

BPJ

BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL VOL. 66 Nº2
WINTER 2015/2016

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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

Please see our website for current submission guidelines. Address correspondence, orders, exchanges, and review copies to *Beloit Poetry Journal*, P.O. Box 1450, Windham, ME 04062.

Retail Distributors

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

Ubiquity Distributors, 607 Degraw St., Brooklyn, NY 11217

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.

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ISSN: 0005-8661

Printed by Franklin Printing, Farmington, ME, using 100% certified renewable energy

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Mary Greene, Design

Alexis Lago, "Tree of Indulgences," watercolor on paper, 2009.

www.alexislago.weebly.com

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

MARK WAGENAAR

A Reply to Du Mu From the South

Du Mu looks up from a letter he's writing to us
twelve centuries ago,
a letter edged with a description of the four hundred eighty temples
of the Southern dynasties—
what they did with their idleness,
with a need they couldn't explain.

Old friend, the same wind
that lifted the corners of the rice paper
around your hand
riffles wild white yarrow & black-eyed Susans
in the field beyond the burned church.

Here, as many empty porches & boarded windows as Southern temples.
Tractors rust beneath grass, county roads dissolve to gravel,
the walkers on the bridge
vanish. Where do they go,
the ones who move on without a word,
who leave toys in the back yard, utility bills on the front door?

Here, a little sunshine & a wine-dark spill of deer's blood
across the county line,
orange sun-spotted pagodas
of wild tiger lilies in the ditches

off the rain-tamped white dust of Elk Chapel Road,
a straight shot to the polestar.
So much I can't explain,
so much forgotten or unfinished,
if you can tell the two apart.

Old friend, I'll be forgotten.

JENNIFER ATKINSON

**After the Burning of Flood Christian Church in Ferguson, MO:
An Exploded View**

—*in the manner of Cornelia Parker*

Arson undid them all | | all the pieces almost
Equally. The artist (Imagine her | | in rubber boots and yellow
Mackintosh shaking off rain) | | would take what she chose
And winch up those pieces | | suspending each on its own
Wire. A congregation of shards | | to abstract from the ruin quiet
Form. Parker would retrieve | | from the wreck and char silver
Tacks *By the rivers of Babylon* | | a fork a flattened silver-
Plated plate a cut-glass | | earring riffles of ash-
And gold-edged pages dog-ears | | and thumb-smears rests half-
Notes and time signatures | | the warped candle snuffer
The image of God as a rock | | a hen fire an anchor
A word a man a potter | | with clay underneath her nails
Pink-flushed puffs of fiberglass | | insulation keys a copper
And verdigris elbow of pipe | | the choir's indrawn breath
Before its first anthem | | *the words of our mouths and meditations*
The stink of burnt foam-rubber | | ozone tobacco and sweat
A bullet cast from melted | | trumpet brass easy
Sleep a cymbal and clang | | clang clang clang . . .
(How long can this listing | | and winching go on? Not

→

JENNIFER ATKINSON

Seven but seventy times | | seven wrongs and forgivens

Hundreds of ingots of lead | | hang in the air a sooty

Cloud of witnesses a pending | | storm Can you see it now?)

How can we sing | | bent notes a bent

Cup turned upside-down | | *We hang our harps in the willows*

Raze raze remember | | *my chief joy my son*

Head dashed against | | *a stone May the words*

Mouth heart harp | | Psalm 137

There we sat down | | *and remembered*

JENNIFER ATKINSON

The Homophonic Translation of Birdsong

—after Alan Sonfist's Time Landscape

Like leaves to the trees, the leaves come—
Serrated, palmate, lobed, entire.

Never a sycamore leaf to a birch or a birch to a maple branch.
No errors, no revisions. Natural

As in according to its nature, the code inscribed
In its green charter and by-laws.

Which is not to say the coming is easy.

Like a sparrow pecking among the gravel
Or winnowing dust for seed,

Like a catbird eating ants from a witch-hazel wand
Or a towhee thrashing about in dry leaf-fall,

The titmouse sings. From inside the nightshade
She sings *cheater, cheater! teacher, teacher!* Repeatedly.

Which is not to say she is wrong either way.

NICELLE DAVIS

The Poster Reads: Active Shooter Event

You mistake it for a college band flyer or haunted house ad—faceless grim reaper, no, hoodie without a face—and this is why you don't understand when six cops burst into your classroom, point pistols at your head, press fingers where bullets would go, say

You're dead

then turn toward your students but mostly your favorite, Lisa, who you'd bet a silver dollar on getting out. Guns aim: they die. Dead, you see for the first time how young Lisa is, how skinny, how black. Alive, you saw none of this, knew her by her smile. Front row, she's smiling now, as though teeth could shield a bullet. The guns look at your students, and the cops say

