

BPJ

BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL VOL. 61 N°2
WINTER 2010/2011

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BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL
Winter 2010/2011, Vol. 61 N°2

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Zhang Xinying, "Rolling Out Dumpling Wrappers,"
painting, 1999, Jinshan, China



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 Elizabeth Langemak (December), Janice N. Harrington (January), and Anna George Meek (February).

BPJ

THE EDITORS OF
THE BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL
ARE PROUD TO AWARD
THE EIGHTEENTH ANNUAL
CHAD WALSH POETRY PRIZE
OF \$3,000

TO
CHARLES WYATT
FOR HIS POEMS FROM "THIRTEEN WAYS
OF LOOKING AT WALLACE STEVENS"
IN THE SPRING 2010 ISSUE.

HONORING THE POET CHAD WALSH,
COFOUNDER, IN 1950, OF THIS MAGAZINE,
THE PRIZE IS THE GIFT THIS YEAR OF
ALISON WALSH SACKETT AND PAUL SACKETT.

MARÍA NEGRONI
from *Mouth of Hell*

Sucede sin aviso el ajetreo verbal: de pronto, alzando vuelo como un ave heráldica, el misterio empenachado en su sombra. Y, en tal aquelarre de fasto y pobreza, como si el pasado perdonase a los hombres, una presencia de plata: un puñado de cantos para medir el camino que va de las armas al alma. Todos ellos en fila, geometría indeleble, como naves felices dispuestas para el gran viaje.

A rush of words comes unannounced: all at once, jacked up into flight like a heraldic bird, mystery plumed by shadow. And even in this pandemonium of pomp and poverty, as if the past pardoned men, a silver presence: a fistful of cantos to measure the span from sword to soul. All lined up, an indelible geometry, like lightsome ships set for the great journey.

No se podrá decir que no hayan cometido toda suerte de errores afectivos. Ni que hayan retaceado al cuerpo su porción de sed y menoscabo. Colmo de las contradicciones, habituados a golpear y malherirse, los hombres componen un tríptico de nacimiento, copulación y muerte y así consiguen, de paso, someterse a aquello que los hiere. Ninguna otra comedia los llevaría más rápido al destino que escriben sin saberlo. Ninguna otra vía, así de espiralada, al laberinto de su propia sombra.

You couldn't say they haven't committed every error of feeling. Nor rationed the body's share of detriment and thirst. The height of contradiction: men, inured to beatings and self-affliction, compose triptychs of birth, copulation, and death, and so, submit to their torment. No other comedy would carry them straight to the destiny they write unwittingly. No other path, spiraling like this, through the labyrinth of their own shadows.

Cada tanto se escuchan detonaciones, estruendos, amenazas. ¿Qué forma de magia, preciosa y estéril, atribuyen los hombres a esos ruidos? ¿Qué los encandila en la utilería bélica? Algo prolifera en el cielo sin explicación y después la tierra ensangrentada y cada vez un odio, un esparcir de vísceras talmente ilegibles. Algunas bestias buscan escapar. Algunos esqueletos, balanceándose, en un manuscrito infame.

Now and then, detonations, rumblings, menaces. What kind of magic, precious and sterile, do men assign to these sounds? What about these war props dazzles them? Something proliferates inexplicably in the sky, then on the bloody ground, and it's always hate, a scattering of viscera equally illegible. A few beasts try to escape. A few skeletons, steadying themselves, on an infamous manuscript.

translated from the Spanish by Michelle Gil-Montero

SUE D. BURTON

Bulletproof

for Spencer Reece

Today it's Hopkins and *his obscure spiritual contraptions*—
everything I read is heart-corseted, like a concealable vest,
police surplus good as new. Some fanatic is packing a gun.

I turn to Hopkins—*living speech*—sprung,
stressed, compressed—then I'm off again, help me, obsessed.
O, restless mind—my own strange spiritual contraption.

Armor with a warranty: order it online—unless you're a felon.
But a killer aims at your head when you're his holy pretext.
Right to choose: third eye, bull's eye. Some fanatic is packing a gun.

Why is the body so feared, its physicality, its passion?
Even Hopkins—*the beauty of the body is dangerous*—wrestling
with God, that obscure spiritual contraption.

Last week I read we're wired for God: blessed evolution.
We're (spring me!) wired to control—oil, water, sex.
God help us: tonight a fanatic is packing a gun.

Another doctor shot. The killer thinks he's won.
Bodies, ourselves—mere rhetoric? Beauty is the spirit fleshed.
I mourn, I get ready for work, I put on my contraption,
it presses on my heart. Some fanatic is packing a gun.

KEVIN DUCEY

Dragonteeth

*My dream, O my sister, my dream,
this is the heart of my dream.
Rushes rise up all about me,
rushes sprout all about me. . . .*

—*The Death of Dumuzi*, Sumerian myth c. 2500 BCE

Dulce it's not: How many miles
underground do we tunnel? Into darkness,
the tunnel rat goes past black pits
and poison traps and once
he comes round an oblique corner into a
hospital with operating theater,
sweet air blown in,
beds still warm, the wounded fleeing
down the tunnel before him.

■

You know the story,
the king buries
dragonteeth into the sod
and they jump up—
soldiers to fight for the kingdom.

■

Once you've introduced the teeth,
the rest of the animal can't be far. Think
of a dictator pulled from a spiderhole, tell
your friends, tell them it's *dulce*. When
the soldier comes home from Iraq
he flees the house of his uncle
and disappears into the sand and palm trees
of southwest Florida.

