

BPJ

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WINTER 2006/2007

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### COVER

**Abby Shahn**, "The Two Headed Woman," egg tempera on paper, Collection of Colby College. For more of the artist's work, visit [www.abbyshahn.com](http://www.abbyshahn.com).

**Mary Greene**, design



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

# BPJ

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

TO  
SAM REED  
FOR HIS POEM  
"FROM *THE BOOK OF ZEROS*"  
IN THE SPRING 2006 ISSUE.

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

**SCOTT WITHIAM**

**The Wound**

My friend and I did not stay  
in the backyard playing  
because, as our fathers said,  
that's what friends do.  
Play was girl stuff.  
We left the yard, snuck a look  
through the backdoor screen.  
My friend squatted at my feet.  
I stood and leaned over him.  
It was an awkward age. Hot love  
in the air, we did not touch.  
So in our separate ways we kissed the screen  
to better see what we were missing.  
It was a small house. Soon enough,  
my father emerged from the steaming bathroom  
at the end of the hall. He cradled his dripping friend—  
my friend's naked father. Gangly,  
he limply hung off either arm.  
Woozy, his eyes rolled back  
into his head. It was right out of a religious painting.  
Between his sallow legs was a sanitary pad,  
placed there to soak up blood from the testicles  
lost to cancer. There, like a miracle,  
was what we weren't supposed to know.  
He bled like a girl. And they stood like newlyweds  
upon the threshold, stumbled into the bedroom.  
It wasn't one of those  
kick the door shut once it's behind you scenes.  
It was left wide open.

**KATHLEEN MAYBERRY**

**First Lesson**

Four little girls, ten years old,  
excused from long division in the middle of the day  
to sit in a row of folding chairs  
in a room no longer the janitor's closet,  
the nine-inch mouthpieces of their new flutes,  
smelling of the shiny nickel,  
pressed too tightly to their lips,  
their rushing breaths random, missing their marks. . . .  
How, I wonder, did the other three  
withstand the gentleness of his hands  
as he turned the mouthpieces inward and outward  
again and again against our chins  
or of his voice, its deep modulations  
urging us to relax, relax.

**RHODA JANZEN**  
**Strongly Scented Sonnet**

Just kissing the skin, inside the chemise  
she tucked a modest apple in the nest  
of hair beneath her arm, a scent like cheese  
extruding musky fragrances when pressed.  
And for two months the apple crabbed and freaked  
the hollow armpit, ripening, the smell  
about to hatch, a chicklet plump and beaked  
that taps suggestively against its shell.  
She wrapped and sent it to her fiancé,  
who amorously kept it by his bed,  
inhaling it—superb!—until the day  
when he and its contributor should wed.

Dear sir, do you detect the perfume of  
what I have used as substitute for love?

**RHODA JANZEN**  
**Ormesby Psalter**

*East Anglican School, ca. 1310*

The psalter invites us to consider  
a cat and a rat in relationship  
to an arched hole, which we  
shall call Circumstance. Out of

Circumstance walks the splendid  
rat, who is larger than he ought  
to be, and who affects an expression  
of dapper cheer. We shall call him

Privilege. Apparently Privilege has  
not noticed the cat, who crouches  
a mere six inches from Circumstance,  
and who will undoubtedly pin

Privilege's back with one swift  
swipe, a torture we can all nod at.  
The cat, however, has averted  
its gaze upward, possibly to heaven.

Perhaps it is thanking the Almighty  
for the miraculous provision of a rat  
just when Privilege becomes crucial  
for sustenance or sport. The cat

we shall call Myself. Is it not  
too bad that the psalter artist  
abandoned Myself in this attitude  
of prayerful expectation? We all

would have enjoyed seeing clumps of  
Privilege strewn about Circumstance,  
Myself curled in sleepy ennui,  
or cleaning a practical paw.

**RHODA JANZEN**

**Pioneer Girls**

*Pioneer girls who crossed the prairies in the days of wagon trains,  
pressing on with strength and courage, scaled the mountains,  
crossed the plains. . . .*

—The Pioneer Girls Manual

Blue sleeveless uniforms with red sashes;  
white gloves in theory, not in praxis;

soprano songs, salute, and Bible verse;  
a special Wednesday night, our guest a nurse

prepared with pious pamphlets to instruct  
us Pioneer Girls on never getting fucked,

her message camouflaged by tactful hints.  
(We didn't get it, but have learned it since.)

On one thing was she clear: LaWanda Franz  
exhorted us to change our underpants.

Decorously cross-legged on the floor,  
we prayed for little girls in Ecuador;

played Esther and her cousin Mordecai  
(but pardoned noble Vashti, doomed to die);

made pencil holders molded out of clay;  
improved hard macaroni with gold spray;

contended with a ball we learned to dodge;  
earned badges in the art of découpage,

and, swallowing a not unnatural yawn,  
we glorified our Lord and sewed them on.

**RHODA JANZEN**

**Ghost Train**

The March heart of winter chipped  
ice from the sky. I stood on the corner  
in a Doctor Zhivago hat I'd borrowed  
from my hosts to walk their dog.

A panhandler pressed me for change,  
but nothing changed. Although I and  
the dog had just arrived at this corner,  
we felt it to be the same corner of

previous arrivals, the same fur hat  
from the universal closet. The tracks  
shivered, prescient, the train somehow  
ghostly, backlit a luminous green,

bright as the drop of a guillotine. I  
suddenly realized how dark it had got,  
how dark it had been gradually getting  
all along. In the train's phosphorescence,

I glimpsed commuters with heads bent  
over newspapers. A ghost conductor  
punched tickets as if in the pulling  
away from the platform of this life

we need proof that we have lived.  
I did not desire to stop at this or  
any station. I wanted to hurtle  
forever parallel to these streets but

above them, nothing to teach, have,  
leave, or know. Here and not here,  
the life under this hat has disappeared,  
clean gone before you saw it go.

