

BPJ

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WINTER 2008/2009

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COVER

Zhang Xinglong, "Autumn Harmony" (woodcut, detail),
Huxian Country, China
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 participating poets for this issue are John M. Anderson (December), Jessica Goodfellow (January), and Greg Wrenn (February).

BPJ

THE EDITORS OF
THE BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL
ARE PROUD TO AWARD
THE SIXTEENTH ANNUAL
CHAD WALSH POETRY PRIZE
OF \$2,500

TO
JOHN HODGEN
FOR HIS GROUP OF FOUR POEMS
IN THE SUMMER 2008 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.

TEMPLE CONE
A Southerly Route

Think of the generations of hands that have held bread,
Mouths that have tasted it. Bread nourishes the past.
When we break it at table, we eat with other mouths.

Should I be saddened, or jubilant, that the Chopin playing
Through my iPod earbuds can alter the world around me,
Bring Parisian rain and lindens to a street of towering steel?

Geneticists claim we move to the rhythm of nucleotides.
What I dó is me: for that I came. An owl's circular face
Is meant to glean fields of mice beneath a half-opened moon.

In the long stalk of my spine I discern a boyish faith.
My callused feet point to many sleepless nights ahead.
My hand says stars perish, but my lips say the winds go on.

Samurai composed verse and kept crickets in wicker cages
For the pleasure of song. Today's warriors are brokers,
But the samurai's katana still cleaves the air in their lungs.

O little sorrow song, you're teaching me to feel peace again.
The sea-ice of thought opens, and my prow edges forward
On a southerly route that has been blocked for years.

TEMPLE CONE

Listening to the Stars before Dawn

The mouse makes her bed in the same field where she might die,
Lifted upward in a barn owl's claws, a meteor in reverse.
Imagine how she sleeps, nose to tail, curled like the spiraling stars.

Before the universe exploded into being, astronomers say,
It was the size of a cherrystone. But they're mum about the fruit
Enfolding it, or about the mouth that drank the juice of stars.

The derricks over Texas oil wells are like postmodern theorists,
Pumping dry the ground they stand on, making themselves useless.
Appaloosas circle a split oil drum to drink rainwater filled with stars.

Today we scarcely agree on the meaning of meaning, let alone of words.
Grace means dignify snails to you, God hides in a pistachio nut to me.
But let's try to agree on this: there is darkness, there are stars.

Somehow one sculls to the end of *Finnegan's Wake* and begins again,
Somehow the goat can digest thistle, cardboard, and oyster shells.
Atoms are endlessly consumed and reborn in the bellies of stars.

Eat and be eaten, commands the world. Jesus is a wafer on the tongue,
The serpent at the beginning of existence swallows its own tail,
And from the collapse of stars comes a darkness hungry for the light of
stars.

MATTHEW GAVIN FRANK

Pop Derringer

In bed, as consultants, we're staging a backyard play
for our parents regarding the death of Abraham Lincoln.
I'll be the stagehand who's misplaced the blue paint.
You be the tugger of a thousand velvet ropes.
We've crawled out of our cribs with politics
on the brain, aspirations to pluck the salamander
from the next-door neighbor's sump pump, turn him
into a slimy policy. We have to fight way past
midnight not to be the assassin. In bed, as consultants,
we find and make our home with fences and flywings,
hieroglyphs of lemonade stands, little blue shirts, an
Indian Ocean-ful of toys. Buried at the feet of our sleeping bags,
these 1865 forceps, and the sort of Windex that pretends
to be anesthesia.

MATTHEW GAVIN FRANK

Little Mouse

Cobbled-together roustabout makes dilophosaurus
dioramas with pegboard and stiletto shoeboxes.
Hoping for an A-plus, pastes pennies for their eyes,
Abraham Lincoln inward, green paint, this imagined
standoff with the walnut brains, your mother's extra-
long toes that once, before you, choked your father.
Do this to avoid the holy horror of weightlifting,
your father's fourth eagle tattoo, the muscular
world shoving peacocks beneath our armskin. Even
the Romans would have slandered them in Latin,
called their biceps *little wriggling mice*. But still
you hear it, how boys belong on soccer fields.
So many big decisions: to use the rubber cement,
to go extinct.

DENISE BERGMAN

Memory Is a Lame Dog Lagging

Stakes

The storm cracks the midnight valley

flashing wounds, opulent-silver gashes
bleeding sky

My feet on the gel of the cliff,
metal stakes and rope in my pockets
How the family, amazingly, sleeps
while the tent bows, flirts, teases,
its cheeks round with wind—a stringless
kite about to take off

How the hunter storm ferreted me
from sleep

and flamboyantly I grip
the rope and stakes

The where

In the sluggish half-hour
when bathing suits dry,
when mothers stuff net bags with plastic toys
fold towels and lawnchairs
match flipflops to feet—
wavering on the blue municipal pool
floor

