

**ANNOUNCEMENT:** Alan D. Perlis, a former member of the *BPJ* editorial board, has a chapbook *Skin Songs*, (1977, 40 pp., \$3. paper, from Thunder City Press, P.O. Box 1126, Birmingham, Ala. 35202).

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**Cover:** Sondra Boggs

The poems in *The Beloit Poetry Journal* are indexed in the *Index of American Periodical Verse*.

**NO SIGNAL FOR A CROSSING**

"Lady you're a poet do you think about death?"  
I untangle my legs from his, listening,  
knowing it's himself he wants to hear.  
He tells me he dreams about trains,  
"Always the same dream, the train running me down."  
In moonlight he turns toward me,

but all I want is to feel those muscles  
singing against my skin.  
Our lives divide us. There is no signal  
for a crossing, no place but here  
that we can meet.

He rides me like a locomotive  
chug and chug and chug and chug.  
I am a field, marked in lines and grids.  
I am a stuffed dummy, tied to the tracks.

Like any woman I've been shaped  
by father, mother, husband, lover.  
It's an old story, a long story  
I've lost the need to tell.  
I think about surfaces:

the angle of a hip  
where lust and loneliness collide,  
the grace of a smooth back,  
that point on the far  
horizon, the last stop.

**Rhoda Donovan**

**THREE POEMS****The Retriever***for Jim Smith*

The farmer goes out so early,  
crossing his fields in search of  
a child. He stoops. He pries a find  
from the hard clay: an ant's palace, a dog's  
yellow skull. What makes him  
brush the loose dirt from it? Call it  
a pet, call it something he lost  
years ago, call it his life. Now he takes  
it back; he fondles it, holds it  
to his lips, brailles the sockets, tries  
to imagine a time before he felt  
the crop inside, the harvest of bones.

**Filthy Rich**

Sky a gray slab,  
the wind picking up,  
you say your father went out  
in such weather to jump  
coal trains on the steep grade.  
Then he was rich,  
running his hands over it,  
drawing its dark onto his skin.  
He heaved it down  
like a gambler who knew his luck

would run out, the heat  
would go out, and the world

go on. Sky ripening,  
the fields dusted with snow,  
your father came through  
the flurries, hugging coal

in his arms, his pockets  
crammed full: money  
to burn, money that stained.  
Each time less scrubbed out.

### The Fisherman

*for my father*

Back when I was still trying  
to have a boyhood, my father  
would take me fishing,  
and lie with a book in good  
tall grass by the dank Sandusky.

He wasn't fond of fishing.

So whenever he had to rise  
and pluck some sorry crappie  
from my hook, he would murmur  
soft apologies as it struggled  
in his hands like live money.

And he always threw it back.

He'd stand there with the sun  
in his eyes, and then kneel,  
holding his big hands out  
to the river like rusty hooks  
he sometimes dreamed of losing.

Will Wells

**THREE VOICES : DELPHI**

1.

I am the voice of the boy  
who was killed  
by wandering shepherds.  
My father spoke  
with the words of a poet,  
his friends came with him  
onto the mountain, Parnassus,  
over the shrine of Apollo,  
and snow was still high on the peak.

I was seven  
and my body was clear as Parian marble,  
my eyes green as the ripening olive.  
Why did we go?  
I was never told  
except I know how my father  
believes in old myths  
and his friends believe in his words.

They chose a high camp  
on the ridge where the bay swept out  
from rocks beneath us,  
and jumbled ruins clung  
like shattered wisps of an old eagle's nest.  
The sun sank into our campfire.  
I heard their voices  
in the circle of dark,

my father lifted up parts of songs  
in the old tongue and then lapsed  
into his own before I wriggled  
and faded like a spark into my dreams.  
How could I know what would await me  
when I woke at dawn  
and left them sleeping among tilted bottles  
to walk over ridge and gully,  
looking only for a sight of the summit  
my father had promised we'd reach that day.

They were stooped in a circle,  
backs and vests of lamb's wool turned to me,  
so at first I thought them animals,  
expected the bell-wether's startled face,  
but found only masks of wild eyes  
and their hands on my arms,  
and still I was not afraid  
because these were like the poor men  
of my father's island,  
the ones who live in stones and gorse  
and talk to their sheep and gods.  
They did not treat me roughly  
for I was the answered prayer,  
the wandering image of Dionysos  
the mountain had given them.  
When my feet bled in the long path  
they lifted me up  
and took me on their shoulders,  
and the old one who walked beside me  
touched my thigh  
as if I were sacred glass,  
the chalice of flesh.

High on the ridge  
near the edge of snow  
they piled rocks for an altar  
and whetted the knife in my presence.  
I wept and struggled  
when they led me up.  
I was cold when they took  
what clothes I had.  
How could I understand  
the gentle reverence  
they touched all parts of me with,  
or the strange words  
they said through my pleas?  
With love they thonged my feet and hands,  
with love they raised me up  
as if I were newly delivered  
from some prize ewe.  
The thin blade slit my voice.

