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Design by **Mary Greene**
from painting, "Rivals in Love," by **Luo Zhijian**,
Huxian County, China



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

DOUGLAS WOODSUM

Relic Prayer

O Virgin, O spirit that divided into His flesh,
please intercede for the members of my flock. I ask
for little, for what's left after a saint's holiness
transports him to heaven. I ask for the body
unresurrected, though touched by God as Christ was touched.

The wayward sheep of this holy house, the lovers
of pipes and beer who sit in back on the rare Sundays
they are here . . . they need, Lord Mother, the dead flesh and dried blood.
Nothing less than a memento mori will move them.
Because they doze, I let the acolytes hiss and kick them.

If we could have only a saint's finger, that would be enough,
O Mary Mother of God. But a whole arm would bring
such holiness to the church. We would revere it preserved
in glass: a small, jeweled reliquary coffin for one
arm or, if it's not over-requesting, a strip of martyr's scalp. . . .

Please, for the light of the soul shines about the heads of saints:
The golden aureole, Fairest Mother, you yourself display.
And if a toe were to be available, the flock would rise
more easily each time the choir sang, so unburdened we
would be by the uplifting gift of but one toe. Amen.

SCOTT WITHIAM

Hey Now

Like none of the mall's chains are open yet.
Chains, and not too far away
my daughter takes a college entrance exam to gain,
in short, acceptance, in the long run, freedom. En-trance.

Wandering into a mall with nothing to do.
I hope her mind isn't so much stuff
inside without anything going on.
"Every sha la la la, every whoa oh oh"

goes the piped-in Carpenters' song. O Karen,
I too have had failed obsessions with living
by consuming nothing. Christ, here they come—
a klatch of early morning power walkers to

"Hey now, hey now, don't dream in slo mo. . . .
Don't dreammm . . ." is right. No one does.
No one has to. Everywhere, the corporate outlay.
Then trends to use up presently unused otherwise occupied prime space.

Like these early morning, off-hour power walkers.
Going nowhere. And exercising someone else's idea. Hey
now, *that's* getting accepted? My poor daughter. *Squeak*
go the power walkers' sneakers. Squeak, squeak, squeak.

Come out, little rats. Squeak. Hug the wall.

JESSE LICHTENSTEIN

River Run

Many beginnings before the middle comes.
The season too late or else too young,
water slow in its channels, riffles bare
to rocks. A plan may founder
against one contrary breeze.
The weed in the basalt embankment is
its own anchor. A plain bird in a juniper tree,
its plainsong. Each with a strategy
to outwait the afternoon. And we let out
impatience, hand by hand.

YOUNG SMITH
from "Radiation in the Visible Spectrum"

The Collapse of the Wave Function

Like you, the light
that warms your balding
scalp would prefer very
much not to die, or—

since death is its lot
as much as yours—
to die at least in some
more handsome spot.

Iridial

As she walks from the bathtub to the kitchen
for one of the towels folded there on the ironing board,

the sun drops below the eaves of the west-facing windows
filling the room with a soft amber flush—while, behind her,

on the tile just outside the bathroom door
the cat drinks from one of her golden footprints.

Illuminance

Beneath the aureole
always the umbra—

that “blackest region
of a shadow”—

though beneath
the umbra, as beneath

the cysted flocculi
of the sun, always

a deeper light
that gives the dark

its burnish.
And it is in this

subtle gleaming
of the black,

in this quiet *here*
beneath the absence,

that the light
achieves its first

and sure dominion
over grief.

KATHLEEN WAKEFIELD

Still Life: Nearly Reclining Woman, Settee, and Leaning Axe

Sitting beside the handle of this axe,
it's not the thwack and splitting
open of pine log and linden
I think of.

No, I'm thinking about the way
one thing leans into another, how it's a kind of comfort, wood
to cushion, cushion to skin,
skin to skin.

And though I'm tempted
to consider memory as the trace of one thing
held inside another, the slide of a hand up and down
that swung length of hickory
smoothed to the cleanness of bone,

I think mostly of rest,
the good heft of a thing being itself on earth,
of the stillness of the green field and its four small trees,
an apple, a pear tree, two ash.

HERMAN ASARNOW

Resistance

*after Catherine Tufariello's "February 18, 1943,"
dedicated to Hans and Sophie Scholl,
executed on February 22, 1943*

This is a poet's apology for the silence
that coldcocked him again, struck him
dumb, left him dark in its shadow,
and then malingered in his mind's alleys
ready to garrote any fragment of thought

Into that darkness came a poem
flickering with life like the fatal leaflets
of the White Rose Resistance it celebrates
that swooped down their school's staircase,
"wind-torn blossoms, sideways in the air"

blossoms brave living minds imagined
and threw into the air like flames
—momentary, glancing, skew like light itself—
the flower's fatal, riotous art of resistance

SUSAN VARNOT

Elegies in the Leaves

catch and turn in late autumn.
The trees have lost
their orange, except for scraps
that cling to space
in a village where two dogs in a street
will meet a third,
its three legs triangulating,
the wounded limb amputated at an angle
so that when it walks away,
the sore bobs in the grass.
In *War and Peace*, the peasant prisoner,
Karataév, strokes a similar stray,
the blue-gray dog that walks on three legs,
and even that touch is not ownership,
although the dog returns to him even when
Karataév is shot beneath a tree, the French soldiers
moving away, dangling their guns
as though apologizing.
Tolstoy writes that the dog began to howl
and, trapped in the time the corpse bends,
was howling. Reading of this loss in an afternoon
in which the hours rotate along an arc of light
in which the stray limps the yard,
I know I have refused to touch that three-legged dog
because of what it means to him
and have refused even to look at the trees and field I know
from memory, memory that turns, that
howls, and that, finally, lets the field carry
the dog away in it like a glinting gun.

ROBYN ANSPACH

Under the old city

People live here:
have built their homes over the ground studded
with ashlar stones of the second temple era;
their children scratch at dirt, turn up fresco shards,
glinting red and gold, bits of glass.

meanwhile a shape like the cloth-circles
of men's heads, seen translucent, seen from above,
the ovum sits, saying the twenty-four hours its walls
weaken to being pierced, saying wordless

At two weeks, the embryo would be a double-layered plate;
ectoderm, endoderm, and, scattered among,
loose cells of no layer, these: what will be
the skeleton, blood vessels, heart.

Someone says, *this place is ancient; dig deep enough,*
you'll find bones

and the ovum speaks,
saying *now*

ROBYN ANSPACH
Hagar speaks of sand.

□□□ □□□□ □□□□

Let him put his mouth to the dust—
—Lamentations 3:29

1

Hunger leads to this.

his scholar's body etched its ribs tight, to the skin, my hand.
Where I came from

this arc, here, the ivory tusk
nearly something I could clutch through his chest,

and I'd turn

the world over, white like the pale of him with its undergrid of bone. The boy
will clutch at my knee. Our boy
will stalk ravenous, offering up

his palms, and suck my nipples to cracking
when his head's still unossified and brittle
as a scholar, here

where nothing grows but boys like desert scrub, wild
and nearly without water.

2

Geophagia: it means I wanted dirt. To eat
dirt, muck, mud, salt of the earth: I sat, squat over my belly's taut orb,
licked at my fingers that scratched
at the land. *Where you*

came from. Rose from the dirt as I
from his rib, scapulae sticky and shining with newness. He tasted like this:

the grind of grit against my teeth and tongue which hung
like a hanger, angular beneath its sheet of dust. Like the boy, his skin
a brown stain against the sand. And when his father took hold of my hands
and wouldn't let me eat,
I said figs,

I'd eaten figs and swallowed seeds, but nothing grew because nothing
grows without dirt

3

or water. The boy
has eyes like desert which means there is no water there. See me
here, the sand every direction
whiter than the father's sum total of skin and bone, and the boy's look, I say:
 this is my son. My son

 unspeaking and growing dust-
colored and dry, while meanwhile the bottle empties, and the dates and bread
 are gone.

My child
has sinews moving within his back and arms, and I think

of his stomach like the space beneath the sky-dome, filled with heat and air.

 I say:
where we came from and there are places where land is enough.
I am hunched, gathering grains between my fingers, and come to me,

boy, like something wild made momentarily calm.
I offer up my son

to lap from my palm,
his mouth filling with earth and sand.

