*I'm sorry.* More a breath you'd summoned than a word,  
I am still breathing it in, breathing it out,  
standing & mumbling the threefold *kapparot*,  
waiting to know for certain what it is you said  
& what it was, what it could have been, you did.

**LOLA HASKINS**  
**For the Suicides**

Izumi is sending a stream of characters into the night.  
As she types, she dreams she is a fine-cracked cup  
from which, imperceptibly, tea is leaking;  
or jetsam in the tide marks of a raked garden; or in  
her bath, where last week she rinsed her new green hair  
and the extra color surged down the drain like blood.  
Some lines shiver through the narrow streets: Hiroko.  
By the time Izumi's monitor shrinks to a small eye,

it's settled: the place, the time, he has the pills. And  
how she'll know him (by his red, high shoes), and  
he her (the hair). Oh you not born to the computer age,  
there are powers you've not yet fathomed. Pass by  
your children's rooms when they think you're sleeping.  
See what gleams, as if off water, underneath their doors.

**LOLA HASKINS**

**The Barren Woman to Her Sister**

I'll hang blown eggs above my door, so you will never innocently enter my house. If you leave one of Lakshmi's receiving blankets behind, I'll let it bleed over a tree limb like a pink organ. If you forget a rattle, I will hang it out of reach, where it will chatter with fever, even when it is silent.

I will knock down the wasp's tunnels and smash its crisp babies. I will upend the cardinal's nest and give the thin stream of her young to the cat. If the cow fattens, I will have her killed. Mark me, sister. It is I who will triumph, not you, I who will never be Mother, with her infinite malice and her pills.

**E. R. CARLIN**  
**Raising Drusilla**

*It makes me laugh, Caesonia, when I think how for years and years  
all Rome carefully avoided uttering Drusilla's name.*

—Caligula, from Albert Camus's *Caligula*

*We have brought you here among ruins,  
stone mothers crumbling from years of  
cold, erosion, waste of the need to need.  
Three honorary vestal virgins as sisters,  
the second a goddess in childbirth and  
death. She stands among us,  
a statue erected in his private garden.*

I remember a second skin formed from sleeping bags, my marine blue  
zipped to Sara's sunless yellow; like an earthworm  
Cut in half, we struggled toward each other, regenerating separately,  
on a bed of iced flat rock. The interior membrane was soft-  
Ribbed, walls oiled with perspiration almost aglow. I remember the  
stone cooking our wrapped bodies, outside a crisp  
Noiseless blackness, the heat inside baked our fluids to blond  
highlights of pubes. No fantasy, we conceived in a snowmelt.

*He preens under her sapphire nipples,  
stands in a birdbath of apricot leaves,  
cold water steaming off his asylum  
tongue as he licks her granite belly.  
She remembers him, the boy king,  
wrenching open his mother's body,  
a Caesarian dreamsong  
twitching on his pale blue lips.*

Even in the gravity of memory, I refuse, not wanting to remember  
heartbeats gurgling up navel, and it seems  
Odd to me now that I choose to prioritize my own: beat . . . thresh—  
apex—irregular from fear I'd be discovered,  
Bottom drawer, uncovering the naked photographs of my mother.  
Positively I remember her breasts, but what I desired  
To touch was only that blemish, timeline to my birth, perfecting  
her skin, scar that ran curvilinear to Sara's scar.

*She will not, his sister, no she can't  
submit, make love to his alter  
ego, sprawling in the drag of Venus,  
squatting in the lap of Jupiter.  
When he is ready he dances across  
the bridge that snakes between her two  
ritual mounds; his worshippers grope*

*and stretch, his testicles bulging  
pomegranates in slings of loincloth;  
he hurls them with icy pleasure  
up into her burning ethos, transforming  
her from a tongue-tied sister to queen  
of sodomite sweetness. Her skin  
smooth as plums in rain after drought.*

Truth is, what I remember now is less her father, less her brother (who she claimed raped her repeatedly)—  
Mostly her abortion. Only geas, disingenuous quests, at the peripheries of my poems, where I named the unborn:  
Ariadne, Skylee, perhaps Drusilla Junior here. In the half-built gazebo of self, floating palm in rock garden of blood,  
I watched her popping ex-lax after milk to coat the throat, wishing umbilicus to piss out nightshades of fetus.

*Everything comes apart in this garden.  
The hedge of laurel shaped like a uterus  
is dead, she can't cure this poem's illness.  
Incitatus, our brother's glass horse,  
breaks into a thousand pieces each night,  
filling the sack of the universe with sharp  
stars pierced into the mirror of selfhood,  
the poet's trivial empathy erases like snow.*

A few nights before her abortion, I started having this dream scenario:  
I'm eating her out underwater and  
Her womb has turned to gold. I teeth out a thawing avocado pit, but  
when I pull it away, it strips down  
To a core of pyrite. I swim up for air, only to find the rocks polarized  
above; surface tension lost, I dive back down  
Her body with the little light left worming through my teeth, throat,  
and lungs. No excuses. I broke us up then.

*On these winter nights, his blood-  
lineage frozen to zero, Drusilla would  
pad into her brother like a kitten on her  
mother's underside of fur, warmed milk  
of flesh, half-moon birthmark, to calm  
her convulsions. His nightfevers.  
Enough revealed. The rumors end here.*

This is what I mean; she could have stood for anyone: writing invisibly to black-paged journals—confronting *its* namelessness, Hitting her gut repeatedly, and dropping acid to forget. Maybe I even participated, suggesting sex to loosen her womb naturally, Trisecting her body with my desires. Honestly, only when I see limnetic grime at the water level of my bathtub  
Do I think: *this could have been my child.* And then I imagine Sara's life being wasted, one last suck and gag down a drainpipe.

*Now we can gather our sister together,  
away from his otherworldly innuendo.  
The matter and the pattern of a lyre's  
weave, a singer's halt then stutter in  
empty ballroom. From our bruised throats:  
a woman is given voice, who cloisters love,  
will she dissolve as a pearl dropped in vinegar?*

Of course she's no empress, and I'm no Catullus, nighthawk in lustful comeliness. I suppose I could be blamed for these images, Spreading my callused hand under the wish for sunshine, touch of cicatrix, goddess of agelessness as the age of men passes. It must have been a few hours *after*; I came home from school to find Sara asleep. I had no desire to be my father, mortgaged Out on deathbeds, so I didn't wake her, daydreaming she was my mother in infancy of her illness, untouched, still immutable.

*There is no other way out of Roman history.  
Cleopatra deserved better too.  
"Strike so that he can feel himself dying!"  
His reply: "I'm still alive."  
Caligula's tiny uneven boots stomping  
like a thunder machine against our under-  
world. The assassins thought of Caesar  
when one laid open his new wife,*

*Caesonia, then dashed her daughter's brains  
up against the stone wall. There is no justice  
in a chilled wind, history forgot our oneness:  
"This isn't right. It was never right."  
That's our mother soaked in blood over there.  
Don't speak to her now—  
reader—we're changing the story.*

**JEFF CRANDALL**

**Conversation with the Rose Man**

**1**

“Josephine Bonaparte caressed these petals  
in 1790. She noticed this particular  
assemblage of blossom, how different it is  
from the cabbage rose, maiden’s blush,  
*rose de quatre saisons*.”

*When a bee enters a bloom singing,  
a lip grazes a leg  
and nothing—nothing at all—is said.*

“She studied this nuance of peach  
infusing the china white, the grainy sheen  
veining its way to the lipped and throated palate.  
She knew this fragrance, this soft  
curve of thorn the way I do now, the way

*I think of honey flowing along a knife—how  
swift the tongue,*

you do. In how this rose eases into  
our very pores, the eye’s rods and cones,  
the finger’s nerve, we know  
too, something of Josephine’s own sadness.  
Her long-dead joy. Her comfort.”

*how lucky the knife.*

**2**

“My partner is positive—  
has been for six years.”

*I, too, have tasted the milk of Death,  
a beautiful man*

“I guess that’s why he wants nothing  
to change in our lives.”

*with sapphire eyes. He took  
caustics daily to live. And died*

"I want affection, a smile at the door, an interest in my day.  
I want sex. Instead I get  
dying and all its silences."

*groaning and gowned  
in his legible bones.*

**3**

". . . gophers ate the roots. We planted wire cages  
to guard the cuttings. That winter  
a heat wave killed ten thousand starts."

**4**

*A '99 Bordeaux breathes from two  
fishbowl goblets. We stand, both  
rubbing our faces,*

*both married  
to other men.*

*When his lips touch mine  
and his hands move slowly along my back,*

*and my lips touch gently his neck  
the clock's second hand moves  
from 12 to 11 to 10.*

**5**

*A rose is a rose,*

"I've never known

*as a rock is a rose,*

how to be with someone

*as you are*

in pain, without

*a rose.*

being in pain."

