

BPJ

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**BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL**  
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**Mary Greene**, design

**Jan Owen**, “Who,” four hanging panels of Reemay with ink,  
2007, with text from a poem by Lee Sharkey.

Photograph by **Lee Sharkey**.

→

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](http://www.bpj.org). The participating poets for this issue are Karen Lepri (September), Kirun Kapur (October), and Christopher Howell (November).

**DWAYNE THORPE**

**Mother Time**

His hand clamped inside her claw,  
the boy runs to keep up with the black skirt,  
too breathless to cry, "Slow down, Mommy."  
Sliced by winter wind, she has forgotten him  
and his short legs. So she must not be  
time. Time must be the wind—yes?  
And what is that red shopping bag  
flopping along in his right hand?  
Why does he clutch and not let go?

**KAREN LEPRI**

**Wave**

You begin on one side  
                    of the integral  
                    body and arrive (gasp) on the other

No predictable measure of time, no table  
                    of coming and going to pour  
                    by candlelight, the sips, pocks, dregs

accrued with tide. How to believe  
                    the overextended  
                    family, our aqueous genome's reach—

If I push here, where will you feel it?  
                    Which village  
                    will cry into the distance?

Troops, march, march.

Underwater, a little bomb; above  
                    black specks of surfers

**KAREN LEPRI**

**Root**

Antithesis of stuck, stable, mud posse  
rather—failed escape, see *Aventitious, Aerating*,

*Aerial*—the cambium, ever-grow, ever-seek milk-

Mother, the vascular lair of ground's company  
miniscule at farthest reach

Infinite organ, who playest thou, longest  
keys between two

Worlds—what injures here could be felt

Anywhere. See the canopy wither—  
the birds depart.

**DAVID HARRIS EBENBACH**

**City of Peace**

After the decisive battle, they moved further into the land and came across what first appeared to be a mountain but was in fact an extraordinary, mountainous knot. The knot was so vast that they supposed it would take them two days to march around it. So they camped there at its foot to decide what they ought to do next, and endured a night that was utterly dark yet filled with the uncertain intimations of voices. In the morning they began their attempts to untie the knot; one of them had suggested that the voices were promising riches or other destinies in the knot's deep interior. It quickly became clear that the rope, as thick as ten men together, was made up of many thinner strands, that each of those strands was knotted to others, that indeed there were countless thousands of knots at the heart of this one mountainous knot. They started to work in earnest, all of them picking and grasping and in fact tearing at it. They continued into the night with its voices, and into the days beyond. This is how their enemies found them, and how the battle was engaged once more. With one hand they pulled at the knot and with the other they swung the sword. Their enemies, too, found themselves caught between a desire for vengeance and a desire to disentangle. Because war never fails utterly, blood was shed. It soaked into the ropes and, as it dried, tightened them, first around hands, then around arms and bodies. By this time, all were quite unable to move. Nonetheless, the fighting found a way to continue, and the knot continued to tighten.



**DAVID HARRIS EBENBACH**

**Hallelujah**

They've torn the fields down,  
the thick run of empty stalks  
harvested for I don't know what.  
For the good of the sky, maybe—  
the sky that's kept its distance  
all through the growing season.  
Now in the great open,  
the sky rests on the bristling soil.  
This is a new way, a good way,  
for us to be alone here.

**JOE WILKINS**

**Hayrake**

In that interminable summer of the devil's own breath  
it was most all I did:  
pull the hayrake behind the old Ford tractor,  
the arced cutter bars

spread wide, the circled forks spinning behind,  
gathering two, sometimes  
three thin windrows of drought-shocked alfalfa  
and buffalo grass

together, funneling the fallow, bird-boned, orphan fruit  
of that unpromised land  
into a single windrow that wound the field thick enough  
for the bailer to jaw up.

But, too: that was the summer of Kevin, my older sister's  
thick-necked,  
ridiculous boyfriend. God, but we loved him—  
his jacked-up Toyota

with iridescent silver roll bar, his Wintermint Skoal  
and seraphic vocabulary  
of whistles and grunts. Kevin was from two towns  
over, the county seat,

was something new, something to set against the neighbors:  
the broken old ones,  
the sad fat ones, the ones eating each night boiled mudfish  
and boxed mac and cheese,

the ones with names that could have been the names  
of tractors or weeds—  
say Harlan Wilson or Sandy Russell, their skinny wives  
and gap-toothed girls,  
boys bromidic as their fathers. And all of them, and us,  
dust-stunned, debt-ridden,  
just barely hanging on to the sagebrush plains we worked,  
that worked us. Not Kevin:

JOE WILKINS

he was off to play football for the community college;  
without asking  
he'd flip the dial to FM, throw his massive fists in the air  
when Van Halen came on;

he wore his sunglasses even inside. So the day I heard  
that Kevin's beautiful  
Toyota had like some strange bird lifted him into the dark,  
and he, like my father

and Sandy Russell and Harlan's baby girl, was dust—  
I left the house  
and walked north, to the one decent field we had left,  
where I fired the Ford

and turned myself around that patch of dirt for hours, until all  
those skinny windrows  
were one and good, and there was only one world,  
and God's or not,

I was in it, and I was pulling the iron-winged hayrake.

**KERRY JAMES EVANS**

**An Empty House**

**1**

Oak limbs sprawl into the window panes,  
and the unpainted picket fence—

fallen over.

Soldiers washed under the sand.

No, there are rats crawling about —chasing squirrels,  
wallpaper sagging

across the floor  
like the necks of men in old age.

I own nothing but my teeth.

I will never learn it all.  
I am better for it.

2

No children running about this house.  
No ghosts. But the ghosts

of soldiers.

What of the air conditioning units stalled  
for who knows how many years?