You're all dead

and you die again. When they leave, you lock the door, sit in the dark together, just like the poster must have instructed. After an hour, Lisa admits she's pissed herself. You walk out to see what's really going on. This is California, so the center of the building has no roof; a tree grows in the courtyard. On the first floor, Mental Health offices. Second floor, Child Services. Instructors crack jokes about one-stop shopping. You could shop here. You find yourself cracking. You think of the next two classes you have to teach today—will guns attend? You think of the girl who came to class in her bra. *I paid \$20 for this. I want people to see it.* It's beautiful—and truth, you understand \$20 because you live here, too, so you tell her to take a seat, and you continue lecturing on how it was, the mothers binding the babies' feet, cutting off first their daughters' toes then their heels. You teach about blood and where it comes from. You remember Ms. M just back from Iraq on the day you read "Ode to a Nightingale" out loud. At the line, "Thou wast not born for death," she threw a chair at you and shouted, *You want us to feel stupid.* So you said, *Outside, now.* And there she fell and kept on falling like a baby in your arms. You offered a different assignment, a different way of talking to each other. You told her what you couldn't before: you don't know what a good

→

chance is anymore, other than it implies something different might happen, and she asked, *How can you not know? You're the teacher.* She used what you taught about descriptive language in her next paper on the effects of PTSD and being raped by her own unit. Again you see the gun, Lisa's face, and tears seem the only substitute for bleeding. You feel so full of blood you might break open. Lately you cry all the time, mostly in your car. This is California, so you can drive away half of every day, but you're not in your car now, and Lisa's waiting in the dark, wet and ashamed. When you ask the cops, they say you should have read the poster. When you ask the cops, they say they were just having a little fun. And you believe them, these men you talked to just the other day about pumping rubbing alcohol out of your neighbor's belly. *We're just fighting to keep the whole thing from going up in flames,* and you thought *thing* as in person when they meant *thing* as in neighborhood, and you felt lost at your own front door. Now you see Lisa's smile—a light that burns nothing. There's a grid you want to get on, help others get on, lines like a road toward being counted as human. You'd give anything for your car right now, to do as you teach: bet that silver dollar on yourself and get the hell out. To be seen, recognized, not for dead but as bleeding—you were dead, but now you're bleeding. You look at the poster the cop put in your hands:

Make Yourself Invisible.

Your Life Depends On It.

ANN KENISTON

Ash Ode

Like ash, which sifts
through fingers, then

is washed away, the emblem
of her vanishing

ensures more vanishing.
The outline beneath

the painted form
came first. Or an early

study, blurred because
it was left out in the rain. Here

is where the elegy
inserts itself like something sticky

pressed over what she was,
this replica I worked to make, then

came to love, then after
it vanished had to start over.

ANN KENISTON
Unconscious Ode

it is beautiful
to touch a surface

as if there exists

an underneath
that can't be touched—

hidden, *filled*

with light of all kinds
like seeing a heart

on ultrasound, its feathery

valves opening
and closing—

a shape, aberration

or movement visible only
when something adjacent

is probed with out-of-date tools

since this artifact never
existed at all in the ordinary way,

its obsolescence built in

from the start, just
as its advocates

might have predicted.

JEFF WHITNEY

Terra Firma

*Beat, heart . . . Not everything
Has been swallowed by the earth.*
—Antonio Machado, “Hope says . . .”

1

Today I won't think about dying
alone in a house with no windows,
won't remember my grandmother
remembering us less each time,
won't imagine what happened
in Lebanon, won't remember
that bloated tongue of the river
licking town gone, won't paint quiet
fields of dead horses in Hungary,
so many I didn't think there was
a name for it, but there is, *dead horses*,
I can't not say it, can't not
imagine a version of Saturn
eating his only son, holding him
by the ankles like a chicken
and dipping him into his mouth
head first like some kind of horror
one thinks can only exist in paint
or in dream, and I know grief
is a two-dollar word, I know
spent bullets like bodies of insects
after the feverish swarm, after
the frantic air emptied and went
quiet, and birds like gods picked up
the mess, starving mouths blessing
the silence. This is me starting a war
with every shadow. This is me lying
down like any animal in a field of snow.

2

A field is old fires as a building is a future toppling.
A woman goes to bed as what she wants to be.
There is the question of what to do with hours
when hours are the only thing one has. You know this
is wheat, but you don't call it so. That stone in your hand

→

is not a bird. That light is only reflection. Pick a bullet up
and it will tell you what it wants: to go fast into the other side
of a thing. I want something to say about red barns
and needles kissing forearms. It's too easy to make a tragedy
of a body, to reach without prompting the word
holy, oh *holy*. Ruin, you are my brother. Don't die.

3

Some days all you can do is whisper mountains
into existence, walk through town where no one talks
about the silver of stars or the haunting flight
of bats. There is nothing you can do
about some bullets or the people they find.
Heaven is a person knocking on our ears.
Let children run naked through the house.
Let chickens hang spilling their red galaxies on the floor,
pretty things who have learned the secret to flight
is not hollow bones or wings.

4

I'll be goddamned if the birds ever stop
being a wonder, the scatter and coming back
of them, the sudden space of what's left.

A flag can be dead at the top of a pole,
but this has nothing to do with the flag.

