

BPJ

BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL VOL. 65 N°2  
WINTER 2014/2015

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**BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL**  
**Winter 2014/2015, Vol. 65 N°2**

<b>Chad Walsh Poetry Prize</b>	5
<b>Andrea Cohen</b>	
Doing the Loop	6
Poison Hotline	7
<b>Sarah J. Sloat</b>	
Inksleep	8
<b>Beatrix Gates</b>	
Blueprint	9
The Verge	11
<b>Lisa Allen Ortiz</b>	
Betaken	12
Assistant to the Curator, Notes on the Donated Collection	13
<b>Philip Metres</b>	
<i>from</i> Shrapnel Maps	14
<b>James Toupin</b>	
What Light Admits	17
<b>Joseph Bathanti</b>	
Postdiluvian: Mingo County, West Virginia	18
<b>Sherod Santos</b>	
The Green Screen Settings	19
<b>Tim Seibles</b>	
At 59	20
<b>Richard O'Connell</b>	
Translations from Catullus	24
<b>Lola Haskins</b>	
Smilax	25
<b>Jenny George</b>	
Sword Swallower	26
Bait Dog	28

## CONTENTS

<b>Joey De Jesus</b>	
self-portrait as queen of adders	29
<b>Rachel Rinehart</b>	
Epithalamium for a Feral Child	30
<b>Amy Sonoun</b>	
Wreaths	32
<b>Nicole Stellon O'Donnell</b>	
Advice to the Young Right Fielder	40
<b>BOOKS IN BRIEF, by Rachel Contreni Flynn</b>	
<b>The Still-Living Past</b>	41
Amanda Auchter, <i>The Wishing Tomb</i>	41
Jake Adam York, <i>Abide</i>	45
<b>COVER</b>	
<b>Mary Greene</b> , design	
<b>Marc Norberg</b> , "Reflections," traditional black and white photograph, Minneapolis, Minnesota, c. 1998	

# BPJ

THE EDITORS OF  
THE BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL  
ARE PROUD TO AWARD  
THE TWENTY-SECOND ANNUAL  
CHAD WALSH POETRY PRIZE  
OF \$4,000

TO  
FIONA CHAMNESS  
FOR HER POEM "CHOREOGRAPHY FOR ENSEMBLE"  
IN THE FALL 2014 ISSUE.

HONORING THE POET CHAD WALSH,  
COFOUNDER, IN 1950, OF THIS MAGAZINE,  
THE PRIZE IS THE GIFT THIS YEAR OF  
ALISON WALSH SACKETT AND PAUL SACKETT,  
MADELINE WALSH HAMBLIN, SARAH WALSH,  
AND FORMER WALSH PRIZE WINNERS  
MARGARET AHO, KARL ELDER,  
JESSICA GOODFELLOW, ELIZABETH T. GRAY JR.,  
JANET HOLMES, MARY MOLINARY,  
LUCIA PERILLO, SUSAN TICHY,  
AND CHARLES WYATT.

**ANDREA COHEN**

**Doing the Loop**

The rules are made in factories.  
The rules are made to be broken.

Broken people see themselves in broken things.  
Whole towns of broken people work somehow.

Somehow is not a place.  
Yet you get there and wonder: how?

How, repeated, is a kind of howl.  
In wilds and towns, how answers how.

How do you begin or end?  
There are no rules. Begin again.

**ANDREA COHEN**  
**Poison Hotline**

It's got one operator  
and two numbers, one  
  
harried taker of incoming  
whose job it is to listen  
  
and sound unalarmed, to  
first do no harm by recalling  
  
which number a caller  
at the end of her tether  
  
has called. One number  
offers antidotes for poisons  
  
taken mistakenly. The other  
instructs how to bake  
  
a Bundt cake with hemlock.  
Keeping it straight is a lot  
  
to ask of one insomniac, who  
on quiet nights dials one  
  
number from the other, taking  
turns as a certain injured  
  
party, practicing for when  
he gets back to the dark  
  
still house and talks  
himself through it.

**SARAH J. SLOAT**

**Inksleep**

I lean into sleep alphabetically but tonight  
I can't follow the *q* or the *g*, only a lapping

that deadens all letters and seeps into margins,  
a lapping that drapes a blanket over recto

and verso, over misprint and ardor. Inksleep,  
moving with magnetic instep, pulling

the loose pieces to it, the run-ons and fragments.  
I wade in, awash in the blotting, hem

gone indigo, knees steeped in the deep blue  
that comes not with the terror of typesmear

or error, not with sessions of eyeshut,  
no blotch or flub, no fear of omission. Just

ink that spills from its tipped well  
that seals the lids with lists

and inscriptions, the inverse of erasure,  
the gathering stain I let at last overtake me.



**BEATRIX GATES**

**Blueprint**

—for Jane Cooper

**1**

A blue-gray triangle

fills the body's chambers

breath across the collarbone quiet down the ribs

flowing flame at the solar plexus.

Breath drawn from the space of air outside the body

penetrating tiniest nerve endings clustered at the fingertips.

Hear it See it

The sun reminds us of our time.

Peaceful curtain, drawing.

Blue-gray inside orange finger flame.

**2**

A bird knows

how to re-enter the sky

flying from the buildings scaffold of wing.

Is the blue-gray triangle your mind

growing rays from the cool hands of the clock

towards a large still place?

Not supposed to live past the age of five,

you wondered at what you saw:

porpoise signaling from the waves.