I see it first, the answer
to her *where!*

Veer

From the front porch
the red-and-white bike is a monstrous
pinwheel

spinning, the clothespinned cards
whipping from the spokes

all of it catapulted

all of him, yellow t-shirt, gray shorts, green hat
over the hood of a car

His

Richie's long scar
across his Popeye bowling-ball upper arm
Blue coverall sleeves pushed up

he showed me, shyly

Lame Dog

Tripod! lifts his head

Three spotted paws
light as dancing light on the rock-rim dirt lane

Boys wrap against a summer wind,
warm hand-me-downs but bare feet, bare heads,
scraped knees

On this eastern bluff, waves snap into mist
The friends race along the shelf

and there's Tripod lagging along
taking his dog-ear time

I've heard

*Never turn your back on an ocean and never
face into a wave*
which leaves you forever spinning

Veer

No words from my mother's lips for months
after the boy next door, the one
who first in line at the Good Humor truck
always got the last fudgesicle,
veered his handlebars,
black and white streamers, ring-a-ding bell
into the out-of-town car

Stakes

Heart, my heart
first at the smell then at the sight of a fresh scat
mound on the fever-blazened tundra

Earlier a cub lame and bleeding
left alone

The where

*At least, someone whispers,
she'll have the other*

A one of two, a twin
blue as the cement pool floor and centered
on a lane stripe,
round as an unfulfilled whole note

His

Richie, to escape
a suddenly toppling mass of vertical
half-inch sheets of cold-rolled steel,
had held out his arm,
palm perpendicular like a cartoon white-gloved traffic cop or a
talk-to-the-hand teen

until the furious muscle burst the crepe of skin—
he and his biceps
that strong

Lame Dog

Look at Tripod,
lone front paw digging a mighty

hole to China, digging digging
and why not?
Maybe he's found

the reason

O Tripod!
Dig for us, dig!

PAOLA CORSO
Quotes of the Day

Pittsburgh as described in italics by visitors from 1860 to 1877

City of immigrants

black to the eye, *black to the touch.*

I trod barefoot in *Hell with the lid taken off*
holding a candle through curtains of smoke.

I stop to take a bath, get out of the tub
following my own footprints, following
ash turning me Negro upwards.

I plod through
copious showers of soot from the furnaces.

My ears ring with the rumbling of *ponderous machinery*
and wagons *laden with iron.* I step into a saloon, searching

for a clean heart but find empty glasses. I walk until I see
the sky, see *belch black* fumes and remember
to dust we all shall be airborne.

PAOLA CORSO
My Mother's Eggs

My mother's eggs are nothing like soot. The ice on the North Pole is less

likely to be white than the henhouse.

If ice is tar is an oil slick is a leaded

belly-down freeze, then Santa is a dirty man. If warmth is a global airing

of fueled injection on burn, then airing

is a herring melt with eggshell fins

that hatch and stick and tarry. But I still love Santa, his plump gas pump suit,

his octane eyes, the nose plugs he wears

to sleigh through the driven ozone, the grin

on his face when he takes the lump of coal out of my stocking and fills it

with a Hummer. My present from him

is as thoughtful as an egg laid

if the henhouse is a greenhouse burning.

PAOLA CORSO
Oxygen for Two

The life he breathes is not his own. He inhales the airy Os, oh so elemental on the periodic chart times two, exhales for a life within, one that kick slushes a cavity of water, cribbed in a cage of bones with a wet receiving blanket and coughed lullaby huff of rhythm, the twittering sound in his tube, those rattle-shaken notes that bring sotto voce sleep to his night of day while the life within sucks tank by the liter, learning past the wheeze to breathe on its own or hold on with him. My father says he's going to lick it and cut off the life within. Leave his body alone. This is the ending we rehearse during visits home. This is the beginning that answers our prayers, what to expect when you're expecting.

SEAN LAUSE

The Gift

The day my mother dropped a net
of oranges on the kitchen table
and the net broke and oranges
rolled and we snatched them,
my brother and I,
peeled back the skin and bit deep
to make the juice explode with our laughter,
and my father spun one orange in his palm
and said quietly, "This was Christmas, 1938,"
said it without bitterness or anger,
just observing his life
from far away, this tiny world
cupped in one palm,
I learned I had no way
to comprehend an orange.

This morning our city dump burns and nobody knows why, only that the air is smoke-thick from everything the town has tried to throw away. "It just flared up overnight," someone reports in the afternoon paper. This morning my neighbor raised her head from the flowers and said, to no one in particular, "It was so nice yesterday. And today it isn't." So much wringing of hands over a sky. My mother, sitting on the last couch of her life, glances at the books stacked around her when the sky is mentioned. "Oh, I suppose it is," she says. She's ninety-one years old and recently quit smoking but won't tell us why. At the age of twenty my mother stabbed her first husband with a scalpel, no doubt sterilized. But the cut was deep enough in the man's forearm to leave a scar that made him flinch whenever he hit a woman again. "A good Christian," my mother always says when she tells the story. "Never missed his blessed church on Sunday, no sir." She fled that night wearing her only nightgown and hid out in the hedges of a neighborhood park. All night she sliced strips from her nightgown to stanch blood flowing from her nose and mouth. "My own best patient," she says, "I'll be goddamned if I didn't think I'd be naked by morning." She left that man whose fist had no love for a wife who read Shakespeare and worked in the giant woolen mills that stretched along the Merrimack River and went back to nursing when she heard that the army was desperate for nurses.

