

BPJ

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Editor for Reviews and Exchanges

Marion K. Stocking

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BPJ

THE EDITORS OF
THE БЕЛОIT POETRY JOURNAL
ARE PROUD TO AWARD
THE TWELFTH ANNUAL
CHAD WALSH POETRY PRIZE
OF \$3,000

TO
JESSICA GOODFELLOW
FOR HER POEM
"A PILGRIM'S GUIDE
TO CHAOS IN THE HEARTLAND"
IN THE SUMMER 2004 ISSUE.

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

REBECCA DUNHAM

The Tempest

after Giorgione

Clouds orchard the sky, dangle
flush globes overhead. The storm
has not passed. There is no
rest, I know, just my son's cry

splintering the silence. A flash
both serpentine and bright.
If sleep's slick waters could slip
their banks and cover me

like a sheet. If the telephones, tea
kettle, even the rasping green
sofa's slipcovered twill could be
quieted. Below the water's purled

surface, a stillness pours. Please.
This, the uninhabited moment.

REBECCA DUNHAM

Catherine Blake

I flush my paintbrush against the water bowl's sides.
A cloudy tail spirals up in its wake. For me,
each morning dawns to a disk of fire not unlike
a guinea, and this he will not forgive. My paper

glows out yellow like the sun rising and singing
to my husband: *Holy, Holy, Holy, the Lord God
Almighty!* A swarm of angels crying to him,
he says, and though I try to see otherwise, it's just

the bees that have roosted in our eaves. The dry
husks of their bodies bat the windowpanes.
I dip my brush's tip and swirl it round
a lozenge of paint. Only here, in the window's

mirror-glare, do I see more than he:
white feathers spit from my lips instead of air,
sticking to me, a gutted pillow's snowy innards,
till I am waxed and feathered as any saint here.

REBECCA DUNHAM

Galileo's Daughter

Father, I send you this electuary of fig,
nut, rue leaves, and salt.

A plague beats our convent gates.

Crystals of arsenic burn at my wrist
and float in my lap's jet folds.

If your silhouette were to scorch
the parchment sheet hung between us,
I would know what a woman knows,

curtained within her bed, when
the black form of her lover approaches.

MARY KANE

Afterwards

What is the difference between exterminating ants
and indulging in an extramarital affair?

Obvious answers include types of toxins employed,
number of ant bodies stumbling about the baseboards.

On the first morning I shook the dream. I was
a dog just out of the ocean. I left meaning out of it.

Pest control salesmen will lie without shame
or will themselves into self-protective ignorance.

A barn loft will collect several varieties of morning
light, all of them useful for reflection.

On the first morning I looked for ants and found too many.
When you've agreed to annihilation you don't want reminders.

My daughter sprawls, just now, half awake, seven,
untroubled by what persists. I kill an ant.

On the first morning I remembered the weight
of a single fruit in my palm. That physical knowledge.

Pest control applicators ensure there is no need
to cleanse kitchen surfaces. They insist on lack of danger.

Mornings I do what most adult humans in New England do.
Sip coffee. Breathe. Evaluate my existence, find myself wanting.

I wash my face, throw in a load of laundry, go on as though
another intricate root system hasn't just altered this ground.

This life. And kill another ant. And remember the torn flesh
and sweet juice of that first bite. What is left on my fingers.

at school is against the rules,
so when a spike-haired

first-grader in need
butts up against your hip,

don't you wrap your arms
round his skinny bones, don't you

cup his skull in your palms,
smooth a knuckle up his baby cheek:

he's got lice, he's got AIDS;
you kiss him, you die,

or worse: late nights, he'll hunch up small,
stare into some laugh show

and whisper what no half-pissed dad
cares to hear from his wife's

kid at the end of a long day
of nothing, when sleep

is the only country,
anywhere else, terror:

a father you've marked
before, slouching into parent night,

two hands trembling
along his thighs like birds

shot down,
black eyes wary as a bull's:

he blinks at the butcher,
you smile, you fold

your unheld hands;
what roils in his wake is the one

you won't teach
to beg an answer from love.

RAE GOUIRAND
Ufficiali di Notte

Florence, 1432

As twilight hums and men are released
from professions, the Office of the Night knocks,
checking at houses with sons, probing

popular neighborhoods near the unfinished dome
for nocturnal codes and conjugated
accusations. The great oculus squints

at writhing corners of shadows, the edges
of palaces and sheds where the city is undone
by its civics. Your family has dismissed you

from evening meals, and in this particular lane
a cloud of others' suppers wafts from houses
where your presence would invite visits,

fines, beatings, worse. According to neighbors,
who have been asked, you couldn't care less
about sex, never a woman swelling in

your parents' house. Unseeing of your acts,
they sleep through your consoled entrance at
some late hour, edges rubbed ragged with imprints

of architecture, the rough fit of your front
into the urgent curve of that arch where you let
him pin you. Your ribs undone by the press of

the sandstone, you've just glimpsed the math
radiating from the perfect circle, these structural
thrusts. In every alleyway, men slur

the hymn of the half-done dome, a deadened
overture to the herringbone brickwork that hollows
above the streets. Another's hands on your waist,

your shirt pocket tears from the weight of wages'
hard round mouths, national faces stamped
on their surfaces. These spill from the rip

down your marble-cold legs, lost in
the cobblestones, the only things you abandon
when those who have heard your small mouthings,

the tracery of your breath, come with their lanterns,
set you running through the streets, released
like an integer from flourishes of stone.

