

BPJ

BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL VOL. 59 N°3 SPRING 2009

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BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL
Spring 2009, Vol. 59 N°3

Scott Withiam	
The Smallest Know	5
Garth Greenwell	
First Morning	6
Harry Humes	
Rabbit Man	8
Christina Hutchins	
Quail	9
Michaelean Ferguson	
Retaken	10
Osip Mandelshtam	
from <i>The Voronezh Notebooks</i>	
Звезда	12
Star	13
По выбору совести . . .	14
But conscience chooses . . .	15
translated from the Russian by Tony Brinkley and Raina Kostova	
Jeff Crandall	
Night Call: Broodmare	16
Mary Leader	
They Vibrate	17
Letter to Arkady Plotnitsky	18
Albert Goldbarth	
Extinct	20
Three Quotes from William Irvine's Account of the Nineteenth-Century Scientist-Explorer Thomas Huxley's Life	22
Ghassan Zaqtan	
صورةُ المنزلِ في «بيت جالا»	24
A Picture of the House at Beit Jala	25
كما لو أنه هي	28
As If He Were She	29
translated from the Arabic by Fady Joudah	

CONTENTS

David Bergman	
Nativity Scene	32
Chuck Carlise	
Breaking Up with Katie from 8000 Miles	33
Steve Wilson	
Evening	35
Rosscarbery Bay	36
K. A. Hays	
Early Creatures	37
BOOKS IN BRIEF, by Marion K. Stocking	
The Full Resources of Language	41
Hayden Carruth, <i>Toward the Distant Islands</i>	41
Joseph Stroud, <i>Of This World: New and Selected Poems</i>	42
Roger Mitchell, <i>Half/Mask</i>	42
Marianne Boruch, <i>Grace, Fallen From</i>	44
Frank Bidart, <i>Watching the Spring Festival</i>	45
Alice Notley, <i>In the Pines</i>	47
Susan Howe, <i>Souls of the Labadie Tract</i>	48
Jeffrey Yang, <i>An Aquarium</i>	49
Susan Stewart, <i>Red Rover</i>	50
C. D. Wright, <i>Rising, Falling, Hovering</i>	53

COVER

Joan Braun, "Someone was alive / whom you followed by oil lamp," photo collage, 2009. For more of the artist's work, visit www.joanbraun.com.

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 Garth Greenwell (March), Fady Joudah (April), and Mary Leader (May).

SCOTT WITHIAM
The Smallest Know

Under the sign that said PRODUCE,
three lifetime clerks in long white coats
quietly stacked pears, till one clerk said,
“I’ve noticed hourglasses form
in the relief of the packed pears.”
And a second clerk chimed, “Time relieves nothing.”
“Initially, even a bruise can
be succulent,” said the third clerk,
and sighed. Out of them all, one pear spoke:
“But don’t let anything stand for very long.”
“Sit. Stop it! Get back where you belong,
you little shit!” screamed a mother to her son,
who had unbuckled himself from his shopping cart
shaped like a fire truck. “Man, there’s our future!”
said the first clerk. There was a hissing sound—
the green produce being misted from overhead.
“The child thinks the ceiling is crying,”
said the second clerk. “The smallest know,” the pear said.
“Then what would you suggest?” asked the third clerk.
“Get busy,” said the manager, as he approached.
“As usual,” said the first clerk, “he’s going to
give that boy a piece of fruit to shut him up.”
“Give him the talking pear,” said the second.
“Shine it,” said the third, “shine it.”

GARTH GREENWELL

First Morning

I woke up to piss, and then to wake
the kids it was my charge to wake.
In the little bowl of the field of our camp
the dozens of tents rose weirdly up
in the lingering low fog like stationary sails,
like ships in opening ice. The sun's
slit eye ghosted distant from the east;
the made world glanced at the unmade.

Awake before me, in nothing but shorts,
towel slung slack across his neck,
the small boy danced an awkward sideways
dance across the just unfrozen ground,
his bare feet locked in fog, his skin—
musculature lithe beneath it sliding
liquid and adult—bristling with cold,
white gleaming lunar in the morning air.

Behind me, a body turned in its tent,
then another, then from inside the tarps
the waking voices of adolescent boys.
I imagined them cycling the intimate air
moist with sleep, and their breathing skin
bare, and some of them hard, and some
sweating incommunicable dreams—

Turning from them, and from my own response,
I wandered toward woods that stretched
the previous night impenetrably far,
now a band of trees just three or four deep—
and at the back of it a makeshift fence,
three lines of wire stapled into bark,
ridiculous, forceless, yet gathered there
six cows stood worshipful and blank.

Coming to them quietly I watched
their pastoral loveliness melt away
to uninflectable abjection: legs and stomachs slick
with excrement; nostrils caked with mucus
and flies, flaring at my scent; their own scent,

→

stinging and sweet at once, stomach-
churningly strong; and piercing each ear,
sole adornment, an orange plastic disc

counting them out for slaughter. Until some fine
invisible line between us snapped
they let me close; then, disturbed, leaned
sudden as a body back. I took
a small red apple from my jacket and reached
my arm out over the fence and stood,
the waxed skin gleaming dully in my hand,
unclear emblem of something generous

and empty and good. The closest one,
the least afraid, slowly stretched its neck
to sniff my hand, then pulled back its lips
and took the fruit in its teeth, alien eyes locked
humanly ahead. What did I stand there
wanting? The slack jaws worked
the white flesh referenceless, grinding
a momentary sweetness out.

HARRY HUMES

Rabbit Man

That way he had of pulling his leather cap snug,
then giving it a little slant to the right,
cocky looking, rakish, the leather cap that now hangs
on a peg in my room, the room
from which I look out over fields and hills
he would have loved to walk,
hunting coat patched and stained,
boots worn down, but for all that still a tidy figure,
now and then kicking a brush pile
or stopping to listen for the two black
and tan beagles after a rabbit,
and the day drizzly, filled with the scent
of fallen apples and swampy bottomland,
the old double cradled in his left arm,
cough gone, eyes clear, still giving me the lay
of the land, where to watch, where to stand.

CHRISTINA HUTCHINS

Quail

The roof's edge. A quiet touch of cool,
intimate air. A quail's voice, scrabbling dawn
from the undersides of berry leaves; the screen
lets pass what is without

and light, and brightening. The screen lets pass
what is within and too dense to be contained.
My brother has opened the window.
Nothing more can be lost here.

A small family of quail strides out for seed
spilled from an old man's hand. Later today
it will be winter rain in spring, but
this is seed left over, spread out

for the bobbing quail yesterday afternoon
when even Beethoven failed,
when Newell, having dragged a plastic
patio chair into the sun and tidily

crossed his trousered legs, dozed
in two right shoes, one white one black,
when Helen, walking her wheelchair along
with quick shuffling feet,

came again and again to the closed room
across the hall and knocked at her own door—
when beyond all tenderness
the surf of breath rose and thrashed,

and we thought that ocean never would
settle, or still, or cease its jailed burning,
until just before first light,
first bird, he did cease.