A bomb can light a face unfamiliar.
What has your friend lost that you won't?

What is the purpose of world's slow bleed
if everything goes? Yes, pumpernickel, yes
house. Hush now. There, there.

CHRIS HAVEN
Instant Replay

—after Anne Waldman

Back back before the days of instant replay things only happened once. If there was an explosion the concussion of it concussion of it had its moment in time time and then went away like smoke smoke in the air. Those in the area would turn turn their heads and that was their one chance to see see what they had already felt. Before the camera nobody knew just what a horse's legs legs looked like in motion. Only an artist could imagine imagine the unimaginable. Now the video camera is our artist stuck in a loop loop of the same thing thing so we believe everything happens again happens again. This time each new time it's different it is. Pause and zoom zoom. Freeze freeze the moments. Call them real. We know so much more much more than we did before. We are so much more real real. When someone blows up, it's time to cry cry. Cry.

JASON TANDON

Discipline

You feel it coming.
An incommensurate anger.
The gesture your father made
like a butcher hacking through bone.

What must your face look like
for your son's to look like this?

There's no paddle, no switch.
When you're at the table
making noise with your peas,
you'll close your mouth. Beg pardon.

RICARDO PAU-LLOSA

Manifold

The trowel of rain levels the road with puddles,
mirrors that tame the now-filled depths.
Some pools rim crevice and potholes,
but straight down the center of the lane
two rails shimmer to denote the width
a world of tires has faulted into tread.
Could keep the car on course by habit alone.
All direction asks is precedent.

RICARDO PAU-LLOSA

Dove Lake

—after *Thomas Eakins's Swimming (1885)*

The figures mount, peak, and dive into stasis,
a frieze of youthful males in the raw that yet
reflects, as does a chain of words, a sentence's
urgent roll into a single thought.

Such is flesh, even the undesired,
that—brute as sun, untainted by veil—
it should lure the fervent eye from its tired
enclave. And yet, beauty will never fail

to riddle the mind, impugn the soft contrivance,
baffle instinct. The candid joys, in trance
with bodies on rock and font, close and dance

in verticals and pyramid, in measures,
that the compassing eye might guard the fissure—
dressed and healed—between scene and desire.

JOHN C. MORRISON

Furrow

Dizzy to rip past shirttail
and panties
I lay down on my back

on rough clods in the old
furrow left fallow
scraggly spring grass

now golden around us I was
as underground
as I have ever been halfway

in shallow grave a plow-depth
closer to corpse
and I whimpered to hurry

hurry before a boy out hunting
quail might kick
across the dry field onto us

in our scuff and hum a little
bit of sky
over her new shoulder outside

the curtain of hair she sorry
for my back
and bare ass I for the grit

and the grind on her pale
knees the wear
on us enough we finished without

any sweet linger a tangle without
a moment's hush
to hear the crows dusted we rose

ROBERT THOMAS

Sonnet with Goldfish and Proxima Centauri

Of what could imperial I be jealous?
The white rose and how the muted spatters
of rain conjure red dots on its petals,
as if bloodstains would appear on the page
when holding a poem over a flame;
of the black moor goldfish and how it glides
effortlessly through rough limestone grottoes;
of hydrogen, its flammability
and its abundance; of the migration
of monarchs, their winters in Mexico,
how the ones who begin it aren't the ones
who end it, like the three generations
that it would take to reach the nearest star,
those astronauts anything but homesick.

ROBERT THOMAS

Sonnet with Rain Dance and Gitanes

Jealous of the one who does not exist,
never the one who does. *Him?* His dirty
Peugeot parked where you thought I wouldn't see
his French cigarettes on the dash at night
as I walked home on Grant? The mandolin
picker with his beach house? Who cares about
him? But the one with iridescent wings
on his cock and a range of five octaves
he can sing with it, the one whose dancing
evokes five forms of precipitation,
each more astonishing than the last, down
on the withered grass below your window:
I've never seen him but know he exists,
as the Devil howls and knows God exists.

ROBERT THOMAS

Sonnet with Abalone and Glue

You say it doesn't mean a blessed thing,
but don't you see—that's what I want. That's what
I envy. The ocean ebbs, revealing
blue anemones, yellow barnacles,
a lone, iridescent abalone.

It feels nothing for the moon, whose being
transformed it into this revelation
in tide pools. What human being would say
it means nothing? What it means is the most
blessed thing imaginable. The hide
of a noble horse becomes glue that holds
the ribs of Itzhak Perlman's violin
as it sings Mozart and Rachmaninoff.
Tell me what he does to you means nothing.

PATRICK KINDIG

Themistocles Enters the Marketplace Pulled by Prostitutes

From the chariot's
small lantern room Themistocles

looks at the crowd, the white sea
of eyes, the legs before him beating

the air. In most ways today
is unremarkable. The sun

is there, the sky
a patchwork of breath, the street

a knot of polished bodies
hesitating between lead

and gold. *This*, he thinks,
is an ending. There is nothing in this world

left to bridle. He carries his weight
like the crest of a wave.