I would tell my father  
*Live in the sacred body,  
let the hands that caress you  
lift you lovingly  
before you are set down on stone.*

They found me in Spring.  
I'd turned to bones.  
My father no longer sings.  
The old gods have fastened his tongue.

2.

I am the voice of the place.  
I speak for the almond trees

and the eagles.

We blossomed here long before  
the coming of altars.  
In these twists and curvets of stone  
the sun is always drawing us out,  
coaxing our flowers into  
the welcoming drone of the bees.  
Before they came we cast our fruit  
in profusion into the tufted weeds,  
and the wild goats grazed at our feet.  
In one place for all these years,  
in one place watching stones hewn out,  
white marble outshining our petals,  
the bleating of sacrifice  
while earth, that drags at our roots  
and eats what we leave,  
drinks itself black with blood,  
we have watched the ground devour those stones,  
the men loose their hammers  
and lovers under our boughs fall asleep,  
and our honey still flows in one place  
fixed between sea and sky.

We rise on our still wings  
only on what we feel  
in spread sinew and feather,  
and lifting in circles from perch to perch  
as the sun draws the air up into itself,  
we spiral toward our golden hole in the sky  
and hear the voice of air,  
deep breathing of earth,  
up past rough jaws of rock  
where we rest and peck



at the split and ruddied fur of the hare,  
 past the last eddy of cove and cusp  
 and into the cold river  
 that flows forever from snows and peaks  
 till the trees lose their shapes  
 and the temples are nothing but scars  
 and the bay is a finger a wide sea jabs  
 at the land, and we are seven circles in tiers,  
 our eyes turned now to the sun,  
 our wings on fire to rise.

## 3.

. . . speaks now  
 speaks forever                    my voice  
 the unending river  
 with no source                    no ocean  
 of destination                    always flowing  
 that they may dip into it  
 with their own vessels,  
 holding a moment  
 in the cupped palm  
 this fragment                    this still  
 clear song                    Apollon  
 Apollon . . .

## SONG OF INNOCENCE

*From The Doctrine of Selective Depravity*

Snickers Bar. Firm and rippled  
chocolate on top. Biting it you pass  
through caramel down to malt and peanuts  
back to chocolate. Caramel threads out  
you bite a piece off. Make it curl  
upward, look at it. Suck the air in  
sides of your mouth, chew, taste  
better, too. Chew. Watch  
feet going by, legs,  
hips and arms. Going. Right.  
On. Sun on heads, arms,  
shoes, papers. On ears, hands,  
dark glasses, caps. One  
turns, comes towards you. Sits  
next to you on your railing. Looks ahead.  
Looks around. Looks at you.  
Pops some air out of his lungs.  
Waits, then says *Oof*. Silence.  
Snickers starts to pop in your mouth.  
Tastes better. Swallow. More.

*Smack*. The man says smack. So  
wait until the caramel softens. Then  
say *fifty dollar*. Make sure  
you say it juicy so if he the Law  
you can un-say it; meantime  
you can figure *thirty-five you paid  
from fifty leave you fifteen* so you wait  
some more just wait he nervous  
now popping that air, and *oof*.

You just get down and walk,  
he coming on, around the corner where  
an alley. In. When you reach to get  
another Snickers in your candy sack he knows.  
You keep your hand in. Wait. *See  
your money.* He fumbling in a pocket.  
Pitch your shoulder at his balls, reach  
and feel for gun. None. *Hey. Shit,* he says,  
but got the money. Give him a bag.  
Say *Nice stash. Pure.*  
*I got more. Come back. Go.*

You move along the sidewalk. Hold  
your candy sack. The Hit Man not  
here, not today. Not may be.  
You are Innocence. You laugh. He always  
run you off from the girls. Not  
smarter. No so. She likes you. Warm.  
Say *I like you. Warm.* Hold  
her close. Lie on her. Play. Move  
her with your mouth. *Too much,* she says,  
*you're too much.* Then  
eyes closed, pulls you closer.  
Better than the Hit. You know. Because  
you seen it: Hit he got to hurt,  
he got to *give it to her* what  
she wants but more, too much, but really.  
You know. You know more because  
you seen and once you seen you know.  
Like the burning. Like the Hit  
he didn't think of burning up  
his mama. Only her. But really you.

*You know.* Standing by the Crescent Baths.  
Massages. Turkish. Some he-shes here  
who buy. Wait till Big Joe leaves  
the door, the dodgem. Through the doorway, puckered  
plaster, flowers, designs. Peeling.  
You can hear the steam, sometimes shouts.  
Edge in the dressing room. Poker.  
Seven he-shes from a place on South  
Park Way, the chorus line.  
They got their wigs off now, just  
poker playing. Stand and wait.  
Crinkle paper. One looks.  
*What?* asking. Wait. Then  
crinkle again. *Betty Lou*  
one calls out. High.  
*Yoo-hoo* laughing, saying *ante*  
*up*. Talking high and low.  
Door opens and a tall one pokes  
a head in, saying *washing out*  
*my hair*. You crinkle one again.

