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### COVER

**Joan Braun**, "Tree Sacrifice Series #6," Epson print, 2006.  
Insert: "Baby Jesus and Dead Iraqi Child," Epson print, 2006.  
For more of the artist's work, visit [www.joanbraun.com](http://www.joanbraun.com).

**Mary Greene**, design



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

# BPJ

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

TO  
SUSAN TICHY  
FOR HER POEM  
"STORK"  
IN THE SUMMER 2007 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.

**JEREMIAH WEBSTER**

**August 15, 1945**

Worse than any wizard  
from Oz throwing back the curtain  
on his pyrotechnics was the day  
God died

and became human:  
after his dynasty above  
the sun, Hirohito,  
divine wind, kamikaze,  
no more.

The broadcast  
went out with the static  
like any other voice,  
went out from the lungs.

And the believer  
cut back the branches  
of his garden  
until white river stones  
glowed with the same light  
as the exclusive moon.

**M. A. SCHAFFNER**

**Oh Dorothy**

A scarlet monkey—golden epaulets—  
blows on his whistle and screams. The sacristan  
trembles with his little bells and runs. Just once,

I wish, as the rest dive under their desks,  
I'd like the chain of command to dangle straight,  
each link clean and visible, and weigh

no more than I can carry without cursing  
the day I entered this paper city.  
The monkey spits out vocals—a question?—

then scratches out the first eye looking back.  
It's hard for everyone, even for the boss,  
who looks at the tissue caught in his nails

as if for an answer, and proclaims  
the meeting over—regarding the next,  
time and the agenda will follow shortly.

**CHRISTINA LAPREASE**

**Low Country**

This is a city built on its dead,  
but brick, mortar, & knucklebone

crosses made things pretty, all sweet-tea  
& happily, smoked the voodoo out. Now

children sleep perfumed, in velvet  
rooms, dreaming of sugars & foptails

while keys & pistols carve a hush in white-  
pillared homes where ruby-throated malice

keeps nicely. Still, nobody knows why  
the dogwoods won't grow, & yet every

night there is the man beneath  
the streetlamp, a dark mouth

blooming as he moans out a little,  
drop-thumbs his five-string, singing

how one day he'll rise up & take  
everything, *oh, everything.*

**CHRISTINA LAPREASE**

**Antechamber**

Lacking my other, the blue-ribbon body  
who begged for me with his teeth,

I remain, not sweeter, but always willing  
to swoon. Most nights I am best when fevered

& postured for soft in a four-post bed for one.  
I prefer cambric, frilled necklines & thin

quietudes of camphor & chamomile. Still, I covet  
more than these windows of apprehended wind,

a geography cruel with cold & carrion.  
Not for want of green weathers, but an urge

to hold the warm revolver of a heart, to feel,  
at last, the marrow of something in my hands.



**NANCE VAN WINCKEL**

**Purportedly**

I was told it was a holy book. I'd heard there were no bells  
and no amens and no body or blood to suck on. But bright  
shuddering wings, brave scuttering unretractable claws.

I was told there was *yes* and *no* at the same time, sorrow  
licking the back of joy, and vice versa, which was how I liked it.

I was told I'd be stripped clean, rendered to bone, and purportedly  
nothing would be lost of the mind's shimmer and tidal turnings.

The future would stop hammering the past: the clicking  
cataclysms stilled, and the black carp swimming up.

And all of this made me open the book and finger the pages  
of antique vellum. All of this made my eyes water, blur  
and look away, only to catch sight of myself in the window

and see that I was, yes, too old now. Old and tired  
and slumped too long among the recycled mists  
of badly lived days to dare go further, to track on  
from word to word, to deepen the pursuit.

**SANDRA KOHLER**

**The Sentence**

The sky this morning says rain, despite the forecast. Such withholding, such dry reluctance. In the bleak gray-green scape of late summer, a cloud of blackbirds swirls off toward the river, which is low, slow, sluggish, barely covering the bones of its bed. They are ominous and omen: meaningless beauty, symmetry controlled as the flight of a child's audio-guided plane, drawn together, centrifuge, gyre; ruled, tight, precise. And meaning nothing. Meaning. Nothing. Yesterday, the first day of school: on the island where I walk, the farmer's son and his wife come out of their new house with their two girls, one too small for school, the other going for her first day: all of them wait with her. They are blonde and sturdy and unfinished looking. The older girl skips from side to side, caught up in the rhythm of a sentence she knows but cannot parse. We are gamers, game. What schools us is the world. Is meaning in the rhythm or the sentence? Rhythm is the sentence; we are bound to it, by it. I can't break the hold of my sentence.

