

BPJ

BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL VOL. 60 N°3 SPRING 2010

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BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL
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Temple Cone	
Oneliness	5
Chris Hayes	
Young Fathers	6
Michele Battiste	
Accepting the Newborn	8
Sandra Kohler	
Directional	9
Julia Lisella	
Intimate Friendships	10
Mothers Talking Summer Night	11
Matthew Landrum	
Southern Eschatology	12
Polychronicon	13
Charles Wyatt	
<i>from</i> Thirteen Ways of Looking at Wallace Stevens	14
Christopher GoGwilt	
<i>from</i> In Defense of the French Horn	22
Jennifer Atkinson	
Canticle of the Blossoming Almond Tree	24
Canticle of Assisi Rain	25
Canticle of Francis and the Wolf at Gubbio	26
Canticle of the Abbey	27
Yvan Goll	
Greise	28
Old Men	29
Rosentum	30
Rosedom	31
translated from the German by Nan Watkins	
Mark Sullivan	
Landscape in the Manner of Huang Gongwang	32
Barcarolle	34

CONTENTS

Nathaniel Perry	
Seeds and Seeding	35
Jacquelyn Malone	
Playbill for the Gray One	36
Bern Mulvey	
Character Readings	40
John Rosenwald	
A Conversation with Coleman Barks	41
COVER	
Ding Jitang , “Picking Persimmons,” woodcut, Xi’an, China, 2000	
Mary Greene , design	

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

Poet’s Forum

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 Charles Wyatt (March), Jennifer Atkinson (April), and Nan Watkins, translator of Yvan Goll (May).

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

TEMPLE CONE

Oneliness

Into her pregnancy he did throw himself,
the taut honeydew of her waist an unspoken plosive.

When the missionary position became unthinkable,
they thought how hummingbirds can starve on the wing.

The hour the wind-lapped shingles proclaimed the hour,
her body was a battlefield reclaimed by rain;

awkward prayer did follow snippets of medicalese.
O you are so not leaving this room, mister.

Grackle eyes are thimblefuls of gold.
Imagine hearing the vulgate after a lifetime of Latin:

first creosote, then the sigh of thunder-drenched grass.
Each fingernail a moon provoking *Goddamn, I love you.*

Let there be labor both day and night during harvest.
The combines wonder at the resurrection of the wheat.

CHRIS HAYES
Young Fathers

—after Sharon Olds

That look of vigilance
in the eyes of the young father
who waits for the slits

between the window blinds to fill
with light. He brings ice chips,
empties the bedpan, is held apart

from the thrust and grunt. He watches
the blue sack of his daughter's body
slip fishlike into the room. He snips

the blood vine. This young man
whose seed-filled pouch of flesh
hangs hidden and necessary in the dark.

Now he swabs with alcohol the clamped,
black stump that hangs from the child's
belly button like the stem of a mushroom.

Now his home becomes a womb, filled
with detached light streaming out in small
bright planes from under every closed door.

■

Again he is held apart
from the thrust and suck

which shape the daylight hours
that burn down around them.

The mother presses her flesh
against the breast pump's cups

while the child naps. The house
quiet, except for that rhythmic

tugging. He buries his face in her
nightshirt as she sleeps, and inhales

the milk-soaked cotton her breasts
rise against like knolls of dough.

■

The spongy pith of his daughter's body
ripens with every hour she's asleep.

Belly paunch and thigh fat, her flesh
grows more dense by morning.

The watery stones of her eyes
drip with new light. They loll upward
toward the fan's five-tongued whirl,

hazy and fixated. Her heart floats
in her chest like a plum, and the father

knows that despite the bone-wall
which encloses it, it will be bitten.

■

When the house fills with the sound
of his daughter's colicky throat,

his body, like a wall, refuses movement.
His sleeping ear is fine-tuned

to the creaking weight of a bootheel.
He memorizes every loose floorboard

from door to bed, the slackened nails
beneath the carpeting that rise with age.

MICHELE BATTISTE
Accepting the Newborn

Bees are dying, eon-old tree
frog species appear to have
disappeared, coy leaflets hiding
only dew and droppings. I root

for cutter ants, little bodies
like keys, locking up entire
Central American eco-

systems, their devotion to
compost carved into rainforest
floors, mapping the cycle of food
then life, then food. What I wish for

you is complicated. It's a
guilty trade when the littlest
ones go first, go fast, and beckon.