6

*Now I've memorized the body's atlas.  
Mapped the grasslands and crags,  
roadways and laughlines.*

*When my lips brush lightly his neck,  
and his hands ease their pressure  
and the body withdraws in grace,  
"Good night."*

*the rat of love  
takes another bite  
out of the heart's  
caged root.*

**STAN SANVEL RUBIN**

**Rope**

Starved for flesh  
it loops the neck  
with its braided  
kiss innocent  
as grass woven  
into basket, into net  
in which pale salmon twist

**BRUCE TINDALL**

**The Ambassador of the Interregnum**

After the sealing wax ran out, he filed  
no further reports. His credentials were his very  
lack of credentials. Children requesting  
*infirmation about your country that I am doing*  
*a project on for scholl* got left-  
hand halves of pages ripped from the code book:

HFGUL	Withdraw ultim
HFHBA	Issue passport t
HFHKW	Extrasensory pe
HFIOM	Tariff negotiatio
HFIPR	Woodchuck(s)

Calling at other missions, His Excellency  
cut the four corners off his card and strewed  
them on the silver charger. He blazoned new arms:  
*sable, between three mullets sable, seventeen pelicans sable*  
*vulning themselves inefficaciously*. The last day,  
flaunting the plumes of his ceremonial headdress,  
he plucked himself from history like a goosequill.

**BRUCE TINDALL**

**The Ambassador as Horatius**

Waiving immunity on principle  
he pays the pedestrian toll  
like any mortal. He chooses to stop  
in the middle, to offer  
the boundary commissioners  
an unprecedented case.

Memories, a freezing rain,  
glaze his brain's snapping cables,  
the last one how, surprised by the sudden Peace,  
he'd fled through star-dark woods, crossing,  
recrossing the invisible border  
all night until by mistake he fell  
asleep in a liberated province.

Only the fisherman who pulls him aboard  
hears his last words, "I have. . . ."  
which are a lie.

**BRUCE TINDALL**

**The Last Ivory-Billed Woodpecker**

The mate I have not quite imagined into being  
refuses to answer my daily call, or is it that she  
answers by answering with refusal? To be rare  
is, by definition, to be endangered. I am

a tautology. Because those swamp-tramping seekers  
tempt me with recordings of long-dead matriarchs,  
I have reasoned that rarity causes endangerment  
according to Supply And Demand, the truth of this

world made by *Homo economicus*, Prudent Man.  
Because I live in that made world, I hoard  
my existence. But I did not make this world,  
am not prudent, not man, and sometimes irrationally hazard

everything, taunting their avid ears  
to call a few of them to risk belief.

**PEGGY STEELE**

**Dried Phlox**

Tiny blooms stiff  
as wood curls catch  
the light at the edge  
of our yard,  
still, but dancing  
in a fluid jump  
like jacks held forever  
in an upward throw.

*This is the first day I've ever seen  
my handwriting look old.*

Each starry bloom sits back  
on air as if there were no  
falling, lifts itself softly  
as the gray dove  
that visits, then leaves  
on a sweet rip of wings.

## G. DAVID SCHWARTZ

### An Oracle of the Shaman as Reported by Toma the Stutterer

#### 1

The following scribical  
index, scribical indent,  
scribical indenture, scribble,  
scrabble, indenturist  
manifesto, fester, ah, man, a, man  
a festering scribble of dentures,  
dented scribbles festering  
is a true replication,  
a true repreciation,  
a tuned reprehensible  
supplication of the  
blessed sacrament,  
blasted sucker mints,  
as orally, oralaity,  
originally ascribed,  
scribed, scribbled to  
Toma, tom tom, toma  
the some, sun, son  
of Dweedle,  
dwee, dweedle, de  
deem, deam, demented Dweedledum  
tater, poor, poor  
poor tato.

#### 2

The world, word, the whirl  
will end, the whirl will end  
will bend, will up end, on  
Janu . . . janu . . . janu . . .  
June twenty-fi . . . fi . . . fi . . .  
tenth  
in the yee, the yea, the yea  
nineteenhoun, nun, honey bun,  
nineteen hunt, hunted, hunting  
for that information now.

**3**

Be, b, be, bee, beep, be be  
be a wa, a wa, wake.  
Be, b, be, bee, beep, be be  
be a wa, a wa, a ware.  
Be, b, be, bee, beep, be be  
be wear, wear, wearing,  
bee, be, wearing underwear.  
Thus sayeth, sayst, seth,  
thus soith soweth  
so, so soweth seth the tumbler  
tumor, tuma,  
ahh, so sayeth Toma the stut, strutt,  
strutt, strutter  
Toma the strutt, strutt, stutter, er  
some, sun, suma cum  
dwee, dwee, dweedle  
deem, deam, demented Dweedledum  
tater, poor, poor  
for tater, tummy  
tuma  
tuna  
t, tea  
tee, ter  
ter, ter,  
teeter totter  
whirl, word, world  
ta, ta.

**HADARA BAR-NADAV**

**A Number of Things**

On the 6th day  
there was no rest.

6 churches on 6 corners.  
A hook to hang Sundays on.

$1 + 2 + 3 = 6$

$1 \times 2 \times 3 = 6$

6: the sexy, first  
perfect integer.

A 6th sense never  
did me any good,

I'm doomed to make  
the same mistakes.

(6 men in 6 nights)

My 6-letter name  
crumbles in shame.

All the A's fall  
through the cracks.

6 months later  
stuffed with baby fat

my 6th finger renames me  
thief, witch, the disavowed.

If I believed in God,  
6 would be the number of mankind.

6 million shadows  
encircle my mother.

The 6-pointed star  
my grandmother wore.

Yellow Star of David:  
two equilateral triangles—

6 points/angles/sides collide,  
sweat of inseparable lovers.

Only 6 thousand years of humping  
to create creation.

If you let me  
I will tell you 6 lies.

**HADARA BAR-NADAV**

**Long Division**

The glass in my neck  
    is breaking.  
High splintering  
    as fractions divide,  
minute decimals of bone.

Dreams make loud  
    subtractions.  
Six white mice  
    climb my spine,  
scratching the bulbs  
    of my vertebrae.  
120 transparent nails  
    score my cerebellum  
where I'm no more human  
    than mouse.

Twelve beady eyes  
    and six pink tails,  
my nightly disintegration.  
    Porous bone gathers  
like sand at my feet.  
    My skin, supple  
as veal. I feed  
    the tiny mouths  
and atrophy. The remainder:  
    milk and fur.

**HADARA BAR-NADAV**  
**Sustenance and the Ark**

Ribs of a legless cow scrubbed white,  
luminous ark come to save.

We layer the insides with maple leaves  
moist and cool against our feet.

In the water, sounds of licking mouths  
(the cow chews the insides of her cheeks).

We play Italian boatmen in a city we cannot see,  
grip ivory tips that know our hands.

Children feeding on the red-black womb,  
fatty layers of grace grown thin.

Rations quartered, then quartered again,  
a potato, matches, and a tongue.

## HADARA BAR-NADAV

### Knacker

To harvest the inside of a house  
or horse, slide the paneling  
off the walls. Like this. Peel  
down. Good for insulation.  
Hides can be sewn into winter coats.  
A rug in front of a fireplace.  
Careful with the windows.  
Scrape clean with alcohol  
and razors. Dimpled glass  
that looks like shivering.  
Even the chipped sink  
and clawfoot tub can be sold.  
Taffy hooves for glue. Hacksaw  
buried in a heap in the garage.  
A blender and ice-cream maker,  
tags attached. The electric knife  
for piping. Strip the copper.  
Soft parts can be cooked into syrup,  
canned, jellied. Barn wood will fetch  
a pretty penny (stars in our eyes).  
Whatever we can carry on our backs.  
A stable with a red blanket,  
*Starlet* carved along the beams.  
Marrow is sweet to the taste.  
Mixed with carrots and an onion  
for soup. Then the bones can go  
to the dogs. We'll burn what's left.  
Everyone knows the hearth  
is home to the heart.

**HADARA BAR-NADAV**

**Black and White**

A woman lets a sheep suckle  
her nipple. Anonymous,

her face hidden  
by a soiled man's hat.

Stained yellow sweater,  
unbuttoned blue dress.

The sheep's face  
pressed to her pinkness.

Sheep and breast,  
lost lovers.

(One who gives,  
one who takes.)

Behind them, a burnt field  
and dozens of bone-thin legs.

Hungry sheep hunt  
for a single blade

while this one drinks  
what others will die for.

A woman, another kind  
of grass.

**DANEEN WARDROP**

**[Marco, when you, Niccolò, and]**

Marco, when you, Niccolò, and Maffeo returned after twenty years  
in rags, at first not recognized,

    jewels sewn in the hems of your Tartar clothes—  
                    the seams of your clothes, highways—

you passed around ginger, ginseng,  
                                    then jade, lapis—

and I, not yet your wife,  
    scorned the jewels  
    that reflected the moon but were not the moon itself.

The Silk Road does not lead to the moon, you said.  
Every road leads to the moon on some night,  
I said, and then you were following me home—  
                                    brick, tile, marble,

and every way leads east till it becomes vested with its own  
desire for direction—  
    wall, roof, walkway.

Did I want some *east*? I wonder,  
my dress floating to the floor,

    white smoke lifting out the chimney—

    in the distance a shore fluttering like a hem—





**DANEEN WARDROP**

**[Trees move houses past our]**

Trees move houses past our carriage windows on the way to Milan.

Forest rain, a gauze we could heal ourselves with,  
asks no attention for itself, stays patient,  
    faces of saints rounded  
        as babies just before sleep,

not quite the same as the hushed circle about the Khan  
who allowed no shouting or even talking  
        from as far away as the next town.

You are pleased that our oldest girl draws a map,  
dragon curled in each of two corners.

The mist turns my skin to dough, giving me warm ideas:

If I were to look full at you before the next town attaches itself to our  
    windows—  
I would not know the way home.