**SANDRA KOHLER**

**A Quilt**

Waking from dream to snow: an inch of it covering the yard. I get up, start making my bed, turn on the radio—there's proof, someone's saying, that Saddam Hussein has aided Al Qaeda. I'm smoothing white cotton sheets, shaking out pillows. The Coast Guard has been deployed on military duty for the first time since the Vietnam War. I'm pulling up the comforter. An anonymous official warns we could use nuclear weapons, a preemptive strike. The quilt I'm spreading was made by my husband's three sisters, a gesture of love for his marriage to a woman so different from them she might as well have come from an alien world. The quilt is patched, appliquéd, embroidered; its tiny stitches taken by hands used to diapering babies, scrubbing floors, paring vegetables, kneading dough. The news grows worse each hour. A gray train of cumulus over the northern horizon is turning rose. This moment is cold and precious as a sliver of ice in the mouth of someone dying of thirst.

**LEONORE HILDEBRANDT**  
**A Dream More than Twice**

Again—you are left at the station, distraught,  
narrowly missing the train after the myriad  
obstacles got the best of you,

again your father touches your hair  
and you cry because you are young and  
you'd rather be waking from it.

Then you lie there flushed, surprised, dismantled,  
your hands wandering about yourself—  
a living belly, two legs—until your

fingers, their harvest of freedom preciously  
gathered over the years, wrap you  
in ripples of light.

**LEONORE HILDEBRANDT**

**Plowing the Canvas**

Considering narcotics or a cliff  
to jump from to escape life's spasms,

its stench, its futile clinging to reflexes,  
and also since we dig ourselves

into the ground while still warm—  
the question of how to make it

from one margin to the other,  
to traverse the canvas via lines

of color, in rows of beans and corn,  
leaving spaces, at the end, for air.

**CHRISTOPHER MATTHEWS**

**Fetching**

Because aggression damns us to a clumsy  
intimacy with what we misunderstand,  
I took my big plastic lime-green

baseball bat and pitched to myself  
and knocked with a shivering *thwonk*  
my last Whiffle ball across both fences—

our six-foot wooden one and their  
waist-high chain-link, and the weedy ten-foot  
no-man's-land in between—and watched it

land like an empty skull among the sad  
toupees of grass, shed quills of ill birds,  
and a dead tree's old propellers of seed

in their dusty backyard. Within minutes  
a woman my mother's age in a flimsy  
worn-out dress led me through their house

to the back, where she set a foot on the snout  
of their scabby little sausage of a pit-bull  
so I could kneel and retrieve my ball—

so I could see, as the dress pulled back,  
her legs and their dark inflammations,  
dizzy with bruises, pitted in a pattern

concentrated at the ankles. Sure,  
now the mind lurches at causes—  
but we have to ignore what I had no idea of

to see what I learned: What skin felt like  
when it crawled, and how to begin the unfinished  
education in how to feel indebted

to what makes it crawl. All because,  
like some ancient city's founder, she showed me  
the way and kept the beast down;

all because she dipped her hand  
in a birdbath's stew of bugs and cigarettes  
and flicked it on the hide of that which

had not yet learned surrender.  
And right there sprang up  
some muddy dream's first bud.

**GREG WRENN**  
**One of the Magi**

Buggy baby, the Thou  
in the deep feedbox

that rams snort around,  
I'm shaking a vial

of my fragrant  
blood. Other resin's

in my tatty pockets.  
O Mumsey and "Dad"

and you donkeys braying  
toward Aries and Vero Beach,

you hogs inhaling  
half-thawed Swanson slops—

clear the barn, he's  
mine. I see his unhealed

wound, a fresh  
umbilical stump

that purses and dilates  
so urgently.

Do I unstopper,  
pour, and smear?

Gift him everything  
human, myrrhed virus?

**GREG WRENN**

**Epithalamium**

Startled by the pealing beep  
of his text, leaving my rolling chair  
for his waterbed, I'm his newest  
Internet bride. My belly's  
down, my back's waxed. My lean,  
starved womb's  
a slight rectal bloom. O my rinsed-out  
entrails, surely rife with  
microcuts. So easily he works  
into me like a mallard driving its bill  
through retention-pond mire.  
He finishes & I'm warm inside.  
Will I carry our self-replicating child to term?

**JENNIFER BORGES FOSTER**

**[Sew together the brittle leaves]**

Sew together the brittle leaves and wait for wind.  
Hold the blank sheet, stay the fastfortunate tearing,  
linger for the messages the breeze declines to bring  
in its haphazard push; wait and watch the world's  
waneslope, tugbonnet, give and take, take.

I hear we are lonesome but languishing more  
is the bitter spill at the bottom of the cup—  
imagine you uncurl like tea  
to find no mouth wants the tobacco strandishness of you,  
you are smokecertain and cooling as morning  
gives way to other wishes.

The Frenchman packs his boxes with such deliberate sorrow  
and somewhere my ancestors are cellcycling into something  
we could call purpose or mastmatter,  
the bow of a ship breaking around Cape Horn  
centuries past Sephardic escape.

Fall asleep in the bath and wake to the smell of green,  
the hanging plant made dappled glass of you  
when the steam and small wind  
met its tender articulations,  
littering you pretty in rest,  
arranging you as the innate patina of inclement fate.