SANDRA KOHLER

Directional

How can I describe the beauty of this morning
which has no particular beauty? The muddy
risen creek, leafless trees, fields of dead grass,
the alley gleaming black with rain, fallow earth
waiting, the small drops suspended along the edge
of the porch railing as if they'll never fall, the mist
which does not attain to the mystery of fog. On
the roof next door, a flurry of small birds lands
and takes off, a baby starling alights on the porch.
Overhead a symmetrical vee of geese, silent,
synchronized. Yesterday in a cornfield beyond
the sewer plant on the island, hundreds of tundra
swans landing, a distant white flock. The old yellow
dog who never barks slept on the mud outside
his quonset doghut. Today he'll be back inside.
Thirty-six degrees but the grass is turning, fields
gone greener than a day ago. Sun breaks through
a stratus bar; cumulus masses, soft edged, forget
their boundaries. One thing leads to another.
Sun falls on my hand, a gleaming landscape:
hills of sand, desert, miniature rivulets,
curved striations, tiny golden strands of light.
Every day I forget that I'm going to die.

JULIA LISELLA
Intimate Friendships

They are girls, though taller and more slender than you,
brushing their long hair in your bathroom,
washing their armpits, spitting into your sink.
Sometimes you can even touch their skin, help them
with towels and bra straps, hold their determined bony chins
in the palm of your hand, briefly. Sometimes
you kiss them hello, hug them firmly.
You know their noises of pain, and you know
when they're screaming because some boy they know
called, said, what? You can't quite catch it but it's
mainly nothing.

You know the smell their jackets leave behind,
what kind of detergent their mothers use. You know
your daughter may love some of them until she is old
and forget some of them. Pictures of them fill your albums
at 4, at 8, and at 13 with their tongues
hanging out of their mouths like some bad heavy metal CD cover.

You know they are someone else's children
in your house, in your car, at your table.

JULIA LISELLA
Mothers Talking Summer Night

The heart sleeps so much of the time
it's possible to forget to breathe
or forget you're breathing.
Beats beat and breaths
rise and fall. But you
are just sitting, listening to that mulled sound.

Then there's a day: it's hot;
the concrete would burn your feet;
black ants want a meal of you.
You're wearing your new expensive skirt
that looks casual and cheap
and she tells you she's been to the oncologist.

You feel salt
rummaging an imaginary
slit on your tongue
and just loving her casually
as a mere acquaintance
is not enough.

You sit beside her on the dirty stoop.
You listen for what she has to tell you.
You want to hurry her
and slow her down
all at once.

Mainly you want her to live
and now both your tongues are burning.

MATTHEW LANDRUM
Southern Eschatology

I have come through fields of soy and cotton.
By bridges at Memphis and Cairo, I have come

to the interior floodplain. Tires hum
a hymn of homecoming. Listen—
the end will be a hollow light, Jerusalem distilled

in rain. When voices sing low in summer rooms,
it will only matter who was baptized

by the Mississippi. Dawn lifts over Arkansas
and locusts rasp in the high grass. Past sloughs and ditches
I have come by Hoxie, Newport, and Walnut Ridge.

By Augusta, Sikeston, and Searcy, I have come
to a dry county. Roads now trace what will be

made manifest. Stalks of cotton and husks of corn
will be burned to make fertile the fields of God.
At the appointed hour: Jerusalem.

But now, humidity as I begin my ascent
into the Ozark foothills.

MATTHEW LANDRUM

Polychronicon

Night subducts the living city. Smoke hangs frozen above factory buildings, saffron pilings on the skyline. Here is the hour of your sleeping in another room while I watch traffic thin

on the street below. Even in love, the thread of desire weaves possibility into abstraction, and buttocks, arms, breasts, and thighs become conceptual. The city taught me not to trust

the immediately beautiful, but to ravel out revelation. I know the patterns of streetlights like I know your breathing, that when I come to lie beside you, you will stir but not wake.

What is this rarified metropolis? The window half shows the outside, half reflects the inner room. The image of books and lamps imposes itself on the passing cars. Here is the act

of worship, the mind caught between thought and the actual, body overridden with desire until skin won't sate. Here is the benediction over house and street: the smoke that remembers.

CHARLES WYATT

from *Thirteen Ways of Looking at Wallace Stevens*

It is like a boat that has pulled away.

From the boat we see the land recede
and the harbor turn in a slow gesture
as our wake unfolds and we turn away—

And from the land we see the boat
become truer to the landscape, lakescape,
seascape, there a gull, there, the setting sun—

And cries of astonishment and applause
as it leaves behind one bright slice
broken free, sun bite, floating helplessly

until overtaken and lassoed by the boat,
and the boat, turning, steams or diesels
or sails toward shore where, waiting, we

stretch out our arms to the floating sun,
still yellow as gold and soft as a canary,
hissing and knocking sweetly as a boiling egg.

When, suddenly, the tree stood dazzling in the air.

Sometimes a wind, ignoring the other trees,
tousles the extreme upper branches like a hand
reaching down to pet a dog's head—a loose wind

rattling about in the heavens, lifting the birds
out of their trajectories, sifting through
the categories of birds, through all the bird

metaphors, word for word: a bird drank
at the stream, a bird struck its beak on the dead
branch, sound of sword, of struck branch,

but dazzling? The dazzling girl, my dazzling
thumb, a dazzling brace of trombones
hung from the branches of the tree, sudden

in their effect, chiming affably in the wind,
that loose French-speaking wind, scrambling
about the paper clips, the debonair trombones.

