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→

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

KELLY TALBOT

Of Says His

Three words. He can't get them out of his head:
"of says his." Those are the words, but those aren't
the words. Something is not right—the order.
"His says of." No, the other order was
better, closer somehow. "Of says his." This
order is right, but it doesn't make sense.
He decides to take a break, think new words:
"At ten, I shall shun the edifice." Yes,
but what does it mean? The edifice is
clearly a symbol, representative
of some other word, some other concept.
Edifice (of says his) is a building.
Building what? This is a construction, but
what are the materials, the foundation?
How large is this, and how solid? But these
thoughts are somehow also wrong, straying from
what he is trying to grasp, which is what?
"Of says his." This is the key. This order.
And "at ten I shall shun the edifice"
is also this order. He can't let go
of these thoughts. It is like a compulsion.
Yes! That's it! "Compulsion." It still doesn't
make sense, but it seems to fit together:
"Of says his." "Compulsion." "At ten I shun
the edifice." This order. This order.
"Of says his compulsion. At ten shun the
edifice." This order. Yes. "Of says his
compulsion. A tension, the visit." This
order. "Of says his compulsive. Tension
deaf visit." This order. Yes. "Of-says-his
compulsive a-tension deaf-visit this-
order." He is very close to it now.

SONJA JAMES
Death of a Mouse

Her song is cheap—
a mere sliver, a lie
based on the certainty of death.

And yet,
the mouse gloats in the pantry.

Come see for yourself
the wondrous suck and pull
of the distant ocean
which is her strength.

Insert a needle
into the blue nerve of the sky
and you'll discover
the fit body of her god.

Yes,
steal the cloud ripped by pleasure.

Unbearable—
the August heat,
the first taste of the farmer's poison.

SONJA JAMES

The Skull

Shimmers, no,
winks in sunlight
the varnished skull
of the fox.

Now, the fierce projectile
disclosing
my fabulous debt to
the ever flaming Sun:

Dante's journey toward Beatrice,
or, better yet,
my own thin lips glowing—
two red-hot wires

burning to be cooled
in that sacred barrel
of glinting water
lugged from the Shenandoah.

MARSHA POMERANTZ

What the Tenor Does with His Hands

Sometimes sketches out a winter sun
and covers it with cumulus,

then from the center gently cleaves
a cloudbank, leaving listening women

exposed like an icy harbor, men
straining toward a steamy cove.

Sometimes it is fall in the tenor's hands
and they keen over lost leaves, then round

a rock, a breast, a Cape of Hope, sink
back, bereft, pleading inconsequence,

quicken in their innocence. The stage
inhabits an old anatomy hall where

from this balcony you could see
a scalpel separate throat from sound,

a larynx from its silent string quartet,
eight bones in the privy of a wrist.

Life was stanching, death was then
contained on a table. Now sound

incises me, the piano is implacable,
the weather palpable. I pour.

MARSHA POMERANTZ

Who and Whom

The two sat together at their
dining table. I have long looked in

at lighted windows saying
Would that were I. They

spoke of *do* and *re*, tinkling stainless,
pinging glass. Who said

*The rim must hug the plate more
tightly. Space, please, between*

the knife and spoon was said by
Whom. Folded napkins clapped

as only damask knows to do. Candles
flinched in the small wind of *so*.

MARSHA POMERANTZ

Cire perdue

1

You say *Nothing's missing*. I point: where there was wind, was rustle, was hush of light, was a squirrel unfurled tapping the branch down, was a lurking bird twitching on two feet. Five trees gone, and I'm still standing. So seared. So sorry you can't see behind my eyes such green demeanor as I remember, such radiant shade. What thisness they'd have brought your mind, swimming in living with all their limbs; now nothing brought, now no green thought: low plants only, and high wires. Monday Tuesday Endsday, the sun still comes up, looking for leaves to feed.

2

History is this: I was lying awake nights when you were gametes unacquainted. I rummage in fact, wonder what will suffice to fill you in, debate how truly to tell. The dead person whose name you wear wore a different smile from yours. Breathy gap between two front teeth squared and forthright, fine lines spreading in lifted lips, blooded burgundy, crosshatch brown. *And how did her mouth sound?* Like Pola Negri, ticking through projectors, slick with lipstick. Mouth slackened one day, started to stiffen, jaw got tied shut with a towel. *Then where did the kiss go?*

3

I consult in Paris with experts in absence, search a bar where John is not, see not an empty bar and not the others tipping there, but *pas-Jean*. Which fills my mind: *pas mal*, the *isn't* that persists. My mind twitches on two feet. Yet I thought to fly.

4

A man is molded by the landscape of his homeland, wrote the poet Tchernichovsky—in reinvented Hebrew, in disputed Palestine. I wish his name was pleasanter to pronounce. I wish my shape was consonant with hill and dale, leaf or branch. History has ticked forward; I still lie awake some nights. Outside of Poland, Pola will never have a speaking role. In Poland she had another name and a thisness swimming.

KURT LELAND

California

He said: *This is who I am.*
I thought of the shredded bark
of a eucalyptus grove,
the aromatic buttons
browning the ground, their centers
engraved with five-fingered stars.

We were sitting on a bluff.
Below us, the Pacific
seethed: *That's who I am*, he'd said.
I thought of the tea garden
in Golden Gate Park: the bronze
Buddha, with its unheeded

offerings of oranges;
the aloof pagoda, pool,
and perfectly reflected
bridging arch; the pruned-back growth
of so many tiny pines.
The waves kept shattering, their

sound like bottles slowly crushed.
This is who I am, he'd said.
I thought of the boy I'd seen
stooping for shells, pebbles, smoothed
beach glass; the solitary
surfer's scud, stand, and tumble;

the lovers' embrace, knee-deep
in froth. We watched the sun dive,
the spray turn to crest-flung flares.
Seabirds cruised the ridge lines, dodged
their quick downward curl and crash.
A sharp wind began to chill:

This is who I am. We both
saw the path of foam and red-
gold light extending toward us.
It disappeared as the sun
swelled, was swallowed by distance,
shade, the sea rim's hard-edged curve.