MICHAELEAN FERGUSON

Retaken

The flowers soften so sweetly,
the petals unshriveled
and flushing red,

violet, pink, and unbuttered cream—
all the different shades
of mourning—

rebloomed, eager to unbury you.
I find you beneath
the stones,

brush the dirt from around your casket,
take you home again,
remove the burial

clothes, unwash your body, scrub onto
your skin the soft, sticky
silt of living.

Your mouth unstitched splits open,
lips stiff as a crocus,
and cold,

as I retrieve the gold coin you were to use
to bribe your way
into heaven.

Then—the barn, its new mice balding,
growing wet and pink
in their nests,

summer insects retreating into their egg
sacs. I bend to suck
useless air

from your lungs, hold your face between
my hands and kiss
the pale

version of you goodbye. I wrestle the noose
over your head, unite
the two ends

of rope with a knife, retreat into
the yawning darkness
behind me

and leave you to hang, your face
uncontorting, the rafters
jerking you up—

how lovely—the unbreak of the neck,
the long, slow rise
back.

OSIP MANDELSHTAM

Звезда

О, как же я хочу,
Не чуемый никем,
Лететь вослед лучу,
Где нет меня совсем.

А ты в кругу лучись—
Другого счастья нет—
И у звезды учись
Тому, что значит свет.

Он только тем и луч,
Он только тем и свет,
Что шопотом могуч
И лепетом согрет.

А я тебе хочу
Сказать, что я шепчу,
Что шопотом лучу
Тебя, дитя, вручу.

OSIP MANDELSHTAM

Star

27 March 1937

Oh, how I wish to fly
where I could cease to be
—unknown, unseen—
behind a beam of light.

And you a light within
a sphere—no other happiness
exists—and from a star to
learn that light means this.

That it is only radiance,
radiance and light—
whispering with powers
that heat the murmured words.

Dear child, I wish to tell
you that I am whispering
now, that what I whisper
to you offers you to light.

translated from the Russian by Tony Brinkley and Raina Kostova

Note

“Oh, how I wish to fly” is one of the very few love poems Mandelstam wrote for his wife, Nadezhda Yakovlevna. Images of stars and beams of light are often associated with terror and catastrophe in the Voronezh poetry, but in this poem the same imagery—like a Russian icon—transcends the cruelties of Mandelstam’s time and place.

OSIP MANDELSHTAM

По выбору совести . . .

Но окончилась та перекличка
И пропала, как весть без вестей,
И по выбору совести личной,
По указу великих смертей,
Я—дичок, испугавшийся света,
Становлюсь рядовым той страны,
У которой попросят совета
Все кто жить и воскреснуть должны.
И союза ее гражданином
Становлюсь на призыв и учет
И вселенной ее семьянином
Всяк живущий меня назовет . . .

OSIP MANDELSHTAM

But conscience chooses . . .

But conscience chooses, too much
death decrees, the roll call ends, vanished
like the news without a trace. I stand
in a strange country, in company with all
the living for whom resurrection is a right—
standing at the call, the reckoning—
a feral child, frightened by the light-world,
in union with her inmates
in this universe of kinsmen.
All the living—all of life—will name me . . .

translated from the Russian by Tony Brinkley and Raina Kostova

Note

“But conscience chooses . . .” is a stanza, eventually cut, from a late draft of “The Lines for the Unknown Soldier,” which was still in progress at the time of Mandelstam’s second arrest and subsequent death in 1938.

JEFF CRANDALL

Night Call: Broodmare

The colt is torn flailing
from its mother's womb
into the shit-filled hay,
mucus spewed from nostrils
flaring for breath, waxy
hooves malformed.
The mare collapses. The vet
cannot stanch the gushing blood.

Wasps hover in worship. One eye
glued shut, the colt spies light
and erupts in a childlike scream so unearthly
it guts sixty-three years of hardened resolve.
The rancher grabs a hoof pick,
brings it down hard.

Iron. Sweat. Bone.
Silence is the beating of blood in the brain.
Two men gaze at the mess of creation.
They do not speak,
do not look at each other.

MARY LEADER

Letter to Arkady Plotnitsky

Chicago, July, 2008

Germanium has indirect gaps.

Sun-points punctuate these geraniums.

Germanium can be doped with copper.

Geraniums can be red; these are.

Something about bulk germanium

As opposed to very very thin

Layers of it buried in silicon, measuring

Intensity against shift, then repeating

The measurements, Raman intensity, Raman

Shift, for various thicknesses of germanium

(Grown at different temps). Germanium and

Geraniums, then. Both said

To be grown. Paintings being flat should look

Flat. In lifeism, these geraniums

Are red and the fence behind them is bluegray.

This coffee's wonderfully wonderfully bitter, 'tis.

Ramen noodles are good and cheap. It costs

Nothing to read these warm geraniums.

It costs zero to look at a library book:

The Principles of Physical Optics. If a painting

Looks like nothing so much as a painting,

That is the ultimate realism. That is why

I would paint these geraniums bluegray

And the fence behind them red. Click on, click on.

Click on. Germanium may be ultrapure or

Germanium may be an impurity. Does Ga

Stand for Germanium? Does GaAs

Stand for Gap Absorption(s)? Kandinsky's
Painting *Waagrecht Blau* (1929).

Almost the whole painting is blue, but the small
Square is red and hence foregrounded. That

Is its/his prerogative. *Waagrecht Blau*
(Horizontal Blue). *Physical Optics*

WITH TEN PLATES AND 280 DIAGRAMS

Important as a cat's yawn, lovely and true.

Munich, July, 1913

"Surrounded, perhaps for the last time, by

The summer beauties of nature I send you and yours
A farewell greeting. Your old friend, Ernst Mach"

ALBERT GOLDBARTH

Extinct

There are as many as twenty species of flowers in this tapestry. They are depicted with great scientific accuracy—greater than in any of the botany textbooks of the time. They include English bluebells, oxlip, bistort, cuckoopint and Madonna lily. Botanists haven't been able to identify a few; it's possible that they are flowers that have gone extinct since 1500.

—Richard Preston, in *The New Yorker*

Although we commonly apply it to species, it's only another way to say "extinguished." So a single candle flame can be, and obviously will be soon, extinct. Or a person: look at these people walking out of a square of the sepia morning light and into a sepia shadow, in this photograph from the 1940s: what were they, to Time, these little parents, if not candle flames? My mother is holding a clutch of flowers they must have picked together, or that he handed to her as a gift, although the kind of flowers by now is as mysterious as the ones in the Unicorn Tapestries at the Cloisters, 1940 and 1500 being equal flames to the breath of the world.