JOSHUA RIVKIN

Cartographic

In maps of antiquity continents
 threaten to fall
 from the world and vanish

into a serpent's open jaw as if
 land drawn
 in relief could disappear in blue-

gray mouths of ocean or demon.
 A skin over
 things, we guard ourselves

flesh with clothes, eyes with shade, distance
 between one
 love and the next. Carefully

we watch objects of worry
 glass marks
 on coffee tables, widening rings

of Saturn or Jupiter, a dangerous orbit
 of stain and scar,
 then risk each other whenever possible.

Like how we threw you, water on fire,
 all of us and couldn't
 stop. This was before

and I didn't think you'd make it.
 We passed you
 between us. Gave you up instead

of each other as if you were the offering
 for sins we had yet
 to name. We were young enough

to believe you would feel it less, that storms
 between adults
 could pass through the young

like sun through windowpanes.

Glare casting light
across a living room, damaging

nothing at first, but wait, it happens.

Not in hours
but years, not burn but fade,

elements breaking down, a chair

in the corner
yellowed teeth or smoke. Thinned

fabric exposes its inner muscle

marbled tendons
in the late afternoon

haze. We passed you across oceans

risked your life
for ours. Tell me you are less fragile

than continents, that maps misplace fears,

that water and serpents
cannot swallow you whole or in part,

that the past cannot be pressed

in relief,
that you have forgiven me.

JOSHUA RIVKIN

Enough

Smoke not for the fix but the pause. The slick
stream of water around my body. Breaking
bread in rough edges. These are mine.
I read in the paper today the average person
believes three point two million dollars is what
happiness is worth. Would that be enough
for you to buy a fire engine. A ladder truck,
red and chrome, signal and hook gleaming
in the afternoon sun. I've seen how often
you stand on the front porch an ear to sky
for spinning vibrato. Waiting for the glistered
blur to streak the street. Sirens consume air
in pitch and strip any doubt the city isn't safe.
But for you it's not about disaster.
A fire truck calls your attention to the world.
That we take pleasure where we find it,
unexpected and limitless. That it's possible
to risk ourselves again and again.
That we save each other all the time.

ADRIAN BLEVINS
Why the Marriage Failed

prompted by a line from Gerald Stern

From the beginning it was the money, how we would not or could not
make it.

It was never avarice, I resent the implication, it was how much like
starlings
children are with those same raggedy screechings and us such languid
nest makers:

him with his camera pointed up and me in the chair with the Plath in
my lap.

From the beginning it was our innocence, it was our impertinence, it
was a bent outhouse
in the dead dead double-dead clot of twisted winter. It was him with
the black cloth
over his shoulders and that huge camera for a face and my face also
like an infant's
in the photos he made. It was stupidity and I don't mind saying it, for
we were farcical,

we were illogical, we were like a circle spinning and just that hollow—
we were the fragrance of the idea of the meaning of not. We didn't want
destruction,

we were totally against *that*, so we made it our philosophy: we sought
a garden of black-eyed Susans because all we wanted was to frolic

because like everyone else, we just wanted to be happy. But we were
too wet,

we were like fog, we were an orchard of water in a cabin, stupor gone
amok.

We'd sit on the porch and look for some fields to farm, but we were too
fertile

and didn't have hoes. We were minus a measuring cup and missing an
umbrella

when you two boys got here and that was it, we were history. There were
maybe three candies in our pockets, but we weren't blank, we were
stuffed

from loving you—we'd stare at your craving mini-mouths mid-shriek
and go *oh my god how entirely exquisite oh my god what have we done.*

WALTER BARGEN

Snapped Shots

Two riveted holes elegantly threaded
with braided red string. *Großes Buch*,
Hesse & Becker, Leipzig. Faded photo album.

Hundreds of dull, diamond-patterned ridges,
worn away at the corners.
Back cover stained, a mirage of coastline,

peninsula curving back into bay,
where an unnamed river enters the studded
cardboard-green sea. Miles from shore

the spreading oil from a torpedoed ship.
Above, the sputter of a B-17, the crew
thinking it safer to scatter themselves in the sea.

Small white paint spots, the trail of flak
following the bomber as it spins out of control,
and the parachutes of those still trying to return

to us after all these years. Turned over, the knot
in the red string flattened from decades
of face-down-attic forgetting.

Where the stain wraps into a smudge,
the rubble of a city, the shadow of something shot
through, a dried pool at ground zero.

In the upper left-hand corner, silver-embossed
wheat sheaves, their stalks cross the handle
of a red-rimmed spade, and on the blade

a broken-legged cross. Open, one young face
appears under field cap and helmet,
at attention, bespeckled, eyes pinched by small

round frames—always smiling—tossing a grenade,
baring the shoulder of a friend to expose
the pfennig-sized shrapnel scar, kneeling

in snow, rifle ready. This must've
been at the beginning, when it was easy
to believe anything invincible and manifest,

superior and godly. Platoon posed on dunes
by the North Sea, poised to launch rafts toward
double-spired churches impaling heaven,

in the drunken pose of a one-room party, a singing
that will be recalled in springs to come, the beaming
foolish faces of forgotten young men. The final photos:

smoke braided above blitzed tanks, a single
file of soldiers stretched toward the horizon,
drudging a muddy rut, backs turned

to a faceless fate. Somewhere a mother,
a father, and an untameable grief,
who also might be face-down

and indistinguishable in some field.
Once headed toward defeating the world,
half the album blank.