Later, your poems tracked the sight lines

of aviators clearing the bomb trail

and from the ground, "the sky . . . streaked with pilots falling."

Blue-gray porpoise, lasting, leaps into the sun.

Your mind skirts the universe starlight from canyon floors

and names far and near as blood and stranger.

No use dying amid your sense

of having to climb infinite ladders and stay standing.

The high cliffs beckon.

The birds.

3

Approaching the city

from the west I see the rising  
blue-gray towers, orbs, triangles,  
silhouette of mysterious Chrysler  
and Empire State buildings.  
The river strand shining white  
like your hair around your living  
lined face.

Cool slices of sky in the river current.

4

Blue-gray, the changing cloudscape  
nest of orange sun behind trees

Gray changes to rain freshens the paved road.

And when I ask, you direct me.  
I leave the door open a crack  
for higher heat—your mind aglow  
and three new pencils dreaming beside you.

Looking down, looking around for clues I say little.

“It’s all so incomprehensible,” you reply.

Your eyes, the blue-gray  
looking out from the horizon.

**BEATRIX GATES**

**The Verge**

*—on 2/3/13 for M.*

It snowed the night  
white and black  
And you are sharp  
outline of this tender visible  
seeing

This morning, every branch speaks to the ground  
as it speaks to the air

February: an ungallant, undeniable  
between

This is the juice, the squeeze between,  
the time ground works  
to bring round what we will know  
and recognize—

How we need the verge

Caution Shoulder Work Ahead  
Ice jam at the bridge Stream's locked  
Busting concrete's cracking from the beam

I hear delirium, the changing blood  
Water caught hard  
Ungallant, undeniable  
The water must through!

It could be called delirium  
Speaking to many  
But it's not  
Change

**LISA ALLEN ORTIZ**

**Betaken**

*Stay* I said but already she was gone.  
I set the table: feeble sun, napkins rolled  
in their beaded rings.

Silver tiffin box. Outside: that tree.  
Moss and lichen, damp ferns,  
all its tendrils crack and spin.

I was left alone. Every dawn retaken.  
A paper hymn, each broken note:  
gate, road, tires, rocks.

Before she died she said: *too many windows*.  
Birds marked up the sky then it all erased,  
blue as before. Dark hole, brass horn.

**LISA ALLEN ORTIZ**

**Assistant to the Curator, Notes on the Donated Collection**

One taxidermy grizzly bear, standing (fair condition).  
Albatross skeleton, mounted as in flight.

Domed vignette of songbirds in bronze leaves & branches.  
Foreleg fossil identified as mastodon.

Eight framed boxes of butterflies, organized  
by color, no thought to genus.

Everywhere I look the moon in mirrors:  
reflected in the gems of beetle backs,

planets in the glassy eyes of foxes.  
A world unbalanced by so much keeping.

Murder bird. Milky flame of ivory.  
Feather thief. Name things. List.

Box of pressed ferns & orchids.  
Notebook sketches of hummingbirds & swallows.

Taxidermy badger, taxidermy armadillo.  
Framed pine-tree study: its leaves, seeds.

Mass of feathers, box of jaws & teeth,  
Various bones, unlabeled shells.

**PHILIP METRES**  
**from Shrapnel Maps**

[       ]

*Palestinae Delineatio Ad Geographiae Canones Revocata*

As there is no adequate Arabic version of “as the crow flies”

When you come into the land of Canaan

We are the distance

*The Delineation of the Borders [1603]*

That is the land

*The Holy Land once the Promised Land or Palestine*

That shall fall unto you

The distance

*Of the journey in the wilderness and the conquest and partition*

And as we were worthy of sketching it so will we be worthy, with our own eyes

The distance

Of seeing it built up and settled

*As today it is called*

The distance between birds and Jerusalem

PHILIP METRES

[            ]

*Is most true and the most considerable of all for the entire Land of  
promise, from Dan even to Beersheba, a description of the*

As with a map, as with narrative

Any chosen detail necessarily blots out

Proximate details

Like the new studies of memory—

Items in a list spoken aloud

Are made more memorable

But make the unspoken ones

Disappear

Say: that painted copse of trees

A quaint flourish

Could cover over a village

## PHILIP METRES

this is the map without names & names  
without maps / maps of unprecedented  
embroideries of flora / maps of sleeping  
stone / maps without edges without scale  
if I don't let my right hand wither if I don't let  
my tongue cleave to the palate of I do not  
remember / unexploded coffee unamputated  
bread / room at the inside / room at the outset  
if an image of haven if image of heaven if image  
of leaven if cleaving leviathan then leave close  
the question who begat whom / before  
we settle on a name / contract the pregnant question



**JAMES TOUPIN**  
**What Light Admits**

—*Daguerre*, “View of the Boulevard du Temple” (1838)

The view from on high  
looks down at the way’s turning,  
the instant an eon.

Only what lasts out the gaze  
is destined to appear.

Always before  
the human has been lost.  
It almost is again.

The street, then crowded  
with the traffic

of drays and carriages,  
is vacant. No one  
strolls the boulevard.

What did not stay put  
could not be caught.

Only by happenstance  
could a man emerge.  
He stands near the corner,

shadow fixed to page  
because he was fixed

to the spot in life.  
His shoes, it is thought,  
were being polished.

The smudge at his feet  
might be the bootblack,

seen as the eternal,  
if it does,  
might discern us.