SUSAN TICHY

Couplet

Mang Thit River, Vietnam

I would call the poem *What I Did Not See*. It would begin in the multiplied shade of the outdoor restaurant, the one we came to tired, and accidental, ten hours on the water, our interpreter already tired of the whole thing. The edge of the poem would be its bamboo fence, that and a handmade roof, patched with rubber where they had to be, enlisted in the cause of something real: a sense of place, a sense of time, the body sweating in its plastic chair, holding out for a cold beer, or a slight rhyme. To write this I would need a photograph, to know the man wore a loose clean shirt, with a neat hem, and would, in the ordinary course of things, stand not quite to your shoulder. But you were big: he wasn't small in his own world and he isn't small in the poem, when he jumps up from his chair and charges you and you stand up to meet him, and the fact that he doesn't hit you and you don't hit him is just a fact: I didn't see it. I had gone to piss on a clean slab of concrete by the river, or gone to keep my rendezvous with death's fragmented angel, depending on the mode of reportage that you prefer, him blank behind the eyes and tethered by his right ankle in that hot place with flies beside the river. *A sniper in the DNA*, I heard one poet call it, but I'm out of the business. When I see the planes in memory, I'm seeing footage, photographs: I wasn't there. Images of images I could say, like calling the man right in front of you a ghost. He's showing you the bullet in his arm or the fist he's held for thirty years opening, at the sight of you, into a hand again, while this one shows me, back here in the flies and heat, cut off from the breeze of the river, this fine romantic mist, which I remember most things through. It's a cloud of poison, a special effect, I drop now through this sentence, so I can right here, precisely, say: what the planes sprayed, they sprayed so we could see. That's what they said: they said *so we could see*. So this is simple, isn't it? You there; me there; the shooter shot; the one not born yet, born.

SUSAN TICHY

One, Two

1

One girl was taller and one was brown. They played ball
Without a ball, happily kicking an orange through the dust.

My notes say this: because, when you're young, fear and the other emotions
Are so close together you can't tell them apart.

I fill the blue tin cup with water, swallow its shocking cold. Again, again,
Though when I move my hand beyond the light I bring back air.

The dress I wore to his funeral lay for a year on the floor of my closet.
Then I washed it, hung it up, and that was the second year.

The body is not the soul the soul is not the body. Repeat this daily
In times of war, plague, flood, famine, drought, or the guillotine.

My great aunt died in summer. Her mad friend, a painter, hid two pounds of
bacon
And all her silver on the roof. Guess how they were found.

"On the first day of war, already there's no getting out," a man said, stammering.
You can see the wolf in the dog by the way it stands, with its elbows in.

I got through the days by making a list: wash face / get dressed.
A horse can be utterly dusty and still smell all horse.

At Stonypath now a temple and gardens and, still, a stony path.
For example, if he was faithful to me but wished he were not.

It is better, I think, to suffer a nightmare under the heading
War comma Slanting Light.

He was studying words someone had scrawled in a margin,
So he copied them into a margin and left the center blank.

2

At dusk the deer I once fed daily stand head-to-tail in the yard like a little train.
The drought has ended. They turn their heads as if a bell had rung and then
stilled.

What is not ours, he asked me. Or was it not a question, was it what
Is not ours: the black bowl, the morning light, the tea leaves, the soul.

Ten years have passed, and still I feel the rope-burn on my palms, the lightning
In my hair the rain not fallen yet, the moment, as I let the horse go.

Twin beds in a room with a high ceiling, a bare floor.
Outside, Seville stood with its light disheveled, its cold pure.

If I could have turned away it would have been there,
Which we called *now* and spoke of, even then.

What are the odds, I asked him, touching my hand for the first time
To Shiva's brass body, the whirling world.

"But don't, now, don't—" My friend on the phone,
Trying to talk through hail on the roof, a radio, some kind of bird.

My notes say this: a red poppy blooms where it is not wanted, a not-quite-red
poppy,
Which marks it as American, and less acquainted with grief.

A teabag is called Origami and the stitching is called Sincere.
The kettle boils, he handed me tea, and handed me tea again till our life ended.

For a moment I could not find the war, in memory. Then I turned my head and
everything
Again was islanded, a raised hand, ripened breath, nothing fallen, still.

When the saw-whet owl flew into our window glass, I made him come out to
the night and see.
He was naked and cold and pleased. It was kitten-like and alive and the grass
was dry.

3

In the part of the form where they ask for annual income
I listed all the countries he had been to that I had not.

In one of the mudholes, someone had laid the wire shelf
From an old refrigerator. Under our tires it sank, bent, held.

This is the doctrine of *heaven, heaven, hell*. For example, his arm was heavy.
For example, beating my fists and tearing my hair.

Where the creek runs over the footbridge I meant to write *under*.
The notebook was spiral-bound and the ink was dry.

We walked through Fez when I was young, though not so young as I had been.
From vats of dye the steam was steam-colored, and the men were almost naked,
barefoot, warm.

It took a year to teach that horse to pick up his feet like a gentleman.
Right, right, left, left, pick them clean as a whistle, clean as bone.

My notes say this: if two people stand on the bridge, they are lovers but not
genuine.
The plate is old, but English, not Cantonese.

"America went down a rabbit hole," they say, and they mean the war. That
spring,
At the foot of a pine, we found a rabbit's skeleton in the decomposing stomach
of an owl.

Every page is a prayer flag, I said, and meant to ink them. Instead, he began to
turn them
Faster and faster the farther we went from home.

We visited the Streets of Charcoal, Tin, Barrel, Drum, Brick, Bell.
We did not visit the Streets of Copper, Sugar, Jars, Mats, Shoes, Sails.

I asked him to choose a moment when I was not dead, but nearly,
And carry me up the mountain to a lion's den.

4

I wonder if falling he knew; and if, what. It was our first night together.
I was young and in love and still trying to guide him past the door.

But you can't hold his hand, they said, the bones are broken.
They said kiss his cold cold lips and walk away.

When the tall girl kicked the landmine, her sister caught it neatly in two
hands

As she had been taught. For example, a short fly-ball on a windy day.

My notes say this: eyedrops, goggles, a wet handkerchief in a plastic bag,
And Vaseline doesn't prevent burns from tear gas: it makes them worse.

That night they washed his face and they combed his hair. For months
thereafter,

Memory was a page of writing from which words had been randomly erased.

My notes say this: the fields are cut and the wine is pressed.

Earth is a ball on an elephant's back: blue, white, near, and it never falls.

In Hanoi it was raining, so the Street of Votive Papers, Ghost Money,
Counterfeit,

Became Straw Mats and Rope, became Mirror.

The word *Alba* means Scotland, white, the soul, a robe, or nothing.

In the dictionary: nothing. And that was the second day.

The horse was called Nimbus and the mountain called Adam,

The vase two hundred years old and the flowers fresh.

We paid three pennies, lit three candles, took off our shoes and knelt on them,

Not because we believed, but because the path to that temple was long and
steep.

Word-like sounds that are not words, or not words I know.

They wanted to tell me how many hours it would take for him to burn.

ALICIA BEALE

The Manifestation of Orange Poppies

There is thy pet, waiting
for some burnt corner of toast.

There are the names of grubs:
Wichity, Bardi, Saltwater Assassin.

There are dropped Bibles
from the hands of small boys
frozen from snowballs.

There are the messages
from bull elephants pounding out
rendezvous, last chances.

There are the anythings
you can imagine dropped among
paperclips, discarded condoms.

There, a man's character is revealed
in his backsliding shadow.

When you look up, there is only
so much chattel: harnessed clouds,
corralled stars, waning moons.

When we are told to look up,
we must repent.

It is said the invariant blue
is heaven, the cause: temporary
blossoms blowing across our feet.

DANA ELKUN

Interview with a Madman

What did you want to be when you grew up?

Blue hat box, sturdy
like an early wheel.

How did you end up here?

The reason I had to escape.

How can you stand the solitude?

A small French boy opens a valise, finds
no bread. He hangs from the window
to call for his mother.

Do you have a mother? Does she visit?

Women tend to circle men
before leaving. Men tend
to inhabit other people's
countries.