They rust like rabbit cages  
holding shredded newspapers and hay.

The brick and mortar foundation gives way.

Outside the screened-in porch, across the yard,  
this oak's roots sprawl —like

that wallpaper, like those necks  
I have seen drooping from my jaw—

there,

a white dog with a brown spot for an eye  
barks at the tails of the rats

—at me.

I trace the lines of his barking.

A soldier.

3

My neighbor told me of a poker bet.  
He told me of how this home—

he told me how this house was bought.  
No, he told me how it was won.

When I walk through this house, there is  
no family sitting at the table.

There is no table.

Only the rats circling the unpainted  
picket fence,  
my eyes bloodied like maples turning—

and who lived here?

Who lived in this empty house?

I must live here, though I  
have never owned a thing, but my teeth,  
this winter with no snow—  
locked out, this family.

KERRY JAMES EVANS

Are they walking down the sidewalk?

When I am hanged.

A soldier is buried beneath this house.  
The floorboards creak his name. Mine.

**KERRY JAMES EVANS**

**Packed in Ice**

Not only are we waiting        for the right line,  
the exact emotion        is a peach

packed in ice. We cannot    accept this,  
though clearly, there it is,    cold

and ripe, and now,    in hand,    passed  
around the room    like a desperate artifact.



**MARTIN COCKROFT**  
**Agreeing with Larry Levis**

If there is  
only one world  
it is this one

white leaves  
on an empty street

a morning  
deprived of school bells  
or a sidewalk

like pieces of bone  
whisked clean

a wall  
looking for stones  
loose children

no one bothers  
to gather

**SIMEON BERRY**

**The Doppelganger as Guidance Counselor**

All day long they struggle in and out, their sentences  
smudged with pot, THC shorting out major plot points  
like a sizzling logo flashing *Ingest at Joe's!* One told him

she had *the fuckin' ennui* but was taking pills to clear it up.  
The doppelganger looks down at the insectoid scribble  
of algebra that is Arlen's greatest worry, after his mother

trying to sell his gold-plated pendants on Third Street.  
Aren't they all word problems? *If Marlina decides  
that crystal meth is best stored in her birth control case,*

*how many Tuesdays will elapse before she realizes  
head trauma is not aerobic activity?* He has some  
spider plants. They are supposed to inspire trust, and are

silent but alive nonetheless, like teenagers, which is why  
his office is known as *The Hanging Gardens of Dorkylon*.  
High-schoolers believe no one else in all of history

has ever used a textbook to express their rage at being  
carbon-based and deriving nonspecific sexual pleasure  
from animal crackers. His bow-tie is based on ancient

Assyrian texts and protects him against all 400 known  
variants of sarcasm. He cannot tell them they are alike,  
but different, so often he has no choice but to say,

*You were born to Middle America in great confusion  
and escalating limerick rates. You will never understand  
that Prussian and Russia are not satisfying rhymes,*

*and will often think there are tiny red machines  
in your spine that eat good thoughts. You are best suited  
to study either Neuter Astronomy or Advanced Frippery.*

**TIMOTHY J. FITZMAURICE**

**Honey and Darlin**

The carcasses were there wrapped in tinfoil  
just where Harold had said they'd be.  
It had been three weeks since his call,  
describing the knoll in the backyard so recently his  
and what was buried there. The kids watched  
from the house as our father dug, awkwardly and uncertain.

We giggled at the insanity of it, the incongruity:  
our father in his undershirt, elbow deep in earth,  
and a handkerchief tied to his face like a thief. He knelt,  
reached into the ground and pulled up in his arms  
first one stiff heap of canine, then another, and stacked them  
on an old pull wagon Harold had built and left.

Our father towed the hearse across the lawn,  
losing the top body two or three times. He left them  
glittering like baked potatoes at the end of the driveway  
the farthest our father would allow Harold since the closing.  
He was late, of course, and by afternoon we could smell them  
from the garage at fifty feet. By morning, the wagon

was empty, but our father, always a queasy sort of man,  
didn't fill in the holes right away because of the maggots.  
Left open for near a week, the graves were like eye sockets,  
gouged out and watching me at my bedroom window at night.  
Left open, that is, until Harold called again  
not to thank but to ask about his horse, Mabel,

buried somewhere in the vicinity. That's when our father,  
just after dawn, went out before work, necktie  
and shirt sleeves, and closed up the gashes in his yard.  
Tipped the earth back and sealed off  
whatever could make a man ask another man  
to disturb the dead.

**KIRUN KAPUR**

**Melon Cleaver**

They stood in line to buy a slice of melon—  
My father and my uncle, in cantaloupe season.  
When the boy in front reached out to pay,  
The melon seller waved his cleaver.

This was Lahore in cantaloupe season:  
Summer was working up its heat.  
With one hand the melon seller waved his cleaver  
Over a bright, thick slab of fruit.

Summer was only beginning,  
But already the days had grown hot.  
A cool slab of sweet melon  
Was everything two boys could want.

But already the days had grown heated  
When the boy in front reached out to pay.  
Chilled melon was all two boys could want,  
Or so my uncle claimed.

When the boy reached out to pay,  
The melon seller brandished his cleaver.  
My uncle paused before claiming,  
*With the other hand, he stabbed the boy with a dagger.*

The melon seller brandished his cleaver,  
Drawing all eyes from the fruit.  
He stabbed the boy with a tiny dagger,  
Putting his other hand to use.

All eyes flew to the cleaver—  
*The boy fell on our feet.*  
No one was watching the other hand.  
This is how my uncle told it.

*The boy fell on our feet.*  
My uncle's voice was full of wonder.  
This is the way he told it—  
As if a comet had passed overhead.