My mother's mother was made twice  
when the ship carved its shoulder into the green side  
of paradise—this morning one of her called me wanting matzo  
while the other sucked a wooden toy in a lavamade grave,  
still knowing herself better by the smell of goatsoap  
and the choking sound the wheel made in a rut  
when the hospital was too far from home.

The only storm called perfect  
takes from itself first  
and will leave you with the debris of a scattered life—  
sew together the brittle leaves and wait for wind,  
for the chiming sound of a home  
still audible in the fogpath of fleeing.

**JENNIFER BORGES FOSTER**

**from Seraph**

**1**

Uriel, you are in the attic again, sewing shadows to yourself,  
the peaked roof and dawn doing justice to your struggles  
while you knit a semblance of humanity to your edges,  
muss your hair into fine triangles, and cast prisms to the walls.  
Little sleep is needed; when I wake I pretend not to notice you  
blowing hills and rivers into my ears. I pretend that you  
do not check for a rattle in my chest when you press your head there,  
that you look so human when you light your cigarettes, that you  
are ravenous because of hunger. Uriel, you forgot that the doorway  
in the back of the attic is a dropoff and walked out,  
stood there flutterless, your naive wings barely stirring the air.

**2**

Uriel, as fall lisps into winter,  
the crows' beaks seem to be disappearing.  
Tell me that this is an act of the Lord, that like Gerard,  
I must find faith in words after seeing so many blackshod bodies  
lose their place in this world. Tell me that it is the Lord's hand  
that marks the trees with charcoal sketches and the sky with ashy  
aftermath, so that we can read there the presence of the unified  
heart, the  
dismissed pure matter, the stringy selfmark we hide for shame  
of similarity. Uriel, you have been cast down from the place  
where the crows now go. Uriel, our divinity is uncertain.  
Walk with me while the crows still sit beside the near fallen leaves,  
while their black bodies still fissure the gray-blue plait of sky,  
walk with me and watch for the certain cool burn of their heavenly  
retreat—  
then take me back to the attic, to your white arms, and do not  
speak of God.

3

Uriel, as a child I would wake to walk from the deceptive houses.  
Each day would take me from the placard rows, the neat sickness,  
each day would take me through the forest to the horses, whose  
barn smelled  
of hay, whose hooves smelled of dirt, whose sides gleamed solid  
and forgiving.  
It was holy to lie in the tangle of those wounding limbs, to breathe  
in the eaves of the  
astounding ribcage. It was holy to beat the ground behind us as  
morning rose on  
the still unjust world. Uriel, I sleep in the city and the city stretches  
its eaves for the sleeping.  
I sleep in the city and wake to walk. I walk in the city and the city  
is entranced in growling slumber.  
I go to the islands, the city ferries me there in its palm, the city  
says, you cannot leave the people.  
The people build furnaces and the city burns. The people build pipes  
and the city floods.  
The people sleep in the city, and I dream of crawling into the belly  
of a horse, of breathing in  
the pink light cast between the slatted bones. Uriel, the Lord told  
the Israelites not to multiply horses  
unto themselves, lest they return to Egypt wrathful. I have not  
multiplied horses unto myself,  
though I know their limbs to be consecration. I have not left the  
city, though the city never wakes.

**JEFF McRAE**  
**Picking Stone**

I call this one the empty bag of money  
and this one trip to Vegas,  
pocket aces, lacey windows, honeymoon suite.  
Hot day kiss my back. Here—  
I call this some bizarre unknown changed life,  
a wife, a perfect afternoon. Here—  
this sweltering dirt field.  
I'm what fifteen or something dreamy? You can see  
this bucketful, load weight . . . Exacta to win,  
gin, juniper, madness of rock, stock, barrel.  
Skin, my skin. Little flesh like fresh paint  
peeling under the weight of work,  
so my little glass of water, so my little breeze.  
I call this one mother, this father.  
How have you been? Let's begin  
by jumping ship. I call this clipper wind, port.  
Avenue of dotting white pine, this is family  
and ancestor and custom and control  
over a bowel function slipping away.  
This is artifact, way, a being mere memory,  
mere tradition. And still picking stone,  
still heat. Wind whipping this field up  
and over the trees; each stone's smoke signal—  
what language to inject in this contract this epilogue?  
Goodbye yard and Guernsey and Brown Swiss and Jersey.  
What's the impression of a field wall?  
Blood, blister open, oozing on a handle,  
an eye lashed on the woods road.  
Blood on a sheet, my son  
who will know nothing of that New England,  
that exact field, those buildings, routine,  
pounds of produce, milk, meat of earth.

