

BPJ

BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL VOL. 64 N°3 SPRING 2014

**Editors**

John Rosenwald, Lee Sharkey

**Editorial Board**

Christian Barter, Melissa Crowe, Rachel Contreni Flynn,  
Juliette Guilmette, Leonore Hildebrandt, John Rosenwald, Lee Sharkey

**Editors for this Issue**

Christian Barter, Melissa Crowe, Rachel Contreni Flynn, Juliette  
Guilmette, Leonore Hildebrandt, Leah Kuehn, John Rosenwald, Lee Sharkey

**Supporting Staff**

Ann Arbor, Al Bersbach, Karen Hellekson

**Web Manager**

Lee Sharkey

**Subscriptions**

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

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

Add for annual postage to Canada, \$10; elsewhere outside the USA, \$15.

Discount rates available for classroom adoption.

**Submissions**

may be sent at any time, via Submission Manager on our website or by  
postal mail with a self-addressed stamped envelope.

**Retail Distributor**

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

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

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

Copyright 2014 by The Beloit Poetry Journal Foundation, Inc.  
ISSN: 0005-8661

Printed by Franklin Printing, Farmington, Maine

**BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL**  
**Spring 2014, Vol. 64 N°3**

**Temple Cone**

Sloth 5

**Alexander Booth**

Ianua 6

Alba 7

**M. P. Ritger**

Evergreen Cemetery, 1990 8

**John F. Deane**

An Elegy 10

**Jamie Ross**

Trousseau 11

**Elizabeth T. Gray, Jr.**

Kanpur Central Railway Station 12

Wearing Thin 13

Sunday Morning 14

Had She 15

**Leeya Mehta**

The Abduction 16

**Kevin Heaton**

Mississippi Crossing 19

**Gary Fincke**

Fraternity Brothers, 1970 20

**Scott Beal**

The Dream of the Foam Toy Sword 22

The Academy 23

**Nate Marshall**

Chicago high school love letters 24

**Karen McPherson**

What It Takes 26

**William L. Ramsey**

Running Late in Yuyao 27

## CONTENTS

|                                                         |    |
|---------------------------------------------------------|----|
| <b>Allison Funk</b>                                     |    |
| Metamorphoses                                           | 28 |
| <b>Johan Huybrechts</b>                                 |    |
| The Visit                                               | 36 |
| <b>Scott Withiam</b>                                    |    |
| Audit                                                   | 38 |
| Wedding Reception at the Aquarium                       | 39 |
| <b>Christopher Robley</b>                               |    |
| Yip                                                     | 40 |
| <b>BOOKS IN BRIEF, by John Rosenwald</b>                |    |
| <b>Negative Capability: A Cure for the “I” Disease?</b> |    |
| Nicelle Davis, <i>Becoming Judas</i>                    | 42 |
| TJ Jarrett, <i>Ain’t No Grave</i>                       | 44 |
| Brian Komei Dempster, <i>Topaz</i>                      | 46 |
| <b>COVER</b>                                            |    |
| <b>Mary Greene</b> , design                             |    |
| <b>Lee Sharkey</b> , “Raven Elegy,” photograph, 2013    |    |

### **POET’S FORUM (blog.bpj.org)**

The participating poets for this issue are Kevin Heaton (March), Nate Marshall (April), and Leeya Mehta (May).



An arrow at the bottom of a page indicates the stanza does not break.

## TEMPLE CONE

### Sloth

When, and if, we think of you,  
it's like staring through humid haze  
at the souls in some distant circle  
of hell, perhaps, or heaven,  
though it's hard to tell  
with us here  
down below,  
where things get done  
to us faster  
than heart can feel  
or mind master,  
where things get done  
to us, where things get done.

**ALEXANDER BOOTH**

**Ianua**

Dust in hand in sun  
The shadows said *you should not*  
Or *visit only*

Now & again

But how resist this land, its rust-

Hued rests of ruin, red paper wisps  
Of poppy The present here

Is always past, a chiaro-

Scuro flicker distant branches

Down through the layers

Below the basilica, in the green dark

A sound of water

The most natural thing

I turned you were not yet gone

**ALEXANDER BOOTH**

**Alba**

Within now speech-  
Lessness, we, as

Without I listened  
For your still, small voice

The seasons turned

Again, & then  
Ear-empty, mouth-dumb

Within, as without  
Felt what had been

Unwoven          unfound

**M. P. RITGER**  
**Evergreen Cemetery, 1990**

Now that I am  
free from all I love  
    the black scaffold  
of the bare  
magnolia still  
    standing at  
the lip of

spring when sex  
    will gather  
and furl  
on its limbs  
    like dust  
on shelves I see  
the full

    bloom slum  
coming and  
the tramp stamp  
    sunlight of  
summer muscling  
the alabaster  
    blossoms off

in a wind  
shaken off  
    as a dog  
flings water  
from fur  
    wrung water  
blossoms flung

earthward  
    garden-  
ward white  
wax petals  
    drifting in  
the grass as  
snow is now

M. P. RITGER

like chips at a  
sculptor's feet  
now even  
    in the green  
deaf of leaf  
I hear  
    the bare tree's

disappearance  
reappear  
    for me  
winter stricken  
ribs throb  
    through the earth's  
green dress

and reflect  
    in the dun  
sheen  
of the meltwater  
    pond now  
that I am  
free from

    all I love

**JOHN F. DEANE**

**An Elegy**

Flora in the roadside ditch  
are boasting the watercolor purple of a pride of bishops—  
vetch, knapweed, clover, and the rosebay willow herb;  
and I would make a poem

the way old Bruckner caught a flight of pelicans in his  
*Ecce sacerdos magnus* . . .  
for eight-part choir, key magenta, though these times the spirit  
slumps, mal-tended in this limping country. Now

a blackcap, fast and furtive, comes to feast on the white berries  
of the dogwood hedge; bullfinches,  
secretive, subdued, flit in a shock of rose-petal black and white  
across the alder thicket

and I am urged to praise, willing to have the poem  
speak the improbable wonderful. Today  
the poet Seamus Heaney said he was leaving us for a while,  
visiting, with Moses, high mountain pastures

for he has been slewed by grief for the misery of the people.  
As gift and punishment  
he glimpsed the heels of YHWH, will come down to tell of it;  
*What name, he said, shall I give them, should they ask?*