Let's not go soft here. My mother would sicken if a pretty makeup of style were put on to cover the skull of truth. The fact is that Hiroshima is not even two historical years away, and nobody can see it coming. Relocation camps and concentration camps and prison camps are thriving. Slaughter and herding of humans has become quite a business. Orders seem to have a lot to do with this. Everyone is following orders, even my parents are following orders: A lance corporal's orders send him to Idaho where he comes down with pneumonia and spends two weeks in the base hospital. The day before his release a Yankee nurse walks into his ward by mistake. "What's that you're reading?" she asks.

→

In two days she will board a train for Fort Bliss, Texas, before shipping out from San Francisco to the Philippines and New Guinea. There are no orders for what happens between the corporal and the Yankee nurse. They have dinner, they dance and promise to write each other. And they do write, again acting without orders. For more than two years they run their separate deadly gauntlets of what-ifs lined up by a history gone mad. How often have I pondered the myriad terminal what-ifs, the statistical either/ors calculating myself or nothing and shuddered at the odds. How often have I listened to soothing explanations which told me only that I am. All of us can buy marketable answers for the what-ifs, merchandise telling us that it was god's will or the will of something that always comes with a price. These are sold with guaranteed convictions that invoke themselves as evidence of profitable truths. My mother's eyes have seen her truth, "Something you can't buy," she says. She stands up from her last couch and turns her head from the clotting sky outside. When I ask her about all of this, she doesn't hesitate. "There is nothing, beyond us there is nothing and nothing goes on forever. Simply nothing. Because there is nothing, we need always to be beautiful." She gives me her hand. We are going to lunch, my mother now being fond of Chinese buffet in a way she never was before. "Is that from Shakespeare?" I ask, knowing the answer already, knowing what she'll say because I've heard the words before. "Maybe," she says. "It would come to me inside the burn ward, in New Guinea, when I couldn't stand the screaming anymore." She squeezes my hand at the curb. "You know that. How many times do I have to tell you?"

CHRISTOPHER BAKKEN

Triptych: Against Jesus

1

When Jesus was announced to Saint Eva
she was hanging the laundry in Black Earth,
her first son only a few months buried
beside the stillborn one with no birthday.
Jesus said he took both because of beer,
their dancing on Fridays at Legion Hall,
then said he'd return to claim the rest,
all my aunts and uncles who'd come later,
and so it is: he will. Oh, Bleeding Lamb,
savior of the dairy farm and hay field,
please rescue us from our reproduction,
but leave us Eva, the sky's diadem
around her breaking, the flames licking her,
the shirt-yokes drying and the sheets all clean.

2

The runoff creek zigzags south full of trout
and the Indian "Man Mound" hasn't budged
since the town stuck a park on top of it.

John Sweat's gristmill fed the Milwaukee Rail
with grain for the Mississippi—that snake.
Their feet run to evil and they make haste. . . .

All the way to Mount Horeb the fields are spread
ankle-deep in American manure,
and still the farmers' sons are as sterile
as the dead interred behind Vermont Church.

Virgil and his Mercantile packed with meat,
three shoe salesmen on ganja at Heiney's,
even Albert and his three-speed down East Street:
the whole of Black Earth bent against Jesus.

3

We carved up an acreage of valleys,
brought it low with splitting maul and axe heft,
hardscrabble old tasks we can't muster now,
with the railroad surrendered to bike path
and farms inherited by couples from town.
The years we have left are spent laboring
to forgive them all—the fathers who fled,
and our holy, sin-damaged grandmothers.

Eva begged me to let Jesus possess
my heart, right there on our knees, by the organ
where we sang her hymns, where the light failed,
where my Eden would be flattened out by love,
not sin, where I'd remain my father's son,
confounded by the logic of her God.

LYN LIFSHIN

Champlain, Branbury, the Lakes at Night

Always women in the
dark on porches talking
as if in blackness their
secrets would be safe.
Cigarettes glowed like
Indian paintbrush.
Water slapped the
deck. Night flowers
full of things with wings,
something you almost
feel, like the fingers
of a boy moving, as if
by accident, under
sheer nylon in the
dark movie house
as the chase gets louder,
there and not there,
something miscarried
that maybe never was.
The mothers whispered
about a knife, blood.
Then, they were laughing
the way you sail out of
a dark movie theater
into wild light as if no
thing that happened
happened.

ELIZABETH TIBBETTS

Bird Woman

Each morning, in all weather, they gather
in the high white pines along the back line
and watch the window. And when she flickers
in the reflected trees they call loudly

until the porch door scrapes open and she
appears bearing a pan of crusts, cores, scraps
of fat, all but potato peels, which they
won't eat. She tosses the orts to the lawn,

inspects the day, then caws the waiting flock
down: six crows, black and lit as the jet beads
in the box on her bureau. Each morning
she counts what is left of her backyard birds

(one pair of cardinals, chickadees, a mix
of finches, robins, summer's rubythroat,
and winter's rare sweep of hungry waxwings
filling bare trees) now that weather's fickle,

old fields and forests gone, and time has thinned
thick flocks to a trickle of song. She's not
heard the rustle and cheep of nesting swifts
inside the cold stovepipe since she was young.