**PETER MUNRO**  
**Animal Kingdom**

*Shall I be still in suit?  
Have I no harvest but a thorn  
To let me blood, and not restore  
What I have lost with cordial fruit?*  
—George Herbert, “The Collar”

*“Sir,” she replied, “even the dogs  
under the table eat the children’s scraps.”*  
—Mark 7:28, NEB

**1. Survival of the Fittest**

I wish I moved like a beast, brutally  
obedient to all animal law,  
haunch and foreleg drawn taut to beautifully

strike prey or take a female. Smooth on paws  
of a cat, I would pad through a silence  
altered when lust and hunger spread my jaws

to a roar, thoughtless in the violence  
stringing sinew to bone, which iron and sperm  
whisper blindly through my core. If I sensed

estrus, the urgent, red tempo of germ  
cells, and mounted in a surge sharp as fire,  
the female’s ruff in my mouth rolling warm,

and if I stalked through the dark unattired  
in wisdom but full of the awful grace  
that every animal bears like desire,

I would not chafe this diction of restraint  
against my skin until I am erased.

**2. Antistochastic**

Since I am a beast it would make sense  
to move like one, to drawl the language  
of the skin across this present tense

slowly, dripping with sunlight, languid  
in my pleasure. Sleek as a porpoise  
leaping, muscling up from liquid,

I should flex my blood with no purpose  
beyond the kill or sex. But strictures  
inflect me and I loudly practice

the law scribed in this richly textured  
cassock, this word made meat that I wear  
past imperfect, fractaled Scripture

coded along procreation's hairs,  
chromosomes raveled like asps and smooth  
as adders, where, latent in word-pairs,

a lion dies of a broken tooth,  
a lamb frisks in the garden of youth.

**3. Knowledge**

Attired in wisdom, I am struck  
stupid. Commerce in the lingo  
of squander renders my nut shucked,

money-brained. Wild as a dingo,  
blood pelts whole vocabularies  
past a future tense with jingos

and hucksters, power and glory,  
preachers and prophets and cut-rate  
retail sales. Mine offertory

biddeth high unto Big Mac. Great  
value. Full meal deal. Extra cheese.  
Communion and fries consecrate

glut. Numbed by abundance, I feast  
against the death my dearth betrays.  
I am the kind of bartered beast

who knows, and thus must choose to pray,  
who, knowing, forgets to be praise.

**4. Moral Animal**

This narrow kingdom of death  
defines my prayer. When germ cells  
encrypt scripture and a deaf,

blood-hardened penis retells  
laws of nature, when a bleached  
blonde sags to all fours and sells

lots drawn on her womb, her breached,  
Golgotha portal hammered  
at by three-piece-suits who preach

money, and when I stammer  
my want, hungry and alone,  
what harsher desire clamors

through the harsh desire I own?  
I praise from narrow domains  
hollowed in tablets of bone

because these peptides contain  
living, as the law ordains.

**5. Cryptich**

My soul has a bone-splint.  
I pray the prayers in genes.  
I repent my blue-print

for flame and tongue. I sing  
my want in the inner  
sanctum of want. I glean

fallen crumbs, a sinner  
claiming procreation  
rights, or at least dinner.

My rough incarnation  
slouched in that instant God  
set self-replication

sets God in motion. Flawed,  
body split from the holy  
as if a crypt for awe,

molecular, lonely,  
I bear God, slowly.

**6. Animal of the Cloth**

Wearing the vesture  
of a dog, I've humped  
among investors

in the fuck biz. Pimps,  
and their prodigals  
in high heels and simp-

ers, weave madrigals  
of silk and honey,  
promise miracle

stiffeners, money-  
sleek love or at least  
good times. All moony-

eyed, I've pierced the greased  
birth canal and touched  
Golgotha's bright beast

bleating praise, the breach  
mitosis completes.

**7. Meiosis**

Each gamete chipped  
off the old block,  
each image spit-

shined and half-cocked  
haploid as Christ,  
each soul unfrocked

by body and twiced  
nicely, each skinned-  
alive and sliced-

in-two gene-skein  
coded with ad  
campaigns absconds

with one half Dad  
and Mom, burgles  
the crypt of sad

news, those squiggles  
Jesus juggles.

**8. Oracle**

If the knit  
between soul  
and flesh sets

soul equal  
to flesh, I'd  
loaf easy,

the lush juice  
of a plum  
smeared across

my tongue. Glazed  
purple skin  
offers praise

enough, burst  
in my mouth,  
if I trust

the dark fruit,  
my sweet heart.

**9. Broken Word**

Blood-thumped  
iambs  
unslump.

Enjamb-  
ment breaks  
my I

AM a-  
cross lines  
that ex-

alt mol-  
ecules,  
the syl-

lables  
this an-  
imal

conforms  
to form.

**10. After the Assay**

Bro  
ken  
by

Dar  
win's  
wis

dom,  
I  
claim

de  
sire  
is

blazed  
breath:  
faith

less  
death.

**KAREN JOHNSON**

**Deep Winter**

It happens every year, the same  
imperceptible crossing of  
the light, the future perfect  
counterpoint to the beginning of  
dragging the shovels out of the barn,  
mounting the plow, the blower cleaned and  
candles ready for the darkening  
which has already come  
which will always be  
which is no more and no less  
than a flake on the back of the ox  
which once pulled down the high wall  
of the shed with one shake  
of its head, teeth clenched tight on the tether  
and the lantern suddenly flaring.

