

BPJ

BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL VOL. 59 N°4 SUMMER 2009

Editors

John Rosenwald, Lee Sharkey

Editorial Board

Leonore Hildebrandt, Dawn Potter, John Rosenwald, Lee Sharkey,
Marion K. Stocking

Editors for this Issue

Leonore Hildebrandt, Dawn Potter, John Rosenwald, Lee Sharkey,
Marion K. Stocking

Supporting Staff

Ann Arbor, Al Bersbach, Karen Hellekson

Web Manager

Lee Sharkey

Subscriptions

Individual: One year (4 issues) \$18 Three years \$48

Institution: One year \$23 Three years \$65

Add for annual postage to Canada, \$3; elsewhere outside the USA, \$7.

Submissions

are welcome at any time, but must include a self-addressed stamped envelope.

Retail Distributors

Media Solutions, 9632 Madison Blvd., Madison, AL 35758

Ubiquity Distributors, 607 Degraw St., Brooklyn, NY 11217

Beloit Poetry Journal is indexed in *Humanities International Complete*, *Index of American Periodical Verse*, MLA database, and *LitFinder*, and is available as full text on EBSCO Information Services' Academic Search Premier database.

Address submissions, correspondence, orders, and review copies to
Beloit Poetry Journal, P.O. Box 151, Farmington, ME 04938.

Copyright 2009 by The Beloit Poetry Journal Foundation, Inc.

ISSN: 0005-8661

Printed by Franklin Printing, Farmington, Maine

www.bpj.org

bpj@bpj.org

Hadara Bar-Nadav	
Family of Strangers	5
Ellen Kombiyil	
Cerberus and Persephone	6
Peggy Aylsworth	
Adjustments	8
Peter Munro	
Lullaby in Storm Light	9
Bleeding Cod	10
Ritual on Deck before an Approaching Low	12
Northern Fulmar (<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>)	13
Simon Perchik	
[These waves still surface . . .]	14
Michael Jones	
Home Cooking	15
Toby Wiliguru Pambardu	
Wālinu	16
First Truck	17
translated from the Yindjibarndi by Shon ArieH-Lerer	
Joe Wilkins	
Notes from the Journey Westward	22
Luke Johnson	
Corn Snake as Compass	23
Avery Slater	
Bullet Proof	24
Joseph Duemer	
A Dog in Hanoi	30
Farewell to September	31
Exile	32
Benjamin Jackson	
Bloodlines	33

CONTENTS

BOOKS IN BRIEF, by Lee Sharkey

A Human I	40
Adrienne Rich, <i>A Human Eye: Essays on Art in Society, 1997–2008</i>	40
Adrienne Rich, <i>Telephone Ringing in the Labyrinth: Poems 2004–2006</i>	42

COVER

Zhang Zhilan, “Old Shih Tzu,” painting, 1991

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 Avery Slater (June), Hadara Bar-Nadav (July), and Peter Munro (August).

Effective immediately, review copies should be sent to P.O. Box 151, Farmington, ME 04938.

HADARA BAR-NADAV
Family of Strangers

Ghosts continue leaking, spreading
while I sleep.

Ghosts born two at a time, tearing
from my nostrils, and a large child
who bubbles from my mouth and suckles my chin.

Once black eyes now alive
with iridescent fog.

Blue electricity needles.

Some ghosts are children who stare
at me while I sleep.

Some are fathers who can walk again,
smoke streaming from their hair.

In daylight I miss you.

I begin to miss you when
I am peeling from sleep, edges
reddening with sun.

Ghosts, I adore your absence.

Ghosts, I cannot lie to you
who are transparent, I
who am also transparent.

In daylight I pretend to stop
loving, to stop looking for you,
ghost children, ghost men—

Let us never be absent or calm.

ELLEN KOMBIYIL
Cerberus and Persephone

It's audible to the three-headed dog:
her fear like a high-pitched shriek

held in her throat. Preunleashed. The thought
of the shriek and not the shriek itself.

And it's freaking her out, this mind-reader dog,
how he tracks muscle twitch, her intent to act,

presynapsed. He demands to know the *before*,
before the before: she was plucking flowers,

yes, when the ground opened its mouth,
but how she arrived at this exact spot:

how slowly she chewed and what she ate
for breakfast, how she slipped, stepping

onto the bath mat, her precise existence
at this particular moment—the two-, no

three-second pause at the four-way stop.
Indelible decisions. The luck

of the draw. The dog deciphers
eye flicker, delves past thought in search of

the anatomy of thought, which moves
like starlight, born but the reaching delayed,

which moves like the gorgeous dark.
He's doing it again, she thinks,

and he reads that, too. In his pupil-black,
black surrounded by gold flecks, she sees

the prepatterned repetition
of *next* and *next* and *next*: her mouth, stained red;

she will not be leaving this place, not yet.
This future spans away from her

like a cannon boom of sound. Calla lilies,
held fast, she lets drop. The great winding

of a clock. She loosens her thoughts, lets them
swirl and untwirl, the helix undone.

PEGGY AYLSWORTH

Adjustments

The day had a long, narrow feel.
I squeezed myself into it, but
the ophthalmologist said he played
a recorder, despite his new cane.
A compass and flute included.
My eye had no unfinished insights,
except when he mentioned gay marriage.
Is implanted the same as embedded?
Words, he said, don't say what they mean.
The lens he slipped in might have made
everything clear. The world doesn't
revolve around understanding.
The Ingmar Bergman movie gave us
more than enough to talk about.
The lover was a brute, my husband said,
and she had a perfectly happy marriage.
The heart knows no logic, according
to Woody Allen. Things must still
be worth seeing. Surgery at eighty-seven
carries a certain belief in the hereafter.
My altered eye makes the yolk seem yellower.
The taste of everything has a curious brightness.

PETER MUNRO

Lullaby in Storm Light

I have heard the slamming of hatches.
I have witnessed the railman's grunt and heave.
I've stood by while my deck boss catches our chief
in his arms, too drunk to leave the Elbow Room on his own.
I've staggered under the weight of a young deck ape
who'd mourned his marriage with vodka
then tried to bugger an obese and weathered whore,
her scorn for his failure crowning him like Jesus.
I've seen storm light burn black as a Bible,
an illuminating darkness, its locus
the eye of a lone sailor unable to look away.
I've listened while screamer captains ream their boys on deck.
I have lifted my eyes to the wheelhouse high among fulmars
while a skipper on the loud-hailer riffed
hard and long on themes conceived in anger.