**JOSEPH BATHANTI**

**Postdiluvian: Mingo County, West Virginia**

The day dawns repentant,  
sky blue. Union Mission

hauls in food and blankets, toys.  
Pigeon Creek, now slaked,

plumb in its banks, yet still flexing  
at its gouged shoulders, is sick—

green-brown in clefs of sunlight—  
dull as a gorged serpent.

Too much to drown,  
after more mine-rain runoff

than Mingo tribal land would suffer,  
its breach was obscene—massing

diluvia bent on blood feud.  
Sycamores snapped in tandem.

Roil stormed the house, cleaved  
its seams and sockets, white

shakes skived in coils from its face—  
the Pigeon in the children's room,

counterpanes of water  
draping spinet and chifferobe.

The roof caved the porch.  
The saltbox jackknifed, joists

gone for tinder. A good house—  
swamped, then sundered,

vitals bared, the yard  
washed off to Pike County.

**SHEROD SANTOS**

**The Green Screen Settings**

How could I care I'd come to be a member of a family  
my name so-called I rose from bed  
made my way down the corridor up the stairs across the stone threshold  
the mole-hilled yard already in sunlight  
sparrows already in bunches roiling.

■

Once upon a time I sat upon a curb where was I where was I going to be  
what took me aside the butterfly bush  
what boredom lifted the hours away.

Once upon a time a bicycle fixed on the future passed  
a girl in marigold pedaling  
one leg shorter than the other  
not a word between us only once or twice a glance my way.

Was death upon her then?

■

Would it hereafter ever be over? Like waiting for a knock at the door  
I paced myself biding time  
between thumb and finger the green-gold powder from a monarch's wing  
its iridescence fading.

■

The night I left not fleeing so much as walking away from myself in time  
I broke my word  
no moon no stars no last look back just making my way if not then  
where would I bygone be . . .

■

. . . or come to be preoccupied  
with what across the inward eye amounted to my destiny  
a sixth floor walk-up with an alley view  
interior to a shadow play whose end if unforeseeable  
I still presumed to say.

**TIM SEIBLES**

**At 59**

Roving from Nike to New Balance,  
Prince to Puma, I pick up a pair  
of size 13s, some shorts and blue sweats,  
still feeling the sneakered beast scuff  
his muzzle against my skull.

Two tall, hard-shouldered young brothaz  
fondle Air Jordans, talkin a little shit:  
*If I getchu down on the block*  
*wit deez muhfuckas'll be callin you Betty.*

“A drowning man,” Mooji wrote, “is not  
*interested in air*” and as the constellation  
that pardoned my life goes dark, I recognize  
this snag in my chest, this cut breath, this

lonely, late mid-life knowing: the inescapable  
all around me, desperation all around—my own

stumbly efforts at love, my own  
trying to say *say something*,  
while the duck-speaking dickheads  
salute their zombie platoons.

Always big, bad Death posting me up,  
backing me down, the ball's trick bounce  
racking my heart: I know he's smooth  
with either hand, but still mean  
to snuff his shot.

In my college days,  
when my parents were well  
and the bulk of worry sat elsewhere,  
I strolled around with *my boys* and mostly,  
we wanted the same things:

to play sports, “make big bucks,” and have  
the fine babes find the come-hither in our faces.

What I miss is that damn sure *hellyeah!*  
we carried like crisp cash. JC, his wit,  
that manic laugh, Eric's slick grin,  
and Doc, so thin only his head  
cast shadow: that loud halo  
of hair. "Don't touch the 'fro," he'd say.

I miss my boys and the *Ohio Players*  
funkin' us up against the Earth's black hips—

. . . *you a bad, bad missez*  
*with those skin-tight britches*  
*runnin' folks into ditches, yeah . . .*

We couldn't help ourselves.

O Sex, song book of the Better Angels, how I craved  
and savored your generous pages—chapter  
and verse and verse: kissing for hours, daylight lost  
to the liquid velvet of the tongue, the body:  
delicious synagogue, cello hungry to be bowed.

These days I'm a *Sir* a gray beard to be addressed with deference,  
someone whose wisdom might even be vaguely revered.  
I don't believe the longing ever ends. I can't believe  
I'll ever understand what I need to understand,

but in college I told Doc, "Prob'ly by the time  
I'm forty things won't get to me as much."

As I look at my life, I'm afraid and earlier today,  
in the mirror, I saw my mother's face  
shocked at how old I am. *My goodness! How old*  
*are you?*

And when I tell her, she's sure  
I'm lying—and to be honest, I just  
don't know if I'm the age I am. Each year,  
part of a conversation I almost had  
with someone I meant to call.

You think maybe all you do adds up  
to a definable sum: the eulogy,  
a campfire that lets survivors  
warm their chilly hands, but really  
nobody knows  
what turned inside you or why  
evolution has guaranteed that  
none of us stick around. Recently,

a friend shrugged, "Might as well be positive,"  
and I want to bear the *affirming flame*,

to believe in people because I'm a person.

I think about Kennedy's brain  
blown all over his wife's pink dress,

and Malcolm X, dying  
with a new idea guiding his voice—

but whoever mentions Yuri Kochiyama  
holding his head in her lap? I believe  
in the last word she saw lighting his lips.

Across the street, beneath a sky-blue sky, trees  
black-barked and bare. I'm in a café now, surrounded  
by clattery laughs and scrambled chatter, a mad jazz  
that would scatter birds. Awhile back,

one of my boys died. I heard about it long after—  
the funeral, somewhere in Georgia—so in my mind's eye,  
Dewey's still alive: *doin' the bump*, party-whistle  
beaming in his mouth, "Jungle Boogie" *rockin' the house*.