**DANEEN WARDROP**

**[I want to touch, in]**

I want to touch, in paintings, the thick platters of halos worn by saints,  
so *this-rather-than-that* hatches.

This—safety; that—out there.

Not at all like Mary's cheekbones,

mine, sharp and needing.

You rest in their shadows,

while our daughter rests in my lap

after falling in the canal, from reaching between the bridge spindles  
for a duck, wanting the glitters in its wake—

her hair drenched then dried,

embossed, an almost nonhuman tangle.

A moth gimbals the lantern.

You touch her hair.

I hold her tighter than water.

**DANEEN WARDROP**

**[Other women will hang carpets]**

Other women will hang carpets on the balcony rails today.  
But inside, my girl coughs a briny cough,

I exist  
to hear that cough.  
Her hair lies across my knees.

She knows by heart our houses' mossed, mildewed ankles,  
listens to waves breathing  
and dipping umbers, turquoises, rusts, ochres—  
millefiore reflections bouncing off the surface.

We have tides for roads. Long sweep

along the jaw as she studies me, she is I, and sewing  
will not thread for me, the needle itself wants  
to split a thousand ways.

I hold an embroidered lion with only thready shaggy mane, no body.

In sleep now, my girl's features pull toward the center of her face.

I will not hang a carpet today, we might drift away—

everywhere—  
water sucks at our walls—

**DANEEN WARDROP**

**[The Thousand Buddha Caves, westernmost]**

The Thousand Buddha Caves,

westernmost outpost of China—

where turquoise paintings that after months of eastward sliding,

Taklimakan sand,

almost took your eyes out with disbelief,

the turquoise of oasis dreamed-and-found

in hundreds of cave paintings and statues: the Buddha face

not quite man not quite woman,

halos kinetic with movement,

and flying beings, mermaid tails of fastest silk,

end not in turquoise fins but in a turquoise point

from which flight emits

and curves.

Some heavens are made of rewards, some of ecstasies.

If Buddha had been Christian, you say, he'd have been a saint.

And in a mural crowd of stone people one man, a round-eyes, was  
painted in the middle:

someone there before you, Marco.

Our girl's aqua eyes erase with sleep.

**DANEEN WARDROP**

**[Fingering pomegranates, peaches, melons, and]**

Fingering pomegranates, peaches, melons,  
and glass figurines a vendor near the campanile sells—  
transparent animals, trees, ships feel spiky in my grasp.

I, Donata Badoer, no hair glossed as the Blessed Madonna,  
no jade skin as an empress,  
rest, watch groats' halos and crosses  
shift finger to finger.  
They give one to another, rounding, smoothing,

as carpets sail on wrought balconies, women looking out behind them,  
where I've sat many times, my look also painted by sky,

my daughter fevered with canal  
beside me, talking rapidly of sparkled feathers' gold, turquoise, bright-  
black.

On a whim I buy a ship rigged of glass lacings,  
tiny clear dollops at the prow  
and sharp rainbowed oars,

to sail in the palm of her hand.



**MIRA ROSENTHAL**

**Heat**

A languor sitting down on the stone lap of Buddha.  
In Rishikesh I remember heat like that.

The chanting of *bhajans* infusing the town  
as I was walking by the languor sitting like Buddha.  
In Rishikesh I remember heat like that.

Sweat cooled by the breeze off the Ganges River.  
Wind carrying *bhajans* through the dress of soft cotton  
covering me as I walked by the monkey and the statue.  
In Rishikesh I remember heat like that.

Concentration required for a simple silence. Smell of *samosas*  
browning in grease. Sweat of the body's boiling and motion.  
The breeze off the *Ganga*, the chanting of *bhajans*  
infusing my walking and the languor sitting by Buddha.  
In Rishikesh I remember heat like that.

Green saplings over the hill where the water falls. Thoughts drifting  
through the mind in concentration, in a simple silence  
when the smell of hot batter frying in oil descended  
into evening, into prayer, into *bhajans*. The rustle  
of my walking startled the monkey who sat cross-legged  
with Buddha. A red sun in Rishikesh. I remember heat like that.

The smell of diesel from rickshaws careening down the hill  
where boys soaked in hot water, thinking nothing, thinking simply  
about frying *samosas*, flies buzzing around them  
and *sadhus* sat cross-legged singing and chanting  
as I passed and the sun bit the lip of the river, sank light  
into stone of a statue, into hair, into silver on the back of a monkey  
running from Buddha. A red sun in Rishikesh. I remember heat like that.

**CHARLOTTE BOULAY**

**At the Sackler Museum in Cambridge**

there's a room

    full of thin blue china and dolomite stone,  
    scrolls of the early Japanese,  
    painted willows and carp  
and women in kimonos  
    stooping to the bamboo-shaded river,

    serenading each other. I too love to sing,  
usually in the car. Always the same  
    songs, the ones I think  
I know well. I concentrate  
    on the music instead of the road.  
Somewhere a cricket chips the Harvard hush—

I peer under tables and behind ancient  
    screens but the sound rings  
off the polished floor, the brass  
    sculptures; I can't find it anywhere.  
In India, there is a lake full of swirling carp:  
    at Bodhgaya the step of the temple ghat is a seething

mass of fish risen to feed, their whitegold  
    orange bodies smoothly muscled,  
    whiskered and hungry, foaming  
as the old man feeding them crumbs croons  
to himself, stooping over the water.

    You can tell the temperature by a cricket's chirps:  
    it's the number in fifteen seconds plus forty,

they call for love with accuracy.

    The old coins in their glass cases  
    are like ears, each eroded on one side.  
The cricket is creaking his springs, the song  
    a familiar tune to which  
    I know all the words, mostly.

**CHARLOTTE BOULAY**

**In darkness**

an onion sprouts a long green shoot.

    The potatoes watch its metamorphosis;  
I close the drawer and leave them to their own devices.

Light leaches through a sieve of sky,  
    a plane rises, slices two layers of storm  
splits them and leaves them weeping  
    for a change.

    Pale cities glow through the grey  
clouds   sunken ships lighting the deeps.  
Everywhere the sky is freckled with the wingtips  
of airplanes, red for port, green for starboard, strobe  
for rising        rising        gone.

    In the Himalayan night there were only stars  
and my watch face, irradiating my sleeping bag.

    One morning we rose at dawn to see a mountain,  
climbed a snowy slope as the half-light churned

around us, cream before the butter.

    The crush of continents is muffled, but the mountain  
is still rising, roots twisting in the dark.

    The onion in its drawer is growing, although I can't see it,  
and the daffodils we planted this autumn are waiting  
their chance.            Cities darken and blaze.

    On the plains a flight skims

the earth's surface.    Inside my watch a small  
nuclear particle divides itself, keeping  
time, as if we could lose it.

**CAMILLE T. DUNGY**

**Concordance**

It is nineteen forty-seven. Somewhere  
in Pittsburgh steel spits in a cooling tank.  
Somewhere in Gary iron curves toward flame.  
And, this could be anywhere, a woman  
reconsiders his final letter, marks  
with her finger welts the sentences left  
on the page. Outside it is December.  
Her garden is a crop of stone. We have  
language to describe a woman like this.  
Even in summer her tomatoes grow  
yellow-skinned and rock-hearted. She will keep  
her windows closed even under the blue  
flame of August days. We have many terms  
that define distance. We might say once, when  
she was a thin-necked girl, one man collapsed  
all the intricacies of heaven  
into the four syllables it took to spell  
her name. There must be a phrase that explains this  
desire. She questions her response. Did she  
read his plan right? Somewhere in Milwaukee  
men stir hops and thirst for sweet abandon.  
When she was a slim-fingered girl no ring  
suited her taste. We have plenty of words  
to describe a woman like that. But now,  
since she followed the tracks laid in his eyes?  
Her whole life a coupled string of freight and  
rusting emptiness? Those children waving,  
running beside her through the sun-scorched yard?

**BERT STERN**

**Borscht**

In my fur coat I'm walking in Buffalo like a sea lion.  
Nobody makes a good borscht anymore,  
how they used to do.  
So I'm walking to the last store in America  
that sells sour salt. But on such a day!  
The coat's warm but the snowflakes make me dizzy.  
More of them than of me,  
I keep losing my place.

When I left the house I had two blocks to go,  
one short, to Mrs. Sunshine,  
corner Commonwealth and Tacoma,  
but now I've been walking all my life,  
and still I am moving backwards.

When I began, I smelled pickles in the two barrels,  
the old and the new ones,  
just a bissel schmaltz herring in the air,  
and Mrs. Sunshine's knife cutting through the halavah  
was gritty to the ear. Oy, I am lost.

From here to Sunshine's delicatessen the people on the upstairs porches,  
where in the summertime they swing on the glider under the awning  
and listen to the elm trees,  
those people are all dead, and the weakness is overtaking me as well,  
this blinding snow, *verflegete* winter without end.

## LUIS MIGUEL AGUILAR

### Conclusiones

Se pierden las Mont-Blanc; quedan los Bic.  
Y uno se da de topes  
Contra las mesas, los escritorios, las repisas  
Y contra el hoyo negro del presente  
Donde perdimos para siempre  
Eso imperdible, ese monte, esas nieves  
De antaño.

Rueda el pasado  
Irrecobrable  
Sobre el piso del otoño.