SIOBHAN PHILLIPS

Waiting

She knew the matter was no more
to some than dawn clotting through the sour

starter on the sill, starchy light
of the larder in its cold fried potato

pall, or breath lined with balked smoke
from damp and kindling, later steam

from tea, whose globed leaves strain
yet add no weight to water— What was this,

this heaviness at five, six, darkness
not yet gone, but late hours at low

and lengthening wicks, pulling seams, undoing
oily skeins, her mind

unfolding miles long; outside,
those thick heels and hands asleep, those mouths

slack that drained stores to scums of foam,
like lips left the sand by empty tides,

and needed more— What was hers to waste
but time, and what but waste, the lost,

missed, the raveled warp, the not-sure-how-far
gone was there to thread, spin,

cast— Yes, she had her dream, idle
thought, an age clear in moments; never

again: to bear something, move, bound
and making do with what is taken on—

ELEANOR STANFORD

Tarrafal, 1974

During the Cape Verdean struggle for independence (which was actually fought in Guinea-Bissau), the Portuguese imprisoned colonial dissidents in a jail in Tarrafal, on the island of Santiago. Amilcar Cabral, the leader of the independence movement, was assassinated in 1973. The prisoners were released in 1974; the islands won their independence the following year.

The monkeys in the trees are tame. They swing
onto the table at the bar and dip
their delicate fingers into my cup
of grog. I ask the sullen girl to bring
another, but she just stares, her long
magenta nails tapping on her hips.
Cabral is dead. While they told me, the slap
of drums beat out some poor girl's wedding song.
The sandstone cells outside of town still cast
their shadows in my sleep. When they opened
the gate, all I saw was walls: the *praça*
where old men pace hand in hand; the slope
of rocks around the bay; the *batuque's* fast
patter; the darkness falling on the mangos.

The darkness falling on the mangos
is not the same as other darkneses.
In the bay, the young boys dive from rocks, fling
their shining bodies into motionless
water. A circle of girls draws tight,
their hands calling rhythms from the sacks clasped
between their knees. The mangos hold the light
in drooping arms, fruit glowing in their grasp.
I remember my wife drawing the blade
across the mottled skin, feeding me slice
after bright slice until the acid flayed
my tongue. I no longer recognize
her touch. Cabral is dead. Where is their shame?
Even the monkeys in the trees are tame.

LAURA ESCKELSON

Harvestmen

In the tropics, they tangle on bushes,
a shivering snarl.
Indian harvestmen knit together
by the hundreds, tilt
back and forth,
a hungry tumbleweed.
Here, they will not give way.
Two of them approach each other, stiltwise,
raise whisker legs and flay.
A standoff of sixteen legs
in three inches,
bodies sleek as seeds.

LAURA ESCKELSON

Body Origami

My fingers loop in the circular prayer
of needle and thread—
winding sheets for his bones:
ivory castanets.
The cowl cannot quiet the tics of memory
that spark in the ashy marrow.
His death encodes my dreams
with lost movement.
I awaken with arms crossed over my chest,
one leg folded under.
Leaping knits into my body:
a hook grown over with moss,
a flash of silver.

DEIRDRE CALLANAN

Counting

The wide lattice of the fence
checkers the snow with
18 shadow-rimmed boxes.

The pulleys of the two blinds I have raised
lie splayed on a yellow window cushion
which is adorned by 63 rows of cotton nubs.

Four could converse on this window seat,
play games at this table, and of course they did.
They were a family from Quebec.

The daughter, *naturellement* Marie-Claude,
opened all seven drawers as soon as they arrived.
Her brother Louis closed them after her.

Les Quebecois set down cases, binoculars,
smoothed the map atop the table,
studied it, hurried down to the sea.

Marie-Claude raced ahead, Louis shouting after her,
“*Lentement, lentement, ecoute-moi!*”
They stopped abruptly: a scalloper steamed away.

Louis proposed draughts. Shutting
his eyes, he recalled the glass-topped table,
its green and white pattern of 64 squares.

He ordered his sister to gather 16 similar shells.
His shells were pewter, Marie-Claude’s pearl.
It was brightly pleasant.

Louis defeated Marie-Claude in 122 games of draughts.
She slid her shells quickly across the table squares.
He took his time.

Their father dozed on the beach, a worn copy of
A L’Ombre des Jeunes Filles en Fleurs open on his stomach.
Their mother tatted on the balcony, sipped a *moheto*.

Each evening Mme. Michaud sang
an ancient lullaby to *les enfants*,
its tune vague, its words incomprehensible.

Yet it soothed Marie-Claude who slept suddenly,
like a dropped stone—rounded, motionless,
but it drove Louis wild with longing.

Louis had learned to depend on counting. He began
with the bead-board, then the rug's cross-hatch pattern,
accepted slumber murmuring, "*Cent trent-trois.*"

Several things happened that August in Chatham.
All told, the Michauds ate 16 pounds of lobster,
96 Wellfleet oysters, two gallons of cranberry sorbet.

Louis took tennis lessons, increased five-fold
his willingness to surge to net. Marie-Claude bought
27 postcards, mailed 25, pasted two in her memory album.

They strolled to the lighthouse every evening save one,
walked into town twice weekly; Marie-Claude
paused 359 times to inhale pink roses' perfume.