JEFFREY SCHWANER

WHILE THERE ARE NO GIBBONS CRYING IN THE TREES OUTSIDE MY HOUSE AS THERE WERE IN ELEVENTH CENTURY CHINA, MEI YAO-CH'EN NEVERTHELESS SHOWS INTEREST IN THE MONKEY-LIKE SONG OF THE PILEATED WOODPECKER CAREENING FROM TREE TO TREE ON MY STREET, AND SINCE HE NEVER WROTE A *SHIH-HUA* OR STATEMENT OF POETICS AS MANY OF HIS SUNG DYNASTY PEERS DID, I ASK HIM WHAT HE THOUGHT ABOUT THE NINE MONKS OF THE LATE T'ANG DYNASTY WHO IT IS SAID WERE UNABLE TO WRITE A POEM WITHOUT THE WORDS *MOUNTAIN, FLOWER, GRASS, SNOW, FROST, STAR, OR MOON* IN IT, AND WAS THAT A GOOD THING OR A BAD THING, AND IN RESPONSE HE WRITES THESE LINES IN VERY SMALL CHARACTERS ON PAGE 219 OF MY COPY OF THE *KAUFMAN FIELD GUIDE TO BIRDS OF NORTH AMERICA*

Who can stop the monkeys in the trees from chittering and screaming?
They will do it anyway, no matter my mood as we drift past the trees

overhanging the river. A thousand years later I hear their echo
in a great crested bird here—he finally stops his crazy laugh

to pulverize tree bark on his way to pulling out a bug.
I feel through my brush the vibration.

JEFFREY SCHWANER

MEI YAO-CH'EN AND I, WALKING DOWNTOWN FOR PIZZA ON A MAY AFTERNOON AND COUNTING OURSELVES LUCKY TO DO SO, ENCOUNTER A GARDEN FULL OF BUDDING PEONIES, NODDING THEIR ROUND HEADS IN AGREEMENT, WHICH ON CLOSER EXAMINATION ARE EACH HOSTING AT LEAST ONE ANT, WHICH LEADS TO A DISCUSSION OF PEONY FOLKLORE OVER GUINNESS AND THE EVENTUAL AUTHORSHIP OF THESE LINES BY A CERTAIN SUNG DYNASTY POET LIVING IN MY HOUSE

An ant crawls across the crown of the king of flowers.
It may be just an old wives' tale after all

that this least artistic insect opens the peony by nibbling away at the closed bud until its thousand petals uncloset and cluster as if embracing memory.

In Luoyang the peony crawls across the second largest city in the world and opens up the city's memory that it is beautiful in spring.

And in much the same way I nibble on these lines because I like them having no idea what will unfold in you.

If love could embrace you forever you would feel the red peony around you.
If lost you were ushered home by the moon it would smile like the white peony.

The dewy eyes of the first glance of your first child
are a black peony and the ants scrambling away invisibly are every moment
you lived before that moment.

ANDREW BRENZA

Now

s n o w s n o w s n
n o w s n o w s n o
o w s n o w s n o w
w s n o w s n o w s
s n o w s n o w s n
n o w s n o w s n o
o w s n o w s n o w
w s n o w s n o w s
s n o w s n o w s n
n o w s n o w s n o
w w w
s s s s s
n n n n n
o o o o o
w w w
s s s s s
n n n n n
o o o o o
w w w
s s s s s
n n n n n
o o o o o
w w w

ANDREW BRENZA

Song and Dance

t r u m p e t s t r u m p e t s
r u m p e t s t r u m p e t s t
u m p e t s t r u m p e t s t r
m p e t s t r u m p e t s t r u
p e t s t r u m p e t s t r u m
e t s t r u m p e t s t r u m p
t s t r u m p e t s t r u m p e
s t r u m p e t s t r u m p e t
t r u m p e t s t r u m p e t s
r u m p e t s t r u m p e t s t
u m p e t s t r u m p e t s t r
m p e t s t r u m p e t s t r u
p e t s t r u m p e t s t r u m
e t s t r u m p e t s t r u m p
t s t r u m p e t s t r u m p e
s t r u m p e t s t r u m p e t

ANDREW BRENZA
The Certainty of Things

a b l e s t a b l e s t a b l e s t
b l e s t a b l e s t a b l e s t a
l e s t a b l e s t a b l e s t a b
e s t a b l e s t a b l e s t a b l
s t a b l e s t a b l e s t a b l e
t a b l e s t a b l e s t a b l e s
a b l e s t a b l e s t a b l e s t
b l e s t a b l e s t a b l e s t a
l e s t a b l e s t a b l e s t a b
e s t a b l e s t a b l e s t a b l
s t a b l e s t a b l e s t a b l e
t a b l e s t a b l e s t a b l e s

MELISSA STEIN

Playhouse

Under a collapse of honeysuckle
and its fury of bees, under a mulberry

canopy, its wavering thatch of green—
that's where you'd find us when the voices rose,

playing out civility: leaf-napkins, twig-utensils,
acorn-goblets, tea of wild scallion

and mud. Beside the garden's tangled
wire. Thimbleberry, chokecherry. Lulled

by the overripe reek of mulch, our own
quiet in failing light. All summerlong

we colluded on a patchwork of dried leaves
stitched together by stems—crimson, bruise,

amber, brick, cinnamon—to blanket us
when those voices called us home.