JAMIE ROSS

Scout

So I'm looking at this thing—let's
call it a bear. Let's call it the soul. *Let's*
call it, we were calling in our red

caps with the fleurs-de-lis, up against
the line, our khaki shirts, green-forest
shorts, our blue, blue scarves, we

were up against a line that wouldn't
back down, between two trees in front
of the tent with somebody's hands, most

of the hands gripped to the poles as
if to hold it up, the soul I mean, the
shaking in the body just across

the twine stretched there
in the twigs on the dirt and the bodies
of the insects, a smell of grease and

shovels shoveling down a fog with its
sheet of superstition, clothes hanging up
and I'm wanting them back

because I'm right here
where it's rising like a bear, huge gaping
mouth, sharp gruesome teeth, but

I don't have a hat, some pants
more like pajamas, my scarf disappeared
before the orientation—and there's

no room left to grip, it's
a four-man tent, for their hands only—It's
a fact my shoes are loose and I've got

a bloodshot eye; the other one's floating
off to the left, up into the orbit
so I'm staring at this bear

and I'm looking direct, nothing in my fingers
dripping to the fog and it's got
some things to say—something like

a scream, more like a groan—just beyond
the line where it's more than wretched,
lifting its paws in the searchlight

of a throat with its red grieving horror and
the green snake teeth and the blue
thought of fear that everyone has left

with the pocket guide to slipknots, they've
taken the flashlights, jackknives, the matches,
and the dice. It knows I'm alone. It knows

like a planet: Oh, I'm *ugly*. It knows
like *Saturn*. So I step across. It
knows I'm screwed. But it's got my eye

and I need to see.

JAMIE ROSS
El Cervantino

The poet came to dinner yesterday

With his children, he said.

And he sat down
between three empty chairs.

To his right—Edna, he said.
There, to his left: Cristál. Next
over, finally, Robin.

And he did not ask much food. Only,

Edna would like salad. Cristál,
her passion is the bird, the darkest juices;

And Robin—his love is roots, you know:
potatoes, *jícama*, carrots—
and the rabbit lying with them.

The plates, themselves, not large
but each handmade, Saltillo. Ordered
by our host, Jiménez,
for just this fall occasion

When all the farmers and their wives,
the dancers, entertainers
would join the miners and officials
who'd brought the train, the silver, all
the candles, *carga*, *cargadores*.

Thanks to God, Jiménez said—*A Dios!*
Gracias for this feast! And so he raised his glass.

And then we saw the children—
Edna, Robin, and Cristál

Their plates wiped clear as windows.

JAMIE ROSS

The Annunciation of Noah

after a photo by Hiram Bingham, "Doorway, Machu Picchu," 1914

First I rose, lifted you. That's what it was
to be a wall. Then I opened, crouched. That's
what it took to be a gate. Some women
get it easy: *down*—the body shoots. But you

stood back, half in, half out; your
thong-treads, frond-stripes, manta
open at the V, braced against decision
the way a reason does. I yelled, *Come on! Crows*

fly free! Car parts in the weeds, the roof's
caved in, radios and furniture from one fence
to the other. I raked it, swept it, stirred—*Hey*
you!—I took the tree and shook—*What*

have you to announce! The drummers
hunched on the wide earth bench and pounded. And
the horn players drank the corn-beer, and blew
the headlights wild. The Mennonites and priests

drove in from San Istápa, eyes blurred with candles, hands
with prayer and cheese. The dancers from the nightclub
wailed parrots, steamed *La Bamba*, churned
the jungle lizards—They broke the ox-beast's heart

and the ox-beast broke the bus. And the youth who
sells milagros unpinned his cape, flared out in silver—*Look*
here, we're all stars! Old Sandro with the gearshifts, curb-
side by the tavern, broke his little platform; got up

on both stubs, slugged the wheels at tourists. Then Sister
Magdalena, full of wings and sap, shrieked, *I'm pregnant!*—
and threw up in the fire—*What's in a name, but who's*
returned! Who are you but echoes, rock! She

squatted in the rat-vines, on the backseat of a Ford.
From high across the ridge,

the waves began to roll.

JAMIE ROSS

Shoes

All night the boats
drift through the jungle, long
shoes. My shoes, the elephants', our
elemental hollow *would*. The
burned-out log the will

creates. Does it float, does it
hold you? The vines
twist: *No answer. But*
elephants remember. Ask
them to appear—

Hah!—Since

when do *they* need to! You

can't see their little chairs. Or
their linking trunks, pencil tails
in the Chinese watercolor. A
hidden falls—wide brush. The river
draws the river. What else
did you expect? You stroke
them with your hands. They walk
you on the water.

AIMÉE SANDS

The Mortgaging of Self Is Done

And the floors dreaming in wide,
drowned light. The drifting and bobbling,

nodding you off in another direction,
broken sideways, sideways

broken. Farther. Father. And the staff
of good intentions that sprouts leaves,

feathers, the formal calm that surprises,
gauze outflung and laid.

The miner that comes with a light, knees,
questions, gunpowder. The stifling,

the unbinding. Moral, normal, matted,
matched. The pelt of suffering,

hung in its usual place.

ANNE MARIE MACARI

Mozart's Requiem

That night in Prague I dreamed singing, *lacrimosa*,
windows open and voices

crossing paths, a chorus bearing him
even as he wanted

to stay, dying and composing
as the untongue licked him

toward oblivion and the tenors sang *promisisti*.