**PAUL GIBBONS**

**Quantum Elegy**

**1**

He wore a black fur hat against snow  
split by a few junipers, and he became a small *i* on the trail,  
his pale face, at a distance, the small emptiness  
between his body and the period suspended above it  
as though gravity, to this professor of physics,  
need not apply. As he walked up the hill,  
as though decapitalized, something relegated  
to marking pages from an introduction in his textbooks,  
he seemed more italic, more a slant heading into something extraneous,  
which is to say, the way I think of him now  
is less than it should be, a vowel  
shortened under a breath trailing cotton on cold days,  
invisible on warm ones,  
which is really a way of saying  
light sometimes comes out as a particle,  
and other times as a wave,  
weighing. . . .

**2**

When my father married for the last time, an IV sack  
was perched above his wheelchair, his hat in his lap.  
His hair long by then, he was the imprint  
in the old way, the Newtonian measure of equal and opposite  
forgotten by a typist, who,  
pressing a key, forced the metal arm against a page  
gradually blackening. Sitting, my father's body was a bold letter  
next to a white gown, his bag  
of blood suspended like a point that no longer  
defied gravity, as though for a moment the typist  
who would strike him there  
thought more of the Carolina Wren poking under the hood of a car,  
or a gull distancing itself at dusk,  
or an apple hanging above the sleeping Newton,  
a blurry speck on his spectacles, and the weight  
at the end of the typewriter's arm  
didn't quite hit the page with the attention it should.  
The dot, supposed to hover above the body,  
was not fully *there*. It's as though the moment  
in which his *i* came into being through pure classical

→

mechanics had lost its velocity, and my father,  
holding his last wife's hand, could simply watch himself  
grow smaller above his head.

**3**

And what is honest, finally, about  
what is at once there and not there,  
versus what is either there or not,  
is more like snow. It falls in small attractions  
enough that to lick the flakes  
makes more than the syllable *i* can,  
no matter how long it tries to keep on my tongue.  
It would violate the laws of one physics or another,  
this praise my father performed by walking up a hill each morning,  
or marrying three times, or opening a shoebox  
with a hat in it blacker than lampcord,  
blacker than the drain hole in a tub, blacker  
than the heavy tissue of his bones that attracted,  
according to his textbooks and radiation scans,  
too much light. My father's hat, a singularity on a hillside,  
would be too dense, anyway,  
for my hands which on a cold day, for a second,  
wouldn't know the difference between burning and freezing.  
My father did not drag or limp up the hill  
to work in the morning. He stopped and waved,  
making a little variation on the letter *i*,  
his face the blank force of chance  
that is all the matter.

**PAUL GIBBONS**  
**Messiaen, WWII**

In the mansion's kitchen, the wounded are wrapped  
in steaming linen. A nurse streaked with coal  
gives out sips of tea laced with whiskey.

The string quartet has stopped playing in the parlor.  
The house smells of burnt silk.  
In one corner, a bamboo cage with a canary sits  
on copies of Berg, Bach, Stravinsky.

From the foyer Messiaen watches  
as they bring in a woman  
flaked with straw. A shell has exploded  
against flagstone, shrugging dust off the barn's roof,  
layering the wounded  
and deafening the horses,  
who bleed from their ears.

She passes by him, her tongue  
the copper of a soldier's button  
reflecting a carbide flame. Soon he is told  
to put his hand over her chest. A fragment  
the size of a moth still smoulders inside,  
a clone of light that seems to rise arhythmically,  
accompanied by the palindromes of cannon-fire mixed

with an aide-de-camp pounding  
floorboards back down. Around him, drying,  
the linens resemble staff paper exhausted by rain.

The quartet is now sweeping the steps and smoking.  
The horses stare out toward low clouds that catch  
the burning color of midair. Occasionally,  
another shell shimmers overhead,  
and the canary responds:

It is annunciation. It is without  
measure. It is a waterfall of red-hot pitch.  
It is the year he is captured, the moaning  
of all twelve keys shuddered loose in the mind's foil.

**CHARITY KETZ**  
**Blessed Are They**

**1**

In the first death I'm rubbing the maroon  
nap of the car  
against my thumb—skin  
warps words, their click  
like bees inside fluorescents.  
So mother can scald meat  
in the pinking  
flour spit up from pan, my father  
bears the fizzle of air, my thumb's rubbing  
comfort to nothing.  
While my neighbor collects our pet's fur so that,  
desecrated, the body  
never appears, never feels meat fill its casing—my rabbit,  
drag-mouthed by my dog—father retreats inside  
the shadow of the cages  
like the guillotine. The straw underneath's  
stink closes in frost. Mother sets down  
chicken breasts. "Eat," she says, "this bird gave its life."  
"You were at the rink," she says, "practicing."  
Acquire a body and you have no body—  
the rabbit cages and the dog  
stay equidistant. The neighbor cleans up  
my rabbit like something you'd offer  
a god—body dragged through its screams—like Hector—to an evening—  
I was practicing. The whole  
structure disappears one day or another.