BRUCE BOND
Semper Fidelis

In a far room a child is listening to music
from the fabric on the hi-fi console

twice his size, no, three times, more now
that there is music in it, and inside that,

the leafy crackle of vinyl beneath the needle
as if some beast were rummaging the trees.

If I tell you the child is me, it is me
as an enigma now, a speechless witness

just inches from the black fabric that is,
in turn, inches from a distant parade.

My father is away on business, and so
he takes the shape of records that he bought us,

or rather the family before I came
into the world a stranger, though I must have

felt less of one, somewhere, far away.
The trombones are serious about getting

from here to there, and since I know them
as funny in cartoons, I hear their laughter

in a military number scored for horns.
It is November 1957,

and armies with their morning glories of brass
march our streets every Veterans Day,

me the glad hat on my father's head
and shoulders, bouncing in time because he bounced.

I still hear the trumpets' high sentence,
how they walk in time a flowered street

to reach their full crescendo as they pass.
Always America in songs and pledges

BRUCE BOND

whose gratitude is too powerful
to be clear, like a boy's shadow

small inside his father's as it grows.
I do not quite know what people love

when they love their country, but for me
the music of affection begins with one

room, one face, one patriot, say, who
served on a warship in the Sea of Japan.

Mostly his stories go so far and then
trail off when things turn dreadful or boring.

Hard to tell. All I see is my father
before a photo of his destroyer drawn

across the shadow of the Golden Gate.
How patient his stare, a long time now

entering the ash-white fog in silence.
How small his body inside the visual

music of the harbor, the great wet chill
that flags the mast, the pallor of surrender.

MILLER OBERMAN

Who People Are

My mother's people came from France,
from Germany, came from money, came
to New York, to Philadelphia,
went to San Francisco, to Alaska, were
furriers, left us photographs, lithographs,
tintypes of tiny ladies in huge hats,
of bearded gentlemen standing up
straight in Union blue, little girls
in ermine, bear, elk, seal, who sat
in huge chairs with flashing eyes,
who died young. They left us stained
glass windows in synagogues, left
graves off the Jackie Robinson Parkway.

You wanted to be a window washer.
I wanted to ride in horse races
across the desert. We met in the city.
We met in a graveyard. We met
as my father's body was cooling.
Our eyes locked in the yard
as his body was washed and shrouded,
as crockery was shattered, two
blue shards laid over his eyes.

I was nearly a corpse, white-bellied
fish floating down the James.
You were a bear, I was a wolf,
you were a lion, one minute satisfied,
starving the next. I was a mossy place
to kneel on, you were a candle,
you were a singer, I was a river,
I was a soldier, I was a black suit,
you were a black shawl, I was dust
in the sun, you were a window washer.

MICHAEL BAZZETT

In the Himalayas

1

I climbed the mountain
to where the old man sat
nested in his white beard.

Look to the moon, he said,
and learn that you will be
shaved down to nothing;

you will be skinned clean;
you will be eaten by sky
and become only darkness.

Okay, I said. Point taken.

That was when I noticed
he was levitating
about an inch above the granite.

Can you go any higher?
I asked.

Not really, he said,
but I can do this—

And he gave a gentle push
using only his fingertips
and coasted over the rock
like butter in a warm pan.

Would you like to try it?

I nodded, reached out
and gave him a firm nudge
as I would a plastic puck

riding its cushion of air
on an air hockey table
in a suburban basement

only realizing my error
once his bewildered face
glided over

the edge of the cliff.

2

The next guy looked
pretty much like the first:
turban, lotus position, etc.

As soon as I arrived,
he started speaking:

The moon instructs us
how to be whittled,
sliver by sliver,
like a shard of bone—

Got it, I nodded.

He looked at me kind of
quizzical and suspicious

and maybe a little
disappointed, like
he was just getting warmed up.

He opened his mouth
to offer a bit more,
but I held up my hand:

Seriously, man. Duly noted.
The first guy filled me in.

His eyes lit with delight.
You know Kevin?

I smiled and nodded,
like I was chuckling at
what a rascal Kevin was:

Dude lives on the edge.
Know what I'm saying?

It's the Himalayas, man,
he said, his smile vanishing.
We all live on the edge.

3

The jails in the Himalayas
are not nearly as cold
as one might expect.

They are also unexpectedly
generous with the yak butter
and the secondhand tea.

So much of life is about
managing expectations,
I thought. I reached

to scratch my head,
forgetting for a moment
the bamboo slivers

beneath my fingernails
and the iron cuff
that held my wrist

chained to the wall
where I leaned
in the chilled alpine light.