And woke to the feeling of being *there* and *there*
swept up and

plunged back. I lay still in the record heat

listening for the atmosphere to change, almost
feeling it, hundreds of miles off

but coming this way. As sometimes hearing
the music, far off

but approaching, voices thin at first,
making room

for *sanctus*, mouth open even if
I'm full of dread,

even if beyond Mozart's death there's
one Napoleon after another—

visionaries with their frozen dead.

There's the music and there's
the marching, *Rex tremendae*,

and someone paying the price, *majestatis*, down to
car bombs and body bags,

and now they play music in their helmets,
supplicanti,

ANNE MARIE MACARI

such blessings, so much joy, the morning
after hearing his *Requiem*,

lux perpetua, the music that has everything
even terror, how believing

when I hear it, almost too beautiful to be
human voices, knowing it

so well I can almost sing
all parts, and want to sing,

a kind of purification, a prayer, like the story of him

still composing when he died—as if without
agony—music all over

the bed, last contractions, timpani, cellos,

his ink-stained hands.

GWENDOLYN JENSEN

First Blood

Myself am hurt. I bleed
the shy in me.
Not a scab
to pick, but sea
I cannot lean across.
Child is best.
Will it remember
me no more?

But the lava moves,
its pale taste
not yet worn,
a sentence
on the tongue
and belly stung.

GWENDOLYN JENSEN

Language Includes Me, Unaware

It's a city I have longed to know,
whose height and sprawl—like self-interest—
I have learned, but whose smaller parts,
little streets, the shops, the place for tea,
are still unknown, perhaps unknowable,
like the small word on which so much depends,
a word made simple by a loss of grounding
or detail, it surfaces, picked clean,
a tar pit skull that smells of asphalt streets
and incandescent afternoons.
Do not ask which death it died.
Once it had a tongue, and howled.

GWENDOLYN JENSEN

Epitaph for Liz

*Both doors of the world
stand open;
opened by you*
—Paul Celan

I bore you in the cricket's thistle song,
I bore you ever green, abundant
from the hot blind earth, and you are gone.
I bear the fate you have become,
I have work to do, and death has done;
but in the blank and zero of the night,
I hear the banging, banging of your open
doors, vast eyes of many lenses,
luminous, compounded, and I am content.

ROBERT BUCHKO
Suspension of Disbelief

after a poem by David Brannon

I see three letters.
Each is black
and holds the next.

At a distance
they bleed together.

So much of life
spent in self-deception,
misreading angles,
redirecting light.

From folded hands
and a lamp, a child fills
night's empty room
with a thousand faces.

There are three letters
each a small *t*
printed across the horizon.

Like bones, their weight
lectures to the earth,

a warning, perhaps,
to the crowd,
or the soldiers
that hold them back.

Three steps closer,
we know,
the crown of thorns
becomes a bird's nest.

GARTH GREENWELL

Love's Holocaust

from the Greek of Marianus

1

There, in the shadow of the plane trees, by
the river which on even the hottest day
cools,

Love, exhausted, slept.

To me,

his fiercest, most worshipful acolyte,
Love as he lay down
entrusted his burning torch.

2

I held Love's burning torch. The flames
in which my heart so tortured had
turned

stood dancing

in my hand.

What I held I hated. I knew, for the world
that groaned in the tyranny of Love,
I must snuff out Love's torch.

3

At the river's edge, where grasses bent
green into the river, grasses shrank
from the torch

I thrust

down. The waters

shrank from it. Merciless, in the shrinking
waters I drowned Love's torch,
drowning my own heart

4

also. But the river, writhing, burned;
the torch did not drown; with
intenser light

it blazed

as though water

and air were one. Fevered, the waters
caught at the flame and fed it, offering it
sacrifices of themselves, until

5

one single element linked bank again
with bank. Then the grasses, which had
shrunk

from love,

strained at their roots

for love: the very soil of the riverbank
caught fire. I turned, terrified, back, but
already my hands were lit

6

like hands of glory; as I breathed, the air
that I breathed was flame. Love
beneath

the plane trees

woke

to plane trees lit by love; he tasted
for the first the ash so long
my food. There would be no end. I, the world,

7

Love, stood burning each in burning love.

GARTH GREENWELL

Zeal

Plagued by the insufficiency of my love, I sought
a foreign love, infinite, austere,

conceivable only as discipline, free from matter

and the passingness of matter. I wanted to be dead
to eros, to be moved only by an objectless unbreachable

loyalty to good. I wanted to be good. Lord,

I thought of you as punishment and embodied you
as punishment, and was punished in the sharp surfeit

of your joy. But I failed to circumscribe your joy,

I let you raise a glad palatial certainty in me, unaware
that the ground you opened was a ground

from which you would withdraw, leaving behind you

bleached salt imperishable habitations. My entire self
I made the repository of your joy: you gave

ecstasies that profligate, bleak, breed now gall.

ERIC PAUL SHAFFER
The Famous Poet's Wife

At the podium, the famous poet is having sex with his wife
in the poem he reads tonight. He uses the four-letter word.

The act is all ankles and elbows, slits and staffs, grunting,
sweating, and unnaturally assumed positions. Naturally,
I'm embarrassed because I can see the famous poet's wife

squirming in her chair as he caresses the heft of her breast,
the eager spread of her knees, and a tiny, beautiful blemish

none of us will ever see. Handy with his tongue, he speaks
of that moment her thighs muffled his ears in her passion

and lingers on a lonely moment when her rush of pleasure
left him behind. The ladies are glassy-eyed. The men nod
and grin. I'm shifting in my seat. The famous poet's wife

sighs as the last line kisses the poet's lips. Some of us clap,
and the applause raises her husband's head from his work.

KRISTINA MARTINO
Cnidian Venus as Hypochondriac

I suffer from esoterica and stichomythia.
I'm sorry for my s-sounds, but what
if the cysts under my scalp aren't stone?