As the Blahdy-Blahdy-Blah Distinguished Professor of Humanities where I teach, I sometimes have my students select one of the seven Unicorn Tapestries to inspire an in-class essay. I have two things to say. The first: the best included this: "So often I've heard the phrase 'the fabric of Time' used loosely, casually; it's a pleasure to find it made literal here. The weft and warp are so excellently plied, that over 500 years later these stems and petals look as if they were just whisked out of a cone of florist's wrapping paper." I like that. The second: my friend's daughter Zoe, three, once blurted out, "Extinguished Professor!" Well, not yet. Still threading my way on through.



And some went horribly: they were dragged behind
a car and partially skinned alive in the process;
shot, while kneeled and begging
the child's release; or slowly turned to stone
by a fatal witchery in their own cells. Others,
easily: at ninety-five, in a restful sleep.
And some, in an unsolvable obscurity: a weekend
out of town, and then . . . an open-ended
nothing. So we see there's no such thing
as Death—it's more of an ensemble cast; each,
a different assignment. A different one of us.
And what we are is names that linger only for a while,
until the names too disappear. Goodbye, Sweet William,
Daisy, Jack-in-the-Pulpit, Lily, Black-eyed Susan.

ALBERT GOLDBARTH

**Three Quotes from William Irvine's Account of the Nineteenth-Century
Scientist-Explorer Thomas Huxley's Life**

1. "Australian natives believed that white men were reincarnated ghosts of the dead."

Well we're not.

And yet, in the time and the place invoked,
and given the reigning consensus reality,
given the lack of better or even competing explanations . . .
a very plausible theory.

As good as the physicists' one
about eleven dimensions, about the place where light
is eaten to its pit, about the edge of time,
the end of time, the bubble-cluster cosmos.

In one anecdote about Huxley, his biographer introduces us
to Edward Forbes, "a genial and talented geologist
with a romantic weakness for assuming lost continents
to explain peculiarities of plant and animal distribution."

As if we could posit the sunken Atlantis
exerting its force in the background, and: *bingo*:
marsupials! Why not?—does it *really* sound sillier
than "continental drift"? And Heaven. . . .

Heaven is a theory—not a persuasive one,
I'm afraid, and yet a populous one;
among its throng of billions are my parents,
waving down at me with gusto—theoretically.

But I prefer the actual ones, she with her quiet strength
and her plastic "cigarette" (to wean her away), and he
in his undershorts yukking it up to hold
the thousand fears of our two-bit urban existence at bay. . . .

I suppose I even prefer the actual Blackie
to any posited Blackie-in-the-afterlife, although
when I was ten that shrill, pugnacious puff
of a mongrel dog—a snapper and a sneak—made every
day of the year a trial. When he'd run away, and I thought
good!—it was somehow nonetheless my job to recover him,
to scout down glass-sherd alleys, to investigate
the webby crawlspace darknesses, until
after hours of sweat and hoarse yelling I'd find him hunkered
and sour in some corner, puking grass up—and for this
no theory was needed, it was nothing
but wild-ass cussedness
behind the peculiarities of this stupid, ugly, dead-end
plant and animal distribution.



2. "Huxley was still in the midst of his strenuous first lecture course. . . . He resisted with difficulty an impulse to howl and crow in class."

It seemed to me that, at my niece's wedding,
more people observed how I look like my father
than offered congratulations to the bride and groom.
My father?—with whom I couldn't agree
on anything? If he said snow
I'd say Sahara. Today I look in the bathroom mirror:
time, it turns out, is a kind of agreement.
There he is, inside my bones, and working his way
from the marrow to the surface. My mother,
as usual, beside him. If ghosts are what remain
of a person's essence after the person is gone,
then children *are* ghosts, and the Australian theory
is proved correct, for everybody, white,
black, yellow, red, and all of those midway
toasty colors we're lately so lustily combining toward.
And if we're born only after a stay
on the island of gill, the island of feather,
the island of all-over downy lanugo, then
yes, then grrr, then let the silt
of these lost and sunken awooo, aghaaar,
these lost these aaawp these chrrr, rahoow,
sk'reeel continents sunken continents sssp
rise fssh uuunh sunken ahyyyaaa
rise once for their credit.

عليه أن يعودَ يُغلقَ تلكَ النافذةَ،
ليسَ واضحاً تماماً،
إذا كانَ عليه أن يفعلَ ذلكَ
الأشياءَ لم تُعدْ واضحةً
منذ أن فقَّدها
وبدا أن حفرةً انفتحتْ في مكانٍ ما منه!

أنهكهُ إغلاقُ الثغراتِ
وإسنادُ الأسيجةِ
ومسحُ الزجاجِ
وتنظيفُ الحوافِ
ومراقبةُ الغبارِ الذي، منذ أن فقَّدها،
بدا كما لو أنه يستدرجُ ذكرياته إلى خدائِعَ وأفخاخٍ!
مثلَ حيلةٍ تبدو طفولتهُ من هنا!
أنهكهُ، تماماً، تفقُّدُ الأبوابِ
ومصاريعِ النوافذِ
وأحوالِ النباتاتِ
وتنظيفِ الغبارِ
الذي لم يتوقفَ عن التدفقِ
إلى الغرفِ والأسرةِ والشراشفِ والأواني
وإطاراتِ الصورِ على الجدرانِ!

منذُ أن فقَّدها وهو يجلسُ في بيوتِ أصدقائه، الذين يتناقصونَ،
وينامُ في أسرَّتْهم التي تضيقُ
بينما الغبارُ يأكلُ ذكرياته «هناك».

GHASSAN ZAQTAN

A Picture of the House at Beit Jala

He has to return to shut that window,
it isn't entirely clear
whether this is what he must do,
things are no longer clear
since he lost them,
and it seems a hole somewhere within him
has opened up

Filling in the cracks has exhausted him
mending the fences
wiping the glass
cleaning the edges
and watching the dust that seems, since he lost them,
to lure his memories into hoax and ruse.
From here his childhood appears as if it were a trick!
Inspecting the doors has fully exhausted him
the window latches
the condition of the plants
and wiping the dust
that has not ceased flowing
into the rooms, on the beds, sheets, pots
and on the picture frames on the walls

Since he lost them he stays with friends
who become fewer
sleeps in their beds
that become narrower
while the dust gnaws at his memories "there"

... عليه أن يعودَ ليُغلقَ تلكَ النافذةَ
النافذةَ العلويةَ التي غالباً ما ينساها في نهايةِ الدرجِ المؤدِّي إلى السطحِ!