Se pierden  
Las Mont-Blanc; se pierden  
Los grandes recuerdos; sólo un bolígrafo Bic  
—Y éste incluso con muescas, sin tapa, mordido,  
Ya con el plástico lívido,  
Con cataratas, mellado—queda, cuchillo de palo,  
En la casa del herrero.  
Y en la ocasión solemne en que la muerte  
Llega a la casa de uno para firmar  
Su sentencia no menos solemne, no encuentra nada  
Con qué apuntar  
A la altura de un gran monte, puesto que a esa hora  
Vemos que perdimos las Mont-Blanc; inútil ir en busca  
De aquello que con ellas escribimos:  
El brillo que era ya convicción  
De un asidero, un nombre  
Promisorio, un infalible  
Número telefónico, gloriosos  
Mediodías, el paradero  
Del médico imbatible, la ruta de evasión  
Hacia la noche; sólo queda  
Alguna inútil dirección  
Borroneada en papelito, con un Bic,  
Como la única muy pobre  
Pero intacta  
Certeza del recuerdo.  
Digo que llega incluso la muerte  
Y hace como que viene en busca de Mont-Blancs  
Como si no  
Se hubiera llevado ya esas plumas  
Esos montes, esas nieves  
Previamente.

## LUIS MIGUEL AGUILAR

### Conclusions

The Mont-Blancs are getting lost; the Bics remain.  
And we slap our heads wondering where—  
Tables, desks, shelves,  
And the black hole of the present—  
We've lost for keeps  
What can't be lost, that mountain, those snows  
Of yesteryear.

Irretrievable,  
The past tumbles about  
On the autumnal floor.

The Mont-Blancs  
Are getting lost; momentous memories  
Are getting lost; only a ballpoint Bic  
—And it's nicked, toothmarked, topless,  
The plastic clouded over,  
Gouged, cataracted—gets left, a wooden knife  
In the house of the blacksmith  
And on the solemn occasion when death  
Comes to one's house to sign  
Its equally solemn sentence, it will find nothing  
To address the heights of a great mountain  
Because at that hour  
We see we've lost the Mont-Blancs; no sense to go on looking  
For what we used to write with:  
The sheen that meant a sure  
Grip, a promising name,  
An infallible  
Telephone number, glorious  
Afternoons, the whereabouts  
Of the invincible doctor, the escape route  
Into night; all that's left  
Is some useless address  
Scribbled on a scrap of paper with a Bic,  
Like that one paltry yet intact  
Sure memory.  
As I was saying, death itself comes  
As if in search of the Mont-Blancs  
As if it hadn't, ages ago,  
Already carried off those pens,  
Those mountains, those snows.

Quedan los Bic; perdimos las Mont-Blanc  
Siempre a destiempo, siempre antes del invierno  
En algún mundo  
Donde siempre  
Se pierde algo del mundo, y sólo hay Bics  
Y otoño.

Se pierden las Mont-Blanc.

Quedan

Las cenicientas, los silencios, los trapos, las manías,  
Las huellas anilladas de los vasos  
En las viejas mesas de noche: lo que siempre  
Quisimos perder, y resultó  
La única sombra canina y fiel.  
¿Quién tiene las  
Mont-Blanc?

Miren: un

Bic.

The Bics get left; we've lost the Mont-Blancs.  
It's always the wrong season, always pre-winter  
In some world  
Where a part of the world  
Is always getting lost, and there are only Bics  
And autumn.

The Mont-Blancs are getting lost.

What's left

Is the grub work, the silences, the tatters, the manias,  
The ringed imprint of glasses  
On old nightstands: everything we always  
Wanted to lose turned out to be  
The one faithful shadow dogging us.  
Who's got the  
Mont-Blanc?

Look: a

Bic.

**translated from the Spanish by Kathleen Snodgrass**

**LUIS MIGUEL AGUILAR**

**El cielo y mis libros**

Cuando te mueras—dice  
Mi hija Mercedes—todos  
Los libros de tus librerías  
Deben morir contigo.  
Si no  
No podrán  
Irse al cielo contigo.  
Y qué aburrido  
Para ti  
Que no se mueran tus libros.  
Aparte, claro, de que  
Algunos de tus libros  
En el cielo  
Yo creo que ya  
No pueden conseguirse.

**LUIS MIGUEL AGUILAR**

**Heaven and My Books**

When you die—says  
My daughter Mercedes—all  
The books in your bookcases  
Have to die with you.  
If not  
They won't be able  
To go to heaven with you.  
And how boring  
For you  
If your books don't die.  
Besides, for sure,  
I really think  
Up in heaven  
Some of your books  
Are not going to be available.

**translated from the Spanish by Kathleen Snodgrass**

**BRENT PALLAS**

**The Rhinoceros**

*I rode to the Zoological Society, & by the greatest piece of good fortune it was the first time this year, that the Rhinoceros was turned out.*

—Charles Darwin, letter to Susan Darwin

An avalanche might begin like this  
with leaves for ears sprung  
from pavement

and a twig for a tail. No tufts, bald  
as a hammer, a pewtered  
room

sucking breath over windowsills,  
with platters for kneepads.  
Almost

bovine, an element of winter, the flame  
of its heart burning steadily  
in a windless

place. Trotted out like some distant shore  
of unspeakable curiosity  
for unbelievers

to believe in. Never hiding its gaze  
in the arm of some recurring  
doubt

but wreathed in certainty, an empire  
of one nibbling the grass.

**BRENT PALLAS**

**The Walrus**

*the Dugongs cannot be united with true Cetacea or whales.—but  
are aquatic Pachyderms. & Walrus—*

—Charles Darwin, Notebook E

Galumphing aloofness, big  
    like a lump of goo, beautiful,  
brooding paralytic, seamlessly

wrapped in himself: a state  
    of grace unmistakable  
as a teacup, swallowing tides

with each breath, too  
    unimaginable to be unintended.  
A throne wherever he sits.

What matters is mass—  
    the persuading sway—the rest  
is sensuousness.

## **B. LANCE LEVENS**

### **Dawgs**

Guzzling margaritas as they rip out the breasts  
Of char-broiled birds, these Joe Montana wannabees  
Wag about their pug-nosed angels, the tutelary  
Spirits of this mutt-enchanted town. You can feel  
Their hot, panting tongues dangle  
Through the rain-fat clouds, drooling on the crowd  
As they recall the time Uga 1 pissed on the Seminole's  
Flaming spear or the time coach kicked Uga 2  
And the god of bulldogs cursed the team with a losing  
Season. Above, the clouds thicken as Brunswick  
Stew is served to Go-Go dancers and microchip snake oil  
Pushers and Presbyterian Fascists—all on this  
Green sward of the four-on-the-floor academy. When the clouds  
Finally break wind and the sticky rhetoric  
Resumes beneath the rapturous tent, you can hear overhead  
As the latest to achieve apotheosis chomps fleas and slurps  
The only balls that count.

## B. LANCE LEVENS

Ho

Ho dnut Jones, that wicked jug, had a  
Ho ee-eye, ee-eye, oh. She  
Ho unded and surrounded him 'til he fled into God's  
Ho use. She vipered into the vestibule. At the altar  
Ho dnut clung to his lucre—see-eye, me-eye, ho!—and summoned the  
Ho st, the Wing-ed Ghost, to rescue his sorry butt from this  
Ho rn mad flesh merchant. Heart-bolt! His geist giggled out of its  
Ho me of booze-oozing flesh.  
Ho otchie Cootchie! She approached on tiptoe, plucked out her  
Ho nest wage 'til—Lo! A Double Shot of Holy Lightning!—and she  
Ho pped on Ho! Ho! Ho!  
Ho sannas into a life of no mo tricks. Moral (tee hee!):  
Ho b nob with the  
Ho ly Ghost and He may claim you  
Ho stage.

**KIRSTIN HOTELLING ZONA**  
**It Wasn't Death She Saw**

But life:  
skin dancing with flesh  
like silk curtains that swirl in the wind  
above her mother's window

*up up now puff! and in again*

Or breath—is the wind breathing?

She'd been playing in the grass when it happened:  
the snake flung  
from the mower's blade, rainbows  
of ribbons in the air

*rainbows rainbows everywhere, catch a ribbon for your hair*

She wrapped the pretty pieces in willow leaves and grass.

When she told her mother what she'd seen—  
the way life  
leapt out of the snake  
just like a ballerina—  
her mother beat her,  
scrubbed her tongue with salt

*but Mama, it was beautiful, like fireflies at night*

She learned to hold her body

very still.

**RENNIE McQUILKIN**

**Killing Time**

Just out of sight of the bridge on Hungary Road  
I'm killing time while my grandson casts  
for trout too cagey to show their spots  
where the water bubbles and eddies below a fall.

Beerglass glitters. But there, downstream  
Salmon Brook widens and deepens, is overhung  
by an enormous sycamore kids must once have  
monkeyed up to that fraying rope.

A dirt bike's mutter says what matters now's internal  
combustion. I find a sitting-stone and pull out  
*Poetry*, the May number where Eamon Grennan is,  
and presently two damselflies

transfer their affair from phlox to the written word.  
One has white-spotted jet-black wings  
and an iridescent blue-green abdomen.  
The other is dun but has completed the circle

the first began by gripping her neck with his tail:  
she has bent a dusky abdomen up to his, is stroking  
seed from him with delicate and digital concern.  
When every so often she pauses, his wings go

wild. Clinging to page 86—  
oh infinite delicto—  
the two are right over Eamon's "free of memory  
and forecast." This is killing

time all right. I hardly know  
what to do when they separate, am reduced  
to counting knots on the swinging-rope  
like any monk telling . . .

no, more like a kid  
climbing, knot by knot, toward the limb  
the rope hangs from, then swinging, letting  
go with a cry—

Except it's my grandson calling out. He's caught  
a speckled, glittery (waterlight on leaves and bark)  
trout that dangles a moment from his hook-  
then flips a backward somersault, is gone.