What is strange about your country?

The way we enter the water.

Did you ever want to get married?

Two owls call
to each other
across a desert.

Do you ever feel sadness or fear?

After his father's death
a man finds a bag of marbles.
The bag breaks, the floor
a landmine of glass.

Do you ever think about dying?

Every generation, a library
burns to the ground.

DANA ELKUN

Foreshadow from Buffalo

This beast begins with abundance,
a barrel-chested b, the fullness of meat
in the belly. Then there's the shudder
vowel, the rumble and grunt
from the south, the uff
that we sludge, ugh that we gruff,
the ruckus of plains in a sandstorm,
earth getting whipped
with hoof, the fricative thousands.
Nothing could ever be silent
again, not even invisible h,
a roughness in the breath, grass
hanging and dust, a halo.
Ah retreats to the hills
with l like always
but what remains is the open ring
of the lowest tone, our mouths
pulling down to our throats.
This is only, bone, ago.

DAWN LONSINGER

The Blue-Gray Body of the Zambezi

The river is full of albescent bodies
floating, water tossed with light,
 lumbering undone
in the earliest arcana of submersion.

At night the bloat
 of hippopotami sinks
into the earth, massive
 envoy of a galaxy draping
its animal counterpart, the massive
mouths slowly tearing up shortgrass,
hunger chasmal.

Now—sunlight a kind of king-
fisher—these creatures, amassed,
 dial back the flow
of the Zambezi with bulk.

Each bull, cow, calf born underwater,
drifts silently through the glass of under,
 river horses galloping
through the ambient
cords of water lilies strung
 gutless between
surfaces.

A cow and her newborn stray
from the others. For hours they blink
& plunge & drink & defecate,
but now—the sun, a dim commute—the dominant
bull rushes through the quietus, opens
his mouth four feet wide, bites down
on the calf. The mother tries, but he thrashes,
releases the blue-gray body draining, loosened
bricks of blood filling
 the Zambezi.

The bull, rid of potential
competition, wallows. The sun does not bargain
with the bleak: one new body floating lifeless down-
stream, as human as ascendancy.

DAWN LONSINGER

contour figure on a contour figure on a rock

the way the elbow leans on the knee—it could be coming from anywhere, this body or that—it is only when we trace backward to the conjunctions—wrist joint *and* ulna, *if* clavicle, *if* sacrum, coccyx *or* tailbone—that we realize we are looking at one body, presently wrapped in its own evocative pause—the closer I get the less definitive you become—you are a model leaking out of a model, an archetype dunking donuts in your mirror image.

thin red and blue outlines jangle about the body like eighties bangle bracelets, vie for your contour—that final clause that collects you up and says—*here*—to the waitress, lover, interviewer, et cetera with eyes—so who shall win—the blood-red rendition or the less permeable blue of you?—which too—cobalt, glum—is its own kind of blood, uninvestigated by anything—swings, stethoscopes, ATMs—outside the body—swirling secretive inside—yet thumbtacked to injury: *anyone feeling blue today?*

your hair is equivocal, seems clamped on, the death clutch of a parasite—like dried icing or lava—we keep backing up—you sit on any rock—your eyes, wet chestnuts in a puddle of pixels—the blur of double-dutch dead center—stare into the massive arbiter of all of this—space—the mouth cuffs itself like an activist to your image, won't go anywhere without it, you—such dedication to the thin borders that rope us off from everything else—as if each of us is an expensive piece of art—the way your hand is cocked on the jaw, sitting like a dead crab on sand, makes us keep our distance—which means you become clearer by default— but one might find this very suspicious—superficies—the crab, the hand *playing* dead.

DAWN LONSINGER

Love litigates like this:

sugar sugar sugar go go
go sheet sheet sheet

I dip my felt-tip face to
your page and let all the ink in me run
out, leave a dark & rebel stain.

The heart beats so bloodily,
so why can't we feel
the blood along the arteries, the perpetual
massage of living?

We talk with the pulp of fruit
in our mouths through
the chain-linked
fence of our faces,
quaint the ceremony.

Beauty persists, you remind me,
and the little moons in me chuckle,
tug at the intricate rug of ocean that is
your heart, immense serenity & torrent vast.

In my dreams my gypsy
emotions are pumping gas,
preparing to look for you,
some deeper truth, away
from this sexual grind of glimpses.

This morning I woke with your voice,
but then, I opened my eyes & it drifted as if
realities are only made of corneal playthings—
Your voice is at least ten swallows
emerging from a chimney.

It is so wonderful to walk across a Dali
wakescape into your eyes, equally full
of rearrangement.

I have never in all my poeticizing
produced or erased a piano, and yet,
when you say something,
suddenly, tangibly, I can feel
the piano press in all around me as if I were born
in it all along. I move, and despite myself, a key twists
out a sharp note, a sustained note—
the crescendo comes.

At night when your fingers drum on your chest
in a small incision of light, you remind me
of my own imminence.

My dependency clinks & chatters its teeth. Can you hear
its minute vocabulary of *come*? This is just to say:
I pledge allegiance to your maverick canon,
your anthro-apology, your peculiar thirst.

It's a rather small church—
just the revered one and the reverer.

KARL ELDER
American Bovary (The Cosmetician)

Zip code sans abode: for one, one won one
yet lost all heart in Cleveland, where Madam
X, one's spouse, made it big to then make off
with a dollhouse manufacturer from
Versailles. "Forsooth," her lover crooned to her,
"you learn how false true love when you face the
truth," truth being the manufacturer
sooner than later would fracture his skull,
ramming headboard to topple wall, crying,
"Qui vive!" over his living doll, her rouge
powdered cheeks, those coarse, horsehair lashes
open suddenly, as up she rose, too
nonchalant just for lust, but wantonness
more blind than a pair of glass eyes combined.
Looking down, she loathes her frog prince's drool,
kit, and caboodle; knows she ought haul tail,
jiggle and cleavage, to Cleveland; recant
in grand style to an emasculated
husband; then don her own wand for love of
green bred of her black magic, instead of
funds bled pure white, the spit and miss of spite.
Economics masked in histrionics,
dogged with life in a mirror, poodle turns
cat staring back as if groomed to scratch the
bitch, her itch gone south, home, to her own kind
à la KY, where, for one, one ate one.

KARL ELDER

A Disappearing Act

Zowie, word in a hummingbird heard—gone.
“Yikes!”—what it seems to say with its lofty
exit, its scaredy cat, peek-a-boo play.
We the peephole to hell, perhaps, remain
virginal in terms of maiden flight to
unparalleled heights, but on unchaste chase
to unearth heaven here, I say, “Holy
scat, no angel if not Tinkerbell’s soul
rates wings like those.” Still, should time come for res-
cue—fire or ice—would I kowtow? Does the
pope in his garden clamor for ladder
overhead, that bee-line and blur in the
noise of the hummingbird, thin rope of hope
more like from a toy helicopter and
less a flying saucer? I don’t *think* so.
Kaput means kibosh, ash for balderdash,
je ne sais pas. Dare one stare dead in the
eye of the beholder seeking beauty
here with mirrors, or does one shudder,
gnostic who pictures black behind the glass?
For fortitude—out of fortune, fear or
egress—is faint ally to existence,
dawn the round nemesis of time’s eclipse,
cyclical as it is, as is the coy
buzz, the quick charge, the discrete retreat of
all muse, that, game won, song sung, vanishes.

KARL ELDER

Love in the Time of Quantum Mechanics

Zircon cons, but not even a pendant
yea long cons like a diamond—Saks or Brand
X—carbon hardly being forever.
Water, more genuinely speaking, *is*—
vaporized ice. Hold a glass to the light.
You shall possess insight, shall partake of
the spirit world of diamonds, two rungs of
separation from the nether world of
raucousness that is the nesting grounds of
quarks, of squarks, of leptons, of sleptons, of
photons. Photinos? Photons you've seen. Say
"Hola" a Los Photinos, new to the
neighborhood. It's no surprise that with a
million million million atoms known to
live in a teaspoon of water there are
Kilkenny cats, that quarks are quirky, that
just as there are sleepers there are leapers.
It's the whang on Yang that makes for squarks.
Here he lies in the oral embrace of
good time Yin, the marriage's darker half,
for which its design is homologous,
each of two embryonic states of grace,
deaf to our deft imaginings: Is this
cosmology or numerology?
Be it two, three, four dimensions or ten
a cosmos of sparticles is no gem.