I used to think my lucky days made me  
different somehow—"some angel  
payin' my way"—like my mom said,  
but this poem  
could just as easily be Dewey, almost  
remembering me at the same party,

TIM SEIBLES

under the same groove: my fantastic history  
filed down to a few finger-pops and some *Kool*

& *The Gang*. It's hard to breathe  
without the delusion that magnified my life.

I sat across from him in class. We both  
wrote poetry. Does everyone secretly

believe they're indispensable? I stall  
inside this self    amazed by my face

which is brown and not remarkable.

**RICHARD O'CONNELL**  
**Translations from Catullus**

**CXII. To a Macho**

You're a big he-man, Naso, a real stud  
in public,  
but at home you neigh the mare.

**XCIII. To Caesar**

Caesar, I will not praise your camp,  
nor lick the backside of your stamp.

**CV. Because It's There**

Prick keeps trying to assault the Piplean mount  
with his poems. He ought to carry oxygen.

**CVI. Going, Gone**

You see an apt lad walking with an auctioneer  
and right away you know he's bought and sold.

**XIVb. Fragment**

O you who hold me now in hand,  
do not recoil  
from these misshapen lines  
nor shrink from touching me. . . .



**LOLA HASKINS**

**Smilax**

O smilax! How deliciously  
ambiguous you are, neither asparagus  
nor mushroom! How seductively  
mottle-hued! In spite of your thorns  
I wade right toward you every  
time you beckon from the bushes!

**JENNY GEORGE**  
**Sword Swallower**

**1**

The soul enters the body  
through the mouth.

So the legends say.

I say: the soul enters  
through childhood.

**2**

A barn with its doors left open  
fills with night swallows.  
In the hayloft  
certain dark sections  
flicker with movement,  
the dimension of depth.

Finally, stillness. The moon—  
a threshing tool  
revealed in the diminished light.  
The glint of its blade.

And the earth under a black quilt.

**3**

Sleep: that ancient union  
of death with its body.

The child sleeps.  
As in—the child returns  
to the time before her body.

But the earth always adjusts.  
A blueness pools in the shadows.  
Dawn pierces her  
with its strange dream.  
The birds open their throats, cry out—

4

Before language, there was just  
the peculiar house of nerves.  
Now the world is buried in me, to the hilt.  
The sun burns off the mist.  
I take my violence out over the field.

**JENNY GEORGE**

**Bait Dog**

It's not the fighters  
bred on hunger and chains,  
not the losers, shot in the end  
and dumped in a pit,  
but the bait dog, the one  
who crawls into the ring each night,  
back bent, gaze magnetized  
to the concrete floor.

She crawls to me  
and all my lost feelings return,  
their teeth sharp, unused.

**JOEY DE JESUS**

**self-portrait as queen of adders**

you've sighted me among red lechwe  
lunging over waterlogged weeds, my snarl  
a curl slurring psalms of a mokoro sunday.

I am that claw or that hook in that mouth,  
that fullrot hole, that venomous root.  
I am metal in the sole

of your durashock boot, a body toggling  
after an asp's mass of fiends—heathen  
me, lurching low in the lichlands,

slaloming for meat—I am the flintlock,  
the longfang, harpooning through air  
the snare kept and coiled

on the battlefield a hoplite in scalemail,  
this merciless gab, both ghost raid  
and drone war, this star-garnet crown,

this whipcord in longhand is me as a snake  
the charmer, the wrangler, the rat—those too  
are me. and the slipknot. and the bullet—

**RACHEL RINEHART**

**Epithalamium for a Feral Child**

They have listened at your throat for root sounds,  
sought the Ur-language in your heaving grunts  
and sharp barks, but you are only  
a corn farmer's unsanctioned experiment,  
your teeth rotted and rank with bitch's milk.

Once they kinned you to a boy, needle-boned and reared  
in his father's aviary. Seeing you, he winnowed and chirruped  
for his finch mother, his robin aunts.  
They tore you from his neck in a spray  
of inexplicable feathers.

Yet you charmed the youngest anthropologist  
with your lean haunches and swinging breasts,  
the way words glance off your shoulders.  
There is, of course, shame in it—the wanting  
what nature has not prepared for want—

and in his furtive pleasure at your messes, your spine bowed,  
your quiet straining in the corner.  
During the ceremony you chew nuptial lace,  
swallow seed pearls like pill bugs, and sniff at the preacher's crotch,  
your hackles subdued in a froth of taffeta.

You will not be the first to enter the bridal chamber  
on your knees, your nails clouded and clicking the tile,  
nor the last to nestle afterwards at the foot of the bed.  
This will become your routine, nightly the splitting of thighs,  
monthly the measuring of your dark, estral skein.

Though you prefer raw things, things steaming still  
with life, he would wither you on greens.  
Though you can skin a rabbit with your eye-teeth,  
he will prod you to radishes. You will slink into the yard at night,  
fatten instead on worms and frogs,

and once an eyas, storm-blown and keening  
for its mother. When you cease returning for suppers,  
he will cease to let you out. For days you will sleep  
dizzy on stacks of field notes until you wake one morning,  
your nostrils thrumming with the scent

of his jugular. When it is over, they will find you in the yard  
crouched behind rusted scales, jawing your husband's skull,  
sucking, greedy, his white-shined bones. When, out of fear,  
they abandon a leather muzzle by your mat-thick head, know this:  
it will be worth the belly full of buckshot.