Purified by wind, assayed by fatigue,
a fierce language has pierced my ears,
drawn-thin syllables of labor and hurry,
of danger and fear, of rage and despair
in God's worst place in Creation to be alone,
where sailors groan in their sleep,
piled up like puppies while we steam
down to the next string of pots,
their slickers cinched tight to their chins,
hoods up, rain pants taped snug about their boots,
slumber come quicker than God's wrath or gales
or a captain's rant, tossed in exhaustion's odd dreams.

I have been lulled by the slamming of mild steel.
I have learned fear as the barometer plummets.
Gulls have shat on the hood of my foul weather gear.
The deck boss has poured me my coffee.
The chief has lit a cigarette and leaned back and drawled.
Gruffly, the rail man has offered me a seat in the doghouse.
Green water has broken across deck and we wait. God
hath spoken. The whole ocean shivers. Heaped
in our rain gear until the storm abates,
we sleep while our vessel booms and quivers.

PETER MUNRO

Bleeding Cod

Gills sprung, some pop
when they kiss the crucifier.
Mouths trigger, huge as buckets,
bodies arch sideways all their length,
and every fin flares from pectoral to caudal.
Inboard from gaff and roller, the longline
crackles under strain, steadily threading its machined
narrows. Cod lips hit the slot, hooks rip free, leaving
cantilevers of jaw in ruin, and fish thresh crisply,
skidding the chute to the tank, lashing like little storms.
Ruptured up from depth, each crosses the rail
busted in its guts as gasses expand the swim bladder
and blow mesentery, living gaskets torn, anal flues
breached, dying even as hydraulics crucify
by kiss. Circle-hook after circle-hook
wrenches from flesh and flesh
sloshes the bleeding trough.

Charles tips his blade
into membrane ahead of the collar,
dividing blood
from cod.
Miguel touches bright steel through a sluice
of crimson abaft the last gill raker.
Drew hones his edge
along fifty-eight degrees north, slips it
perpendicular to the isthmus, working arc-
wise right toward his own fingers.
Operculum rifts from pectoral girdle
when Matthew's knife hand sighs
as if to release light glyphed in a red spurt.
Shift relieves shift.
The inclined conveyer grinds to starboard.
Mist, frosted adrift off a plate freezer, slews
outboard, swaddles the bleeder, then separates.
Constant near the ears of the sailor,
hooks tick rhythms
quicker than cod hearts ever beat
as the hauler strips groundline through fathoms
and barbed circles clack and plink against
the lip of the tube that guides them to their rack,
yarded aft by the slack-taker.

Sometimes blood, pooled in the heart sac,
suddenly darkens the trough,
plumed somber as predawn,
tilted cold upon metal
smelted to sheet and weld.
Sometimes blood pelts like stormlight
loosed from its furnaces and drawn
gusty under nimbus, decrypted, unflumed
from the large-bore artery charged by the gills.
Scarlet curdles to steelwork until the deck hose
peels color away, flushed to the sumps.
Finally, a few twitches of muscle,
the cod pumping out as it rides prongs
up the conveyer, its last crimson
frayed and hanging in scraps, clotted and swaying
from the grating of the belt, blood shreds
draped over bolt heads like some wrecked lace
once knotted from a thread
spindled alive
out of the dark of a world
unseen, the axle of which turns unseen.

After sixteen hours, Charles gazes
past his right hand, a claw drawn to.
His left elbow hitches sharply,
recalling every broken jaw, every neck plate
forced for his knife, ligament
articulating a body of law spoken in salt.
His story of sea chamber and torn aorta
knots muscles in his lower back, a legacy
ancient as hunger, no older than fear. Sunrise
blusters ragged at the end of watch. The day
tatters, bleeding out as if nicked by steel,
the man become mere matter.

October 2008, B-Season
58E 39.78N N, 177E 02.32N W
F/V *Alaska Mist*

PETER MUNRO

Ritual on Deck before an Approaching Low

Southerly.

One man lights up another.

Hand upon hand, their hands

shielding the flame flickered small in the wind,

they bow together over the lighter.

Their skins are the same skin

where their hands touch. They touch

the wind, one glove doffed and tucked

under each man's arm. Ice

flavors the air as gusts build

and bend sea spray to plate steel.

The first man drags warmth into his body.

The second man tips his own cigarette
into the fire sparked alive in his hand.

Both sailors' lips purse

to receive blessing.

Nimbus grows dark.

PETER MUNRO

Northern Fulmar (*Fulmarus glacialis*)

In the wind the fulmars come and go,
heeling where the northerly blows down sharp.
The fulmars hurtle crosswind,
to and fro by hundreds
until the woven heavens
have been warped
close to this planet, nimbus gathered low, pursed
heavy in that seine
knotted by the birds and reefed,
mesh sewn on mesh, each flight a twine
threaded through bar and row,
seized into gores
where the fulmars feather deft.

In the wind the fulmars never slow.
They crisscross waves,
skimming low in the trough, close
to the face of each sea. The blows struck by gusts
loft wings over rollers driven rough
and the fulmars cast across grounds
trodden by seal and crab,
seined by flounder and whale.

In the wind the fulmars wheel to blood
unpacked like skeins of roe.
Flurries of snow filter light falling dusky
as fulmars flurry and reel on the breeze,
a cloud alive of hooked beak, stiff wing,
and woe to the dying
afloat aloud
on the loud sea
then tumbled under all that flows.

SIMON PERCHIK

[These waves still surface . . .]

These waves still surface, not sure
it's her lips that open and close, kept moist
though you can't hear her voice

scented with rotting wood, weeds,
and bottom sand—you row this boat
left, right, swinging your arms

half moonlight, half almost makes out
the words rising from empty shells
and the dress you first saw her in

—you need more arms, clear summer nights
from that inch by inch love song
heavier than these overgrown paths

no longer listening for her forehead
that once anchored the earth
and water too knows what it has

reeling from a gentle stroke, another
another, facing the sky
it leaves behind, caressing her hair

her breasts, her shimmering—some nights
you can hear her, one by one
—some nights it's colder, colder.