The 'Nam vets go looking for him. Rumor
he'd been seen on a bus stop bench
dirty and unshaven sends the old men to the jungles,
dressed homeless to look for the young man
because Gilgamesh said to Enkidu

→

on his descent into the underworld:

“Do not put on clean clothes,
lest the [dead] heroes come forth like enemies;
Do not anoint thyself with the good oil of the vessel,
lest at its smell they crowd about thee.”

■

The tunnel rat goes to the last place
the kid has been seen; along the highway
embankment he finds a drainage pipe
“large enough for a man to crawl into,”
or something to crawl out of.

It’s not usually the old ones who go out
searching. Telemachus goes for his father,
and Oedipus finally finds his parents.

In Vietnam now they’ve opened
these tunnels to the tourist trade;
here’s Orpheus, the original tunnel rat,
and the shade of the young man flees before him.

The old man, gone into the ground,
sees again the briefing room desk,
the well-stocked hospital ward
(as if those things
could make them whole again).

The black echo
whispers now ahead of him, the oblique
turns twist away before,
and the white phosphorus burns
brightly above Dumuzi’s Euphrates.

■

The smell is overwhelming. The
maggots had no trouble finding
Dumuzi in his dream. The shadow
face passing by, petal on a flower
we never saw bloom. The dead
follow us even as we leave

→

AMIR HUSSAIN

Night Poem

this is the sleeping sleepless face of the parent
this is the cry of the father
 a long letter the owl keeps in his feathers
this is the sunflower teapot, the sunflower
 fading on the black and white porcelain form
the voice you cannot listen to, you do not want to hear

this is the sleepless sleeping face of your parents
the cat biting its paw in the dark
the shade that goes up, against which rain patters
 carried by wind, flute, and drum

this is the chime in the temple that is pressed by the hands
this is the still silence of sand and wet as a flower
the home of the red desert
 where children touch the feet of their parents

if I could change one thing it would be in childhood
to have touched the feet of my parents
 white bulb onion of my mother's feet
 brown earth soil of my father's feet

nowadays my feet are sand and I walk toward them
toward home, toward the funeral of rain
toward the rice paddy and the clay saucer for tea
the tea leaf in the soil growing tall as I walk

ANNA GEORGE MEEK

Self-Possession

In Judea, the ancients hold the scrolls
near to themselves: within caverns, the papyri

roll out songs and laws, in fragments,
in tongues.
The body is finding

a library that the dead
have left behind.
The Dead

Sea divides
around a peninsula called

the tongue. It wears
a blue-white cloud
and a shroud of salt. I wear

my words; I am embroidered

by pain, daily, whose garment I will leave
my children. The design is
undetermined, but gently, you may

read it for yourself. You may render it
valuable. What I wear is an heirloom.
For thousands of years

after the ancients disappear, the Dead Sea Scrolls
lie dormant until the boys who wear sheepskins
find them. This day,
I have found a sleeping infant

inside me, and have loved. In *The Marriage of Figaro*,
mistaken identity finds

love, after all. Women wearing
each other's

clothes. A good story. When a white woman reads
a black man, he sometimes turns to see her

watching him. She recognizes
his clothes. Perhaps a case
of mistaken identity, but possibly

she is thinking, *I am near to you. I am near to you.*
Perhaps he interprets

Somali in the evenings for his American
cousins, but tonight, he asks the woman
to the opera. He has misread

the situation: she is a lesbian.
Tonight, another woman

has taken herself
from her home to safety, the blue-black prints
of a man in her skin. Biology is an interesting

story. The brown-haired marks of a man
appear on the hermaphrodite's skin. Pronouns

divide her. Verbs multiply her. For years,
I did not have names for the nouns

in my body.
Sometimes syntax fails. Scientists are fighting

to own the basic translations
of our human genome. Biology

is a dangerous story. The body finds
a library of letters that the dead have left behind.
I find

that the literal is singular, but metaphor
is plural. Myself, I have often appeared

in the third person. She mistakes herself
for someone she knows, for someone

she could write. She remembers
the nights of the years she has nearly taken

her own life.
I ask the woman

in the shelter to sign her name, or an X, and she doubles
over to clutch her knees with one hand, my arm

with another. We

must be here. We
may appear like the asters

ANNA GEORGE MEEK

in dark fields where the shepherd boys
have entered the caves, and now,
they near the finding:

what there is to have, it is

among us.

STEVE WILSON

Of Marriage

Shadow. Dark watcher there.

Would you taste it then,
in thinking toward some other?
A want that worries sleep,

lulls a way into. Turned, so
suddenly, you'd sense yourself
awake, but of a moment made,

still spare as light, uncertained
upon wandering. Breath,
insistence, desire now—

your hand open, old words,
body—how they drift their hurt
down seas and seas and seas.

JAZZY DANZIGER

Yahrzeit

I learn the word *leilot*: nights, plural,
a false feminine. How often I've sung *nights*

without knowing what I sing. Each night
you carry me, frozen child, from temple

to the house's citrus heat. You bathe me
in the lowest tub. The body is washed,

dried, dressed. The body is wrapped
in sheets. The light withdraws. The door

slides shut. Footsteps darken
in the hallway. The child mourns every night,

until mourning is its mother.