**KAREN JOHNSON**  
**Death Becomes You**

You bending picking the wild poppy,  
celandine, alien, slicing it neatly  
with your nail, a leaf, too, sweetness curling  
already, just this little,  
around your thumb, hint of death  
at the corners of your mouth, beauty,  
relaxing of petals, of eyes, you, death

how I remember you among flowers,  
the little truths, gathered, without names, death,  
death is all, you, true, flower-gatherer,  
gathered still.

**TONY BRINKLEY**  
**from Saccades, a sequence**

Partly erased, my  
moonscaped skin,

adjacent to a field  
of flame, the sound

eating its own  
like rustling silk.



Private placed in public eyes constructing my femininity—  
there is a code, but what, coded, might be then an end cause  
or a first cause, lensed or not, too or not sufficiently slippery

—I still love my domesticity, which includes my washing up,  
scrubbed now and cleaned, my or your shower, the many  
water drops among the public spheres. Us—like our mothers

—thoughts are clothes for us, they come in sacks, patched  
bed draggings, my long dress, my necessary waist-exposed  
stitch, my lost place. Where is spaced for you—sentenced lines,

our gerunds, being visually put together, cut out seamed stress.  
And tracing a thread, knots, cuts not meaning anything by  
that—silked, labored cotton, while can and could stand out.



Retinal screening, surfaces receding inward at light speed, a cat  
within with three mice at the entrance of the eye—the retinal claws  
withdrawn into the pupils, velvet dark, the three discarded witnesses.

Perhaps a cat within your eye was also sleeping, undisturbed, a retinal pause  
and a slight purr of seeing: here like Moses, chronicling silence. Tear as  
you will—he will, they will—in between as willed—accumulating discards,

listen carefully—but not seeing, hearing the silk rustling, but not breathing,  
the ground swelling—if you could close your eyes and did not tear the hands  
that feed you—three mice playing . . . here like Moses, chronicling quiet.



Your eye claws tear my hand because  
I reach to touch what you are seeing—

from the skin my fluid sensing  
in your hands a way of reading.



The important characters are yours, stepping  
into fashion, made-up, rouged, in your dressing-

gowns—let in after clearing the streets and  
opening the walks to others, before the display

windows, in which to see almost any of us,  
street-workers, strollers in pinks and violets.



The air in air before  
anticipates a brilliant

star, lit from a blessed  
tree enclosed in glass.

As if it were a brilliant  
star, a lamp or, given

oil to light the star, the  
iridescence, we should

not be blamed if we  
invite in every eye

forbearance—or  
else gradually reduce

the distance for the  
promised messenger.



In Gomorrah your mother  
protects you from angels,

the posts of her bed are  
crocodile teeth. I teach

you the game of holding  
your breath—breathe in,

you are gone—breathe  
out, I am there. You

practice the magic that  
hides in the dark and

hide in the sheets that  
protect you from fire.

In Gomorrah your mother  
protects you from angels.

**SANDRA LIU**

**Folk-tail**

It flicked its tail, then  
    flipped to one side,  
        then to a further side.  
It flipped  
again  
    and flicked its tail so I

opened my mouth  
to let the fish out.  
The drubbing sound of its body  
flip-flopping inside me rose up and  
    echoed  
        loudly  
            into the air.

I heard mother say *She's hungry*  
and mother's milk flooded my mouth and drowned  
the drubbing sound.

The fish inside my tummy  
repeated *hungry*  
and it, thenceforth  
knowing itself  
as *Hunger*,  
stopped flopping about,  
stopped as it was enveloped by the milk  
flowing into the bowl of my belly.

**ANGELA RYDELL**

**Pregnant Woman Thinks of Rainforest**

The elephant stands on a stool—one-footed—  
a teacup curled in her trunk, the delicate gauze of a tutu  
stretched over her ample torso.

Some kids nearby have become the quietest  
they've been in probably weeks, mouths four poised O's,

as if in awe, she believes, of how love can be so fat and enormous,  
thick-skinned, compliant when trained, yet twitching  
a sail-sized ear, a tail, its true nature bursting the seams  
of its costume, tuned to the far-off stammers of toucans,  
the flexible cage of a zebra's running body,  
while balanced so carefully in the spotlight, on stage,

on one small point, chairtop to foot, and what a foot:  
strong as a Mack truck, sensitive as the bones of the ear,  
evolved, when pressed, to feel,  
through any molecule on its wide pad of sole,  
tremors, voices, seismically wise,  
speaking to her through the shifting earth.

**STEPHEN MALIN**

**Wordfill**

*Publishers Mills & Boon of Manchester, England, donated  
2.5 million romance novels for burial to aid noise reduction  
on a motorway extension.*

Hardly at a loss for words, this  
most novel action has stilled its  
fill of voices, unlettering  
forty miles of much-tiered shelf space.

