

BPJ

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A. Millager

artist statement: fragility of falsehood 5

Patrick Moran

Neanderthought 6

Bildungsromangst 7

Sarah Blackman

The Blue Key 8

Local Politics 11

Traci Brimhall

Come Trembling 13

The Orchard of Infinite Pears 14

Shuttle and Loom 15

Jacques J. Rancourt

Field 16

Gabriel Spera

Romas 18

Christopher Munde

Entomology of Exhaustion 19

What Was Gentle Has Turned Careful 20

Dan Murphy

A Sleepy Song 23

Daneen Wardrop

Mozart's Starling 24

Counterpoint 25

Lilah Hegnauer

Jam Funnel 26

Bread Knife 27

Richard Miles

The Second Time 28

Eduardo C. Corral

Variation on a Theme by José Montoya 32

CONTENTS

T. J. Jarrett

After Forty Days, Go Marry Again 38

BOOKS IN BRIEF, by John Rosenwald

Good Night: Anne Carson, *NOX* 39

COVER

Mary Greene, design

Ann Arbor, “Transport,” color digital photograph, Hangzhou, China, 2009



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 Daneen Wardrop (March), Christopher Munde (April), and Eduardo C. Corral (May).

A. MILLAGER

artist statement: fragility of falsehood

my vision for this series hinges on the postulate that fallacy—the unexpected momentary collapse of authenticating mechanisms—might actuate a disturbance of sorts, that the overarching perspective which customarily validates the relational aesthetic between the inventive impulse and the essence of realness, but which is so often diminished by the ‘thereness’ of geometric forms and their corresponding figure/ground relationships, would, rather than reflexively abdicating its hierarchical imperative to the mediated space, exploit the cross-referentiality between that intuitive realm from which the carnivorous self lays siege to legitimacy and the restrictive albeit reassuring body-politic of day-to-day understanding.

this incursion of graphite into pressed cellulose means to embody the eternal struggle between that which is overtly transparent and that which is eternally opaque. **t**he dry fuzz of obfuscation and clarity’s glittering razor set up an über-prophetic resonance whereby the underlying territory of energies (perceptive maxima of optimism and truth mingled with the visceral detritus of fear) implicates the chaotic embrace of self-actuation in the lingering tautology of extant maleficence. **t**his phenomenology of disappearance reflects an ontological nexus at exact odds with the preternatural impulse effecting the cartesian mind-body split. **a**s an artist who is concerned with beauty, it is my fervent intention to deconstruct this meta-spiritual fidelity to exact ideas, thus annihilating the mythology of linkages that grips our world in an ambivalent yet viselike embrace.

PATRICK MORAN

Neanderthought

Knuckle-pure & forehead-finished, spear-perfect & canine-wise, it wrestles with mammoth-peculiarities & flint-feelings. Unnumbered, its days amble stag-free across the cave-plains of Lascaux-like visions & Altamira-like ambiguities. She-wife tolerates & transposes & transcends he-husband's mud-mutterings & dirt-ditherings & finds love buried like the first & fragile shoots of ungathered & unlooked-for affections.

PATRICK MORAN
Bildungsromangst

Two cups of squalor & three heaping
teaspoons of overcast/oppressive village,
add several cases of undiagnosed child-
hood consumption with a dash of petty
larceny, stir over a low heat of human
indifference, cool with a blast of bitter
accusations & serve thick/black wedges
to starving artists on the eve of the only
war they will ever regret.

SARAH BLACKMAN

The Blue Key

One day, an assortment of people went walking by the window.

It was clear as the sea foaming crisp at the base of the white cliff, this was a procession.

I am a curious girl. I was born for obsessions.

Wiping my hands on my apron, I left the baking table strewn with flour, herbs, oiled bowls of rising dough.

The loaves murmured disapproval from dish-towel cloisters. On my apron were two white handprints, so I left it at the door.

I am a curious girl. My mother tipped me back and forth to watch my eyes slide open, shut.

The women in the procession wore their hair like sculpted seashells.

The men wore mitts as if to protect their hands from an anticipated heat.

I fell in toward the end of the line. We skirted the cliffs.

As a child, it took me a long time to recognize myself in the mirror. I was startled by how my teeth betrayed my skull.

Some people had sewn pouches into their shirts in which they carried their animal familiars.

A cat, a monkey, a bat sleeping with his wings folded like a steeple in front of his eyes.

I am a curious girl. My father bound my hands behind my back and tipped me into the shallows.

The mood of the crowd started to change.

Some women dabbed at their eyes with handkerchiefs pulled from their towering hairdos.

The men produced bouquets of kelp and sea grass from behind their backs.

Before me the procession parted. I craned my neck to see.

We were at the town square. The familiar cobbles, the yellow café, the hibiscus opening their tequila throats for inspection.

Someone had built a bandstand.

Someone had hung an archway with anthurium, each petal like a waxy plate waiting for the dessert.

My little kitchen seemed so far away. My baking table like a raft adrift and the sorrowing dough searching for a horizon.

Under the arch was a tower—a man, his beard like a hurricane, bells swinging from its cumulus. An orchid pinned to his vest.

I am a curious girl. My favorite brother put his fingers in my mouth and under my tongue left a ring and a key.

The crowd began to sway from foot to foot. The crowd began to clap.

The cat picked up a ukulele, the monkey a mandolin. The bat flew to a tympanum and patted a sleepy rhythm.

They made a music like water sluicing through sentinel rocks.

It took me so long to recognize myself in the mirror. By the time I looked again, it was too late.

The crowd pushed me to the front, many hands at the small of my back, under my skirt, feeling for purchase.

The bearded man took the ring from under my tongue and slipped it onto my finger.

I am a curious girl. My sisters went before me. Their dresses were mailed home, mended and neatly pressed.

All my loaves were lost at sea. They sank to the bottom, dish towels shadowing them like rays.

SARAH BLACKMAN

When a storm brews over the ocean, I recognize my face in the whipping
waves.

All that is left in my mouth is this key.

