

BPJ

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COVER

Front cover photograph, "Ted in Conversation," courtesy of
Vent Haven Museum and Molly Tenenbaum

Back cover, **Samuel Nisenson**, "Constructing a doll-dummy,"
from Edgar Bergen, *How to Become a Ventriloquist*, 1938

Mary Greene, design

→

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

Editors' Note: We invite you to join the online conversation
with *BPJ* poets on our Poet's Forum at www.bpj.org. The par-
ticipating poets for this issue are Molly Tenenbaum (Septem-
ber), Gary Fincke (October), and Muriel Nelson (November).

MOLLY BASHAW

Josephine

My great-grandmother was a farmer and a pianist in a silent movie theater. When she died, she left me a music dictionary. On the first page she had written in pencil:

Modulation: Under the cow, one note changes milk-on-pail to milk-on-milk.

Staccato: Write music with cornmeal on your belly skin. Invite the chickens.

Polyrhythmic: Night, August. Crickets in the marsh.

Pianissimo: Maple sap rains in the maple woods.

Perfect pitch: When the pumpkin grows, hold it to your ear.

Da capo: January. 1918. Your grandmother is born.

MOLLY BASHAW

Music Box

I was born of a carpenter and a seamstress.

Father built stilts for himself. Stars held his waist
like a skirt. He sang opera.

Mother sewed slippers to fit the stilt tips.

They were charged with juggling
fire too close to the sky

and decided to try their hands
at farming:

Mother knit me a sweater out of popcorn,
flower corn,
dent corn, sweet corn, Indian corn, flint corn,
squaw corn, cow corn.

Father milked the house cat.

We sat on riding saddles
in front of the fireplace. Horseless.

Wood from the old piano, hacked in thirds,
burnt wild blossoms of sparks.

REGAN HUFF

Occurrence on Washburn Avenue

Alice's first strike gets a pat on the back,
her second a cheer from Betty Woszinski
who's just back from knee surgery. Her third—
"A turkey!" Molly calls out—raises everyone's eyes.
They clap. Teresa looks up from the bar.
At the fourth the girls stop seeing their own pins wobble.
They watch the little X's fill the row on Alice's screen—
That's five. That's six. There's a holy space
around her like a saint come down to bowl
with the Tuesday Ladies in Thorp, Wisconsin.
Teresa runs to get Al, and Fran calls Billy
at the Exxon. The bar crowds with silent men.
No one's cheering. No one's bowling now
except Alice's team, rolling their balls
to advance the screen around to Alice, who's stopped
even her nervous laugh, her face blank and smooth
with concentration. It can't go on
and then it does go on, the white bar
reading "Silver Dollar Chicken" lowering and clearing
nothing, then lowering and clearing nothing again.

RUTH WEBBER EVANS

When People Ask about Wildlife on Our Property

I tell them what they expect: hummingbirds and
catbirds, the flash of blue as a kingfisher dives,
the pencil stub of my favorite Mountain Ash, all
that the beavers left. I don't tell them Glen and I
are the most interesting wildlife here.

The loons are back, calling in the cold night air.
We open the window, sound and air flowing over us,
"Jesus Christ, I love loons," he says, and goes off
to remove his hearing aids and elastic stockings.

■
Brushing our teeth, getting ready for bed,
I tell Glen something I've read about garter belts,
in the days before panty hose.

His face alight he rhapsodizes,
not about that lost sensuous movement of women
drawing sheer hose over long legs—

about garters. That amazing invention.
So clever: strong enough to hold the stocking up,
yet arranged not to snag.

He makes that little sliding movement,
thumb against finger, pushing
the stocking-covered button down onto the metal loop.

■
One of us can spell, the other writes poetry.

When my spelling confuses the computer
I go to my back-up spell-check.
"Vehemently, just like it sounds," he says.
"I spelled it like it sounds: *via ment ly*,"
I reply (somewhat vehemently). He blushes
(for me, for him, for the world of phonics,
or the ignominy of marriage to such a speller)
and goes back to the weather forecast.

■

We are two aging homo sapiens,
bringing in groceries, daily wood for our fires.
We display some of those mild courting displays
of animals past reproduction. Each keeps an eye
on the other, wondering, measuring.

STEVEN D. SCHROEDER

All the Better to Eat You With, My Dear

Out there a squirrel chitters in a cherry tree net,
its limber-limbed hug
trembling up the trunk. In here a raccoon, fingers
stuck in the butter churn,
grips that glistening spread. Upstairs a penthouse
built entirely of antlers
shucked after rutting season by the elk mounted
on the mantel, sleeping with
their derrieres hung in the den. Ignore the granny
panties beside the bed
and fear no bachelor pawpad predator, no lady
killer, no wolf whistling
at sheep in haunch-high stockings. The fleecy drapes
match the bearskin rug.
Past gums and teeth and lips and chops comes tongue.

STEVEN D. SCHROEDER

If It Bleeds, It Leads

My day as a tragedy
brand manager: the red-
on-void blockletter logo
for *Blackwater Black Widow*,

two choppers buzzing a chase
till their midair collision conjures
whizbang fireworks, pitchfork
microphones in smoky eyes
of lightning strike survivors.

But some hack in the studio glues
a smiley sticker over my skull
and crossbones collateral
damage graphic with friendly

fire casualty counter, *to restore
morale* says the anchor, an American
pit bull terrier pup in his arms,
its tail thwapping your eyeballs off
titanium planes and the bodies

of bombers. I sneak one frame
of my face in blank screens between
botched surgery before and afters,
a shooter and his seventh victim.