**AMY SONOUN**

**Wreaths**

—after George Herbert

**1**

Today my daughter testified *de raptu meo*,  
“Concerning my rape,” bore witness to the truth,  
The truth of that to which she testified,

From Latin *testis*, root of “testicles”—  
In the vernacular, “*cojones*,” “nads,”  
“Balls,” “boys,” and “stones”—and though she swore by none,

No man or boy has call to lend her one.  
Her one great role—played by so many stars!  
So many stars, most cast for just one night,

For one-night stands, no second or third trial,  
Trying, under pressure, to say what’s right.  
The right to silence generally conferred on us

Conferred, on her, an onus to speak up,  
Speak up and stanch those tears behind her words  
Her words could stanch. It’s all obscenely trite,

To write a scene—cribbed from a screen—that writes  
Itself, itself repeats and magnifies the harm,  
The harm, not hurt, it took some balls to do.



2

Cecilia Champaigne played her role. No balls,  
But balls enough to testify that Chaucer,  
Chaucer the couplet man, did take by force,

Did take by force what she alone might give,  
Might give and never have again. Released—  
By her released—he sent Cecilia ten pounds.

Ten pounds Cecilia gained for having “stones.”  
Chaucer’s stones lie now in Poets’ Corner.  
In Poets’ Corner canons dust his stone,

His stone and those of lesser English poets,  
Poets whose voices dropped a pitch at twelve,  
And who, by twelve, knew honesty by tone,

By tone of voice—the men who hear it, know it.  
I know what silence in a church won’t say,  
Won’t say which of these poets, pens at rest,

Penises dust, rests easily in such a place,  
Placed as they are so close to Geoffrey Chaucer,  
Chaucer the couplet man, stone silent, now as then.

3

Athens cross-examined Maycomb's Ewells,  
You'll recall, in *To Kill a Mockingbird*,  
A mocking, superior Atticus Finch

Inched Mayella Ewell away from perjury,  
The jury itching to deliberate,  
Deliberately to affirm Mayella's lies,

Lies she learned at the left hand of her father,  
Farther and farther, bent by blows, from truth.  
One "truth" witnessed on screen by many boys—

Many too many boys?—Mayella lied,  
Lied like a girl, lied *de raptu sua*,  
Concerning a "rape" that wasn't one at all,

But a confederacy—Maycomb's fathers'  
Fathers' fathers bringing rope for that "boy" Tom,  
Tom "robin's son," no mockingbird safe from Finches.

From Finches too many boys learned girls lie,  
Lie ballsy with their right hands on the Bible,  
Biblically lie about boys they know they want,

Want to lie *with*, not *to*: lie is what girls do.  
Girls do not have what it takes to testify—  
From Latin *testis—de raptu sua*.

4

How many met like Cecilia and Chaucer?  
Chaucer in arras, whispering “boo,” pen stiff,  
Stiffened most urgently, though he was married,

Married fourteen years, and not to Cecilia,  
Not to Cecilia but to a well-born maid  
Called Phillipa, like her queen, a lady’s maid

Made in a bed—her father a courtier,  
And a courtier’s son—a vessel, a lady  
Made—doubtless—in release, release most blessed,

Blessed by the church, and with his wife ordained,  
Ordained the one vessel of his seed. How many?  
How many met like Cecilia and Chaucer?

Met Chaucer, and made him ache—so he did find—  
And finding make, make in his chamber, make  
To understand him, at a feast, in half-light

Half-cast and half-withheld by torches,  
Torches, sconces, tapestries, or in some crook,  
Crooked while his one vessel Phillipa danced her part,

Her part in a new reel, and rushed to enter,  
To enter as he entered, in a rush, to reel,  
And reeled, too, in a bawdy house, as some say

Cecilia’s stepmother did run, as her family name,  
*Chaumpaigne*, French for “open country,” or “field”—  
*That* field, as it were—seems made for meaning.

5

Today my daughter took Cecilia's part,  
Mayella's part. For Chaucer stood a boy,  
A boy my daughter "knows," but barely—

He barely knows her, though they've met, this boy,  
The boy who got her stoned, the boy whose stones  
Ached—she passed out—ached until they didn't.

I haven't said yet how he met my daughter,  
My daughter, whom he knows biblically: she drank  
Three shots, pre-party, then he put a bong

Bang against her mouth. Maybe they kissed, lips  
Bang against lips. Maybe he put his hands,  
His hands, on her ass, in his room. Maybe,

Maybe his balls ached, like Chaucer's balls, until—  
Until they didn't. She'd passed out. When she woke,  
She woke in open country, no underwear,

Nowhere near his room. She didn't know until—  
Until she did. She does not know him sober.  
Sober is Athens, not Maycomb. Sober can

Consent. Sober knows "no" and "no" is no  
Double negative. Soberly she testified,  
From Latin *testis*, meaning "stones," and "boys."

6

My mother held her tongue and held a glass,  
A glassy silence seventy years long,  
So long that even I learned to see through it,

See through the nothing that her mother made,  
Made and kept for her, until she'd make her own,  
Her own to care for—silence, a man, and children.