Descent has rendered speechless all  
the reaching aspiration in  
countless vows of panting, would-be  
poignanters, unpantied to no end.

The trillionth alphabetic face  
has gone to earth—filling but still  
unfulfilled, unsought, fading and  
remote. Refusing any page,

these love letters lie, lost, sometimes  
the cost of grounded characters.  
Good luck to them all. They've stopped their  
noise. May they now stop some of ours.

**Heather McHugh** is editor of *The Best American Poetry 2007* (New York: Scribner, 2007, 169 pp, \$30 hardbound, \$16 paper), with David Lehman as series editor for the twentieth year. McHugh in her introduction holds theme and instrument inseparable: “the oddity and opportunity of verbal life” have seemed to her “not just a poem’s object but its fundamental subject.” The introduction itself is very like a poem: “A logophiliacal hunger craves amazement. And words can blaze!—most brightly where (like fires) their logs are interlaid with airs.” The dance of those long *a*’s, the *logs* in *logo-*, the syntactic synapses—all invite the reader to play, to become, indeed, logophiliac. Yet language as subject need not be solipsistic. Verbal hijinks, with the delight and laughter they provoke, can transcend and transform “the means of the meaning business.”

As a self-described “logic-and-structure addict,” McHugh has enjoyed in assembling this “bestov, schmestov” convocation the verbal coincidences between poems as they line up by their poets’ abecedarian order. Jeannette Allée’s wicked “Crimble of Staines” leads to Rae Armantrout’s “Scumble.” Robert Creeley’s “Valentine for You,” with its anaphoric structure of *Where-* words, leads across the page to Linh Dinh’s parade of lines beginning with *Like*. The reader will enjoy discovering other pairings, perhaps suspecting as McHugh hints that some poems might have made the cut because they irresistibly resonated with an alphabetical neighbor. Other poems she has chosen for the collection use the alphabet as structural principle: Mike Dockins’s comic harangue “Dead Critics Society” doubles the abecedarian odds, beginning “Zooks! What have I done with my anthologies? I’ll need a” and ending “awaiting death—the only theme suitable for a poetry buzz.” Matthea Harvey’s pair from her series “The Future of Terror / Terror of the Future” draws on words she found in the dictionary between *future* and *terror*, playing through initial and internal alliteration and assonance, modulating from one letter to the next—first in alphabetical order then inverting the order in the sibling section. Employing a related strategy, Natasha Sajé begins all but the tricky last line of “F” (on the obvious subject) with that letter.

Not only do such generative procedures affect content, they may appear to effect evaporation of content. Kary Wayson implies that the title of her “Flu Song in Spanish” is a joke; she was

writing with a fever in a language she does not know. Two lines became the “mechanism of the engine” that generated a poem “built more out of sound and rhythm than out of an intention toward particular meaning”—establishing the “texture of the text” that McHugh admires. Here’s how it opens:

God of the bees, god of gold keys, god of all in-  
famous noses, I folded our total  
in two today—I drove alone  
and I walked away (as if each mile up your hill  
were a letter in a word I’m inventing).

Yet, beneath the buzzing, an implacable subtext emerges:

My Father (that bitch!) he hides  
at the head  
of his third wife’s table.

. . . . So I stick my head in a hole and drown. So far  
lost, so far

found: a bone-cutter’s house in a blood-lit town—  
an Oedipal drama that inescapably evokes Plath’s “Daddy.” In  
both, the verbal play that disguises content, even from the self,  
makes revelation possible.

While I’m bemused in the bee-loud glade, here’s an excerpt from Julie Larios’s “What Bee Did,” which plays on *be* as a prefix: “And because Bee tokened summer / (the one season we all, like Bee, must lieve) / Bee also dazzled.” Sharon Dolin’s “Tea Lay” creates purely homophonic music in couplets—a John Clare sonnet, her note discloses, translated into other words with the same sounds. Dolin’s translations, unlike Louis Zukofsky’s, do not aim for a coherent parallel text, e.g., “Ear-moist, diving highest, I ease a taller thicket, / Announce Time’s sick of us, foam in its spigot.” “Chance and the dictionary,” she explains, “as well as my associations to word-sounds, all played a part in what I hope are independent poems that teeter on the brink of sense.” But doesn’t the fun in homophonic verse come from recognizing the original? As a student I learned “Liza Grapeman, Alry Myndus / Weaken maker Liza Blime / Andy Partin, Lee B. Hindus / Footbrin Johnny sans a dime.”