SARAH BLACKMAN

Local Politics

On the cover of a comic book, two girls bemoan their virginity.

“Hinkeys! Everyone else has found love!”
says the girl who is colored cappuccino. She’s the kind of cup
with chocolate shavings, a cap of foam
dipsy-doodling over the edge of the oversized artisan mug.
“Not everything is only a thing,” say her very tan arms and her breasts,
high and succulent.

Her friend is a peach frappe. There’s some ice
in that complexion, some granulation.

“Willikers!” she sorrows. “Do you think there’s something
wrong with us?”

The girls are on a bench. The girls have identical, improbable
bosoms—heaving—and identical legs.

The kind of legs you’d see drawn on anthropomorphized
salt shakers or oil cans. Legs just made for pumps
and garters. Let’s-Face-It legs, meant to be hyperextended.
The blue hollow of the tendon as the hip pops.

In the background, happy couples are staking out the bushes.
Everyone is hail fellow, well met. A jock with a jock,
nerds prisms the world through duo-lenses. Even the red-
headed boy—so pale, his freckles like liver spots
betraying a deeper unhealth—has paired up
with the sock in his pocket,
a picture of the oil can clipped from the coupon
circular and pinned to the inside of his shirt.

In a moment, there will be a tremendous dystopia.
The girls are about to be surrounded.

The world is a moist place, busy, undercurrented.
The world swirls algae in the shallows,
buries the small bones under layers of last year’s leaves.

But these girls are singular.
They go it alone on the bench, knee to knee,
wrists bent like royalty, love-lashed eyes (two blue,
two hazelnut-cream) swooning the horizon line.

SARAH BLACKMAN

Just off scene, someone is cocking
his arm for the punch. Someone else is pushing
her super-do—a Jackie-O, fresh hairspray beading
like rainbow spiderlets—a little lower, a little lower, almost there.

TRACI BRIMHALL

Come Trembling

In the country where believers eat the bodies
of the gods, we meet a priest who pulls a rope
of thorns through his tongue to make his mind

pure enough for a vision. He dances to music
we can't hear and waits to come trembling
into knowledge. We don't recognize ourselves

in his radiance, but we do in his suffering.
He passes through pain and into healing without seeing
the holy rendered visible. He tells us the oracle died

when she refused to divine the future,
but we find her tangled in her own hair wearing
a garland of feathers and burrs, manacled to the bed.

We ask for a better world to die in, but she says,
Submit to your freedom. We tie new knots in her hair
and celebrate the feast of the dead gods

and the festival of the living. We hold matches
to a bush, but it will not speak. Rumors say
the secret of life is sewn into a dead man's coat,

but when we unearth him, all we find in his sleeves
are his fractured arms. We want to believe,
to split open the myth and lie in it, return

to original dark and be changed, but the bones
won't yield to us, the gods remain so quiet
we hear water speaking between the stones.

TRACI BRIMHALL

The Orchard of Infinite Pears

On a mountain, we find monks who won't speak
because they cannot bear the way sound travels

and returns. They take us to their cave—genesis-dark
and deep as dream—and there we read their history

by the light of their bodies. The book says: *Myths
invent nothing*. And the book says: *We are all born again*.

And the monks point to a nova pulsing in the eastern sky
when they mean to say: *Creation is a sacred violence*.

When they learned they were ruled by time the way
the sea is ruled by the moon, they came to the wilderness

and buried the cold machinery of clocks, the arms
and wheels and chimes that signified their dying.

They grew an orchard of pears to escape the mysteries,
to take solace in the wonted work of sow and reap.

Here they could feel the heft of a harvest in their pockets,
count seeds and the fruit they bore, and record the measurable world.

But then they cut a pear in half, and halved it again, and again
halved it. They divided it by zero and have not stopped counting,

the trees slivered away by arithmetic. *What is zero,
but an elegy?* we ask. *We are afraid of everything*

we cannot touch, they write, notching bark with a number
that continues unsolved—ordinary and divine and forever.

TRACI BRIMHALL

Shuttle and Loom

It happened suddenly: the novice carried off
by a gentle madness as the other women sat weaving.
In the tapestry, angels played with their serpents.

Where once they embroidered hounds given a dead rabbit
to know the scent of the animal they hunted, women now
sewed a bomb to a man who measured its ticking

with quarter notes. It could save him if he sang it,
but he didn't want to survive the pain that made him.
The novice spun thread to reorder his stars.

She wanted flowers to take back the gods they birthed.
To paint over the walls muraled with unsolved mysteries.
She wanted to rescue a man from his sadness,

but she kept saving herself, kept seeking the paler loves,
waiting for a naked stranger to stroll through the courtyard,
his skin dappled by the night shadows of the persimmon trees.

She was stitching more minutes into the bomber's song
to deliver him from his fervor when the darker joy
found her, the wound and its ecstasy unfinished.

JACQUES J. RANCOURT

Field

In the field where I'm always returning,
in the jaundice, in the wheat, I am eight
and we're stomping stems with our running.
Hand that bears no mercy, I ask for none.
In the field where I spend the afternoon
in the Y-crook of a tree, I have been crying.
Mama Bird, hold me quietly. Our lawn is littered
by the gouged car's organs, Papa's oiled hands
that repair, the cigarette that weeps
on the motor. I'm expected to help
but under my skirt I hold secrets.
Hand that does not seek to understand,
here is my face. Here is the rest of me.
My sister and I are pretending in the wheat
we thought hid our childhood. We lie in its itch
long after we should. World of wonder,
world of fireflies and satellites,
the winking of those burnished wings,
the arcs grasshoppers make—early night
smells like wanting. Our world is small
and always shrinking. I take the skirt
from my sister and slip it on to feel
the swish of silk around my thighs.
I run through the field where I'm always
returning to feel its flag drag behind me.
My sister and I are just pretending:
you be the Mama Bird and I'll be the chick,
you be the hand that knows and I'll be
broken on the linoleum floor. Hand that gives
swift reply, answer me now. We sit in the sandbox
the cat thinks is litter. My sister makes me eat
every one—it is the nature of our play,
my obedience. In the distance, a windmill
sounds like declaration: we are, we are, we are.
While we pretend in a field that's more
like a stage, Diesel Papa has had enough
and the skirt is taken, my mouth left sour.
Hand of insurrection that resurrects the hem,
return my self to myself. I retake it
from the closet, hide myself in the field
that betrays while Papa's body is occupied

→

JACQUES J. RANCOURT

inside the cavity of a Chevy. The bluster dries,
makes sails of my skirt, and in the distance
the windmill sounds like heartbeats.