By the time his tooth chips and bloody hair
mats the boy's scalp cradled beside his spokes
which spin and clack, this does not matter.
Not the curbside assault, not the battery.
What matters here is the grace with which
Angelo extends his hand *I like your bike*
then yanks the boy mid-wheelie, plucks him
by the collar and bounces him down Hollins
Market's marble antebellum steps *Give it to me.*
Sure, the pack moves over him like water over
a stone, holds and obscures him, their blows a tide
he cannot fight with fists. On the fire escape
I look away from this, notice paint flecks
dropping like they know they're lead or bags
snagged in tree limbs filling with their threats
of flight. I want to shuck the boy from the thin
shell of my closed eyelids with one of those
beak-tipped oyster knives I see old men hide
in their boots, the ones that rattle like an empty
streetcar once they're dropped to the gutter
and the men beg for mercy. Some stall keeper
swings her push broom and hollers at the pack
to go on home, voice like a stroller ramming a wall.
Angelo says he'll be back again later. He will.
His story is the story of every port city gone dry.
These rooftops smell like tar and mops stained
gray as alleyway bones children practice breaking.
Come dark, when the woman I married returns,
we'll swear we hear bricks working themselves
loose from bad mortar, but it's only a hocked pot
scraped with a coin in our stairwell or the tick
of dominos on the hood of the stock-still Ford
or dreams condensing on a cracked ceiling
then falling towards those who sleep beneath.
I'll tell her I didn't watch the boy as he staggered
into a primer-coated station wagon, unsure exactly
what he'd learned. I know something about grace
is cruel. When I close my eyes to forget all of this
I still see the hand's motion—bright palm's arch
and strike, those fingers closing around the boy
easy as a breaking wave—clutch so smooth

→

and brutal I can't tell if it's born from practice
or is simply born into this world, certain it holds
something it must never, for the life of it, release.

MIHAELA MOSCALIUC

Ode to First Lies

Once you've tasted blood you can never stop,
Father says, as the dog goes down and I watch,
unsure of what comes next, how to bury
one killed with your own hands,
how to mourn, how to replace.

Only dogs, I repeat to myself, only dogs
can never stop.

JOSHUA DOLEŽAL

Little Damascus

Dusty dog day

gravel gritting like teeth

trail winding who cares where

river murmuring

No harsher judge

than rattling brush

hot fist for a gut—snake

bright in the mind—

Its wedge head held high,

the forked tongue of reproof says

something knows what you are

when you don't

GARTH GREENWELL

Candidate

Obdurate the pain the dream long dormant wakes
in waking, with what addictive stinging ache
the desperate discredited longing

breaks again: On the screen, spread out before
the man at whose speech greenness moils once more
the sun-leeched desert ground's exhaustion

America imagined gleams, untoxic, unfailed,
from the Catherine wheel of its history's
demonic recurrence (in nightmare echo

masked in the savage white fifties nightmare mask
the Image of God in orient sands stands, live
wires trailing from his hands) in

agony irretrievably unbound, as gift delivered
here, where—toward the image ungraspable sounding
a ringing undespair—beguiled again I grasp.

PAUL LISSON

from THE PERFECT aRCHIVE

Cartesian Melody

During the processing of new acquisitions,
evidence of cogitation must be monitored.
Arrangement and description are singular
acts based upon diplomatic hierarchies.
Senior Cataloguers are responsible for
record integrity and may access levels
which include purple, blue, and crimson.
Clerical entries will be etched in glass.

Clerks submit entries without encryption.
Add Latin notations only for the martyred.
A common error is the Copernican-Adjunct
attributed to gypsies cleansed en masse.

Doubt implies thought. Thought is prone
to disorder. North's needle is a jawbone.

Ancien Régime

Discrete artifacts possessing encoded descriptions written according to the regulations issued by the old authority. Languages and lessons learned in quiet moments between scars and pistol fire. The process of administrative control precedes that of intellectual control. Old Authority knew the guillotine kiss.

Instruments de Recherche

The relationship of data. The relationship between entities. What was created was received. That which was received was created. The substance of text, of data. The true substance of numerals, images, data. The heart beats seventy-two times per minute. The heart held in your hand.

The Station Guard

Some rules are designated as alternate rules, and some rules, or parts of rules, are optional. Rules of conduct are neither alternate, nor are they optional. The authors recognize only five levels of arrangement. The authors recognize only seven [7] acceptable levels of description. The introductions to these rules are part of the rules, and are numbered accordingly. This concept is expressed by a factual case study: What is a ship when all of the ice has frozen? Only the authors know the context of creation. All records are arranged, and then described.

Rules 0.29 and 1.0D provide all institutions with flexibility when records, and the keepers of records, have reached the terminal point. It is incumbent upon the authors to establish complete intellectual control at the highest level before proceeding to the lowest levels.

Authorized translations will only be accepted when standardization values are [enclosed in square brackets]. Examples of romanization are dealt with in appendices. The decision to terminate is always an institutional decision.

I believe I am myself
in relation to: rock candy
 small feet
 impossible tasks.

When it happened
I didn't know the word for it.

My mother's skin—starched—a sheet-
like organ, unflappable by the wind.
Her skin became hard.

The presentation is commonly distal to proximal. It begins in the
fingertips and proceeds up the arm. Creation begins here, in the
scar tissue, which hardens. There are words and there are words:
God's fingertip bringing a girl into being.