MICHAEL JONES
Home Cooking

Forgetting the urine smell on his mother's hands the day before
and how he'd almost turned away from them as they reached out
in that white corridor, forgetting the pan
where the garlic's aroma was just emerging, he turned
and went to the kitchen table where he'd left the quizzes.
Jamal's was on top: *My mother's method of cooking rice is simple—
do whatever Uncle Ben tells you to do.*
He chuckled and thought, *What a signifying monkey*
and started to think about what Jamal would think about that thought
then remembered the garlic and leaped for the stove
a bit too late, not burned but almost bitter-brown.
You can't leave the pan when you're cooking your garlic
his mother had said many times—it was true.
He banged out a *dammit*, mashed in the anchovies and chili flakes
knowing the sauce would be okay but still,
Do not be an idiot, he said, *it's not so hard.*

Sitting down to eat, he looked again
at the House For Sale flyer he'd laid near the quizzes.
The first bites were best, prickly lush. *My food*,
he thought, *if not my house.* The house for sale
was near the school, near Jamal who'd written earlier,
When my sister whupped and I mean whupped Jamika
I just had to laugh, something else he'd started to think about once
and remembered now, taking bigger bites with shorter pauses,
a house he could buy, barely, and call his own
but wouldn't. Another thing he wouldn't tell Jamal about.
As often happened, he wanted to keep on eating but was full.

wəlinu jarrgajarrganaua wəlinu jarrgajarrganaua	ṭarəngurrii ṭarəngurrii	inđi nauṅulii inđi nauṅulii
wəlinu jarrgajarrganaua wəlinu jarrgajarrganaua	ṭarəngurrii ṭarəngurrii	inđi nauṅulii wurbarirrilaya wurbarirri
nauna manjanuu ningu nauna manjanuu ningu marajunu manjanuu ningu	jindanari jindanari jindanari	wurbarirrilaa ṭola wəndurrarrii ṭola wəndurrarrii
ṭamalkarrii iid-karrarreeya ṭamalkarrii iid-karrarreeya ṭamalkarrii iid-karrarreeya	niliñili niliñili niliñili	ṭola wəndurrarrii iṭinkarrarreeya iṭinkarrarreeya
ṭununga inđin kurlalaya ṭununga inđin kurlalaya ṭununga inđin kurlalaya	wəndaṅalii wəndaṅalii wəndaṅalii	iṭinkarrarreeya marnda-ṅalanmarna marnda-ṅalanmarna
kardinga nein-nein wəṅgaa kardinga nein-nein wəṅgaa kardinga nein-nein wəṅgaa	ṭuriliija ṭuriliija ṭuriliija	karunuulaya karunuulaya
purlara parndii janariijaṅu purlara parndii janariijaṅu purlara parndii janariijaṅu	ṅarlbarari ṅarlbarari ṅarlbarari	ṅamanṅamanina ṅamanṅamanina
ṭinbiṅarrii wuudaa karba ṭinbiṅarrii wuudaa karba ṭinbiṅarrii wuudaa karba	pailala pailala pailala	

TOBY WILIGURU PAMBARDU

First Truck

Strange being strange being	you have come closer you have come closer	now I can see you now I can see you
strange being strange being	you have come closer you have come closer	now I can see you now I can see how long you are now I can see how long you are
I can see you	strange being	
I can see you I can see you	strange being wild being	now I can see how long you are
spewing	light	your eyes reach everything your eyes reach everything
spewing spewing	light light	your eyes reach everything
below	is the engine	in shredded splutters in shredded splutters
below below	is the engine is the engine	in shredded splutters
in front the motor	chirps like a cricket	gushing and spraying gushing and spraying
in front the motor in front the motor	chirps like a cricket chirps like a cricket	gushing and spraying
the smell of oil	comes from behind	up and down up and down
the smell of oil the smell of oil	comes from behind comes from behind	up and down
steam blows high	boiling and	bubbling bubbling
steam blows high steam blows high	boiling and boiling and	bubbling

kariina uura níngulau	taramarra	pindapinda <u>u</u> da pindapinda <u>u</u> da
kariina uura níngulau kariina uura níngulau	taramarra taramarra	pindapinda <u>u</u> da
ti <u>u</u> arna karajula pannii	níndi <u>n</u> índi	nganga-iirile <u>u</u> a nganga-iirile <u>u</u> a
ti <u>u</u> arna karajula pannii ti <u>u</u> arna karajula pannii	níndi <u>n</u> índi níndi <u>n</u> índi	nganga-iirile <u>u</u> a
manamana t <u>u</u> rru-warila manamana t <u>u</u> rru-warila manamana t <u>u</u> rru-warila	ngurnidila ngurnidila ngurnidila	iirrara marng <u>u</u> iirrara marng <u>u</u> iirrara marng <u>u</u>
kalaura kardilmail <u>u</u> a	pa <u>n</u> ganmana	wirndururrija <u>n</u> wirndururrija <u>n</u>
kalaura kardilmail <u>u</u> a kalaura kardilmail <u>u</u> a	pa <u>n</u> ganmana pa <u>n</u> ganmana	wirndururrija <u>n</u>
pajalarrii túrdula-t <u>u</u> ngu	tílur <u>n</u> ada	marni wirrbil <u>u</u> marni wirrbil <u>u</u>
pajalarrii túrdula-t <u>u</u> ngu pajalarrii túrdula-t <u>u</u> ngu	tílur <u>n</u> ada tílur <u>n</u> ada	marni wirrbil <u>u</u>
wilunbina n <u>u</u> lla purrirn <u>u</u> la	jarndi <u>t</u> aru	kura kurd <u>u</u> ndagu kura kurd <u>u</u> ndagu
wilunbina n <u>u</u> lla purrirn <u>u</u> la wilunbina n <u>u</u> lla purrirn <u>u</u> la	jarndi <u>t</u> aru jarndi <u>t</u> aru	kura kurd <u>u</u> ndagu
wan <u>n</u> atarrrii kur <u>a</u> ngun <u>u</u> a	t <u>u</u> rru-wir <u>n</u> ba	nguurra murlin <u>d</u> ani nguurra murlin <u>d</u> ani
wan <u>n</u> atarrrii kur <u>a</u> ngun <u>u</u> a wan <u>n</u> atarrrii kur <u>a</u> ngun <u>u</u> a	t <u>u</u> rru-wir <u>n</u> ba t <u>u</u> rru-wir <u>n</u> ba	nguurra murlin <u>d</u> ani

inside the strange being	two sorcerers sit	shaking shaking
inside the strange being	two sorcerers sit	shaking
inside the strange being	two sorcerers sit	beneath the curved roof
steering	they sit	beneath the curved roof
steering	they sit	beneath the curved roof
steering	they sit	beneath the curved roof
forward forward	rumbling on the plain	making it roar making it roar
forward forward	rumbling on the plain	making it roar
forward forward	rumbling on the plain	making it roar
the wheels roll	over the plain	rattling rattling
the wheels roll	over the plain	rattling
the wheels roll	over the plain	rattling
fire sticks spin	drinking dust	whirling whirling
fire sticks spin	drinking dust	whirling
fire sticks spin	drinking dust	whirling
it jumps	pulling its load	the sides clatter the sides clatter
it jumps	pulling its load	the sides clatter
it jumps	pulling its load	the sides clatter
it sways	as it runs	the ground whirling past the ground whirling past
it sways	as it runs	the ground whirling past
it sways	as it runs	the ground whirling past

waḡarrarraṅaani pirndiri	ḡuri-wirnba	ḡurnda karuwaṅra ḡurnda karuwaṅra
waḡarrarraṅaani pirndiri waḡarrarraṅaani pirndiri	ḡuri-wirnba ḡuri-wirnba	ḡurnda karuwaṅra
kurndankura kardilmailaṅa	ṅilurṅada	maalaya juunii maalaya juunii.