**2**

I forget to water my dog even on days mother calls "scorchers"—  
dog that bangs herself against her cage, or in release,  
bursts to stagger us upright,  
humping whoever pushes off her plush head, spangled ears  
dragging leaves budded under. Her stink  
follows me into the house to scour  
again—hair plastering pity. Almost voiceless  
she attends  
breath of beef ebbing our silhouettes  
and someone stilled at the window—did anyone feed her,  
turn the hose to splash up crust and leaves

→

in her overturned plastic bath?  
Then she's dead. A host of dog  
calendars hangs in my father's office.  
Father who's happy or unhappy.  
Father who goes down to the albumen-white room—  
creaking in the stairwell, my mother and I  
still until he passes. On the porch,  
a garbage can of chow  
stands for years—her saliva-dark leash, the wire  
cage blown through with everything that can.

3

My body is nothing but the nothing  
is clinical.  
I ask myself for an image of  
crying every night for a summer—burnt orange  
retriever who was to ache me  
out of loneliness and then her own  
wet breath latched onto my trunk, needing a face.  
Dog I bred anyway, knowing mother's "People  
and animals don't belong."  
At the doctor's, I flash my spit-  
slick teeth and ease into  
latexed hands—how else not to clench  
on the crinkly table.  
Everything that happens opens my limbs  
to authority. The doctor  
hinges my mouth, unhinges it,  
prods my cervix, presses into my ear—  
the burnt orange center of me,  
stilled under coated hands, tries to breathe less.

4

There is wreckage and a vine under skin,  
the vine of my making,  
vine purpling under fur. At my mother's mother's  
funeral I brush by the grip  
of those who want a plump one—  
who pinch my arms and peer at my face

→

fat on air. Flies descend  
to the face of the drained—the residual, the dumb  
casing of death. Like my weight on the scale, by itself  
it gives nothing—what meats  
keep me inside. Through the sliding glass,  
the wire cages  
catch the lemon dark, and what snow doesn't  
pile over droppings. The cages  
guard what sweeps residually  
over those who weep.

**BRIAN KOMEI DEMPSTER**

**Jacket Elegy**

It was found in a snowy field, tangled in pines,

attached to the cables of your parachute.

The night my lover runs from her father

I drape it over her, place an ice pack against her head.

I trace the grooves of the eagle

in each brass button, the silver-winged patches of your jacket

that guided you through Pyongyang sky.

Your landing is revealed

in the stitch and weave of the torn lining,

the tangled net of branches bending

to your weight. Inside the steaming forest  
of needles and cones,

I summon you, your coat heavy and cold

as the bag of ice that numbs us

from the strike of his hand,

your hands gnarled from striking stones

until they sparked. In your heat

her shivers grow quiet, fade out

like her bruise into the roots of hair.

I watch for you in the flare

rising out of her father's headlights

through my blinds, the footprints he leaves

stalking us through snow.

While he burns a circle

to see through each window of my house,

BRIAN KOMEI DEMPSTER

I hold her close inside the twilled fabric,  
your tattered nest of blue wool.

Uncle, do you stray between the cover of trees

and the iced banks of a river,  
the way she wavers

between me and her father's home?

*Leave him* were his words in Korean  
as he dragged her across the floor

by the hair. *Stay* I whisper

in her ear until her lumps subside—  
the bag of ice turns to water, to the melted snow

you drank from your cupped hands.

Uncle Hide, when you return to us,  
take cover in the changing shape of your coat,

our refuge of mothballs and guava perfume.

—for Hidemaro Ishida, MIA, Korean War, 1953

**HILLEL SCHWARTZ**

**First International Conference of Hermits, Oxford**

They gather by ones,  
begging for little.

They gather neither  
like clouds nor lichen  
nor dead man's fingers  
on fallen maple.

They gather like  
walnuts in a bowl,  
unshelled, ribbed and ridged,  
circumferential.

They gather unlike  
to unlike, neither  
metamorphic nor  
igneous: simply  
aggregate—nearness  
sudden, proximate.

They gather habit  
to habit, desire  
to vow, love to lend-  
lease in the silent  
coincidence of  
plenary. They speak,

when they choose to speak,  
in grand stochastics,  
unaccustomed to  
the polity of  
etiquette, convent-  
ions of turns, waiting  
hours on chances  
of an afterthought.

They come to agree  
just as bristlecone  
and swordpoint cactus  
would, indifferent  
to resolution.

→

Almost dispersed they  
resolve in a breath  
to meet again some

where/time. No, I lie.  
They leave as they came,  
sporadic, long coarse  
robes in Brownian  
motions, their knapsacks  
half-full of calling  
cards. I lie again.  
They leave with their grips  
light as ever, staffs  
in hand, eyes inward.

Apart perhaps from  
a mended sandal  
strap or cord, they leave  
like old prospectors  
or young ghosts, relieved  
of their possessions,  
to be going back  
to places without  
names, sign-posts, I-pods,  
telephones, -visions.

It was all a hoax.  
Not one hermit came.  
The organizers  
themselves never came.  
A good idea  
before its time. A-  
ristotelian:  
not presences but  
potentials, thousands  
coming from all ends  
of the Earth to be  
alone together.

Should have been a sign.

## HILLEL SCHWARTZ

### Whatever

The greens in my salad are brown.  
The brownouts are blacker.  
The blacks of your eyes are filmier.  
Films are noisier, more violent.  
Violence is chunkier, bloodier.  
Blood's digitally mastered  
in the absence of oxygen  
and oxygen's no longer transparent.  
Transparencies are shades of gray.  
Or is it grey?  
Gray or grey, passives are everywhere  
like dust and air filters. HEPA. HEPAsuper+.  
Everywhere dusty lips are being painted blue  
as if cold and wet:  
blue-grey, blue-gray, whatever.