GABRIEL SPERA

Romas

“Kill these yellowjackets,” he says, gesturing to the winged shards of flint and gold converging on the edge of the folding table all but buckling beneath the weight of squat mason jars and stockpots brimming with parboiled tomatoes. He hand cranks the sieve that squeezes pulp into a bowl and sheds the rinds like a molting snake. His bare arms, like an army surgeon’s, are mucked to the elbows, the gray threads on his chest now stark and coarse against the backdrop of skin gone hazel in the unshirted hours spent tending the heat-breathing vines, staking, twining, pinching the rampant shoots. In one hand, he lifts a green sweating bottle to his lips, while the other readies a dishrag to smack a syndicate of insects vindictive as a frayed lamp wire. “Damn these wasps,” he says, flicking the dazed and dead with his slotted spoon. He tops off one more jar and screws the lid ring with a sound like tires on gravel far away, and holds it aloft to let the sunlight fuse through it, transform it to something molten, pulsing, like the heartflow of Vesuvius, or a blood-oil pressed from twenty suns to grease the engine of the day. “That’s gonna be good,” he says, gently nodding his satisfaction before setting it down with the ranks already marshaled on a bench. He drains his bottle, still sweating, and towels the bright gore from his hands. “Someday when I’m gone,” he says, like someone who understands at last the dry wisdom of advice he didn’t heed, “you’ll remember me with all these pots and jars, up to my chin in fresh tomatoes, swatting these damned yellowjackets like some kind of fool.”

CHRISTOPHER MUNDE
Entomology of Exhaustion

There's the work, and then
there's the dig, down through carbon-
brayed Manhattan, just to brush the dust
from the shingles of the old job
wherein the work lies waiting.

Someone's father feels a sure and certain
gestation here, beneath the caked waste
of the buildings' single clot, pulse
and flutter same as the wings
of any botfly, come to prick this minute

and fill it on up with larvae:
pain, obviously, but foremostly there's
accrual, with each sliver of time
passing into coin and piling up
in little anthills in his mind (one,

perhaps, for each birth, birthday, each one's
good grades, bad root canals, wedding
bills) (accrual in the lungs too, counting down
to days of gagging, nights in deep sleep
at the next job), little piles

to block up the processes, to stamp out
the synaptic network of antlife
before it can gnash roads wide enough
to traffic in the colossal, political
bunker buster of what happened here.

Someone's father must be only parts, like the beams,
like the limbs laced among beams below, only
a work boot steady on powdered stone, then
only fingers picking concrete
from only tear ducts, here a shovel driven askew

that he might hope is unlike the paralyzing work
of the expectant hornet, even less like the prey
rendered quiet and ever awake, that the heart may persist
for the housing and the feeding of the strange lives
sluiced inside him.

CHRISTOPHER MUNDE

What Was Gentle Has Turned Careful

[Surveying the quiet auditoriums
for effects left behind, my father
is alone at work tonight when he falls
unconscious falls straight down
the aisle stairs to wake standing

beside his daughter's bed at home.
It feels late and like winter it feels
electric and cold like the eve of every
holiday and he's home, his tie still tight
and the house quiet.]

The doctor tells him
to always seat himself
when the dizziness starts
and, unable to afford something better,
he does, and so the next time it comes

he passes right out in an auditorium chair
and dreams he's at someone else's job, bending
to adjust the spray of artificial rain
on three bodies lying
in grass.

[No eyes: Lids only. He tucks
his sleeping daughter in gently, so she stays asleep,
but then he notices the snoring: hers, and
his wife's, the family's breathing, the house
idling.]

He's a pathologist, he realizes,
at a body farm, and rises
from the water spigot, the measured weather
washing him for a second. He doesn't know
if this is how the other pathologists do it, but it's how
he does it.

CHRISTOPHER MUNDE

[Shirt, pants off. In the blue night
of his bedroom, he shakes his wallet onto the bed
and draws out the check from the Canal St. job, then
the cash from the one on West 4th and lays
it all on the nightstand beside his wife.]

The three
in the grass are the surrogates
for a family murdered and found in a park; the three
have only conceptual blood in common, blood-
shed in common. Even my father doesn't know what
they all actually died of.

[He feels
they're like dreams, his wife and daughter, though he is awake,
like this is a zoo for dreams. He knows all he believes about them
was programmed at the moment he entered their rooms:
his daughter had, somewhere, a fourteenth birthday,
his wife wanted the kitchen bigger, the bedroom different.]

He doesn't know if the woman below
really has a child out there, if the girl ever wore
anything like this blue jumper, if
the boy had ever pretended to be someone else,
to be killed, before. [Like seeing dreams

while awake, reasoning them
and the offering on the nightstand barely ruffled
by his wife's breathing. When he woke in two hours, they'd be gone,
dreamlike: daughter to school, for science he knew,
somehow, wife to work at the lab.] These discrepancies

don't register on the time of death, on the physical
matter of decomposition. Look, they look so
much softer today, a red tumble flung together
holding in rain; who wouldn't believe
they had struggled, and loved each other—

CHRISTOPHER MUNDE

He's letting them be now.

After he's placed
the careful marks he's careful
to fade back to body, auditorium,
the shapes still reclining in his eye—
it's their lids on his eyes—and branding the stage ahead.

He
watches. The processes

[take them.]