*District and Circle*, came the call, or *Seeing Things*. Now I  
have been high on Slievemore heathlands; I heard that piercing  
whistle, peremptory and off-key, I watched  
the sheepdog low-crouched, eager, willing to spring; the furze blazed

with a cool gold flame; blithering sheep  
were marked with blobs of red and purple dye, cumbered  
with knobs of dried-in mud; what name shall I  
give to the people, should they ask? Milady Hare, who waits,

rump high, brooding in a patch of sorrel?  
Or Crested Grebe, perhaps,  
elegant on the waters in brown Connemara tweed? The name then—Seamus,  
abundance, lover, the promise and the death.

**JAMIE ROSS**

**Trousseau**

The thread has no reason. It is older than its fabric. Perhaps the bacon was burnt or the juice artificial, the bread more stale, the hotel's prices hiked, as they are each year. And now the lights, with only you at a table, turned off. This is not your problem. Chabelita at her stove, Pilar feeding the staff, Andrés washing dishes, everyone is cheerful. They take their time. As you will soon. The city knows despair as the land knows deception. So too you, the longer you stay. Once you wed, the bride removes her make-up, puts aside her veil, unbolts her silver dress. Posada de Las Monjas affords no new linen. No children run the *calle*s to the baker at dawn. You have not been deceived. What is familiar becomes more and more revealed. The old trees rot and fall in the streets, the new vines shoot up. The church bells, each hour still clang over the roofs. The anger is not yours. It seeps in the wells and sewers, brick, stone, and mud. It was long before you. And will last long after. There is something, child, you need to take off.

**ELIZABETH T. GRAY, JR.**  
**Kanpur Central Railway Station**

Halfway through our time there it was late  
and we were changing trains at Kanpur  
when we lost Leo who'd been with us ever since.  
It was not even that crowded when we got back  
with tea and sweets. He'd been watching the bags which were  
where we'd left them but he was not.  
It was late. Each of us, it turned out,  
was suddenly missing something—*Veda*, pen, pot, scarf,  
beads—that seemed, when it went missing, trivial  
but became, over time, of vast importance  
the way Leo went from quiet guy to lost guide late at night  
on the platform in Kanpur when we were changing trains.  
What had seemed reliable and in place, what we had come to know,  
what, despite being so bizarre as to be beyond imagining when we set out,  
had become familiar, and this, that had become familiar, turned on us,  
on us and not away from us, and Leo was the first to go.  
It began with Leo.

**ELIZABETH T. GRAY, JR.**

**Wearing Thin**

Even James had had it with shrines.  
If he had to take off those shoes one more time  
there would be, he averred, more than just three hells to pay  
so we checked into a high-end hotel:  
yes absolutely you are from where.  
Two Japanese kept taking photos of Shiva's  
mossy *lingam* in the lobby without  
first offering the requisite marigolds,  
doubtless the blunt stump took notice  
and the road back to Kyushu would be strewn  
with untended consequences. Nadia  
ripped off bits of her gray scarf and wrote out  
prayers for something (we were tired of asking)  
and went off in search of a banyan.  
She's really going to tie one on this time,  
Jack said, and we collapsed in laughter as fraught  
as the route we saw home in those moments  
when you dare to look, when the rains  
go into week three and have ceased  
to be novel or foreign.

**ELIZABETH T. GRAY, JR.**

**Sunday Morning**

Early in the morning when it was yet dark she had gone back to the clinic  
to bring Blake his clothes and they said he'd been discharged  
he wasn't there so she went back and woke Simon and Peter  
who came and up they went past the desk to the ward  
but where he had lain only a small pile of t-shirt and sheet  
and two orderlies each with good English  
yes we had just been calling and promptly the Embassy gentleman  
came as per instructed. Get Andrew and Nadia said Peter and left,  
but Sarah moved not. Then at the doorway  
a tall man in white with no name  
on his lab coat: *Who are you looking for? Why are you crying?*  
There could be steps right here, she said, going down to some river.  
My friend was not clay and glitter not an image of some orange god  
not a version or bizarre incarnation of smudged attributes not something  
you people bow to and chant at and throw your food and savings and shirts  
this is he, is he, is not that, we refuse  
to dance in some street-crush of half-naked hawkers and then throw him  
at some astrologer's perfect moment into some clogged estuary,  
she said, spilling everything onto the cracked tile.  
Later, she thought he said *Sarah*, putting his mace, spear, and trident  
down on a chair, and came over to her, standing just out of reach.

**ELIZABETH T. GRAY, JR.**

**Had She**

Had she stayed  
Had she not stepped up  
Into the train that carried them down  
From the hills to the plane  
Home through Rangoon and Vientiane  
She would know that  
What *kailāśaranashiva*  
*chandramoulīphanīndramātāmukutī*  
*zalālīkārūnyasindhuhavadukhahārī*  
*thujavīnashambomajakonatārī*  
In the cripple's mouth after he spat  
At them at the standing boxcars  
Means is  
*O Lord Shiva on Mount Kailash*  
*Moon-Jeweled    Serpent-Crowned*  
*Ocean of Mercy    Remover of Delusion*  
*Protect me    I surrender*

**LEEYA MEHTA**  
**The Abduction**

*—Lines composed in the Thar desert, six years after India's nuclear test*

**1**

It's been six years since angels crossed the road at springtime.

Six years ago the Cherwell carried boats of scrolls whose black letters sliced through ivory sheets. We undid the blue ribbons and the words fell onto our feet, cutting our flesh. We bled. Our feet caked, shards of T's and Y's stuck out as we ran home in a sapphire meadow knee deep in water, gray spires suffocating as the wings came down in millions around us.