Ah, these delights.

Now the dirt bike again. It's time.

**LEIGH ANNE COUCH**

**Obsolescence**

Precious is the crackslam of metal buttons in the dryer.  
Families race room to room when the telephone sings.  
Bookshelves turn to wallpaper and we cherish the spines  
in their tidy jackets standing at attention.  
Through oneway preprogrammed interactions, we've fallen  
in collusion with things and marvel at their loyalty,  
their wroughtiron faith in us. In the archdiocese of spoons  
there are no sinners. Saints are a quaint but outdated technology.  
The wireless kingdom has come to install the earthly throne  
of God; morning birdsong, the serpent's sigh, are hereby  
preempted by the militant hmmm and murrrr of herds  
of zip drives and other everlasting denizens of the new  
paradise. Onward current flowing, Eden never sleeps.  
We are the gardeners who might have been the garden.

“Sixteen books by poets on poetry! Is it possible that none of them had anything to say about content?” So wrote Faithful Reader after my review in the Fall 2003 issue. I checked back and to my surprise found, indeed, almost nothing. But what exactly is content?

Imagine a reporter from the *Westminster Gazette*, sometime around August of 1667:

W.G.: Sir, rumor hath it that you have a new poem soon to appear. Could you tell our readers what it is about?

J.M.: *I am hoping to justify the ways of God to man.*

W.G.: But what is its subject?

J.M.: *Felix culpa—of man’s first disobedience and the fruit of . . .*

W.G.: [interrupting] Yes, but what is it about, sir? What is its content?

J.M.: *Ah, well, it opens after the war in heaven, with Satan and his council plotting revenge against God with a scheme to tempt Eve to disobey Him and frustrate His project of a paradise on earth. . . .*

*Content* translates as subject matter, and subject matter, I warn Faithful Reader, is rather out of fashion just now. Purpose and meaning, in Milton’s sense, are for many poets today irrelevant. Remember Archibald MacLeish as far back as 1926: “A poem should not mean/ But be.”

Just imagine today:

Q: What is the content/subject matter of an action painting?

A: The paint and the action.

The medium and the process suffice. John Cage in 1957 defined the purpose of artistic creation as “purposeless play.” In his aleatory collage *Diary: How to Improve the World: You Will Only Make Matters Worse: 1965* (words of Bucky Fuller, Marshall McLuhan, and Barney Childs) Cage includes “NO PURPOSE. Imitate the Ganges sands: indifferent to perfume, indifferent to filth.” Hank Lazer, in *APR* (November/December 2003, p. 50), reminds us that Theodor Adorno, “in a phrase that might stand as a definition or central tenet for many contemporary lyricisms, points toward a poetry in which ‘the melody of the poem’s language extends beyond mere signification.’” Frank O’Hara says somewhere, “Oh, how I hate subject matter.” Reviewing David Shapiro’s new poems in *Chicago Review* (Summer 2003, pp. 168–9), Thomas Fink reports how Shapiro in his early work could “enable frag-

ments and sentences to resist conventional meaning-making.” Fink sees here the imprint of John Ashbery, perhaps the most influential of living poets. Ashbery has declared, “I think that any one of my poems might be considered a snapshot of whatever is going on in my mind at the time—first of all the desire to write a poem, after that wondering if I’ve left the oven on or thinking about where I must be in the next hour.” Interviewed in the *Connecticut Review* (Fall 2003), Charles Simic tosses off: “I don’t think poetry should be about anything.” I have easily assembled that little tussy-mussy from memory and from periodicals lying around my office, hoping to provide some clues to readers who are wondering what some recent poets are up to.

For this review I romp through my stack of new books, setting aside those that demand further attention. In these, as I reread and re-reread, I pay special attention this time to content. They constitute a continuum, beginning with the subject-matter-shunners and progressing more deeply into commitment to content.



### Or Dis-Content?

At first glance **Carolyn Forché’s** *Blue Hour* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003, 76 pp., \$24.95 hardbound) resists my reading for subject matter. The epigraph from Martin Buber warns me: “These moments are immortal, and most transitory of all; no content may be secured from them. . . . Beams of their power stream into the ordered world and dissolve it again and again.” To dissolve the ordered world, to memorialize that dissolution in language, and at the same time to compose an elegy to “these moments” seem to be Forché’s mission here. The opening poem, “Sequestered Writing,” begins:

Horses were turned loose in the child’s sorrow. Black and  
 roan, cantering through snow.  
 The way light fills the hand with light, November with  
 graves, infancy with white.  
*White.* Given lilacs, lilacs disappear. Then low voices rising in  
 walls.  
 The way they withdrew from the child’s body and spoke as if  
 it were not there.

The tone of elegiac melancholy is clear. But the images are

disconnected—"these moments," yes, but each image poses unanswered, and possibly unanswerable, questions. The title poem refers to *l'heure bleue*—"between darkness and day," Forché tells us in her notes, "between the night of a soul and its redemption, an hour associated with pure hovering," related to Tibetan Buddhism, the Kabbalah, and our old friend John Cage. Reading further in the notes, I understand that I would be more qualified to evaluate this work were I better familiar with Blanchot, Bachelard, Char, Levinas, Kristeva, Desnos, Benjamin, Jabès, Peirce, and various Vedic and Gnostic texts. This is not my primary intellectual/spiritual world, but I have enough acquaintance with many of these sources to imagine the total *Weltanschauung* and not to make irrelevant demands of it. My enthusiasm for this poet's earlier work, from the most journalistic to the most symphonic, encourages me to read on hopefully, listening for a new music.

One of Forché's *leitmotifs* sounds autobiographical, though I have no way of knowing to what extent the "I" is the actual poet. That "I" is certainly a strong presence: "*How is it possible that I am living here*, as if a childhood dream had found an empty theater in which to mount a small production of its hopes?" The language can be seductive: "Look! Whole villages intact and shimmering" and "silvered fields of millet." Read aloud, the long lines connect subliminally into a distinctive and haunting music.

Two-thirds of this absorbing book is one poem, "On Earth," based on Gnostic abecedarian hymns from the third century CE. It is all content, sensuous images layered with abstractions. There is no spatial progression or logical or chronological movement. The linear order is in the alphabet. We move from "a barnloft" to "a bit" to "a black coat in smoke" to "a black map." I see what a satisfaction it would be to discover how far one could push the pattern before running out of words. Forty-five pages later—spent but spellbound—I arrive at

your things have been taken  
your things have been taken away

zero

"Zero," her note informs us, is "also the 'pure zero' of C. S. Peirce's semiotic metaphysics." Oops! I see I am not as familiar with Peirce as I had thought.

"Is poetry so marginalized that we can only think of poems in terms of other poems?" asks Bruce F. Murphy in the August 2003 *Poetry*. Were I, in another life, a Forché scholar, I would be reading and rereading her cited sources, and I would doubtless be richer for it. Instead I read it as a musical score. I feel a multitude of levels rising, sinking, and rising again in it. I could enjoy charting their patterns of recurrence, though Forché does not necessarily invite me to. I could read just for the long rhythmic surges that carry me along physically. And I believe I would confirm my first impression: the subject matter is "everything"—all of life and death and the language, the inner and outer life, "that nothingness might not be there." Listen to two more stanzas and savor their reticulation of resonances:

snow through open windows  
 soul on its way toward earth  
 sparks of holiness  
 spoken in unknown words of a known language

stepping back into an earlier life  
 strands of hair, blood, corpuscle light  
 streets iced with shop-glass, a flock of stones  
 stripped trees against winter fields.

I can now imagine reading each line of this major poem as an epigraph for the whole. And were I writing as a scholar, not as a reviewer, I would try that.

Here's another brilliantly innovative volume, **Philip Nikolayev's *Monkey Time***, winner of the 2001 Verse prize (Amherst, MA: Verse Press, 2003, 99 pp., \$14 paper). The poet's infatuation with language as language strikes the reader at once: *morganatic obsession*, *atrabilious bastard*, and *telemorphokinesis* don't require a wade into Webster's any more than a jazz riff does. Just let them dissolve on the tongue and savor the flavor. Nikolayev's play may not be perfectly purposeless, but the ludic spirit supplies the energy behind his innovative impulse. A poem titled "Ergo" ends, via *mistfossicking* and *pepperpiper*: "in the root square of the ego/ with ago." The comic voice is often satiric, as in "Family Values" and "Vegan Symphony #9" ("strawberry sushi flummoxed/ to the point of deliquescence"). Here is a poet wonderfully absorbed in the medium and in games one can play with form. (You thought there were no more changes to [w]ring out of the form of the sonnet? Wait till you discover his imbed-

ded sonnets.) Then when I've skittered and giggled through nearly a hundred pages, often skimming, Nikolayev ends with the title poem, an engaging straightforward narrative of an encounter with the temple monkeys at a Durga temple in Benares. Colloquialisms (polite word here for clichés) that would have been juggled into the stratosphere in earlier poems swim quietly here in the stream of the narrative. Solid content, conventionally expressed: one last surprise in a book of surprises.