M. et Mme. Michaud enjoyed four liters of Chassagne Montrachet.
They made love six times, quietly because of *les enfants*,
delicately due to Monsieur's sunburned shoulders.

Mme. Michaud tatted four and a half yards of lace.
Each morning, she plucked out whatever silver strand
she discovered in her otherwise auburn curls.

M. Michaud reread 183 pages of *A L'Ombre . . . Fleurs*.
He clutched the closed book. On that flat, pale beach,
no one noticed his weeping.

The sun has moved, or the earth—however this happens.
Now the lattice's reflections rest under the balcony's table.
There is nothing to do but to keep on counting.

LESLIE SHINN

The Radio

At table the children,
allowed the radio,
unaccountably chose opera.
The light steadied under the swung lamp,
the cloth clean and pulled over the center,
the music low but building.

Tableau: the palm-sized players,
magnified behind the water glasses,
minuet round the salt.

Any talk was of costumes,
making and remarking their hats and the king
lovely, all along his robes
of decided red were drawn
noble, resting dogs:

what they saw when they heard.

LESLIE SHINN

Séance

Automatic song edged round
the marked table—scattered
thinly with candlesticks, peeled
cupcakes, and cold tea in her
gold lily set—and a scarf
of light took over her head,
read the automatic drawings
on the smoke-silk walls.

Pure dark at the bowed windows.
The air pressed close at the door
that time put between us
and pulled, she then the mirror
where I walked by myself.

SARAH SMITH

The Letter Open on the Table

1

Rain stirs and mangles the fringe
of bodies in front of the club.
You pull me in by the wrist, make me
dance to this year's popular song. I'm a little drunk
in the bones as we stand in front,
still swaying, watching some perfect part
of ourselves stumble away
under the streetlights.

2

If I had known you to be so full
of your own spit, I would have left
the letter open for you to see. *Dear you,*
Forget the limes and gin again,
and we will surely fight.

3

Stamps are appropriate emblems
for grief. Any small picture will do.
I check the mail in my new slip,
staggering up the stairs,
and my landlord clucks his tongue
the way landlords always do.

BRUCE A. JACOBS

Turning 50

It's nothing
at first. A hair moves
on your arm.

You see the first droplet
on your skin
only after you feel the next.

You look up. The sky
is clear blue.
The world is strange.

Then you feel
another droplet, and maybe
something is happening.

The air fills with
strings of water.
You'd go inside, but you have

things to do out here.
You begin to understand
how a fish never feels wet.

BRUCE A. JACOBS

TV

Turn the page and there it is
stamped into some respected journal:
a poem you can only
watch.

You know the poems:
the ones that make perplexity
an industry. Factory outlets
of the found.

Like, say, an actual recent poem
in a well-known magazine (you'd know it
if I named it) about a possum in the poet's
backyard at night.

The poem has the possum
not doing something possumy, but instead
"repairing the small distances
where faith spits its seeds."

The poem says
the sound of the possum's tail in the leaves
"conducts you to the serious place
at the heart of mirth."

I think the poet thought
this was not funny,
which might seem impossible
until you

picture this:
the magazine's poetry editor
in bed, a stack of envelopes
toppling between her knees.

Beyond her toes, a TV is on,
maybe a rerun of Johnny Carson
she recognizes from childhood:
"Hii-Yo!" through her parents' wall.

The poetry editor unfolds
the next wing of paper. She holds it
like a screen to the blue light,
blinks once, twice, says,

“Yes.” Repair. Faith. Spit. Seeds. Says,
“Yes.” Tail. Serious place. Heart of mirth.
The editor feels the tickle
of things that might connect

or might not. Oh! The tease
of swarming proximity.
The way light and sound
breathe heavily when they abstain

from meaning, lovers
fucking through their clothes.
She could lie here for hours, her face
to the quivering screen

of the page.
Yes. Oh, there. Yes.
Small distances, Spit, The Mighty Possum
Art Players,

oh, random fit of friction,
sweet streaming faith,
the om of whatever’s
on.

ZACH SAVICH
Judging Children

Duplicate copies of double-stuffed self-addressed mailers, stamped against gains in postage prices or the odd event of the interior's bubble wrap bursting in a pop that, like messy gum on a five-year-old's face, would blast away all but one corner of the usual features—they didn't know, those eager parents, that none were sent back. Not the best ones, carved by stubby crayons on frayed loose leaf pages or on spare three-ruled paper made for teaching the proper dimensions of script, not the best ones about Little Nicker the Hairiest Man in the World, or the Donkey Who Ate Cheese and Found It Was Really Merlin and Grew Huge, or the best ones that began "Once there was Daddy and the blue spider"—no, Princess Erin and her glossy ponies and shiny Why I Love America and spiral-bound Day I Won the Big Game were the ones that would win and return to their authors with an invitation to come get filmed at the station and get fifty dollars from this hairiest of men, grand extinguisher, himself with inner organs of blue spiders.

LEE ROSSI

Die Männergruppe

Like conspirators plotting the overthrow of Western Civ, we gathered in Jürgen's kitchen, drank his beer, and listened to his love-drunk tenor's recitatif—the horse, the riding clothes, the whip—bribes he'd given Birgit, his estranged wife. Better she should whip him, we thought, or one of us.