That night at the ball we crammed strawberries into angels' mouths but they would not keep silent. "The desert is so still at night," they said. "You can hear the shifting of the sand."

The juice from the berries dripped from their lips and splashed on our feet, burning them. "My stinging skin, where is my home, where is my home?" I asked. The night was fluorescent, your green dress fired cannonballs into the sky. "It is time to celebrate," you said, "not to mourn."

We danced. Fireflies in the desert broke into homes, hovered over sleeping children, entered bloodstreams, blew up spleens, burned up hearts, singed brains and livers.

"The desert rose to the sky," I said, but you had already forgiven them.

Your mouth covered my eyes, my tears made you spin round and round, your waist-length hair catching the strobe lights. Your seduction was complete, how could I resist you? You pleaded, "Love me. Love me," so I took your hand. "Dance," I said. I wished you were dead.

At seven o'clock no sun rose over the valley. The streets were empty as we dragged our trains home. You stopped for a moment to take up the fabric in your hands and then—as if you knew I would need something of you—you tore off the dirty train and stuffed it into my surprised hands.

Six years ago angels crossed the road at springtime in front of me. I stood in an emerald green dress, alone. They carried you away with them.

The empty street wound round the river's neck and as I crossed the bridge on the high street, I saw the boats sail out of view. I threw the green rag after them. I was free. I was free of you.

**2**

I have a memory of you alone in the night,  
The rain outside, you screaming to belong,  
*My people* you called them.  
I will not accept that, I said, pushing you away,  
These are not your people, these are not my people.  
You wore your silver angel around your neck  
As if it would protect you from hate.  
Conquerors and conquered we have been  
With such jewels of god hanging by our hearts.  
Like the sand in the desert, you had believed  
The burning train would never happen again,  
That the women on their backs were the victims of barbarians,  
Not our people.  
“Why do you want to belong?” I had asked you.  
Sometimes I feel belonging is like loving a corpse,  
History's endless funerals.

**3**

I return without you to Bombay, the city of our birth. Memory is a curse; what have you done?

I search. I know that carved silver creature must be somewhere. You hadn't taken it with you the night of the ball, you had left it on the dresser by the window overlooking the crab apple tree. I must find that *Asho Farohar*, I must wear it, I must remember what happens when I hate, when I hate who we are because I fear our people are killers.

You could not understand why I do not like mirrors. In the mirror in the green dress we were the same person; my betrayal—when you decided silently in a room full of angels to leave me—was to let you go.

4

I have been looking for you in a hundred cities;  
I have been calling your name;  
I watch the mountains rise up in Tehran like  
Vultures worshipping the sun;  
I throw my net into the Arabian Sea and pull up  
Skeletons of exiles who searched for land.

Hesitant in prayer, I stand in an ancestral fire temple in Udwada  
Repeating softly, *humata, hukhta, huvarashta*  
Good thoughts, good words, good deeds.  
You are nowhere to be found.  
Don't my children need to know who you are?

Finally, in Pokhran, in an ancient *haveli* with  
A Hindu shrine that leads off from a courtyard full of peacocks  
I sit silently watching for a sign.  
The sand moans, the well runs dry, the angels do not come.  
They will not come.

**KEVIN HEATON**

**Mississippi Crossing**

I rise from black dirt, reconciled to mallows  
slaked in deep swallowtail kisses, fretting blues  
riffs to lick the fog from off the levee. My yang  
for this place is the yin in its ground,

the stock and staple of my talk. Its outcroppings,  
more earthy than hallowed, hitched to walking  
plow calluses too poor to miss depressions.

And yet, a provender of sorts: an olio of King  
Biscuit Flour, lard corn dodgers, and loose leaf  
tobacco twist doled out to mildewed gunny sacks,  
hung on half-crushed millstones to never dry.

There's a jubilee here that began as a prayer  
where humid evenings come to listen. More refrain  
than spirit at first, but even so, a voice: one

that would free the Delta from herself, and reclaim  
her with a psalm—a hymn, in a tongue for every color,  
distant but resounding. Own-rolled, scored with folklore  
and cipherings, grist to mill and list into river bottom

dusters, dis privies with old chamber pots, and bury  
company store tokens in dandelion tumbledowns  
still cottoning to rebel ordnance. Pawned

to one-armed bandits in sundering Woolworth parishes.  
Cyclones that began as gusts with gales of their own,  
fanning seed for more flowers—boasting blossoms  
much too handsome to heart half bloomed.

**GARY FINCKE**  
**Fraternity Brothers, 1970**

Two years Rich Cook had lived across the hall,  
Giving me rides in his damaged car  
Where we breathed the stink left behind  
By a creek that flash-flooded hood high,  
But this summer Cook was a soldier  
In the Ohio Guard, and I was reading  
The Victorians and Faulkner's novels  
At Kent State where classes had resumed.  
Since my second beer, I'd been posturing  
As a near-miss survivor, and now Cook  
Was drunk and angry and ready,  
He said, to shoot me if history  
Repeated itself. He carried  
A pistol in the flooded Ford  
I could see through the screen door  
Where white moths were frantic to enter,  
And he wondered out loud if I'd piss myself  
If he decided to show-and-tell me  
Just how cowardly I could be up close  
With him and brother Bowers just back  
From two tours and a pair of Purple Hearts,  
A veteran who had survived  
Hamburger Hill and nameless night patrols.  
Cook asked if I was a Communist now  
Or just some big-mouth asshole drinking  
Beer with someone who was worth a shit,  
And I was ready to renounce my years  
Of second-hand graduate essays,  
All of those sweet-sounding platitudes  
Seeming as simple as pre-meal prayers  
While I was composing apologies  
And expecting both brothers to lay  
A combat-tested beating upon me.  
I could say the overhead kitchen light beamed  
A Saint Paul moment of self-knowledge  
And conversion, but what it did was  
Flicker once when the refrigerator  
Hummed into life just before Bowers  
Said "Fuck the Guard" so matter-of-factly  
I heard the period drop into place,  
Ambushing one argument, at least,

→

In Youngstown where May was fishtailing  
Into June, the three of us positioned  
As if we still occupied our late-60's rooms,  
A telephone hanging outside Cook's door,  
The black receiver he had twice torn loose  
Before sweeping into my room  
After 2 a.m., both times silhouetted  
Against the light, spitting, "It's for you."