I think I'm getting an ugly disease,
because the men aren't semening my statue.

I'm contrapostic and scoliotic and thick
with a strange sound. I think it's a nursery rhyme.

I'm phobic of sex and the triple six.
My Romantic tendencies leave me
with a mildly tetrametric twitch
and, at times, a classical itch up my ass.
Is this permanent and are love poems contagious?
Remind me to ask Erato.

I haven't slept
and my eyes are sere: once I alluded
to blindness by way of Tiresias
and I think I've caught the illusion.

What if when I wake up, I'm unnecessary:
a mere nymph, or worse, a woman?

The sick nuisance of always being nubile
with sex always nascent . . . there it is
again. That damn nursery rhyme disease.

The stichomythic self has side effects
such as ventriloquism with two voices
and one doll.

That, and an eating disorder.
I'm chubby so I took a chisel to myself.
I chiseled until I made too big a chasm
and I collapsed in a spasm of dust.

Forgive me, it seems I have demensia
in my dust-state, and I forgot:
a hypochondriac Venus couldn't happen.

KRISTINA MARTINO

Catalogue of Life Drawing Unlimited

You could blow the dust off a Leonardo
like dandelion fluff. It could become earth again.
Except it would not seed more sepia faces.

The fetus-light of the first star was matted
by dark matter, but not signed by the master.
Space insinuates a somber halo.

Heaven, made with mixed media: gold leaf
and clouds. The frame, gilded fragility;
coffin for a future cadaver of dust.

■

The patience of paper mites on a Leonardo,
swallowing shards of succulent chiaroscuro for centuries.
Their mythic itch and mouthful of shadow.

Perhaps the paper mites make an abstract.
Perhaps someone thinks the paper mites
make a masterpiece.

Their absurd and bluish bodies turning rust-red
in the shadow of a sepia face, no semblance
of a figure in the gloss of their sockets.

■

The corpses of paper mites make a new medium.
Their stomachs split like the seed pods of milkweed:
recycling sepia, resituating shadow.

Tiny cataracts of the classical face.
They constellate, a solar system of sanguine.
The brown dwarfs decompose

across high cheekbones, fading the line fine,
forging the freak speck, the lone freckle
into which they resurrect—

the death that draws a new face.

LYNETTE NG

quarks, charmed & strange

*Here is your fragment: a tone
retrieved from reams of letters.*

In the brown box, every particle is folded
twice, impressed with diagrams of your favored fruit:

*a shiny red pear and an overflowing
supply of ripe white peaches. Tomorrow*

you may have a yen for purple or black
grapes; you could develop a fondness

for apricots small as blood cells.

Each time, you press those pastels down
until just before breaking-point, when the desired
slice of spectrum appears.

A signature is composed
of acoustic gestures, seismic shifts.

LYNETTE NG

the clouded concept of a limit

This résumé is a work
in protest, a sinuously configured

expanse of glass published
by disposable gloved hands so

you may peer into the units
where the heroine dwells, hear

the vibrations of aromatic verbs
distending the bellies of the bold-faced

guests: characters who have done proper
justice to a barrel of sweet plum

wine, but whose disquieting
drives are not necessarily

an indignation
of wings to come.

MALCOLM ALEXANDER

Sisyphus

In one sense, old man,
whatever you do
it's never enough,

and if somehow
your sentence gets
commuted and you're lucky

enough to die,
then they'll forever
kick around your bones.

Bleak, isn't it?
But I know you
well enough by now

to know how much
you live for those moments
when the boulder rolls down

demolishing things, and like
a child with a stick
or a poet with a grudge

you get to gloat over
the brief havoc,
the elegant cloud of dust.

LEONORE HILDEBRANDT
Crossing the Marsh at Night

Under the sky's blind music, I am the confusion
of hedges plunging into fog, the meadow's
green saturations, the misting river's low land.
My hands know the handlebar's grip,
feel the tire tremble on the brick-laid road.

Running out of breath, I focus on breathing.
I gave away the rooms my mother prepared for me,
taking only a small sculpture, a wooden horse
jumping an unmeasured distance, its stiff limbs
almost in flight, the painted eyes endlessly intent.

B. Z. NIDITCH

Holocaust and Art (Gorky, Celan, and Levi)

You cannot live
another day,
your cats
are named Jeremiah
and survive all tears.

Obviously an animal
cannot paint or write.

Yet Jeremiah dies mysteriously
in Armenia, Germany, and Italy,
living more than one life,
spilling myth and milk.

MARION K. STOCKING

BOOKS IN BRIEF: “always beginning as it goes”

W. S. Merwin, *Migration: New & Selected Poems* (550 pp, \$40, cloth) and ***Present Company*** (152 pp, \$22, cloth), both from Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2005.

“for such a journey”

It is clear why Merwin titled this new collection *Migration*. As in many great narratives, from Homer, Dante, and Chaucer, to traditional tales and ballads, to early explorers' narratives that Merwin feasted on, the journey provides the structure for much of his poetry. I can read the early poem “The Station” as an ironic epigraph to his lifework: “No path went on” for the wayfarers at the station, “but only the still country / Unfolding as far as we could see.” Each traveler into this uncharted territory has visualized a different end to his exodus, yet, come morning, only a few, “not, to appearances, the bravest / Or best suited for such a journey, / At first light would get up and go on.” “Teachers” expresses a dark night of the soul in which “what I live for I can seldom believe in / who I love I cannot go to / what I hope is always divided,” yet “toward morning I dream of the first words / of books of voyages / sure tellings that did not start by justifying // yet at one time it seems / had taught me.”

Similarly, in “Beginning,” the “king of the black cranes” summons his flock: “it is a long way / to the first / anything / come even so / we will start / bring your nights with you.” By 1999, “Shore Birds” begins,

While I think of them they are growing rare
after the distances they have followed
all the way to the end for the first time
tracing a memory they did not have
until they set out to remember it.