A sovereign, a souvenir, a sign.

The way morning rules its moving light
leaves nothing to remember—birds
fly through it. Large and solitary bees

climb it carefully—there is no taste of bee,
nor bright sheen of sting, nor visitation
of spirit (angel, perhaps) equal to

the relief of sleep—toll it, then
sleep, bell—let it rock and bay,
give tongue to the rule of silence

and then slip away, past the growing
beanstalk set on revenge,
pot metal goose, tame ogre.

There were ghosts that returned to earth.

All the ghosts of grasshoppers climbed the same stalk
and there made ratchet music one by one.

In a story, then, someone to listen, perhaps the third sister,
who took one in her apron, big as a cat, and home

with her the ghostly grasshopper ratcheting some
nonsense about a spell and a second sister, but

I am the third sister said the third sister, and
the grasshopper climbed down a stalk and down

its root into the ground and down and down he climbed
until he came to the shores of an empty sea and

was transformed into a prince or a bear the third
sister can't recall as she sits at the kitchen table

sipping tea made from magic beans, weedy tea,
fragrant as the inside of an old euphonium.

The wind had seized the tree, and ha, and ha.

And up with its roots, hey ho.
And off with its leaves, squirrel ho.
Why should we say the wind knows a tree,
blind wind, blundering, entangled

in its own brash and billowing song?
There's wind in a river and wind in a stone.
There's wind in the last burnt bell,
in the night, in the word that names the thing.

Take the sword or swing the stick.
Break the sword and break the stick.
And *ha* and *ho* say the song through.
The dogs will play and the wind will bray,

and the tree in stony silence lie fallen
feeling no calling to sing a *ha* or *ho*,
and the wind, long gone, has forgotten
the tree, neither flute nor guitar.

A crinkled paper makes a brilliant sound.

There is the sound of rising fifths on fifths.
The birds gathering over the whaleboat.
Its colors are blue and green *poco a poco*
crescendo.

There is the sound of pages turning by themselves.
All those sentences speaking to the empty room
until a single page holds still, giving a story *al*
niente.

And the room you've never visited, a passage somewhere
you've never followed, an indifferent door
which, opened, lets you hear the quiet fluttering
(*andante*)

of a thousand butterflies, mute, save for their wings,
which beat the air into a frothing cloud, and
there you stand, transfixed—from God's mouth . . .
(*fine*)

Even our shadows, their shadows, no longer remain.

The narrow stairway
turns on its turns,
and the light from upstairs,
the room with dancing

and airs sung lightly,
follows only faintly,
the stairs dim
and the walls dim,

and the scale, *l'escalier*,
descends until those bass notes
so far away and dark,
lap about our knees,

and the shadows that swim
there peer up, reminding
a music to turn itself around—
the steps ascend

like so many things,
a melody at once remembered—
there at the top,
like a bare branch—

and one bird
which will not sing,
and the door to the lit room
is stuck and will not open.

Silence is a shape that has passed.

In a procession, horses, elephants, the wagons
colorful, and the wheels spinning, it would seem,
backward, the little man with the broom

following, applause, acrobats, candy flung
and falling, children scrambling after
marching music, all the several shapes

of brass bells mouthing rhythms heartier
than these—and then the sidewalks empty,
even where a tired child sat down in revolt,

wanting to be carried high above and who
would not want such a thing even when silence
comes last, marching in close step

with paper blowing, the sky a single
unmoving cloud, drained of color—who
would not want to march in step,

to follow, and then around that distant corner
where the lamp post stands under its unlit globe,
vanish like a lizard running on the wall—

CHRISTOPHER GOGWILT

from *In Defense of the French Horn*

at	music	each
the	heard	coil
edge	from	in
of	across	french
natural	the	horn
sound	sea	history
west	invents	recoiling
of	itself	around
history	again	another

what	in	what
may	the	is
be	first	as
the	hours	easy
most	before	as
difficult	life	breathing
last	starts	must
judgment	to	be
call	take	learned

CHRISTOPHER GOGWILT

when like where
the the the
ocean skittering breathing

exhales sea marks
without bird above
the tracks the

time at notes
to high have
read tide vanished

it turning is
is light it
neither yellow wind

this into beyond
scripted a the
breathing gold window

nor leaf or
the that the
surf whispers sea

JENNIFER ATKINSON

Canticle of the Blossoming Almond Tree

Is this, this gray-green net and in it a captured wingbeat, it,
Come now at last to wrest the almonds from their stupor?

Doubt is not irreversible, Love. Take care

Without first the cold, the rehearsal of snow on the wet branches
There are no blossoms or fruit—fruit kept for its hard pit, the flesh
is cut away

But lilies are just as much lilies at root as they are in blossom

Will the feral cat, kinked tail twitching, a bird in her mouth
Set it down to lap a dish of warm milk?