Color scientists are working on all of this.  
The object of Color Science is matching  
what you see with what you get. Wizziwig,  
wistfulwig, whizzgig, you know. Whatever  
appears on a CRT LED &tc. is lit from behind  
or glows like Gidget from within, so  
the color's a screen color, a Bollywood,  
& not what it seems. What it is  
all depends

on the light  
and what is next to what is  
called saddlesoap or afterglow or moonset or battle fatigue.  
With four colors you can map the world.  
Proving that was a cool thing in calculus  
or trigometrics or heavy geometry or  
toposophy. Which means you don't need much  
around to keep borders in line.  
Ochre grape sienna flesh,  
four Crayolas & you can draw the world.

The world is wetter & warmer  
in some places, glaciers melting  
into the mouths of whales,  
& the poles are drifting

→

on the backs of sea lions.  
You can map all of this,  
with the four inc.s—zion, majesty, gold, black beauty—  
ZMGB or CMYB, See My Baby, whatever.

Color Science maps  
what you can see onto what you can hold.  
Science is the color of gunmetal, which ends  
in something o-logical: zo-o, neur-o, bi-o, meteor-o.  
There are showers all the time now.  
The ground is swollen with what it cannot hold.  
It runs into a fifth color, iron,  
or a seventh color, clay, or the color of water  
on a pond in a storm, whatever  
color that is, o.

**KATE MARTIN ROWE**  
**Inscription for Tamarindo**

***Morpho menelaus***

The blue morpho is like cut sapphire. Scratch that. She was imperially silk, “titanium bright” (guidebook), the color of sky multiplied a hundred—but only on top. That is, when her wings fold up, eyespots appear on her brown-rivered wings that resemble an owl face and, theoretically, scare off predators. Despite all that, she’s only got three to four weeks.

When you’re hired to write the eggshell history of a booming travel destination, it depends on who’s asking whether or not they want the truth. The story may be strung with facts, but that invisible silk strand requires sight.

**What I Saw**

*Los extranjeros* land. The American with the white ponytail and flowered shirt describes “millionaire row” and gets almost weepy. In months, values triple. That’s the kind of growth we’re talking. He and his wife retired a few years back and took up a hobby in buying, selling, and decorating. Gotta stay busy with something.

The local, a hostel owner, reports fewer than ten other *Ticos* own anything. She asks me to count with my own fingers. And, that hotel there, the biggest and the first, dumps raw sewage in the ocean. And, the Spanish tourists are angry because now where will they meet locals and learn to salsa? You should know these things because it’s over. If the past were a hammock, crusted with sand and stretched from the press of sweat and sleep and vision, now would be the time to toss it.

**Stolen**

A camera is removed from the backpack of a tourist. She traces her finger over cracks in the story. If she tells a local about the loss, he shakes his head. If an American, he says how no one ever gave *him* anything.

**Getting Born**

She fights her way out in a room designed for onlookers who've got a hankering for a miracle. Cocoons hung delicately, shoulders touching, from rows of wooden racks. We, the thrill-thirsty, conquering, generous and sincere, magnify her work with lamps and imagine birth has nothing to do with soon-death. Her wings require twenty minutes to harden so we pause. Admire her exotic fragile body, damp—before moving on to the hummingbird gardens.

**YOUNG SMITH**

**Description of a Pear on a Pewter Dish**

*But pears prove to be impossible to describe.*

—Czesław Miłosz

See the blue there shadowed  
beneath the yellow's gloss.

That blue is the sky  
within the cutis of the pear.

At night this sky grows dark  
and unfolds a crust of distant stars.

It is these pale fires within its skin  
that give the pear its taste of heaven.

**YOUNG SMITH**

**Squamata**

Draped on the lens of the gas meter's dial,  
the golden lizard declares her form.

She makes a ripeness where she stands,  
a burl of luster among the raddled ferns:

spathe of copper, breathing thorn  
of brass, her stillness is a climate

of its own—a deed of presence only—  
and all the morning is a captive of her work.

**YOUNG SMITH**

**Poem Attempting to Deny the Body**

Every poem is about the body—except this one.  
This poem refuses the language of the flesh.

If you strike this poem, it will not bruise.  
If you embrace its narrow lines, however

tenderly, it will find no comfort in your touch.  
Put an ear to one of its stanzas: you will detect

no respiration (even if its rhythms sometimes  
duplicate the action of a heart). Above all,

this poem resents the tyranny of the image,  
and is most pleased with itself when most

odorless and pale. It craves the poise  
of a theorem, the dignity of a law; it aspires

to a state of perfect abstraction. Dear reader,  
please, allow my little poem what it desires:

Let it trust, however tenderly, its hope  
that it may live without your voice.

**NATASHA SAJÉ**

**F**

Firethorn: a trope for  
Fucking, which people talk entirely too much about, the  
Flurry of phonemes a substitute,  
Foucault would say. I'm beginning to be  
Free of it. Reading  
Feldenkrais makes me blush, how much it mattered. I'd rather swim than  
Fornicate. Laura asks, how often? It depends what you mean by sex, I say.  
    I never  
Fetishized, was never caught in  
Flagrante delicto.  
Forget the times I'd pull to the side of the road  
For some, heating up at 30  
Fahrenheit outside. It's a  
Falcon honing in on a nest of mice, a venomous  
Fang, a  
Farce in Braille and Esperanto. And  
Freud, was he ever wrong! About inversion, envy, and hysteria. O  
Faucet I've turned to a trickle, O  
Fracas muffled in silk, I don't give a  
Fig—your furor and fuss have  
passed, o bittersweet.