(Six children, it turned out, four of whom had balls.)  
The balls it took to break so long a silence!  
The silence brokered, weekly, by her mother,

Her mother, weakly, strengthening in mine  
What I reject in me. Of course her mother knew,  
Knew for years her husband raped her daughter,

Her daughter tasting beer and anthracite,  
Anthracite, tobacco, and acid reflux,  
Acid reflux, like emotion mooted,

Muted, his slow bent motion muting her  
Mute bedsprings, release coming to nothing,  
Nothing for seventy years, nothing I saw through.

7

When my older brother raped my older sister,  
My older sister says, I had just come out,  
Come out—peekaboo!—like the film based on

*To Kill a Mockingbird*, starring Gregory Peck,  
Star of *Roman Holiday*, my mother's leading  
Leading man, who would not touch a lady,

The lady she wanted to believe she was,  
And *was*, unless she wanted him. O Attic shape!  
O Atticus, O Tom, unable to keep silent,

Silent as glass, as vodka with rocks, not stones,  
Not testifying, from Latin *testis*.  
My sister did not not not want to say it,

To say it is not Boo—is never Boo,  
(Whose name means “be afraid”)—it is not Boo  
We ought to fear, but fathers, brothers, mothers.

8

*A wreathèd garland of deservèd praise,  
Of praise deservèd, unto thee I'd give,  
I'd give to thee, who knowest all men's ways,*

*Men's crooked, winding ways, wherein we live,  
Wherein we die, not live: for life is straight,  
Straight as a line, and ever tends to thee,*

My daughter, who did testify today  
*De raptu meo*, and who does not write lines,  
Nor poems, which sound so round but wind,

Wind down the page, as Herbert's "Wreath" has done,  
Must do, in black and white, for poems' resemblances  
Dissemble. Life is not straight. It writes,

It writes us down, twists facts, makes images.  
Imagines, for example, a girl waking,  
Waking up sober in life's open country,

Glassy eyes open and no clear memory,  
Memory cleared by alcohol and life.  
Life left grass in her hair. Life's strong left hand

Bruises the page, as any poem must do,  
Must do, to do a poem's work—hurt and not harm;  
Hit hard and drive the reader to her corner.

To corner a mockingbird's no sin, you know.  
You testified, my daughter, *de raptu meo*,  
"Concerning my rape." I have bent these wreaths

*For thee, who art more far above deceit,  
Than deceit seems above simplicity,  
Forgive not poetry, but poems' complicities,*

*So I may live, and like, and know thy ways.  
Know them and practise them: then I might give  
For these poor wreaths, give thee a crown of praise.*

**NICOLE STELLON O'DONNELL**

**Advice to the Young Right Fielder**

Hold the glove to your face,  
cupping your chin.  
Peek through the holes,  
and the world will telescope out.

See your mother sitting in the stands.  
See the pitcher swoop her fast arm.  
Breathe in warm glove.

You have been put here  
because you are good  
at being wrong.

Be wrong well.

Catalog the dandelions,  
the lumpy lawn,  
the foul line's chalky trace,  
the cloud that rises from first base.

Stand, unready,  
in the green nothing  
you have been allotted.  
Close your eyes.  
Don't worry.

Everything never  
comes your way.



## BOOKS IN BRIEF: The Still-Living Past

Rachel Contreni Flynn

**Amanda Auchter, *The Wishing Tomb*** (Florence, MA: Perugia Press, 2012, 85 pp, \$16 paper)

**Jake Adam York, *Abide*** (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2014, 82 pp, \$15.95 paper)

Elise Boulding, lifelong peace worker and futurist, insisted that we all have a responsibility to address damages from the past and to repair them in the present and future. To drive home this obligation, she coined the term “200-year present,” a concept that envisions each lifetime as at least the life span before and after it. Within that time frame, we are charged with responding to injustices and needs—both human and environmental.

Amanda Auchter and Jake Adam York take up this charge in poetry collections that grapple back for comprehension as they reach forward for change. *The Wishing Tomb* and *Abide* confront, wrestle with, and mourn damage and suffering in poems that urge us to understand and heal. York writes, “Time is moving forward / in memory, memory’s // moving back,” and Auchter joins in, “This world is in me: // let us build ourselves again.”



Our modern memory of New Orleans is perhaps dominated by Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath, the governmental neglect of human need in trauma. Boulding’s vision warns us off such a narrow focus, however, and encourages a broader memory. Auchter’s *The Wishing Tomb*, her second book, offers a deep view of the city’s history and its people. Spanning from the late seventeenth century to 2010, the collection takes as its project the city’s complicated, gorgeous, and ugly identity.

Much of the authenticity of this work arises from that juxtaposition of beauty and horror. The book begins with “Early Pastoral,” a prose poem that describes an ocean journey to New Orleans in 1718 through “a nauseous lullaby” of “rain and its humid talk.” Upon landfall, the immigrating speaker encounters her first view of the city and is pleased by the lush landscape of “marshweed and sycamore,” but at the same time is appalled:

We never imagined so much water, the stench of bodies led away in chains. The mosquito-darkened sky. We watch the town open and open. The first glint of light, smoke. Soon we are standing on the shore and the heat stuns us. We

watch a man lead away another man by his shackled neck  
until we cannot see him. So many bodies.

*The Wishing Tomb* continually employs such disjunctions in its lyrical imagery, layering opulent descriptions of flowers, food, and music with scenes of struggle and brutality.

In this way, Auchter authenticates New Orleans: there are no euphemisms or simplistic portrayals of Mardi Gras or hurricane outreach here. Rather, she presents the city as multifaceted, its traditions both comforting and catastrophic. Disaster is spliced with natural beauty, as in this description from “American Plague” of how malaria decimates certain wards, where Auchter describes loveliness amid tragedy:

a mosquito dabs the water, glances rim,  
table, wooden spoon, pale scalp.