This late work combines the poet's feeling for the evolutionary force that sends birds on their innate journeys with his intimation that this mysterious inheritance could disappear forever with its species. I read *Migration* as more than the sum of its parts—as indeed one long journey narrative, a reflection of the poet's own peregrinations into the unknown. I think of Machado's “Caminante, no hay camino. / Se hace camino al andar” (“Wayfarer, there is no way. / You make a way as you go” (from “Proverbs and Songs”).

“climbing out of myself”

In Merwin’s early books, the *I, we, you, they* rarely refer to anyone specific. While the poet is still seeking his identity, the general *I* or *we* includes the rest of us. It isn’t until *The Lice* (1967) that we watch the speaker lower the mask, first in “For the Anniversary of My Death”: “Every year without knowing it I have passed the day / When the last fires will wave to me / And the silence will set out / Tireless traveler / Like the beam of a lightless star.” Merwin then speaks even more personally:

It sounds unconvincing to say *When I was young*
 Though I have long wondered what it would be like
 To be me now
 As far from myself as ever

(“In the Winter of My Thirty-eighth Year”)

In “When You Go Away” he continues with a memorable image for the inadequacy of the poet to the earlier poems when, in the night, he remembers

that I am falling
 That I am the reason
 And that my words are the garment of what I shall never be
 Like the tucked sleeve of a one-armed boy.

A decade later, in “A Contemporary,” he imagines what it would be like to be one blade of grass, with “no name and no fear,” who would “turn naturally to the light / know how to spend the day and night / climbing out of myself / all my life.”

In the late 1970s Merwin expands this personal dimension. He found a true home in Hawaii, married Paula in 1983, and, in “The First Year,” states simply, “When the words had all been used / for other things / we saw the first day begin.” In the significantly titled *The Opening of the Hand* (1983), with his parents dead, the poet is able to write memorably about his relationship with them. Look especially at the haunting story of “The Houses,” an extended metaphor, as I read it, of the father’s inability to see what his son sees. Then balance it with the painfully courageous “Yesterday,” in which Merwin himself and an imagined alter ego talk quietly about his failure as a son. These, with others in this volume, are brave and amazing transformations of autobiographical material into impersonal narrative art.

When the poet has himself wonderfully arrived with his good companion in his good place, some of the ironies of the quest

romance remain. Even when he has come to a way station, this poet cannot end the journey; he has to go on. Merwin concludes “Waves in August” with an emblem for “such a journey”—his memory of a boat he had hidden as a youth, only to come back and discover that someone had taken it and left to him

instead the sound of the water
with its whisper of vertigo
terror reassurance an old
old sadness it would seem we knew
enough always about parting
but we have to go on learning
as long as there is anything.

“so short a time”

If, as Donald Sutherland has asserted, *classic* is concerned with being, space, permanence, and the one; *romantic* with becoming, time, change, and the many; and *baroque* with the contradictions and tension between these, Merwin’s lifework appears as an evolving journey, from the baroque tension of the early poems toward the romantic (some might say a postmodern romantic), always moving on. His primary concept of time supersedes the tick-tock countable. In “The Counting Houses” he asks, “how many hands of timepieces / must be counting the hours / clicking at a given moment / numbering insects into machines to be codified,” and “To the Insects” addresses these “elders”: “we have been here so short a time / and we pretend that we have invented memory // we have forgotten what it is like to be you / who do not remember us” as we, the human race, will go, “departing from our selves // leaving you the morning / in its antiquity.” With this long view of time, Merwin writes many an elegy: “Most of the stories,” he says in his magical “White Morning,” “have to do with vanishing.” Most of the quiet long-lined poems in *The Vixen* (1996) are valedictories to the immemorial agricultural history of that region of France where since 1954 he has owned a house and garden. He watches the upland pastures and shepherds’ huts go under the bulldozer, and in poems such as “Present” documents in devoted detail those moments when he can still encounter that deep past. In the voice of the displaced farmer, “The Peasant” addresses “you”—the “Powers Of This World,” the devastating “improvers” of the earth—lamenting the social price of economic change, the irreversible loss of his ancient culture of survival, but ending with the bitterly ironic “I am bringing up my children to be you.”

In his *Paris Review* interview (“The Art of Poetry XXXVIII”) Merwin tells Edward Hirsch that from the time he was very small he had an “urge to love and revere something in the world that seemed to me more beautiful and rare and magnificent than I could say, and at the time in danger of being ignored and destroyed.” He told Hirsch that he felt the loss of languages, cultures, and our own language to be tied to the extinction of species (“Several species a week . . . and this is an accelerating process. It’s all because of human action.”). A leitmotif through his mature work is a protest against the loss of whole ecosystems. In “Chord,” one of his most eloquent poems in *The Rain in the Trees*, the two notes are the end of Keats’ life and, simultaneously, the destruction of ancient Hawaiian forests—a counterpoint, a discord, of chords.

Despite his resignation to the Heraclitan sense of time as an infinite river compelling resignation to change, Merwin laments the precipitous rush of ancient forms into extinction. All the poet can do, as he told Hirsch, is to love what remains and “attempt to articulate it.” Like Denise Levertov, he speaks for those of us today who cherish the good life we live in a beautiful place while increasingly impelled to move beyond complacency by the injustice and impoverishment and devastation of the world we live in. In “Waves in August” Merwin inscribes a wry circle:

I thought I was getting better
about that returning childish
wish to be living somewhere else
that I knew was impossible
and now I find myself wishing
to be here to be alive here
it is impossible enough
to still be the wish of a child

That quiet surprise, that reversal of anticipation in line six, with its fresh cadences and simple language, condenses the old romantic dilemma, familiar in Goethe’s *Faust* and in the great odes of Keats: the hopeless passion to arrest the torrent of time, to imprison the perfect moment. It has always been one of the triumphs of poetry to find words to make that moment seem immortal, just as it evolves from being to becoming.