**STEVE WILSON**

**Textuality**

I take myself to be an anthology  
of ancient sensations, texts  
layered one upon the next

until a river crests. I feel the hush of heat  
within my chest. Current, caresses,  
seduction after seduction

as I find myself luxurious beside palms.  
A breeze breaks over the desert.  
Once, Moroccan alleyways played

upon my consciousness,  
and men waiting at the doorways  
to shadowed rooms, opium dens,

secret women. I will not keep it hidden.  
Now, cold white cliffs. Ocean.  
Now, the fragrant fullness of persimmons.

I sense something in me weakens, wears.  
Borrow, then. . . . Steal what you will.  
You have my blessing. These winds are yours.

My silence, yours. Yours, yours alone—  
this whisper of dunes and dark,  
where skin is a landscape we share.

**SHAWN M. DURRETT**

**Salt**

You begged us to slide open the windows, convinced that the whales would hear you. But it was winter, and by then the whales were in Puerto Rico, and from the eighth floor of the hospital, the windows themselves were only illusions welded shut. Below were Boston's gray angles, the streets slowed with dirty snow, the Charles a stretch of black ribbon. You had already lost your feet somewhere near the end of the bed, asking over and over again if the sheet was covering them, bones tender and limp as lines of kelp. *Umbrellas, buggy whips, hoop skirts*—you said, and after spoke only in a series of chirps and clicks that echoed off the walls and back into your open mouth. Your lips were blue and splitting, and you cried for thirst, sipping water from a plastic cup, and when you couldn't sip anymore, opened for chips of ice melting off our fingertips. I looked into a humpback's eye once as it passed under the bow of the boat, saw every barnacle clinging. There was a moment as the whale approached, phosphorescent green rolling just under the surface, that I was sure it would flip us over into the gray sea. I'll remember you when there was no way to smell the harbor, only the body's salt, your arms breaching up and over a white sheet, you surfacing to tip.

**HOLLY IGLESIAS**

**Natural Flair**

Nursing a fever since birth, she saw the scar of her life as less wound than tattoo, something to build a look upon—necklines to draw attention, earrings to distract. Attempts to dress the small appliances, however, met with less success; the toaster cozy was dull, the blender's bib droopy. Desperate, she reverted to accessories, a red tam for the percolator, and for the egg poacher a single strand of pearls.

**HOLLY IGLESIAS**

**Civil Defense Drill No. 6**

Her life grew inflamed, like gums around a tooth that needs pulling, the swelling an impediment to digestion and speech. And so she made pap of her sentences, dipped the tip of Baby's spoon into it, imploring him to open big, then to swallow, those small askings but the first in a succession, where the mouth is taught to take what's given, do what's asked—say *aah—aah* the unwilling portal to tongue depressor, swab, dogma, and drill.

**ROSS R. WHITNEY**

**The Argument**

*No animal has done more to renew interest in animal intelligence than a beguiling, bilingual pygmy chimpanzee named Kanzi, who has the grammatical abilities of a two-and-a-half-year-old child and a taste for movies about cavemen.*

—Eugene Linden, “Can Animals Think?”

Something in me, unreasoning and huge, wants to say that Kanzi—taken from a forest covered by a sky so vast it might have been the sea

inverted magically—that Kanzi could learn so much more than how to press a button for the plastic ring or banana pellet. That she

could learn our alphabet. That she might learn to string real sentences. To learn, like an earnest six-year-old, to compose a letter. To say,

“It is rainy here today. I stayed indoors. I don’t like thunder.” That she could learn addition and subtraction. Something in me begs

to say that more would follow. Geography, social studies, computer science, shop. Silly, that something, but insistent. And some day

someone—maybe even me—might ask Kanzi what the answer is. And she might point to the sky, vast and bright, or to the shadowed

earth, or to the wet cold water in her white china cup. “No, Kanzi, the harder answer to the harder question. You don’t understand.”

*Again we’ve argued. To a forty-year work in progress we add another volume. No one will read them. No one will learn.*

*But see. The rain comes in shaken sheets.  
It blasts, and it sifts. The sky tips a bowl  
of purity our way. We could cup our hands.*

*And if we wait, the sun. It never fails.  
The sun holds back and lets the rain  
finish. If we wait, we'll hold the light.*

**DANIEL LUSK**

**Woodchuck in Winter**

Orpheus stirs in the dark  
to the blinking of the digital clock.  
Power out, time stopped,  
it's no use turning on a light.  
House buried comfortably in snow.

He won't bother to put batteries  
in the radio for news.  
Thoreau was right: theft happens, fires,  
murder. When they repeat, it's only gossip.

He recalls the scents of green grass,  
pungent broccoli, sweet basil.  
He favors parsley, good for the prostate.  
When spring comes he'll remember  
what it's for as the young  
bare their tattoos again. For now

these invisible walls may as well  
have trees flowering with butterflies.  
And glyphs of soft-furred females  
he's encountered—love and loss  
his only ailments. As for a theology,  
the same as for politics: there is fat  
for now and fat for later.

That humans have souls is a nice conceit.  
That they preserve their carcasses, quaint.  
Death is not a mystery to disturb one's sleep.  
He contents himself that the deity,  
as someone once remarked,  
"isn't on a cloud; she is the cloud."

**KEVIN DUCEY**

**Chisholm Goodnight Loving**

**1**

Showing up to class  
early I found my poet  
leaning over the  
refuse bin set beside  
the sidewalk, inspecting  
the glitter of the pebbled lid.  
“Oh, hey,” he said. “Have  
you ever looked at these  
garbage cans before? I mean,  
*really* looked—the  
little stones here  
sparkle so.”

No. No, I  
never noticed. I believe  
the whole thing’s  
coated in urethane.

“Why do you suppose,”  
he said, “we put our trash  
in such bright things?”