No clichés in **Heather McHugh's** new *Eyeshot* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2003, 80 pp., \$20 cloth), but much spirit of play. McHugh, like Nikolayev, is enthralled with the medium, but the medium itself (the language) is not here synonymous with the message. "A Dearth in the Dreamboat Department" opens with the "surface's dilemma," but concludes:

That's utterly unsettling, god

above! We thought you'd thing along.  
Instead you thunder us; it's only

woe, woe, woe your boat. Warily,  
warily. It's not fair. We need a breeze,

we get a gust. We need a love, you give  
a damn: a surface lust. A scream from

time to time, a stab in the  
glissando. Life is just—

is what?—is just?

Under the surface glitter, the ocean surges with the old questions and, as usual, withholds the answers. One could never say "no content" in this poem at the heart of a book that, if hardly on a Miltonic scale, takes on the big enigmas of love and death and divine justice. The mercurial voice and the deft lineation are twenty-first-century, but the visionary wit recalls the seventeenth. And the music! Melody and metaphysical intelligence distinguish "Through"—the "eyeshot" lyric that focuses the vision gazing out from her book. Here are the first two stanzas:

In blue or black, all lovely and beloved,  
Some countless human eyes have seen the dawn.

→

They're sleeping at the bottom of the grave.  
Here comes the sun.

But far more delicately than the days  
The nights ignite in countless eyes a spark.  
The stars are always sending out their rays:  
Eyes fill with dark.

**James McCorkle's *Evidences*** (Philadelphia: The American Poetry Review, 2003, 128 pp., \$23 cloth, \$14 paper) is the winner of the APR/Honickman First Book Prize, judged and enthusiastically introduced by Jorie Graham. His title leads me to suspect it has subject matter. Actually in the context of this review it's a hybrid. In some poems (particularly those based on paintings) content slithers away from me; here's a stanza: "assembling the found/ questions authenticity in so far as/ which and why that one or/ of the furrows' octaves jabbed crows/ as in somewhere we began this." But in many poems the sensuous evidence is vivid. "Pyromancy" (wonderful word!) opens:

Poised above salvia and impatiens,  
The pair arrived like green tears—  
I had not seen any since moving from the other side  
Of the continent until this summer—  
arriving on spun arcs.

As if traced by a steady hand, lines like hot glass  
Pulled across the garden's profusion.

I'm at home here: ruby-throated hummingbirds, vividly perceived. The poem moves into the poet's consciousness; he knows he is greeting messengers from "bromeliads and the flesh of orchids," until finally these essential evanescences remain with the poet through the winter "iridescing/ The snow, the wings of crows,/ The water running off our skin as we rise from the steaming bath." If syntax is the visible skeleton of the poem, the syntax of "Pyromancy" supports sturdily.

McCorkle's "Bee-Yards," where bees and beekeepers are the content, is more complex. As his daughter strokes a dead bee, the poet's lines spool out apiarial images as he muses on memory and history, covenants and rapture. The first section (one sentence, eighteen lines, nine stanzas) generalizes at the end to this:

In recurrence's syntax, no sentence is the last,

Or lasting, no fixity of lead or gold,

What is done in this life, swarms momentarily,

toward air, light-tossed trees.

Epistemology seems the function that this form follows, leading to the larger subject—mutability.

Center stage in the four-part drama of "Bee-Yards" is a lineated essay on the executioner at the prison at Auburn, New York, a beekeeper who understands that "life is temporary, that/ As the role of the bee-killer and drone depict,/ There are only the sacrificed, functionary,/ And predator." He is actually the inventor of the electric chair,

Solace to our desire that everyone should die  
Without pain, while our God  
Of Cruelty, the only one we can claim ours,  
Made in our image, searing white,  
Oversees the ministration of pain.

Here is content with a vengeance: a *deus* startlingly appearing *ex machina*. When political anger erupts in this book, the syntactic skeleton leaps out.

In the final act, again one long sentence, McCorkle draws together his meditations on history, memory, mutability, and the way the mind copes with what it perceives and conceives. Here's the first stanza:

History collapses to moments, we stitch  
bit by bit, thread and silicon wafer,

memory's caches like amber cells stretched leading to a series of similes. The syntax is slithery. "We stitch" seems a subordinate clause (*that* understood) until I notice that "memory's caches" appears to be the object of "stitch." It has to function both ways at once. The imagery is similarly slippery. How does the "silicon wafer" relate to the "wafer of morning gold," or to the communion wafer? With such an invitation the reader may be tempted to leap to that notorious wafer in the sky at the end of Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*. (That way, to pervert Lear, madness lies.) We pick up *thread* again at the conclusion of the sentence, the end of the play:

like sentences appearing in dreams, the thread we've spooled  
out before  
to follow back, from the underneath and lost,  
our breath carrying the language of bees

If we were to return this way, swarming on the still-warm  
flesh, the carrion-birds  
sidle off, as Aristaeus, bee-keeper and overseer,  
is walking from the shadows with the last of  
her garlands.

(Time out to look up Aristaeus. In the section on beekeeping in his *Georgics*, Virgil tells how Eurydice was fleeing Aristaeus's sexual pursuit when she encountered the fatal serpent. As punishment, all his bees died, but after he had made propitiatory bovine sacrifices he saw swarms of bees rise out of the carcasses.)

I welcome this mythological conclusion with the excuse to go back to my Virgil, but McCorkle's final section is so melodious and resonant that I hate to confess my trouble in comprehending it. I enjoy the prosodic variety: simultaneously synchronic and diachronic, the graceful creation of one verse form after another. I read it aloud and delight in its seductive music. And certainly it has abundant subject matter—allusion (Theseus spooling out of the Cretan labyrinth, somehow an overlay to Orpheus), crime and punishment, history and memory, father and daughter, dream-work, syntax itself, and always those swarms of bees. In the process of working through it, I have become increasingly absorbed in this poet's work, increasingly trusting of his imagination, increasingly frustrated that I haven't world enough and time to give every poem the attention it requires. I'll stop here, just lingering to appreciate the importance of the bees, for us as for Virgil representing nature's recovery after human outrage. Perhaps I am doing what some of our experimental poets demand—creating my own poem from the materials they provide. I am a willing reader, sharing the poet's politics, his passion for the natural world, and his sense of loss (his regret at "the theft of what would have been"), and his mastery of verse melody. This is an amazing first book; I look forward eagerly to his next.

■  
**The “I”s Have It**

Most of the books I have read in preparing this essay have abundant subject matter; it tends to vary from poem to poem, while the content of the book as a whole is, well, let’s say the life experience of the poet. The self (often in the process of self-discovery) has been now for many decades the dominant subject and object of American poetry. Although it has produced much self-indulgent solipsism, it has also motivated poems that satisfy Valéry’s object: to investigate the fundamental nature of consciousness and uncover the system of language. Here is a sampling.

**Neal Bowers’s *Out of the South*** (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002, 52 pp., \$22.95 cloth, \$15.95 paper) opens with a poem that establishes the ambivalence of the poet toward the Tennessee red-clay country where he was born and raised:

I hate the drawl, the lazy voice  
 saying I’ve been away so long  
 I sound like I’m from nowhere;  
 the old hand gathering snowballs or peonies  
 or forking up an extra dish of greens,  
 bitter, just the way I like them.

No visible mask of persona between this poet and the “I” in the poem—pure honest retrospective autobiography. A few poems wryly wrung out of the racism to which he was raised introduce and shadow but do not dominate the book. Instead, Bowers allows the reader to join him in a retrospective journey to retrieve his family, both in his memory and, in the long title poem, on a sort of vision quest—a literal return to the places of his childhood. The vision remains elusive, and the poems that follow—increasingly lyrical—make a quiet music from this seeming failure of self-making. These are strong moving poems, finding language for an unillusioned way of living—an *ars poetica*, finally:

Look in the mirror and you see  
 what you look like  
 looking in the mirror.  
 Wave and you see yourself waving  
 to see yourself wave.

It could go on like this for a long time,

→

so imagine someone hands you a stone,  
 saying, "Take this flower."  
 Doesn't the whole craggy cliffside  
 break into bloom?

This book adds up to considerably more than the sum of its parts—a success in the process of self-definition without sentimentality or narcissism.

As if to anticipate this direction in my review, **Tony Hoagland** titles his new book ***What Narcissism Means to Me*** (Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 2003, 72 pp., \$14 paper). Indeed, these are first-person poems, poems in which (hooray) a comic spirit erupts between this poet and his mirror image in language. The world he documents is distinctively his own, with its chiropractor providing mental adjustments, its black culture "more foreign than China or Vagina./ more alarming than going down Niagara on Viagra." Hoagland's mirror has a sharp edge, often satiric, and the "He-Who-Is-the-Subject-of-This-Poem" disarmingly implicates himself in the culture he satirizes. Believe me, it's not all satire, since Hoagland is fighting alongside his readers in "The Time Wars"; we can feel time "speeding up, rapidly escaping./ like the hiss from a leaky balloon":

We were trying to plug it, to slow it down, to decelerate,  
 but none of us was having much success—

One day in February Kath brought in some roses and said,  
 "Here, the sun came 93 million miles  
 to make these flowers that I killed for you,"  
 and I said, "Kathleen, my talents are not capacious enough  
 to properly exaggerate your virtues,"  
 and we both burst out laughing  
 and time stopped right over our heads like a little red car.