And *moment* is a recurring word in Merwin’s work—his rock in the onrushing Heraclitan current, anchored in memory as the stream of change pours on. In many of these poems he concentrates on

that moment in which the implications of a story are charged with energy, something very like epiphany. “If you could get one moment right,” Merwin told Christopher Merrill, “it would tell you the whole thing” (*Poets & Writers*, July/August 2005, 40). Addressing the dead in “The Hydra,” he says,

One thing about the living sometimes a piece of us
 Can stop dying for a moment
 But you the dead

Once you go into those names you go on you never
 Hesitate
 You go on.

When the moment has passed into history, the emptiness precipitates something close to nihilism—a wasteland that darkens the way of the mental traveler. In his grimly beautiful “The River of Bees,” “We are the echo of the future // On the door it says what to do to survive / But we were not born to survive / Only to live.” And to live assumes always *becoming*, through a dark time.

Traditional symbolism of dark and light informs Merwin’s portrayal of time, as time informs the prosody. Writing “On Open Form” in 1969 he proposes that “what is called its form may be simply that part of a poem that had directly to do with time: the time of the poem, the time in which it was written, and the sense of recurrence in which the unique moment of vision is set” (in *Regions of Memory: Uncollected Prose 1949–82*). Here he is, in “Substance,” writing in the late 1990s about his life on the French uplands a half-century earlier:

I could see that there was a kind of distance lighted
 behind the face of that time in its very days
 as they appeared to me but I could not think of any
 words that spoke of it truly nor point to anything
 except what was there at the moment it was beginning
 to be gone

The drop from *beginning* to the next line—the very lineation and syntax—enacts what the poet has no words for. That remembered moment carries its incandescence down to the reader’s present through the poet’s mastery of cadence—in its original and its musical sense—“proved upon the pulse,” as Keats had it.

“I who have always believed too much in words”

Though Merwin accepts that languages evolve and drift and eventually drown in the stream of time, he mourns the extinction of nonliterate poetries, losses he compares to the library at Alexandria. *The Rain in the Trees* is rich with poems on this subject: “Losing a Language” begins, “A breath leaves the sentences and does not come back / yet the old still remember something that they could say // but they know now that such things are no longer believed / and the young have fewer words // many of the things the words were about / no longer exist.” In “Witness,” just eighteen words long, he confronts this double loss—of the forests themselves and of the words for what was there: “I want to tell what the forests / were like // I will have to speak / in a forgotten language.”

What to do? Cherish and celebrate what remains, and “attempt to articulate it.” In his early “Learning a Dead Language” he declares that “what you come to remember becomes yourself.” But he does not assume that human speech is the only or even the best language, satirizing in the wrenchingly comic little poem “The Fly” his own obtuseness to the limits of words. He would include in *language* the multiplicity of ways nonhuman organisms communicate. In “The Cold before the Moonrise,”

It is too simple to turn to the sound
Of frost stirring among its
Stars like an animal asleep
In the winter night
And say I was born far from home
If there is a place where this is the language may
It be my country.

Although finding the right words may be the only way a poet can mourn the lost and the disappearing, protest injustice, preserve a symbolic moment, Merwin over and over asserts the inadequacy of human language to arrest time or to express all that he experiences—the perceptions and passions and visions beyond language. Here he stands at the opposite pole to his contemporaries for whom language itself is the be-all and end-all. In “Lament for the Makers” he speaks of carrying with him “that breath that in its own words only / sang when I was a child to me // and caught me helpless to convey it / with nothing but the words to say it.” Yet those very makers have inspired him, with all that he has inherited

from them, to emulate their success. And he can still declare (in his interview with Hirsch),

I have a faith in language. It's the ultimate achievement that we as a species have evolved so far. (I don't mean that I think we are the only species with a language.) It's the most flexible articulation of our experience and yet, finally, that experience is something that we cannot really articulate. . . . That's the other side, one of those things that makes poetry both exhilarating and painful all the time. It's conveying both the great possibility and the thing that we can't do.

“At the fountain of thistles / Preparing to sing”

In his first book in the twenty-first century, Merwin in *The Pupil* comes to “waken backward” through time—his own seven decades and back “beyond time beyond memory.” In “The Wild” he recalls his earliest passion for nature unmediated by language, implied in his many references to “the forest”:

First sight of water through trees
glimpsed as a child
and the smell of the lake then
on the mountain
how long it has lasted
whole and unmoved and without words
the sound native to a great bell
never leaving it

He told Hirsch that when he was about three he saw men cutting limbs off the one tree in the yard, flew into a “real rage,” ran out, and started beating on the evildoers. Ever since he created his enchanted white bear in “East of the Sun and West of the Moon” he has continued to make voices for the beasts. “Lemuel’s Blessing” (recalling Kit Smart’s cat Jeoffry) takes the voice of a domesticated dog, blessing the wolf and aspiring to learn from him. “Noah’s Raven” asks “Why should I have returned?” since he had “found untouched the desert of the unknown, / . . . my home. / It is always beyond them.” In “The Widow” Merwin defines the inherent divergence of our species from the rest of nature:

How easily the ripe grain
Leaves the husk
At the simple turning of the planet

There is no season
That requires us

More appalling than our divergence from the rest of the natural world is our responsibility for its devastation. As a romantic apostle of the “many,” Merwin protests the loss of diversity of species, accelerating in our time. “Inheritance” laments the lost lushnesses, in barely a century, of “as many as four thousand / varieties of the opulent pear.” “In Autumn” begins, “The extinct animals are still looking for home / Their eyes full of cotton // Now they will / Never arrive.” The full force of the poet’s irony bites through “For a Coming Extinction,” which opens,

Gray whale
Now that we are sending you to The End
That great god
Tell him
That we who follow you invented forgiveness
And forgive nothing.