DAN MURPHY
A Sleepy Song

The windows all close up and she softens
a sedative with her tongue, then her eyes
blink. When she blinks she gathers the scattered
flowers. She stops gathering baby's breath and
lets fall the fat heads of hydrangea still fresh
from the sprinkler's hissing spray.

It does its
work; it works its mellifluous song—tongue
to throat—the odd integers dissolve.
The birds' closed bodies hunch in the trees.
And it is pleasant. They will not fly away.
It is pleasant to lie on this purple space between
breaths, between sleep and the next brush
with fame through death. The space between evening
and night.

A thousand magazine
articles, asterisks of snow. Dead skin. The water
must be cold beyond the sun. The water must be
cold before mixing with blood. When does
what's taken in become our own?

Something
was lost outside, something left. The water
must be cold even in sleep's monochrome,
even with logic unfolding, the dress billowing
over the water, over the quilt mother made.
She is not floating on the water. She is not imagining.
She is several.

DANEEN WARDROP

Mozart's Starling

Mozart selected a starling as a pet and musical companion. . . . One of his notebooks records a passage . . . as the starling revised it. The bird imitated it closely but changed the sharps to flats. "Das war schön"—That was beautiful!—reads the comment in Mozart's hand.

—Susan Milius, *Science News*

Sing a song

of sixpence, a POCKET FULL OF RYE
four and twenty ^{blackbirds} baked in a

skreek, and he comes home, clicky-key
rattle, ahem, "Guten Tag, Liebchen," he says to me,
and I say to him, guten click, tag, baked in a ^{PIE!}

He can pace and pace. Scratches at the music-twigs,
a tune—I know it!

"Schön, yes?" he says. "You copy me, Liebchen,"
and turns a page, crisps
a turning page.

"Ach! But now I'm copying you—Scheiss!—my ink writes in your tweedle,"

and takes from the stand the huge feather, leaky blue—
gritchy, whistles it
gritchy, I sway to it—
skreek, what a dish to ^{set} before a

—soft beak, he has to say pretty birdy, pwready boody,
and I teach the soft beak,

wasn't that a TASTY dish
to set before ^{the}—

He's got it. Nattering
gut sequence. He's ruffling.

But one note's sharp.

DANEEN WARDROP

Counterpoint

Animals are the originators of music and the true instructors. Humans probably learned music from animals, most likely from birds.

*—Temple Grandin, *Animals in Translation: Using the Mysteries of Autism to Decode Animal Behavior**

No way to thank them.

Bathe in finches

singing fugues with each other.

Tag! the child says,

passing on the touch

and the *it*.

Our timing as *it*. Robins

feed morning to a pinking sky— My

vertebrae, each,

tune to sound-slice then sound-slice.

This is how we stand.

—for Devan

LILAH HEGNAUER

Jam Funnel

Thinking you could even hold court in this belly. You
who do not exist: once it seemed the function of poetry

was to *mean*. It was to last and to be and to hold
a place for you. While I slept you stood in the kitchen

watching beans soak in the silver bowl.
These messy omens and symbols and how,

like Odysseus, we might get home after all.
Stiff filler, you were an epoch in

our bed. Thinking you could divide your cells
even now. I spared nothing for you.

LILAH HEGNAUER

Bread Knife

I want only your nerves in my endings.

And a hearth. Keep me

on the lookout for noon, unimaginably awkward and here.

If you have this streak of indigent loneliness, I don't know it.

If you have a motto, it's *plenty*.

If you were a woman, you would be

decked out in gaiters, up to your knees in the snow
too short for this life

and loving it. I was only ready for the
momentous embers.

Hello mousseline frost, and hassocks,

hello shuttered garden, rabbit warrens timorous
under the solstice field.

Here I am tending this fire in ignorance: all I know
is how to set it hissing.

RICHARD MILES

The Second Time

1

You awake
panther tracks around your head
cave entrance
black wick of burning candle

thing not yet language
approaches on the path

2

eight times through the crystal
a drop of water inside
the oldest on earth
turning in sunlight

below a mountain drying
and a single bird

the fourth time
you rounded up wild bees
rolled them into the yard like a hoop
for the dogs to leap through
climbed into the fur
of lawn

when you had bagsful of sand
you walked away
scattering the sand as a road

white bandage
wrapping your eyes

3

nights you fall
asleep on your eyes

they lift the cover
to find you
plant an oak
in your chest

RICHARD MILES

whatever words they stitch
to your thumbs or feet
do not find you

they must let
croon of summer frogs
condense on their brows in sleep
wipe you from their eyelids
in the morning

4

when you extend your hand
a window stops it
you hear apples rolling on the floor above

there is something over the doorway
that keeps you
from walking through

what's in the next room
you stare until it moves

go outside
stretch arms high in the night
toward sprays of stars
reaching back through cells
silence buoys the trance

you must hold
until there is something
to hold

5

your name
there in the wind

6

when the river widens and slows
anything might happen

bird alights on a treetop
freezes
its motion permanent and

rubbed off by a bee's foot

7

catch a big fish
toss it in a sack
haul it over the road

the ocean
ends in each hand
fish

crying take me home
between apple trees
across a stream
rain on glass door
mirrors their silver waters

curtain of steam
pond of faces

8

at first you thought it was the second time
you walked
between these white trees
in sight of signal sheep
wilting on the hillside

glowing mountains
more a gold mist
than land

RICHARD MILES

when did clouds mutter in breeze
like water-lapped scows
when did the banner of birds
split apart like a line of weeds on a beach

it must be the second time
because you know where to go

to rest and drink
earth smells come back

but nothing seems to know you
except the sheep

fixed in stone
their glance a footprint
on your face

EDUARDO C. CORRAL

Variation on a Theme by José Montoya

Hoy enterraron al Monchie.
El Mero Mero de Durango. Mister
No Contaron con Mi Astucia.

They found his body
afuera de Eloy,
debajo de un mesquite.

Hands tied,
a bullet to the cabeza.
Dicen que murió

por el polvo.
Tell los chismosos
he pushed a lawnmower

in Palo Alto.
Tell los chismosos
he flipped burgers

in Sacramento.
Tell los chismosos naco
but not narco.