**2**

He was not a real  
cowboy. He had been  
a bookkeeper in St. Paul  
and he came out  
to Montana for his health.  
He had a bad  
tuberculosis, and  
after a few months  
he got so sick  
the old man brought  
him into town and  
left him. He said to  
the rest of us: One  
of you ought to stay.  
He looked right at me  
and I said I would stay.

The boy kept hemorrhaging  
all over everything and  
I took newspapers and spread  
them out on the floor and on  
the bedclothes.  
He did not want me  
to leave him for a minute.

**3**

I was a guest at Nestor's Hall when  
Telemachus came looking for his father.

The old man sat the boy down, told him  
stories of the war, Odysseus's parting

by the shore. We rolled the joint and  
passed it, listening to the old man

talking about himself. He liked nothing  
better. After some time he stopped and fixed

the boy with a look. "Your sister—  
don't you have a sister?"

**4**

Marion Morrison in 3-D rides  
upon his lone prairie. Git-along Daniel  
Water'dstock Drew—Herman Confidence

Melville cries out in the wilderness.  
A visionary: Daniel Boone or mad  
bomber. The stock out of Texas

were immune to tick-borne disease, and  
when the cattle drives rolled into  
Kansas all the imported Hereford

of the locals up and died. Rail- (and other)  
heads shifted west—away from contagion  
& settlement: Loving, Goodnight, Chisholm,

geologic time an accumulation of  
paranoia (Dodge, Hays, Abilene;  
every extension of the line pushing

John's face—he weren't a real  
cowboy—up against the native's—  
as if one had a choice).

5

I had been there with the kid  
a week. Mr. Fuller came down one night  
and he told me  
you'd better go to bed. I hadn't

been to bed all that time,  
only slept in a chair  
once in a while, because he  
wouldn't sleep unless he could lay

his head on my arm. So I  
went and laid down in another  
room. About midnight  
Mr. Fuller come for me. "You'd

better come now. He's  
asking for you."

I guess he knew  
he was going. So I went  
back where he was, and he

wanted to know if I would  
lay down beside him and let  
him rest his head on my  
shoulder. In a few minutes

he mumbled something about  
Ethel, his sister I think, and then  
he was gone. I went off to  
a honky-tonk first damn thing—

6

Ethel, his sister, though  
maybe he meant  
Ethelred, the Saxon King  
who married a  
Norman princess and  
opened the door  
to William—that boy  
was always talking  
like that and we were  
going to miss him  
that winter no doubt.

Not a real cowboy, he  
kept saying the  
cattle drove us—*not*  
the other way 'round.

7

The shade of young  
Elpenor loitered at the  
end of the bar, coming  
forward as the drink  
was poured, resting  
his shadow across my  
arm as I drank. “I was  
a bookkeeper from St. Paul,”  
he said. “Who was I  
to sing all night  
to the beasts? When I  
was young I climbed  
the roof of my parents’  
house. I played in the  
graveyard across the street from  
where they’d buried that  
Tom Horn. He’s one  
who outlived his time  
and shot the wrong boy.  
Or, maybe it wasn’t a  
mistake. You can ask

→

him yourself—when he  
comes up for a drink.  
He kept a cabin in  
Montana that the FBI  
dismantled and presented  
as evidence in Sacramento.  
I have a sister, tell  
her not to marry Canute,  
the Dane. Make my  
headstone of granite, flecked  
with mica—  
let it shine under your sun.”

**MARION K. STOCKING**

**BOOKS IN BRIEF: Another Kind of Best**

This year **Billy Collins** is editor of *The Best American Poetry 2006* (David Lehman, series editor, New York: Scribner Poetry, 2006, 224 pp, \$30 hardcover, \$16 paper). I am always grateful when editors spell out their criteria for selection as Collins has, generously, in his introduction, “Seventy-five Needles in the Haystack of Poetry” (reprinted in the September/October 2006 *American Poetry Review*). He wants, first off, to hear a human voice speaking to him. He wants to be oriented clearly at the beginning, either in the title or the first line, with “a degree of surface clarity.” He wants to be taken somewhere, “an imaginative journey,” one in which the poet may seem unsure where he or she is headed, but which may proceed from “clarity to mystery,” guided by a mind thinking. That mind may turn on itself in a comic self-awareness. At its best the poem combines “an acute awareness of tradition with a unique freshness of voice,” resulting sometimes in playful irreverence. It should by all means provide linguistic pleasure—“verbal and imaginative thrills.” And always for him a true poem has a form, either traditional or invented, and “a sense of manifest content.”

Collins is explicit about what turns him off—largely the reverse of these positive qualities. And he has his prejudices: for example, a poet longing for his approval should never write memories of family nor use the word *cicada*.

Choosing from the contents of 1,754 magazines, Collins made his final selection from poems that “invited me to return to their first lines again.” Among these is Megan Gannon’s two-page poem entitled “List of First Lines,” beginning “when the winter sits as if // when a wrist gives.” Though I enjoy the assonances and spontaneous rhymes, I am left wondering how the editor could have selected this without the poet’s long essay on the composition of her poem, which involved her trying out first lines, all beginning *when*, hoping that one would generate a second. None did, but the false starts themselves constitute this poem. I suppose that for Collins, the thirty-two anaphoric lines, none of them referring to Grandpa or including the word *cicada*, were enough.