JENNIFER ATKINSON
Canticle of Assisi Rain

An olive branch threaded with clear beads of rain
The whole tree swagged with garlands of rain

Fog, the same fog cowl Chiara wore,
Scarves my hair and shoulders, before, after, during the rain

Pecking for crumbs in the gravel, fledglings
Hunch up and soften like bread in the rain

The cypresses nod, a solemn quorum of elders,
A jury to rule on the rights of rain

The lines of the city are washed away or left undrawn—
The road, wall, far side of the garden—forgotten or dissolved in the rain

JENNIFER ATKINSON

Canticle of Francis and the Wolf at Gubbio

Once upon a hill, a shepherd long and far away and a wolf of what big
teeth and slaver lived alike on lamb, lamb bone, and stars

O they sang to the wax and wane, O to the glaring full

Then comes drought, comes famine. Then snarls the wolf; the shepherd
gnaws the gnawed bone then. O they cry to the wane and wane

So the stranger waves his hand: so rain, so corn. Sheep fat with twins,
one born for the shepherd live, for the wolf one stillborn

O they sang to the wax and wane, O to the ever after full

JENNIFER ATKINSON
Canticle of the Abbey

Under splotches of cloud-shadow and kiting cloud,
A great dry lake of lavender

Pine, honey, cut cork and sage, wheat
Scythed down and bound with wheat—the dry scent of growing lavender

Chants of the sequestered monks brim over the gray windowsills
And spill out to water the dry lavender

Who will walk with us among the furrows, the ruled waves,
Down the long voluptuous aisles of dry lavender?

Purple's woodwind timbre cools the throat,
Dry voices slaked and retuned to the color of lavender

YVAN GOLL

Greise

Euer nelkenfarbenes Fleisch
Das noch von mageren Vögeln zehrt
Und daran Feuer fängt

Singet langsamer ihr Greise
In dem verwandelten Wind
Und laßt die Sonne bröckeln
Zwischen den Fingern

Der blaugefiederte Schlaf
Hat Totenzähne
Und die Stimme des Kalks

YVAN GOLL

Old Men

Your carnation-white flesh
Lives off scrawny birds
And thereby catches fire

You old men, sing slower
In the shifting wind
And let the sun crumble
Between your fingers

The blue-feathered sleep
Has the teeth of death
And the voice of lime

translated from the German by Nan Watkins

YVAN GOLL

Rosentum

Mondrose
Die in Tierköpfen brennt
Hirnrose
Aus Schädeln geschält
O jähes Rosentum

Solang das Rad der Rose
Schwingt und schwingt
Die Mittagsroserei
In Äckern fiebert
Bohrt sich das Rosenaug
In meinen wachen Schlaf

Doch wehe wenn die Unrose
Aus den Metallen steigt
Und meine Rosenhand sich hebt
Gegen die Sonnenrose
Und die Sandrose welkt

O Rose Rose der Rosen
Die nur dem Rosenlosen loht

YVAN GOLL

Rosedom

Moon-rose
That burns in the heads of beasts
Brain-rose
Skinned from skulls
O hot-tempered rosedom

As long as the wheel of the rose
Turns and turns
The noonday rosary
Raves in fevered fields
And the rose-eye bores
Into my waking sleep

Yet woe if the Unrose
Ascends from the metals
And my rose-hand rises
Against the sun-rose
And the sand-rose withers

O rose rose of roses
That alone blazes for the roseless

translated from the German by Nan Watkins

Yvan Goll's poems from: *Yvan Goll. Die Lyrik in vier Bänden. Band II. Liebesgedichte 1917-1950*, hg. u. kommentiert v. Barbara Glauert-Hesse im Auftrag der Fondation Yvan et Claire Goll, Saint-Dié-des-Vosges. ©1996 Argon Verlag GmbH, Berlin, S. 314 + 320. Alle Rechte bei und vorbehalten durch Wallstein Verlag, Göttingen.

MARK SULLIVAN

Landscape in the Manner of Huang Gongwang

Beginning of February, ice-melt
 across the tar of the landing
making its bleak little landscape
 beyond the window, mountain
passes of snow, asphalt-dark
 inlets. Already the week-old
storm has shifted through several
 geological eras, upheaval then
erosion along the curbs, until
 now the shoveled drifts show all
that remains in the successions
 of time and exposure. If we could
see our histories in x-ray, the sweet
 dissembling now turned half-clear
in the mildly harmful radiation
 of our gnosis, they might resemble
the flawed geometries forming these
 scaled-down sierras and exhaust-
washed arroyos. I think we'd be
 metaphor rather than memory,
some sheer promise of a knowing
 that would shatter and stay like
nighttime waters. On our drive to visit
 my wife's mother in her nursing
home, there's a stretch of parkway
 where vines and trees tangle for
every inch of light and air.