Once, she saw, heard, a swirl (was it bats?)—no,
it was swifts, dark and feather-light as soot
in the blue evening sky—arrive, circle,
whirlpool, then funnel by the hundreds

into a tall, thin brick chimney. She thought
she'd watched broad day be inhaled by the past.
Now, if someone else would feed these crows, there
are things, yes, and birds, she would go back for.

1.

Smelling manure, the humid
sharpness of rainforests
beyond those fields,

I got off the bus.
For three days, I'd fasted on deviled
eggs and honey, sipped

turmeric water—just following
orders, my orthopedic
surgeon's. I'd ripped out

his ad from the back
of an almanac,
dog-eared on top of a friend's toilet:

Do You Believe In CENTAURS?

*You can rid yourself of burdensome footed legs:
Dr. D. Angel of Brazil now offering a revolutionary
surgical procedure to become a centaur. Be 0 & 1,
sleek & wise velocity. Risk-free.*

It spoke to me, as a dubious relic
seems more numinous
once taken from its locked

case and placed in one's palm.

2. Intake Form: Part D

Always felt dead
from the navel down.
Some man touched me,

warped my bones.

Never could run

the way the other boys did, those lithe
cheetahs—flying past the dugouts,
the fence feathered with creeper.
My feet splayed out like an emperor

penguin's when I ran—
I'd will them into straightness then turn around

and still see fresh
angled prints in the sand. I pray for my hips

to be hoisted from my body into the heavens,

hot engine lifted
from propped-open hood.

I see cordless, immaculate sanders
working my ilia—

feel invisible, benevolent
chiropractors turning,
tuning my ischia, each grateful bone,

shifting my kneecaps inward:

two pneumatic
quahogs nudged closer
in the mud.

3. Previous Interventions

To reawaken waist to feet,
I've tried *Utthita Trikonasana*,
Rolfing sessions, psychedelic

meditation retreats, pure stretches
of mindfulness spiked
with extracts of Yucatán moss.

—All a bunch
of New Age baloney.
I considered binding my feet

into alignment or having
the bones of my lower
limbs broken, re-set.

—Too Geisha-like,
too Golgothan.
I let many men

culled from cyberspace
crush and slide into me,
choke the backs of my thighs

like chicken throats, graze
and bite, grip my arches
but never flip the switch.

Just this once let me.

4.

I want to fly across the land.

I said that to myself three times
as I rapped on the door
with the greasy horsehead knocker.

The intercom cracked.
A long tone. A nurse's voice
that wavered
then gained strength.

“Sit on the cushion
in the center of the stables.
Close your eyes.
Your left lid will twitch
when your animal whinnies
and puffs its arrows of longing.”

5.

motes curling in barnlight
cushion really low stool
in middle of long corridor
fringed with toys hay
I plunked down there
stalls seemed to rattle breathe as single
mammal collared in zirconia

promised grace wasn't shot
bow never even strung arrows
never whittled feathered
had I tapped unwitting interspecies
morse code LET NO ONE
LOVE ME I want to be
chosen/pierced to go home

Dr. Angel shook me.
Then shook my hand.
“Do not despair, Marquoose.
They can be . . .
stoo-burn.”

He pointed at Mister,
whose black eyes shone
as if peering into
an incision. “He wants you.
I hear him crying out your name.”

6.

Holding the mask
over my mouth, the doctor counted down
in Portuguese with a Tuscan

accent. I could hear
the horse being rolled in
on a stainless steel cart. No doubt

he was tipped over
on one side, on a bed of dry ice,
fine Sharpie lines drawn
along his lower neck.

When I awoke, strange
birds were grooming themselves on the windowsill.
No saliva in my mouth.

I heard water running continuously.

An enormous drum of pain
persisted below my stomach, pinch,

pull, pound.
Stretch, fitful fusion, incubus knock.

Dawn agony teething.

When I first stood up,
I was a palsied crab, dazed.
Skittering, scraping.

Hot flurry of spindles
seeking ground. Ratchet, legs of
milk teeth, what moves
us on, gravity then

grave. In the mirror I saw
my navel was nearly stretched down
to where my brown coat began.
Skin the color of dry pomegranate
pulsed at the suture.

I began to emit more heat than ever.
I shook sporadically.

7. Post-Op

Once, only once,
I let him ride me
bareback. It was near sunset,

late, late November.
He had completed his day's work.
We were in the kitchen,

and he brushed away
a housefly from the veins
along my numb legs.

I kneeled a bit, he understood.
He relaxed into my back.
He held onto my neck,

his calves against my flanks,
and I started for the field,
for what felt like an ocean.

There's a trust
that won't throw us.
No bridle, no reins.