I’ll say a little more about the poets’ notes—a distinguishing and very welcome feature of Lehman’s series. The biographical introductions are crisp and useful, telling us where to look for

more of each person's work. I very rarely need the poets' explanatory essays to know how to read their poems (flagrant exceptions: Gannon, Richard Newman, Paul Muldoon), but I did enjoy them—many longer than their poems—for their engaging prose style and occasional glimpses into the working artist's atelier. Some notes are prickly with puns (e.g., Daniel Gutstein, R. S. Gwynn), some valuable in their supplementary narrative (Bao Phi, Donald Platt), some disarmingly crisp (J. Allyn Rosser: "I think of this poem as a kind of literary panic attack" and Ilya Bernstein: "This poem is about Lenny Schlossberg, an actual person. When I showed it to him, he looked skeptical and said, 'This is what passes for poetry nowadays?'"). When I'd decided Jesse Ball's "Speech in a Chamber," beginning "In this book birds are taught their flying," was pure nonsense, I turned for help to her note and was reassured of the correctness of my first impression when I found a half-page "conversation between a crow and his wife," deliciously incoherent. Here's a frivolous suggestion: read the notes first and see which "invite you to return" to the poem.

■

On to the poems themselves. For Collins, as for Wordsworth, pleasure is the principal end of poetry. What has this editor assembled for our pleasure? May I exploit his playful spirit and his explicit criterion and make a poem of first lines? I'll begin with page one and continue from there:

Into every life a little ax must fall  
 I'll not be doing that now, nor the tropical islands,  
 You walk out in the morning  
 Not the smoothness, not the insane clocks on the square,  
 In this book birds are taught their flying  
 We wouldn't write this,  
 Lenny Schlossberg, with a wonderful musical voice,  
 Your preposterous death I contained  
 When a sentence is composed of two independent

What sort of editor selected these poems, lured by the appeal of their first lines? First, someone obsessive about process: *doing to write to composed*. Fair enough, for a poet who cares about form; between the self-conscious artifice of many of these poems (e.g., Lawrence Raab's self-referential "The Great Poem," Julie Larios with her "Double Abecedarian," Jennifer L. Knox's automatic writing) and the many craft-concerned notes, his book is a

treasure trove of experimental techniques. Second, the editor is someone with a dark slant: *not, not, not, wouldn't to preposterous death*. This analysis may seem unfair to a book that has an abundance of light verse, engaging humor, and technical and imaginative playfulness. Yet beneath many of these verbal high-jinks lurks a shadow; watch out for John Ashbery. Third, I suspect that the music of the line is not a primary criterion. Many of these poems ask to be read as lineated prose. For me the sole first line that sings out in my list is the one beginning, "Not the smoothness, not the insane clocks on the square," which initiates a pattern of heroic couplets and continues, "the scent of manure in the municipal parterre, / not the fabrics, the sullen mockery of Tweety Bird, / not the fresh troops that needed freshening up. If it occurred. . ." and concludes dourly,

So often it happens that the time we turn around in  
soon becomes the shoal our pathetic skiff will run aground in,  
And just as waves are anchored to the bottom of the sea  
we must reach the shallows before God cuts us free.

OK, students. Spot passage quiz. Who's this poet? Were you going to guess that those classic couplets were John Ashbery's? When you read "A Worldly Country" for yourself you'll discover one of the darkest poems in the volume.

I'll stay with these first-liners a little longer to suggest the range of Collins's volume. The first introduces Kim Addonizio's "Verities," eight proverbs it has amused her to turn inside out. She continues,

Every dog has its choke chain.  
Every cloud has a shadow.  
Better dead than fed.  
He who laughs, will not last.

Need I go on? The gimmick runs away with the game. And there are other selections that rely on a smart wrinkle for their initial appeal, good for a grin and a giggle. On the other hand, Krista Benjamin's "Letter from My Ancestors," beginning "We wouldn't write this," imagines a voice for the generations who labored in the fields and offices without ever having time for such "musings," so that their children and their children's progeny (i.e., the author) would have "the luxury of time" to be poets. Benjamin's poem is the first of many simple personal narratives in the volume. The best of these (like Ilya Bernstein's poem about Lenny Schlossberg, "You Must Have Been a Beautiful

Baby,” and Gaylord Brewer’s “Apologia to a Blue Tit”—the bird, that is—) project voices growing richer as they move through the process of discovery-through-composition and arrive at a closure that avoids sentimentality. These likeable poems remind me of the form and function of many of Billy Collins’s own poems.

■

The range of poetry Collins has selected is broad, from Addonizio’s little joke to George Green’s rich, scholarly “The Death of Winkelmann,” which except for its informal academic voice might slide comfortably into a Victorian anthology. More colloquial in tone, Mary Jo Salter’s “A Phone Call to the Future” also handles a mercurial sense of time skillfully and freshly. (Part 1 begins, “Who says science fiction / is only set in the future?” Part 2, “This was the Fifties: as far back as I go.” And Part 3, “It’s the end of the world.”) R. S. Gwynn’s selections from *Sects from A to Z* speak in a voice familiar from generations of limericks. Here’s one for the pun in *Sects*:

The Shakers thought sexual activity  
Was a wastefully sinful proclivity:  
    “No more sleeping in pairs!  
    Go make tables and chairs!  
Sublimate and increase productivity.”

It should be obvious that I’m a pushover for comic poems. When I was first reading for the *BPJ* in the 1950s I was chuckling at a poem I was screening and heard Robin Glauber, one of the founding editors, say, “Marion laughed. Take that one!” But the trouble with many of the poems we receive nowadays is that they get to the reading-aloud stage, reap our laughter, and then someone says, “Would we really want to read it a second time?” And it goes into its SASE. Collins has included a few that after my grateful giggle would have gone back to the poet. Gwynn’s religious spoofs would (sorry) go. Kay Ryan’s little joke, “Thin,” is only that. Tom Christopher’s “Rhetorical Figures,” a linguistic romp beginning, “When a sentence is composed of two independent / clauses, the second being weaker than the first, / it is called *One-Legged Man Standing*.” He goes on to invent twenty “figures for various bizarre rhetorical situations,” a catalogue that quickly wears thin.