(I wrapped my arms
around her, threw my leg over
her when we slept.)

By the time the upper arms have hardened, there may be
stiffness in the legs or abdomen.

(Sometimes I fell asleep next
to her and woke with my arms wrapped
around a rolled-up blanket.)

Or the insides may turn to stone,

next, dust.

The skin of the face and neck may also be involved. The skin may appear red and shiny. Polished fruit. Finger tightness. The problem may be a gold wreck on the outside. There may be happiness. There may be a fantasy of hollow skin.

For example, the wall.

Touch is the first of the senses to develop in the womb.

There are places on the back where
we are unable to perceive the difference
between two small feet an inch apart

and the prick of a single point.

I think she is a certain wonder.

In the hospital room was not a ghost, but her body, eyelids taped shut. I did not ask how she would see to find her way back to our house. White tape, neither transparent nor opaque, kept the windows shut. I believed in windows. I believed in her insides, as if her body were a basket or a hurdle to leap over. My body, this temple. How she would disperse.

Meaning without the word.

She knocked on the door.
The door was hard.

She knocked without her hand.
(She was dead.)

I knew better than to let her in.
She came in.

My mouth opened to answer her
questions unheard, questions unknown

unlike the door
(locked)

the carpet
(yellow)

the ceiling
(high-beamed

and knotted).

Everywhere is a potential
exit, except the door.

I drew a high wall at the skin;
at the bottom I drew a gutter.

I was eleven. These are the words I have for it.

Choosing Your Ventriloquial Voice

Everyone wants to pitch it high.
Don't, you'll strain your cords.
Horseplay a while, funnel your drone,
flatten it, thicken it, add a little
backtongue, soften your palate like eggs
on low heat, the French way, with cream.
Forget that, now squeeze in some *ng*, let *aaaay*
splay like a tossed daddy longlegs.
Remember, it's difference that shows
off your skill, so if you're Mom,
make Baby a duck. A duck *and* other-racial.
Whoever you pick will be with you
for life, so make it someone who'll
fall in a well, who'll bawl after bedtime
(from under the pillow), yodel as you nightcap,
pun as you weep. Or one like yourself,
but reversed, who takes what you'd say,
smart-alecks it, trebles the plaint,
pipes up the pest; who won't believe you
really exist. Or, yes, you can
be the horse from your dream,
that dapple, that sage-haloed flame,
that gallop with the tangy mane—
but spangle it pink, wink its curtain-fringe lashes.
For backstory, say Who knows, it neighed
on your doorstep one orphaning dawn,
the blue-orange rain ranting like lions
out there and what could you do
but boil a hot potful of id-meal for breakfast,
and foster it in. Believability? No problem.
Even these silicone days, these
can't-get-good-wood-anymore, these
those-were-but-now-they're-not days, these days
of computer-keyed, self-shutting
eyes, the chip-off-the-old-
block joke still flies.

MOLLY TENENBAUM

Difficult Speech: Welcome

Make up your mind to overcome this so-called impossibility of pronouncing the B, M, N, P, and W.

—Arthur Prince, *The Whole Art of Ventriloquism*

Come all you periwinkles and brilliantines,
carpet-weavers and voluptuaries,
lift your tympanums, brandish your vegetables,
pinch your caps, forestall your equipods—
betimes, I virtuoso and hymnotize, unmoor
my intimate diva, pop my marrow, and offer
this humble fantasia, my solfeggio and psalm.

Oops, I'm tongue-tubbed. Before your very louvers,
my vintage but glimmers. Carpentered, I'm
back to first cube. Behind my fast gasp—flat
effervescence. My friends, I'm unbearded,
I'm all a-clam. I've invited my best
bosom forward, but, dear loves and alarums,
fops and beauties, for this furbelow, I'm mute.

MOLLY TENENBAUM
Easy Oration: Greetings

Stand before a mirror and watch your lips.

—Alexander Van Rensselaer, *Fun with Ventriloquism*

Hello, you rustics and roses, you candle-lighters,
dough-kneaders, cradle-rockers, and rug-sellers, you.
Raise your eye-arches, knuckle your zukes,
restrain your hats, and clutch your horses
as I shudder these eyelashes,
aerate arias, tell trials and anecdotes,
turn the joke on the hand on the stick
under this coat, he who's tacking out talk,
his digits on keys, who does he think he is,
rolling these eyes, isn't his dad calling,
can't he dunder to his study, don his desk,
retire to his inky old dots?

I hunger to get you alone, you ginger-cake,
you snickerdoodle. Such a night, the air
like heated cognac, and such lunescence
roundly glisters that I itch to say the giant *L*,
tear this toy shirt, declare naked heart.
Oh, honey-croissant, though the internal aorta
lunges, though these kissy gesticulators
assignate, his don't, so I can't
say, knocking hand to chest, that this lance,
this thrill soaring to alight in you
originates here, in—

Sadly, I lack a nascent noun.
Here, darling, conjure all that's red and rushing.
Under the curtain, our hearts are yours.
You sing it, our secret chord.

HEATHER KIRN

Writer Repents

Crown, I said, or *kite*, and that was that.
Like flames encased in glass, the nouns dissolved.
But *levitate* had weight around it. Rapt,
I wrote it down. Then *menacing* jabbed dark
with dark and *triumph* made me win. I grinned,
heard the strained trill of an oriole
and knew it too was mine.

As was the phone.