JENNIFER WHITAKER

The Invention of Childhood

Believe it: father made the world just for you—
the sunlight fluttering like ribbons in a pony's mane,
the river that pony a child leads through the hills.
This lullaby he licked clean: the riverbank
peddling hellebore's fat pods, flowers antique and verdigris-hued.
The fence he painted the dulled color of comfort. Believe it:
he made you this lushness, these extravagant blossoms cut and vased.
Made you a porcelain tub, mildew-slick,
and called it *river*; the water flushed red,
clear again. Made you a bird shot through
with light and called it *defiant girl*.
Bang, he points with forefinger, thumb straight to heaven,
the tiny eye an explosion of red. *Bang*. The neck a soft torn cloth.
Bang. The beak shattering to dust.

JENNIFER WHITAKER

Habit

When I followed him to the river, it narrowed itself
to a needle's point—the morning clear,

the cicadas' swelling hum a comfort.
Lures spread out carnival-bright on newspaper,

those feathers trembling. The day's catch was usual:
fish too tiny left on the banks, a snake flayed open to the light.

Later, when rocks bit the backs of my knees,
the haze of insects crowding around us,

my skirt pushed back like a gasp and the water
the water a stagnant slash across the land

I didn't fight. You see, I was older now. I wasn't scared anymore;
I was tired. Back at home, I brushed my hair, put on a clean dress.

I thought it was this taking that would follow me through the halls his
fearlessness with the sky so blue and vast above us

but instead it was the field beyond the river,
those daffodils' pursed lips,
the cattails bending in the wind.

ANN KENISTON

The Overlay

The light again: it interferes
with matter. In some cases, as in Monet's
Seine, the objects vanish
before that shimmering. No poplars, no
water but a density stuck before them.
It's what I wished for:
that something would intervene between
my friend and her dying. My error was
in confusing ground with figure: the fog, gauze,
little dark spots I was distracted by
were her dying, not some overlay.
The way the poplars were the light.

ANN KENISTON

Dock

sky over the lake, an emptiness
on an emptiness

the paler space
of sky retained

useless as the kayak passing in the near dark
close by the dock

not metaphor or ghost
though the rider casts a torch

forward, then passes back
into the dark

and her vanishing
continues, my wish

to feel her presence
shorn by me of touch, cheek

and lip removed or blurred
as if I didn't know where

to look for her
or she'd grown invisible which I cannot bear

and require, as if I'd reached down
my cupped palms

toward the water's surface
which is too far to touch.

JANICE N. HARRINGTON

Why, Oh Why, the Doily?

The lace doily (or antimacassar) was to become as persistent a symbol in [Horace] Pippin's later work as the classical torso in Chirico or the jungle in Rousseau. Whether it represented some unattainable respectability or was seized upon solely for its decorative mosaic, we have no way of knowing: but toward the end of his career its use became pervasive to the point of abstraction.
—Selden Rodman, *Horace Pippin: A Negro Painter in America*

Why, oh why, the doily?

—Elizabeth Bishop, “Filling Station”

1

In a slant of light, a woman crochets a doily,
working the hook in and out. She wraps
a thread of cotton floss around
her index finger, almost
as if she were writing. The words fall
from her crochet hook, linked
into white lace, a white page.

Words tangle in stringy ink,
almost manic, a speaking in tongues,
looped, caught, tucked under a stitch
of breath. Memory rises as if
it were a doily of lace, beautifully edged,
holding what once mattered.

2

Memory snags on a doily's lace, a ring game of thread—
Put your hands on your hips, let your backbone slip.
The past wears the body of a girl-child to skip, spin-
dizzy, fall and leap up again. There is resurrection
in a jump rope's twirl. The past tosses the unseen
like a stone, then, scooping it up, claims it, the present
a pip, a prize for having journeyed. A doily starched,
shaped into fullness, the hem of a child's skirt as she twirls,
twirls and falls. Our first sex is with the earth that pulls us
down, that holds us against its skin as a doily draws the eye.

3

From fiberglass, an artist crochets doilies of resin.
“Arte Povera,” she says, “chaos theory,
the Fibonacci sequence, the numbers π
and e , and Pascal’s triangle.” Fiberglass chains
and joinings gather light and transform
into shining, into narratives of mathematical
precision, from simplicity into hybrid
space and form, thread and fabric, plane
and dimension, maker and made.

How measure a doily’s self-similarities?
Unraveled, a doily is skeins of cotton thread.
Untwisted, the threads are fiber. Released,
the fiber drifts over a mill in Carolina or a field
in Alabama, over a cotton row where a rat snake
coils under the shade of a cotton plant, unaware
of a descending blade, how things fall apart.

Another artist links antique doilies, builds
sculptures, webs, womb rooms, huge cellular
amoebas of chains (*sc in 2nd ch from hook
and in each ch across for 34 sc*). Elsewhere
a poet writes that a single doily is the cell
of an extraterrestrial organism. Objects drawn
past its plasma membrane are consumed.
At night, doilies levitate upward toward
their host colony, frequently mistaken for mist,
cloud formations, snow, or vees of geese.
Doilies have always been amongst us.

4

A man lies on top of a woman.

Which is the doily?

Which is a vase of clear water
filled with wands of weigela or lemon basil?

Which—the man or the woman—lifts this moment
above smooth flesh, bare and shining like still water?

5

Doilies are two-dimensional planes until starched
and shaped or crocheted with wire or words or breath.

Then they are architectural. Doilies are flat
like stepping stones, like old graves, like the known

universe before longitude. But they can be bowls,
mesh cages, or equations of hyperbolic geometry,

say Russian kale or a coral reef, say old grief
or a black woman's hair on a humid day.