KARL ELDER
Making History

Zero gravity or depravity,
yogi or yokel, Roman numeral
X or I, you think you've got a shot and
what you've got is exactly that—one shot.
Victory? Nowadays it's victors' vice,
underwritten by Nike, and we're not
talking goddess but stylized "V," that
"swoosh" so ubiquitous as not to be
read as logo, symbol, or word but a
quip on equipment that doesn't bear it—
phantom confetti. What we need is an
old-fashioned future where what is won is
now to be earned. "You wanna fat loan? Give
me a lien," Nature says, witch that she is.
Likewise, if you want a forest, plant trees.
Keen on poetry? Read. One whose action
jives right with carpe diem sees the day
in his sleep, before which the sheep he counts
have profiles less of lambs, more like mountain
goats, and a proper number of iambs
for that climb to a dream of the sublime.
Every good boy does fine, scales his way back
down inclines where history's his story,
crescendo or no. Absent plot it could
be you: airy obit writ by Mort at
Acme Mortuary, who came up short.

KARL ELDER

The Rookery

“Zero-zero,” says the tower to the
yo-yos, their flight plans in hand, those junior
execs who, through windows of palm pilots,
weather the lousy weather in want of
visibility. Similar’s the tale
untold of those flown-to-never-return
tiers of grounded angels in which entire
squadrons took refuge, that sanctuary
rank with a darkness so plumb one cannot,
qua imagination, let alone thought,
perceive to what grave degree is less than
obvious: no unbound limb, no free hand,
no crowbar to pry open a hymnal,
much less concordances to Bibles as
likely squeezed unreadable with all knees
kowtowing to appease the word within.
Justice? It turns out she’s one of them, an
interloper who, feigning to right her
halo, undoes the knot of her blindfold,
goes gray as a ghost at a vision of
fowl most foul she cannot tell from feathers
everywhere—condors’, vultures’, ravens’, crows’—
decomposed, no hint, even, or glint of
coal, no diamond shaft, no gravity, this
black hole where the soul goes, sold on itself,
as if, in the first place, there was mercy.

KARL ELDER
Urban Denouement

Zombie on the left. Zombie on the right.
You know you're no scarecrow, let alone Christ.
X, nevertheless, marks the spot, the cross-
walk where you stand on the median, that
vicissitudinary attitude
undomesticated creatures are known
to show, perhaps a tooth bearing snarl, when
shit of the pigeon targets the skull and
runs down the nape of the animal's neck,
quietus, as if flesh chose not to crawl,
poised, posing as if for a photo of
one impervious to it all, although
needlessly so, already part of the
mural on the tall glass wall across that
looms in this necropolis such that a
Karloff—Boris, that is—spine erect and
jolly well asleep, bores us, you and me,
I see, with me being the third here who
halts and, like Frankenstein's monster there, stands
glued to shoes tucked in his lead galoshes
for now and in perpetuity,
erstwhile the light turned green, turning us dumb,
dullards in a stinging rain of hail hell
casts up like cinders at our shins for sins
born of omission—player and no part,
auteur and no art, hero and no heart.

KARL ELDER

The Watchers and the Watched

Zeitgeists like this mean more museum heists,
yule logs the size of toothpicks, and a Rol-
ex on all our lists instead of Timex,
which, as Christmas wishes go, is not as
vain, not as opulent, oddly, as it sounds
utilitarian, the greatest good
the grandest goods for the greatest number.
Somehow somewhere sometime something almost
rococo burrowed in the soul not to
quaff from an empty vessel but, like a
psychological corkscrew, take hold, pop
open the bottle to release from its
nascent state the desire to be fulfilled.
Meanwhile, there are culture's accoutrements,
like rescued tapestries of the past or
K rations in the form of film cans for
Johns and Janes Doe, who, in contrast to an
infinite number of names for numbers,
have not known nor sought the dignity that
goes ink in pen with an identity.
Face it, with film as the mirror of our
era, only the faceless can save face,
drawn to both sides of the proscenium,
characters like actors actors portray
benighted with pseudonyms for a blind
audience that cannot tell them from them.

KARL ELDER

Shining

for Joanne Lowery

Zapped in the back with a Rayovac beam's
yards of teeming mist, this live planetoid
X (that might as well be light years from us)
wedged in a fork of paper birch (inert
victim of blind, benign voyeurism,
unfazed by the likes of us lowlifes) lies
the cub porcupine, whose guise at dusk, a
scrub brush turned up (sans any chance in a
race from us, tortoise, or tamest of lame
quadrupeds), but with a gorgeous hue of
pewter so rare as to be the sheer form
of itself that (in urgent fervor to
name in order to more perfectly re-
member) a Plato might call angelware—
light the gown angels wear, their gossamer
karma aura's alloy in the ideal—
jerry-built, as is always the human
idea of the beautiful, when our
history has yet to happen on some
godforsaken, lopsided moon on the
far edge of the farthest galaxy, where
eons from now sparsest particles rain
down in a mist of emptiness here sensed,
coveting the porcupine's seeming o-
bliviousness to angst and bliss alike,
as hid in its caterpillar crawl—wings.

SUZANNE HEYD
Elemental: Nitrogen

Four-fifths of every breath
we breathe at least
two forms, one combustible

one pure asphyxiate, azote,
artless in the free state,
insufficient. O inertia, save us

from the explosive steerage
of ground tanks, sailing vessels.
Sal volatile easily passing

to aeriform—winged or buoyant,
wasting away. Heart shorn, impure
distillate of antler or any bone.

Dephlogisticated, a body denied
the hypothetical principle
of fire. What release in burning:

a pure phlogiston, once thought
to perish as sulfur or soot.
Yet even now, the gray skies

rain acid on the barren city
of Shechem. *Sal ammoniac*, salt
of amen, soot of the camel

at the temple of Jupiter Ammon.
Fertility rivers its pollutions
on fields of flame-clustered phlox,

garlands of gamopetalous limbs,
inner whorl of the perianth,
fecund protective envelope ablaze.

White purples and pink reds
on the craggy face of Jebel Usdum,
south of the Dead Sea. *Sal petrae*

exudes from mineral crater and cave.
Gunpowder, the gods provoked
have slain Niobe's pride. We stand

petrified with grief. Constituent
of the living tissues, *thou shalt rub
thy children newborn with salt.*

Sal hartshorn in order to soften or
toughen, in order to render less brittle.

Sal volatile in order to kindle,
or burn, in order to separate strands.

Sal petrae to build pressure, to force
the oil upward, in order to blacken.

Sal ammoniac in order to induce union,
or color, in order to temper the senses.

Disciples of perpetual obligation,
this is our covenant, four-fifths
of every breath we breathe at least.

Meredith

We bump shoulders, tease each other about always ending up in the same place, the same Union Square, farmer's market, squeezing the muskmelons together. Irises, gladiolas, gladden every step that surrounds them. Knishes, we smell and resmell the knishes. But we always buy the darkest loaf of Bavarian rye our fumble-bumble hands can find. My husband leads me through the weekly vigil, the many shadows of Father George and his revolutionary horse. It's peace in Colombia this week. Colombian music, a savvy guitar, a Colombiano singing, dancing white wings into every tree and walkway. As usual, we finish our morning at Amy's, reading the *Times*, a cappuccino, peeking at each other's faces like we were only seventeen.

Holy shit!

The plane flew right into. . . .

Holy goddamn shit!

I had to come to this place, dustland, shadows, airplane whine bouncing off the mountains. A woman in black, Meena, leads me and the others into her home. Her son is beside her, unable to speak, drooling sometimes, clutching at her shoulder, her hair. I'm shy. But I manage to mumble that my husband called on his cell phone. Said he was on the 53rd floor. Said he was going back up. Meena says that her husband was in the courtyard. Just outside the back door. No time to go anywhere. Oh, if we could just mother each other into the ground. Meena looks up, offers a cup of tea. Our hands do not meet. But the cup feels warm. Suddenly I realize that I want to lie down beside her, face to face, her mumbler son warm there between us. In half an hour, the jeep will drive up. I'll pause at the doorway. Then leave.