منذُ أن فقدها

وهو يمشي دونَ سببٍ

الغاياتُ الصغيرةُ للنهارِ لم تعدْ واضحةً أيضاً.

. . . he must return to shut that window
the upper story window which he often forgets
at the end of the stairway that leads to the roof

Since he lost them
he aimlessly walks
and the day's small
purposes are also no longer clear.

translated from the Arabic by Fady Joudah

فَكَرَّ في ذلك الإحساس!

الذي يشبه أن تحملَ طوالَ الرحلةِ حقيبةَ سواكَ وروايتهِ

دونَ أن تنتبهَ

بينما روايتكُ تموتُ عندَ خطِّ البدايةِ

وتجفُّ في أنحائها الإشاراتُ والوجوهُ والمواعيدُ الملقوفةُ بعنايةٍ

بانتظارِ أن تحدث!

فَكَرَّ أيضاً:

إنه حملَ روايةَ ميتٍ

أو شخصٍ لم يأتِ أصلاً

خطأً ما حدثَ هناكَ عندَ خطِّ البدايةِ

خطأً صغيرٍ يراكمُ عتمتهُ بصبرٍ ميتٍ ودأبهِ

كانَ عليه أن يعرفَ

عندما كانَ الموقِ يفتحونَ أحلامَهُ ويدخلونَ إليها

بتمهّلِ العارفِ ورييتهِ

موقٍ لم يلتقِ بهم من قبلُ، أو هكذا حُيِّلَ إليه،

ولكنهم يواصلونَ الدخولَ بيهيئاتهم المشوشة!

كانَ عليه أن يعرفَ

عندما سألتُ المرأةَ التي وجدها بالمصادفةِ، في الشرفةِ

تسقي زهورَ الحُبَّيزةِ، عن اسمها...

كانتُ ترتدي قميصاً رجالياً، تذكّرُ أنه ابتاعه من تاجرٍ جوّال

في الصيفِ، وخفّاً منزلياً

وكانَ هناكَ ما يشي بقدّمِ وجودِها ونزاهتهِ!

GHASSAN ZAQTAN

As If He Were She

He thought of that feeling
the one that resembles your carrying another's suitcase and narrative
throughout the whole journey
unaware
while your narrative dies at the starting line

and its signs and faces and carefully wrapped appointments
desiccate in waiting!

He also thought
he carried the narrative of a dead person
or one who never came

Something wrong happened there at the starting line
a minor error that accumulates its dark with the patience
and perseverance of the dead

He should have known
when the dead used to open up his dreams and enter them
with the deliberation and caution of those who know,
dead he'd never met, or so he imagined it,
yet they persisted to enter in their vague forms

He should have known
when he asked the woman he accidentally found on the balcony
watering her mallow, about her name . . .
she was wearing a manly shirt he remembered he had bought
from a street vendor in summer, and house slippers . . .
and there was what betrayed her ancient and noble presence!

أُو

عندما، استثناه الضابط، هكذا وهو يَنكُشُ أسنانهُ،
 من دوريةٍ منتصفِ الليل، تلك التي أُبِيدَتْ دونَ رَأْفَةٍ على
 بُدِّ أمتارٍ مَن الساترِ الترابي!

أُو الرائحةُ

الرائحةُ التي توفِّظُهُ في الصبَاحِ، الشتائيةً تحديداً،
 الرائحةُ التي لها عينانِ آسيويتانِ تحيطانِ بهِ مثلَ نبعٍ وتواصلانِ بعثَ
 فراشاتٍ ملونةٍ إلى قلبه!

أُو

عندما رأى نفسهُ على الضفةِ الثانيةِ للبحيرة، كان يرتدي
 ثوباً خفيفاً من الحريرِ الأزرقِ وجمَّةَ نساءٍ يضحكنَ في الأجمةِ
 كانتُ هناك، أيضاً، امرأةٌ لم يتبيَّنْ وجهها تواصلُ تذكُّره وتبعثُ اعترافاً
 مشوشاً بذنوبٍ يكادُ يعرفُها، عثراتٌ ومصافحةٌ سريعةٌ يدُ باردةٌ على
 كتفه العارية... صوتٌ يتقدَّمُ من المنعطفِ أو الضوءِ في الشقةِ المجاورةِ
 التي مات ساكنها
 الوحيدُ منذُ أسابيع...

هنا كان الأمرُ يلتبسُ عليه تماماً ويبدأُ العشبُ بالتطاوُلِ
 حتى يغطي ضحكَ النساءِ على الأجمةِ، وتتكاثفُ رائحةُ النعناعِ وجذورُ
 القصبِ لتفصلَ
 المكانَ برمتهِ عما حوَّلَهُ ويبدأُ ذلك الإحساسُ
 بإحاطته فيجدُ نفسهُ وحيداً في ذكرياتها، المرأة،
 كما لو أنه هي!

Or

when the officer, picking his teeth, singled him out
during the midnight patrol, which was mercilessly annihilated
a few meters away from the sand barrier

Or the scent

the scent that wakes him in the mornings, winter mornings,
with a pair of Asian eyes that encircle him like a spring
and persist in sending colorful butterflies to his heart

Or

when he saw himself on the opposite lakeshore, wearing
a light blue silk dress while a few women laughed in the thicket . . .
there was also a woman, he could not discern her face, who kept
remembering him and sending a hazy confession of sins he almost
recognized . . . a stumbling, a fast handshake, a cold hand on his bare
shoulder . . . and a voice approaching from the corner or the light
in the neighboring apartment whose sole resident
had died a few weeks prior . . .

This is where the matter used to befuddle him and the grass elongate
until it would cover the laughter of the women in the thicket, and the scent
of mint and sugarcane roots would unite to separate
the place in its entirety from what surrounds it . . .
and that feeling would begin
to encircle him so that he'd find himself
alone with her memories, that woman,
as if he were she.

translated from the Arabic by Fady Joudah

DAVID BERGMAN

Nativity Scene

It was hardly a birth. There was no labor.
She merely knew the time had come and lay
Down on the clean straw, not waiting for help.

No birth was ever like this, accomplished
Without labor or tears, and yet she may
Have moaned though not with her own pain

But for the agony to come. There was
No labor, merely a rattle through her loins
Like the last breath lodged in a man's throat.

Nor did the baby cry. He slept soundlessly
Against his mother's breast, smiling,
Happy to have come so far at last.

It was very quiet, hardly a birth at all.
Even when the strangers came bringing gifts
Even then, everyone whispered with suppressed joy

And sleepy amazement since they were all
Tired, bone tired, and they knew that at dawn
They would have to continue their journey.

This is how they wanted it remembered,
As words passed down with much labor, contrived,
Distorted, the facts wholly forgotten.