6

Consider the doily, a plane, space made lovely,
space that is and is not, form that is and is not.
Atop a doily you may place anything of value,
anything that you want to beguile the eye:
a porcelain soup tureen from the Azores,
a lead crystal candy bowl, the photograph
of a soldier in uniform. Consider the doily,
how it shows what does and does not belong
to you, what little you have, as if, surprisingly,
there is always poverty in such display.

7

646.42 Doilies, The Art of
Doi

Patterns, repetitions, skeletons of lace used for display,
to protect, proclaim, give status, attract the eye, give
access, to prove, as she said, that *Somebody loves us all*.

Subject headings:

1) lacemaking 2) crochet—history 3) handiwork, women

(see also geometry)

8

The doily knows only one word: *Behold!*

9

Questions the doily asks:

1.0 *Is space a material thing in which all material things are to be located?*
—Bernard Tschumi, *Architecture and Disjunction*

- 1.1 If doilies are material spaces, should space be understood as form?
 - 1.1.1 If doilies are intersections of form and space, what is the boundary between conceptualized space and the space of the material doily?
 - 1.1.2 If the doily's purpose is display, does an object placed within or atop a doily represent the measure of its display? Do doilies display, at every moment, all objects in any space? We display the doily. Does the doily display us?
 - 1.1.3 If a doily contains an infinite number of spaces, does display alter the perception of space?
- 1.2 Doilies replicate gardens: lilies, roses, palm fronds, carnations, forget-me-nots, daisies, as gardens themselves replicate the wild and fecund. What is consumed in a doily's replicated garden?
 - 1.2.1 If doilies are figurative gardens, are they subversive in the context of the large-scale monocultures of modern agribusiness?

- 1.2.2 As metaphorical garden and embodied paradise in which divinity and sexuality are not separate, do doilies deny same-sex desire? Are they petitions to an absent divinity?
- 1.2.3 As metaphorical gardens, doilies feature flowers, the classic emblems of sexuality. Is the doily a means of seduction?
- 1.3 A doily belonging to Eva Braun is sold at auction. A Negro folk artist paints pictures of his wife's doilies. A black woman passes on a cardboard box, filled with her mother's doilies, to her daughter. Which doily does not represent memory?
- 1.4 Are doilies beautiful because they balance absence with presence?
- 1.4.1 If doilies are hybrids (form and formlessness, repetition and variation), is what composes a doily also hybrid—space, connection, beauty?
- 1.4.2 But if the doily is itself beauty, as well as a marker for beauty, does it compete for the space allocated to women? In making a doily, does a woman replicate *woman*, *feminine*, *womb*, *girl*?

10

In *Spring Flowers with Lace Doily*, 1944
Pippin paints gladioli, chrysanthemums,
roses, and orange poppies over a doily
as intricate as a spider's web or altar cloth,
a pictograph across a sandstone cliff.

Wild abundance or what is only lovely?
He argues with himself

about the divine
 and the earthly,
about chaos
 and order—he can't decide.

He paints a doily, labors to show
every intersecting thread, each thread
a path untaken, a path that might have
made all the difference, each thread
a journey. He paints the spaces,
the interruptions of pattern that are also pattern.
His doilies look like nets, sieves,
or the aerial cartography of a vast irrigation system,
labyrinths where there are monsters,
but also, surely, gods. And so the flowers,
and so his doilies, and so his petition.

"Questions the Doily Asks," section 9, after Bernard Tschumi, "Questions of Space." *Architecture and Disjunction*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001.

JAMES DOYLE
Civil War Photograph

Flesh and blood turn mathematic.
The limbs illustrate opaque angles,

the sky rotates three hundred sixty
degrees around eyes burning

black zeros into its center. The light
is solid geometry, testing the premises

of interlocking masses: rifle stocks
that won't be stripped of hands,

legs nesting among the salley branches,
brocades mounting bones, sheer

vests and their torsos intersecting
brambles, plains crawling forward

into the smoke. The scratched lens
is a blackboard solving equations,

each one for its elusive X: maybe
a single cell regrouping, maybe the tasteless

cleanup of an unrelenting sun, maybe a wild
animal tracking fresh scent into focus.

ELIZABETH LANGEMAK

Illinois Cornfield as Nude Descending Staircase

As is the case with Duchamp's painting
we are not trained to imagine less
than a full field, no less than a shuffle
of form wherein one figure sways,
behind it a series of selves leaning
forward on brace root ankles,
lock-kneed and peeling on tawny stalks,
the echo that leads to now, to one
plant at the ditch's verge. October gusts
comb crooked parts through rows,
and the plants rattle their low-growling
engine of cob and leaf shifting
and bowing in girlish angles.
It is not newly made for you, this sound,
it is the sound that tracks each stalk
like shadow, the sound that haunts these
hiplike husks, these willowed legs.
Might the painter ask, where the corn
without this field of trail? Might the painting
answer, where the woman still unshucked?