But Collins has selected many I would come back to and read

aloud to anyone who would listen. I wouldn't have missed Betsy Retallack's "Roadside Special," which climaxes a catalogue of automotive bargains her husband has succumbed to ("No more / '88 Honda Accord, no power steering, jinxed transmission") with a lightly comic essay contrasting the desires of men and women:

Men want complicated toys and simple relationships.

Women want simple toys and "interesting" relationships.

Continuing the automotive theme, master poet David Wagoner's "The Driver" begins,

It's a safe car. It belongs to somebody else,

And you've parked it legally near the right doorway,

And you've made sure there's a tank of gas

We recognize the voice of the perfect getaway driver. For once, amazingly, to our perverse delight, after several heart-stopping interruptions, everything goes right. Not a breath of piety, irony, or satire, unless it's a tweaking of all the books and films in which everything goes wrong for the robbers. (Don't look for Juvenalian satire in this anthology; what satire I spot is gently Horatian.)

Wagoner's poem satisfies almost all of Collins's criteria for poetry, as does Paul Violi's "Counterman." I enjoy how "Counterman" establishes its voices, orients and launches us on a journey (end not foreshadowed), takes increasing pleasure in language, and (though the manifest content—ordering a sandwich—seems slight) leads to a sly shift that transforms it into a work of art about art. It has two delicious rhythms, the dance of the stichomythia in the first part and the preposterous formal pacing of the second half, leading to . . . oh, I'd have to quote the whole long poem. Go buy the book.

It should be clear by now that I have especially enjoyed the conversational and colloquial range of voices in this year's collection. David Kirby's "Seventeen Ways from Tuesday," a fine example, gives the illusion of being a free-flow chatter about art and poetry while emerging as an elegantly crafted work of art itself. Mark Halliday's "Refusal to Notice Beautiful Women" is chatty also, but beautifully paced chat and a masterpiece of comic irony. And then there's Donald Platt's "Two Poets Meet," honoring Carlos Drummond de Andrade and Elizabeth Bishop with a rhythmic patterning that makes reading aloud almost like dancing. Here's the first stanza, establishing the cadence:

When my two favorite poets in the whole infinitely worded  
     world met,  
 and they met  
 only once, it was by chance on the sidewalk at night in Rio

I was also interested in several poems in this volume that explore how the mind reacts under pressure. David Yezzi's "The Call" examines his ambivalent response to hearing that a very irritating acquaintance has died. Mark Kraushaar in "Tonight" takes the reader through the way the mind behaves when trying not to think of an unthinkable threat. Ashbery's accretion of seemingly random details, some jokey and messy, some strangely calm, accumulates a weight of generational meaning. But I found few that focus their gaze steadily outward. Laura Cronk drops into her blissful "Sestina for the Newly Married" a parenthetical line, "The world was at war, which is a whole other sestina." Carl Dennis, in his sad little satire of "Our Generation," one that once carried protest signs and is now absorbed in "children and lawns and cars and beach towels," wistfully hopes that generations to come may more effectively picket for other values.

Strongest in their social voices are the three poets who deal in their different ways with the issue of race. Marilyn Nelson's sonnet "Albert Hinkley" is one of a dozen to be published together with a dozen by Elizabeth Alexander on the harassment of teachers and students at a Connecticut school opened in 1833 for "young ladies of color." Terrance Hayes, in "Talk," bitterly portrays the distress of a black student-athlete in a posh boarding school, boiling from a verbal slur from a teammate, torn between standing up for his race and keeping the peace by playing it cool. A strong and subtle poem. In Bao Phi's "Race," the "manifest subject" is a car race between Whiteboy and the Vietnamese Huey. Although Asian Americans had introduced illegal import street racing, mainstream wannabes had co-opted the sport. Here's Huey's view of Whiteboy:

Some called Whiteboy the Mandarin because he had  
 Kanji tattoos on his arms that he thought said  
*Strength in love* but really said something like  
 Unreliable delivery service  
 And he would wear a purple satin coat with dragon and phoenixes  
 →

Which made him look like Confucius threw up all over him  
While drunk.

The reader rides with Huey as he narrates the race. Here he is,  
shifting into fourth gear as he

slithers down the sleek roads wet with neon perspiration and  
the streetlights are whizzing by so fast that they look like  
they're Ping-Pong balls popping past the table of the horizon  
and he gets a little scared now scared enough to laugh a little  
more and that whiteboy wannabe wankster waste is so far  
behind he can't even dream of catching up.

I won't give away the ending, but I know of no other poet with  
this command of narrative drive (pardon *my* pun), demonstrating  
how far performance poetry has come as dramatic art. How I'd  
like to hear Bao Phi perform it. Indeed, if a selection of the poets  
in Collins's collection went on the road with their poems they  
should be reading to packed houses.

The "imaginative diversity" Collins aims for—of forms, subjects,  
and voices—has been one of the delights in his *Best*, but he  
makes no effort to reflect the whole spectrum of poetry today,  
from the infrared to the ultraviolet. (He has only a nine-poet  
overlap with Lyn Hejinian's selection for 2004.) In one way this  
volume reflects the paucity in contemporary American poetry of  
poems that confront global environmental, political, medical,  
and social problems. But no editor, selecting from the periodical  
verse of a single year, has claimed the absolute "best." The glory  
of David Lehman's series is the cumulative wealth of the twenty  
annual collections. Those who complain about the decline in  
American poetry in our day should come to the banquet and  
gorge on the delectable abundance. And honor the poets by  
buying their books.