■

and blackness ahead and when shall I reach
(the trumpet cries)
that somewhere
morning and keep on going
(the accordion moans)
and never turn back
and keep on going
(the trumpet wails)

■
 Agringado. Recién llegado. Eyes the color of garrapatas.
 Manos de trapo. Cell phone strapped like a pistola
 to his belt. His grito: *La revolución no nos hizo iguales.*
 The typos he found in menus.
 Girled cheese. Trench fries. Saturday night pachangas.
 Western Union
 patron. Drinking piss but dreaming of Patrón.
 "Al pie de un verde nopal yo me acosté/
 Al ruido de unas guitarras yo me dormí."
 Camisa negra. Gold necklaces. Dólar
 store cologne. La pinche migra at every pinche corner.
 The batteries
 for his radio. Los Yonics. Los Bukis. A small apartment. Six roommates.
 "Adiós paisanos queridos/Ya nos van a deportar."
 Prepaid
 phonecards. Flea market bicycles. Above his heart, an alacrán tattoo.
 Pocho words
 like pepper on his lengua. Hina. Pichear. With a marker he'd scrawl *Viva Colosio*
 on his apron. Agringado. Recién llegado.

■
 overturned rocks hoy
 water splashes on canal walls
 the whirl of helicopter blades me
 voy indigo-peaked mountains
 scorpionweed/puncture vine hoy



ruthless north star
sardine tins/plastic bags
morning several hours away by foot

old wagon trails/hiking paths
water stations
hoy
infrared sensors/sound detectors
me
voy

■
Near Douglas,
on a gabacho's rancho,
he found
a scarecrow
decked out
in the uniform of
a border agent.
Using blood
and papel
he made a note
that he hung
around its neck
that read: *Pancho*
Was Here.

■
Qué chido his chistes. Qué
chido his tocayo. Qué
chido his peso-colored balas. Qué
chido his mandas. Qué
chido his snakeskin botas. Qué
chido his guitarra. Qué
chido his rolas. Qué
chido his Chalino t-shirts. Qué
chido his botellas. Qué
chido his lust for tetas. Qué

→

chido his puros. Qué
chido his carcajadas. Qué
chido his golfas. Qué
chido his reloj de plata. Qué
chido his groserías. Qué
chido his copitas de mezcal. Qué
chido his billetes. Qué
chido his puñetadas. Qué
chido his bigote. Qué
chido his cuerno de chivo. Qué
chido his piropos. Qué
chido his tarjetas telefónicas. Qué
chido his pachangas. Qué
chido his antojos. Qué
chido his pasitos Duranguense. Qué
chido his gallos. Qué
chido his rompecabezas. Qué
chido his grito.

■

Marooned in salmon-
morning colored sand, surrounded
and keep on going by desert marigolds
and never turn back and sotol, a rusty '68 Impala:
and blackness a wetback's motel.
ahead
The sun rising
in the rearview mirror. Bucket
morning
seats torn out. In the trunk, on a pile
and keep on going of tattered jackets,
and never turn back an acoustic guitar
and blackness
like a mischievous girl lifting

→

ahead

her dress.

■

Hoy enterraron al Monchie.
El Mero Mero de Durango. Mister
No Contaron con Mi Astucia.

His brothers
carried his black caja
through las calles
of Orizaba.

They dressed him
in a Dodgers jersey,
necklaces de oro,
snakeskin botas.

Before digging
under a mulberry,
his cuates poured
caguamas

on the ground
to loosen the earth.
His caja was lowered slowly
into the dark.

Instead of dirt
his jefe tossed
a fistful of silver bullets
on the caja.

■

porque no quiero olvidar me voy me voy

(the trumpet cries)

a Los Angeles porque no quiero olvidar

me voy a Los Angeles me voy

(the accordion moans)

a Los Angeles porque no quiero olvidar

mi México

(the trumpet wails)

Notes

“El Louie” is José Montoya’s most famous poem. An elegy for a pachuco and Korean War veteran who lived in Central California, it is noted for seamlessly weaving English, Spanish, and caló into an unvarnished portrait of a man battling addiction and assimilation.

This poem borrows lines from Robert Hayden’s “Runagate Runagate” and lyrics from two corridos (border songs), “El Crudo” and “El Deportado.”

T. J. JARRETT

After Forty Days, Go Marry Again

—for Vova Tumayev

Beslan School No. 1, September 1, 2004

She was only just here. That's her,
that's her in the red dress, that's
her, too, fists full of balloons as if
she would fly away. That's her at the
bottom of the hill. She ran as fast as she
could toward the top, arms wide,
cheeks flushed. She reached me
breathless and toppled both of us.
That's her, and her again,
her black hair in pigtails held
in yellow ball-stay barrettes.
Girls of that age are particular about
such things. I sleep in her room
some nights with all the lights on,
everything as she left it.

There she is in Rostov, there she is
and there she is and there she is.
There she is: bits of black hair
and the earrings. They say: *Maybe
that's not her.* Look. There.
The ball-stay barrettes. Yellow,
flowers stretched around. There she
is at Christmas. There she is that
summer she grew three inches. They say:
After forty days, go marry again. But
there she is, and there she is again with
her friend from class. That girl is dead too.
There she is at the carnival. There she is
with her mother, her fists
clenched on the balloons. There
she is at the door, lunchbox in one hand,
waving with the other. At night,
I pretend to sleep; there she is
standing over me as if there are words
left to say. There she is. There
she is in the dark.

JOHN ROSENWALD

Books in Brief: Good Night

Anne Carson, *NOX* (New York: New Directions, 2010), unpaginated, \$29.95.

Christmas, 2010: the final days of the first decade of the new millennium. One present remains. Given its size and shape, almost certainly a book. A thick one. A first touch seems to confirm that suspicion: three of four edges protrude slightly, suggesting a hardbound volume.