Language—imaginative language—good company and a comic spirit are our weapons in the Time Wars. As of now, Tony Hoagland appears to be winning.

A very different poet-centered book is **John Canaday's *The Invisible World*** (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002, 66 pp., \$16.95 paper). Like Nikolayev, he is drunk on language, not only English (*lagan, clypeal, carnallite, mondaines*) but enough Arabic to require a glossary. Like Hoagland, he translates the self into verse through the medium of a disarm-

ingly self-conscious sense of humor. There the similarity ends. Canaday's book is an account of a year in Jordan, either "tutoring the children of American expats" ("Entrée") or, according to the bio on the back cover, "tutoring the children of King Hussein and Queen Noor." Royalty (or indeed students) are not mentioned in the poems, which record encounters with a memorable cast of characters, mostly Muslim men. As a storyteller, the poet admits to a faux self, and I have to admit that even when I suspect I am being manipulated, just as the poet was manipulated by a native acquaintance, he proves so spellbinding a narrator and so skillful with sensuous detail, I hang on every word. I am also seduced by the prosodic skill of these poems: blank verse, heroic couplets dropping off into free verse, a ghazal, slippery rhymes, and WCW's triple-step dance. Although I'm a sucker for such prosodic virtuosity, on first reading I hardly noticed the texture, rushed along on the current of the narrative. Right in the middle come fourteen pages of a mock-Dantesque expedition, "Impostors," in colloquial terza rima. Canaday's Virgil, an acquaintance named Ghazi, entices the poet to his home, where he and his henchmen strip their guest to his jockey shorts, costume him as a sheik, and pile into his rented car for an outing. The fastidious New Englander, too polite to resist, allows himself to be led on an expedition through a comic hell, each circle more unpredictable, more humbling, than the last. When the poet finally relaxes into a comfortable companionship in a pool at the top of a waterfall, a vision of Dante appears:

I'd almost swear  
he spoke then, in the voice of a Bedouin:

"Get up now. Even in your underwear,  
you're still a tourist in this life; your art,  
like mine, rests in not resting anywhere. . . ."

No *Paradiso* in this *Commedia*. The poet later makes a Biblical pilgrimage, having

driven up the Jordan Valley road  
to look for Jacob's oil-soaked pillow stone,  
the pillar he'd erected like a . . . well,  
a finger pointing out the path to God.

He is rewarded, it would seem, by another vision, this one grotesque—an oracle from the mouth of a dead goat. "Doubt is the angel of our time," he muses, but concludes: "Why doubt the

goat could speak? You heard yourself/ the dead words whispered in your inner ear.”

Although the subject of this book is the poet’s groping to experience and understand a strange place with its strange culture, its true content is an adventure in self-exploration. In a prose paragraph within a poetic sequence (“Shit”), Canaday acknowledges the premise of his writing: “Because language is metaphorical, the self can be seen as separate from the seeing. Language provides a space outside the self in which the self performs.” Exactly right.

**Louise Glück**, in *The Seven Ages* (New York: HarperCollins/Ecco, 2002, 68 pp., \$12.95 paper), commands attention as one of today’s preeminent poets (since this volume first appeared in 2001 she has added the editorship of the Yale Younger Poets and the post of U.S. poet laureate to her possibly unmatched accumulation of awards). Much of her earlier work has been autobiographical, and here, in “Summer Night,” she confronts the question of the poet as the subject of her poetry, in terms very different from Canaday’s:

Why not? Why not? Why should my poems not  
imitate my life?

Whose lesson is not the apotheosis but the pattern, whose  
meaning  
is not in the gesture but in the inertia, the reverie.

Desire, loneliness, wind in the flowering almond—  
surely these are the great, the inexhaustible subjects  
to which my predecessors apprenticed themselves.  
I hear them echo in my own heart, disguised as convention.

Balm of the summer night, balm of the ordinary,  
imperial joy and sorrow of human existence,  
the dreamed as well as the lived—  
what could be dearer than this, given the closeness of death?

Glück writes in the first person, but these poems could hardly be tagged “confessional.” There is a dignity of distance between the woman writing and her reflection in the work. The title poem seems to be in the voice of Eve, recapitulating in dream the life of Woman. This Woman would appear to be the “I” of these

poems—a woman sustained by sensuousness, a woman disillusioned (or betrayed), self-mocking in her “erotic freedom,” divided between a soul that looks before and after and pines for what *is* and a body subject to the tyranny of Time. She complicates this tension with a dialectic stress between a static idealism (for example, “the solace of ritual”) and “the sorrow of human existence.” Glück maintains the elegant distance between her self and this Self-in-the-poems through a series of fables (some of them so titled, others not) and through a purity of style. Here is the devastating “Fable” that concludes this book:

Then I looked down and saw  
 the world I was entering, that would be my home.  
 And I turned to my companion, and I said, *Where are we?*  
 And he replied *Nirvana*.  
 And I said again, *But the light will give us no peace.*



### **When Subject Really Matters**

In Bowers, Hoagland, Canaday, and Glück, radically different as they are in their presentation of the self, sophisticated awareness of the process of composition combined with their various skills with language produces content that transcends the “I.” Now I’ll examine some poetry with content not obviously reflecting the poet’s self. My order here is inverse chronological. Four of these books are written in a contemporary “plain style.” By this I mean in diction and syntax—Wordsworth’s “selection of the language really used by men.” No “poetic diction,” please; no conspicuous ornamentation; little figurative language. Nothing to call attention to style over content. The plain style is not at all what I mean when I complain about “lineated prose.” In the plain style a quiet rhythm reflects a counterpoint between, on the one hand, the line ends and spacing on the field of the page, and, on the other, colloquial sentence structure. Each poem is a score for the human voice.

**William Heyen, *Shoah Train*** (Silver Spring, MD: Etruscan Press, 2003, 96 pp., \$29.95 hardbound, \$15.95 paper). I didn’t see Heyen’s first two books of Holocaust poems, enthusiastically praised by poets as different as Hayden Carruth and Jorie Graham, but this one is simply superb. For a quarter of a century Heyen has been combing the historical archives, including a wealth of survivors’ accounts. Here he presents evidences

from his research, all short sharp poems, many brief stories in various voices. There is no attempt to make them “poetic”; in their austere precision they require no heightening. After the poet’s selection of significant moments, his job, as a poet, is to find a fresh form on the space of the page to allow each story its distinctive impact. The book’s organization is linear—from early evidences of virulent anti-Semitism to the distance of today’s visitors from the impact of the sites, and ending with a few poems in the poet’s own voice, as he looks into the future. “The Legend of the Shoah” begins

time came when  
it was forgotten  
for what it was  
whatever it had been

no one remembered even  
one ancestor who had spoken  
of one survivor  
to one descendent

This poem, with its bitterly ironic ending, is a harsh indictment of memory and history. For me it circles back to James McCorkle’s *Evidences* (which would have been an accurate title for Heyen’s book). “History collapses to moments,” McCorkle writes in “Bee-Yard.” In “Iron Path (*Eisen-Steig*)” Heyen observes:

The erasure of evidence is the demand that power makes,  
for without that evidence there is no witness. History can  
only be the record of erasure, thus in itself complicit with  
power.

In his scholarly fidelity to evidence (every source documented), in his passionate attention, in his refusal to countenance erasure, in his self-effacing humility, and in his quiet masterly power as a poet, Heyen has given us a book that should be in every school and public library. It is that fine.

**Sondra Gash, *Silk Elegy*** (Fort Lee, NJ: CavanKerry Press, 2002, 124 pp., \$14, paper). Moving back to the roots of the Shoah, Gash has created a book-length poem in the voices of the family of Morris Bronsky, a Polish silkweaver and loom-mender, who, with his wife Lena, fled the pogroms at the turn of the last century to settle in Paterson, New Jersey, then the silk-weaving capital of the Western world. Their daughter Faye, born in 1913, is the teenaged speaker in most of these poems. From her we

learn about her frustrated struggle for an education, her father's action for workers' rights, and her mother's descent into mental illness. Faye learns from Lena that she is descended "from a long line of rhapsodic women," but the poems in her voice are not rhapsodic. Listen to Faye watching her mother:

Alone on the porch  
 Mama glides  
 back and forth  
 back and forth,  
 cooling off in the dark,  
 and her head whirs like a loom.

In masterful fiction, we come to know and care about the characters, more, perhaps, than about people we see daily. In *Silk Elegy* also we have that privilege.

**Jana Harris, *We Never Speak of It: Idaho-Wyoming Poems, 1889-90*** (Princeton, NJ: Ontario Review Press, 2003, 112 pp., \$14.95 paper). In this, another book-length poem, comprising twenty-eight monologues, we step back a full generation from the immigrant Bronskys to the pioneers who headed overland but never made it to the coast, stopping off where their wagon broke down or their oxen died. Like Heyen, Harris is a scholar who has pursued her subject for years, prowling libraries and interviewing survivors. Like Gash she writes a fiction, set in an invented Cottonwood, Idaho, but fiction based on actual events. Her characters' monologues are more dramatic than the Bronskys' since we hear Harris's speakers speaking or writing to a real audience. In the beginning of "How Hard I Try: Lucy Annie Smith, Rock Creek Road, Snake River Country, 1889," Lucy Annie is pleading with a schoolteacher:

Missus, the lawyer says  
 I need a witness. Cruelty the grounds and I want  
 custody of my infants.