**SCOTT BEAL**

**The Dream of the Foam Toy Sword**

is as real as you, as real as the reign  
of your mental confetti machine. The way you want  
to be a real boy, a real seafood chef or arsonist, the way  
you want to be a real housewife of orange county  
in the damp cellar of subcellular yen

is the way it wants to be a real sword,  
to thicken its foam into devastating iron.  
No more thwacks and thuds when it's parried  
or bashes a plastic greave, it wants to clear  
its molten throat and sing like a smithy,  
it wants to strike the wall and gouge the brick,

it wants in the midst of the child's roaring  
to swing its truest self, sudden steel, a new dense weight  
dragging its arc toward the floor where it will slice right  
and proper through a foot, hack it clean at the ankle,  
no soft whump of an imminent bruise, no  
chuckling dance of ouches but the godawful shock

of a lopped limb, of the world that ended  
at the floor coming to end some inches above.  
The sword aches to catalyze, to cauterize, aches  
to inhabit its form and forge, its history  
and factory of heat and blood and siege engines  
the way you yearn to make yourself

a staggering lover or salesman-of-the-month  
or half the father your father was, how  
you churn your guts and wring your fists  
to sift a cure for failure—just this deeply  
the sword knows if its dream coheres, if it channels  
the current racing down the child's arm,

the capillary hum and the lactic acid choiring  
to the muscles, burn, burn, the lungs' shuffle  
that feeds the child's vision of paladin, assassin,  
if the sword's dream meets the child's as far  
as the wrist that it could turn, that it can turn itself  
into the dream and bite through birth and dawn.

**SCOTT BEAL**  
**The Academy**

Aristotle said trash falls because the earth is made of trash.  
Babylonians counted stars in a base-sixty system, but  
cipherless, so you never know if a single  
digit means sixty or thirty-six hundred.  
Epicurus found being composed of random atoms means  
fondle folks at will and swallow your fill.  
God does not play dice, by golly, said Einstein,  
horrified by quarkmuddle but fine with bending spacetime.  
In the *Timaeus*, Plato claimed our maker is perfect but matter  
just sucks, so we scrape at our scabs and yowl for towels.  
Kepler nested his laws of planetary motion in a hallucinatory  
lexicon of perfect solids and the literal Music of the Spheres  
mathematically rendered into clefs and quarter notes.  
No neurochemist alive can patch the holes in Pauline's brain  
or explain the polished clarity of her memories of the Depression,  
picking tomatoes in a white sundress, or the dumbstruck  
questions she asks her son, parting her purse to find a phone charger.  
Roger Bacon in the thirteenth century insisted our natures  
spread from our centers like warmth from a torch,  
tremoring through furniture and friends.  
Until 2004, no person had seen a live giant squid.  
Vision, said Ptolemy, is caused by rays  
which radiate out from our pupils. When Wilhelm Röntgen  
x-rayed his wife's hand, she knew she'd seen straight into death.  
You can imagine how the Babylonians would have felt,  
zero being invented before their eyes.

**NATE MARSHALL**  
**Chicago high school love letters**

**first day of school**

**1**

i would take the bus  
to you, walk through  
your neighborhood  
& navigate the colors.

**3**

take my student ID  
to lunch. it's clipped  
in the corner for  
free.

**homecoming weekend**

**46**

come to the dance.  
my hands wand  
around your frame  
searching for danger.

**58**

you can wear my letterman jacket  
home. if it's the wrong shade  
of blue then imagine it around  
you while it sits in your locker.

**winter break**

**131**

i would  
airbrush  
you on  
a t-shirt.

**156**

i would fight for you  
like my shoes or my  
boys or my indescribable  
need for contact.

**spring break**

**214**

i know all the museum  
free days by heart. you  
the exhibit i steal touch  
from in shadow.

**226**

i'll stay with you  
forever. even after  
the streetlights come  
on or don't work.

**prom weekend**

**320**

jump the broom  
or turnstile. no car  
except kiss. no ride  
except want.

**331**

this song is dedicated  
to you: either r. kelly  
or r. kelly. love  
ballad or elegy.

**graduation**

**333**

you can  
hold me  
before i  
disappear.

---

The numbers in "Chicago high school love letters" represent the homicides during the 2007-8 Chicago Public Schools academic year.

**KAREN MCPHERSON**

**What It Takes**

is what it gives. Stones  
pried from dirt's grasp  
pounded to pigment,  
funneled into vials of glass—  
a spectrum. Weeds  
boiled, cabernet  
distilled, for inks to map  
the distance from this home.

There's an underbrush  
of something else, a track  
where insects rise  
in clouds  
from the wheat-  
grass tide.

Just looking long  
and hard enough. In balance  
with the sure & measured stroke,  
I find, beneath, not visible, a single  
thin dark line.

**WILLIAM L. RAMSEY**  
**Running Late in Yuyao**

—*Zhejiang Province, PRC*

We stopped briefly before reaching  
the bridge, your eye distracted by some  
silk that might be suitable for a cheongsam.  
So I turned toward the mountains, your purse  
in my left hand.

A brownish black goat planted  
a hoof in the dirt, lifted the other hoof,  
planted it, shifted, looking down a long  
draw toward an old woman washing pots  
in stream water.

Voices like water over the rocks,  
clashing, chaotic, unexpectedly quiet,  
carried up the hill, but you bought  
no silk. And I continued to hold your purse  
in my left hand.