It sang an octave lower than the bird,
rang all day. *Go away*, I wrote
and dialogue was born. I gave the words
a mouth, designed a face, a body, legs
for him to choose the wrong direction—there
he went and there he fell. I clasped my hands.
He multiplied. Then, *Yes?* I took the call.

The voice said, *First you killed the oriole.*
You killed the old man who found it too.
You say you're sitting down? it asked. *You killed*
entire villages, then carved initials
into anything that bled. A eulogy?
A prayer? How could we say a word?

I bowed

my head, left the pens and rode the car
to padded walls. I ate soup. *Soup*, I said
and slapped my wrists. *Pill*, I swallowed.

The walls

are blank as pages. In my dreams, I write
the kiddy books that label every noun.
I write *door, bed, salamander, slug*,
erase a letter only when I start
to feel an adjective, a verb. Nothing does.
By morning, all the work evaporates.
No word remains but one. *Intent*. When split,
it names a sleeping spot. If stripped on the sides
it calculates the digits on my hands.
But whole, it settles me to self. I meant
no harm. I found a shape and made a world,
then crawled inside. Where else was I to live?

SALLY MOLINI

Darryl says

he chooses when to be seen
and hardly eats,
calls it proof
of the body's fake solidity.
No answer yet
as to what the ground beneath his feet
means. He tells me
the soul is clear, not good
with lies, closets, or other
light-deprived departures
but it learns fast
and can make papers flutter.
Nice, to be invisible
and still have an effect—
he hopes to walk
through walls someday
and says everyone should
live his way but don't
talk about yourself or you'll
get hungry and reappear.

L. L. HARPER

I know the man

out on my dock,
all knee bones
and ruffled coat,
and although some
would swear it's
a big blue heron,
I know that's a lie.
It's the man in
the window, the man
on the porch, the man
in the front seat
of his car, front door
open beckoning me
to see how forgetful

he is, how he left
the bath without his
pants, how he needs
help to put things right,
the man on the dock,
geniculate in the wrong
direction as he stands
erect, stalks the shallows,
scans for dinner,
his timing as impeccable
as his haze-blue coat,
waits strikes
what he's needed
all this time.

graphic: *The women were more energetic in their aversion:*

they hid behind trees . . . & Daphne

[née nymph]

hid too, from god, who saw her & thought . . . *what*

would she not look like properly dressed with her hair

nicely arranged [Hamilton, Dame Edith, tatting/metaphrasing

Ovid & Apollo's thought], & though god sent his voice ahead of her

desiring to persuade her to . . . *stop & find out who I am, I'm no rude rustic,*

this only spurred her to pump faster & had her gasping/shrieking/plead-

ing when she spied the deep green shadows of her father's river

which succored, sucked her heel/toe/instep/ankle

under . . . & then

holy Hymen!

a bodacious sheath of taupe [zip-

zip] scrolled up her, & afterward the locals in-

scribed syllables on her, like *Lhäh-rall* [umlauting her chaste

chase], or *La-ray-elle* [finding back-up vocals in her upreach], or

Lorelei: allure: all those sleek leaves; & lately [pruning her largesse],

just *la*. For lip. Especially when she sougled [her shtick: low lull-

lapping sounds], which made her feel lightheaded, seiche-y, under

that resilient as a leaf spring in the sky, that shy

meniscus: her mother

.

MARGARET AHO

to be flanking the petiole to be

stipules that stipulate nothing but

basal appendants: 2 small leaves fused: vas-like

beak-like: a mouthpiece for stems . . .

to be sessile [yes] be sap-attached be

selah's rest stop a breather abeyance . . . & canted

inclined [free] to carry a torch be green

adductors to bring toward to fur-

ther be bar none be wee be

blind-faith astride still-life en-

jambing [o folio] leaflines still scrolled

still unreadable . . .

to be long-lipped for buds o to be kissing the world

MURIEL NELSON

To Wit, To Dote

When the mind minds sometimes, then doesn't mind at all,
heart's boarded up, then downy-nested, opened wide,

is it that "certain age" when trees take off their clothes for cold,
or spell when, feeling ill, they foolishly send all their buds?

Well, hello illness, I know you. You're the tiresome guy who stays
too long, drinks all the wine, and finally spins us dry. Anon,

anon., I say: *Not I* soon enough. The garbage gods
will come collect. Will wit be wizened then, or I awake?

Will the alarm cat pounce in such a nick? Do you think? I hope.
I hope for purring on that day, for some great beast's vibrations.

But now (dear words), *but now*, the brave plum finds the vertical
to measure February's shorts and longs—short tenderness

of bud, longing reach for blue which sounds cry's hues, gymnastics
in four-chambered pump, flappery of feathered thing,

limbs' wish to hold the whole of spring in some fine dotery
now, while inner space is lightened by a growing sense of sky.

MURIEL NELSON

Feeding the Venus Flytrap

There's a comfort in fog, the trees tucked in,
distance up ahead out of sight,

like washing dishes in the dark with you,
easy, easy. (Over easy soon? Who knows?)

How does the peace start? asks a radio's voice.
The answer comes, *with cellos*. Verdi's *Requiem*,

he means, but I'm thinking Beethoven's
sonatas in the night with you, or Sarajevo's cellist

in the sun with bombs, his solo rising like a steeple.
Dawn plums again, our country wars, clouds blossom

out above it all, and what could be more
peaceful than a baby carnivore which needs feeding?