4

Mindfulness,
mindlessness,
I chuckled to myself.

I mean, really.
Who's to say?

ALEXANDRA TEAGUE

**In the Case of Mlle. Zina Brozia of the Paris Grand Opera Versus
M. Jean Metzinger, Cubist, 1916**

Because a woman posing for a portrait expects

her face, not a radio sputtering

disassembled circuits, a madman tating

her collar like a hedge on the asylum lawn

loop after loop of lace and so many throats

the notes would never find their way

it's dangerous

calling this a body, art, what aria

ever sang out of the ear of the beloved

triangle line line circle

what portrait painter worth his easel

could believe as this one claims

this is the sum of what will be remembered

when she passes out of vision's range

as if the sum of 1 plus 3 were muskrat

just subtract a plum, then add a dirigible,

a spoon, Your Honor, this not

as you say, *a delicate controversy,*

not that model who sued over Aphrodite's

shell: in question, should she have to supply it

→

ALEXANDRA TEAGUE

was it essential to the pose like Eve's leaf

I understand delicacy: woman naked on nothing

in the painted ocean but I am not a ship

radioing SOS, dits and dahs all run together, an abacus

in a windstorm what Salome

no matter how wild with love, desperate—

cursing at her mother, could lift her hand to die

if she couldn't first distinguish

the dagger's fatal line from her own body?

SIMON PERCHIK

[With just a rifle, lean, taut]

With just a rifle, lean, taut
and though there's no helmet
one eye is swollen, keeps staring

which means the boots no longer move
—in such a silence you hear
a marching song, still warm

from the foundry when this toy
was molten iron and step by step
setting fires with ink from letters home

black, blacker till there's no star
where North should be—that
and why are you holding it so deft

helping it guide each night down
in the dew you dead still listen for
spreading out behind this dam

half hillside, half being built
with so many unknowns
rusting in place, one by one.

ÉIREANN LORSUNG

Telephone [1]

Up the telephone. Say *The letter was written
by a student.* Down the telephone.

A few days later transmission intercepted
by History. Say *Say something about the events*

in the train on the way to Frankfurt. Let
body equal crumple in an outsized coat

if air turns fair to foul as fast as Jew
turned to Jew along the eastbound

track. Say *Yours gratefully say this gentian
say I would be more than happy say*

Where are things leading with us. Up
the telephone. Say nothing to the no

one there. Say *And yet! Here!* Say
empty breath, wind on the line.

Down the telephone. Down the
telephone. Say *after all, say*

a second time. Since *body* has sense
before *ear*, lie next to rail;

say *for weeks.* Cover the ear
of the body as the train pounds by.

(Fragments in italics taken from the correspondence of Paul Celan and
Ingeborg Bachmann)

ÉIREANN LORSUNG

Century lesson

*If Bohemia still lies by the sea, I'll believe in the sea again.
And believing in the sea, thus I can hope for land.*
—Ingeborg Bachmann

Remember in 1919 when Bohemia disappeared.
Remember, Jiří, we were running together.
Remember the walk along the canal in February,
 when the world was beginning to get lighter.
And it got darker, Jiří.

Do you know the names you wrote on that paper.
Did you touch the old boundaries.

I pick up a twig covered in yellow lichen. You're walking ahead of me now.
In the evening we'll see an animal among the trees.

Only a brief map.
Only the blue color you put above our heads.

I have taken all the papers with me to our new countries.
According to legend the sea is still out there somewhere.
Jirka, what is the canal called? Are there still traces
of our steps in the branches? Do animals cross the lines we made?

I was waiting a long time for the story I thought you would tell me.
You were waiting in the future. I didn't hear you come in.

JARI CHEVALIER

Andean Strains

Wind feathering grass . . .
horsetails touch. From a horse's snout
a hummingbird's sound.
Wind in eucalyptus
spooks the horses; they reposition.

Lake silt in the horse's iris.

No one's seen the bottom of the gorge
or of thought or love—no one's seen the bottom.
Wind polishing metals in grain
Sometimes horses stand and sleep.
The wind is still—5 sleep, 3 eat.

BOOKS IN BRIEF: Shadowed in Sunstruck Fields

Melissa Crowe

Vievee Francis, *Forest Primeval* (Evanston, IL: TriQuarterly Books, 2015. 92 pp. \$16.95 paper)

J. Scott Brownlee, *Requiem for Used Ignition Cap* (Asheville, NC: Orison Books, 2015. 76 pp. \$16 paper)

We're travelers. Few of us stay for life where we were born and raised. We escape, or we're exiled; we seek love or work or adventure. Writers may seem particularly suited to relocation, to traveling light—slip pen and notebook into ditty bag and disembark, wake up new in a new place. But the notion of truly leaving home is a fantasy; in truth, transplants must always reckon with two places at once, the point of departure and the point of arrival. No matter how vivid the new location, home clamors for attention and, for some writers, demands its place on the page.