The landscape they make looks as manic
as a preschooler's crayon coloring,
 no space untouched. Her mother's
almost all space now, the voids
 becoming ever more solid, and
I don't know where the details
 go as synapses misfire, the network
unknots. Language no longer an
 element to live by, involuntary
as breath, but the wild bird
 amazed inside the house, stunned
for sky. In the Yuan Dynasty the great
 master Huang Gongwang roughed out
the unfinished handscroll of his mountain

→

dwelling in one sitting, the whole
composition, then carried it with him
the rest of his days, long horizon
rolled in its silk sleeve. In the evening,
as if drawing down a shade, he would
spread it out to add the dragon
veins to each crevice, pour shadows
through the pines. Tea cooling in
his cup, the lamp flame low. Finding
more room everywhere he looked, wind
on the roof like a barely wet brush.

MARK SULLIVAN
Barcarolle

Chopin, Op. 60

The music slides into itself
like something made only out of pouring.
Notes lap notes; the pedal's down
so ingots of air glow soft in molds.

A forest's like this just as the sun
hasn't risen. Gray shadowless place
whose silence is the rustling of scores.
And then the twilight crowds with tuning.

The left hand wills a rocking line
where boats keep company all night
against the docks. Like schools of shimmer,
the right's tune magics the harbor lights.

How is it Chekhov knew whole lives
in pages? Barely eight minutes here.
Love's not, he notebooked once, the middle—
it's prelude and past, if anything.

NATHANIEL PERRY
Seeds and Seeding

We're shaking seeds into their furrows
and wonder how they stay asleep
for years. The clouds this afternoon
are heavy poke-sacks, flocks of deep

pockets full of black and fat with rain.
The night will fill with waking—
children staring at the thunder
in the ceiling; nightbirds shrilling and staking

their claims in the longer calms; bush beans,
a second row of beets, beginning
to unsleep; the rain, the wildness, doing
and undoing, slow hands unpinning

night from the background, like a flag
meant for a ceremony where the part
we're meant to play is a mystery,
and everything is about to start.

JACQUELYN MALONE
Playbill for the Gray One

1. How My Father Spends His Time

The playbill reads, "How Can What Is Be Without What Was." The Gray One—a puppet with a thoughtless head—tries to act his part, crying though he can't remember why. Fumbling in the medicine chest, gaping at the script, he stalks the stage on padded strings, bobbing alike before the mailman, the sobbing child, a blank wall. He stops to pat a cushion, ceaselessly groping for his mind, but it has joined a troop of traveling jugglers and left him timeless. The supporting cast ad-libs and whispers cues as the Gray One whacks his useless head, aware he's not aware.

2. Bottom Stands Center Stage

The crowd has gone, and the Gray One hangs on his appointed peg, between the star-eyed ballerina and the crafty fox. In the workshop silence, only the moon moves, slipping a slice of silver across the puppet's wooden head, stirring a dream of the role abandoned long ago. In the forest, leaves and hillocks of light even-coat the darkness where creatures blip and scurry under half-doused spots. Close by, mischief is afoot, and the Gray One, exposed to what he can't take in, stands center stage, his nose, a muzzle, his voice, a bray, as howls of laughter surround him.

3. The Youngest Grandchild's Play

Little Red Riding Hood had a grandpa who was a hunter and knew which animals to kill—until the forest paths grew tangled and unsure, and he forgot the simplest things. When it came to him that red meant danger, he watched the child with wolfish eyes, and because he'd gone mute, Red Riding Hood was afraid. But the Gray One will show the child many unyielding twists: He lets the creature in without heed to Grandma's screams. He knows the axe as friend, and when the mopping up begins, he cradles it and croons—blood runs down his wooden cheek, and Red Riding Hood's eyes grow huge.

4. Lear and the Stage Manager's Play

It's the Gray One's scene, and the stage is rigged, but he isn't set for what will come. Behind each flat lies the void of what's forgotten, and snow removes all trace of yesterday's paths. One hundred billion flakes, and the heath is white. One hundred billion neurons, and his brain is barren—beard and mind tangled, all sense of north or past gone. And yet he plunges on, lost in the mocking wind, lost in a flickering fury at the night and with himself. Like the snow-slapped footlamps, his anger sputters as, visage naked and ablaze, he bellows, "I will do such things . . ." to the malevolent force behind the shifting skies.

5. Rewinding Plato

Put the Gray One in a cave and let him tell us
what is real. When he enters its damp mouth,
he leaves behind the light—his notions of health,
justice, love. Chain him to his chair and lock
his head. Let him chase the shadows down
the paths in the muddled ways the brain takes,
where echoes scramble voices from the past—
sounds that fade in fits and starts. In the cave's pool
the chamber erodes from within as water eats away
the stone, the void growing larger day by day.
Let him watch the eyeless fish pursue
sightless crickets. Then let him tell us,
of all he's known—of taste, smell, caress,
idea—what he expects to last the last.

6. "Who Goes There?"