A gust against the casement—rattling glass unsettled,
 revealing tiny cracks for the cold to squint through.
I'm going to open it, bring the sky inside to find me.
What else, on earth, can I do?

STEVE WILSON

Evening

Foolish, to need when there is sky—
a small dog pawing at the door
of an empty house. From the road

into town, dust. The world we sleep
within, only outlines and half-
words. It reminds us even the wind

won't stay, offers someone moving through
the dark, through breath and hills. Thought,
worry open your window tonight.

STEVE WILSON
Rosscarbery Bay

—like gorse—like breath—
like heather holds
through distance—from light

undone and evening-long—
the bay where oystercatchers run
to eddies—wade to washes—

it silvers out the valleys—
yes even sea now slowed
lulls toward that farther sky—

1

The tide smacks through. I watch
the kelp's hold fumble from the sand, the stipe
battered and flung until the blade tears
and the kelp sinks. I think of tearing out
my hold. Of saying, I knew that kelp, that kelp
was an old friend.

(At other times, in wonder, I've said, Lord?—)

Come monk, nun, priest, and would-be saint,
bunchberry and sea rose, bog and heath—we'll call
until a god calls back, and if no god has seen
the arms we raise, a branch, a stipe—

The scrub has yellowed. The gulls mill white
on the gray tide—a rattle of gulls, a scribble
that smudges back in, as if some sketching artist
played with mood. Except the sketcher
has no eyes. And doesn't think.

Sail on, dumb clouds.

2

The ducks are molting now—
some eiders or old squaw that the sea moves,
the sun behind them blackening their forms.

The sea casts on and purls them in, a fog
knits through, night needles down, their heads
tuck into dark, bedraggled wings. (I fear the voice of god

may be no more than wind at doors, the settling groan
of mindless airs. The world is touched
by the grandeur of these mindless airs, by minds
that hear a god in loose-hung doors.)

3

Even the whales flute sounds that mean,
and the sea does not care but carries their speech.
The sea allows their speech to be. If no one hears—
if the song glides into a trench, or if a whale's bones jut
from a beach or break up in a pink channel—
the sea does not care, but carries the quiet as it carried the song.

A person might pray to the sea; I would not object to it.
The prayer would not anticipate the sea's answer
or gain the sea's love or its rebuke.
The prayer would only release a current
that would die along another shore.

4

Come and we'll walk out along the spit
at low tide when the kelp chews heat, and loafs,
and the wind's baggy hum loses tone—
when the soft mudflats lull us to stay
and feel the unfeeling,
benevolent dead, who want for nothing,
and whose want for nothing itches in our throats.

5

I don't invite the dead to wake. Not here
where the hummocks' sphagnum pricks and shakes
above the hollows' lichen. I don't believe the dead are pulled
toward any yellow cloud. Even the mother of god
was assumed by a pitcher plant, stuck to a leaf in some bog,

and let go in a watery cup. Who could see her assumption
and say, I am saved? The bog preys, rots, feeds.
I go wet at the roots. No, bog. It isn't time.

In tannins, in peat and the mouths of red plants, in lichen
and my own flesh, the dead break up.

Here is the music: I think the dead don't care.
Go on, bog. Keep your wet, deliberate soil

that wants and wants but wants so softly
and with such rich stillness, it tempts the living to give.

6

Fog blows across the wetlands,
the ghost of ghosts. The scrub leans east
from the west wind. Pale reeds

and green sea rose shake, and darkened stalks of phlox
bend into fog. Kneeling to the east, the whole mass
of low plants keeps the roots in place.

The stipple of a flock flees from sea
to tidal pond, skimming
from the west across the face of it.

The west wind hurries a boat
away from the cliffs, and the fog takes it.
Spruce, cormorant, kelp, reed, and sea rose will be taken.

I have tried and am trying not to be lifted
or strewn; to keep walking in mown fields
against the blowing. To wait, a doubtful apostle.

To watch the dead, as they go, assume
the strange unity of birds.
I stand on the easternmost shore, grateful

the vessel blown into the fog is not yet my body.
Sea that gives and takes away, deaf sea—
give me your grace for that time.

7

These black angels, the cormorants, fly over the bog
and cove as one, slip through sea currents
as if they were only wind, spin miles through wind as if
it were only sea. Some stand straight on rocks, their wings
held out like black flags. They are drying their feathers.

Soon they will take to the sky. I ask
to watch in company their calm that will be fury,
their sharp beaks, their black eyes, the way they startle

from their preening and swivel
their long necks, as did—during the visitation
of a comet, or at the appearance of an herb, potent
and miraculous, where some luminary fell—
the early creatures, from whom
we blunderingly came.

William Wordsworth in his 1800 preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* made literary history in his attack on “poetic diction.” In his experimental poems in that volume he sets out “to choose incidents and situations from common life,” using “a selection of language really used by men.” This combination of ordinary life and ordinary language both refreshed an art that had become stale and expanded poetry to encompass a world poets had previously ignored. Two centuries later, the critic Terry Eagleton pinpoints one reason Wordsworth’s assertion was so revolutionary when he asks: “Why is poetry so scary? One answer is that it mobilizes the full resources of human language, and this is clearly not something we do every day.”

Wordsworth assumes the language of poetry will be metrical. Meter, for him, increases the reader’s pleasure in “the perception of similitude in dissimilitude, . . . the great spring of the activity of our minds,” including “the direction of the sexual appetite, and all the passions connected with it.” Contemporary poets might substitute “cadence” for “meter” in their attempt to explain the means through which poetry achieves its emotional power. Like them, however, Wordsworth’s emphasis eventually lies on the choice of subject and language, and their interrelationship. It is this notion of the “full resources of human language,” and how these resources manifest themselves in contemporary poetry, that I wish to explore in this omnibus review of ten volumes selected from the dozens lining my bookshelf, couch, and desk.

Hayden Carruth in *Toward the Distant Islands: New & Selected Poems* (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon, 2006, 197 pp, \$17 paper) creates or perhaps recreates in the dramatic monologue “Pa McCabe” the language actually spoken by one common man. It starts:

You tell these young spratasses around here
you got a ram down in the brook, they’ll look
at you like you was talking the Mongolian
jabberfizzy, they ain’t never heard of any such
a thing.

When writing in his own voice, Carruth records various moods and modes. “Sometimes When Lovers Lie Quietly Together, Unexpectedly One of Them Will Feel the Other’s Pulse” relies on

its cadences to suggest Carruth's diverse voices. Here are two: "I saw our willow, the great eastern Maenad, *Salix babylonica*, toss her wild hair in sexual frenzy," which leads to the final lines, "And for a while I was taken away from my discontents / By this rhythm of the truth of the world, so fundamental, so simple, so clear," to which I'm sure Wordsworth would nod in agreement.