Donald, an American, said that American girls were all talk and no sex, whereas German girls were all sex and no talk, and Lutz said that if Donald's German were better, his relations with the locals might improve. Then Kurt, another *Ami*, told about his night with Ulla,

how she did nothing but talk. Making love to Ulla, said Lutz, who used to date her, was like a five-act play with no fourth act. And Manfred said that now that his girlfriend Karen was a lesbian, she was *not* doing with a woman the same things she used to *not* do with him.

Jürgen said that he and Birgit had a terrific lesbian relationship. I considered for a moment various arrangements of sockets and plugs and confessed that I too had lesbian urges—especially for Karen and Birgit. Kurt reminded us that lesbianism was not so much a sexual preference

as an affirmation of political will. Just like *Lysistrata*, women were retaking ownership of their bodies. Donald said he didn't want to own a woman's body. He only needed a short-term lease. On several women's bodies. Week-to-week rentals would also be okay.

Manfred said that the act of love should be as beautiful as a poem by Heine. Lutz said his best sexual experience came at thirteen when he found his father's hidden copy of de Sade and read it to the neighbor girl in his parents' bed. Donald said that Manfred and Lutz should stick to comic books.

Meanwhile across town the ladies of the *Frauengruppe* were likewise raising consciousness and glasses of wine, each in turn answering the question, what's wrong with men, by giving the names of my five compatriots and myself. Thus ended the privacy of private life.

Ami-slang for *American*

R. S. ARMSTRONG

Cove

for H. E. E.

It is of inlets and peninsulas:
the creek of dock and mud, heron, crab,
of small boat frayed rope. Of one road only.
Of faster by boat, water-slosh and bird-call.
The cataract in one eye halves the land,
makes her a poor judge of distance.
Afraid of drowning, he harbors
in explanation. Caution proves fatal.
She stands anchored in rising water.
Who is cove, cover, over.

R. S. ARMSTRONG

To Whom

Dear as in the story of
Dear as in to hold

Dear sorrow, dear tender
one-eyed dog, dear shelter,
dear liar, dear liar.

I knew the moment it happened
but didn't let you know.

Dear what-did-you-expect?

IAN BICKFORD

The Librarian's Adventures in Love

Alas! Because
Cupid drinks everything
 fortune
 goes
 haywire.

I just keep losing
 my newest other!
 Periodically,

quiescent rage
seems totally useful,
 vatic,
 wise,
 Xenophonic,
 Yorickian,
Zen.

Here now is *The Best American Poetry 2004*, with guest editor **Lyn Hejinian** and series editor **David Lehman** (New York: Scribner Poetry, 2004, 288 pp., \$30, hardbound). First, I open at random and get “Porn classics with simplistic sound bytes—howls and yowls, infinity in a rush seem different every Re-re-re-re-repeat. The Reveal in the Barracks. Rainbow prisms. Jissom prisms” (Kenward Elmslie). Remembering that Hejinian is one of the original *L=A=N-G=U=A=G=E* poets, I’m prepared for a gallimaufry of adventures in language (*gallimaufry*, from French, *ragout*; probably from *galer*, to make merry, plus *mafrer*, to gorge oneself).

■

Second, I read Lehman’s and Hejinian’s front matter, then settle in for the feast, beginning with Kim Addonizio’s light-hearted but wicked-minded twist on the chicken who crosses the road. Next comes Will Alexander’s section from “Solea of the Simooms,” five pages of cascading adjectives (e.g., “ragged palpitations of a cautious dissembling liberty”). Yikes! I’ll have to come back to that. Swooping on through the anthology I find thirteen poems that are (to use what for some has become a dirty word) accessible, each a delight in its own distinctive way: Olena Kaltyiak Davis’s dialogue on the unnameable irrational, “You Art a Scholar, Horatio, Speak to It”; John Hollander’s romp, “For ‘Fiddle-De-Dee’”; John Koethe’s ironic “To an Audience,” on a poet’s secret self as subject; Carl Phillips’s philosophical meditation in “Pleasure” (the pleasure in the act of making); Robert Pinsky’s “Samba”—a sort of sweet New York version of Sandberg’s “hog butcher”—and Virgil Suárez’s analogous “La Florida”; Arthur Sze’s magical imagination in “Acanthus”; James Tate’s anecdotal “Bounden Duty,” on his phone call from the White House; and Paul Violi’s “Appeal to the Grammarians” for an English version of a Spanish punctuation mark, “For every time we’re ambushed / By trivial or stupefying irony, / For pure incredulity, we need / The inverted exclamation point.” If you read only these poems, you will have more than your money’s worth—lungs full of fresh air. Most of the poems on this short list have in common technical expertise, wit in their humor, something to say (warm or chilling), and, in the modern if not recent tradition, a poet invisible except in the art.

■ Back to the poems that challenge conventional readings. I'll try to read some of them in the tradition of dream records, free association, and automatic writing—the most self-indulgent compositional techniques of all. Some poets' notes, an invaluable feature of this series, authorize such a reading. Oni Buchanan says that "The Walk" is "a waking nightmare kind of poem." Aaron Fogel explains that parts of his "370,000, December, 2000" were "done almost by automatic writing." Jack Collom calls his "3-4-00" a marriage of fact and "a bit of mindflow." *Mindflow* is a useful word. Billy Collins explains that "The Centrifuge" was his first poem after the "poet laureate road show" and he "took it as a good sign that I did not understand this poem." At this point I wickedly recall how a reporter quoted Hejinian as saying: "In my value system, thinking is very high," as these spontaneous effusions appear to contradict her intellectual principle. But she goes on to explain that many post-modern theories "use logics that are similar to poetic logics in that the poet provides words that precipitate thinking that the poet could not have anticipated" (*Boston Sunday Globe*, 22 August 1999). Much of the responsibility for making sense of a poem resides, therefore, in the cooperation of the reader. As Jean Day writes in her "Prose of the World Order," in this collection, "all I know / is what the words know." The ghost of Wittgenstein haunts this philosophy.