In no earlier volume in this series have the poets’ notes been so necessary. The reader can no longer assume Coleridge’s principle that a poem must carry within it all one needs for its appreciation. I would enjoy discussing with McHugh how she

selected some of these without prior access to the game plan. Robert Pinsky, for example, informs us that he's enacting personal and cultural processes of remembering and forgetting in "Louie Louie" by "acting dumb." Susan Parr explains that "Swooping Actuarial Fauna" is made of "nouns and verbs and other parts I found scattered in a word list attached to unsolicited e-mail sent me by Renegade K. Leveraged, or someone of her ilk. Made, that is, of subfragments—sent by a figment," contemporary cultural "whistling wherewithals."

Some poets here improvise on the tennis court of conventional form. Marya Rosenberg's haiku sequence on her experience as a cadet at West Point ("If I Tell You You're Beautiful, Will You Report Me?") treats the convention loosely ("We slept in the trash / heap, and I lay all night warm / in his arms"). In contrast, Amit Majmudar's "By Accident" bears witness to the rewards of playing within the strict traditions of the ghazal. Alan Shapiro in his note describes his "Country Western Singer" as "a profoundly affectionate parody of a genre of music I love." Also in conventional form are Richard Wilbur's playful couplets and Helen Ransom Forman's flirtatious "Daily," in which she orders Tennyson's "In Memoriam" stanza to amuse a different muse:

Today I did a washing and the line  
Bowed and flopped with my job; dearly I scrubbed  
To make the chirping suds fizz in the tub  
And bead in bubbles. This my pudent wine.

Not all the play in this ludic collection is primarily linguistic. Albert Goldbarth in his sonnet-shaped "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" draws his own conclusion to Frost's poem, moving that outward-facing classic wonderfully inward. Forrest Hamer's "Initiation" pulls the rug out from under the reader, as does Stephen Dunn's strangely moving "Where He Found Himself." And the reader who expects the predictable from Donald Hall will be surprised by "The Master," which opens: "Where the poet stops, the poem / begins. The poem asks only / that the poet get out of the way." This might have been a cautionary epigraph for the 2007 edition of *Best American*, where so many of the puzzles can be solved only when the poet steps out in front of the curtain.

■

In the context of a culture where much poetry asserts a radical dissociation between language and meaning, many poems here may seem to deny, or at least avoid, the substance of contemporary life. Perhaps, though, as in “Flu Song,” the apparent denial provides the sole means of approach. Such, often, is the function of satire, whether Horatian (gentle ridicule) or Juvenalian (savage critique). Nabokov claims “satire is a lesson, parody is a game,” but in this collection the line between game and lesson is nebulous, as is the line between satire and invective. I’ll now venture across these lines from Horatian to Juvenalian and on to darker game.

Many of the targets of satire here are linguistic. David Kirby, in “Ode to the Personals,” has elaborately witty fun with the English-language classifieds in Italy. It’s a hoot. So is Mark Halliday’s “Best Am Po,” a parody of poets’ notes in this series. Denise Duhamel in her “Language Police Report (after Diane Ravitch’s *The Language Police*)” begins its five prose paragraphs: “The busybody (banned as sexist, demeaning to older women) who lives next door called my daughter a tomboy (banned as sexist) when she climbed the jungle (banned; replaced with ‘rain forest’) gym.” I’m delighted she stretches the limits of the prose poem for a subject so ripe for ridicule.

Billy Collins and Linh Dinh, for their parts, ridicule our culture’s attitude toward vulgar language, but to different ends. Dinh’s “A Super-Clean Country” catalogues a cleanliness-obsessed culture’s reduction of *shit* to a ubiquitous meaningless intensifier. Collins’s catalogue of offensive insults in the poetry of Catullus, that “mean-spirited pain in everyone’s ass,” licenses him to indulge in the invective he derides even as he puts down “the afternoon shadow of a column” and Wordsworth’s daffodils.

■

In “Maggie’s Farm: The Fate of Political Poetry in Our Time” (*The Writer’s Chronicle*, May/Summer 2007) David Wojahn laments the artistic glibness of much anti-war poetry and regrets the paucity in English of strong poems such as we find in world poetry, poems that engage “the intricate relationship between self and politics.” Why, he asks, do so few of our poets tackle the great issues of our time? Of those who do, why do so few produce

memorable art? McHugh's own "What He Said," on the literal silencing of Giordano Bruno, is one of the poems in English that stands with the work of Herbert, Milosz, and Hikmet, in—to quote David Lehman—"shouldering the burden of conscience." As editor, she does, within this banquet of linguistic experiment, include poems that respond to Wojahn's challenge, avoiding the "overwhelmingly subjective and hermetic" recent poetry that Wojahn deplors.

Taking on this challenge implies a recognition and acceptance of complexity. Don't expect easy formulas here for political poetry. Brian Turner's "What Every Soldier Should Know" addresses directly the anomalous position of a soldier in Iraq, where "Men wearing vests rigged with explosives / walk up, raise their arms and say *Inshallah*" ("Allah be willing"). This poem, like the poems in Turner's *Here, Bullet*, gives his readers both the raw material and the tragic ironies of the Iraq war in simple, riveting language. The satire cuts deeper in Robert Hass's "Bush's War," sneaking up on the reader through the sensory abundance of a May idyll "south of the Grunewald," "flash[ing] forward" to a catalogue of slaughters from recent history that lapses into sermon. If Swift's *saeva indignatio* might be inadequate for confronting today's outrages, themselves already self-parodies, Hass's indignation is at least equally savage.