The brownish black goat lowered  
its head to the stream, so fast and cold,  
so much louder suddenly than women  
or wind. I cannot remember if the bird sat  
in a nearby tree

or on one of the rocks to sing. But,  
as you looped your arm in mine and began  
walking down to cross the river, every voice  
inhaled, and in that hush I heard it: high notes  
in a clustered hurry.

**ALLISON FUNK**  
**Metamorphoses**

—*Maria Sibylla Merian (1647–1717)*

**One**

Not from dew. Not from cheese or wool.  
Not from rain. Hair or horse dung.

Not from cabbage. Cobwebs. Sweet basil.  
Vapor. Oxen or mules.

*Not* spontaneous generation.  
But metamorphosis? In insects?

Nature's lowliest. Unseemly.  
Even unholy. Not unlike Satan

Twisting into a woman,  
Witches multiplying like maggots.

**Two**

With a mortar and pestle  
She ground, she mixed pigments.

*Not from dew. Not from cheese or wool.  
Not from rain. Hair or horse dung.*

Green from the buckhorn's sap,  
Gold scraped from mouths of volcanoes.

*Not from cabbage. Cobwebs. Sweet basil.  
Vapor. Oxen or mules.*

On lilies and hyacinth  
She'd find larvae to raise.

*Not spontaneous generation.  
But metamorphosis? In insects?*

Some with blue arrows down their backs,  
Others dusted yellow and snow.

*Nature's lowliest. Unseemly.  
Even unholy. Not unlike Satan.*

What's more amazing  
Than a pupa swaddled like a child?

*Twisting into a woman,  
Witches multiplying like maggots.*

**Three**

Female painters?  
Guilds bolted Germany's doors.

*With a mortar and pestle  
She ground, she mixed pigments.*

She studied the pupa that frees  
Itself from its case.

*Green from the buckhorn's sap,  
Gold scraped from mouths of volcanoes.*

Were the household chores never finished,  
The spinning of wool into yarn?

*On lilies and hyacinth  
She'd find larvae to raise.*

Along muddy banks, alone in her garden,  
She followed the insects' fruity scent,

*Some with blue arrows down their backs,  
Others dusted yellow and snow.*

With the care she'd take with her daughters,  
She tended each chrysalis.

*What's more amazing  
Than a pupa swaddled like a child?*

**Four**

The larva, a spirit; the pupa,  
A girl; imago, full grown and ready to fly.

*Female painters?  
Guilds bolted Germany's doors.*

Reliquaries—the *Wunderkammern*  
Housing insects fuzzed with dust.

*She studied the pupa that frees  
Itself from its case.*

She fed them sugared water, the newborn  
Garden Tiger, Hawk Moth, and Emperor.

*Were the household chores never finished,  
The spinning of wool into yarn?*

With brushes tipped with marten or sable  
She recorded molt after molt.

*Along muddy banks, alone in her garden,  
She followed the insects' fruity scent*

Beyond the camphor of wonder rooms  
And their musty habitats.

*With the care she'd take with her daughters,  
She tended each chrysalis.*

**Five**

What if she found species  
No European had seen?

*The larva, a spirit; the pupa,  
A girl; imago, full grown and ready to fly.*

Not divided in boxes, moths from cocoons.  
The White Witch drying its wings.

*Reliquaries—the Wunderkammern  
Housing insects fuzzed with dust.*

From which plants did they lift,  
Which return to, to feed?

*She fed them sugared water, the newborn  
Garden Tiger, Hawk Moth, and Emperor*

She engraved in *The Caterpillar's*  
*Wondrous Metamorphosis.*

*With brushes tipped with marten or sable  
She recorded molt after molt.*

Frankfurt, Nuremberg, Amsterdam.  
In the New World, what might she become

*Beyond the camphor of wonder rooms  
And their musty habitats?*

**Six**

Far from what she'd known.  
Surinam. Unmapped. Interior.

*What if she found species  
No European had seen?*

Caterpillars turning crimson  
And cream in the guava's leaves.

*Not divided in boxes, moths from cocoons.  
The White Witch drying its wings*

Glimpsed through a blur  
Of heat or rain.

*From which plants did they lift,  
Which return to, to feed?*

A tarantula. Leaf-cutter ants.  
Larvae with venomous spines

*She engraved in The Metamorphosis  
Of the Insects of Surinam.*

Uncased, wings stretched  
Wide as a woman's hand.

*Frankfurt, Nuremberg, Amsterdam.  
In the New World, what might she become?*

Seven

Spider-like: the strangler vines,  
Webbed trees, the tail ends of monkeys

*Far from what she'd known.  
Surinam. Unmapped. Interior.*

Species teeming  
From canopy to floor,

*Caterpillars turning crimson  
And cream in the guava's leaves.*

Is it fever?  
Between leaves, a flash of azure

*Glimpsed through a blur  
Of heat or rain.*

Glints of carmine, indigo,  
Ochre, and ultramarine.

*A tarantula. Leaf-cutter ants.  
Larvae with venomous spines,*

A Blue Morpho,  
Sphinx moth, Ghost

*Uncased. Wings stretched  
Wide as a woman's hand.*

**Eight**

*Spider-like: the strangler vines,  
Webbed trees, the tail ends of monkeys,*

*Species teeming  
From canopy to floor.*

*Is it fever?  
Between leaves, a flash of azure,*

*Glints of carmine, indigo,  
Ochre, and ultramarine:*

*Her Blue Morpho,  
Sphinx moth. Ghost.*

**JOHAN HUYBRECHTS**

**The Visit**

*The hardest thing to tell*—as I come in  
and pass through the vestibule, the scent of dried roses,  
tomatoes, beeswax, oak—is not the tempered cool of the old  
bluestone dalles floor, the faint light

brighter as I step into the hall,  
a garden view, the empty vase and the cut-glass bowl,  
the boy-flutist in the red pantaloons, *A Night Mass in Irimbo*,  
and the unreasonable height of the roofbeam—

is not the quiet of the Haut-Bailly  
in the dark below emanating through the (locked) cellar door  
or the cherry and mahogany inlay in the commode  
under the oval mirror, nor the oak itself,