KIRUN KAPUR

My uncle's voice was full of wonder:  
*The boy was reaching out to pay.*  
As if a comet had passed over  
My father and uncle in melon season.

**KIRUN KAPUR**

**Light**

The only aunt I know would tell me,  
*This is how you knead the dough.*  
*I don't remember the old stories—*  
*Make sure it doesn't get too tough!*

Knead carefully to make the atta.  
Good girls know how to make good puris.  
Make sure the gluten doesn't toughen,  
A puri should be light and golden.

Good girls know how to make good puris.  
They don't ask for the old stories.  
*A puri should be light and golden,*  
Like your cousin's and your cousin's cousin's.

I overheard the stories  
When all the women shared a bed.  
My cousins and my cousin's cousins—  
The older women slept still dressed in saris.

When all the woman shared a bed  
The fan chuffed through a cloud of talcum powder.  
Still fully dressed in saris,  
They whispered names I'd never heard before.

When the fan chuffed sandalwood and roses,  
I raised my arm above my head.  
They named the aunts and daughters.  
I caught hold of my cousin's hand.

I raised my arm up in the dark.  
There was a niece who could have been recovered.  
I held my favorite cousin's hand.  
Her name meant light, like mine.

There was one niece who could have been recovered.  
My grandfather had her traced.  
Her name meant light, like mine does.  
I've tried not to imagine her face.

KIRUN KAPUR

Somehow my grandfather found her,  
But her brothers refused to take her back.  
I imagine the row of our faces,  
Women in bed in the dark.

Her brothers refused to reclaim her.  
This was after the riots and trains.  
In bed, in the dark they could say it:  
*This is what broke us apart.*

After the riot of years,  
How should we remember the old stories?  
What will break and what will toughen—  
The only aunt I know would tell me.

**CHRISTOPHER HOWELL**

**The Circular Saw Children Confess Their Joy**

We waited, of course, to become disks  
as the sun and moon

and Mother's mirror. We thought  
it would be perfect to be endless  
edges gliding, perhaps flung  
and cutting things off at the knees.

The cruelty of such circumstance  
would not belong to us  
but to the shape of us  
merely, an accident of science  
or a miracle or fate as, say, a sudden  
bright blue rose rising like a cobra  
beside a white gate.

We thought doilies, lids, and portholes  
were our secret sins  
wheezing in the hallway's dream  
of flattened hats and all things orbital and thin  
enough never to grow old.

We imagined the face of our round lake  
a god or djinn  
demanding sacrifice, which is why  
we tied and threw our neighbor in.

"Don't worry," we said to his disappearing frown.  
"What's drinking you, that perfect 'o,'  
will make you one of us as you go down."



**CHRISTOPER HOWELL**

**Edvard Munch**

She came down the road  
like a piece of the road dis severed  
from itself by two legs and a shoe.  
She carried a rat trap basket of brown  
and brittle flowers: her companion, compass  
and advisor of whom she asked, What  
is the name of that bright red unseen bird?  
This is East Prussia, perhaps, and the beaten  
armies drag through the orchards leaving a trail  
of dented canteens and coal scuttle helmets.  
The soldiers walk right past her, they know  
death when they see it: always the withered  
flowers and haunted look of a girl  
going nowhere and a road that stops  
while seeming to go on. Always someone  
lifting tea through its own steam  
as he writes on a yellow pad.  
Always the disgrace of his probing  
and then the rain  
dark as blackbirds falling into ditches  
the girl would see if she could see anything  
but rain. And what does the Kaiser have to say,  
now? The soldiers are through listening  
and after a while the tea is cold. The ragged child  
picks a few flowers and asks their names.



**NICHOLAS JAMES WHITTINGTON**

**Venn/Grünbaum**

the rains  
cause  
an archipelago of ripples on the pond  
widening points of contact  
little blue  
& little yellow  
green diagrams  
of discreet childhoods  
indiscreet human dust  
caught in the polyps  
of a lapse

**AMY SCHUTZER**

**When I Sleep, It Still**

comes to me,  
not a dream, with that raveling,  
reel to reel, spooling behind the eyes,  
circus and slow motion.  
No. It is more like shadow,  
instant before waking,  
eyes opening, sleep a gravity that pulls on me,  
the window bare of curtain or shade  
and the stagnant, ambiguous light  
of morning, a frost that etches across the glass.

It comes to me:  
woman with a finger to her lips,  
in a doorway to a backyard  
of rusting grass, grass with a sour blight,  
finger bloodtipped and raised in the gesture of quiet,  
mouth a carnelian flame that turns in on itself,  
and a girl in a plaid dress  
four feet away,  
arms fixed to her sides,  
pale, milky arms  
like the breast feathers  
of the dying hens running by  
the girl barefoot in the reddening grass  
refusing, refusing  
all that the woman asks.

**NORMAN LOCK**

**Alphabet of Chrysanthemums**

Had he not looked up from the chapter of Confucius's *Analects* known as "The Master Shunned" to see a young woman smiling, Li Wan would not have put away the book and, leaving the library and its tides of shadow, seen everywhere in Ju-Xian Town the chrysanthemums heaped up in the flower-sellers' stalls as people might be who throng the streets in the capital of the sun to view the emperor and his retinue—or, say, as the sea is at the molten hour when the waves lie down in sheets of gold. His mind forgot in an instant (like a cup drained of its measure) Confucius and even the compilation of Tang poetry on which he had for so long labored below the Fragrant Mountain—remembering only the character for chrysanthemum, as a man cast into darkness will that moment when his eyes were dazzled.

**GARTH GREENWELL**

**Consideration**

After, in the little cramped stall in the dark  
where we had spent those moments together—  
unnaked, exposed—he didn't leave  
at once, he held me there a while  
on my knees still on the foul tiles breathing hard.