Wrapping paper removed, the object retains book characteristics. A spine: ANNE CARSON NOX NEW DIRECTIONS, with the iconic horse and rider of that publishing house. An attempt to duplicate in light gray paper a linen quarter-binding. A front cover: ANNE CARSON again and underneath the name a boy in goggles and bathing suit, his slim photograph superimposed on a jagged stripe of yellow. Dark gray boards meeting the faux linen, though all is high-quality paper, the seam an illusion. A back cover with a note from Carson, printed in white ink: **WHEN MY BROTHER DIED I MADE AN EPITAPH FOR HIM IN THE FORM OF A BOOK. THIS IS A REPLICA OF IT, AS CLOSE AS WE COULD GET.**

But it's not a book. It's a box. Precisely crafted from heavy cardboard, it opens easily. Inside lies another cover: same photo, same yellow stripe, but no name. This sheet lifts left to a traditional title page, followed by an accordion-fold stack of paper two inches thick. Weighty.

What is a book? Carson implies. And how does *this* replicate *that*? Past the title and copyright information arrives another challenge: a sheet with six iterations of "Michael" scrawled in cursive, covering the paper from top to bottom with pen strokes becoming increasingly thick as the eye moves down the page, the last one smudged slightly in the lower left corner, as if a fingerprint left in haste or anger. In the middle of the sheet, superimposed on the six signatures, dimming but not obliterating the handwriting, printed on what seems a slender strip of paper glued in a position similar to the previous photo and yellow stripe, lie three words:

NOX

FRATER

NOX

Night, brother, night. That much high-school Latin remains. Flip the fold and the unexpected continues: the left side of the next sheet reveals a ghost of the cursive “Michael,” though it can’t be authentic, since the actual back side remains blank. The right side gives the illusion of another piece of paper, this time a small sheet—faint yellow, slightly wrinkled—pasted two-thirds down the page. On this scrap occurs the first artifact that might open a conventional book of poetry—ten lines of italic printing in a serif font, every other line indented, with what might be a title printed at the top: “CI.” To be sure, the “poem” is not in English, but by now, who would expect it to be? It looks again like Latin, and like a poem. The printing, however, is blurred slightly, rendering some words almost illegible. Still, it’s a start:

Multas per gentes et multa per aequora vectus

My Latin stopped with Vergil, so I flip the accordion page rather than struggle with what has been offered. More surprises. On the left side, the word *multas* as title, followed by what appears a dictionary entry: identification as adjective, relationship to a Greek cognate, numerous examples of appropriate usage, ending with “*multa nox*: late in the night, perhaps too late.” As on previous folds the entry appears to be printed on a wrinkled smaller piece of paper and then pasted onto the accordion-fold sheet. On the right side another pasted scrap, now printed in a plain sans-serif font, headed by a simple “1.0” and for the first time what seems a recognizable text in English:

I wanted to fill my elegy with light of all kinds. But death makes us stingy. . . . No matter how I try to evoke the starry lad he was, it remains a plain, odd history. So I began to think about history.

Flip the accordion page, again an apparent non-sequitur. No thoughts about history, no immediate attempt at elegy, no words. Instead a photograph: dark, again with the illusion of being pasted to the sheet, showing curtains split open to reveal a fuzzy outdoor scene, and below them, inside, heavily shadowed, what looks like a young boy sitting in front of someone older—a man, perhaps, but scarcely clear.

■

Thus begins Anne Carson’s courageous new work. Courageous in that she confronts the aesthetic assumptions and limitations that have dominated the past twenty-five centuries of Western

culture. Implicitly she asks her audience to reconceive the notion of verbal art. In *NOX* she addresses questions that have concerned her since her earliest publications. By introducing formal changes, she creates thematic shifts that enable her to treat compellingly emotional material usually absent from her work.

How does this happen? Let's look back. In *Eros the Bittersweet* (1986, 1998) Carson investigated the shift in seventh-century BCE Greek literature from a poetry heard to a poetry read, and theorized the relationship between oral and written cultures. This shift results from what she called "an accident of technology," the adoption of an alphabetic language. She claimed the Greeks subsequently entered a period of "contraction and focus" whereby individuals moved from "complete openness to the environment" to "individual self control":

As an individual reads and writes he gradually learns to close or inhibit the input of his senses, to inhibit or control the responses of his body, so as to train energy and thought upon the written words. He resists the environment outside him by distinguishing and controlling the one inside him. . . . The poets record this struggle from within a consciousness—perhaps new in the world—of the body as a unity of limbs, senses and self, amazed at its own vulnerability.

In a chapter of *Eros* called "Folded Meanings" Carson explores effects of the alphabetic innovation. "From the time of its earliest use the technique of writing and reading was appreciated by the ancients as an apparatus of privacy or secrecy. All communication is to some extent public in a society without writing." "Words that are written . . . may fold away and disappear. Only the spoken word is not sealed, folded, occult or undemocratic. . . . The written word fixes living things in time and space, giving them the appearance of animation although they are abstracted from life and incapable of change. . . . As communication, such a text is a dead letter."

In the face of what Carson regards as an inevitable tendency toward privacy created by the shift to written texts, one role of poets remains to "take seriously their own function of counterbalancing private emotion with communal reasoning," operating as a "hinge" between public and private worlds. Carson discusses this role at length in her comments on the Greek Simonides,

whom she identifies as the first “paid” poet, one who understood early and fully the implications of the transference of the spoken poem to the page, and even more lucratively to the tombstone. In her *Economy of the Unlost* (1999), she compares Simonides to the twentieth-century European poet Paul Celan, whose exploration of the relationship between speaking his native Romanian, writing in German, living in France, and confronting World War II and the Holocaust provoked him to create a poetry as transformative as that of his Greek predecessor.

Significantly for Carson, both Simonides and Celan did not work in traditional forms but created instead “indeterminate genres.” To some extent, Carson has for years done the same, moving across time zones in her juxtaposition of Simonides and Celan in *Economy of the Unlost* or of Herakles and Clint Eastwood in *Autobiography of Red* (1998); crafting that entire work as a “novel in verse”; creating in *The Beauty of the Husband* (2001) “a fictional essay in 29 tangos”; mingling translations, essays, conventionally shaped poems, and opera in *Decreations* (2005), her most recent book before *NOX*. As Joyelle McSweeney stated in her comments on that volume in the *Boston Review*, “Anne Carson is a mental pentathlete.”