The schoolteacher, Frances Stanton, is the voice in twelve of the monologues, the principal lens through which the reader listens in on the community. Readers of this magazine may recall Harris's "Broomshop Regulations," in which Stanton's student, Duke Deneke, writes to her from jail in Wyoming, concluding, "You often said I'd be hanged/ before I turned twenty-one./ I'm writing to say/ I've four more months/ to prove you wrong." Harris enriches this long poem with a map and two dozen eloquent archival photographs.

**Nick Flynn, *Blind Huber*** (Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 2002, 72 pp., \$14 paper) takes us back to the eighteenth century, when a blind French beekeeper, François Huber, spent fifty years imagining himself into the hive and discovering much of what we know today about honeybees. Fourteen of the poems are in his voice; others speak for the Virgin Queen, the swarm, the hive as a whole, the drones, the workers in their various functions, and for Huber's assistant. The poet imagines a collective voice of the race of bees, recalling their earlier geography, their homes in tree trunks, and even the process of being embalmed in amber, as resin

flowed glacially from wounds in the bark,  
pinned us in our entering  
as the orchids opened wider. First,

liquid, so we swam until we couldn't.  
Then it fell like sleep, the taste of nectar

still inside us. Sometimes a lotus

submerged with us. A million years  
went by. A hundred. Swarm of hoverfly,  
cockroach, assassin bug, all

trapped, suspended

in that moment of fullness, a  
Pompeii, the mother

covering her child's head forever.

In reading, we learn a good deal about the history and methodology of beekeeping, but we learn it through (I can't say *visualizing*, can I?) smelling, tasting, hearing, touching, and somatic and visceral feeling, in short by sensing with another consciousness. Nick Flynn has achieved something splendid here, vicariously entering Blind Huber and through him the sensuous consciousness of the hive.

**Rachel Zucker, *Eating in the Underworld*** (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2003, 64 pp., \$26 cloth, \$12.95 paper). The plain style is appropriate for much of today's verse,

but not, I hasten to say, all. The style of Rachel Zucker's *Eating in the Underworld* is lavishly rich, in accordance with its subject matter. Now we take two long leaps—back to the universe of classical myth, to Persephone, Demeter, and Hades; and ahead to a contemporary imagination of the story in which Persephone enters the Underworld on her own impulse, eventually chooses to marry Hades, and freely negotiates the return to her mother. We hear no voices in this poem, experiencing all through Persephone's diary and through her correspondence with her mother and Hades. The imagery is of our century; here's Persephone's diary entry about entering the Underworld:

all the light turns green at once  
go, go, go, go, go

I will

go, not even knowing

where

It is easy to read this as a record of the ego and the id joined in conflict with the superego, a universal story of adolescent virginity consciously and unconsciously craving maturity through sexual fulfillment. The vivid transformations in the Underworld carry the reader through Persephone's process of liberation, metamorphosis, and disillusionment. Freudian vocabulary is out of fashion now, but it serves me well in identifying the syntax underlying the contemporary myth. As a scholar of the Shelley circle, I have been attracted to the material of myth as it changes to meet the needs of successive generations. Start with Hesiod's Prometheus and arrive, via Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein: The Modern Prometheus*, at *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and "Frankenfood." Such transmogrifications succeed but do not supersede their source. Some graduate student is doubtless huddled in a carrel tracking the incarnations of Kore/Persephone/Proserpine through Milton and Swinburne toward Zucker.

We all know the story, how Persephone returns to earth to terminate the suffering of winter. Part 2, with a spooky epigraph from Sylvia Plath's "Wuthering Heights," chronicles the disillusionment of her return. Lest she wander into meadows from

which she can return to Hades, Demeter confines her to an urban world where “Sleeping/ is something I do to forget the inching and inching/ of the onward city.” Her love for Hades wavers, but at last, of course, she returns to him. Ego has matured to control id and superego. Despair and desire reach equilibrium.

Remember, we don't hear voices; we read letters and a diary by characters living their intimate lives on a mythological scale. In an early diary entry in the Underworld Persephone writes,

It's so hot the thin-skinned lemons are weeping.

Isn't this what I wanted? Sick of deciduous life,  
The dappled light, pointillist neighborhoods.

The wooing notes Hades writes to Persephone as she deliberately eats the pomegranate seeds are appropriately unworldly: Familiar words become strange; we skid on the grammatical slippage of “elixir, transmute, refined.” “You will find ardor,” Hades writes,

Congeval, extract, distill—  
one thousand times.  
Solid to vapor and vapor to solid;  
you move too quickly for rain.

Zucker is painterly in her use of negative space. In her wedding-night diary, words abandon the bride. White space (long indentations, ellipses, triple line spacings) in Demeter's letters simulates the failure of language in the face of her grief.

Find two friends to read the parts of Persephone, Demeter, and Hades with you. As the musical instruments for this thoughtful, sensuous music, you will find yourselves made richer and stranger.

These five book-length poems, different from each other in content as they are, have so much in common in their structure that I am tempted to consider them, along with Sharon Chmielarz's *The Other Mozart* and Natasha Trethewey's *Bellocoq's Ophelia*, a subgenre of new poetry. Each is chronological and episodic. Each projects the voice or voices of the dramatis personae in a linear narrative. Although the poets only rarely include poems in their own voice, they often, in foreword or afterword, discuss their deep personal involvement with their

subjects. Only Zucker places her narrative in this century, but her luscious style and mythological subject keep a distance between the poetry and the age. This distanced content affords their work the specificity and breadth of perspective that enables their and our imaginations to confront subject matter necessary to survival at the beginning of the twenty-first century.



### **Where Are We Now?**

In the preface to **John Haines's *For the Century's End: Poems 1990–1999*** (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001, 104 pp., \$25 cloth, \$14.95 paper), Haines addresses the question of content. “I have always sought a poetry,” he writes, “that, as in the classical past and in the case of many of our prominent modernists, can include the public events of our time and do so in a way that makes them at once contemporary and unavoidably linked with humanity’s long and troubled history.” In this volume, he creates that difficult fusion in poem after poem. From his stance in the present, the poet visits a wax museum in Victoria, BC, and, meditating on “these murderous spaces,/ this blood-haunted silence,” envisions today’s political scene in the figures on display—from Henry VIII and Bismarck to Nixon:

Out of his sleek arrest  
he steps toward us,  
as if to greet a voter—

a fixed, ferocious smile  
on the blue jowls  
brushed with powder.

In “Kent State, May 1970” he recalls the young woman in the now-classic photograph:

Premonitory, her outstretched arms  
as she kneels in the spring sunlight,  
the cry on her lips that will not  
raise the boy lying dead before her.

How often has that image returned,  
to fade and reappear, then fade again?  
In Rwanda, in Grozny, Oklahoma . . .  
Kabul, city of rubble and orphans.

Through poetry the figure of that woman, whose name we have already forgotten, takes on an almost mythic significance, even

now as we sleep “in the blurred ink/ of our own newsprint.” Haines himself has become something of a mythological (or, more properly, legendary) person, though it may embarrass him for me even to suggest it. Reading his poems and his invaluable essays, I understand that the clarity of his vision and his not-unconnected exhortation of our era’s violence and injustice follow from his years of living intimately with the wild country our species emerged from so recently in geologic time. He sees what we have lost and what we are still losing. In this volume the poems move deeply in time, from “The Ancestors” in the Cretaceous to the economic/political present in the Juvenalian satire of “Notes on the Capitalist Persuasion.” Here’s one stanza:

In your small and backward nation  
some minor wealth still beckons—  
was it lumber, gas, or only sugar?  
Thus by imperial logic,  
with carefully aimed negotiation,  
my increase is your poverty.

The satire, not confined to our species’ earthly doings, extends in “NASA Dreams Quietly of Mars” to the invasion and conquest of what we call “outer space.”

As a poet, Haines has long been a visionary, not, like Blake, seeing angels climbing trees, but as one moving through the process of composition into vision. In a poem that appears to conjure a spirit of the wilderness—a profoundly romantic lyric with the bitter title “Another Country”—he addresses a woman walking with “a wolf loping before you/ on the ice-road, and a raven/ that called and spoke to you/ as it turned in the wind,” a semi-mythological figure at home in “a fabulous woodland,/ its haunted lairs and icy springs.” “In the Cave at Lone Tree Meadow” records his experience in a Chumash Indian pictograph cave in southern California, where the print on the ceiling of a grizzly’s track recalls a bear at Glacier Crossing, where

Thirty summers past, I stopped  
by a stunted tree above the creek,  
to watch in the thicket below me  
the brown, humped shoulders moving,  
the great head down . . . and Fear,

like a grass blade trembling,  
stood up and turned toward me

its face, ferocious and blind.

It was Fear he had been tracking all these years, to “find my quarry here, in the sand of an old sea-bed,/ uplifted and changed to stone.” The quarry as predator takes on a visionary form:

I wait for a sound I know—  
the slow, climbing tread  
that has followed me all my life  
and will track me down.

Haines’s poetry provides the reader with a necessary bridge to that increasingly remote and threatened world which we have left behind but carry, consciously or not, within us. “It is important,” he writes in his preface, “that the subject or event connects us with something intuitively deeper in the self.” In the works of all these writers this is the function of content, and eventually of subject; to create “something of a modern mythos remains the essential task.”