JOHN M. ANDERSON

Guantanamo Officers' Club : Marcel Marceau, 1963

Artist of the absence
 of props, impossibly

smooth. French and white
 as brie. Pretends

like a perfect child:
 to be

in a narrow glass
 tower and no escape—

in love with a radiant
 beauty none can see

and lose her, flowers
 wilting, stop-

motion fast in his courting
 hand—to sew

his own fingers
 together, skeleton

marionette in a silent
 spot. Coercive art:

JOHN M. ANDERSON

Manhunt for Osama : Book of Kells, AD 800

The tall crane crouches white in the initial O,
his long neck, knotted, steps and slides—

mandala, white-rose bramble maze—

his narrow saber bill threading the whole, his blank,
black eye looking out. Bird its own nest,

intestines and ricochet trajectory. Egg

and scramble. Plot twists stuck in an intricate craw.
Fuse. McGuffin and flow chart. Omega.

JOHN M. ANDERSON

The Baghdad Zoo : Albrecht Dürer, 1515

Stasis. Every animal stunned, awed—
the acid gnaws into an empty plate
and inspired, mystic engraver's

keen trenching. Every pebble in the hide
magnified as if by moonlight. Surgical
hatching, cross-hatching, gutters

running over with a black shine like ink.
Each deaf ear deftly carved, sense numbed,
eye a rivet. The flesh exhibits return

to their wildness to be toppled in their paltry
numbers like the herds of bronze equestrian
monuments. Hunger unsated, fires unquenched.

MATT TERHUNE
Dublin, Georgia

In Connemara, ponies gift their shining
to the sea, ruby fire to a coalbed of day.

Joyce sleeps among the boys' books in
a college town in Athens, early '80s vegan drag,

biblical guitars, Michael
sticks his southern honey to the mike.

The bombs

were laid like black pearls wired to the
floor of the city: disaffected drawl, bell of a

brogue bronzed in grief. The poem cannot recall,
reconsider, this barrel-act of memory, wheel ache: cotton

like water spilling from a gin, Roscommon

moonshine, slumbering in the belly of a bruise
for days. The memory of what is written

always against the common code. No one understood

Dubliners. Faulkner eludes. For years,

fallen women thrashed laundry through the filthy bins of
Magdalene, beat them against the whip-laced backs

of Georgian rocks. One with a whistle of battered

tin, the other through a blood-laced tongue like a shredded
lute, this life a knotted poem balled under a fist.

TANA JEAN WELCH

Fortification

George, the man whose penis I sometimes hold,
has brought me to this old Austro-Hungarian spa town
surrounded by high mountain stone—a place
to hide from his battalion, the war, my spouse,
a place to look up from the valley
to the cliffs and imagine an army of husbands
running then suddenly stopped short.

Under the issued white terry-cloth cowl
I am Magdalena or the Madonna
and George is my Hieronymous or the bishop.
Together we move from fountain to fountain
clutching our blue ceramic cups:

the metallic water is thick and salinic
like ejaculate in this water
we swim under marble ceilings to the sounds
of a pre-recorded lightning storm
like manatees we swim one inch beyond extinction.

All but one café has been closed,
so the patients, the solitary doctor, the left-behind women
and Boris, the masseur who says he's too old to fight,
all of us all eat together.

When George skips his shave, arrives at tea
with a dark-shadowed jaw, Boris complains
and sings propriety like my mother-in-law clicks
her tongue when her sons wear their hats to dinner.
But this was before her sons were old enough to march.

Before I learned to love a five o'clock shadow.
Before I knew George's face stubble in concert with his tongue
licking my pink, licking my labia
gives me great pleasure. Who is Boris to deny pleasure?
Who is anyone to deny pleasure?

We soak in mud and steam, nurse ourselves with minerals
and milk, while on the other side of the mountain,
the bodies of a thousand men—husbands and fathers—
are cracking open. Because we are sick
we can only drink our water and pretend not to hear.

TANA JEAN WELCH

Ad Infinitum

The sex was never-ending
and beautiful like a billion poppies blowing
over the graves and empty houses
and the explosion in the distance

was beautiful like a billion poppies blowing
toward the east trying to escape the west
and the explosion in the distance
worked in our favor as you bent me over

toward the east trying to escape the west
and the pounding and the pounding
working in our favor as you bent me over:
like thunder and rain, a black blizzard, a charged sky

and the pounding and the pounding
like an orgasm to wake all neighboring armies:
like thunder and rain, a black blizzard, a charged sky
I heard myself coming until my throat was sore

like an orgasm to wake all neighboring armies
or the hard slap on a woman's round ass
I heard myself coming until my throat was sore
from screaming over the loud machines

or the hard slap on a woman's round ass
committed by a soldier on leave, a soldier gone AWOL
from screaming over the loud machines
saving his supply of butter and cinnamon for my nipples

suckled by a soldier on leave, a soldier gone AWOL
the one missing two fingers
licking his supply of butter and cinnamon from my nipples
because this is how we keep going

the one missing two fingers
pulling apart our clothes under the battle-broken sky
because this is how we keep going
like the atom eternally splitting

pulling apart our clothes under the century-long sky
the sex was never-ending
like the atom eternally splitting
over the graves and empty houses.