In ***Of This World: New and Selected Poems*** (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon, 2009, 377 pp, \$18 paper), **Joseph Stroud** opens with "Suite for the Common," eighty-four six-line poems—personal memoirs, snapshots, flights of fancy, and comments on literature—capturing in their cadences and simple diction voices that might be of "the common man." Here again are two:

"Melancholy Lu Yu Returns from the Graveyard"

I've been reading Lu Yu, the Master of Woe.

I know there's no end to sorrow, but good grief

he wrote 11,000 poems! My favorite is the one

returning from the graveyard when he finds his son

reading a book, laughing. Hey, I laughed, too,

and thank Buddha, so did sad old Lu Yu.

"And the White Goat Tethered to a Fig Tree
Above the Blue Aegean"

If it happens that I am to go down into the underworld—

let no one say I went willingly, without regret or tears,

if even to see Eurydice with my own eyes among the shades

or to pitch my tent in that dark world of memory and desire

and listen to Dante sing of Beatrice. Say how I struggled

leaving this world of sunlight and strawberries and night stars

Roger Mitchell's *Half/Mask* (Akron, OH: University of Akron Press, 2007, 94 pp, \$14.95 paper) provides examples of three ways beyond cadences that poets today heighten the impact of the common language. Both passages I cite here occur in the central seventeen-part poem, "Grise," recording the seasons Mitchell spent in that Inuit hamlet on Ellesmere Island, the northernmost island in the Arctic Archipelago. Coleridge admired in Wordsworth that when he used a word he intended it to mean everything it could mean. When I reviewed Houghton Mifflin's *American Heritage Dictionary* I called it "the poet's dictionary" for

its valuable appendix of Indo-European roots and cognates. Here is how Mitchell handles the word *raven*, the bird itself usually found far from humans, for humanity

needs watching, frankly, needs to be made
a little uneasy, given his less than kind
habits, his somewhat ravenous history.
A history, it seems, he would blame on the raven.
I've misplaced my dictionary of ravenspeak,
but the book of my own multifoliate tongue
(from the Anglo-Saxon *hraefn*, Danish *ravn*)
says that to seize by violence is to raven,
that a ravener is one who plunders, if not
ravishes, that from there the distance to ravage,
is short, that ravening is to rave, unravel,
go mad, be rabid, finally illogical,
since to ravel is the same as to unravel.

A second and a third method for heightening the intensity of common language come in Mitchell's aria to winter. He leads with "wind slicing air into thin strands of glass," a vivid metaphor, which Wordsworth would accept, metaphor being so common in everyday speech. And then:

From there not only might you have forty or more
words for snow, but as many also for darkness,
time, the varieties of wind, windlessness, woe,
movement of cloud, kinds of cloudlessness, vagaries
of shadow and thought: looming, ecstatic, shapely.
You might call water by hundreds of its moods. As,
water into which a stone has been thrown, water
the color of water surrounding a rock. . . .
water over land, standing, water we came from,
water we can't go back to, water we will, wild
white froth, trickles, spills, muddy water, mud itself,
meltwater, spring water, no water, boat dragged up
on the shore, flood, boat at the bottom of the sea.

Many poets today, including those who would deny intrinsic "meaning" to language, follow this lyric process: rhythmic repetition of words, intensified by words suggested by the similarity of sound: "vagaries / of shadow and thought: looming, ecstatic, shapely." I particularly enjoy how human elements, such as woe, coexist with the nonhuman in Mitchell's work.

Marianne Boruch, in her *Grace, Fallen From* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008, 106 pp, \$22.95) warbles no arias nor lingers over the depths of a word. Like many of our poets, aiming to have each word mean all that it can, she makes room in her poetry for self-consciousness about language, as in her delicious love song to “Learning to Read,” where we watch a boy discover “That anything / *means and is!*” And her self-mocking poem on how she should and can be “Nice.” Mostly, however, I’d like to illustrate the way she crafts the link between language and subject through the dramatic movement of her poems. Something actually happens in them, reflecting Wordsworth’s aim, through intensity of observation, to reveal the “primary laws of our nature” (as in his “Anecdote for Fathers”). Here’s a simple one from her suite “In the Woods” that enacts how the mind moves even when trying to focus:

Whatever was between
 Dickinson and that fly: I want it.
 So I’m very still, my fly
 making its rounds around the cabin.
 Its bad radar has it kissing
 walls, bouncing off the ceiling.
 I know. Everyone gets tired though
 the pines put their limbs out
 pretty much straight, keep
 them there, day and night, a very
 large exception. I think what it is
 to be anything not human. Or how long
 it’s been afternoon, hours now.
 Or how light only pleases
 when there’s enough shade
 in it. And the fly. I forgot
 about the fly.

A more complex poem, “Still Life,” dramatizes poetic imagination. It begins:

Someone arranged them in 1620.
 Someone found the rare lemon and paid
 a lot and neighbored it next
 to the plain pear, the plain
 apple of the lost garden, the glass
 of wine, set down mid-sip—

→

*don't drink it, someone said, it's for
the painting. . . .*

The artist
wanted light too, for the shadows.
So the table had to be moved. . . .

It was heavy,
that table. Two workers were called
from the east meadow to lift
and grunt and carry it
across the room, just those
few yards.

The younger of them exaggerated the pain and cried out for no
good reason.

But this
was art. And he did, something
sharp and in the air that
one time. All of them turning then,
however slightly. And there he was,
eyed closed, not much
more than a boy, before
the talk of beauty
started up again.

It is to me a joy to be led back into that seventeenth-century
scene, observing some of what goes into a work of art, and merg-
ing so thoroughly in the poet's imagination that I am at the end
standing there with the rest, moving on from a slight interruption.

Frank Bidart in *Watching the Spring Festival* (New York, NY:
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008, 61 pp, \$25 hardbound) has
several *ars poetica* poems that require close examination to
appreciate their art and architecture. "Little O" is a wonder, but
I'm selecting as an example the more lyrical "Winter Spring
Summer Fall." Here it is complete:

Like the invisible seasons

Which dye then bury all the eye
sees, but themselves cannot be seen

Out of ceaseless motion in edgeless space

Inside whatever muck makes words in
lines leap into being is the intimation of

Like the invisible seasons

Process, inside chaos you follow the thread
of just one phrase instinct with cycle, archaic

Out of ceaseless motion in edgeless space

Promise that you will see at last the buried
snake that swallows its own tail

Like the invisible seasons

You believe not in words but in words in
lines, which disdain the right margin

Out of ceaseless motion in edgeless space

Inside time make the snake made out of
time pulse without cease electric in space

Like the invisible seasons

Though the body is its
genesis, a poem is the vision of a process

Out of ceaseless motion in edgeless space

Carved in space, vision your poor eye's single
armor against winter spring summer fall