My hair where his hand gripped me was damp.  
And then the grip loosened, becoming  
after the violence I had loved  
something not a caress exactly but gentler  
than before, expressive of kindness maybe

or gratitude or finally just relief at having thrown  
for a little while what had ridden him  
onto that ground we shared. Then,  
still gripping me with one hand, with the other  
he reached up and twisted the long bulb back.

We looked at each other in the sudden flat light.  
He was older than I had thought,  
his skin was drawn, the striking gray eyes  
looked at me a moment and then  
shifted away. He leaned back, his hand light

on my neck now as I worked my own need,  
as I pressed myself to him, neither free nor bound.

**GARTH GREENWELL**

**Festival**

It's late. The doors to all the theaters are closed. But  
in broad Place de l'Horloge in the shadow of the palace  
we shoulder aimlessly our way through crowds.  
Every third step, a hat laid out for coins.  
In a corner streetlamp's circle a man  
batters out Rachmaninoff on an ancient upright  
that creaks away from him on its wheels; actors  
from the little troupes declaim at every curb;  
somewhere by the toilets a brass band plays. Noise—

confusion and noise, everywhere in its bright rags art  
pleading for alms. The coin of our attention, snatched at, slips:  
nothing in the tumult to love. Faces  
eerie as moths endure painted above us, men  
on high crates impersonating stone,  
waking sudden to startle  
the children who shriek at them and scatter  
and gather again like fish. Only at intervals, discreet  
as the Rhone, the very poor hold out their hands.

We cross into the dark leading down to the river. Close to it,  
where pavement gives way to grass, we stand and feel  
the huge water sliding silent in its banks. Then,  
placing your palm on my back, turning me to you,  
you knit your free hand with mine  
and slowly, to a cadence entirely clear  
of the music behind us, you coax me into a dance: simple,  
solemn, your face in the fold of my neck,  
a dance by the black river, a dance in the midsummer black.

**GARTH GREENWELL**

**On Watching a YouTube Video of Antony Hegarty Singing “River of Sorrow” with the London Philharmonic at the Barbican, London, 30 October 2008**

Somewhere in the crowd someone is holding  
surreptitious and trembling in his hand  
the cell phone taking this video of you inhaling  
open-mouthed to sing. The angle isn't flattering:  
from the first rows looking up, your face  
slides even more alarmingly down, like a cake  
left out in rain; your terrible bangs, dyed  
implausibly black, hang ragged into your eyes;  
the mercifully formless dress keeps slipping  
from your neck, and you rearrange it  
with a gesture like a dream of glamor,  
the fat on your arms set shimmering like a fish.

The strings behind you are holding their accord.  
You hang fire a moment, bending the time,  
then, tilting your head just slightly up,  
you sing. And I feel like Alcibiades cracking  
the statue of the monster to reveal the god.  
Miracle in the digital light, your voice  
rides eerie its column of air, like a vindication  
of metaphysics, so that all your ugliness seems  
ordained. Climbing the terrible scales, the strings  
helpless to support you, you lift your arms  
over and over your head, like a diver reaching  
for the bright surface sliding away above him.

At the crucial moment I freeze the frame.  
How can you survive it? Leaning close to the screen,  
I love you, I say, I love you, let me devour  
your shining face. In the real world  
the rain falls down. You stare out unmoved.



**MARY JO THOMPSON**

**Thirteen Months**

**April**

I did consider the Blue Book value  
against airbags, the other trade-offs: no  
sunroof, loose bumper, tilt-back lever jammed.  
Got the title, fair speed in general—and just  
one concession, a speed bump's tenderness.  
I have to thank the shocks, and certain thrills  
out on the open road: tail-fires blasting  
out the carbon, the license to stop or cross  
the tracks and shriek. Other top features:  
full blasts of heat, salt-damaged chrome,  
two roll-down windows, at least one headlight  
to track the sun back home. Dings. I hated  
this marriage, damaged slowly beyond repair,  
though I thrilled at rides that blew back my hair.

**May 7 (your birthday)**

For eighteen years we drove to your parents  
through smog from steel mills and rivers  
converging, the swift Connoquenessing,  
the Slippery Rock. But they'd bulldozed  
the ovens down, girders and rust melted  
away, a graveyard where you once smelted  
stainless tubes, ablaze, dark eyes smoldering.  
Across from Loccisano's Grocery,  
that ash hopper for dumping chemicals,  
slag, where you and your cousins lobbed footballs,  
snowballs: grace and iron. You held onto those  
plays, kept your aim to forge raw elements  
into enduring forms, choreographed  
a life's dream that the mill would send you on.

### Memorial Day

A in *alone* is a sound known as schwa—  
a slight *uh* we make with our tongue low and level,  
a common hum. In old Hebrew schwa stood  
for letters not noted. Schwa, written *e*,  
but upside down—remember? You probably  
learned it on a first grade chart. But that's not  
important. It's how schwa is spoken: just pretend  
that I'm listening for your admiration,  
for an unstressed *us*. I'm all anticipation, wet lips  
barely open, then out your mouth it runs:  
*uh, uh—affair—*your schwa, so ancient and  
correctly pronounced, far back in the throat.  
Say it again: *affair, affair—*now more  
smoothly. Watch the syllabification.

### July

Black soil over an ancient privy pit  
where I must dig out clay chips. They threaten  
the delphinium. I wonder who once  
flung garbage into what is now garden.  
Whole nuts, nit combs, buttons and pins, fragments  
of lamp float up now and again. And this,  
another pentimento: blue cobalt  
tattoo of nightingale, without saucer  
companion, soaring still on a cup's cracked  
skin. Repented belongings that turn up  
like runes, talisman discovered, taken  
for woe. The time was when I didn't think  
it odd to find a perfume stopper or  
entertain the question it was raising.