For a while, the children taste rain, wild-  
flower, sugared bread. For a while,

there is no fever

These poems swarm with obsessive repetitions: mosquitoes, smoke, sweat, magnolias, cornpone, chicory, beads, and water—always *water* swamping, advancing, retreating, wrecking—providing both life and disaster to the land and populace. The collection begins with the line “The question is water,” and does not let up probing what that life force and destroyer means for New Orleans. Auchter keeps the dichotomy always present. She writes in the voice of slaves patrolling the levee: “We are of the water, its moon- // shards, the desperate way it breaks through / whatever contains it.” In “The Good Friday Flood, 1927” she comments.

The sky tongues its way into houses,

into hot water cornbread rising  
out of the pan. Someone sings *trouble*

*the water*; adds flour to roux, parboils  
rice. Rosary-fisted, someone kneels

to the floor, says, *swallow me back*,

*Oh Lord.*

Expressions of faith abound in *The Wishing Tomb* as Ursuline nuns offer blessings and herbal remedies, and Marie Laveau, a renowned voodoo priestess, performs love spells and ceremonies to stave off danger. Yet spells and prayers never ward off the rising water; both the faithful and the superstitious despair. When Hurricane Katrina nears the city, some residents look to old charms, tossing holy bread into the wind even as they are filled with bitter doubt, even as the cathedral's statue of Jesus is broken by a storm-spun brick. Post Katrina, the faithful continue to pray but are deeply shaken. "Prayer at Saint Rock Cemetery" is delivered in a flat, perfunctory voice, giving tasks to a deity who is addressed with no name:

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

clear the rain that covers the broken  
paths and graves. . . .

At dusk,

we will light small candles, offer what we have:  
MREs, crucifixes, photographs

Throughout its history, despite vigilance, prayer, hard work, voodoo spells, and repeated rebuilding, New Orleans has *withstood* rather than *prevailed*. While *The Wishing Tomb* describes how New Orleans has survived chronic floods, fires, disease, and ferocious violence, it makes clear that survival has come at the cost of suffering for its least powerful residents. A slave caught eavesdropping has her ear sliced off. Prison inmates protest brutality by cutting their own Achilles tendons. When the city's black and Creole populations are hardest hit by (and blamed for) the fever epidemic in 1853, a mother implores, "What language / must we speak to keep safe? / Every prayer a tongue of fire, every psalm // a child's cry deep into the night."

Elise Boulding's work urges us to "sample the invisible," to give historical importance to the experience of those outside an entrenched power structure. That quest often fails, given the power structure, given the dearth of extant material. Auchter's book tells its wrenching truths in the voices of disenfranchised persons or sympathetic witnesses, focusing on the "invisible" and their often-hidden perspectives. In *The Wishing Tomb*,

women's and children's stories dominate, and African American experiences are central.

The trauma of the slave trade and the devastating repercussions of racial injustice in New Orleans remain ever present in these poems. Those who were never asked to report finally weigh in, as slaves speak in "Report on Levee Breach, 1816": "a white man whips mules / with a chicory whip. And our backs: // sweat-shined, marked." Auchter imagines the warning given before "Homer Plessy, who was 1/8th Black, was arrested for entering a whites-only railcar":

They will want to take you into the field, fill you  
with bullets. They have been known

to make a man disappear. They will call you  
*coon* and *boy*. They will yell *pull him off*

while showing you their revolvers, their lips  
spit-slick, white. No one will look up

Auchter does "look up" to comprehend and carry forward otherwise neglected experiences, including the pushed-aside stories of residents devastated by Katrina and its aftermath in late summer 2005. The poet joins Patricia Smith (*Blood Dazzler*, 2008) in leveling invectives against the criminally negligent response to the disaster. Auchter's book, perhaps gentler in tone but no less strenuous in its stance, speaks in its final section to the suffering caused by this neglect. These last poems are awash in debris, sewage, shotgun fire, and mold—they do not adopt false optimism or tease out the beauty that was present in earlier poems, earlier times. As Christmas arrives, New Orleans remains grim and devastated:

an alligator wearing a Santa suit

waves and waves through the dome's  
clear glass. Inside the Dome,

all the lights are out. Every window

black, empty. Inside the glass,  
the dome has gone dry.

Auchter's rich, troubling poems do as Boulding encouraged: they insist that history include the testimony of the fragile and marginalized. They remind us to return and make right:

What brings you back is the sugared air. . . .

What calls you: the music

of a gate opening onto Tchoupitoulas Street,  
chicory-heat, the roof tiles

in the black sky. The water. The rising.



If we are to undertake, as Auchter does, the charge of crafting a present and future mindful of experiences of those historically overlooked, we should heed the last poems of Jake Adam York. In his first two books, *Murder Ballads* and *A Murmuration of Starlings* (see *BPJ*, Vol. 63, No. 1, Books in Brief), York undertook a “work of a life, both countless and one” to elegize the martyrs of the civil rights movement. This project was cut short by his unexpected death in December 2012 at age forty. *Abide*, published posthumously, remains true to the project. In verses that echo Boulding's concept of an extended present, York writes that memory “reaches back, like the future, / which is just another kind / of history, a shape / for whatever's missing.”