To play the dead is not a role he dreamed of,
but the Gray One intrepidly takes the part.
Dark and cold, the scene unfolds
in Denmark, the planet in the grip
of ghostly lights—green, red—above
the snow-white fields. Wind on the ramparts
strikes his chain-mail shirt until it melts
into his bones, and he can't remember why he's here
nor why revenge will be the rut his mind will take
when it cannot bear the treachery of fate.
Boldly he shows himself—who fears to die
who is already dead? A voice demands,
"Halt? Who goes there?" Startled, he cannot
stammer king or player. Ghost or fool.

7. Resolving Roles on New Year's Eve

Because every puppet must be used, he has a walk-on role—
as Father Time—though when his mind was clear,
the Gray One aced it as the clown. In the span at which
a puppet's years play out, he's due a few. And he, alas,
will get them. In the wings, disembodied hands
move in the shadows as curtains rise. The Gray One
steps forth into the spotlight—a pan-eyed owl
on a winter branch. Around the stage, masked
revelers mill—a shrill breed with horns and whistles
as the ceremonial end begins. The silly crowd
apes him as the Gray One makes his addled way
across the boards. In the winged darkness
the impressario takes notes. Since time favors
oblivion, he plots to reassign the parts.

8. How the Gray One Leaves the Stage

In the spotlight, the Gray One sees a shadow
that flits before him on the boards. He stoops
to pick it up. "Oops," he says, and "Oops."
The Fool, his eye cocked, winks aside and chirps,
"Good sir, you need this shepherd's crook," whereat
the Gray One gaffs at the fleeing form. The Fool *thinks*
the puppet's piney head and says, "Termites
in your wood, good sir?" Laughter flares across
the abyss. The Gray One, startled, stares back
to where he came from in the wings
and sees Nothing-Remains-the-Same
and Nothing-Stops, the rude stagehands
who man the set, awaiting the direction
of Nothing to drop the curtain on the stage.

BERN MULVEY

Character Readings

The key to successful study of kanji lies in breaking down the barrier of unfamiliarity. Once one can appreciate how a character is made up, how it acquired its shape and why it came into existence, then one is a long way towards achieving this end.

—Kenneth Henshall

Here

Speak
is a needle
 balanced pin up
on the tongue
word
the miracle
 a leaf
 that unfurls later
in the heart

Here

the two readings of *truth*
a ripe field ready to cut
a person hung by the feet
 dead

for not saying
 is the flower
that opens
 in the next day's
quiet

Here

face
is a canvas others write on
 thin
 the ideal skin
 wide
 for art must be seen
 palimpsest

above a dream of body
the work waits

JOHN ROSENWALD

A Conversation with Coleman Barks

*Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
there is a field. I'll meet you there.*

*When the soul lies down in that grass,
the world is too full to talk about.
Ideas, language, even the phrase each other
doesn't make any sense.*

—Jelaluddin Rumi

translated by Coleman Barks

In 1975 Robert Bly gathered at a Colorado woods camp fifty artists, poets, musicians, dancers, and others interested in the Swiss psychologist/mythologist C. G. Jung for a ten-day Conference on the Mother. Thirty-five years later the tradition of imaginative enactment and serious study of interrelationships between mythology and artistic endeavor continues as the Annual Conference on the Great Mother and the New Father.

One of the most successful and productive outcomes of the conference has been collaborative presentations of classic Sufi poetry in translation with music by Marcus Wise on tabla and David Whetstone on sitar. Robert Bly began this experiment in 1977 at the third conference, held near Sebago Lake, Maine, when he, David, and Marcus together introduced at a closing concert the poetry of the Indian mystic Kabir. Already the previous year Robert had suggested to Coleman Barks that he begin to translate or retranslate writings by the thirteenth-century Persian poet Jelaluddin Rumi. Soon Coleman began to read with Marcus and David as well.

Ann Arbor and I participated in that first conference, thrilled to that first concert, and longed for many years to sponsor such an event on the Beloit College campus. In November 2009, students at the college, in cooperation with the English Department, invited Coleman, David, and Marcus to perform as the initial event in the college's annual International Week and as the culmination of Ann's and my thirty-four years of teaching and creating community in Beloit. On the day of the performance, Ann and I sat with Coleman in the college library and talked about

the relationship between music and poetry, isolation and community, judgment and acceptance.

JR: Some years ago you made a casual recording with two old friends, Jim Kilgo and John Seawright, "A Conversation of Southerners." In it you talked about James Dickey.

CB: Yes, Dickey has kind of an ecstatic sense of life that I share with him. He has a poem called "In the Mountain Tent"; it's just being up in the mountains by himself. In a mountain tent in the rain. And he gets this expanded sense of essence, whatever you get in that place. It feels like his voice becomes something that is coming out of the holes, animal holes in the mountain. He's no longer embodied; it's like he's got a wider identity, larger, so his voice becomes something before the first intake of breath in the first line of the Bible.