■ I find another approach to reading this poetry in Paul Hoover's introduction to his Norton anthology *Postmodern American Poetry*, where he explains that such poetry "opposes the centrist values of unity, significance, linearity, expressiveness, and a heightened, even heroic, portrayal of the bourgeoisie and its concerns." A useful catalog. And Hoover's introduction is also helpful in distinguishing between what he sees as two poles of the postmodern: the "constructivist" $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ poets (such as Lyn Hejinian) who challenge "a speech-based poetics" and aural/oral poets who extend "spoken poetry into performance poetry."

Knowing how often in our editorial meetings initially difficult poetry leaps to life when we hear it read aloud, I wonder whether the same magic might work on these poems. Should we consider

them as a kind of music? Let's try. Here's Aaron Fogel in his "337,000, December, 2000":

It is the sieve of words the wild geese flying
The Luoyang exiles, the six vowels
And a thousand years later the Luoyang fire

The six avowals the six false promises the six days of
creation the six sicknesses

Ah! now I'm more at home. The vowels/avowals make the music, and it's no more important to identify the references than to identify the "symbols at your door," "six proud walkers," or "April rainers." I am delighted that Hejinian has included the innovative lyric in her community.

■

For we *are* talking about a community. In her introduction Hejinian is clear: "the life of poetry is highly social; every poem acquires its meaning (and its meaningfulness) within the communities of those who care enough to consider it and converse about it." This anthology welcomes those who "care enough" into its community, and I confess I have to work at it, as in the 1940s I had to work at Pound and Eliot. There are many communities in contemporary poetry, and one of my aims as a reviewer is to open the doors to as many as I can for my readers. Though I read widely, I fail to recognize the names of more than half of the poets this editor has selected; I am familiar with only eleven of the fifty-one publications of origin. A friend from Berkeley, an admirer of Hejinian, looked at the table of contents and remarked, "Oh, these are all her friends. Well no. Not *all*." Hers is just now a very influential community. Biographical notes for poets A-H (Addonizio through Howe) identify faculty and poetry program directors from Fordham, California at San Diego, Princeton, Bard, Washington University, Pennsylvania, the Poetry Project at St. Marks in the Bowery, Syracuse, Toronto, Lehman College (SUNY), Naropa, Virginia, Temple, Boston, Columbia College, Wayne, Berkeley, Yale, and New School University. It is clear that if you are a writing student at one such school, you are probably being initiated into this community, which is having considerable impact on the rising generation of American poets. It is important for us as readers to pay attention.

One significant difference in these poems from the dominant mode of the late twentieth century is the shift of emphasis from the self to the artifact. Experimentation in technique is important, some of it very clever. I'm delighted with the language play (Alexander's *insinuendos* for example), and the range of innovation. One poem looks like a list of aphorisms (Charles Bernstein's), one like an echoing dialogue (Olena Kaltyiak Davis's); several look like prose, but if read aloud would be indistinguishable from many variable-line verses. Then here comes Bruce Andrews's "Dang Me": "Motive bodega bjork hole portishead squirt at the squirt." I can recognize two energies here: one phoneme generating the next and a playful principle of "discombobulation" (his word).

I could have crammed this review with evidence of this innovative spirit of play—*homo ludens* on a rolling romp. Here are a few more instances. (i) Verbal play: "plastic sturgeon" (Ashbery), "wasp-waisted object" (Carla Harryman), "Scraps re-collected/ in tranquillity" (Rachel Blau DuPlessis), and "Knives of the Saints" and "Chives of the Saints" (Arielle Greenberg). (ii) Jokes on clichés: "Don't ask me to be frank. I don't even know if I can be myself" (Charles Bernstein). (iii) Rollicking repetitions: As in Mark Jaffee's "King of Repetition," which demonstrates a keen musical sense exercised in pure play, but which Jaffee claims he wrote as a senior in high school and has almost no recollection of writing.

But there's more than play in this make-it-new poetics. K. Silem Mohammad has a long poem "Mars Needs Terrorists," in ten "sonnets." It looks like this:

.....the republican party has degenerated
in the face of terror
probably calls up phone sex
while they were teenagers
work for NOTHING) as slave

I challenge you to discover the technique. Fear not: a half-page note enlightens us. A small e-mail collective Flarf initiated a form "whose chief aesthetic objective was to be as 'bad,' as 'offensive,' or as 'not OK' as possible." The technique employed a Google search for the string *terrorists, teenagers, wet, republican, sex, and slave*. About all the poet did, he admits, is arrange the fragments in sonnet-length sections and add the typographical

skittering at the beginning of each line. Ah, but as in John Cage's selection of texts for his mesostichs, text choice determines a political element: Mohammad's poem is for him "a formalized distress signal, an arational decoding of my traumatized affective response to both the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and Bush administration policy (the 'War on Terror,' the 'Patriot Act,' 'shock and awe,' etc.)," resulting in an "(in)appropriately nauseous froth." There now. You can read the whole and be appropriately nauseated and, if inspired, employ the process to create your own Flarfy emetic. But don't expect Bush and Co. to tremble.