Gideon

Aggies, cat's-eyes, puries, steelies—not a chance. Only a rock, a plain old ordinary piece of gravel, would calm my daughter's heebie-jeebies. A white landscaping pebble from under a neighbor's shrubs, a stray gutter stone, a rock crushed a hundred times by a garbage truck out in the alley, they're scattered all over her room. I've seen her search, poke the beach sand for an hour and a half, not for a miracle shell, but just for some common hardness to hold in her fist at night. Once her mom brought home a piece of coral, lucked into it in some white elephant second-hand store, rose-tinted fans, dorsals and pectals, tendrils reaching toward all seven oceans at once. She placed it on our daughter's dresser, right in front of the mirror. Disappear, disappear, disappear. We never saw it again. Like our daughter willed her mirror to suck it up. I'm a musician, a folk singer. I love the oldies, Bob and Joanie, Cash, Leadbelly, all the 60s stuff. One time on a singing trip out west, a folk singer friend of mine gave me this geode, nodules and spikes, weird shades of purple, orange, brown, some pepper spots of crimson. I thought I could hear every song I ever loved swirling out of that inside world. When I offered it to my daughter, she actually winced back. Sitting on the side of her bed, she said, "Take it away, Dad, it's creepy."

Holy shit!

Flew right into, hit. . . .

Goddamn holy shit.

A mountain is just a rock acting big. My daughter would like that. Rock and drought country. A land of mountains, bombs, and bullets. I don't know why I came on this trip. I'm no good with weepy women or kids that can't talk. So I sit out front, keeping this Mad Max mud house company. We're both just a couple of crate sitters. I pick up my guitar, the cheap one I take on the I don't know where I'm going journeys. Sure, I'll play "Barbara Allen." Why not? Sure, I'll sing "Down by the Ohio." Why not? People start gathering around, strangers, not many men. Sure, I'll twang out a little "Tambourine Man." Maybe throw in some "Route 66" or "Ring of Fire." Why not, why not? Nobody can understand a word I'm singing, but they start moving to the music. Oh, oh, Mr. Trickster is creeping up on me. I sneak in two verses of "Be Bop a Lula." One twelve-year-old starts to laugh, arches back and waggles his hips. I laugh back.

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Why not? I step over and hang my guitar around his neck. Then I try to say in Dari that I'll take his picture. That's when it happens. I see my daughter's face in his. She's calling me from inside the airplane. She's saying that four men have taken over the flight, changed its direction. The men around her are whispering about doing something, taking some kind of action. She says she's scared. She's got her Walkman, but she's really scared. I should have told her not to hang up. Don't hang up. I'll sing you something. "I am a rock. I am an island." Sure, why not? "It's a hard, it's a hard, it's a hard rain's agonna fall."

Jim Jim

So what? She does her thing, and I do mine. I don't care if her office has a door with five names on it or if she works in a gold-plated, terror-proof tower. I walk. I wander. I work the streets. Neon blink signs. Quick, blink back, blink back. Lookee here, two palsy-walsy pyramids, red apples and gold. I'd like to grab one of those right now. Designer jeans at \$150 a pop. I'll mark this store down in my book. People think I'm crazy. But I take my banged-to-hell trumpet, station myself right in the middle of the street. I blare and blow until all the people get across. Cars honk at me, and I trumpet back. They honk louder, and I blare back louder. Until I got all the people smiling, laughing at that seething red Lexus, that stalled-out Infiniti just one year old. I'm blowing the terror right off these streets. Mom keeps hollering that I don't take care of myself, don't eat right. Once a month I give in, clean myself up. We meet in the lobby, take the express elevator up to the 78th, transfer to another express all the way to her favorite Top of the World Restaurant. They always put us near the back, crimson tablecloths and real silver, but not before I steal a look out the window. Street people, we're just specks down there, dust specks and blurs. We don't even get on the screen. Mom always pays. And it's nothing to her, but \$10.95 for a hamburger? That's when I begin to lose it. I ask her, "Who are these people waiting on us? Who works behind those swinging doors?" We always end up arguing. And I head for those long subway tunnels where I can play my horn, and "Cry Me a River" or "My Funny Valentine" bounces off the walls just right. Once I blurted out, "Not long ago, I watched this wino tramp, this dust speck, die. He had collapsed on a park bench, and he tried to get up. Raised his head alittle. Then his breath just stuttered out of him. There was a small crowd. We all pulled back. We wanted to run. We should have been on our knees, giving thanks for him giving his breath back to the air, back to us."

Holy shit!

God Almighty, they flew right into the center of. . . .

Holy holy shit.

I had a hell of a time convincing the group to let me come on this delegation. They would look at my horn, my clothes, and shake their heads. Over and over, I kept saying, "Look, homeless to home-

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less, orphan to orphan. Don't you get it? The streets, that's the beginning of everything." Finally, they did get it. They let me come. Even paid for most of my way. Even let me bring my trumpet. On the way in from the airport, this battered-up pickup, I keep looking for my people, the ones with no houses. Around every crossroad, they're there. Around the markets too, scrounging the thrown-away garbage. Mothers, the smallest kids, circling a red crescent doorway, a goldy-glow mosque. When the others go visiting their families, I head for the streets. Blow some. Stop. Blow again. Soon a gang of kids has me surrounded. They take hold of me, lead me out to this tank, some Soviet relic, T-something or other, hasn't budged in years. It looks huge, like a big iron building. We start climbing all over it, me blaring my trumpet, exorcising all the soldier breaths. I even get to climb inside. But I don't find anything down there, no bones or bone dust, if that's what you're thinking. All the while I'm in there, I'm thinking about my mom. How the office wood must have gone up in flames, smoke thick, so damn thick. I bet she jumped. I bet she grabbed her purse and took the sky elevator down. When I shimmy my way out of the tank, it's getting dark. Most of the kids have taken off. Only a couple three left. I motion for them to come closer. Yeah, let's crawl under the tank. Lay down with the seeds and die. In the morning, we'll all wake up and whisper our mothers' names.

Twana Jo

I kept telling Jackson to move on over to my place. No use moping around his place. Alberta passed on five years ago now. That apartment's just getting grungier and grumpier. I got plenty of room, a spare bedroom just for him. Plenty of light. Subway station right around the corner. So he could catch the express down to work in that monster building of his. But no, he'd complain, complain like the world's ending tomorrow, but he wouldn't budge an inch. I remember when he did budge and mighty fast too. We grew up on a farm, sitting almost astraddle the Georgia-Alabama border, near one of those fancy white towns with a Greek name. There was a river nearby, and daddy had him a few acres of good dark bottomland. How he managed to get that land I'll never know. Yeah, we was growing cotton, though daddy would always stamp his foot and swear he wished he could grow corn. We had a mule, kind of a wild thing. And Jackson, he must have been about twelve at the time, sure was interested in that mule, eyeing it, shaking his head, pacing and muttering to himself. One day daddy just up and grabbed Jackson and set him down on top of Joansie. That's what we called her, Joansie. Well, Joansie began to huff and snort worse than a locomotive under a full head of steam. Jackson's eyes got bigger and bigger. Wasn't no more than a half-dozen snorts later that Jackson slid-fell right off that critter. Took off for the fence, crawled under, got shit all over himself. Been hiding behind that fence ever since. I saw the whole episode, yeah, the whole catastrophe, and I started forming me up a plan. Started gathering up some of daddy's best hay, hay from the bottomland, mixed it in with sweet grass. Everyday I'd feed a little of it to Joansie. Got so she would follow me around almost, drooling for her hay. One day, I stationed myself over near Jackson's hiding fence. And when Joansie came over for hay and sweet grass, I climbed that fence and plopped right down on her back. For a second, Joansie was one confused mule. Just when her ornery streak was about to take over, I reached down and gave her a handful of hay. From that day on, I could ride that mule anytime anyplace, just so long as Joansie got her sweet grass reward. Ever since then I carried this bottomland knowledge with me. During the Klan times, all that burning and lynching, during the sit-ins, during all those singing and march times. Don't have to hide behind no barnyard fences. And when I moved up north, got a job teaching in the city, I wasn't about to hide even

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for a second. The moon is not a furling Klan robe, not any boss man's white shirt either. Sure I taught some from the books. But mostly I taught freedom. I remember one time Elaine Brown was in town. She's that Panther lady. We were talking right at this very table, not about guns, but about knowing what you're doing. I had two daughters right here in the room with us, so they could hear, learn. None of this shoot-up-the-courtroom wildness. Good river and bottomland sense.