And I like that. I had a place I used to go to when it started to rain, especially in the fall. It was a little back porch on the back of the headmaster's apartment. And it leaked. But there was a couch out there, I mean a bed, and a quilt. I could get underneath the quilt. When I was about ten or twelve, I'd go out immediately when it started raining in the fall, go immediately back there, and shut the door, and I'd just be there in a kind of ecstatic state. In the rain, particularly when it was cold, in the fall. I loved that state, and Dickey defines it well.

JR: You still have a place up in the woods somewhere.

CB: I do. I love it; it's about 120 miles from home.

JR: What does it mean to you?

CB: It used to mean a whole lot. I got it in 1979. It was a beautiful retreat where I could go and write by myself. I just felt the need for that. But now, for some reason, I need companionship there. I don't want to go up there by myself anymore. I've got to write something about that, about that shift, and how I don't need to judge myself for that. I wonder what I've lost that I don't want to go up there and be totally alone.

AA: Couldn't it also be called something you gained? That you don't need that isolation anymore?

CB: I hope so.

AA: That being in a community is better than being outside it, at least in this phase of your life.

CB: Okay. It just feels like I've lost something. I don't know if it's self-reliance. It may be self-satisfaction that I've lost. I need more contact with people, and conversation maybe.

JR: But you said also "I don't want to judge myself for that," which throws me back to a remark you made in the "Conversation with Southerners": "The place I aspired to reach in reference to all people, even myself, is that of no judgment. I would like to accept what is and what has been, then let my actions and words proceed from love and compassion around that acceptance." You're kind of bumping up against yourself. How do you achieve that sense of acceptance?

CB: I think it's a sense of being—the Daoists call it *choicelessness*—of not making a choice, that is, of leaving the mind out of it. Maybe it's that place out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, out beyond *mind*. Maybe. Out beyond where the pronouns make a difference. Out beyond where even the phrase "each other" doesn't make any sense. Or the world is too full to talk about it. Some place beyond *language*. And that's kind of a fake thing, isn't it, because I adore language, and love word choice, fooling with it, and what comes with spontaneous language. But I'm sure there's a place beyond mind and heart and soul. This is radical theology we're into now, that has no name, that, when you get there, the language you say is just like saying lines of poetry, like saying lines that somebody else has written. But that part can't speak. It can listen, I think, and maybe that's why music is important to it, because then music responds to it; it responds to music. That, I don't know what to call it, heartsoul? Something else, or deep being. It's only experiential; it cannot be talked about. But that's what I'm hoping is a Chinese character being written.

AA: Heart and mind, it's one word, *xin*. There's no distinction between them in Chinese.

CB: Maybe they know more about this place of deep being.

AA: That place of deep being, that place you went to on the porch with the blanket and the rain, and there was a sound there but it wasn't language; it was some other thing. It was that music of the rain and the expanding. . . .

CB: It was a deeply joyful place. This other place, I think it's beyond joy. It's beyond talking about it. Maybe it's just a sort of clarity and emptiness, what the Daoists call the "original face." Whatever it is that's going to live through death.

I had a dream recently. My friend, Walter Gordon, who teaches, wasn't a close friend, but he had a great, serene smile. He just smiled walking the halls of the English department at Georgia, and the dream was that I was back in the old quadrangle at Baylor School where I grew up. And Walter Gordon was there, facing me, and a truck backed over him. He totally could not live through that, but somehow he got into a place where the atoms disintegrated and he became particles. It's hard to explain—it just happened in the dream. And then he came out of it saying this "God language." And he was speaking, he was in whatever that state is that lives through dying. He was still alive. So I had a strong sense then of what that state was, as he came out of it, saying "Allah" or something. It was some language that was only of that place.

Whenever you start to talk about this, you feel . . . horrible. You feel that way because you can't say anything. It's the same thing with the "beloved" or the "friend" that Rumi talks about. I don't know whether you remember, but one time about fifteen years ago at the Mother Conference Robert asked me to give a little talk on the "beloved" or the "friend." I think it was in Montana, at that wild camp with the wild river and the wild water. And the moose. So Robert asked me to give a little talk on "the beloved." It was a trick, I think. I tried to, and you know the more you talk about it, the more the mind kicks in. And it finally says it's just the Sufi imagination of God as a sweetheart, it says there's

no such thing. Robert told me afterward, that's too important a thing to have doubts about.

JR: You've mentioned Daoism twice and I'm sure you're aware that the beginning of the *Dao De Jing* says the Dao that can be talked about can't be talked about as Dao. A name that's the name is not the name.

CB: So, all this is fraudulent. [all laugh]

AA: Did you expect anything else?

JR: Did your ability to *not* talk about this come in part from your work with Rumi? When did you start thinking in terms of not talking about those things, or even talking about them just as the "beloved"? Obviously, in addition to your own poetry you've achieved a reputation as translator of Rumi. What did Rumi mean to you and is this part of it? Did he clarify it?