■

Let's face it: the motive in much poetry, from *Beowulf* on, is political. When William Hazlitt, writing on *Coriolanus*, bemoans the way the "language of poetry naturally falls in with the language of power," he anticipates a political platform of the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* poets and many of their followers, who complain that our language has been so perverted to exploitation by advertisers, politicians, and others of our consumer-captivated, capitalism-compelled culture that poetry has a duty to subvert it by any means—disjunctive syntax, repellent diction, clobbered clichés—whatever you can invent. Here we have a serious intellectual foundation for much of what at first glance appears to be incoherence: principled iconoclasm. Hejinian presumably selected these poems without the assistance of the notes that so candidly accommodate the reader of her collection. A poem may at first glance appear simply incoherent, but initiates know what to infer, and Hejinian's own political stance is unambiguous. In her introduction she attacks the political events of the year of these poems (2003) as "nefarious" and "rampantly destructive."

The political/economic magma erupts throughout this volume, once one knows to look for it; Rae Armantrout, as quoted in the *Boston Globe*, has articulated this function crisply: a protest against "the intervention of capitalism into consciousness." Not all such allusions are subtle; indeed several exploit the language of the "enemy." Alice Notley explains how her "State of the Union" was "written at the time of the 2002 State of the Union address by the president [lower case *sic*], who is perceived finally as nothing but a set of genitals." Fanny Howe, in her "Catholic,"

unintimidated by cliché, locates him anatomically a little farther back. Bob Perelman's "Here 2" seems to me an edgy satire, more rhetoric than poetry, employing the language it excoriates, but unambiguous in its contempt for a world "where the language of power is both intrusively obvious and utterly opaque." Steve McCaffery's "Some Versions of Pastoral" begins "Et in Arcadia ergo points to everywhere. Semantic stability laid smooth across cyclic ridden-epoch pages of remainders" and ends eleven pages later: "(Ate in Acadia Eggo?) // Mentality's the flat I've never moved from [.]" (the poet's brackets). His note explains that his "suite" addresses two questions: "What is Pastoral in an age of carcinomic neoliberalism and how do we address and utilize a defunct genre whose shards still carry such urgent pertinence?" Here's how: "Perhaps Paul Celan is the crematorium built especially / for Language Poets." Ouch!

Now turn to Major Jackson's eloquent ridicule of the "arrogance and disrespect" of educators who cannot understand the dignity and resonance of the names of their African-American students. Jackson speaks for many when he says in his note: "I am normally not in favor of the didactic in poetry, but I am growing older and the urgency to change the world around me seems starker." I personally respond more openly to this stance than to the implicit (and sometimes explicit) nihilism of others in this volume, such as Mary Jo Bang's ekphrastic "The Eye Like a Strange Balloon Mounts Toward Infinity."

■
Nevertheless, the verse music in Bang's spooky little poem leads me to one more consideration. Among these poets that I, in my taxonomic pedantry, tend to classify as avant-garde, postmodern, or post-postmodern, I find many who attempt to supersede free verse without reverting to traditional forms. But the rage for order persists, and a poet's art appears to require the invention of a fresh form appropriate to the function of each work. (Hoover, in his *Postmodern American Poetry*, understands this new prosody as "an ongoing process of resistance to mainstream ideology.") One form this impulse takes is that old bugbear, "the imitative fallacy." As we see our culture crumbling around us, we imitate the disintegration in our poetry. Disjunction. Smashed mirrors. Of whatever fragments we shore against our ruin we make collage.

Still, within these nonlinear poems I find many forms, many musics. Bang employs a stubborn counterpointed ostinato:

horizontal to vertical, particle

to plexus, morning to late,
 lunch to later yet, instant to over. Done
 to overdone. [*now listen for the tone change*] And all against
 a petstore cacophony, [*and now another musical strain*] the
 roof withstanding

its heavy snow load. So, winter.

In some poems anaphora provides a sort of a spine. Kenneth Irby's "[Record]" begins seventeen lines with *and*. Fanny Howe's "Catholic" begins five in a row with "The drive." Taking iteration more complexly, Ted Greenwald approaches pure lyric with a tightly interwoven sequence of repetitions without any apparent necessity for "meaning," despite the historic resonance of individual words and phrases. Here's one of the six double-triplets from "Anyway":

(Gasp!)—but still, as always, as ever
 Close to the train, so to speak
 And bang And bang bang, gossip basics

Zip on those legs, as always as ever
 Close to the train, gossip basics
 Zip on those legs, this is sunglasses

Each of these double-triplets has its own verbal fancy-dancing. As with many innovative forms, I enjoy them acutely as I work through the process, but then my appetite is satisfied. These sequences could go on forever, yet I feel no compulsion to follow.

I had a similar response to Lyn Hejinian's much-admired *My Life* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon, 1987), constructed in 1978, when she was 37, in 37 sections, each of 37 sentences, and each paralleling a year of her life. Eight years later she added eight sections, with eight new sentences to each of the preceding sections. The text is engaging, with disconnected snapshots interspersed in a moving continuum of consciousness. The section titled "A word to guard continents of fruits and organs" begins: "A landscape in a landscape, an appointment in my house, there can be a summer in a summer. To dread differently. The clock's tick-tocking is

talking.” Certain lines appear at apparently random intervals throughout the sections, such as “As for we [*sic*] who ‘love to be astonished.’” There are sparkles in this mosaic, such as “a book so good I don’t have to read it,” and “language becomes so objectified that it is different from whatever you know or say. But there is such a thing as a lazy man’s load, it is the largest one and is destined to fall, drop, or spill. Both subjectivity and objectivity are outdated filling [*sic*] systems.” I was glad to be acquainted with *My Life* before I received this anthology, a useful introduction to the dialectic between radical language, syntax, and nonlinear sequence on the one hand and that “blessed rage for order”—for controlled artistic form—on the other.