**November 11**

Instructions for a plague: Burn entrails.  
Always check the pulse with gaze turned away.  
Obtain ring finger knuckles. Gather shirt,  
apron, handkerchief. Squeeze vinegar through  
or taint stays. Turn mirrors for protection.  
Poultice thigh to trunk. For disinfection,  
forget not bud roses nor herbs with strong  
perfume. From solstice to the equinox  
scatter blood meal. All this doth wring a cure.  
Or flee. Sing, laugh, indulge every new  
appetite. Choose finest sweetmeats, drink dry  
wine, but temperately. Collect whatnots,  
dulcet hours for hunting, dance, and suchlike  
pleasures. When the sick fall, show them the stones.

**December**

I take the children bowling, yes, in hopes  
that at the alley a little disco  
bumps my heart, and if they turn the black lights  
on and each pin glows, I can somehow gauge  
the angles right, find the velocity  
that knocks ten pins down. Silhouettes, neon  
lights, rows and rows of worn black balls on shelves,  
the shuttlecocks, young foosballers and league  
bowlers times twelve, all of us hefting weight  
to fling and slide, then wait, genuflecting  
on one knee, all the right body English  
imploring a strike, that resounding sound.  
Christmas is next week. I'll be alone. Our  
kids, your new girlfriend, will be with you.

**February**

Our children believe you when you say you'll live.  
I hear you're wasting—you've lost sixty pounds.  
From that crest of hill above the train yard  
they're gliding down on their plastic Christmas  
sleds, not too far from where the 280 bridge  
straightens highway, combs train tracks to the ground.  
Maybe twenty detached coal cars tonight  
wait to hook up, load up, full again.  
The distant overhead billboard says,  
*#1 silent killer? Depression.*  
The kids bring up other things. Their mittened  
fingers' burning cold. That they toe the hill,  
don't fall down. In a film at school some Bronze Age  
man dug from a bog, skin and bone.

**April 1**

Breath in blooms, I cover new flowerbeds  
in blankets. They're forecasting cold like pox.  
Now the garden too becomes a hospice  
and we'll likely see a spring killer frost.  
As for death, we just delay the petals.  
Doctors steep you in treatment, your mother  
says her beads. Do you care they've made a priest  
your accountant? Does he keep his raven's  
scorecard of your soul? Do you give a lot  
of thought to contrition? Arithmetic?  
You'll see now what's behind the sliding door.  
I haven't kept good faith or religion.  
For this—contrition. Try to pardon me.  
What can I add but flowers for the bier?

**April 15**

*Aida*, sharp and sweet as blood oranges  
that young spring in Verona when you  
led me to market, palmed a few lira  
for stained labels: the village wine. Nearby  
in a meat stall the butcher's knife opened  
a stunned hare. He peeled off the skin, seized  
the cardinal organs, the scarlet liver slid.  
A clot with its syrup clinging, it filled  
a small bowl. Today doctors call. We hurry.  
You hold up a plastic bag, say: *Contents  
of my stomach. Are you impressed?* Then our  
daughter runs shrieking from your room. More bags  
hang ungenerously from metal hooks,  
silently ensure the coming encores.

**Late April**

You said *yes*. A secret was the twisted  
part of you, and shame, in the end a debt  
your body had been mortgaged to. The cost  
of losing face—an organ turned to pus?  
A slowly slaughtered faith, trust wormed through.  
What couldn't wait, or last. You said *young*, and  
young, you'd seen the lake. Why had you never  
guessed that it kept from you its source, its depth,  
how it looked at you and loved? Weeping  
made the water cloud, lust the hidden ledge.  
Reflected, the light from your abdomen,  
the margins—of you, of us—changed just at  
the end, your own face floating up, hopeful  
lines, tubes, serum. *No*, your mouth and eyes said.

**End of April**

We were all leaving our bodies—but no one helped us, no one said, *Breathe into the spaces you can't feel*. We were all losing our bearings. We'd seen you, Vesuvian, you who grasped any hand to crush it inside yours, voice rasping out: *See how strong I am!* and your will greater than chemo. Do you agree it was your plan all along, your brand of curative violence—mind's NO versus body's letting go? How funny, dying, you didn't remember this: on a mountain, years ago, you'd encountered a vision. You would die young. You never got sick of your body. It kept you as long as it could.

**Early May**

*Vermivora peregrina*, pilgrim warbler, old devotee of maggot grub and upturned stump, mossy hummock lover, ace catcher—who yes, slyly, took to branch, snatched an insect then glanced around—*seet, seet, seet*—and flew. Little molter, just back from Panama this glazed May to make your northern nest, ever the mover, straggler from scrub, thicket breeder, builder of dome from the hair of moose, fine moss, quill and here in the city where larvae crawl trash cans, dead. Near glass, one olive-gray handful. Nothing sullied except your black eyes drying, worm-eating pilgrim I rescue from worms.

**May 7**

What choice was there but to layer pancake  
makeup deep, his undertaker cousin  
says. Chemo mixed with embalming fluid  
could work like that. My husband, eighteen  
years, my children's father, laid out wearing  
three of his father's shirts at once, and still  
looking small in his casket. We all sob.

Up close we see through thin hair to green scalp.  
I touch his chest, once barrel-shaped. Beneath  
my hand the rib he broke the first time I  
saw him on stage, a night *Newsweek* reviewed,  
singling out his Drosselmeyer, to his delight:  
“ . . . an unusual reading of the role—  
like Clark Gable crossed with Dracula.”