massive and ancient, swallowtailed,  
scarred, time-worn and hard like stone, or quarter-sawn,  
and the flakes, medullar rays, bare like gold veins, eyegleam,  
a light in the hardest core—

is not the way summer mornings shone  
with a light that came pouring in from the south  
nor what I sense to be the wake of time gone by or even loss,  
but more like a change of the arrangement—

is not the way the Ninth hung here  
like a thick impenetrable fog that will not clear, suites  
like nebulae, Cohen, Fournier (comparing them over and over again),  
nor is it the pounding sound of Young and Crazy Horse

or the special sensation one has when piercing  
the foot on a surprisingly sharp-spiked wrought iron fence  
while trying to enter (the shoe stuck and filling with O-negative, then  
dripping a bloodline or *fil rouge* towards the knocker

three steps up)—it's more like a noise without sense,  
a crack, or a snap, a velvet-muted sound from inside the case  
or the house, or the natural hollow of the chest, that almost passed  
unnoticed, and then this squeeze, a tightening of joints

and phren and the vocal cords more tense,  
more tuned, and with every new column of air more  
ready for piping a language that will not come, something to do  
with the overall condition of the instruments,

a hairline fracture in the maple body or the neck,  
a loss of hair suffered by the pernambuco bow, or the horse,  
the loss of wood of the tree, a tone gone astray, a missing timbre  
or peg, or the zing of strings touching strings

out in the draft after being safely stored  
away for years, the first and last sound that comes with it,  
the baton ticks, brass, *clef à remonter*, lock that turns, returns and released  
springs and clicks back into place, then this plain silence

of origins, absence, passing clouds, waves  
running through fields like wild galloping mane, the push within  
the thin green peel (and all else woodenly skeletal), me leaving here in '93,  
keyless—*this unease I felt when she opened the door.*

## SCOTT WITHIAM

### Audit

The pages of numbered rows of numbers evoked fields of wheat. No wind, but the grain moved. Something in the grain swimming. Above the grain, long tail feathers. Pheasants astride or astrut? To resist the pressure to discover something, the accountant lingered there, until the feathers reminded him of the overblown scare of dorsal fins. And then came the prehistoric similarities of fish to birds, not how their single genetic path divided, but evolution overall like the bloody aftermath of an audit—everyone just taking off. But it wasn't necessary to go after these birds. One of them trotted right up to the hedge where he stood. No, there were two birds. He determined the male by its bright color—although they were both bright—and drew a knife, a buck knife, though he didn't know what a buck knife was. Yet he was sure he knew how to throw it. Given the imbalance between blade and handle, even with the slimmest chances of accuracy, he threw the knife and it stuck, though he wasn't entirely sure where, till the female, quite calmly or quite removed, got away. *Brighter*, he thought. The male collapsed without a squawk or stagger. He wouldn't do such a thing in real life. He didn't even like meat. This was more automatic. A tool was placed in his hand and he used it. He had a modern brain and older parts exercised it. He didn't want to clean that bird, to go any further, but he didn't believe in waste or any effort unfinished. He sprinted from the field to the nearest house. Signs of life inside, but no people. He plucked and gutted the bird in the porcelain sink, but was more interested in cleaning up, of showing no signs of a mess, what he was trained to sniff out as something very wrong. He went to the garage, the first place he'd expect anything to be hidden. The garage was highly organized. You could eat off the floor. There was a man dying there. This really upset him. This even more: his guts kept spilling. How many times did people need reminding of what they did? He'd had a motorcycle accident that landed him halfway up a waterfall. You really couldn't land on a waterfall, he advised. Fluidity—you would instantly be moved. And then a woman, separated from the man for some time, arrived to comfort him, threw open the garage door. "Did you say, *brighter*?" she said. To him or the dying man? He couldn't tell. He was never good with words.

**SCOTT WITHIAM**

**Wedding Reception at the Aquarium**

An enormous jellyfish contained in a pillar-shaped—  
some might call cone-shaped—tank. Others just *tank*.  
I loved pillars or columns and you. Still do. But on our way  
out, hovering at the entrance—different than the one  
we came in—I preferred geometry to architecture,  
space to be determined rather than filled in, though I was more  
like *it*. The tank lighted from the bottom, less to  
see under than through the protoplasm to the nerve.  
It collapsed to propel up, the only way  
up, and then relaxed as close to fluid as could be  
without wholly dissolving. Floated down  
like a wedding gown or an eye.

**CHRISTOPHER ROBLEY**

**Yip**

Betamax yaks taxidermied actress;  
appetites chitchat factual ka-ching!

Rainforests talk Toblerone through  
Google Translate's fluent cuneiform.

Some glib bullet grazing razor-grass  
either whispers scripture or it won't.

The Om of State breaks moonlight  
on the bent bars of its big-ass cage.

Pre-verbal  
lip service  
avers itself.

Invisible Christ  
hanging on  
the sniper's crosshairs.

## **BOOKS IN BRIEF: Negative Capability: A Cure for the “I” Disease?**

**John Rosenwald**

**Nicelle Davis, *Becoming Judas*** (Pasadena, CA: Red Hen Press, 2013, 112 pp, \$18.95 paper)

**TJ Jarrett, *Ain't No Grave*** (Kalamazoo, MI: New Issues Press, 2013, 104 pp, \$15 paper)

**Brian Komei Dempster, *Topaz*** (New York, NY: Four Way Books, 2013, 119 pp, \$15.95 paper)

John Keats described “negative capability” as the ability to exist “in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (letter to his brothers, 28 December 1817). Many have adopted the phrase Keats apparently coined; some have used it as the basis for sophisticated philosophical systems. But Keats mostly wanted to convey a sense he articulated more fully in other letters, where he praised Shakespeare for his absence of personality, his gift for entering dramatic characters without suffusing them with his own self. Keats regarded this skill as central to the calling of a poet. Most accessibly, he illustrated the experience with a simple and profound image when he announced, “if a Sparrow come before my Window I take part in its existence and pick about the Gravel” (letter to B. Bailey, 22 November 1817).