Holy shit!

They flew dead aim into the center of. . . .

Holy goddamn shit.

I didn't ask to go on this mission. They came to me, muttering and moaning that they needed an older person going to meet the old. They needed a person of color because the people they were going to connect with had sun and darkness in their skin. I'd heard this white muleshit before. Besides I had more than enough grief of my own. Yeah, a whole bucketful, a whole baleful of sorrow. These white radical types, they were messing with my grief. I was about to kick them out the door when they said something I'd never heard a white individual say before. They said, "Tell us about it. Tell us your sorrow story. We'll listen." So I did. I told them how Jackson spent twenty-five years in the man's army. Over there killing in Vietnam. Still didn't learn his lesson, stays way beyond what he needs for his pension. How when he finally gets out, he and Alberta come north to this city. But the damn fool idiot gets a job in those two monster towers. Where's the bottom grass near all that marble, super-glass? He switches from one tower to the other until they make him a supervisor or something. Claims he's got a little office up there on the 78th floor. Hell, I knew what he was. He was a janitor. Still hiding after all those years. Goes to work every day, even though he's got some kind of dizziness, some kind of syndrome. Rides the subway down to Fulton. If he'd been over here like he should have been, keeping the family together, I would have kept him home that day. Damn him to Hell anyway, he was probably holding a broom when it hit. The plane, the flames, must have crashed right through where he'd swept. I don't even have a speck of Jackson's dust to sing over, to lower into the ground. Well, by the time I was through telling my story, I knew I was going to go. We're all here now, the four of us. Jim Jim, he took off down the

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street. Said that's where the homeless were. Gideon, he's out front plunkin' his guitar. Meredith's right at the center of this burnt-out house, sipping tea with a burnt-out mother. But I'm over here in the corner, sitting on this bench with Old Grandma in Black. We don't have each other's language, but we get plenty said anyway. A sorrow look, click-clicks of the tongue, a touch of hands. Just being here. I know this family's story. A wedding party, friends and relatives from miles around, just like daddy gave me. Men got all joy-fevered up, started shooting their rifles in the air. Next thing they knew, they heard jets. They didn't hear the rockets until they hit. Nineteen dead, including the father and the daughter bride. Grandma in Black motions over to another one of the daughters. Looks about twelve or thirteen. I've never seen grief piled up so high in any child's eyes before. It's like her skin is so heavy it wants nothing to do with her bones. "Laida," I hear the name "Laida" a couple of times. Grandma has her sit between us. Not long before we start to sway alittle. Grandma and I, we sway and hum, touching this girl on the knees, on the shoulders, on both sides of her face. We're touching, stroking her hair. The both of us, one on each side, we're blessing life back into this girl. Laida does not smile. She utters no sound except the in out shush of her lungs. But some glint comes back to her eyes. Her flesh makes a truce with her bones. Our group is supposed to leave for another town tonight. But I think I'll stay here. The bride's funeral is tomorrow. Her father's too. I begin to smell the grass, the river coming through this door. Tomorrow I'm gonna throw a handful of dirt down on top of the bodies. I'm gonna sing me a song for Jackson.

MARION K. STOCKING

BOOKS IN BRIEF: Translation: Text, Texture, and Architecture

Part I: The Ancients and the Moderns

Four confessions: One: I've been letting review copies of poetry in translation pile up for several years. Two: Of the original languages, I have little Latin and a good deal less Greek, some competence in French, less in Italian, and—well—enough German to get through my doctoral exam. Three: I am uneasy about any translation without the original *en face*, even when the original is Arabic or Chinese. Four: I have long accepted Robert Frost's words in "Poetry and School" that "there should always be a lingering unhappiness in reading translations" and that "the eye reader is a barbarian." Yet, as Frost admits, "some translation of course in course for utility." I hope (*pace* Frost) for the *dulce* as well as the *utile*. Since my own familiarity with global literature beyond French and Latin derives from translations, I am indebted, deeply, to translators for my inheritance of the staggeringly rich wealth of poetry from the earliest cuneiform to the latest eloquence of Bei Dao.

From the many (over a hundred) recent books before me I'll review here only those poets I want all my readers to know, if only in translation. My Duke graduate school professor, Allan Gilbert, a distinguished translator of Plato, Aristotle, Longinus, and later Machiavelli and Ariosto, insisted that if one were condemned to reading in translation, one should find the most literal prose version. (Someone told me that Gilbert, assigned to teach American literature, held out as long as he could but, informed that he had no choice, announced on the first day of class that "we will begin with Longfellow. And we'll start with his translation of Dante." That was good for a semester.) I propose here (*pace* Gilbert) to consider translations that are themselves poetry, hoping for versions that suggest poetic texture and architecture as well as content. I am also interested in poets who create their own versions of earlier works, evidence of a classic's persistent power. Since teaching the Prometheus myth from Hesiod through *Frankenstein* to *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, I have always sought out what in poetry survives and evolves in its relevance to later centuries and cultures. For example, I've enjoyed romping through Ted Hughes's versions of Ovid and of Euripides's *Alcestis*. I relish them, however, not as translations, but for his out-Lowell Robert Lowell in reimagining the works (Hughes invents a whole masque-like section for Heracles to drunkenly act out the first seven of his labors. Though *Alcestis* conforms to Aristotle's description of tragedy, Hughes wants to exaggerate the comedic effect; I suspect he would have liked to have played Heracles himself—as a comic hero, but nonetheless a true hero.)

■
Back to the Fertile Crescent

The earliest work I recommend is **Stephen Mitchell's *Gilgamesh: A New English Version*** (New York: Free Press, 2004, 314 pp, \$24, clothbound), an artifact of pure delight—a rich brown ink on creamy stock, lucid typography, with an elegant endpaper design carried along the foot of every page.

We open to a sixty-six-page introduction by master translator Mitchell, in which he explains the origins of this “Oldest Story in the World” about the historical Mesopotamian king from the third millennium BCE: (1) the earliest version of his story (ca. 2100 BCE), in Sumerian; (2) the Old Babylonian version (ca. 1700 BCE), in Akkadian—a Semitic language cognate with Arabic and Hebrew; and then (3) the Standard Version (ca. 1200 BCE), the basis of our modern texts. Now we skip about three thousand years to 1844, when excavations near Mosul, Iraq (ancient Nineveh), brought to light, along with monumental sculptures, the earliest fragments of clay tablets, inscribed in cuneiform. (It's worth a dip back into Dante Gabriel Rossetti's splendid poem “The Burden of Nineveh,” a very modern take on the unpacking in the British Museum of these Assyrian treasures.)

Mitchell then takes the reader on an introductory tour through the poem, a reading charged with his enthusiasm for the timeless human significance of its story. Gilgamesh is a tyrant who cannot imagine that his reveling in unlimited power might be arrogance. At the political and moral level, *Gilgamesh* avoids a facile division into good and evil; the characters are complex, capable of development. In adventuring out to slay a monster, Gilgamesh learns, as Mitchell has said in an interview, “you can get in a lot of trouble when you go out to slay monsters.” There is a higher justice at work in this universe. Of contemporary concern is gay marriage: the portrayal of the profound love between Gilgamesh and Enkidu—the wild man first civilized through heterosexual initiation and then the instrument of moral transformation of Gilgamesh, who evolves from a self-aggrandizing tyrant into a leader dedicated to the well-being of his people. At the spiritual level, the poem portrays two excruciating agonies of the human condition: Gilgamesh's heroic grief at the loss of his beloved partner, followed by his doomed quest for immortality. Out of these existential sufferings emerges the first true hero in Western civilization. Like Rossetti, Mitchell recognizes timeless parallels

between that four-thousand-year-old materialist culture and ours. His introduction serves as an exemplary essay (you see why I am reviewing ancient texts in a journal of today's poetry).