It's nearly Easter. Like fervent Christians, flies buzz ceaselessly
and feast. Let's go in peace. Let's feed Venus.

MURIEL NELSON
For the Night People

A little celebration:
it is six a.m. and I am not sick.

Each of your doors breathes peace. So far
(I'm testing morning) coffee obeys gravity's law.
Streetside, brakes screech as always: the paper's here. A bird
hits a pane, not hard, and our cat apparently sleeps.

I'm testing morning for you. The news mixes
concept car, torture refined, smallpox alive, small war
enlarged, cement truck overturned on the Narrows Bridge with
importance
of finding language for pain. There's a sheen on things. Names

shrink-wrap them for afterlives. There's no more
running for yours. On your lives, I'm swearing,
I say *guaranteeing* for life's time a little
celebration. For you,

did God die? (It's good to know when you love.) One
night, the "J" writer scrolled back creation to dust.
Then mist. Next, a man-doll with uneven ribs, Eve,
and their God-potter all breathed.

Much later, our Apple ticked forever to say: *Carefully Saving*.
Strange—we kept things in Apples with glass eyes,
we who didn't know what to make of joys, we who can't help
but in morning make noise.

GARY FINCKE

Things that Fall from the Sky

Seeds

Take one early evening. A father calls
His wife and children outside to witness
The eastern sky going bloody with clouds.
“What?” they say, transfixed, “What?” staring skyward
Until the rain swarms like sand, a brief storm
Of seeds that spreads them apart, their eyes closed
Under this brief anomaly of hail.

The afterlight is so yellow it seems
To have traveled here from a jaundiced star.
Before he can speak, the father must kneel
To examine that rain, his wonder turned
Watery, doubt taking his fingertips
Over their pinpricked skin to read the Braille
Of what might be born from a vocal rain.

A name for the first day of invasion
Wells up in him, a long vowel that leaves
Its breath on their faces. When they watch him
Like babies, that man smiles the first falsehood
Of devotion, afraid they already
Believe so much in these seeds, they'll swallow,
Certain that superstition will feed them.

Powder

*In 1969, in South Carolina, nondairy creamer from
the new Borden plant began to fall on a small town.*

1

The day became white and sweet
Like the air above a rolling pin

As a woman thins the dough
For chip-filled cookies. Children stood

Beside their mothers, their hands
Clutching toys they would not part with.

2

The weather cut the neighborhood
Into the shapes of families.

The cloud was soluble on tongues.
It surrounded each face like sound.

Already there were footprints
On sidewalks, a dream of shovels.

3

Those dusted by light took vows.
Suddenly, declarations of love,

The streets become hospitals.
Time was ending. A memory

Of old prophecies collected
In the eyes of everyone.

4

At last, the company's reassurance,
Though later, when the whitened bathed,

They stroked the film that had formed
Along their cheeks, their fingertips

Dizzy with the wonder of children
Touching the rouged faces of the dead.

Documents

In 1973 a set of papers that explained, with graphs and formulas, "normalized extinction" and the Davis-Greenstein mechanism of astrophysics fell from a distance higher than a 300-foot radio transmission tower.

When the paper fell from the sky, it looked
As if a briefcase had opened, a latch
Sprung loose among the clouds, spilling a set
Of documents, nothing in that story

To rush cameras right over, not when
There'd been a robbery and a fire, not when
The news desk smelled the late-night stink of hoax.

But there was the detail of the tower,
How its height was cited, and documents
Aren't a rock format prank. Moreover,
This caller worked in radio, a sort
Of cousin to humor when he described
Formulas and graphs, suggesting a plot
Filled with spies or scientists dangerous
With political or religious hate.

A few lines then. A small item below
An ad for dishwashers, television
Showing that gutted house and empty safe
As if its news were in summer reruns.
But after, when no one claimed those papers,
Chosen repeated itself like *amen*
As the last word of that witness's thoughts.

Prophecy, now, was physics, difficult
As a burning bush or exploding star.
And didn't "normalized extinction" sound
Like a careless spin on nuclear war?
He remembered the meteor legend,
How it explained the end of dinosaurs,

All things large starving in the dusty years
Of toxic darkness. Scholarship set in
Like the deep winter of apprehension.
Each night, before looking up, he wished for
The empty sky of the ordinary.

Meat

After meat fell from the sky,
After that shower ended
Like a cold tap twisted shut,
There were men who sampled it,

→

Cautiously chewing like kings.
Like mutton, one said, relieved,
Or venison, second choice,
Someone suggesting vultures
Had vomited together
From overhead; somebody,
At last, saying they were scraps
From God's table, calling up
The old words for mystery
That caught in the throat like bones.
The men who had eaten coughed
While wishes circulated
Like secrets pledged to silence.
For days, children examined
Their fathers for fur and claws.
Old wives were as tentative as
The child brides they had been, deep
In the nineteenth century
When transubstantiation
Was a bright, beautiful fact.

So it is with the strange.
A choir of analysts
Performed the old cantata
Of certainties until meat
Was people who had been ripped
To pieces by the sharp scythe
Of tornado, their parts swirled
Upward and returned as rain.
A family was missing.
Parables were passed through yards
Until streets of disciples
Formed a holy neighborhood.
A chattering of voices
Settled on porches, the words
So much the same they sounded
Like clouds of starlings rising.