the stars arc around it	as it runs	a roaring meteor a roaring meteor
the stars arc around it	as it runs	a roaring meteor
the stars arc around it	as it runs	
roars cover the plain	fire sticks	fading in the distance fading in the distance

translated from the Yindjibarndi by Shon ArieH-Lerer

Note

The blind poet and singer Toby Wiliguru Pambardu was one of the foremost voices of indigenous Australia of the early twentieth century. He lived through momentous changes affecting the Yindjibarndi people in the Pilbara region. The wonder (and perplexed amazement) of first encounters with technology are an important element in his poetry. "First Truck" was recorded by the German linguist C. G. von Brandenstein, one of the first scholars and ethnologists to work extensively on Pilbara languages. His translation appeared in Jerome Rothenberg's 1968 anthology *Technicians of the Sacred*. Though this translation differs significantly from his, it relies on his field notes and linguistic work, which do much to elucidate archaic poetic Yindjibarndi vocabulary and expressions borrowed from neighboring Pilbara languages. This translation attempts to capture Pambardu's daring innovation, excitement, and poetic style.

We died in the wagon. We had been sick
since Wyoming, since the skin
of things had begun to pock
with sagebrush and knobs of rock,
like the wrecked face of that bare-
knuckle man back in Cincinnati.

We said our little prayers. In our fever
the angels came. They had no teeth.
Tongues thick as snakes, sky-wide
mouths, lips cracked as ours—
in this dry place, we decided,
even the seraphim must thirst.

We ate the meat they gave us
and were hungry. We drank the milk
and were thirsty. We pissed where we lay
and did not understand. Yet we asked
no questions. We knew the only answer
was farther West.

And here is what they did: Above a dry valley,
up under a sandstone ledge,
they shoveled us in. If it weren't for the blood,
our snapped and lolling bones,
dust the wagon left settling on our lips,
we might have had the look of lovers.

Once, we were given an orange. This was early,
just across the Missouri, the grass
thick, green willows weeping along the creeks.
We would still walk then, a minute
here or there, hand on a horse's muscled rump.
And at the very hour of our death, again
we tasted it, how we ate it peel and all.

LUKE JOHNSON

Corn Snake as Compass

Miles inland, a shrimp boat gathers grass,
rice paddy and swamp swallowing hollow keel.
Dual masts rise slant, pointing skyward.

Overgrown and out of place. Direction loses
itself at an empty till. Aft and fore become
back and front while the windswept bog hums

with late night traffic. Disembodied headlights
flicker through marsh grass like lanterns.
A corn snake, shedding, uncoils in the hull.

Low gusts blow swelter across the bow, bending
rotten planks, and eventually something snaps.
Then, in that percussive moment beyond summer,

maybe before the boat's skeleton is picked raw,
when no one will hear the fixed rudder rattling,
our snake might move on, trawl the tall stuff

away from this forgotten wood sinking, this shell.

We live submerged at the bottom of an ocean of air.
—Evangelista Torricelli

1. Silkworms; the Casimir Effect, 1948

From the fifth instar's insatiable gut
to the mouthless adult thumbing the world
like so much ripened plum with its lidless eyes,
a way was found to retrieve the silk
from the swaddled worm, spilled back from its body's spool.

From quilt-stitched hair to shaved steel. Moss. Then,
silk—in a four-ply Aachen weave—
to withstand a revolver's shot, one way
for the dueling man to reinherit
the earth, in a bulletproof vest.

Entry somewhere—exit elsewhere:
nothing is lost for the self-sufficient.
In the Phillips Lab, two Dutch physicists
wrote a sequel for the riddle of the thumb-capped reed
drawing water from water that had baffled the Greeks
for whom there had been no truth to the void
only fullness of earth, only forms as the mind receives them.

From theories of Nothing to the Casimir Effect:
two mirrors, secure in a vacuum, uncharged,
unmagnetized, no force gauged between them,
will (parallel, as their distance dwindles
down to a hundred-thick strand of atoms)

seem to attract: that seam, the effect
proximity inspires in a negligible gap.
One atmosphere of pressure, as the two mirrors meet
cymballing together in the airless chamber
to illustrate that even when all one is able
to remove is removed

there is energy left. There is force arising from the field.

2. Sericulture: 3,000 BCE–present

With a history of care five millennia long,
the silkworm no longer lives in the wild.
Bred and bred with itself, its gene pool
cinched shut, stalled to eternal routines,
fixed in the greenhouse glass of its body's yield.

Still no one can duplicate its simple thread—
beta-pleated protein sheets congealed
in corkscrewing noils of amino peat.
It's the *mess* of nature that's so hard to recreate:
mutations mar any hope to retrieve.

At a river's dammed mouth, its surge translates
elsewhere to voltage. Just downstream,
the riverless walled ravine, like an apse—
harnessed, withheld. When the system is closed,
such gain; such a ghostly blank.

3. Einstein's λ ; Redshift, 1929

Abhorrence of a vacuum: mother of invention.
Pupae. At eight paces, bulletproof silk.

Torricelli's quicksilver column ascending
to the gap that weight of the earthly heaven

cannot counterbalance, in an emptied tube of glass,

proved there was pressure, like an unseen hand,
everywhere that is; that we live in a limbo

tangled and embraced by opposing exertions,
even in a vacuum, waves slowly rocking toward
drift and collision. Atlas, shouldering the globe.

Einstein, watching the universe collapse—
contracting to a point like a fish down a cormorant's

throat (if his theories held)—amended his
math with a constant that could salvage stasis,
deduced from the energy of empty space:

some force in the void, some tissue of sine waves
fathoming space and tendriling time,

turgor for the stem of existence. He called it
lambda, “cosmological constant,” (God?).
Regardless, it redeemed the heavens’ stilled shape,

till Edwin Hubble, tracking light’s long ghosts,
found the signals—like the whistle of a train receding—

fading; he found the creation of the cosmos
was still underway, and the distances, growing.
Einstein abandoned his constant at the sight

of the redshift’s peony swell.