The empathy cherished by Romantic poets such as Keats developed in part from the late eighteenth-century distinction between sentiment and sentimentality. Later in the nineteenth century Robert Browning explored the poetic possibilities inherent in negative capability through his development of the dramatic monologue, a technique adopted for their own purposes early in the twentieth century by Ezra Pound, by T. S. Eliot in his portrayal of Prufrock, and more recently by many other modern and post-modern poets.

The ability momentarily to abandon self, to enter the personality of another, and to use the perception gained to craft character and reveal a vision of a world other than one’s own provides a means of creating literature that moves us, perhaps partially by avoiding the egocentricity of so much contemporary American poetry, the “I disease.” Negative capability moves beyond empathy to include not only feeling for, but also immersion in, the other. It involves *becoming* the sparrow.

■  
Each month more than thirty poetry volumes arrive at the *BPJ* Farmington address. Most come from poets I don't know, whose poetry is unfamiliar to me. How should I decide what to read and then which to review? Browsing new volumes some months ago, I thought of examining the relationship between poems we had published in the *BPJ* and books released by those same authors. I wondered: Were the poems we published similar to those included in their books? Had we managed to capture themes or images more generally important to them? In accepting some poems and rejecting others, had we missed significant work we should have chosen? Were the poems we published stronger or weaker in the larger context?

As I read I also became intrigued by the *BPJ*'s commitment to poems that display negative capability. I began to search for volumes by poets whose work did just that; in this review I'll investigate three new books by poets we have published whose efforts reflect the quality so valued by John Keats.

■  
Nicelle Davis twice stunned us as an editorial board with her submissions. First we could not resist accepting a tragic-comic bedroom sketch where one partner has contracted herpes from another lover (Summer 2011). Then we published her concrete poem that wittily both depicts and describes the "Hairstylist Sam Villa" (Winter 2013/14). I awaited the arrival of her second book to see what her extraordinary imagination would next provide. *Becoming Judas* did not disappoint. The volume is intriguing, rich, ambitious, and perhaps disturbing, from the pseudo-romantic staged portraits on the front and back covers (Davis as a jittery Ariel? Davis as an aged Alice in Wonderland?), to the funky interior pencil sketches by Cheryl Gross, to the poems themselves. Here's where it starts:

THE MISSING TEXT IN THE GOSPEL OF JUDAS

Salvation:

[a door opening onto another

[[full rotation; self-begotten, I am, threshold.

→

Devouring light to be light. Every child is  
a knob turning inward. Language of swallow-  
ing. Forever.]]

joyful/joyful]

*Becoming Judas* is not an easy read. But as Davis begins the transformative process, as she describes “Genesis: Origins of a Homemade Religion,” some strategies become clear. The poet must first have us exert our own negative capability, enter into her psyche as she first enters consciousness: “My myths crossed when I was four. I mistook the pastel picture of Jesus hung in every Mormon home for John Lennon. Both called the Prince of Peace. . . . I still talk to John when praying to Jesus.” Much of the book seems autobiographical, but its energy comes from the constant juxtaposition of what seems personal material with larger pop-cultural issues and with religious themes, both generally Christian and specifically Mormon.

Sometimes, as in the herpes poem, she presents a grim romp. In this passage from “Enough Time” she depicts her grandmother:

She is married to a man who at twelve tosses his five siblings  
from a second story window before dragging his father’s  
kerosene doused body

from their burning house. . . .

Later she will tell  
me stories of the Great Depression—how she spent money to  
see a flushing toilet. . . .

I’ll never feel like I loved her enough. I’ll love her more than any.

Often she seems to be painting the personal mostly to arrive at a broader canvas. If Judas is the betrayer of Jesus, then by becoming Judas, does the poet become the betrayer of her own savior, of John Lennon, whose lyrics occur as section titles of the book: “all you need is love” and “imagine” (here identified with the “Songs of Songs”), for “*I’m not the only one.*”

But wait, she asks. If negative capability enters these

negotiations, are we our own betrayer, do we always betray ourselves? Did Lennon do that through his alliance with Yoko Ono? And is that betrayal always a love/hate relationship between or among various portions of ourselves? In “Jesus Propositions Judas” Davis has at least one Prince of Peace say to his betrayer, “*Stop struggling against me and give us a kiss.*”

Throughout *Becoming Judas* Davis raises and questions the question of empathy, of negative capability. I won’t pretend to understand the book as a whole, won’t even pretend to understand if it’s understandable, but I admire the imagination and respect the complexity, the interweaving of stories, and the issues she raises most explicitly in the book’s title poem. If Judas betrays Jesus, if John betrays the Beatles, if Joseph Smith betrays his followers, if Nicelle Davis betrays her music, her culture, family, mother, lover. . . then what? In “Becoming Judas” Davis shows Judas (and perhaps herself) now regretful regarding the betrayal: “*There is something worth / keeping in this*” and asking longingly, “*Will I know you in heaven?*” to which Jesus answers, “*What use is there in knowing me / if you are me, Judas?*” to which Judas responds, speaking in second person, “*You hate this answer,*” to which the poet responds, “*I hate this answer.*” Finally she asks, “*How can I love you, the way that I do?— / without having myself to loathe?*” This mirroring, this “*reflection / of Judas—dark opposite to the light we worship,*” calls into doubt the efficacy of empathy and even the possibility of negative capability.



In *Ain’t No Grave*, TJ Jarrett raises similar questions but comes away, at least on the surface, with alternative answers. Like *Becoming Judas*, *Ain’t No Grave* demonstrates considerable structural complexity. A sequence of four quite different poems titled “Ruin” runs through the book’s five sections. Two other strings, titled “What We Say to the X” (where X = Fire, Water, Tree) and “What the X Said/Says” (where X = Dark, Sky, Grass, and again Tree) run through the book as well. Many of the poems identify themselves as autobiographical: “*I’m running away, I said. . . . I was eight.*” But it is clear that the personal growth of that autobiographical figure stems in part from her negative capability, her entering into myth, family, and the racial history of the United States.