Many critics besides McSweeney have heaped accolades on Carson. Michael Ondaatje calls her “the most exciting poet writing in English today.” The *Village Voice* called her book of poems *Men in the Off Hours* (2000) a “breathtaking . . . work of gorgeous innovation.” Many stress this novelty, but even a quick glance at those items presented in her volumes as poetry reveals only minimal formal exploration of the poem as visual text. Her prose has challenged and interested me more than her poetry, her “indeterminate genres” more than her verse.

■

In *Autobiography of Red*, *Men in the Off Hours*, and *Decreation*, Carson explores visual poetic space in various ways—alternating short and long lines neither obviously metrical nor syllabic, lines of decreasing length, center-justified verses—but most of the poems look like the majority of twentieth-century poetry: words in a single font, mostly in English, printed sequentially on paginated paper. One major exception is the autobiographical comment on the death of her mother that ends *Men in the Off*

Hours, an anticipatory piece both in its personal subject matter and in its discovery and praise of the crossouts in Virginia Woolf's writing: "It may be I'll never again think of sentences unshadowed in this way. It has changed me." More typical, from *Decreation*, is the opening section of "Nothing For It":

Your glassy wind breaks on a shoutless shore and stirs around
the rose.
Lo how
before a great snow,
before the gliding emptiness of the night coming upon us,
our lanterns throw
shapes of old companions
and
a cold pause after.

Here Carson uses traditional rhetorical structures, assonance for example, thereby producing fairly conventional music. In *Decreation* she also includes an ekphrastic poem along with its source photograph, "Seated Figure with Red Angle (1988) by Betty Goodwin," and explores its vision in the key of anaphora, each line beginning with a conditional "If." Like the comment on her mother's death, this work perhaps prepares for what will follow in *NOX*, but in general Carson's earlier poems represent formally for me mere spatial manipulations of words on a page; they do not visually require the reader to question fundamentally the nature of literature, of semiotic structures, of communication.

■
NOX changes all that, asks precisely those questions. And answers them as well. Ursula Le Guin, in her essay "Reciprocity of Prose and Poetry," suggests that all texts are translations, implying some Platonic existence of experience only secondarily captured in words. In *NOX* Carson interrogates the concept of poetry, again from the standpoint of a technological revolution, but this time neither the alphabetic transformation Simonides and his contemporaries confronted, nor the moveable type press in the print shops of Gutenberg and others, but one much more diverse. Texts on the page, Carson demonstrates, no longer inhabit a strictly alphabetic culture. Poets in the exquisite corpse tradition, or even e. e. cummings, might argue they transcended simple printing at the beginning of the twentieth century, but digital electronic technology enables Carson and her publisher

to produce visual effects unimaginable a century earlier. Photographs, scraps of paper scrawled with messages, collages, ribbons, paint, postage stamps, staples, marks etched on a second sheet by a pen pressing on the one above, dictionary entries, the list goes on and on. Perhaps in the “form of a book” mentioned on the back of the “NOX box,” these different elements were real—actual staples, scraps of paper, ribbons—and are now “replicated” in facsimile by photographic reproduction. Or perhaps in what Le Guin calls “the other text, the original,” they may have had no physical existence at all. In the text offered by New Directions, however, technology has made possible this trompe l’oeil effect, the illusion that what we hold is a compilation of numerous artifacts, all of them combining to make the “poem.” And the illusion is impressive: the crossouts, the smears, the wrinkled paper “stapled” to the sheet below with a photographic reproduction of the bent staple ends on what looks like the reverse side of the same sheet. But the illusion is scarcely the point. For Carson, reading words on a page folded carefully into a container is not enough. She demands that her audience no longer focus *in* but *out*, become again aware of all that is around us, not private but public, globally public, both spatially and temporally.

One implication of this shift becomes a return to “communal reasoning” and an implicit reduction in “private emotion.” In the past Carson has consistently attempted to minimize the personal and private dimension of her writing, or at least the autobiographical element of her poetry and scholarship. In her “Note on Method” that introduces *Economy of the Unlost*, she begins, “There is too much self in my writing. . . . My training and trainers opposed subjectivity strongly, I have struggled since the beginning to drive my thought out into the landscape of science and fact.” Twenty years later, in the middle of “Stanzas, Sexes, Seductions,” a poem that may or may not be autobiographical, the speaker asserts, “My personal poetry is a failure.” Most publicly, Carson attempts to reduce the significance of biographical detail in the minimalist “author notes” that grace the jacket of many of her books: “Anne Carson lives in Canada.” Any reader of the *BPJ* should anticipate our appreciation for deemphasizing the contemporary authorial cult of personality. In her essay on Simone Weil, Carson ironically outlines one current model: “To be a writer is to construct a big, loud, shiny centre of self from

which the writing is given voice and any claim to be intent on annihilating this self while still continuing to write and give voice to writing must involve the writer in some important acts of subterfuge or contradiction.”



Given this reticence, how could Carson approach the material that lies at the core of *NOX*, for that material is extremely personal. It is stunning that “Spring Break,” the poem in *Decreation* that follows “Stanzas, Sexes, Seductions,” treats directly those family relationships about which on the surface she so rarely writes. Even here, however, Carson interrupts each narrative line with a lyric “swallow song,” and ends with a thrice-repeated and inconclusive “open up or I” that leads to a final mundane and opaque comment by the mother: “Fish sticks for supper? she said to no one in particular.” Although the poem seems autobiographical, as “personal poetry” it is a “failure,” except insofar as it maintains the distancing, the refusing to reveal, that characterizes most of her early poems.