## BOOKS IN PRINT

### Stuttering into Song

"I stutter into song," claims the contemporary Chinese poet known as **Bei Dao**, suggesting both the importance of music to poetry and the difficulty of composition. As editors and reviewers we face the task of choosing which work to bring to the attention of our readers. For this cluster of reviews, four members of our editorial board each chose a recently published volume where a poet transforms difficulty into song. So here we treat a late eighteenth-century German lyric poet, a mid-twentieth-century American renegade, a late twentieth-century Chinese dissident, and a twenty-first-century Chinese American poet engaged with mathematics. One strength of poetry in the United States over the past hundred years remains its exploration of and commitment to voices other than its own, whether in the experiments of Fenellosa/Pound; the championing by Bly of Machado, Rumi, Mirabai; or the growth of a North American audience for Brodsky, Szymborska, Milosz. Like them, the poets we have selected serve as antidotes to the weak tea regularly served by many of our contemporaries. As Bly translates Mira, "I have felt the swaying of the elephant's shoulders, and now you want me to ride on a jackass? Try to be serious."

Some of the difficulty involves the stuttering itself. Like Friedrich Hölderlin struggling to write in his later years, Hayden Carruth attempting to identify the "voice that is great within us," Karen an-hwei Lee tracing an "open cycle" as she merges mathematical and layered verbal worlds, Bei Dao has fought both to "revive . . . an ancient language" and to blacksmith a new one. In his essay "Translation Style: A Quiet Revolution," he discusses the need to wrench Chinese from the official language demanded during the Maoist Dynasty. His poems frequently portray the inefficacy of words: "alphabets upside down," "words . . . the poison in a song," "a word has abolished another word." When he and his colleagues first published their magazine *Jintian (Today)* in 1978, they both created and entered the "exile of words," an exile no less intense than the political one many of them have endured.

In *The Rose of Time: New and Selected Poems* (New York, NY: New Directions, 2010, 300 pp, \$16.95 paper), editor Eliot Weinberger has skillfully compiled a rich selection of Bei Dao's work since his first attempts to liberate the Chinese language from itself. The volume offers both Chinese and English texts, providing versions from at least six different translators over the past three decades. Weinberger assumed responsibility for translating Bei



Dao around the turn of the millennium, working first with Iona Man-Cheong and now, in collaboration with the poet, on his own. Despite changes in translators and momentary linguistic fluctuations, the poems make a coherent volume. Perhaps it's the consistency of the poet's concerns, whether language, love, politics, or the search of an exile for his place in this world. Or perhaps it's the complexity of the imagery, which, early and late, seems close to surrealism:

a ladder goes deep into the mirror  
fingers in a school for the blind  
touch the extinction of birds

Given his personal and political history—including the risk he took in publishing *Jintian* and exile itself—Bei Dao's poetry often partakes of anger and darkness. Weinberger points out the irony of his being known mostly for the early and explicit poems with lines familiar to every Chinese student in the late 1980s: "In an age without heroes I just want to be a man." "I do not believe!" Many of the poems from the mid-1990s are dark and difficult to track, either in Chinese or in English. To read this volume as a whole, however, is to watch the poet emerge with his own language as he enters new phases of his life—accepting American citizenship, marrying a second time, fathering a new child. Despite the limitations of language itself, "we begin to speak"; "you listen closely / to a new city / built by a string quartet"; "earth and compass spin / through the secret combination— / daybreak!"

In the hands of many writers this movement from anger to darkness to dawn might turn stale, but Bei Dao avoids the trap of egocentricity, of the merely personal; very few of his poems *feel* autobiographical. One moving exception, "A Picture," sketches his daughter, unable to see her father during early days of his exile. Others, equally personal, give no indication that they describe their creator. "Ramallah" evokes the mood in Palestine when a group of international writers accepted Mahmoud Darwish's invitation to visit him and to meet Yasser Arafat. Bei Dao has treated this experience directly in his essay "Midnight's Gate"; the poem, however, describes the environment without drawing attention to the poet:

in Ramallah  
the ancients play chess in the starry sky  
the endgame flickers

It's not that the current vision ignores darkness. In one of his

strongest recent poems, “Black Map,” about his temporary return to China to visit his dying father, Bei Dao writes, “cold crows piece together / the night.” But a combined father/son figure manages to transcend the dark: “let my white hair lead / the way through the black map / as though a storm were taking you to fly.”

Image, music, absence of ego, presence of the world—all have contributed to Bei Dao’s stature as the leading Chinese poet of his generation. This stature complements his courage as an editor and a human rights activist, activities he explicitly separates from his work as a poet. I hope I’ve suggested how this volume demonstrates all these characteristics, except one. For those who have no Chinese, I can only convey Bei Dao’s music through an anecdote: In the early 1990s I gave a close Chinese friend a copy of one of the poet’s essays, asking her for a quick translation without revealing the author. She read one sentence, stopped, insisted on knowing who wrote it. She lauded the language: “So strong, so unique, so rich in sound.” And that’s just his prose.

— John Rosenwald



In a new en face compilation, ***Selected Poems of Friedrich Hölderlin*** (Richmond, CA: Omnidawn, 2008, 496 pp, \$24.95 paper), translators Maxine Chernoff and Paul Hoover, themselves accomplished poets, generously sample all phases of Hölderlin’s work: early odes, later odes, elegies and hymns, fragments of hymns, and last poems, along with plans and fragments. An introduction by Paul Hoover prepares readers for Hölderlin’s challenging work, where “all is change, interrelation, and transformation.”

Friedrich Hölderlin is well known as a key figure of German lyric poetry. His poems often explore the tension between the gods’ presence—in mountains, rivers, thunderstorms—and the gods’ departure from our world. The poet’s purpose, Hölderlin believed, was to render life in its entirety—a difficult and dangerous mission. His most valued work was created between 1796 and 1806, before he succumbed to insanity.