I look up from the gallery desk purblind; everything's gone white. Yes, the walls, but also every piece of art, each frame, the ceiling and the ductwork and the carpet. I am deafened by such brilliance. The drawings and paintings are not white on white; they've been erased. No pentimento, not a mark. So too, when I look down again, my phone and my computer, white; the last page I was typing from is blank. I struggle to remember what it was, when into the space a white dog runs. He is not large; he is not small. His beauty is his whiteness, but instantly I see that he is driven by a mania to perform laps around this room and already he's exhausted. As he circles for the fifth time, slowing slightly, I confirm he is but half a dog, sliced directly down the spine and hollowed out inside. From the opposite profile, one would never notice. He is failing rapidly and I think that he will die. I am concerned I have no shroud. The one white thing in which to bury him is my mother's wedding gown. And surprisingly he's come to me and laid his half-head in my lap, in my hands, at which I've shut my eyes, partly out of disgust and partly out of abject heartbreak. When I open them, what seems a moment later, he is dark save a few hairs at his muzzle and the tip of his tail, which curls into a question mark. He is dark and he is whole.

Dwelling in a foreign land. Time is the only familiar tableau, last locus. Even your shadow falls aslant here, aping you strangely, or are you really hunched and scurrying along the sidewalk? When did you grow so much smaller? It is easy to become nostalgic. One easy thing. Clearly time is not a landscape to make a home in. Your beloved, in whose beloved city you now dwell, agrees one of you has an advantage. But which one? Remind your beloved that *dwell* comes from the Old English, meaning *to lead astray, to wander*. As *ravel* has come to be both *unravel* and also its opposite, you point out, twisting your key ring in your fingers. *Abide* then, say you *abide* here, suggests your beloved, remembering too late that *abide* also means *to endure, to tolerate, to bear*. Are all the words for holding still so fraught? You both settle on *reside*, free of overtones, swinging your legs over the balcony that overlooks the park where you go sometimes alone to feed the little yellow birds that remind you of your childhood home. Neither you nor your beloved suggests you claim to *live* here. Secretly you think you dwell here, you are raveling, you are unraveling—becoming opposite, and opposite's opposite. Only your shadow lives here, still having everything it has always had. Because your body is its roof. Because you are its home. Its homeless home.

JESSICA GOODFELLOW

: Map : Glass :

A map of wind is usually called glass.

Subtract motion from wind, and oh! what's left

is window, map of subtracting self from ~~motion-gravity~~ particulars.

An absence of glass is usually called shadow.

You'd thought it was the ~~opposite~~ lack of light, but no,

it's liquid dissolve of motion—you, trapped between god.

A map of self is usually called ~~whisper-weapon~~ window.

Fusion of sand, lime, ash; ~~sacred~~ translucent barricade
against elements, motion. As if the self were other than.

A map of self is usually a window of ~~god-gravity~~ smoke.

Childhood home burning, panes bursting outward.

Homeless, mapless, sparks rising like little yellow birds.

JESSICA GOODFELLOW

: Form : Shadow :

A sacred property of glass is translucence.

An unlucky property of glass is translucence. Light's entrance is also its exit. Moon trapped in revolving door.

An unlucky property of breath is translucence. The visible is easier to forgive. Early windows were thin sheets of alabaster. Earlier still, windows of dragonfly wings.

An unlucky property of breath is chaos. Unlike wind, breath holds only itself; sometimes, in winter, casting shadows. Wind casts matter randomly. Breath casts only itself, randomly.

A sacred property of breath is chaos. Slow leak from a body of faltering alchemy, entropy's lottery. Haphazard light escapes through the 10,000 gaps between breath and next breath—invisible flute of fluke. All jelly and no fish.

A sacred property of shadow is chaos, or rather, the absence of chaos. Silhouette of refusal, empty map of matter's insistence. See how shadow crawls along the ground, seeking a breach, a crack into which it will someday drag matter, a place to hide the body.

An unappeasable property of shadow is form. Denied the rite of translucence, matter calculates its dark matrix. Collision of body and light—what falls to the ground will not be trampled barefoot. No matter; everything beloved is the same as nothing beloved: godlike. Walk carefully—your shoes are what you shine your shadow with.

J. D. WHITNEY
from All My Relations

Cousin Wildfire:

Yes
 your
little sister
does
 live
here with us
happily
enough.
Please
 don't
come for her.

Cousin Walking Stick:

Yes
 of
course
you're
 not
there.

Cousin Bloodsucker:

No
you
 can't
be my brother
too.

Cousin Glacier:

Maybe you
 could
come back by—
scrape
 some
clutter off?

Charles Wright is the guest editor for *The Best American Poetry 2008*, series editor **David Lehman** (New York: Scribner Poetry, 2008, 218 pp, \$30 hardbound, \$16 paper). Since Wright has cast a wide net to represent the “various factions and inclinations of American poetry,” his selection dramatizes the historically unprecedented diversity of today’s poetry. Nevertheless, he confesses that he “like[s] things to make sense nowadays. . . . Art is supposed, they say, to make sense out of the senseless, coherence out of the incoherent, and connections out of the unconnectible.” Be warned, therefore, that certain experimental and avant-garde poets are not included. All but a few of these poems are easily accessible; all but a few reward repeated readings and the closest attention to language and technique. Well over half arise from personal experience. About half a dozen, I’m happy to report, deal with social and political problems of our dark day, outstandingly Robert Hass’s “I Am Your Waiter Tonight and My Name Is Dmitri” and James Tate’s “National Security,” which prompted Lehman in his endnote to say that “Tate has agreed to serve as the national security advisor to the series editor and staff of *The Best American Poetry*.”