■

I want to look closely now at one of the longer selections in Hejinian’s anthology, the seven-page “The Dark Continent,” by a poet who, according to his note, would have preferred to remain anonymous: Sean Manzano Labrador. Since Hoover has distinguished between two branches of postmodern poetry, the constructivist and the aural/oral, I want to explore how a poet in the tradition of verbal disjunction, fragmentation, and materiality over signification handles his impulse to form. I notice at once that all but the final stanzas are triplets—sixty-one of them—but rarely are two identical in line length or pattern of indentation—the result, I then notice, of most lines being centered on the page. I then pick up frequent anaphora (and sometimes epiphora), creating little lyric riffs.

have you ever jerked to the side
 have you ever measured the fallow shoulder
 have you ever dissolved into the rearview mirror

for shadow
 for devil
 for flower

The rhythms established by such techniques sometimes produce long lyrical passages, with variations on their themes. (Themes? What themes? I’d spoil the fun if I told. Go read.)

Clearly the distinctive formal qualities of this poem are both visual and aural; the constructivist and the personal/lyrical enjoying intercourse. Labrador employs/exploits/enjoys the traditional lyric tool kit: lavish alliteration and assonance, for

instance, flowering into the wordplay that distinguishes so many of the poems Hejinian has chosen. How about Labrador's linguistic hijinks of "what boxstrut what boxtrap / scissors and caesuras / is palimpsest" or "this waist land a rest stop." Then there are his caesuras. There are slippery silences. There are ejaculations (one-word line: "Yes."). There are fluid pages of enjambed narrative lines. Ann Lauterbach, writing here about her poem "After Mahler," says that she has been thinking about the privileging of the visual over hearing/listening in our culture. Mahler represents for her "a number of complex engagements with modernity in relation to lyricism, where lyricism is not simply a poetic mode, but a sign of linguistic specificity." Though I am not absolutely certain what she means, I find her statement suggestive as I read and reread Labrador's dance of the constructivist and the aural/oral in "The Dark Continent."



I have enjoyed working with this year's *Best American Poetry* for its healthy sense of innovative play but even more for its intellectual challenges. In place of the poem in which the speaker appears to be either the poet or the poet's persona we have works that create an artifact, much of its "meaning" dependent on the involvement of the reader, an involvement that requires close reading. Although *postmodern* seems to be the most convenient pigeon hole for this wildly diverse movement, I'm not entirely comfortable with it. Whatever one means by *modern*, most would agree that Eliot's *The Waste Land* exemplifies *modernism*. The disjunction between the sections in that work seems the progenitor of the smaller fragments in these latest mosaics. I tend to read many of the poems in this collection as *ultimate modern* as they push their socially symbolic constructions out to the terminus of the genre—not the avant-garde of a new movement, but the extreme expression of an old one, where Khlebnikov's "Zaklyatie smekhom" ("Incantation by Laughter") and Ian Hamilton Finlay's *Poor. Old. Tired. Horse.* are among the progenitors. Whether Hejinian's poets are a culmination or annunciation in our poetic history, we'll have to wait and watch and listen. Don't expect to be hearing any of these poems on Garrison Keillor's *Writer's Almanac* any time soon, but if you want to be in on the processes of inventive composition, you should get this book and give it plenty of time and caring attention.

يَحْتَارُنِي الْإِيْقَاعُ، يَشْرُقُ بِي
أَنَا رَجُوعَ الْكِمَانِ، وَلَسْتُ عَازِقَةً
أَنَا فِي حَضْرَةِ الذِّكْرَى
صَدَى الْأَشْيَاءِ تَنْطَلِقُ بِي
فَأَنْطِقُ ...
كُلَّمَا أَصْغَيْتُ لِلْحَجَرِ اسْتَمَعْتُ إِلَى
هَدِيلِ يَمَانِيَةِ بِيضَاءِ
تَشْهَقُ بِي:
أَخِي! أَنَا أَشْخُتُكَ الصُّغْرَى،
فَأَذْرِفُ بِاسْمِهَا دَمْعَ الْكَلَامِ
وَكُلَّمَا أَبْصُرْتُ جَدْعَ الرُّزْزُلِخْتِ
عَلَى الطَّرِيقِ إِلَى الْغَمَامِ،
سَمِعْتُ قَلْبَ الْأُمِّ
يَخْفِقُ بِي:
يَحْتَارُنِي الْإِيْقَاعُ
أَنَا أَمْرَأَةٌ مُطْلَقَةً،
فَالْعَيْنُ بِاسْمِهَا زِيَرَ الظَّلَامِ
، كُلَّمَا شَاهَدْتُ مَرَأَةً عَلَى قَدَمِ

Erratum: Those of you who read Arabic may have noted the error in the original text of Mahmoud Darwish's poem "Cadence" in the Fall/Winter 2004/2005 issue. This is the poem as Mr. Darwish wrote it. Our apologies to him and to our readers.

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