ELIZABETH LANGEMAK

Expectation

*I suffer all the time: I have no relief, no escape: it is monotony—
monotony—monotony—in pain.*

—Walt Whitman, in the week preceding his death

Walt Whitman, when I stood unmoved
at your tomb, I wondered, then, what place

might move me. I read the plaque
but you were not in the grass. I touched

the moss and still you stonewalled
from inside your barred hole in the hill,

from your casket stacked up
with your kinfolk. Like a pebble

dropped into stale waters, your death
rung out others: around the cemetery

the gray hospitals, pale office buildings,
then chop shops and shacks with their

flagging dispositions, paint shattered
on panes, cast-off condoms and careless

tires. To be invisible is to barely be,
and so Camden becomes, with you

lodged at its heart in your reluctant
sublime, your drunken embrace

become hangover, your tickled palm
turned itch. In your quiet park

on that sweated morning, I knew
what you meant by monotony, I felt

the old expectation, the wanting
of wanting, I suffered for lack of better

ELIZABETH LANGEMAK

pains, and from this there is no relief
either. But also hear this: just as sure

as each breath beat its path from your lungs
as it beats now from mine, as you are

bones in a box as I stand in my skin,
as we both should have known

you would not wait at this place,
hear how my voice has the gait

of a woman who wanted something
better. And is not afraid to ask.

JUDY LITTLE

Glossing Glossolalia

1 Corinthians 13

Though I speak in the tugs
of glitches, my splotch
at grace beglotted

enclanks persymboled
faith, dark in the godclutch
enlovelied, outglibbed for

prayer-cum-impasse,
but sound interpretorsion
must enstammer glory

till time at sunder
deconstutters
love.

MARCUS WICKER

**The Message, or Public Service Announcement Trailing
a Meth Lab Explosion**

The edge I'm at is eleven feet high and safer than
the dirt lot below, where shattered glass doubles

as ground. Three rusted-out pickup trucks
have been outfitted with yellow steel boots

and stuffed with flames, igniting steady gusts
of ammonia—bodily and actual—a smell

inextricably related to the tear ducts that also
combusted here, and why I'm standing atop

a single-wide eyeing punched-in mobile home
darkness. I'm thinking

about Grandmaster Flash. "The Message":
an open row of a freshly set chessboard, bleak

beneath a pink, umbrella-donned table. And
the two rats, fat as badgers, schlepping around

a dog's charred carcass is the move I will make
to hurt you. It's 3 AM. I just pulled off a Nowhere,

Indiana road to watch a trailer park smoke. A fist
of ash like nail polish scorched with salt blasts

me to my knees. Everything disintegrates
from this angle. Bit by bit. Like blacktop

sweating off layers in sun. Like police tape
singed with flame. From this point of view

soot cloaks stars. Even a white, grinning moon
finds its cheekbones eliminated here. I'm talking

about real lives and white rock rubble. Eyelids,
pocked with reddening cinder. Noses, eroded

and raw. I'm wondering if a face on fire
looks the same in any city. In any hue.

MARCUS WICKER

A phone rings an answering machine awake.
The trailing silence harkens to a boarded-up

project building. And in one great big empty
alleyway after another, people are boxed in

or burning up. Vanishing into thin air. Here
I am again, sketch pad in hand, glued to this spot

watching smoke stifle everything—white
and black chess pieces melting in slow mo.

MARCUS WICKER

**Who in their right mind thinks they can put a stop to hip hop,
if it don't stop 'til I stop, and I don't stop 'til it stops?**

—for Maurice

So wrap your cultured-up skull around this. I woke
to a red cross stenciled onto mismatched logs

and “The Entertainer” weeping from a black baby
grand—each note a hound dog’s droopy ear. Hear

me when I say, I was lost. Stranded at a teen arts camp
so north in the U.P. I was hearing southern tongues.

Some flannelled blond man trailed a finger in the air.
Bumped cha head perdy good there. Reckon ya

twisted that ankle on this. He aimed at my foot
with the bottom of a snapper’s lacquered shell—

hazy compact, reflecting a dark, faceless me. *Am I
in heaven?* I asked. He cackled at that; shaking his

bronze leather face at the wall, *No, no. 'Least not like him.*
My vision steadied on a hunchback boy in a yellowed white

tee as I rose from the cot. His erratic, thunderous sniffing
spooked words in my throat: *Is he going to be all right?*

—*Oh yeah. That there’s just my little boy, Tim. Been
carryin’ on like that since a babe. Just a’cryin’ and*

playin’ piano that way. Go’on over and say hello.

I joined the boy of five or six at the small black bench

and forced a nervous smile. Timmy’s glassy blue eyes
kept time with a wooden metronome. His pupils shrank

and grew. Shrank and grew; dilating on each upbeat.
What if I said he wrapped my hands around his

wrist? Would you think me stoned as Snoop Dogg
at a slain rapper’s wake if I told you he stared? That

MARCUS WICKER

he wept and played? You think I'm talking shit.
His pupil's penny-sized screen flashed small

looped horrors: the snapper's shriveled head
lopped off with a boy scout knife; a muscled teen

pissing on an old, vagrant man, drooling snuff
on courthouse steps; the night clerk's nose stud

nailed to a bloody boot heel. You better believe
I bounced; hopped toward an exit. But Timmy

kept on playing, drilling notes into me
like a downpour thumping a well.

True story. The boy never left that room.
Go ahead. You can ask me how I know.

MARCUS WICKER

Maybe the Saddest Thing

is a shovel sighing earth—
is what's stirring beneath a well,
where I always go: that suck and push
of air, swelling the chest—its starting
place. That I couldn't end there
is as sad and annoying
as watching a pet mouse collide and
collide with its mirrored glass quarters:
is any ordinary beast acknowledging himself
with a battering ram—dense stump
that slams through the wrong door
in a smoky hallway, reconstructing
the face of an elderly woman
as dumb gold teeth can do.
It's the slim probability of that and
the swinging arm of death falling
for the woman's granddaughter
at the funeral, who has stems as
if a comet's trail could begin at an ankle
and end in a dark, stockinged thigh.
And just like that, we're back:
in the chamber that regulates all.
If you're locked outside its door
or cannot find this room, I sing:
You are lucky as a virgin.
If you're unsure this place exists—
this saddest thing—
Fine. Don't believe in it
or me. But please believe in this
latched dirt-box of a house
speaker strapped to my back, blasting
everything blue—the same.