Hoover sums up the translators’ experience: “The drama of Hölderlin’s consciousness, the beauty of his lyrics, and the largeness of his vision drew us closer to him with each working day.” In my own close reading of *Selected Poems*, I have come to feel the same—

humbled by a poetry that is always grand but without any gesture of grandiosity. Chernoff and Hoover succeed in their ambition “to elucidate while retaining a sense of the poet’s complexity of syntax and theme.” More than once, their English translations helped me, a native speaker of German, to probe deeper into the original, especially since Hölderlin often uses bizarre syntax. (The term “garden path sentence” fits well here: the loosely attached modifiers keep altering one’s perspectives, both forward and backward, as one moves along its path.)

Take, for example, the last stanza of “The Dioscuri.” Hölderlin’s language is both compressed and fluid:

Mit Wolken, säng ich, tränkt das Gewitter dich  
Du spöttischer Boden, aber mit Blut der Mensch  
So schweigt, so heiligt, der sein Gleiches  
Droben und drunten umsonst erfragte.

Chernoff and Hoover offer this reading:

I would sing with clouds. Scornful soil, it’s not storms  
That soak you through, but rather the blood of men.  
Your equal above and below seeks for you  
In vain, thus silenced and made holy.

The first two lines of the translation offer the reader a logical bridge where Hölderlin offers none. The next lines work well with the story of the Dioscuri, Castor and Pollux; the deceased, mortal twin cannot be brought back either from the underworld or from the heavens. I wonder, though, if Hölderlin is not proposing the more radical idea that the very act of seeking is a form of worship, as in “Thus in silence he hallows who asked / in vain for his equal above and below.” I would not have worked toward this understanding had I not measured it against the translation.

Chernoff and Hoover also infuse Hölderlin’s late fragments with a bit of modernist cohesion, lightly smoothing the syntax, and their fragments read especially well. In the introduction, Hoover says, “It is with the fragments, 1804–1807, that Hölderlin takes on his full stature. Especially important in presaging modern and postmodern discontinuity are works like ‘In the Forest,’” a nine-page, free-verse fragment that overall contains much blank space and dissolved semantics:

He remains nowhere.  
No sign

→

Binds.  
Not ever

A vessel to contain him.

Hoover points out the “extraordinarily precise dream-like observation” in some of the fragments. It is tempting, of course, to understand this as a quasi-postmodern comment on the plight of language and meaning. I would add, though, that to read the entire fragment in German is a much more painful experience than to read the English. The dissolution of reason in this brilliant poet and thinker is all too evident.

I may be forgiven if my bias toward the poems in their original language inclines me to mourn the loss of a particularly beautiful phrase or of a long musical arc rather than to notice a clever solution to a seemingly impossible translation problem. Clearly, Chernoff and Hoover capture Hölderlin and present an impressive body of poems to English readers, who might have experienced Hölderlin’s poetry in translations by Richard Sieburth or by Michael Hamburger. All these translations elucidate one another. However, Hölderlin’s *ahnen* of the divine (accurately but clumsily translated in this collection as “having a premonition”) continues to resist easy pinpointing. Heidegger, who helped bring Hölderlin’s work out of obscurity, put it this way: “Poetry cannot name the unnameable, but it can keep open the space for it.”

— Leonore Hildebrandt

■  
**Hayden Carruth** died in 2008, and I miss him terribly. Though I never met him, he was the contemporary poet whom I found myself most often rereading, the writer I most often wanted to emulate. Musical, erudite, he was a virtuosic technician as well as a deft lyricist and narrator. But Carruth was far more than a stylist: he was a moral and an aesthetic force—a man who, as his friend and longtime editor Sam Hamill has written, “wrestled with daemons and angels alike, not least of all himself, in his long writing life,” yet managed to mold his jumble of gifts and flaws into poems that stretch “from the formal to the spontaneous, from local vernacular to righteous oratory, from beautiful complexity to elegant understatement.” Not least, he was a conduit to the stony, stubborn outcrop that is the rural Northeast: to its failing farmers and hopeful drunks and melancholy parking-lot attendants; to the mysterious,

familiar world of the unspoken and the unlettered.

***Toward the Distant Islands: New and Selected Poems*** (ed. Sam Hamill, Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2006, 198 pp, \$17.00 paper) is a slim compendium of poems sifted from the output of Carruth's enormously productive career, beginning with the 1959 publication of his first book and ending with a handful of uncollected poems written between 2001 and 2005. In his introduction, Hamill explains that he was striving to create "a little celebration of 'greatest hits,'" with the hope that "a portable Carruth [would be] a useful tool." Hamill's choice of the word *tool* implies that he was trying to construct an anthology that proffers a lesson of sorts. In my case, the lesson learned is reminiscent of the one I learned from Frank Bidart's and David Gewanter's massive edition of Robert Lowell's collected poems: that it's instructive, and glorious, and also painful, to watch a young poet's swaggering formal bravado swell into a mature and confident brilliance that cannot be maintained.

It's not that Carruth was a bad poet at the end: in many ways, these late poems are an exquisite critique of the way in which a man's life and talent can fade side by side into a kind of poisonous irrelevance. In the opening stanza of "A Few Dilapidated Arias," he recollects "those times when I made poems / like sweet tarts cooling on the windowsill of a / studio in the woods." And later in the poem he writes:

What is the worst part of growing old? you ask.  
 Ok, my young friends and paltry scholars, I will  
 tell you. It's becoming incompetent. All my life  
 I was the epitome of competence. . . .  
 And now? Other people must do everything for me  
 and for themselves too. I'm useless. Can you imagine it?  
 I might as well be a common amanita growing  
 beneath the tall, tall hemlocks in the dark.