Not able to read the clay tablets, Mitchell calls this his "version," not a true translation. But he has worked from the best scholarly transcriptions, and when his words differ from those readings, he provides their text in an endnote. I therefore feel as close to the three- or four-thousand-year-old tablets as I can be. Mitchell provides a bibliography and a valuable glossary. He invents a "loose, noniambic, nonalliterative tetrameter," avoiding irrelevant associations with traditional meters, while assuring us that we are reading poetry. This translator gives us Pound's melopoeia, phanopoeia, and logopoeia—energy of the image, of the music, and of the richness of meaning in the diction—almost more than one dare ask for in a translation.

I found Mitchell's *Gilgamesh*, more than any other version I know, difficult to put down. It has a momentum, an energy, that carries the action swiftly. Here is a bit from Book Five, when Gilgamesh and his partner Enkidu have arrived at the great cedar forest in Lebanon where the god Enlil has posted the hideous monster Humbaba to keep men from desecrating the forest. Although the supposedly evil monster pleads eloquently for mercy, Enkidu urges Gilgamesh on to the slaughter. Gilgamesh topples Humbaba, who crashes "like a cedar" to the ground.

They took their axes and penetrated
deeper into the forest, they went
chopping down cedars, the wood chips flew,
Gilgamesh chopped down the mighty trees,
Enkidu hewed the trunks into timbers

and they "brought to earth the highest of the trees, / the cedar whose top once pierced the sky." Such butchery leads directly to Enkidu's illness and death and the grief that nearly destroys but ultimately transforms his beloved companion.

■

Staying in the Semitic

Four thousand years after *Gilgamesh*, more than two thousand years after the great Hebrew scriptures, the establishment of the state of Israel has initiated a flowering of contemporary Hebrew literature.

Amos Oz has written a verse novel, *The Same Sea*, translated, in

collaboration with the author, by **Nicholas de Lange** (New York: Harcourt, 2001, 202 pp, \$24, hardbound). In its narrative art, this is as distinctive of our day as *Gilgamesh* and *Exodus* were in theirs. Perhaps that is as far as the analogy goes, although one reviewer has said that *The Same Sea* “feels almost mythic.” In broad terms, *The Same Sea* resembles typical contemporary novels in exploring the psychological potentials of the human condition through interactions in complex personal relationships. Like some adventurous contemporary writers, Oz prowls the realm where the old walls between genres crumble, moving as he does from one poetic form to another, in and out of prose, and the prose in and out of lyrical language. It employs the postmodern convention (originating, so far as I know, with Jane Austen’s ending of *Northanger Abby*, but exploited widely since John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*) of having the author seem to step out of the flies onto his stage. Oz carries this one step further when in the chapter “Outsiders” he discusses the Narrator (a character in the novel, described as “somewhere between the mystical and the mischievous”), Dubi Dombrov, another character in the novel, and the “I,” who here seems to be the Narrator but may be the author—serious playfulness.

After we have had time to observe the characters in action, the Narrator comes forward and explains the complexly symmetrical plot relationships. He enjoys showing off his exquisite art, and we gratefully accept his assistance as we move deeper, through multiple viewpoints, into this reticulation of people we have come to care about. And we do care about them. Sometimes we hear them in their own voices. Sometimes an omniscient narrator reveals them. When we have looked in on Albert as he babysits an old friend’s grandchildren, we feel that we know him profoundly and can only love him. I find myself still worrying about what has become of Albert’s son Rico, last heard of somewhere in Sri Lanka, on a quest for—ah, for what? The plot that seems so symmetrical allows space for a poet’s projection into the unknown and the unknowable.



Greek, Then and Now

Next I want to recommend *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho*, translated by **Anne Carson** (New York: Random House/Vintage Books, 2003, 105 pp, \$14, paper). What more could one ask for? A major poet, translated by a distinguished poet who is also a classical scholar; *en face* the Greek text based on the best editions; a graceful

and informative introduction; notes both linguistic and critical; a “Who’s Who” appendix; and “Exemplary Testimonia.” Carson reminds us that from Sappho’s reputed nine books, only one poem has survived complete. She translates literally, adding only spacing on the page to suggest that these were songs to be sung to the lyre. With a Greek alphabet at hand most of us can transliterate the originals and, knowing cognates, can get an illusion of the texture of Sappho’s words.

Many of the fragments seem wonderfully resonant of their lost context. Consider “spangled is the earth / with her crowns.” Or

Eros the melter of limbs (now again) stirs me—
sweetbitter unmanageable creature who steals in

To illustrate how Carson brings the scholarly and the critical to bear, here is a little of her note. She explains that the temporal adverb [*dēute*: “now again”] is a compound of *dē* and *aute*:

Dē is a particle signifying vividly that some event is taking place in the present moment; it strikes a note of powerful alert emotion (sometimes with a note of irony or skepticism), like English “Well now!” *Aute* is an adverb that peers past the present moment to a series of repeated actions stretching behind; it intercepts the new and binds it into history, as if to say “Not for the first time!”

Carson then refers the reader to Sappho’s other uses of *dēute*. You can see how in reading these graceful notes I can almost pretend I’m reading the Greek.

It is not so long a leap as one might think to cross about 2500 years to another Greek lyric poet, **Odysseus Elytis**. I come to Elytis belatedly, finally discovering what I’ve been missing. Here are two translations: **Olga Broumas’s *Eros, Eros, Eros: Selected and Last Poems*** (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 1998, 192 pp, \$18, paper) and **Jeffrey Carson and Nikos Sarris’s *The Collected Poems of Odysseus Elytis*** (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997, 640 pp, \$49.95, hardbound). Carson and Sarris live on Paros and worked on these translations over twenty years, simply out of love of the poetry. Elytis encouraged them, liking the fact that they were a poet and a musician, at home in the Aegean world, the physical as well as the emotional basis of his imagery. Carson has provided a “reader’s guide” introduction, a wealth of notes (conveniently *footnotes*), a chronology of the poet’s life, an index of first lines, and (in an appendix) the text of Elytis’s 1979 Nobel Prize

speech. Broumas, herself born in Greece, also met with Elytis over the years, spellbound by his work since she first heard him speak when she was sixteen. Sam Hamill has written a graceful and appreciative introduction; Broumas concludes with a personal afterword. There are a few endnotes and a chronology of the works she has selected, which include “The Garden with the Self-Deceptions,” a largely prose work not in the *Collected Poems*, but with some verses of great lyric freshness.

How to compare these labors of love. The greedy scholar in me wants the whole works with all the editorial help I can get; for my permanent library, I’d have to have the *Collected*. For the reader who wants a friendly paperback introduction by an accomplished poet, Broumas is your choice. (You wouldn’t carry the weighty *Collected* for bath or plane reading.) Do I prefer Broumas’s title of Elytis’s *The Little Mariner*, with its irrelevant resonance to Coleridge, or James Williams’s translation in the *Collected* as *The Little Seafarer*, with its irrelevant echo of the Old English? Alas, here, as in most matters of translation, I am unable to judge. But both volumes offer that astonishing poem complete. Let me describe it.

The original text appeared in 1985. Elytis creates an elaborate but elegantly symmetrical architecture. Between “Entrance” and “Exit”: four chapters, each with four (at the end three) sections. Each chapter begins with a “Spotlight”—seven “scenes” in chronological progression, each a snapshot of some historical act of violence. An early example: “The first Christian emperor, Constantine, gives the order to arrest and put to death his own son Crispus” (all translation from the *Collected* except as otherwise noted). These “Spotlight” sections provide the dark screen against which Elytis projects his passion for justice and freedom and for the “inalienability of the individual” (a phrase that applies well to the work of Amos Oz).

Following each “Spotlight” is a section of seven (magical number) short prose poems titled by Broumas “Anoint the Ariston” and by Carson/Sarris “To Anoint the Repast.” Here’s a sample:

FROM EARLY CHILDHOOD, they stuffed my head with the image of a death hooded in black, who held life like a mousetrap and offered to us open, and in it the lure of sensual pleasure. Permit me to laugh. He who chewed bay leaf said something else. And it is not by chance that we all revolve around the sun. The body knows.

The passage as a whole establishes the poet's solar affirmation of sensuous life, his presence in the poem and in the cultural history of his nation.