A few of the poets here address violence itself without irony or satire. Forrest Hamer's "Initiation" struggles for an explanation of violence in himself and others, concluding: "How much I hated, / How much I wanted and how greedy wanting made me. / What I wanted most were better words," *want* naming both the lack of words that leads to violent expression and the poet's linguistic desire. On a global screen, three of these poets write on decapitation. Marvin Bell in "The Method" and Theodore Worozbyt in "An Experiment" both explore the consciousness of the victim at the moment after beheading. Joe Wenderoth's "The Home of the Brave" responds explicitly to the video of Nick Berg's execution, attempting to cope with simultaneous horror and helplessness—Berg's and the poet's own. His poem, he explains, "manifests the struggle to keep . . . contradictory forces intact," to make the reader feel "both the potency and the impotency of the will he thinks of as his own," a prevalent ambivalence in the current political environment. All four of these ambitious poems leave me

craving further insight into the broader implications of the atrocities that have attracted the poets' imaginations.

■

Yet another approach is available to poets wrestling intellectually and verbally with the state of the world: to examine history through today's dark lens. Ed Ochester wields his "Voltaire at Cirey, 1736" to take a swipe at our anti-intellectual age. Geoffrey Brock's "Flesh of John Brown's Flesh: Dec. 2, 1859" suggests how the death of Brown "has much to teach us about the difficulty of defining terrorism and madness in places where the status quo is terrifying and mad."

For me the most arresting and challenging political poem in this volume is Frederick Seidel's "The Death of the Shah," whose speaker slides freely from one temporal and geographical location to another, "a worldly man / looking around the room." Since Seidel is one of the few poets who refrain from giving the game away in their notes, I'm on my own in interpreting his travels. I recognize the Shah of Iran (1919–1980), who appears here as a sexually self-aggrandizing monarch with every "foal" in the kingdom in his stable, as a racehorse, and as a pathetic exile dying of cancer. But who is the speaker? He describes himself as "not a practical man, / But clear-eyed in my contact lenses," a worldly "blue-eyed white man" "Despairing of art and of life, / Seeking protection from death by seeking it / On a racebike." From the notes I learn that Seidel and the speaker are about the same age (sixty-seven in the poem); from other sources I know Seidel is an addict of fine motorcycles. So what. The *I* of a poem must be considered a fiction.

In the architecture of this five-page, richly varied, tightly organized work the speaker establishes his point of view as a shrewd observer, capable of a compassionate sneer:

The future of psychoanalysis  
 Is a psychology of surface.  
 Stay on the outside side.  
 My poor analyst  
 Suffered a stroke and became a needy child.  
 As to the inner life: let the maid.

He considers contemporary analogies to the slave trade, making a visit to Ghana where

The slaves from the bush were marched to the coast  
 And warehoused in dungeons under St. George's Castle,  
 Then FedExed to their new jobs far away.

I read this extraordinary poem as a portrait of a debonair  
 representative of the new imperialism: Turn a page and catch a  
 glimpse of his slithery identity:

Here I am, an admirer of Mahatma Gandhi,  
 Ready to praise making pots of money  
 And own a slave.  
 I am looking in the mirror as I shave the slave.  
 I shave the Shah.  
 I walk into the evening and start being charming.

Prufrock a generation later? Ah, but a Prufrock with a disturbing  
 sense of his identity with the corrupt world he smiles through—a  
 shallow, self-indulgent “civilization,” capable of great cruelty. He  
 is a cipher with no alternative *weltanschauung* (*pride* but no joy,  
*sex* but no love, *magnificence* but no justice) but a thinker,  
 nonetheless, who can visualize the contemporary world from the  
 perspective of a thousand years. The haunting word in Seidel's  
 poem is *pity*:

Have pity on a girl, perdurable, playful,  
 And delicate as a foal, dutiful, available,  
 Who is waiting on a bed in a room in the afternoon for God.  
 His Majesty is on his way, who long ago has died.  
 She is a victim in the kingdom, and is proud.

Have pity on me a thousand years from now when we meet.  
 The words of Cummings pounce: “pity this busy monster,  
 manunkind, // not.” Then I recall Wilfred Owen's: “The Poetry is  
 in the pity. . . . All a poet can do today is warn.” We are warned.

Much of the best poetry of the past century, from Paul Celan to  
 Bei Dao, has accused those with power of the theft of language.  
 Whether through verbal games, satire, or direct political com-  
 mentary, the variously troubled poems in this volume work to  
 create new language, or at the least to steal the old language  
 back, raising in the process some of the most serious questions  
 about the role of the poet in a darkened world. At times the  
 logophiliac's wordplay can light the way.