4. Arizona, 1888

The task will be, as it always has been,
living amongst our enemies—
actual, invented. The trial will consist of
a tuliped handkerchief, of reaffirming
the fullness of the absence of matter, all
so that mirrors in the vacuum’s immaculate cusp must
shudder toward touch, half-pantomimed, silent,
no air heir to the sound

as Emery Goodfellow found, crouched close
to the victim’s chest in the Tombstone heat,
a hush of guilt replenishing the world
like echoed figures from a window’s glass,
that temperature shaking with mirage,
strange, soundless pane.

He would see at that shoot-out how a man could die
by the tunneling thrust of an entry wound, yet

→

not shed one blood drop nor sustain
any puncture of the skin—just an eerie bruise,
perforation of the lung, though the bullet proved
incapable of piercing what the breast pocket held:
thin sheath for the heart, one handkerchief's square,
unscathed, of folded silk.

Soon Reverend Zeglen wove, from these notes,
a vest of silk that could greave the chest
from bullets of the era—though invention kept
accelerating death and precision, though chance
often played a part. The archduke's car
took one wrong right turn down a side street, stalled
its gears in reverse near a sandwich shop
where Gavrilo Princip was eating, having thought
the plans were off for the day, and although
under Ferdinand's dress coat was buttoned a vest
of this bulletproof silk, the assassin missed
his aim, in his rush out of Café Moritz—
wife in the abdomen, heir apparent
in the neck.

In the three years following the Second World War,
they returned to the question, what after everything
of matter is evacuated, everything but mirrors?
What, in the nakedness time and space precipitate?
What might interfere, formless thrust, toward transformation?

Wavelengths held at zero-point, where
all sums seem to cancel sums,
in equilibrial détentes—existence, as a system, closed—
are vacuum energy.
(Though slowly, now, our doubt renews in cosmic equilibrium.
Some egress stitched between the worlds?
They speculate the Casimir Effect is wormhole's food.)

Some particles are virtual, but for those real, their amplitude
of nonexistence ceases to cohere
with that which is.

Some bullets kill outside the clothes: how strange,
at rest in flesh, at rest in death, the body, whole.

5. Instar

The eggs give way to the larvae, starved
to multiply ten thousand times
their own initial size on just
one kind of leaf. Their jaws are like
the panic of collapsing stars. Five times
skin's cramped horizon splits
a last restraint, molts free . . .

till, finally, through their spinnerets,
salivary ooze is channeled
to a one-mile strand. They wind
themselves inside their own insides,
that warp all warp; they toss their heads,
bull-like, in frenzied figure eights,
mute signal of infinity . . .

and in the vacuum, infinite,
the resonating energy
but toward the aim of measurement,
its difference is the one concern,
a cipher tucked against the breast,
ten nanometers' interval sufficient to compel
the mirrors face to face with what

remains remaindered by the true
restoring force, like appetite
abhorring vacuum's hunger pangs
to shuttle through the body's loom
the fodder's con-man handkerchief—
digest, excrete the uncut thread,
the worm whisked up its own damp sleeve,
the bullet sunk three inches deep
as blood floods through the lapsing chest
but does not spill, the lead slug swaddled
in the zero-sum cocoon . . .

and there, cell death: a transformation
wreaked by its digestive juices.
Self, self-eaten, gummed, corroded
in that perfect crucible,

→

its ledger's tally neatly balanced,
would emerge, if this completion
did not cut those precious threads.
Thus, all are boiled alive—but if
some few are left to tunnel free
the moths that tear their shrouding husks
are gypsum white, their jaws fused shut:

some saved things still are lost.
Death has no mouth.

JOSEPH DUEMER

A Dog in Hanoi

Ngoc Ha neighborhood, Hanoi, 2001

Maybe Ngoc Ha is nothing
but a vivid dream and here
I am nothing but an animal
who does not understand

the higher order of things.
Maybe the traffic is only
a tumbling hallucination
and I am nothing but one of

these charming, silent dogs
who watch and listen with
detachment—the way
I listen to the language of

my fellow creatures. Maybe
only quiet dogs survived
the war. They walk along
the curb but seldom speak.

JOSEPH DUEMER
Farewell to September

after Zbigniew Herbert

The days were the color of asters
shining like blue coins tossed in the air
then frozen above the ditches.

On television the same speech
recited every fifteen minutes interrupted
only to report disasters,

anachronistic stories in which
the ends always justify the means
and the death of your neighbor's child

is always justified by
the greater needs of the commander.
The children are stitched

to the field of battle like fallen leaves.

JOSEPH DUEMER

Exile

Swearing and swearing
until the whole world
is cursed—
Adam angrily unnameing
each stunned beast.

BENJAMIN JACKSON

Bloodlines

In memory of Chogyam Trungpa

1

There are three things to do
with so much earth:

Dig a hole
put something in it
cover it up.

Build on it—homes, shops,
villages, cities, roads,
roads connecting cities, cities
connecting cities—
thus diminishing it.

Stand there
watch it wither.

Or try to leave.

It all began as a hill, a hillock, a hump, a tiny hummock,
a rise, mount, crag, peak, prominence, cirrus-scraping

prominence: the Fiery Mountain of Heavenly Metal.
Other mountains grew. Other ranges are growing. A plateau

uplifted: silt supplier of five seas, snow merchant of the Indus,
Yangtze, and Brahmaputra, cinder bed of the Asian monsoon.

2

My grandfather read by the light
of his body, which governed
confluence of the Dharma and the eye.

Light through the body, the flash of light
he followed through the snow-sick alley
to perceive a bloody corpse, gunshot

through the back of the mouth, flash
of light in the sacred temple at Dzongsar:
light of the exposed embalmed body.

His tongue held fast to the back
of arid upper incisors as guards turned
the cattle prod on in his mouth.

One monk's tongue petrified
as if mixed with water and cement,
his complexion sallow as the windblown

deodar pollen risen from spring catkins,
the pollen falling on heaps of felled evergreens,
the sweet-smelling fissured stumps and chips.

He woke to tankas and scriptures aflame:
noxious parchment lifted in a gust beyond the guards' stream
of steaming piss through the food flap beneath his door
into the compartment where each day
my grandfather drew out the full length of his body

With beauty before me life is neither this body

With beauty behind me nor other than this body

With beauty about me but beyond the body

(Om Mani Padme Hum) Saké Saké Aieee Saké

(Om Mani) Aieee Saké Saké

He heard nothing those long nights they buried the monks alive

Wind-borrowed from our palms,
where have the ashes of my grandfather gone?

Countries remain, even in the glitter
of new empires, beneath the skyscrapers
of Lilliputian kings, at the heart
of crowded ramparts in European cities,
whose stone rings tell the legends—
*this was before the Mongols, this was
after the Crusade, this is most of
the twentieth century.* The stone rings
of Nuremberg—these were
the hard years,
this was the drought.