Bodies

Begin with the one that famously
Landed on a San Diego car,
Dropping from a midair accident
Like a fantastically narrow storm.
Nothing can come from such plummeting
But disaster or the miracle
That needs snow drifts and touch downs precise
As ones that land softly on Mars, yet
The melodrama transfixes us
The way children, once, at matinees,
Were caught by serial cliffhangers
And spent a week believing rescue
As impossible as growing old.

That driver and her child were unharmed,
But afterward, she had a habit
Of glancing up like a forecaster,
Though it's rare, anyone looking up
For the descent of bodies, rarer
To believe they're falling from a cloud.
It takes the height that turns us breathless,
A thousand feet or more to make us
Think "sky" like one morning when distance
Throttled our breath while suited bodies
Plunged like drops of a passing shower
That pockmark the dust of current drought.

And I, for once, agreed on something
With my sad, conservative neighbors,
Desiring a sect of people dead,
Their lives snuffed by gene anomaly.
The body of Christ, the blood of Christ—
The chorus of communion became
The password into our side for war.
It drummed in the inner ear like pulse,
And I dreamed myself marching to plant
The first flag of a lifetime, tending
It each morning as if cloth might die
And declare me criminal and cruel
In the common carelessness of peace.

Mahmoud Darwish, *Unfortunately, It Was Paradise: Selected Poems*, translated from Arabic and edited by Munir Akash and Carolyn Forché with Sinan Antoon and Amira El-Zein (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003, 211 pp, \$18.95 paper).

Mahmoud Darwish, *The Butterfly's Burden*, bilingual edition, translated from Arabic by Fady Joudah (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon, 2007, 345 pp, \$20 paper).

Mahmoud Darwish, *Why Did You Leave the Horse Alone?*, bilingual edition, translated from Arabic by Jeffrey Sacks (Brooklyn, NY: Archipelago, 2006, 205 pp, \$18 paper).

Fady Joudah, *Earth in the Attic* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008, 96 pp, \$30 cloth, \$16 paper).

Although the poems of Palestinian Mahmoud Darwish captured me first by their lyric power, I cannot read them without remembering history. Since the 1947 partition of Palestine to create the state of Israel three-quarters of the land reserved then to the Palestinians has been appropriated by Israeli settlements and restraints such as the separation wall. Darwish's homeland is by many accounts the most crucial tension area in today's tense world. The Palestinian people consider Darwish something like a poet laureate. What better guide can I imagine into this region in crisis than a poet whose work is not primarily polemical but nevertheless speaks compellingly from its cultural and political nexus. Darwish, like Yeats, understands that the quarrel with others produces rhetoric, the quarrel with oneself, poetry. He warns himself in *The Butterfly's Burden*:

Don't write history as poetry, because the weapon is
the historian. And the historian doesn't get fever
chills when he names his victims, and doesn't listen
to the guitar's rendition. And history is the dailiness
of weapons prescribed upon our bodies.

By writing this the poet makes it impossible to read even a love lyric without hearing the bass line of his poet's identity in his own time and place. But were he not so powerful a poet, I would not be reading him at all. I engage these poems therefore first as music and as a guide through language to the human spirit, yet hearing always the burden (in the sense both of weight and of musical undertone) of their context.

Here then is a précis of that biographical context (leaning gratefully on Fady Joudah's "Translator's Preface" and on a rich

review by Suzanne Gardinier in *The Manhattan Review*, vol. 13, no. 1). When he was six, in 1948, Darwish and his family fled to Lebanon, ousted from their Galilean home by the Haganah, predecessor of the Israeli army. The title of Jeffrey Sacks's *Why Did You Leave the Horse Alone?* comes from this passage, in which a father reassures his son that their house will be just the same when they return. But the boy asks

—Why did you leave the horse alone?

—To keep the house company, my son

Houses die when their inhabitants are gone . . .

Returning a year later, the family found that al-Birwah, their village in the Galilee, had become Kibbutz Yasur, and that they themselves had been branded “present absentees” who had forfeited their property rights by having fled. For the next eighteen years the young Darwish was barred from leaving Israel. Some of that time he spent in jails, where he learned Hebrew. From 1972 until the Israeli siege of Beirut (1982) he lived in Lebanon and then, like many exiles, moved about the Arab and European world, saturating himself in Arabic and world literatures, including the Bible, the Koran, and Shakespeare. Like Doris Lessing, Pablo Neruda, and Gabriel García Márquez he was denied entrance to the United States as an “inadmissible alien.” After twenty-some years in exile, having read his poetry to tens of thousands from Cairo to Paris, Darwish returned in 1996 to Ramallah, a city under siege. He authored the Palestine Declaration of Independence and served for a while on the executive committee of the PLO. The books I have before me date largely from that return.

For a broad sampling of Darwish's poetry we have Akash and Forché's *Unfortunately, It Was Paradise*. Unfortunately, it does not contain the original Arabic, but it does present an interesting approach for transforming one literature into another. Three translators fluent in Arabic who know Darwish's work well created their own versions; the American poet Carolyn Forché then “recreated the poems translated with a different sensibility and made them harmonious in a single voice.” Forché seems to have been an ideal choice to harmonize the translations; these are a pleasure to read, and she would not necessarily be expected to imitate the form of the text in Arabic. Nevertheless I miss the direct correspondence to Darwish's lineation that we get in Jeffrey Sacks's and Fady Joudah's more recent en face transla-

tions. Comparing Forché's shaping of the lines in "Sonnet II," for example, with the Arabic in *The Butterfly's Burden*, I see her version divides the poem into two seven-line stanzas, whereas the Arabic original follows the Shakespearean stanzaic convention. Elsewhere, three short lines in the original become one long line in the translation; anaphora gets buried in paraphrase. I confess I am uneasy at the loss. Nonetheless, this volume is valuable for samples of earlier work and for an accessible translation in English of the important and profoundly moving *Mural* (2000), written after an illness so life-threatening that the poem might well have become Darwish's last.