Yet in his prime, Carruth was peerless. "Under [his] spell," wrote Galway Kinnell, "we are not in the presence of a poem, but of the world." Consider "Adolf Eichmann" (1962), where the use of terza rima as a corkscrew into political and moral chaos rivals Shelley's best work. Or "Emergency Haying" (1973), which, with forthright modesty, seamlessly binds the image of Christ's crucifixion to brutal, unromantic fieldwork. Or "Marshall Washer" (1978), a

long dense narrative, deceptively prosy in visual structure, that by means of sentence flexibility, grammatical subtlety, and the intellectual and emotional underpinnings of its syntax reveals how much Carruth had learned from poets such as Donne and Milton. Toward the end of the poem, Carruth writes:

No doubt  
 Marshall's sorrow is the same as human  
 sorrow generally, but there is this  
 difference. To live in a doomed city, a doomed  
 nation, a doomed world is desolating, and we all,  
 all are desolated. But to live on a doomed farm  
 is worse. It must be worse. There the exact  
 point of connection, gate of conversion, is—  
 mind and life.

It seems to me that the great poems of Carruth's heyday hunt ceaselessly for this "exact point of connection, gate of conversion" between "mind and life." And perhaps that's why his late poems make me sad: the poet has become convinced of his own incompetence. He who, "roughly speaking / . . . could do anything," has been reduced to hurling invective at the television. Yet, of course, this will be everyone's story, everyone's lesson . . . as the anthology's final lines, Carruth's final published words, make sure to proclaim:

Remember me in your agony, my children. Think  
 of what I have foretold. I wrote these words for you.

— Dawn Potter

■  
 When blue damselflies mate, the male's terminal pincers hook into the female's thorax. If she accepts his ministrations, she curls her abdomen under and stretches out to touch her vent to the sexual organ on a forward section of his abdomen. This is commonly termed a mating wheel, but what I saw one day this spring not three feet from where I sat, when a pair of damselflies alit on a stalk and began their rites, was the outline of a sapphire heart, fragile and pulsing. I'd been thinking of heart shapes because I'd been reading **Karen an-hwei Lee's *Ardor*** (Dorset, VT: Tupelo Press, 2008, 71 pp, \$16.95 paper), whose governing image is a cardioid, the "heart-shaped curve traced by a point / On the circumference of a circle rolling / Around an equal fixed circle." The mathematical formula for this shape is  $\rho = a(1 + \cos \theta)$ , one among

many “translated version[s] of the algebraic heart” her text provides in its exploration of ardor as sexual passion, physical pulse and structure, and religious faith—“the invisible ardor of devotion.”

Lee’s sources includes a guide to bird biology, *Gray’s Anatomy*, two translations of the Bible, *Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*, and the poetry of Li Qingzhao, a much-honored woman poet of the Song Dynasty, Lee’s translations of which appear throughout her book. But though the list conveys the materials from which this book-length poem is worked, it does not convey what is at stake in her poetic project, or the tumbling spillover of imagery that brings their leavings together in Lee’s sensuous imagination to form a passionate faith for a time of dispossession, scientific hegemony, and faithlessness.

“How does a Song Dynasty poet’s / Collection of antiquities / Relate to me in this age,” this twenty-first-century poet asks, whose ground—like Bei Dao’s—is moving ground (“the indelible rose, diaspora”), whose mother tongue is “translingual migration.” One way to envision her method of response is to imagine yourself as that dot on the rolling circle—with every degree of arc in its constant turning, you are given a new perspective on the surrounding landscape from which to “Remember this eye’s / Circumference / In song.”

*Ardor* is structured as an interleaving of verse sections with prose letters, dreams, and prayers. Within the verse sections, Lee slips in other structures—a sonnet, a folding mirror poem, catalogs. The lines in the verse sections are double-spaced and function, therefore, as mini-stanzas. We read each as complete in itself before moving to the next, which may or may not extend the line of thought or field of imagery. This loosening of continuity draws attention to individual images as verbal and visual compositions with discrete fields of association. As these accumulate, implied narratives emerge of trauma and destruction (“They took the pomegranate and burned it. / You mean they burst it open. Ripe. / Tore it apart leaf by leaf and burned the seeds”) and suppressed speech (“this pomegranate’s / Vocal throat silenced in / Sequenced red ellipses . . .”).

The color red recurs with amplifying intensity alongside images of anatomical structure—of birds and the chambers of the heart.

## BOOKS IN PRINT

Forests and suitcases evoke perpetual journey. Characters appear and shape-shift: a blind woman seer we associate with Li Qingzhao, whom the speaker turns toward as a progenitor, and “nervous, broken men,” who cede their place in the speaker’s affections to the Holy Ghost as the book arcs toward healing:

Setting bones, an unseen surgeon

Cures the inconstant vision , , ,

Plunging deeper than

The first optic rain

You in parentheses raining

Over retinal insight

To read *Ardor* is to dive into its multifoliate passions—to see through your tongue, feed through your pores, mainline the generosity of the poetic impulse:

Rotary tenderness of the aorta, glistening under

Green meadows, arched meadows, red besotted

Uncovering humble ardor servicing the orchard

Praying deep, this swimming briefcase of a body That experience becomes in and of itself a response to Hölderlin’s two-centuries-old question, “What use are poets in a destitute time?” Happily, the world of poetry is not destitute. Two more of Lee’s books are in the Tupelo pipeline, along with the first full-length collection by Mary Molinary, whose ambitious and formally inventive poems frequently grace these pages. Reading their work and that of other young poets whose voices small literary presses make available to us, I watch a twenty-first-century aesthetic in the process of formation. Acknowledging the traditions that it both arises and has been exiled from, it deploys the arts and sciences with equal facility in moving toward a mutable coherence among the cognitive dissonances of the present—between the ardor of blue damselflies and the heavy hands that carelessly destroy.

— Lee Sharkey