The rings within a hillside tree stump;
the sweet-smelling fissured stumps and chips.

With myth and lore, buried countries
call—*you me you me*
you me you—and we hope
to be remembered.

If religions remain,
not in our thousand razed monasteries,
not in tankas burned, not in bullets
shot through Avalokiteshvara's stone eyes,

but in the body,
the exposed embalmed
body of the Tenth Trungpa Tulku,
then, wind-borrowed from our palms,
where has my grandfather gone?
Ancestors, O gods,
won't you press down here, slowly,
slowly, with your pure index fingers?

3

*No choice. . . . Every map was a map with the wrong roads,
the old roads . . . and one cannot reroute the river. . . .*

By the time we reached the Brahmaputra, we had all run out
of tsampa. We soaked our cracked coracles for three nights,

preparing for the crossing. The whole party helped stitch
the yak-skin coverings. Young men constructed the oval

willow frames. Across the river, dogs barked day and night.
Red flags flew from white temple buildings. No one rested.

We crossed by moonlight, keeping to the backwater passage.
Gunshots fired. Our party scattered. The elders never crossed.

At daybreak the faces of the Chinese glowed on temple balconies.
I hid in a copse of holly trees on the mount's north face,

frost caked to my lips, my cheeks like the serrated Himalayas
I had traced once on a world globe. All day I heard firing

in the valley and blasting where new roads were being made.

It is time.

To bury?

To dig a hole.

To put something in it:
a seed, a skull,
the beloved
skull in a pot of basil
on Isabella's windowsill.

Cover it up.

To conceal: to dig a hole inside,
to put something in it. Cover it up.

To revise, to revise.

To sing something.
To go on.

Before I reached Dharamsala,
in a tunnel open at either end to snowfields

Before I reached Dharamsala,
I have dug inside me for those I love

Before I reached Dharamsala,
both fields crystalline, blinding,
like a roof of pearls crushed by diamonds

Before I reached Dharamsala,
let me unbury those I love, that I may bury them again.

4

Padmasambhava,
a thousand years ago,
seated on a lotus petal,
offered his palms to those
who had meant to destroy him.
The smoke thinned around
his funeral pyre, the nine-day flames
around him turning to water.

My love and most holy,
if our water is
weightless, or, worse,
heavy and from an unclean source,

→

how can the wheel
of existence, without respite,
without concentrated
maintenance, insufferable birth again
and again,
conjure, by gristmill,
the Eightfold Noble Path?

I could not understand the photographs.
In wheat fields, only gnats popped up among those mud cracks.

Winter monsoons iced over butcher shops and floral nurseries:
Losang's penmanship on the back: *Pema pulls nightmares*

from ordinary dreams without even thinking.

Pictures of pimps and prostitutes in Sky Train sleepers;

neon signs, bar stools, erotic metal poles stacked glistening
in cargo cars; soldiers, scarlet banners, and arcades all arriving

by train; corporate conglomerates, mobile towers funneled
up mountain in boxcars and hoppers; monks and peasants

thronging the ballast, waving their hands, little russet flags.
Khampas of the ten poles of Tibet, wrapped in felt in garrisons—

how many rhododendrons rule the mountain flanks?

City I had to come back to, city
perceivable only in the language I come back to—
city, skyline, polar star glimpsed
once, far from any constellation.

We don't know where we'll go,
who will remember us, and why,
and which songs, which songs
we will remember our old selves by.
In the Barkhor heirloom photograph,
by the underwater travertine arcs,
at the service desk, head on fist,
beneath the barren lakeside lilacs,
we translate it all so simply—
love, beauty, work, home.
There is more. The wind will send
back those leaden years. When it comes
and disturbs our dear routine,
it is our bloodline we will see.

Adrienne Rich, *A Human Eye: Essays on Art in Society*, 1997–2008 (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 2009, 192 pp, \$24.95 hardbound).

Adrienne Rich, *Telephone Ringing in the Labyrinth: Poems 2004–2006* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 2007, 108 pp, \$23.95 hardbound; 2009, \$13.95 paper).

In the germinal essay “Blood, Bread, and Poetry” (1984), Adrienne Rich tracked the historical continuity within which she sees her own work. She paid homage to mentors (most particularly James Baldwin) and contemporaries who created art “not produced as a commodity, but as part of a long conversation with the elders and with the future.” In her role as public intellectual, Rich has championed the work of many poets from outside the Anglo-American cultural mainstream, thus opening the dialogue to writers most North American readers have had little knowledge of and scant access to. *A Human Eye: Essays on Art in Society, 1997–2008*, sustains that “ardent conversation among the quick and the dead, different generations, histories, temperaments” about the role of poetry in the world at large. It introduces, or reintroduces, the reader to a selection of writers, among them Baldwin, Thomas Avena, Muriel Rukeyser, Robert Duncan, Denise Levertov, June Jordan, James Scully, Walt Whitman, Judy Grahn, Hugh MacDiarmid, and LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), while giving insight into Rich’s own work and the moral aesthetic that drives it. Collectively the essays constitute a multifaceted reflection of Rich’s current thinking on the question of “art and political transformation.”

The book’s title derives from Karl Marx’s 1844 manuscript *Private Property and Communism*: “The eye has become a human eye only when its object has become a human, social object. When art—as language, music, or in palpable, physically present silence—can induce that kind of seeing, holding, and responding, it can restore us to our senses.” In an essay that was originally the preface to *Manifesto: Three Classic Essays on How to Change the World*, Rich introduces to “new readers” a very human Karl Marx, Rosa Luxemburg, and Ché Guevara to whom revolution was an “act of political creation.” In the context of *A Human Eye*, revolution is the necessary condition for making what Antonio Gramsci termed “a world intimately engrained in ‘possible artists’ and ‘possible works of art.’”

Rather than reprise individual essays, all but one of which were written between 2003 and 2008 and several of which were first delivered as speeches, I will try to track the argument Rich develops in the book as a whole. Her analysis is founded on James Scully's definition of poetry as a "social practice" that "talks back, that would act as part of the world, not simply as a mirror of it." He distinguishes this "dissident poetry" from a "protest poetry" that is "conceptually shallow" and "reactive"—to which she adds "predictable in its means [and] too often a hand-wringing from the sidelines."

For Rich, Muriel Rukeyser was an exemplary practitioner of dissident poetry through the activism that produced such work as *The Book of the Dead*. In *The Life of Poetry*, Rukeyser describes the poem's work as a "transfer of human energy," which she equates with "consciousness, the capacity to make change in existing conditions." "Poetic thinking," in Rich's paraphrase, "like scientific method, [is] one of the essential elements of human power, inseparable from the remaking of society." Rich associates herself, as did Rukeyser, with the "Jewish tradition of secular heretics and radicals who have repeatedly emerged at the cross-roads of culture and thought"—a tradition she first encountered in her father's library: "There are many worlds with many texts worth reading."