Fady Joudah's *Butterfly* comprises three complete books. Joudah, a Palestinian American poet and native Arabic speaker, has set an ambitious and intimate goal for his edition, laid out gracefully in his "Translator's Preface":

Translation should, as Darwish suggests, become more than a new poem in another language. It should expend into that language new vastness. Darwish is a songmaker whose vocabulary is accessible but whose mystery is not bashful. Finding a way to accentuate the orality of the written, that which is on the tip of the reader's tongue, is essential to translating his work. I chose to adhere to the structure of the Darwish poem in order to experience what might emerge when "physical" mimesis occurs, and to honor my faith in the harmony of the human mind. *Structure* here is *syntax* as primary tool for translating cadence and tone.

Section V of "The Damascene Collar of the Dove" provides a small sample of this elegance of form with its marriage of context and lyric grace:



In Damascus:
 the traveler sings to himself:
 I return from Syria
 neither alive
 nor dead
 but as clouds
 that ease the butterfly's burden
 from my fugitive soul

But how am I to evaluate a lyric text in Arabic? The chapter on Arabic poetry in the *New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry* sharpens my regret for my ignorance of the centuries of strong poetry in that language. I have only what drew me to Darwish: in translation these are eloquently moving poems. Although I cannot hear the Arabic cadence by cadence, I can tell that Darwish has been blessed in Joudah with a translator who has respected the original lineation and composed English syntax that is similarly cadenced. In his preface, Joudah tells us that for Darwish cadences are more important than feet and that the most significant feature of his prosodic eloquence is architectural elegance: anaphora, epiphora (lines ending alike), refrain, parallel words and syntax (often lending an incantatory quality), rhythmic dialogue, and often a circular, sometimes chiasmic, structure of the poem as a whole. The translator's alliteration and assonance as well as syntactic cadence give me a sense of something analogous to the original.

Many of the poems in this volume are what Helen Vendler, writing on Yeats, calls the "spacious lyric." Listen to "The Stranger Stumbles upon Himself in the Stranger," one of the love poems in *The Stranger's Bed*, the first of the three volumes in *Butterfly*. The poet begins "We are one in two / There's no name for us, woman, when the stranger / stumbles upon himself in the stranger." It feels criminal to excerpt so tightly organized a work of art, but now listen to these lines from the middle of the poem:

Go behind your shadow,
 east of the Song of Songs, a shepherd of sand grouse,
 you'll find a star **dwelling in its death**, then climb a
 neglected
 mountain and you'll find my yesterday completing its cycle in
 my tomorrow.
 You'll find where we were and where we'll be together,
 we are one in two /

The passage begins in imaginative personal space (“behind your shadow”), moves out and “east” to geographic space, beyond ancient scriptural time and space (“Song of Songs”), through a wonderfully evocative image of the living desert (the “sand grouse”), to where I find myself, suddenly, in cosmic space and time—“a star dwelling in its death.” Then onward up the cryptic “neglected mountain,” where I emerge in time—back to the poet’s personal time—where “you’ll find my yesterday completing its cycle in my tomorrow.” I’ve boldfaced the complex chiasmus in one line to suggest how musical the translation is, supporting the structural repetition (almost an audible anaphora) of “you’ll find.” Add the sibilance of *shadow, east, Song, Songs, shepherd, sand grouse*, through *star*, and then the tonal shift to “dwelling in its death.” This passage is where the poem as a whole pivots, crossing in the center of a poem-long chiasmus, turning then west, “disappearing then reappearing / in a body disappearing in the mystery of the eternal / duality,” and concluding, completing its cyclical architecture:

We need to return to being two
to embrace each other more.

There is no name for us,

when the stranger stumbles upon himself in the stranger!

When you read the poem aloud you’ll make your own discoveries, not only about the lyric form and the character of the speaker, but about how to read a poem by Mahmoud Darwish with its complex relationships between the self and the other: the “other” sometimes personal, sometimes geographical, sometimes political.

Joudah notes that Darwish often speaks about writing in his work. I invite the reader to be alert for flashes of *ars poetica*, such as this in “Low Sky”:

Which time do you want, which time
that I may become its poet, just like that: whenever
a woman goes to her secret in the evening
she finds a poet walking in her thoughts.
Whenever a poet dives into himself
he finds a woman undressing before his poem . . .

Savor the artistry of implication and progression in “a woman goes to her secret in the evening.” And may I hear an echo of cummings’s reminder of death in “just like that”? Perhaps not, but the phrase does intensify the pace before achieving the lovely symmetry in the lines that follow.

Then try this humbling verse:

(To a critic:) Do not interpret my words
with a teaspoon or a bird snare!
My speech besieges me in sleep,
my speech that I have not yet said,
it writes me then leaves me searching
for the remnants of my sleep . . .

Was it my teaspoon or my bird snare that lurched after a possible cummings echo? I am warned and chastened. For a further mention of the poet as the instrument on which the poetry plays, consider these lines, enacting their subject:

Cadence chooses me, it chokes on me
I am the violin's regurgitant flow, and not its player
I am in the presence of memory
the echo of things pronounces through me
then I pronounce . . .