How could she? The answer, of course, lies right here on the table. In this box. This *NOX* box. Revelatory yet disguised. Direct yet oblique. One of Carson’s favorite words is *paradox*. The use of technology to refute conventional concepts of “a book of poetry” directs the reader into a poetry that embraces convention even while rejecting it. The box, the photo, lead us to a Latin poem of Catullus, his poem mourning the loss of his brother, allowing that text to begin to carry the burden of Carson’s own loss.

So now I, like Carson earlier, want “to think about history.” I have to. She makes me. Her basic historical method is comparative, asking us to place the death of her brother in the context of other deaths, other comments on death, other past perspectives of the relationship between living and dying. And because I have finished reading *NOX*, because I’m approaching the end of this review, I want to work backward as I glance at the ways in which Carson uses history to shape this poem and our response to it.

In her final historical comparison she writes, “More than one person has pointed out to me a likeness between my brother and Lazarus. . . . an example of resurrection or . . . a person who had to die twice.” For Carson the parallel relies on Lazarus being,

much like her brother in their relationship, “mute.” And there is “no possibility I can think my way into his muteness.” Earlier there is the parallel with Catullus, accentuated by the “vocabulary lessons,” which (I slowly realized) form a sequence of all the words in the Roman poet’s elegy, numbered “CI” or 101. Earlier still, both in the poem and in time, comes Herodotos, who both concludes the poem and initiates Carson’s exploration, for it is he “who trains you as you read,” who initiates the “process of asking, searching, collecting, doubting, striving, testing, blaming and above all standing amazed at the strange things humans do . . . including by far the strangest thing . . . history.” First, however, comes the prehistorian Hekataios. Carrying an egg containing his father, he mythically flies to Egypt, perhaps coming “to see the immensity of the mechanism in which he is caught, the immense fragility of his own flying.” This realization of the complexity, the paradox of time and history, of *asking* (the function of historians) guides Carson through her quest.



So why is this poetry?

Carson is erudite. In her prose she can quote Lacan or Derrida in such a way as to make pertinent Abby Millager’s parody of contemporary theory that opens this issue of the *BPJ*. Yet though the concept of *NOX* remains complex, the actual language is not. *NOX* is poetry because Carson’s observations on “blush,” “ashes,” “entry” become mini-poems in their own right, lexicographical equivalents of Williams’s treatment of a cat or a red wheelbarrow.

Poetry because some visual images work as well as words, become part of the poetry in the same way Kenneth Patchen’s drawings become part of his “picture poems.” A photo of an empty swing, of a landscape overcome by the shadow of the photographer. At the middle of the accordion occur two ovals, painted the same yellow as the stripe on the cover. On the next fold Carson notes, “both my parents were laid out in their coffins (years apart, accidentally) in bright yellow sweaters. They looked like beautiful peaceful egg yolks.” This image takes her back to Hekataios and his egg. And then to Herodotos and his “explanation of the old wise saying *Custom is king of all*,” his relativistic comment on diverse customs—shall we eat our dead parents or burn them and reduce them to ashes?

Poetry because it is memorable, “news that stays news” as Pound insisted. As the narrative develops, the language itself becomes increasingly epigrammatic:

Over the years of working at it, I came to think of translating
as a room, not exactly an unknown room, where one gropes
for the light switch. . . .

Human words have no main switch. . . .

But all those little kidnaps in the dark. . . .

No one makes a funeral with wailing. . . .

Just like him I was a negotiator with night. . . .

Poetry finally because of her skill with narrative. Reviewing *The Best American Poetry, 2010* for the Winter 2010/2011 issue of the *BPJ*, I turned as my final task to Carson’s “Wildly Constant,” which had attracted me through its slow revelation of a complex and fascinating story. In *NOX*, times ten. Here the narrative contains not only details from Michael’s life, deliberately taking their place against the scrim of the family and its history, but also the sequential recognition of the role of Herodotos, Catullus, and Lazarus within his story, within this history. Herodotos teaches us to read; Carson shows us how to write.

In *NOX* Carson weaves a tale of her brother, the circumstances of his dying, their mother, their complex family relationships, the girl Anna he loved who also died, his widow, his travels, the funeral, his infrequent communications to mother and sister, the parallels between Anne Carson’s situation and that of Catullus traveling to visit his own brother’s tomb and between her attempt to capture that experience and the Roman poet’s attempt to do the same. The intensity of her search, her desire to know and understand, compel both our attention and our emotional involvement. And yet Carson remains diffident: “Nothing in English can capture the passionate, slow surface of a Roman elegy.” She can only “prowl” her brother, achieving at best “those little kidnaps in the dark.” She returns to Herodotos, in the voice of the historian: “I have to say what is said. I don’t have to believe it myself.” Two folds later we see again the scrawl of Michael’s cursive and his signature, but the scrawl, though clear, is almost illegible, “at once concrete and indecipherable,” as she says earlier. Is it “love you, love you” as he signs off at last or “have you, have you” in reference to Herodotos’ statement

on belief? The final vocabulary entry, for *vale*, concludes with “the Greeks have no precise word for this (but we call it ‘night’).” Which returns us to the title, *NOX*. Beneath the pasted quote from the Greek historian appears a photo of an empty staircase, an image that recurs at least half a dozen times, leading to the final English words in the text: “*He refuses, he is in the stairwell, he disappears.*” As the box empties itself of sheets, we move to no resolution. One last photo, fuzzy, of what seems to be an empty swing. And the famous conclusion of Catullus’ poem, *ave atque vale*, receives almost no commentary, while the final sheet of the accordion reproduces a portion of his elegy, in translation, but blurred.

Not that conventional contemporary poetry might or must or should disappear, but that some circumstances transcend convention and demand different formal solutions to aesthetic problems. *NOX* is erudite, complex, demanding—perhaps not for everyone, but for me immensely stimulating as well as moving. As I write, it has become the new year; we begin the second decade of the twenty-first century. Anne Carson at least, though looking backward, is moving forward. Like its folded pages, *NOX* both remains private and becomes public, creating the bridge, the hinge, the urn in which we turn the pages of Michael’s ashes and our own. This box, holding both ash and egg, lies before me, unfolding.