The speaker boasts that “we were made / On another day,” and concludes,

When you will not see again
The whale calves trying the light
Consider what you will find in the black garden
And its court
The sea cows the Great Auks the gorillas
The irreplaceable hosts ranged countless
And foreordaining as stars
Our sacrifices

Join your word to theirs
Tell him
That it is we who are important.

After these hortatory poems, even more moving for me is “Empty Water,” called by a poet I respect “perhaps the greatest poem of the second half of the last century.” Merwin’s dedication to protecting and restoring the ecological wealth of the Hawaiian Islands recalls Marguerite Yourcenar’s telling a Maine interviewer, “I’ve always loved islands. You feel you are standing on the border between the human world and the rest of the universe.” “Empty Water” is worth considering as a whole, for what it says, for what it implies, and as an example of this poet’s mature art:

I miss the toad
who came all summer
to the limestone

→

water basin
under the Christmasberry tree
imported in 1912
from Brazil for decoration
then a weed on a mule track
on a losing
pineapple plantation
now an old tree in a line
of old trees
the toad came at night
first and sat in the water
all night and all day
then sometimes at night
left for an outing
but was back in the morning
under the branches among
the ferns and green sword leaf
of the lily
sitting in the water
all the dry months
gazing at the sky
through those eyes
fashioned of the most
precious of metals
come back
believer in shade
believer in silence and elegance
believer in ferns
believer in patience
believer in the rain

Try reading this poem a line at a time, reenacting the process of composition. Ask what would happen if one ended the poem there. Ask how each hypothetical terminal line casts its light back over the preceding lines, determining what the poem is “about.” What it gives me is an overlay of thirty-three delicately different poems in a succession of voices—the affectionate observer, the historian, the gently amused (“left for an outing”), the ecologist, the metaphor maker, and ultimately the voice of formal supplication. Reading “Empty Water” in the context of all that preceded it, I hear resonance of the famous toads in folk literature; I hear Merwin’s concern for geologic and natural history (no mask here: the poet

speaks of his own spot of time on earth); I hear and am moved by the shifting rhythms of the syntax and lineation, by the limpid lyric progressions, by the clarity and simplicity of the words, always conscious of the silences behind them, and by repetitions all culminating in the incantatory litany. "A poem," Merwin has said, "is an act of attention." His attention here contemplates with sensuous intension a small creature which, in its absence, signifies something crucial about our future on this planet.

"it's even worse now"

Merwin's environmental commitment illuminates his lifelong engagement in political action. Though he has declared himself profoundly bored by "politics themselves" with their "power to manipulate other men's lives," he cannot be silent to "injustice, official brutality, and the destruction on a vast scale of human liberties" ("On Being Loyal," on refusing to sign a loyalty oath, *New York Review of Books*, 19 November 1970. More recently, see his "Statement of Conscience" in Sam Hamill's *Poets Against the War*). At a time when so many poems in English are self-absorbed, narrow in their field of vision, Merwin reminds me of Yannis Ritsos, who when asked in 1970 by Stelios Pattakos, vice-president of the Greek military junta, "You are a poet. Why do you get mixed up in politics?" replied, "A poet is the first citizen of his country and for this very reason it is the duty of the poet to be concerned about the politics of his country."

Merwin's acts of protest throughout his life and especially many of his poems of the 1960s and 1970s express his anger and near-despair at the Cuban missile crisis, the renewal of nuclear testing, and the war in Vietnam. The most explicit is "The Asians Dying," which begins, "When the forests have been destroyed their darkness remains," and his most cynical, "When the War Is Over." His "Presidents," sad to say, might have been written this morning. The nightmare poem "The Old Room" seems to address the Holocaust but to me suggests, beyond that, our anger compounded of potent guilt and impotent outrage in the face of atrocities done in our name. Evidence that such outrage has deepened since then is his most desperately ironic "Thanks" (1988), where he counterpoints gratitude for our comfortable private lives with a dissonant catalogue of the atrocities of our public life. The last stanza draws in many of the objects of Merwin's philosophical and political protest:

with the forest falling faster than the minutes
of our lives we are saying thank you
with the words going out like cells of a brain
with the cities growing over us
we are saying thank you faster and faster

Bad as it appeared then, “I think it’s even worse now,” Merwin told Hirsch. But anger, he goes on, is a dead end. If it “is to mean anything, it has to lead you back to caring about what is being destroyed. It’s more important to pay attention to what it is that you care about.”

Ultimately, what Merwin cares about is the fate of the earth. As he told Hirsch, “When we destroy the so-called ‘natural’ world around us we’re simply destroying ourselves. And I think it’s irreversible.” One of his deservedly best-known poems is “The Last One,” which begins, “Well they made up their minds to be everywhere because why not.” It indicts not only our invasion of Vietnam but also all our “globalization” of natural “resources,” a protest more explicitly and comically dramatized in “Questions to Tourists,” on the commodification of a crop, the pineapple, that exhausts the fertility of ancient soil.