Dare I mention Plato's "Ion"? Inspiration versus deliberate articulation? It is difficult to imagine an art so exquisitely constructed could be so passively conceived. We have the poet's word for it, but the words also suggest the author's intention.

Though to my knowledge not himself a poet, Jeffrey Sacks in *Why Did You Leave the Horse Alone?* reinforces my sense of Darwish's poems as a lyric score, as in these lines from his translation of "The Tatar's Swallows":

We, the people of the ancient nights, have our customs
rising to the moon of the rhyme
We believe our dreams and deny our days
for since the Tatars came, all of our days haven't been our
own

I can ride these cadences without translating them into classical feet. I am carried by the allusive "We, the people of the ancient nights," echoed two lines down; the **e** sounding in "We believe," continuing into "dreams and deny"; the assonance of "ancient" and "days" and "came" and again "days," of "rising" and "nights" and "rhyme," not to overlook the chiasmus of "rising to the moon of the rhyme." Joudah and Sacks incline me to trust that they are approximating a dense music in the Arabic, indeed "finding a way to accentuate the orality of the written."

Entranced by that music, I am not deaf to the historical burden in which Tatar hordes are representative of the waves of invaders

that, as the poet's father reminds him in another poem, have for millennia advanced and retreated over their homeland. Indeed, the very sound of *Tatar* breaks the harmony of the rest of the passage. English speakers can enjoy these poems for their sensuous texture, their passion and longing, and their shape-shifting imagination ("rising to the moon of the rhyme") but cannot ignore the political resonances without impoverishing the poems and ourselves.

Setting aside my teaspoons and bird snares, I can only say that reading Darwish even in translation I know I am reading wonderful lyric poetry—important poetry. Although every translator to some extent traduces the true text, we need translation, as Edward Hirsch said in a 2003 interview, "to get a sense of the full dimension of the poetry universe." And we Anglophones especially, isolated linguistically as well as geographically, need to know the peoples of this troubled globe. How better than through individual poets? I deeply appreciate the efforts of Forché, Sacks, and Joudah, and hope that more of Darwish's poetry will become available in English. I regret that I have no room here to explore recurring themes in his work: the delicate handling of the personal, political, and historical "other"; the variety and range of tone from volume to volume, including the comic spirit in recent work; and the brilliance of imaginative imagery ("So I felt that I had won, and that I had been broken / like a diamond, that nothing but light remained of me") that shines through even the darkest of his subjects.



Fady Joudah seems to have learned much from Darwish in the course of a long devotion to translating his work. Joudah's *The Earth in the Attic* is Louise Glück's selection for the Yale Younger Poets this year. Born to a Palestinian immigrant family in Texas, he is a physician and field member of Doctors without Borders, an international organization that sends medical personnel into war zones to aid victims of violent conflict. As such, his life and his poetry recapitulate on a global scale the experience of exile and displacement that are his inheritance also as a Palestinian. His strongest poems, while lyric, have a narrative thrust—fables, folktales, or exempla created out of his service in refugee camps (unnamed but today suggesting Darfur). But their freely associative movement from image to image makes their political

landscapes sound like dreams, which in turn look like political landscapes: “—A camel / Caravan floating like ocean otters / On the desert floor // Is a hell of a cadence. / The wood they carry is massive.”

Some, like “Immigrant Song,” with its elusive resonances, rich reticulation of echoes in sound and sense, and cyclical construction, are both lyrically and formally reminiscent of Darwish:

We the people in god we trust.

We the people in god we trust everyday around noon a mule.

We the people dream the city:

Yet in context they reveal a different, individual, voice as well, more edgy and disjunctive, more reflective of Joudah’s characteristic narrative immediacy, density of sensuous detail, and ironic grounding in his experience as a physician. Here’s a larger section of “Immigrant Song,” incorporating the lines I just quoted and describing a scene where “every day around noon a boy on a mule” brings dinner to men in the field:

The one-radio, one-coffee-shop village without an ink-line on paper,
Now spilled like beads out of a rosary.

Not what they would have grown.

We the people in god we trust.

We the people in god we trust everyday around noon a mule.

We the people dream the city: Oooh you give me fever.

Oooh you give me fever so bad I shake like beads out of a rosary.

Fever so bad it must’ve been malaria.

Hey doctor! You mule-ride away, you cost the rest of harvest.

In these poems, as in many of the Darwish poems he has translated, Joudah’s language is propelled by a tension between compassion and regret. In the physician’s language the regret is

most mordant. We need both poles to achieve not only a sense of “the full dimension of the poetry universe” but an insight into the human condition. As Louise Glück says in her foreword, “in the absence of the authenticating earth—where home was—only language remains, having to take on the work of both earth and spirit.”

Both Joudah’s and Darwish’s poetry are grounded in internal displacement; both poets have suffered exile from their mother cultures and have chosen the poetic vantage point of the wanderer, the world traveler, the other. Their poetries, in Joudah’s words, take wing on “The thousand feathers that aren’t mine / And are whole for no one,” fusing the personal and political in eloquent music at this crisis point in human history. In all of contemporary poetry it is hard to think of more needed voices and perspectives.

■

Note: It is the policy of the *BPJ* not to publish the work of our editors or to review their books. We would like, however, to announce the publication of **Lee Sharkey’s *A Darker, Sweeter String*** (Weld, ME: Off the Grid Press, 2008, 94 pp, \$15 paper).