Texas-born poets Vievee Francis and J. Scott Brownlee contend powerfully with these demands in their new collections. In Francis's *Forest Primeval*, the wild beauty of her new home transports her psychically and involuntarily to the place of her birth, and once there she grapples boldly with difficult emotional terrain. In *Requiem for Used Ignition Cap*, Brownlee seeks reentry into the home he left behind, deliberately inhabiting its natural and social geography in order to know it and himself more fully. Both books test the boundaries between self and world, revealing how the culture and landscape of a place shape and complicate a life.



The poet's relationship to place in *Forest Primeval* is characterized by ambivalence. From her East Texas birthplace to Detroit to her new home in Western North Carolina, Vievee Francis moves through rich, vivid landscapes and is often seized by their complex beauty even as she resists it. We learn quickly that however much she may wish to maintain a firm boundary between herself and the world, she can't always control what she takes in.

In the poem that opens the book, Francis writes, "Don't you see? I am shedding my skins. I am a paper hive, a wolf spider, / the creeping ivy, the ache of a birch, a heifer, a doe." Almost against

her will, she connects so fully to the wildness of this new wood that it returns her to her own nature, what she calls her “nocturne.” Her current surroundings, the Blue Ridge Mountains, act as proxy for the raw and wounding beauty of her homeland, recalling the “landscape under [her] breasts / topography of pines, clay bottomland, roofs / of tin” (“Salt”). She writes, “I have fallen from my dream / of progress,” suggesting that however far she traveled from her origins, however many years she spent in urban or urbane locales, the “blinding / beauty of green” (“Another Antipastoral”) transports her to the primordial and primal place—home.

Returning to the South, a region Patricia Smith has said some elders consider “a shameful and oppressive place that’s best forgotten,” might constitute a risk for an African American writer. In this book, Francis’s psychic return to her Texas past may be unbidden, but once there, she plunges with courage into difficult territory, turning up both terror and treasure. In “Skinned,” we glimpse the internalized racism and sexism her grandmother endured. Francis writes, “She had been skinned herself (so to speak) / in that her skin was so often examined and found wanting,” and the speaker reveals that as a child she tried to burn off her own skin to “find the pink [she] was convinced lay beneath.” Along with this legacy of shame, the speaker inherits a crucial tenderness toward self and loved one:

She’d stroke my cheek and say “good baby,”
and I’d feel good in my skin,

in that moment.

I’d hold her tight and whisper, “You are the prettiest,”
and she’d feel good, in hers. I want to forget, but I have my mirrors.
And there she is, shadowed, in a sunstruck field.

We may try to leave behind the fields of the past, but we won’t be able to, these poems suggest, and we won’t have the comfort of selective recollection. In “Lightnin’ over Fir,” Francis writes, “No way to get away. / That’s how memory comes, like an incubus / over you.” Here the past is figured as a predator of supernatural strength, one that arrives in the night and enters with or without permission. It’s worth mentioning that Francis sometimes grants that permission in *Forest Primeval*; after all, the poet can’t be a constant resister and must plumb painful memories to make art.

In “Nightjar,” a dark ars poetica, she writes:

Not wanting to frighten it I did not reach, though
I wanted to. It remained just inches away. Reluctant incubus.
Crepuscular darling. How could I fear it? So urgent—
my muscles relaxed as I concentrated
all of my attention on the intruder—so hesitant.
I mouthed, *Lower*. I lay still as an invitation.

Neither the poet nor the person who wishes to achieve peace may avoid the challenge of a troubling past; rather, one must try to reconcile what cannot be expunged. The forest surrounds and inhabits us whether we face it or not, the wolf always at the door. “It’s licking your doorknob,” Francis writes. “You know it’s there,” its “tongue like a language // all its own / And you know it” (“Wolf”).

Even when she’s located firmly in her new (and chosen) home, joyfully occupying the present moment, that moment is tinged with the past. In “Husband Fair,” the speaker celebrates her egalitarian marriage, one in which it feels good “to tell him ‘no’ when I feel like it, and ‘yes’ and ‘maybe.’” In this relationship, she’s able to be open, generous, knowing she can also refuse, married to someone so different from the man with whom her grandmother lay. That man “owned so very much and her, pinned beneath him [. . .] his face a heavy drift / over hers, her face brown as earth below, brown as my own.” A gesture of gratitude for all that’s changed, this poem also reminds us that the past (both personal and cultural) is with us always, its harrowing imagery under our sweetest tableaus.

This layeredness of time and place is certainly figured as burdensome in *Forest Primeval*, but the speaker’s decision to carry that burden may yet yield blessings. These poems caution that reluctance to reckon with our origin stories, to truly know where we come from, keeps us disoriented, confused about who and where we are now. On the other hand, finding “the source,” Francis tells us, may let her “ride the beast that haunts [her]” (“White Mountain”).