Time flexes frequently in York's poems, straddling history and the future. Memory is made malleable by associations, and by the poet's meditations as a son, grandson, and great-grandson of Alabama's rural culture. He writes that family recollections emerge “Like my grandmother's recipes, / you'd get the idea / but not the numbers.” He acknowledges this blurriness as he attempts to come to terms with his place as a white man whose poetry elegizes “men, women, and children, murdered by men whom I resembled, demographically, by men to whom I may be related or for whom I may be mistaken.”

Placed at the end of *Abide*, York's essay “Foreword to a Subsequent Reading” describes, delicately, his approach to this work that required a “hesitation, a stutter, a silence in which the ghosts of the murderers may be sloughed from my skin, even if only for a moment.” The poems in this book are replete

with silences that allow for such contemplation. In “Mayflower,” an elegy to John Earl Reese, an African American teenager shot by the KKK while dancing in a Texas café in 1955, York’s spare language and lean stanzas reflect “the empty room / between the pines // that hold the quiet / of the song he cannot sing.”

York takes up the songs that might have been sung. As themes of water and faith serve as constants in *The Wishing Tomb*, so music centers and organizes *Abide*. The book’s title itself is taken from Thelonious Monk’s standard “Abide With Me,” which is referred to and riffed upon throughout. Many poems call upon physical aspects of musical recordings to act as anchors; they are written as letters “wrapped around” or otherwise affixed to album jackets, sleeves, cassette cards, or vinyl discs. This technique underscores York’s intense desire to memorialize and make permanent. If the music of blues and jazz greats (Monk, Sun Ra, Son House) is immortal, perhaps too the lives of civil rights martyrs will be carried forth. In “Letter to Be Wrapped around a 12-Inch Disc,” York observes

And I needed

this, this music, wherever it was,  
                                this elsewhere  
I pulled from its sleeve and spun

                                beneath the needle, this orchestra. . . .

I prayed against each night  
                                the shells flashed  
on the army range a few hills distant

                                which we knew would be  
among the first to go if  
                                the Russians struck

In this poem and others, York cobbles together uncertain and uncomfortable memories of a childhood in the 1970s. As he gazes at the Alabama night sky, sorting out his family’s place in the world, he tries to make sense of cold war fears and racial upheavals of the era. Without many facts to go on, he resorts to story, as in “Postscript Written on a J-Card”:

## BOOKS IN BRIEF

I have this purse and its coins and bits of story  
that don't fit together. So

I do the one thing the farm taught me  
and look away,

into the stars  
and try to shape the dots  
into myths.

Yet York refuses, after all, to look away. Instead, he strides purposefully from the farm to inquire about matters of justice, memory, willful forgetfulness, and responsibility. Then he writes poems that are at turns restless and meditative, demanding and comforting. In "Postscript," dedicated to Medgar Evers, York posits, "you are everywhere, / in the face of which I'd ask / how can I say anything, / in the face of which I ask / how can I say nothing at all?" In "Letter from Okemah," the speaker memorializes the 1911 lynching of Laura and Lawrence Nelson in Oklahoma, recognizing how easy it might be for him to shy away from such events, to sidestep facts and to disregard the few grainy photographs of record. "But I see them, I see them all, / and cannot look away."

In this poem, York employs a recurring metaphor for his quest to plumb memory and eulogize the dead: he places a phonograph needle on a vinyl album to bring forth music and history:

I hinge the needle into the groove  
of a hundred years' sound  
and finger the platen's edge

and pull it back  
until the horn is gasping,  
until the sound's gone out of everything  
and the wind is coming in.

He remarks that he learned as a child this is a "needle I am not / supposed to touch" and yet "I have to raise the needle // I couldn't touch, once / too delicate for my hand, / needle that had to wait // for my father's."

As in *The Wishing Tomb*, the lyrical poems of *Abide* circle and obsess on central images; York returns time and again to stars

and constellations and grooves in vinyl albums, the needles placed there, as well as to birds, coins, steel mill furnaces, juke joints, and guitars. Sometimes these images come together in near-ecstatic expressions of truth-seeking. The poems propel themselves in long, unpunctuated stanzas as York elegantly wraps language around an often-inexplicable history, as in “Cry of the Occasion,” an elegy for John Earl Reese:

so I  
can say something a little more blunt  
like thunder a finger through the bone  
peeling back the husk of the voice  
opening like a bird called into  
the wild answering

In this poem, as York writes of his poetic purpose of memorializing the forgotten or ignored dead, he claims the murdered are “calling my name louder than I’ve ever / heard.”

In another poem dedicated to Reese, placed near the end of the collection, York makes a subtle shift to invite others to hear the call, and to respond. He tenderly addresses Reese in lines that roll musically and urgently, proposing that we go back to the café and its memories. We should return, he writes, not to relive the hard facts of trauma but rather to honor what “was lived, what is written here, / in the night, in vinyl, in the air . . . / for you, if we may, pull back the arm / and start this music once again.”



Both Amanda Auchter and Jake Adam York recount moments of faltering, or “stuttering,” to move forward with the poems they felt compelled to write. Auchter admits, “Part of me / wants to watch the bus pull into the distance of a coastline // of frail houses and scattered roof tiles, then walk away.” But they did move forward to write painfully vibrant, galvanizing work that teaches us with every stanza, every hidden event, and every brushed-aside death. They have accomplished what Elise Boulding presses for from each individual: a “personal and interpersonal promotion of peace” that reshapes understandings. These poems add critical stories to our history, enlarge our humanity, and perhaps make that peace more possible.