GARY LARK

Song

In the goose-down air
of spring a song drifts up
the row of trailers.
The voice, pale and unprofessional,
lingers like a scent
on the porches, under eaves,
rises through cottonwood leaves.

Neighbors have stopped talking,
as if accepting a blessing
of the unsayable, the unknowable.
After it stops we hesitate,
unwilling to let go
of something we never held.

JOHN ROSENWALD

BOOKS IN BRIEF: Notes for a Postapocalyptic Vision

The Best American Poetry, 2010 (New York; Scribner Poetry, 2010, 253 pp, \$35 hardbound, \$16 paper, ebook edition available). Guest Editor **Amy Gerstler**, Series Editor **David Lehman**.

David Lehman again brings us “the best American poetry” from the past year, this time with the immediate curatorial aid of Amy Gerstler as guest editor. Gerstler is clear about her own predilections: humor, prose poems, a desire to retain the “capacity to be amazed,” what she brings from “ancient Mesopotamia” as “lamentation chatter,” and “compressed language bursts” that she identifies as emblematic of poetry past, present, and future.

Gerstler laces the volume with humor. James Richardson offers “Vectors 2.3: Fifty Aphorisms and Ten-Second Essays,” including a few dogs but many gems: “No one’s so entertaining as the one who thinks you are.” “Knowing how to be pleased with what’s there is a great secret of happy living, sensitive reading, and bad writing.” In “A Man with a Rooster in His Dream,” Maurice Manning tells a tale that doesn’t go beyond itself but manages to entertain with one whale of a good story. Terrance Hayes does even better. “I Just Want to Look” teases us with the persona’s attempt to catch a glimpse of the “topless woman picketing / outside the courthouse,” then runs us through a double case of (perhaps) mistaken identity, criticism for neglecting to celebrate Mother’s Day, and a concluding nonsequitur that refocuses the attention on himself. It’s a romp that tackles racism, sexism, ageism, sentimentalism, and first amendment rights without ever losing its light touch.

Gerstler’s sense of humor provides an antidote for the cynicism and pessimism concerning human endeavor that here sound another chord. In my review of last year’s entry in this distinguished series, I observed the elegiac tone of many poems, paralleled that tone to numerous recent submissions to the *BPJ*, and wondered what it meant for our nation. This year the funeral march continues. Fleda Brown asserts, “I’m here . . . thinking how best / to be dead.” Dean Young concludes, “Nothing can be fixed.” Rejecting Alexander Pope’s neoclassical assertion, “the proper study of mankind is man,” Sandra Beasley, her tongue healthily in cheek, points out that “anything can become a ‘unit of measure’” and in her poem by that title chooses the capybara, the world’s largest rodent, as her “standard,” implying that

human values have too long held sway. Language itself becomes suspect. Charles Simic wonders, “Ask yourself, if words are enough, / Or if you’d be better off / Flapping your wings from tree to tree / And carrying on like a crow.”

One response to pessimism and cynicism remains an apocalyptic vision, including for some the certainty of rapture. This version of *Best Poems* resonates with end time stories: In his notes Terence Winch asserts, “there are so many mini-apocalypses in life, all adumbrations of the big one down the road.” G. C. Waldrep, responding to the theory of apiary colony collapse disorder, applies an apocalyptic hypothesis to the bees, proposing that they “had been raptured, in the evangelical Christian sense of that word.” In “The Devil You Don’t” Mark Bibbins claims, “That which doesn’t kill us / is merely waiting; / it will. . . . // Hell is coming. *Hell is here.*” And J. Allyn Rosser asks, in “Children’s Children Speech,”

What would we want our luckless heirs to say,
Now that we too globally see it will end—
The bees, the buds, the mercurial sea, the air
All spoiled—that we made waste of miracles?

This “lamentation chatter,” this search for other standards, may well be productive, since it implies at least that other values exist. Gerstler suggests her own commitment; she hopes her selection of poems may “provide a shadowy likeness of its time” and lists social concerns that range from wars to condoms to standardized tests, ending with “the careless . . . way we have polluted and nearly destroyed the earth.” From my perspective, however, too many of the poems appear isolationist, remain more personal than national or global, are egocentric or self-referential rather than introspective. In last year’s review I remarked that few poems mentioned geography, other authors, or politics. Again this year I ran a quick check on external references within the poems themselves. Geographical diversity has increased. Notice of other writers remains either minimal or nonexistent: quick takes on Byron, Shakespeare, Nietzsche; more significant allusion to E. B. Browning and Proust. Political figures suffer similar benign neglect: Emmett Till and Nkrumah enter these pages, but few others. At least a few poems, including Michaela Kahn’s “If I ring my body like a bell of coins, will the shock waves of that sound cause oil rigs & volcanoes to erupt?” and Sharon

Olds's fascinating "Q," provide explicit treatment of what Gerstler identifies as "the 'wars' in Iraq and Afghanistan," as well as the related but more local oil spills that dominate the news at the end of this decade. To be sure, contexts sometimes stay implicit, identified only in the extensive, fascinating, and valuable section of author biographies and comments following the poems. Without them, for example, I wouldn't know that Adrian Matejka's "Seven Days of Falling" was "inspired by seeing the Esbjörn Svensson Trio."