I'll just mention some of the arts here that endow simple words with mystery, depth, music, resonance, and manifold meanings. First, the lyric refrains, gaining significance in their repetition. They suspend the mind out beyond the merely sensuous, into the infinite (with the precarious ambiguity of "Out of"). Hear these as spoken by one voice, reacting to the couplets they separate. The second voice, maintaining the thoughtful silence of the spacing, appears to follow syntactically the end of the refrain. But a couplet's "meaning" is continued, if not completed, by the

beginning of the next couplet, so that we are carrying two “readings” simultaneously (“seen” to “*Out of*” and also to “*Inside*”). This is an extreme example of the suspenseful effect most poets hope for when a line ends with one possibility and then adds another to it at the beginning of the next line. A poet will expect such language about the making of a poem as “lines leap into being,” “one phrase instinct with cycle,” “a process . . . Carved in space” and energized by the Ouroboros snake pulsing “without cease electric.” Even the reader to whom this poem does not carry any message can find rewards in the neat and surprising line-end turns, the intellectual cadences that keep the mind singing, and the mysterious role of the seasons.

Alice Notley’s *In the Pines* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2007, 144 pp, \$18 paper) declares its independence from personality (“I said I was / the new species: no one” and “The only thing you need to know here is whether or not you can stand my voice. Of which there is surely no such thing”). Penguin advertises the book as “genre-bending” but markets it as poetry, which is how I read it. It is also gender-bending, as she ranges from denying gender (“I am not a woman. I am a luckless thing”) to more conventional identity politics (“something is of *interest* if the *he* structure says so” or “Why should you want to get form or content? / Some sort of social contract that no woman ever made?”).

On her first page of the poem “In the Pines” Notley begins, “Why should I respect, or convince, or even interest you? (Respect, conviction and interest belong to *him*)”. Well, I don’t know about respect, conviction, or interest. This book nevertheless engaged me—partly for its iconoclastic sassiness but mostly for the music. Music? No, not the contemporary cadences that keep my prosodic pens scribbling, but the actual vocal music that keeps rising up behind these lines, starting with the title, which sent “in the pines, in the pines, where the sun never shines, and I shivered the whole night through” sobbing through me. If the writer of this book has a religion, it’s folk ’n blues and old hymns. “If you don’t know the song, you don’t know anything,” she writes. “Soon be over. Sorrow will have an end. No don’t think what the songs think. Just think how they sound.” If you don’t hear a dark voice crooning “Soon be o-over,” or if you read

Couldn't see that I was running
 from my killers, all along the purple heather.
 Will you go?
 and don't have "wild mountain thyme" running through your
 head for the next few days, well, this may not be the book for
 you.

Another volume that explores the horizon of what language can do in a poem is **Susan Howe's *Souls of the Labadie Tract*** (New York, NY: New Directions, 2007, 127 pp, \$16.95). Let's say you know her work, especially *My Emily Dickinson*, and you open at random. In the middle of each page you find a five- to eight-line poem, like this one:

Door of surrender in the old
 black letter picture in Alciat
 I'd have gone in for you as I

am out and you're forever in
 Oh—but of course of course

Flip to the end and find "FRAGMENT OF THE WEDDING DRESS OF SARAH PIERPONT EDWARDS," which resembles a small square of gray silk and introduces thirteen pages of fragmentary texts, overlapping, twisting at different angles, and eventually disintegrating to illegibility.

Wait! Don't give up. Howe provides near the beginning a background story about Jonathan Edwards, who, when circuit riding, pinned to his clothing a small piece of paper with a new idea, "fixing in his mind an association between the location of the paper and the particular insight." The appeal of fragments. Then comes her "Personal Narrative" of her library discovery of records of the Reverend Hope Atherton—mere bits and scraps—but she "discovered in Hope Atherton's wandering story the authority of a prior life for my own writing voice." She wants to "transplant words onto paper with soil sticking to their roots," though the fragment of evidence, however vivid, resists coherent reading. "Match any twenty-six letters to sounds of birds and squirrels in his mouth," she writes. "Whatsoever God has provided to clothe him with represents Christ in cross cultural clash conscious phonemic cacophony." Wow. So now we know how to accept fragments—what T. S. Eliot initiated; disjunction here travels

to its extreme, and, literally in the final pages, collapses into silence. Howe shows us just how to read this, and it's exciting to share her enthusiasm. "Each page," she explains, "is both picture and nonsense soliloquy replete with transgressive nudges. It's a vocalized wilderness format of slippage and misshapen dream projection." One more gift from the poet (especially to a scholar like me) is her passion for library archives. A photographic fragment of that wedding dress! And all that language! Echoing Thoreau she muses, "I wished to speak a word for libraries as places of freedom and wildness. Often walking alone in the stacks, surrounded by raw material paper afterlife, my spirits were shaken by great ingathering of titles and languages." Her last direct words to her reader are, "True wildness is like true gold: it will bear the trial of Dewey Decimal." To appreciate these poems one must study all the front matter carefully and then read aloud these fragments, shored against her ruin, to hear the different voices.

Jeffrey Yang's *An Aquarium* (Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 2008, 80 pp, \$15 paper) reveals a young poet simply crazy about language. Each poem introduces an underwater resident, presented alphabetically (with room somehow for Rexroth, U.S., Vacuum, and Vishnu). I'm attracted to poets who inspire me to discover new words; this one gave my *American Heritage* and my spell-check a workout. Do I really need to understand "skin coruscates / rhombic crystals of guanine"? No, but I'm glad to be straight that *coruscates* splashes, sparkles, glitters; that *rhombic* comes from the Latin for *flatfish* and (!) *magician's circle*; and that *guanine*, an essential constituent of RNA and DNA, is a purine (look it up) base, etymologically derived from *guano*, as you may have guessed, in which it is found. Like Adam, Yang loves naming; in his "Mola Mola" he sings out forty-six different names for the fish. The first function of language Yang identifies is to be a repository of knowledge. As a poet he goes for everything a word can mean, but for him, unlike for Wordsworth, I suspect the word itself comes before the meaning. Here he is on *poetry*:

For Oppen
 a test of poetry is
 sincerity, clarity, respect. . . .
 For Zukofsky *the range of pleasure*

→

it affords as sight, sound, and intellection.

In a dream

Vishnu visited Appakavi
 who received the secrets of
 Nannaya's grammar: *Poetry*
is the ultimate learning.

A second function of poetry is ludic: surprises, witty wordplay, amusing cross-references, juggling of scientific vocabulary into music. And a third, passion; Yang is passionate for the wild world, passionate about the havoc our species is wreaking on it. Here's the ending of "Triggerfish," a Hawaiian native with a wonderful long name:

poetry, echo of

Aquinas happiness: *the perfect*
activity of the intellect depends
 on right understanding, divine
 quiddity, around us, Flora
 Fauna fades, bay
 slick with sun-
 screen, humuhumunukunukuapua'a's
 home-reef we cannot recreate.