These many worlds—particularities of "individual and shared experience, above all an experience of *location*"—constitute the source of a poetry as "varied as faces are." Communication across cultures is essential to the creation of "an ongoing future" whose "elementary condition is the recovery and redistribution of the world's resources"—including those of attention and voice. "Poetry, like silk or coffee or oil or human flesh, has had its trade routes" of cultural plunder, determining who is read and who is silenced. The inclusion in *A Human Eye* of Rich's review of the anthology *Iraqi Poetry Today* is one such act of redistribution, allowing us to hear Fadhil al-Azzawi's perspective on what Americans call "the Iraq war," now in its seventh year: "Ah! Every morning the war gets up from sleep. / So I place it in a poem, make the poem into a boat, which I throw into the Tigris."

Culturally induced fear, complacency, and despair have atrophied "the great muscle of metaphor. . . . The great muscle of the

unconstricted throat.” They blind us to our “forgotten future: a still-uncreated site whose moral architecture is founded . . . on the continuous redefining of freedom.” Rich summons “the ghostly presences . . . of those who have written against the silences of their time and location” and the “unappointed, unappointed, unacknowledged” artists and activists who live “within every official, statistical, designated nation” as agents of rebirth.



What, then, does the engaged poetics Rich theorizes in *A Human Eye* look like in her own poetry? What are the aesthetic implications of dissident engagement for her latest collection, *Telephone Ringing in the Labyrinth*? For a starter, let’s look to the pronouns. The *I* of her poems, she warns the reader in an epigraph, is not to be mistaken for the author engaging in “self-expression.” Rather, it is “a dramatic I”—in Dickinson’s phrase, “the Representative of the Verse.” Rich’s *I* is a poet figure, a reflective figure, a thinking being in the world, a mirror held up to the conditions of our lives. It is in dialogue with the self and the *you* of her poems, who, the subsequent epigraph also warns us, is likewise a dramatic figure. We are to read these poems not as an opportunity for literary voyeurism but as a drama we ourselves are engaged in—as she put it in “Blood, Bread, and Poetry,” “a kind of action, probing, burning, stripping, placing itself in dialogue with others out beyond the individual self.”

Paradoxically, Rich’s reconception in 1956 of her poetic output as one “long, continuous process” rather than discrete creations (dating her poems by year is emblematic of this) made it possible for thousands of feminist women and men who came of age in the 1950s–70s to develop a sense both of long-term intimacy with a dramatic *I* they followed from one of her volumes to the next and of that *I* as representative, as witness and actor in the historical moment. In the poems and in her public presence, Rich’s relentless insistence on questioning, “How should we live in this world?” has clarified our political and existential dilemmas. David Wojahn observes in a recent *Field* symposium that Rich has held us “to the same austere standards that she holds for herself.” Her travels through the labyrinths of antiwar politics, feminism, lesbian consciousness, Jewish identity, class politics, and worlds outside the Anglo-American mainstream have

paralleled many of our own. Though she cautions in *A Human Eye* that “Poetry is not . . . a blueprint, nor an instruction manual, nor a billboard,” the questions her poetry has raised have been ones we needed to answer. It has afforded us a view of one vulnerable, courageous self in a continual process of over-turning (in the sense of turning over garden soil) and renewal: “If you have taken this rubble for my past / . . . / know that I long ago moved on / deeper into the heart of the matter” (“Delta”).

The human eye makes a conspicuous appearance in *Telephone Ringing in the Labyrinth* in a poem which reads like the embodiment of Marx’s observations:

THIS IS NOT THE ROOM
of polished tables lit with medalled
torsos bent toward microphones
where ears lean hands scribble
“working the dark side”

—glazed eye meeting frozen eye—

This is not the room where tears down carven
cheeks track rivulets in the scars
left by the gouging tool
where wood itself is weeping

where the ancient painted eye speaks to the living eye

This is the room
where truth scrubs around the pedestal of the toilet
flings her rag into the bucket
straightens up spits at the mirror

In this declaration, Rich lets us know where her poetic explorations will take place, not in the realm of force, not in the realm of faith and miracles, but in the “truth” of the relations of power, in the figure of a woman who claims agency in her life by straightening up and spitting at a mirror—a gesture that combines contempt, disgust, anger, and propulsive force.

Still, *Telephone* wears its convictions with more layers of complication than *A Human Eye*. The “laser eye of the poet” is also “blind” and “moment-stricken.” It’s delicious to see Marx himself make a cameo appearance in which he comprehends what ails

humanity but not what pleasures us:

Marx the physician laid his ear
on the arhythmic heart

felt the belly
diagnosed the pain

did not precisely write
of lips roaming damp skin

hand plunged in hair bed-laughter
mouth clasping mouth

The *I* of these poems is both vulnerable and fierce, the eye at once fierce and tender, the mind ever aware of its location within the dystopic country Rich refers to in *The School Among the Ruins* as USonia and the reaches of its empire. Often, the *I/eye* observes from a distance, The reader leans in, listens closely to hear the timbres of its dissenting voice.

More than any other of Rich's books, *Telephone* is (pre)occupied with dissolution and disappearance. As the title of its first poem, "Voyage to the Denouement," suggests, its speaker is meditating on the fact that all things come to a conclusion:

Velvet rubs down to scrim iron utensils
discolor unseasoned
Secret codes of skin and hair
go dim left from the light too long

The Rich persona who for half a century has been engaged in a continual process of undoing her own certainties owns up to how those certainties have blinded her:

Because my wish was to have things simpler
than they were memory too became
a smudge sediment from a hand
repeatedly lying on the same surface

"Call it / haplessness of a creature not yet ready / for her world-citizen's papers," she offers in explanation. The new, still more difficult perspective she has achieved allows no point of resolution in the poem beyond juxtaposed images of cultural, environmental, and personal dissolution: an "African burial ground" lashed by traffic, a flooded city, the opal set in a ring on the speaker's finger, that "fiercely flashed till the hour it started

to crumble,” her own death implicit in the metaphor. The first-person pronoun has all but faded out; its only two appearances in the poem take the form of the possessive pronoun. The attention paid to the principle of mortality renders the speaker’s death one more passing in the general order of being.