If last year's volume included an abundance of elegiac poems describing humans as "voiceless," a number this year speak out, even if in subdued tones, for a sense of the "other," a broader sense of the globe, the creation of a postapocalyptic vision, for survival and acceptance of the human condition. Kimiko Hahn in "The Poetic Memoirs of Lady Daibu" uses her allusion to a "minor work of twelfth-century Japan" not only to increase our geographical and historical reach but also to expand our definition of love poems from "romance" to "love for family and friends" and "how we correspond with the past." The deprecatory humor of Barbara Hamby's "Lingo Sonnets" at times takes a positive and powerful turn: "Don't get me wrong. I'm / no miracle worker, but I know a thing or two about pulses, so / press the chest hard—the heart is buried deep." And Albert Goldbarth, whose waitress persona has commented, "we're left here / with the crusts, the rinds, the lees" and has asked, "But what *do* we want?" dramatizes an answer:

While her brain
revolves in blitzspace, one by one the plates
slip into the sudsy water, and out, and gleam
like the sign of a covenant, a functional peace,
that she's made with the one life she has.

Some of my favorite poems in the volume explore the simplest of themes with complex and rich "language bursts." In "Letter to the Past after Long Silence" Sarah Murphy says, "To be plain, / I miss you," but she says it so elegantly with echoes of the use by Hopkins and Thomas of Welsh *cynghanedd* that the simple statement achieves a tune bearing its own burden:

You know, it wasn't all hell, swelter,
swelling, trembling. . . .

Do I digress? I guess
I meant to say a blessing, pay a debt. . . .

In "Wildly Constant," Anne Carson echoes Murphy's simple elegance while praising, like Albert Goldbarth, "the one life she has." She weaves a narrative that remains mysterious, a detailed middle ground without much background: "Sky before dawn is blackish green." "The wind hits me / a punch in the face." "Ice on the sidewalk. / Nowhere to step." Where are we? Who is the "I"? A phrase repeats: "I should learn more about signs." Slowly both background and foreground become clear: the "I" is a woman who has honeymooned in Iceland and now lives there, in a place called Stykkishólmur, a name that does not resolve for this American reader any potential mysteries. The domestic narrative, however, eventually holds no major surprises, only quite ordinary marital tensions, including the "extreme monogamy" of "three months in one small room." The ordinariness, however, allows for Carson's fresh language to reveal the extraordinary within it:

Now it is dawn.
A golden eyelid opens
over the harbour.
. . . .
we rented a second place. . . .

Now we are happily
duogamous.
And to praise the quotidian:
To be having an adventure

is a sign of incompetence. . . .

I try to conjure in mind
something that is the opposite of incompetence.
For example the egg.

Finally we move with the narrator "to live in a library," but not one of books, for an artist has transformed the library in Stykkishólmur to contain instead pillars of glacier water, "another world," "An *other* competence, / wild and constant." From that wild constancy comes at times "a deeper gust of longing," a force that takes us, via Marcel Proust, back to the past, to overcoming

our sense that “*we no longer love our dead,*” to a moment when we can “*burst into tears.*” While remaining within the life of what Lucille Clifton would call “an ordinary woman,” Carson transports us, through Proust, through the Icelandic landscape, through the “perfect form” of breakfast eggs, to a remarkable moment “that comes up from the bottom / of the heart.”

More characteristic of Gerstler’s selection is the language of the prose poems that “have always intrigued” her. Some strike me as marvelous. Brigit Pegeen Kelly’s “Rome” begins, “I saw once, in a rose garden, a remarkable statue of the Roman she-wolf and her twins, a reproduction of an ancient statue.” By the middle of the poem Kelly is still writing prose, but the music and imagery have intensified: “Under her belly, stood the boys, under her black breasts, not babes, as one might expect, but two lean boys, cut from the same shadowed stone as the wolf, but disproportionately small, grown boys no bigger than starlings.” And by the end the prose has become poetry, the poet tightening the knot, bringing the work to a harsh, emotional, jarring, and effective end: “Beautiful, those boys among the roses. Beautiful, the black wolf. But it was the breasts that held the eye, a double row of four black breasts, eight smooth breasts, each narrowing to a strict point, piercing sharp, exactly the shape of the ivory tooth of the shark.” The ekphrastic mode remains intact, but the author has moved beyond observation to analysis, beyond analysis to critique, beyond critique to resonant commentary on not only Rome but also all empires, including our own.

Gerstler’s inclusion of numerous prose poems reflects our continuing search for appropriate poetic form. Following Whitman’s exploration of secular uses of biblical rhythms, poets at the beginning of the twentieth century were responding to four hundred years of increasing calcification of English metric: Pound investigating the concision of Chinese ideograms, Moore developing syllabics, Cummings utilizing typography, Williams attempting to capture ideas through things. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, formal experimentation seems to me more limited. Perhaps, as Frederick Jackson Turner asserted, the frontier closed. For the past sixty years poets have struggled to discover modes that either ideologically or musically meet their needs. In this volume such discoveries remain few. The past, however, has nearly disappeared. Where stanzas exist they

seem mostly artificial, created for visual effect rather than integral to the writing.