You will also want to read the final poem, "Zooxanthellae," for the full impact of this passionate environmentalist.

Susan Stewart's *Red Rover* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008, 115 pp, \$22 hardbound) is so rich—in forms, in its range of subjects and voices, in its passionate center—that I can understand Terry Eagleton's assertion that poetry is *scary*. How do poets do it? In her opening poem, "The Owl," where an unidentified cloth or bird or something has swooped by, something she cannot name, Stewart writes through her mental attempts to resolve the challenge of identifying what it was and concludes with lines that establish one of her personal priorities:

And still I thought a piece of cloth
 had flown outside my window, or human hands

had freed a wing, or churning gods revealed
 themselves, or, greater news, a northern owl,

a snowy owl descended.

In Stewart's six "Songs for Adam" her lyric range dazzles. I had to read them aloud as a group to enjoy Adam's developing voice as he evolves through his lifetime. Try this to begin:

"Adam lay a-bounden, bounden in a bond"

I-I-I am-m-m-m a-a-a

l-l-l-likeness

without l-l-likeness.

I r-r-r-rule

the s-s-s-sea and the air.

I n-n-named a fish

and a b-bird and a stem,

and a f-f-foal by

the s-s-s-side of a m-m-mare.

My tongue was heavy, too heavy to move.

My feet were bound by roots,

but I learned to open my mouth

and sing,

to open my mouth like a bell, like

a flower.

The next, "the names," begins, "What name shall I give to thee? / What name shall I compare to thee?" (already a sophisticated distinction) and then in a rhymed abecedarian lyric reveals how complex Adam's percepts and concepts have become:

anise bee and cherry

dark and egg and free

ghost hand and icicle

jinx and kiss and lea

many none and other

pain question row

sadness tree unusual

verity and woe

x I signed,

a yawn and zed,

and then I went to bed.

A great gift in *Red Rover* is the translations of texts that sent me back to the originals—not ready to believe that I had overlooked such strong timeless poems both in college and graduate school. "The Former Age" traces human culture from its Arcadian harmony with nature through rulers who were "not eager to press on, / taking wilderness and deserts as their prize," to "our day"

where “there’s only coveting, / double-dealing, and treason and envy.” “The Complaint of Mars” and “The Complaint of Venus,” also from Chaucer, are eloquent lyric voices, more loosely translated. In addition she provides “Variations on ‘The Dream of the Rood’”; whatever your religion, it is a powerful poem, an autobiography beginning

In the wood there stood a tree and in the tree there lived a wood
that was a cross without form
 until it stood upon a hill,
 bleeding like a man
 and in the man there lived a god.

For some critics the heart of this book is the moving “Elegy Against the Massacre at the Amish School in West Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, Autumn 2006,” with its refrain rearranging the girls’ names in each stanza, beginning

Lena, Mary Liz, and Anna Mae
Marian, Naomi Rose
when time has stopped
where time has slowed
the horses wear the rain

But if I had to pick the poem I’d most want to keep, it would be “Wrens.” Here it is, complete:

their tumbling joy
decanted descanting
over cobble
stones in and out
of firethorn back
and forth to gingko
who knows
who will
ever know
what net
binds them
loosening
song?
I would not
lose them
could not lose
them know
if there’s

→

another
 place another
 world another life
 there must be wrens.

If you know me, you know that what the lovely language says makes it memorable for me. It reflects many of the qualities of language I've been highlighting in this review, how one word precipitates another similar word ("decanted descanting") with the intense condensation of meaning in those two words, as well as the quiet *ars poetica* of "what net / binds them / loosening / song."

To consider **C. D. Wright's *Rising, Falling, Hovering*** (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon, 2008, 107 pp, \$22 cloth) I need to quote from a passage in Muriel Rukeyser's *The Life of Poetry* that Adrienne Rich cites in *A Human Eye*. A poem

is not its words or its images, any more than a symphony is its notes or a river its drops of water. Poetry depends on the moving relations within itself. It is an art that lives in time, expressing and evoking the moving relation between the individual consciousness and the world. The work that a poem does is transfer of human energy, and I think human energy may be defined as consciousness, the capacity to make change in existing conditions.

Wright's title proclaims that dynamic, and this work is in constant motion. I'll begin by describing its unusual architecture. First come three poems, in the first of which she places herself on earth with GPS accuracy and then in the "fifth and final cycle" of Aztec time. "We will be stardust," she predicts, but "No, / we must first be ice. Be nails. Be teeth. / Be lightning." Readers, we are warned. Next comes the first of two versions of a poem that will appear, revised, later in the book: "Like Having a Light at Your Back You Can't See but You Can Still Feel," with a young couple whose sense of harmony is qualified by their sense of not belonging. This "hovering" intensifies at the end:

If this took place anywhere near the presidential palace
 it would be nonstop terrifying.

And this could be the reason she has started to scream.
 As I read on, that scream hangs in the air, along with the vague political allusion.

Floods of feelings

militarize our nights currents of solitude cordon off
our days Oct 16 the famous Carousel Bar reopened
in the Crescent City customers resumed drinking
revolving and sinking Providence continues to launch
hurtle heave its leaves And as of Sat Nov 12
according to the Associated Press 2,066
of our members will remain Forever Young

O when the saints go
marching

At the level of policy their kids don't exist
never did will never reach the sun-drenched shore
and now it's Monday again

I have been to Pilates I found my old coat
I took my will to the notary I found my good glasses
I have filled my tank I am going to the market
then I think I'll cut my hair off with a broken bottle

Yeats claimed that of our quarrel with others we make rhetoric, of our quarrels with ourselves, poetry. He thereby provided a rationale for those who would say that if there's politics in it, it's by definition not poetry. But what if today the quarrel with ourselves is about our national shame? Wright in this book is forever quarreling with herself—especially over her role as a

mother:

So the scared self assembles around the stiff self

And the son's mother withstands the summer's son (and vice versa)

(If you cannot or do not wish to perform
this function you shouldn't be in this century)

But we do live in this terrible century, and the poet does control her murderous rage. As her epigraph from Merleau-Ponty promised ("The momentum of existence towards others, towards the future, towards the world can be restored as a river unfreezes"), Wright ends the volume with a yellow leaf floating toward the ground "transmitting a spot of optimism / through a slow intensification of color in the lower corner of the morning." In the control of her rage and the mobilization of "the full resources of human language," Wright, like so many of the poets I have discussed, creates a poetry that approaches both Wordsworth's "dream of a common language" and an art form that might effect the change implicit in his plea for an acceptance of our common humanity.