CB: Well, at the end of a Persian poem there's a tradition of mentioning the author's name. Hafez always mentions Hafez. Rumi in all of his poems never mentions his own name. He never signs the poem; he never claims it as his own. He mentions Shams Tabriz at the end of a whole lot of them, and he mentions "sunlight" or *shams*, that's another way of talking about Shams. And he mentions "silence," *khumush*. I always thought it was a great name for a cat. Khumush, silence. Silence, he gives it back to silence. At the end of the poem he says, let the musician finish that, well let's just give it back to silence. He's the only poet I know that uses the silence after the poem as part of the poem. [stays silent a moment] He lets it be silent after a while. That's my imagination of how he would read a poem that ends with silence. He would be intentionally silent. And probably let the music stop. We don't know whether he played an instrument. He certainly knew a lot about music. He has a whole set of poems that have musical modes, say ten or twelve, and now he'll shift to this different Persian mode. . . .

JR: He was quite specific about this?

CB: He names the modes, yeah, that's in "The Glance" book.

I don't have it with me. If you've got a Persian musician—Reza Derakshani, he was quiet in the sound studio a moment, then he says, "I know what to do." And he would switch modes. It's like Rumi was directing, now a little like Mozart, now like Beethoven, then switch. Music is a very complicated metaphor; there's something like music flowing through us: it's like water, it's like presence, it's like something that can give a lover composure and can douse restlessness. And can give form to the imagination.

AA: Is that all?

CB: [laughs] So that's why he pairs his poems always with music. All his poems can be sung. You get a person that reads Persian and they can. . . . I was giving a talk out in Berkeley on San Pablo—this is 1986—and a guy was sitting in the audience named Alan Godlas, who now teaches religion at the University of Georgia. I call him "the Godlas monster." He's just an unbelievably devout, sweet Sufi, and he raised his hand and said, "Do you know that all of these poems can be sung?" I said, "Would you please sing the next one?"

JR: When you're doing a reading with Marcus and David, is that sense of music conscious? Do you agree in advance what poems you're going to read? Do they have places where they have—what shall we call them—solos?

CB: Yeah, yeah.

JR: How do you create that sort of experience?

CB: We do have a set list, and we have rhythms. They know what they are; they have names for them: *sitar kani*, or something, you know, that's a six-beat. . . . I don't know how they talk to each other in that way but sometimes slower and sometimes faster and I can direct them, a little slower, a little faster when they seem to be dragging or when it seems like the music needs more lift to it. But we do plan it out; we plan out the times when Marcus might throw in the way they vocalize the tabla. We experimented with that along with language; sometimes they're in competition, but not usually. Somehow it's good to have the vocalization. And David has started to sing with the sitar, too.

If he gets brave, he'll do it. I say, "You've got to do it. If you feel inspired to do something, if you don't do it, you might not have another chance."

JR: How is reading with musicians different from reading when you don't have any musicians?

CB: It's so lonesome now not to have a cello nearby. [laughs]

JR: You work regularly with David Darling.

CB: I work regularly with cello; I mean any instrument. The poem feels just so bare or something; I think the music puts it out of the mind, puts it in that layer below, back down in the water table. Somewhere the music lets the personality maybe dissolve a little more, or the ego. A lot of people think that the poem should stand on its own, but it feels good; it feels like I'm giving up some of my proudness, pride in the language of selection, when I let the music carry it along.

JR: What you said earlier fascinates me because suddenly you're saying that you want something else there and earlier you were talking about some dissatisfaction about being out in the woods by yourself.

AA: You need to go with the cello.

CB: [laughs]

AA: I mean maybe earlier, when you were younger it might have been a woman but maybe now you need a cello, or a woman and a cello.

CB: That's what we just did. We were over in Devon, England, and we had these little houses way out in the beautiful countryside, and David Darling down in the meadow, with his cello, and Lisa there on a blanket writing poems, and I was just down on a bench, taking notes, and it seemed like heaven, with two alpacas leaning over the fence, listening. Alpacas. They have these great eyes, and they love the cello; it turns out alpacas are partial to the cello. Who knew? They literally came right to the fence.

JR: Marcus was saying that one of the differences between working with you and working with Robert when you're doing poetry and music is that Robert really *only* understands music intuitively. It's his assertion, and I have no idea whether it's true or not, but you clearly know something about music. You've talked a lot about shape-note singing. It's a metaphor or an actuality for you that music seems important.

CB: Have you ever seen Marcus sing?

AA: Only his vocalization of the drums.

CB: You know why he doesn't sing? He immediately starts crying, sobbing. Somehow singing for him is just a giving in to whatever brings tears—whatever that is. That's my favorite part of religions and I think it's the only part that I would like to save. We can give up the priesthoods, we can give up passing the collection plate, we can give up the actual buildings. We can use those for something else. Nice basketball courts for the poor. And we can give up doctrine, and, for me, we can give up theology, and just have . . . singing. [laughs]