The structure, though complicated, is more immediately clear than in *Becoming Judas*. All four “Ruin” poems lead from the intercourse of god and ocean to the birth of darkness and then light. All the “what we say” and “what the x says” poems relate to specific lynchings and/or burnings and are spoken in the voices of men and women caught in the burst of racial violence during the seventy years following the American Civil War.

Jarrett uses her negative capability perhaps most movingly in the first of two poems titled “As Far as the Eye Can See.” The poet essentially adopts the voice of a wife addressing her husband, part of a lynch mob, who is in turn addressing his own son: “*This is what we do. / This is what it means; this is what it takes to be a man; / This is the means of our dominion.*”

The darkness created through such empathy leads at first to darkness. The initial poem in the fifth and final section of the book begins as if purely personal, but expands as it grows:

When a girl, alone like that  
in my room at night,  
I was afraid of the dark.

For a time, my mother sat and sighed  
at the foot of my bed. Exhausted,  
she brought me a flashlight.

With it, I would write  
words into the darkness until  
I could fill the room with them. . . .

There was a sweet music playing. Sweet music.

This final section of the book, unlike the first four, contains no burnings, no lynchings. The history of violence against African Americans and Jarrett’s ability to enter the victims’ bodies and minds makes it reasonable for her to be “afraid of the dark” but also makes it possible for her to transcend their pain, to accept the flashlight of words and announce, “You can reach for me in the dark because / I am made of it.” The final “Ruin” poem portrays god and ocean, the mythological two lovers, inventing a body language incomprehensible to their son, the Dark, a private

language they eventually can name the Light. By this point in the book's progression, the poet's family has gathered for "Thanksgiving" and its "song of the forks," a dinner which ends as "we laughed and laughed and laughed and laughed."

Negative capability also characterizes the one poem we have published by Jarrett (Spring 2011), "After Forty Days, Go Marry Again," a dramatic monologue in the voice of the middle-aged Chechen Vova Tumayev, whose wife and daughter died in the Russian attack on their school in 2004. The voice, with words borrowed in part from contemporary news reports of the massacre, moved us as we considered the manuscript and convinced us of its authenticity. As usual we were reading the manuscript blind, with no knowledge of the poet. Some months later, just before the poem appeared in print, I was delighted when Jarrett—American, young, black, and female—stopped by the *BPJ* table at the AWP annual conference to say hello and to talk of her experience writing the monologue. Her exploration of negative capability increased my respect for and appreciation of both poet and poem.



Brian Komei Dempster has been sending us poems for years, but we have accepted only one ("Jacket Elegy," Winter 2006/07). Although we were attracted to many, we often felt they needed to appear in clusters rather than individually, needed a larger context. His first full volume, *Topaz*, provides that context. The collection offers a powerful commentary partly because it documents the incarceration during World War II of Japanese Americans, including the poet's mother and grandparents. But its strength also results from his creating a complex vision dependent on his negative capability.

The narrative begins with Dempster driving through Utah, hoping to find some sign of "Topaz," the camp where his grandmother and her children were first interned. He is heading for San Francisco and the Buddhist church founded by his grandfather in 1931, where the poet's mother "was born / and torn away." Dempster, his wife, and their son re-inhabit that same church after decades of decay, his "mother's room now mine," using for his child's crib the same streamer trunk, "temple chest / of rusted sweetness," that had served as birthday

table for his mother during the years of internment.

At the end of one poem written in the voice of a letter from his grandmother to grandfather, Dempster suggests his method:

Shapes dissolve, and words become our windows.  
We go home in envelopes, the ocean rolling us into each other.  
These letters widen doorways, let us grow.

And the poet does roll his characters into each other. Within the thirty-five lines of "Sickness," for example, we follow his mother as she endures a ruptured appendix, his father who has asked him to care for her, an uncle as he undergoes radiation treatment for cancer, the friend with whom he hurries to a clandestine sexual encounter with two young women, the uncle "thinning in critical," his mother now returned from the hospital, his father rubbing her stitches, and one of the young women as she crawls through a window to be with the poet himself.

The elaborate narratives in *Topaz* arise partly from the scope with which Dempster depicts family relations, partly from the historical political situation, and finally partly because interwoven with these two components is the poet's own sexual history across gender and ethnic lines. Dempster identifies himself as half-Japanese. He provides a vivid sketch of the Korean father of his high school girlfriend. He describes his wife as Chinese. The most moving poems in the book are those that explore the interactions of ethnic Asian Americans touched not only by the internment camps, but also by the history of Japanese abuse of Korean "comfort women" and Japanese brutality during its invasion of China, especially in Nanjing/Nanking.

Dempster often seems to enter directly the lives he describes but only rarely speaks in the voice of another person, as he does in "My Wife Grace Reflects on her Great Aunt's Jade":

My husband Brian clasps  
the gem on me, presses  
his warm lips  
to my neck, touching  
my mole—a dot

## BOOKS IN BRIEF

on the map, your city, Nanking.  
He is half as Japanese  
as soldiers who sliced  
you away. . . .

Great Aunt,  
we mark you in stone.

If Joy Kogawa has created, in *Obasan*, perhaps the most powerful depiction of North-American treatment of ethnic Japanese following the attack on Pearl Harbor, Dempster has expanded it through these interactions, with our justifiable sympathies for interned Japanese Americans juxtaposed against equally justifiable Korean and Chinese antagonism toward the Japanese. Although few of the actors here described have immediate connections to their lands of eventual origin, the tensions remain remarkable, not resolved but recognized, both for their pain and for their contribution to our individual and collective growth. In *Topaz* Dempster manages not only to articulate the complexity of his world, but also to embrace the value of this complexity. As he comments in the book's penultimate poem, "Only when I circle back, can I continue beyond." The phrase might serve as epigraph for each of these strong volumes, for each of these three strong poets.