The fate of one form in this collection proves illustrative. The only immediately identifiable sonnets come from John Updike, whose commitment to metrical verse continued lifelong and is here reflected in three unrhymed tributes to acquaintances from his childhood. Barbara Hamby's cluster of "Lingo Sonnets," thirteen lines apiece, are part of a very ambitious formal project of twenty-six such poems, the sequence as a whole an abecedarian, with the lines of each poem forming another type of internal abecedarian, each line beginning with the letter following the last letter of the previous line and ending with the next letter in the sequence. The attitude toward form itself, however, emerges in her notes: "Although each poem has only thirteen lines, I decided to call them sonnets because in my heart of hearts I felt they were sonnets." Similarly, Dara Wier discusses her own creation of "sixty or so . . . sonnet-length poems," although the representative here shares little beyond its fourteen-line length with any traditional sonnet. The title seems a vade mecum for both the form and tradition in general: "Something for You Because You Have Been Gone."

One might ask what role form can play in our times. Amy Glynn Greacen, in her notes to "Namaskar," attempts an answer: "I've always found a natural *ars poetica* in the practice of yoga. In each, there's a common notion that formal contortions can be a path to insights you wouldn't reach in a more 'natural' posture. As hard as it can be to define art, most of us can probably agree that the heart of it is opportunity arising from constraint." Note that I am not making an argument for form. I do not "probably agree" with the argument Greacen proposes—essentially that restriction provides opportunity, that form helps create function and/or meaning. A connection *may* exist: Is it coincidence that of the handful of poems in this volume written in rhymed and metered stanzas a majority have as explicit topics traditional religious beliefs or practices? Yet one can argue the opposite. Unlike classical ballet, the art of modern dance as invented by Martha Graham and Merce Cunningham represents opportunity arising from liberation rather than from restraint.

To reject the argument of a connection between form and function

does not diminish the importance of craft. I personally grow tired of the equivalent of what Henry James, referring to late Victorian novels, called “loose and baggy monsters,” poems that because of their lack of craft go on too long with too little music. In this volume a third of the poems use loose verse paragraphs with no obvious formal structure and often without much to please or intrigue the ear. For me, the least effective of these is Eileen Myles’s “The Perfect Faceless Fish.” At *BPJ* editorial sessions we often note when we reject a submission that it contains a “suicide line,” one within the poem that describes its failings. Myles’s poem takes aim at its own foot:

[I] feel you have chosen
me for this conversation
before it’s cooked
before anything is prepared
anything at all

This unprepared fish is not sushi. It’s just raw fish.

Poets who claim form follows function may legitimately desire to reflect the structure of the universe through their formal choices, but in many cases the role of form remains the creation of music. And music can emerge from superficially loose forms. B. H. Fairchild, in his tribute to Marlon Brando and *On the Waterfront*, which he viewed first as a teenage movie theater usher, shows the great strength possible in what seems at first casual prose poetry:

Flashlight in hand, I stand just inside the door
in my starched white shirt, red jacket nailed shut
by six gold buttons, and a plastic black bow tie,
a sort of smaller movie screen reflecting back
the larger one.

The repetition of the short *a* in the first line, including the internal rhyme “hand” / “stand,” the string of *t* sounds in the second line (“shirt” / “white” / “shut”), and the return to *a* in the third with “plastic” / “black” all culminate in the “back” one line later that accentuates the “reflecting” that in itself identifies the poem’s theme: the retrospective glance. For the poet this glance provides the means for the “know thyself” that serves as both epigraph and conclusion. Near the poem’s end Fairchild, like Dickens in some of his most forceful prose, slips in *within* a longer line an iambic pentameter phrase that carries the music: “my botched translations of the Latin tongue.” He then exits with

further iambs in the key of long *i* and *e*: “and I have no idea what she means.” Fairchild’s *The Art of the Lathe* (Alice James, 1998) still strikes me as one of the strongest volumes of the past two decades, especially its long opening poem, “Beauty.” If “On the Waterfront” presents a smaller scale, a movement rather than a symphony, it still provides an opportunity to watch a skilled composer at work.

Composing in a different key, Thomas Sayers Ellis creates, in “Presidential Blackness,” one of the most powerful poems in the volume. It’s difficult even to call it a poem; Ellis originally submitted it to *Poetry* as a manifesto. Its virtues include “language bursts” more inventive than most poems in this volume contain: “as nuisance as nuance, sometimes some-timey and sometimes on-point,” “a new infinite alphabet pours from the pores of the poor.” The poem asserts its own music, “one that abolitions the flavor locked in foreign forms and second-hand technical devices.” Ellis remains aware of race without relying exclusively on race, desiring to “fragment the linearity of the contemporary literary, color line. A black body, trained-in-the-tradition, can express a complete thought in as many movements as it has limbs, broken and healed. . . . Our Negro Heroico is not one of Renaissance or Power or Cutting Edge or Hype or Post Anything. We did not arrive after us, not after Race not after Blackness.” And without any internal reference to Barack Obama, the poet suggests with his title the role the president of the United States plays in developing what Ellis calls “A Race Fearlessness Manifold Destiny.” The prose poem contains an implicit call to political action that includes but transcends race; Ellis makes that call explicit in his notes: “I also wanted to provide something of my own broken blueprint, a road map . . . of some of the repair-steps the aesthetic practice of Race Fearlessness might take. . . . We know it exists in ‘the streets’ (not Wall not Main) but it seems all too often . . . the craft of poetry . . . is taught in ways that hide or erase practices whose chief tool and line are not made in the mode of restraint. . . . Race Fearlessness is all about speaking when you write. Thinking is not enough for some of us. Some mouths must march.” Indeed we must. Ellis offers us a glimpse of one form that creates rich music while asking us to confront the urgencies of our time.