Altogether, the range of forms and modes in Wright’s fine selection is rich indeed. By contrast, think back to the middle of the eighteenth century: if poetry wasn’t in heroic couplets it was usually blank verse. In today’s *Best* you can savor both poetic conventions and their variations: Alan Sullivan’s villanelle “Divide and Conquer” exploits the repetitive form to tell a truth about cancer. Paul Muldoon’s bitter pantoum is a witty but chilly extended metaphor on “The Water Cooler.” Erica Dawson has the chutzpah to carry off a chant royal in her “Parallax,” with her last line like a refrain, “The train is coming slow and coming fast.” W. S. Merwin adds a lovely open-form lyric. Frank Bidart has a sestina—but without the concluding tercet. Dean Young’s “No Forgiveness Ode” is an ode in name only. Moira Egan’s amusing sonnets on Edna St. Vincent Millay have Elizabethan half- and quarter-rhymes, but eschew the sonnet’s traditional internal structure. David Young’s strong, morose sonnet “The Dead from Iraq” has a few ghostly rhymes, no countable meter, and variable line length, but honors the architecture of the Italian sonnet. Among the prose poems, in addition to Tate’s “National Security,” is Dave Snyder’s extraordinary depiction of a confrontation between Maeterlinck’s natural history and contem-

porary astronomy. Given the formal variety in this volume it is remarkable and perhaps significant that the best of the prose poems here are stronger poetry than some of the “lineated prose.”

Charles Bernstein notes that “fixed forms do not have to be traditional or received”; he contributes “Ku(na)hay,” a form with three-line stanzas, the first consisting of one, then two, then three words to a line, the second of three, then two, then one, and so on. Robert Bly adds in a form which he invented and which does not yet appear in my prosody lexicon, a ramage, in this case a deliciously musical eight-liner, “Wanting Sumptuous Heavens.” Although I again don’t recognize as traditional the form of Richard Howard’s ekphrastic poem “The Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus by Castor and Pollux,” I do admire the elegance of its vehicle for rewriting the story portrayed in the painting by Rubens. In eight twelve-line stanzas, lines alternating between twelve and nine syllables, Howard naughtily introduces his own version of those classic “time honored (or time-shamed)” rapes.

Beyond this formal range, Wright’s collection has satire, catalog poems, at least one allegory, verse essays and short stories, memories and meditations, and a few persona poems, of which Debra Nystrom’s “Every Night” is unforgettable.

There is not much experimentation. Wright is explicit about what he requires. Claiming poetry is “the only time that two plus one makes two—language is half, technique is half, and emotion is half”—he has little room for the “senseless,” the “incoherent,” the “unconnectible.” It therefore comes as no surprise that only six poets appear in both Wright’s collection and Lyn Hejinian’s 2004 volume in the same series. Some of the formal experiments that do appear are less successful than I’d like; I was disappointed at my failure to move with the truly eccentric lineation of Jorie Graham’s “Futures.” The lines vary from one word to twenty, alternating flush-left lines with lines deeply indented. Since most of it is one long sentence, it’s impossible to excerpt. Because this poem demonstrates Graham’s meticulous observation, dramatic syntax, and more than usual emotion, I expected to make my way in it. But the oddness of the lineation kept tripping me.

Before I turn to some of the poems that most profoundly engage me, I'd like to recommend that a reader plunge into the poetry before turning to Lehman's equally engaging foreword, Wright's introduction, or the notes by the poets. Then try reading each poem with its author's note, and then the notes straight through, for a composite view of where poets today find their subjects and forms—why and how they write. Some notes, like Merwin's, read like poems. Some, like the note by John Rybicki, whose poem needs no explanation, nevertheless enrich by providing biographical background. Patti Smith's "Tara," which I read thinking *Gone with the Wind*, explodes when I learn that Tara is the mother of the poet's niece, a student at Virginia Tech on April 11, 2007. In Lee Upton's note, she creates as eloquent a short appreciation of Thomas Hardy's poetry as I can remember. C. Dale Young's "Sepsis" is self-explanatory, but I would not be without the ending of the commentary by this physician-poet, the assertion that all doctors must realize that they are "human, . . . not perfect. At the same time," Young admits, "anything less than perfection can mean failure. I began this poem with the hopes it would allow me some kind of psychological respite. In this, I was terribly wrong."

Apprentice poets will find avenues here for their own education, in both traditional and nonce forms, personal and public subjects. Each reader will find his or her own sources of sustenance. Here are three poems I'd like to read more closely for my own pleasure and for a more detailed view of the range in American poetry today. All are too long to allow more than excerpting—but I hope to send each reader off to obtain the book and take it from there.