In “Still Life with Dead Game,” she writes, “I’m describing the body tethered between worlds.” Indeed, her speakers straddle

various divides—home and away, girlhood and womanhood, fierce self-containment and tender, playful gratitude—and they seem unlikely, even unable, to fully disengage from either. Still, even if it's impossible to completely control the psychic terrain we occupy, Francis insists we have choices to make. Where, now, will we set up house? Once we find our little place in the woods, our sanctuary, who and what will we welcome in? In the end, Francis's house is poetry, and *we* are invited:

. . . up from my wounds—
From this goat's body—
Up from my wood-smoke lungs, from
The milk of me, comes a song, a melody
To open yours, then lick them clean.

(“Chimera”)



If Vieve Francis finds herself involuntarily transported to her birthplace, J. Scott Brownlee returns to Llano, Texas with striking intentionality in *Requiem for Used Ignition Cap*. Home after decades away, he too inhabits a body “tethered between worlds”— Texas and New York, past and present. This book also investigates the breach between the male role he was raised to assume and the man—tender, searching, empathetic—he's become. Brownlee's poems often speak through or accompany the men of Llano as they engage in traditional rituals of manhood. They're former soldiers, their wounds “proof // of what [they've] witnessed / outside church.” They're hunters who eat what they kill, laborers whose work shapes their bodies, swelling their backs and hardening their hands, and athletes “whose skull-white / collisions chorus like rifle fire” (“City Limits”).

Brownlee's poems wrestle with uncertainty about whether he can consider himself part of this community. A collective “we” recurs throughout the book, but he only sometimes uses it to speak from the perspective of men; other times he speaks in the voice of wildflowers that bloom in the town's ditches, suggesting he may identify as much with local flora as with the townspeople. In “Wildflower Suite,” he writes, “Blown here to bloom, we are one / and legion” and later:

We have managed to thrive

in this bleak caliche—carving out
our own lives without any regret.

If you stare at us long enough,
stranger, you may call us angels.

Through these personifications, so imaginative and empathetic, he seems bent on forfeiting the firm ego boundaries commonly associated with conventional manhood. For instance, in more than one poem he writes from the perspective not of the hunter but of the deer. In “Self-Portrait as Buck in *The Pope and Young Club Record Book*,” he writes, “Am I gutted out / now in their floodlight or has my spirit // escaped it?” and the concerns of deer and poet seem to blend. The buck laments that the hunters don’t know his narrative, and again I sense the poet’s own anxieties at play as he returns from an eighteen year sojourn with stories—a whole adult life—to which friends and family in Llano have not been privy. In the final lines, the poet inhabits the buck’s story with striking intimacy, imagining the scent of the mate now lost to him: “*sweet corn, salt lick, sage, juniper, lavender.*”

Perhaps what I admire most about this collection is that although Brownlee’s isolation and bewilderment are palpable, he declines to focus solely on his own pain. He struggles with a sense of permanent displacement, unable to linger in Brooklyn or Llano “without grief.” But Brownlee endeavors in these poems to understand the impact of Llano’s landscape and culture not just on his own life but on the lives of those who have stayed. The work in *Requiem for Used Ignition Cap* is personal, but its concerns move beyond self as the poet tries to heft others’ heavy cargo. He presses himself, for instance, to imagine “PTS wounds after ten years at war— / the fragmented Iraq in each soldier from here” (“Riverbank Elegy”). Brownlee reckons repeatedly with the power and the limits of connection as he writes about and in the voices of boys and men who murder their mothers, commit suicide, cook meth and “cough ribbons of blood” (“The Gospel According to Addicts in Llano, Texas”).

If it's hard to understand and complicated to love human beings, Brownlee finds some consolation in the natural world. This book is a love song—to the people of Llano, yes, but most simply and beautifully to its fields and trees, its birds and flowers, its white-tailed deer. These things, straightforwardly and unapologetically themselves, make sense in a way the cultural landscape never can, however hard he works to see it clearly. Brownlee's Texas is a place of Walmarts and Baptist churches, football stadiums and Dairy Queens, but it's also a place “where the river splits / light like a straight razor's edge” (“Disappearing Town”), a big-sky place of sun-bleached cow bones, cicada song, and mesquite scrub. If, as Brownlee speculates in “Catfish Heads on a Clothesline,” the spirit finally “returns to its source,” here—among bluebonnets, cactus, and catfish—is where he will surely wind up.



The poems in *Requiem for Used Ignition Cap* and *Forest Primeval* speak to the ambivalence we travelers feel about striking out *and* coming home, about distinguishing ourselves from those who raised us and returning in some manner to the fold. Brownlee deliberately seeks to re-inhabit his home place, and despite discomfort and alienation, finds empathy for a community that may ultimately not include him. Vievee Francis dramatizes the struggle to mediate the ways her childhood culture ambushes and inhabits her. Her poems recognize wounds as evidence of collisions with the world and as sites of potential connection with others the world has also bruised.

I'm engaged and moved and convinced by these poems: elegies and love songs lush and ferocious, tough and tender negotiations with the past and with Texas, written with both longing and trepidation from afar. A fellow traveler, always neither here nor there, I'll stand with these poets over the divide, knowing this straddling, this stretching, this brave reaching out is itself our truest nature.