In *Telephone*, the dialogue of self with other, self with self, and self with reader that Rich initiated in *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* and that constitutes for her the heart of engaged poetry is focused on leave-taking. Often it can be read as between two or more of these pairings. *Telephone* welcomes in personal ghosts—former lovers, dead friends—affording the speaker new perspectives on old relationships and opportunities to continue truncated conversations so that the past opens a door to a re-membered future. In the strange and beautiful “Via Insomnia,” the speaker is “called up in sleep” by the voice of a recently dead friend, who has become a “white fur hat unstitched” that the dreamer is stroking. She imagines the unspooling of the soul in death and in anticipation of death, “electricity unsheathing / from the cortex, light-waves fleeing / into the black universe.”

An electric *I*, light pulsing from the cortex. Within and beyond the Rich persona searching for righteousness on earth there has always been the impersonal cosmos, both solace and source of power. In “Planetarium” (1968), dedicated to the then-unsung astronomer Caroline Herschel, she described herself as

a galactic cloud so deep so invo-
luted that a light wave could take
years to travel through me

She turns her gaze skyward here in “Hubble Photographs: After Sappho.” In the Sappho original, the poet dissents from the militarized aesthetic of sixth century BCE Greece—and here I’ll quote from Willis Barnstone’s translation rather than the prose translation in Rich’s notes:

Some say cavalry and others claim
infantry or a fleet of long oars
is the supreme sight on the black earth.
I say it is

the one you love.

Rich’s version pays homage to Sappho and to the beloved while turning Sappho’s poem delightfully on its head:

It should be the most desired sight of all
the person with whom you hope to live and die

walking into a room, turning to look at you, sight for sight
Should be yet I say there is something

more desirable: the ex-stasis of galaxies
so out from us there's no vocabulary

but mathematics and optics
equations letting sight pierce through time

into liberations, lacerations of light and dust

. . . .

we look at them or don't from within the milky gauze

of our tilted gazing

but they don't look back and we cannot hurt them

For the moment, what's most desired—and this is, tellingly, desire, the whole body yearning, more explicit than the love of Sappho's poem—is respite from the weight of caring, the absorption of the self into the gorgeous indifference of the cosmos—"as if / our true home," Rich wrote nearly thirty years earlier in "Transcendental Etude," "were the undimensional / solitudes, the rift / in the Great Nebula."

In addition to the response to Sappho, *Telephone* contains a lyric translation of a poem from the French of Élise Turcotte, an improvisation based on a poem by Edwin Muir, two folk-idiom poems that make conspicuous use of rhyme, "director's notes," short free-verse lyrics, and longer poems in sections. Many incorporate the juxtaposition of disparate elements and multiple perspectives. One form that has appeared in Rich's recent volumes and recurs here is the set of loosely related sketches that read like entries in a poet's notebook, the stuff of poetry before it is fleshed out and ordered into received poetic genres. The openness of these sets is a fitting formal expression of Rich's vision of a multivalent and "still-uncreated" world.

Telephone contains three such sets, telegraphic dialogues across time among the living and the dead. Each section is a scene, a situation, a problem, a proposition. In "Draft #2006," the interior

sections sketch identifiable scenes: a figure wakes early, reassembles herself to begin the day; a solitary figure stands “on the stone causeway. Baffled and obstinate. // Eyes probing the dusk. Foot-slippage possible”; the speaker remembers an evening with an old philosopher friend who might have become a lover; the speaker looks out from a condemned health clinic in “the disensoulment projects”; a teacher fails in her attempt to pass on necessary knowledge; a chambermaid “wrestles a huge duvet, resheathes heavy tasseled bolsters” in a ski resort for the rich and powerful.

The opening and closing sections suggest the concerns that underlie the poem as a whole. In the first, voices emerge from death “asking the unasked questions”: “(What were you there for? Why did you walk out? What would have made you stay? Why wouldn’t you listen?)” Failures in personal relationships give way to failures of the social compact: “—But you were supposed to be our teacher—” and internalized failures to rescue the victims in a violent world: “(One-armed, I was trying to get you, one by one, out of that cellar. It wasn’t enough.)” The poem’s last section places these—our—hauntings within a world empire whose “sheer mass” and “excruciating contempt for love” make envisioning a transformed reality nearly impossible. But here, out of “landfill, closed tunnels, drought-sheared riverbeds” emerge the “unappointed, unappeased, unacknowledged” artists and activists of *A Human Eye*:

Teachers bricolating scattered schools of trust. Rootlets
watered by fugitives.

Contraband packets, hummed messages. Dreams of the
descendants, surfacing.

In “Draft #2006,” the shifts of perspective from character to character, sleep to waking life, broad to narrowly focused shots are integral to Rich’s world view and aesthetic. They generate provocative ambiguities, bring the reader into intimate relationship with the speaker then disabuse her of the illusion of easy intimacy, “other” the self to get a broader view, and invoke the other to talk back, challenge, accuse. The title—and final—poem in *Telephone* deftly employs similar shifts in perspective and relationship. In the first of the poem’s five sections *I* and *you* catch each other’s eye in a hypothetical moment, first through a rearview mirror and an instant later in the “convex reflection” in a shard from

a just-shattered bowl. In the second section a diploid *I* is alternately a “sensual peninsula” and “scaler into thin air,” two poles we have become familiar with in Rich’s persona. The disappearance of the *I* after the first lines of this section trains the reader’s attention on the metaphors themselves, which culminate once more in a loss of the personal, the poet ultimately reduced to “a mat of hair webbed” in a burning bush, a “violent lithography.”

The poem’s third section is an *ars poetica*. The *I* does not appear until the final stanza, and so the reader visualizes the process of creation without visualizing the creator: “Image erupts from image / atlas from vagrancy / articulation from mammal howl.” We read these as acts of resistance in a world that heaps contempt on creation itself:

one more Troy or Tyre or burning tire
seared eyeball genitals
charred cradle

The pronoun *we* appears for the first time in the following section, where *you* is *I*’s mirror and partner, co-creator and resister by “design.” In the final section, the *I* addresses the (same?) *you* from a distance, like one of her own ghostly presences speaking from beyond the grave:

I would have wanted to say it
without falling back
on words Desired not

you so much as your life,
your prevailing Not for me
but for furtherance

In this moment of candor, a final truth-telling, what the speaker desires is not the beloved but that the beloved should live, prevail, “fierce and furthering.” Reading these lines, which might serve as a summation of the motive force of Rich’s work, we feel included in that *you*, fierce with possibility, and blessed.

Editors’ Note

With regret, we inform our readers that Marion Kingston Stocking has stepped down from her position as Editor for Reviews and Exchanges. Since 1968, Marion has written ninety-eight reviews for the *BPJ* and put her own inimitable stamp on Books in Brief. We will miss her learned and humane voice in these pages.