“to the islands of the ancients”

I hope I have convinced my reader that *Migration* is an essential book for our time. But before I go on to examine his latest volume, I have to mention my own candidate for the most important poem of the second half of the last century, Merwin’s true epic poem *The Folding Cliffs: A Narrative*. (You can read my *BPJ* review in Winter 1998–99 at www.bpj.org.) Here the concerns and powers that distinguish this lifework combine. In a 1981 interview, Merwin discusses a prose work on Hawaii he was working on as a “gathering together of almost all my interests—interest in non-literate peoples, in their and our relation to the earth, to the primal sources of things” (*Regions of Memory*). He continues with “our relation to and necessary opposition to the overweening authority of institutions and institutionalized greed, the destruction of the earth for abstract and greedy reasons.” The narrative of Pi’ilani and her family in *The Folding Cliffs* not only chronicles a deeply moving love story but also provides us with a true epic poem for our age. As the *New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* has it, the epic follows a figure (or group) central to the traditions and beliefs

of a culture, “at a period when a nation is taking stock of its historical, cultural, and religious heritage.” I do not know of any poem in the past century that so completely fulfills this need. The period of Merwin’s epic is when Western expansionism and exploitation were appropriating the ancient lines of Hawaiian authority and replacing them with evangelistic capitalism, representing, as I’ve written before, “the whole history of colonialism, still today evolving globally with new leprosies, new deforestations, new economic and political and cultural imperialisms.” In the rich and varied poetry of *The Folding Cliffs*, Merwin sublimates his rage in order to record and honor the pre-contact environment and the values of its culture.

“As though beginning went on and on”

Merwin’s twenty-fourth volume of poems, *Present Company*, borrows from Neruda’s *Odas Elementales* the idea of a book of dedications—about a hundred new poems on the specific (“To a Mosquito”), the abstract (“To Purity”), and the imaginary (“To Zbigniew Herbert’s Bicycle”). The themes that recur through *Migration* are here, from the journey that “turns / into the traveler,” to the ever-evolving, often inadequate, words—“you that were spoken / to begin with / to say what could not be said.” With only shadows here of the raging political poet, these poems nevertheless do confront grief, often through elegy, and—obliquely—with the way of the world.

Two qualities struck me freshly in this book, both anticipated in earlier volumes but flowering more freely here. First, the quiet humor—not so much the wry, ironic humor of the 1970s, but the playfulness of a seriocomic spirit. In “To the Face in the Mirror” he asks, “how do you / know it’s me.” “To My Teeth” develops a hilarious epic simile. And “To the Present Tense” begins,

By the time you are
by the time you come to be
by the time you read this
by the time you are written.

The other quality I especially enjoyed is the dramatic voice, most engaging in *Present Company* because he is indeed addressing that company, so that each poem, implying a listener, enacts a dramatic monologue. One needs to remember that the *you* here is the addressee: “Ashes,” “the Next Time,” “the Mistake,” “the Consola-

tions of Philosophy.” Merwin abandoned punctuation in 1963 when he wanted to let the syntax, the lineation, and the weight of the words carry the pace, as it does in conversation. This colloquial style is a wonder, never prosy—always richly cadenced, and full of the ambiguities and silences of a thoughtful person caught in the act of thinking. In *Present Company* I felt that I needed to read every poem aloud—always poised at the line end to anticipate how to pace it and pitch it, feeling that I was reading a dramatic script, on stage in the lyric theater of the mind.

I have always agreed with Merwin that poetry is a way of hearing. Each poem has its own distinctive music. The fluidity of Merwin’s composition makes excerpting difficult, but I’d like to sample a couple more, hoping to send you out for the whole book. Here’s how “To a Mosquito” opens:

Listen to you
me me me
 nothing but *me*
 even without a voice
 and rash though it may be

to sing out anyway
 here I am
 this is me
 out for your blood

The *ee* sound whines through the rest of the poem. A different timbre of *ee* opens “To Ashes,” and different syntactic rhythms and a more complex vowel harmony create this almost hymn-like sonority:

All the green trees bring
 their rings to you
 the widening
 circles of their years to you
 late and soon casting
 down their crowns into
 you at once they are gone
 not to appear
 as themselves again

These words are both transparent and resonant: *crowns*, for example, means tree crowns, obviously, but crowns “cast down” also calls up the organ notes of “Holy Holy Holy.” And “late and soon” echoes out of Wordsworth. Listen to those last three lines—

the sudden shift of the position of the *you*, creating the dramatic suddenness of “at once they are gone.” How different this would be if the poet had written “down their crowns into you.”

Now consider that “To Ashes” is the fourth of six extraordinary poems, dated between 10 and 23 September 2001. Knowing how “9/11” has passed into our language and having seen in The Academy of American Poets documentary, *The Poet’s View*, that Merwin’s New York apartment had a clear view of the twin towers, I am in awe of the accomplishment. I had already read these six, admiring their variety, their elegance, their freshness, before I noticed that these, alone, had been dated. I read them now as a great gift from one of our strongest living poets, at the height of his powers, and am profoundly moved. “To the Light of September,” composed on the tenth, does something very like Keats’s “To Autumn.” “To the Words,” which begins, “When it happens you are not there,” suddenly takes on a double meaning. So do “To the Grass of Autumn” and “To the Coming Winter,” which carry on from “To the Light of September” without mentioning the disaster, but follow the natural cycle down into the darkness. And there in their midst is that deliciously liberating address to Zbigniew Herbert’s imaginary bicycle.

Returning in conclusion to Merwin’s own selection from his half-century’s poetry and having reviewed the last ten books, I feel more at home. I notice that he has winnowed out much that now might appear sentimental, persistently obscure, or too personal. Among those omitted is “A Scale in May,” which I return to now hearing a great deal in its memorable opening lines (“Now all my teachers are dead except silence / I am trying to read what the five poplars are writing / on the void”) but understanding why the poet cut it. The images of the poem’s eight notes of the scale have never converged into chords. Though sorry to miss those five eloquent wordless poplars, I still applaud most of the cuts in *Migration*, cuts that help clarify this lifetime’s work as a coherently evolving odyssey:

we are words on a journey
not the inscriptions of settled people
(from “An Encampment at Morning”)

The individual books are still there for the scholar and critic, but I am grateful to Copper Canyon for providing this handsome collection that allows a volume-by-volume journey through the lifework of one of the most richly rewarding poets of our age.