The next section of all but the final chapter contains seven poems under the heading "With Both Light and Death," with seven lyrics, each with Elytis's distinguishing luminous visionary quality:

*Youth kneeling in the transparent deep
The more I sleep and dream the more I see you rise
With a basket of green shells and seaweed
Biting as if a coin the same sea that
Gave you the very shining the very light the meaning you seek.*

I can imagine I am hearing something of the texture of the Greek—internal rhymes, lyric repetitions, phoneme patterns, rich tropes. The English poetry is splendid.

These first three chapters end with extraordinary catalog poems under the subtitle (from Sappho) "What One Loves," each with its own heading. In the first ("The Traveling Bag"): a chronological list of the essentials for his travel through life—the places, poets, musicians, artists. Second ("Aegean Route"): a four-page abecedarium of nouns that conjure up his home territory, from "Alexandra / All Soul's Day / anchovy / anemone" through "zephyr / zucchini." The third, "(Snapshots)": three slide-shows of places under this heading: "Precision above all, I said. And I was careful to keep the f-stop narrow. When I got it developed I saw clearly: I had caught certain moments, or, say, 'snapshots' that, once they existed, nothing ever again could destroy." Here, for example, is the first, Corfu: "A spring night in a distant country cemetery. That luminous cloud of fireflies moving faintly from tomb to tomb." The fourth chapter ends with "Exit," echoing back to "Entrance." His symmetrical architecture contains within it a festival of invention and emotion. A few more examples: macaronic dialogues of prose and poetry; neologism, with a line of verse for each letter of an invented word; a hunting excursion in a "forest of vowels"; fragments imitating the mutilated papyrus strips preserving bits of Sappho and Archilocus, each fragment as resonant as Sappho's; a cube imitating classical inscriptions with no space between words and no punctuation—all from *The Little Seafarer*. In the rest of the treasury of the *Collected* are more upwellings of formal innovation that survive translation into English. Here is Olga Broumos's version of a poetic moment in the mostly prose "The Garden with the Self-Deceptions":

PAS DE DEUX

The li li lilt		Ly Ly lyric of a slight
lo the upper hand		graze of elbow
Two three five nine	Blow it down or blow it up	two five eight
black you're white	little string or little cat	Sixteen thank you
	Make me king	
	dress of wind	

Sam Hamill, in introducing Broumas's volume, describes Elytis as following "a line of individualistic visionary ecstatic poets leading all the way back to Sappho." Sappho absolutely, and Blake's "radical innocence" and Mozart's formal elegance, and Rimbaud and Pound and Yeats and Eliot and Lorca, not to forget Theodorakis and Arp and Dali. Had I not undertaken this review I would have missed this poet of luscious sensuousness, the "blend of lemon geranium and jasmine, at midnight," "the spiderspun nightgown." I would have missed the poet of passion for the sea, the rising wind, and the sun. Even more, I would have missed a great poet with a burning passion for justice.

■

Latin, and *De Vulgari Eloquentia*

When I turn to Ovid, I have a plethora of translations to compare and will begin by employing six of them to illustrate the dangers of trusting any one version. First, Ovid's account of Orpheus after the final loss of Euridice, in the Latin trochaic hexameter: "ille etiam Thracum populis fuit auctor amorem / in teneros transferre mares citraque iuventam / aetatis breve ver et primos carpere flores." Now a literal prose translation by Frank Justus Miller in the 1981 Loeb edition: "He set the example for the people of Thrace of giving his love to tender boys, and enjoying the springtime and first flower of their youth." The earliest translation I have at hand is by Arthur Golding (1567) in iambic heptameter ("fourteeners," easily reduced to ballad meter): "He also taught the Thracian folke a stewes [brothel] of males to make, / And of the flouring prime of boyes the pleasure for to take." George Sandys (1621-26) reduces Ovid's three lines to one: "Who beautie first admir'd in hopefull boyes." *Stewes? Hopefull? Come now.*

Rolfe Humphries in *Ovid's Metamorphoses* (University of Indiana, 1955, sadly out of print) chooses iambic pentameter, the most comfortable form for extended poetic narrative in English. I admire

Humphries's graceful lineation, varying metrical emphases that give this small passage an unique rhythm, and (translator's license?) the dramatic illusion that we hear Orpheus speak:

His love was given
 To young boys only, and he told the Thracians
 That was the better way: *enjoy that springtime,*
Take those first flowers!

David R. Slavitt would like to update Humphries in his *The Metamorphoses of Ovid: Translated Freely into Verse* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994, 336 pp, \$45 hardbound, \$14.95 paper). Slavitt essays Ovid's hexameters and aims for "something that might stand comparison" with Golding and Sandys. He warns us that as "a translator I have taken all kinds of liberties"; he sees his translation as his commentary. These liberties are many, as manifest in his version of my touchstone three lines. Orpheus, Slavitt writes, rejected the advances of women,

preferring the random spasms of passion with adolescent
 boys in whom no one invests sentiment, knowing they'd grow,
 change, and in any event forget him as promptly as he
 would forget each one of them, longing in vain for [Euridice].

Well, now! You decide. Is this translation, traduction, or transmogrification?

Now we have a new version of the complete work, translated by **David Raeburn** (*Ovid Metamorphoses*, Penguin, 2004, 724 pp, \$11, paper). Like Slavitt, he chooses a variable hexameter similar to Ovid's, which unfortunately produces the awkwardness of many runovers (reproduced here) on Penguin's small page. A different book design would have saved about three hundred pages and much optical jerkiness:

Orpheus even started the practice among the Thracian
 tribes of turning for love to immature males and of
 plucking
 the flower of a boy's brief spring before he had come to
 his manhood.

This seems to me to have the texture of prose, partly for the clumsy enjambment, but more importantly because, even though I can manage those hexameters with their regular syntactic caesuras, it fails to establish any *meaningful* rhythmic movement. As for the diction, I bristle at that "even" and at the clinical language of "started the practice" and "immature males" and the contrasting

Alfred A. Knopf, 2000, 364 pp, \$30, hardbound). First, Knopf gives us a handsome volume, with the Italian blessedly *en face*, so that even where I can't understand the subtleties of the diction, I can relish the verbal music, the melopoeia. Second, Merwin has chosen a flexible pentameter line—easy reading—not straining to reproduce the tightly interlocked terza rima. He aims when possible for a line-by-line translation, with rhymes and half-rhymes occurring richly but not regularly. His challenge is to approximate the rapid movement of the narrative, so fluid in the original as each tercet spills down into the next. With the seductive enjambments we admire in his own poetry, Merwin makes his version far and away the most moving (both senses) of the translations I know. Only the impulse to look across the page to see *and hear* how Dante has managed it slows me down. Merwin is well aware that his or any translation will be of little or no interest to scholars, “who presumably sustain themselves directly upon the inexhaustible original.” A great bonus: Merwin provides translations (his own) of poems by those poets Dante's pilgrim encounters on his climb up Mount Purgatory. I had forgotten how rich the memory of music and poetry was in the *Purgatorio*.

Beyond the music of the poetry, why read this least familiar of Dante's great trilogy? For Merwin, “of the three sections of the poem, only *Purgatory* happens *on* the earth, as our lives do, with our feet on the ground, crossing a beach, climbing a mountain.” Here the times of day are “the hours of the world we are living in as we read the poem. Tenderness, affection, poignancy, the enchantment of music, the feeling of the evanescence of the moment in a context beyond time, occur in the *Purgatorio* as they do in few other places in the poem.” Yes, and what's more, the tension between the thirst for justice and the pain of justice is powerful. (I have a poet friend who has said that the theme of all strong poetry is justice.) And above all, there is hope (impossible in the *Inferno*, irrelevant in the *Paradiso*). I especially remember in Canto VIII the two angels in green robes, green the color of hope, “Verdi come fogliette pur mo nate,” their robes fluttering in the wind of their green wings—the word *fogliette* (little leaves) fluttering its syllables—Dante's pure poetry.

The old feud between les anciens et les modernes seems irrelevant today. We very much need both to understand the role of the human species on earth. In Part II I hope to go deeper into Europe, exploring German, Slavic, and Scandanavian poetry.