I'll start with Ron Padgett's "Method, or Kenneth Koch." The poet says the trigger was a dishwashing soap with the "unusually abstract" name Method. Here's the first stanza:

Sometimes Kenneth Koch's method I guess you'd call it
 was to have a general notion of the whole poem
 before he started
 such as the history of jazz or the boiling point of water
 or talking to things that can't talk back
 (as he put it) that is apostrophes
 whereas my method I guess I'd call it
 is to start and go
 wherever the poem seems to lead

And off we go—a dozen stanzas, seeming to wander, first displaying the poet in the process of composition, then swerving into Koch's advice to have every line begin with "I wish." A few odd characters wander by, and then: "Who else would you like to know about? / Whom! Whom! not Who! / There actually was a great Chinese actor named Wang Whom," and we're airborne—to an orison to horizontality, then to wilder and wilder leaps of imagination, a breathless Coney Island ride, after which the poem comes to rest in a quietly comical dialogue of adolescent wanting. Padgett seems to be making a case for automatic writing or at least free association until I realize how delicately the imaginative explosions interrelate. It takes a real poet to pull this off.

Sherod Santos's "World News" might appear to be loosely constructed had he not identified it in the epigraph as "an account of Baudelaire's 'Le Voyage.'" Like its model, "World News" anatomizes the Walter Mitty-like impulses and imaginings that precipitate one to a life of wandering. In the lyric dialectic between the dreamer and the traveler, the dreamer suggests that the "poppied gaze / is all the lunar tide it takes / to float the dead-weight of our days"; the traveler admits that "despite the occasional suicide bomb, / I'm often as bored as folks back home." The "wisest . . . / . . . pursue their fate / through the high- / rise of a glass / syringe." Santos does not translate or adapt Baudelaire but follows "Le Voyage" closely enough for his poem to be a paraphrase. He does not employ the original's *abab* alexandrines yet he creates a range of lyrical episodes, each expressive of one of the two voices. Eloquent additions to Baudelaire's world-weary imagery are the italicized lyrical interludes that begin ambiguously liquid ("Firelight on water / Equatorial calms"), proceed to place names in a dry Iraqi landscape ("Al-Oa'im, Anah, Haditha, Hit"), and conclude with a further catalog of the world's desert places. In his note, Santos, paralleling the movement from wet to parched, pays homage to how Baudelaire foresaw the "cultural and spiritual malaise" of today's world.

Series editor David Lehman has remarked on how often the alphabetical arrangement of the poets has created strange and wonderful bedfellows. By coincidence, "World News" leads into Frederick Seidel's wickedly satiric "Evening Man," beginning, "The man in bed with me this morning is myself, is me, / The

sort of same-sex marriage New York State allows” and continues in Baudelaire’s *abab* quatrains to a grim, angry indictment of today’s political animal.

I’ll conclude with C. K. Williams’s “Light”—a dozen couplets that I want to call sprung hexameters—to illustrate what I think Wright means when he calls in his preface for a poetry of “emotional . . . , rhythmical . . . , rhetorical . . . , linguistic . . . , musical sense.” Here’s the first stanza:

Another drought morning after a too brief dawn downpour,
uncountable silvery glitterings on the leaves of the withering
maples—

Meaning is inseparable from technique, as alliteration and assonance (*drought, dawn, downpour*, then *uncountable*) dramatize the musical relationship of the words. As “silvery glitterings” resonates (ironically) with “withering,” I get a flicker of emotion at the transitory refreshment of the shower. On this the poet superimposes the image of the “hundred spheres shining” in the troop of blessed spirits in the *Paradiso* and then the “brilliant, myriad gleam in my lamp” of the eyes of a swarm of bats he once encountered in a cave, with their “cacophonous, keen, insistent, incessant squeakings and squealings.” The language and versification take on an intense auditory dimension, which itself takes on what turns out to be a definitive rhythmic pattern. What I first heard as a trochaic foot keeps reemerging as a strong accent, then a half-accent, then a light one. I hear it in “blessed approaching,” then in “brilliant, myriad gleam,” and “cacophonous.”

This never becomes metrical, but once established it resounds in phrases like a bat’s “intricate furl of its leathery wings.” Here I diverge from Wright in my difficulty in distinguishing between emotional and intellectual response. The intensity of the sensuous phonemic clusters calls Hopkins to mind and leads me to consider the form sprung rhythm. And to associate the correspondence of the natural and the spiritual. The overlay of the natural creatures on Dante’s blessed spirits confirms this response. Then something happens. Among the “fitfully twitching” swarm of bats, one gazes “solemnly, thoughtfully up”

from beneath the intricate furl of its leathery wings

as though it couldn't believe I was there, or was trying to
place me,

to situate me in the gnarl we'd evolved from

The cross-species encounter with this bat suggests to Williams
Dante's reference to "a figure he meets as 'the life of ...' // not
the soul, or person, the *life*,"

his with no vision of celestial splendor, no poem,
mine with no flight, no unblundering dash through the dark,

his without realizing it would, so soon, no longer exist,
mine having to know for us both that everything ends,

world, after-world, even their memory, steamed away
like the film of uncertain vapor of the last of the luscious rain.

I take profound physical pleasure in reading this extraordinary
poem aloud, savoring its multiple musics. I get intellectual
pleasure from how the disparate images harmonize. Mind and
emotions combine as I breathe in the weight of this post-Dante,
post-Hopkins song for our post-Darwin age.