Saying *You just come along here*  
*honey*. You go on down a hallway where the steam  
room. Skinny, with that towel draped  
around, saying *What you got?*  
You say *Candy*. Make the he-she laugh.  
*What else? Something may be good*  
you say, *fifty dollars*. Crinkle.  
*Smack?* the he-she asks. You don't say  
nothing. Voice fluttering. Like a butterfly.  
You can see how much he wants. You can see.  
Looking at you now, reaching out  
*I can make you comfy* smiling

make his eye lids open. *Fifty dollars* you say. *You got?* Nothing. Just stands there. You close up the sack. *Wait* the he-she says. *Just wait.* Goes out. You can hear the poker up the hall. Steam in the pipes. Voices stop. Then *What the shit* and two feet coming, one bare, one with shoes.

You don't hide no place. Big Joe saying *What you doing kid?* grabbing on your shirt. Taking the sack. *Jes talking to the man* you say. *No* the he-she says *he's peddling me* eyelids open and breathing puffy. What he wants is just to take your stash. Not pay. That why you say *Gimme back my candy* holding out a hand: Big Joe saying *Candy huh?* looking inside, poking. *Shit, these is candybars, Durly* saying to the he-she, *what the hell.* *But it can't* — he-she starts and then he don't say no more. Because he can't. He better not. And Big Joe gives you back your sack and says *Git the hell on outta here.* And you take the sack and out of here, out of door, out of here

for now. Anyway. And you can see there still a little bag of smack way down there, hiding. Where it's buried. Where you buried it.

But you cry *I didn't do nothing man*  
saying to Big Joe, walking slowly.  
*Jes git the hell out. And stay.*  
Now passing through the poker room.  
Crying. *What the hell you do beating*  
*up on little kids?* they hollering  
to Big Joe. *Shee-yit* he says  
and then he put his face down  
close at yours and says *You'll cry*  
*some more. I hear that Shank is coming*  
*out this afternoon.* And picks you up  
and put you right on. Out. The door.  
Where the afternoon sun. Behind  
Nation of Islam. Towers. Going  
down behind the railroad, behind  
the police station house. Blue Light Lounge.

Which is where you going. But then a hand  
gets hold of you: the he-she, Durly. *Hey.*  
He still after it. You step out in cars.  
*Hey just where you going?* now he coming  
on. Blue Light just ahead.  
All dressed up now. Not in drag.  
Black pants, leather jacket.  
Hoo. *Kid we going to talk*  
*or no?* Don't say nothing. *You going*  
*to the Lounge? You want to go to the Lounge?*  
*Let's go to the Lounge?* puffing himself.  
You walking towards the little roof on poles  
that come out to the curb. Get under. Stand  
Wait. You have the feeling. Now.  
*Well? Well?* He is quakey now.  
Voice has got the shakes. You know

he got the fifty dollars. But  
he still don't want to hand it over.  
This is one he has to want, to hand it over.  
He wants, but not to hand it over. Yet.

Now the Fixer comes around the corner.  
You can hear them. Two inch heels.  
Shades. *Mmm* he says. Looks  
at you. Stop. Looks at the he-she.  
Wait. Moves his head. Sideaways.  
At you. That makes the Durly look  
away. The Fixer moves his head  
again. You can see the he-she put  
his hand in pocket. Fiddle. Pull  
it out with money. *Fifty dollar*  
you saying as the Fixer steps up close:  
you take the money, count. Put  
inside pants, inside jockeyshorts.  
Reach in sack, give the bag.  
Fixer moves his head again.  
And the Durly going. *What about them  
steam baths?* the Fixer says to you.  
*That one the steam baths* you say him back  
*I done that trick. He won't take me off.  
He don't even scare. Just a he-she.*

Fixer watches as the Durly goes  
inside. *But he got money* you saying  
*I know he got more.* The Fixer looks  
at you. *Smell it. Mmm.* Laughs.  
*Find out where he live* the Fixer says.  
He looks across the street. Where the Crescent.  
*There somebody else. Over there.*  
Nodding. *Um.* You saying you got

to go back to your stash. Then you see.  
Then you go. Shadows in the street  
now. Car lights on.

Go around the corner. Up  
on Thirty First. To an old apartment.  
Living only on the first floor now.  
Two walls of mailboxes  
mostly open. Last one  
on right. Three little baggies  
inside. Your sister cut it on the kitchen  
table. Put it into baggies. You keep  
it here today. In the mail, safe.

Put them in your sack. Then you hear  
the breathing. Know before you look  
around. The Hit standing behind.  
Bad. Badder. In the corner. Wait.  
Hold your hand in candy sack.  
Sound of walking on the stairs; now  
you turn. The Hit. Plenty mad.  
The walking coming closer. He turns.  
Out the door. Now the other door  
opening. *You lost your mama little  
boy?* Lady. Big. Maybe grab you.  
*No ma'm.* Standing looking at you. *Oh.*  
Looking sorry. *Well where she at then?*  
*She at the hospital you say just gone in  
with my little sister. Your little sister sick?*  
she asks. *Well yessm you say but Mama she  
working for the Man. All day. Hard.*  
Still standing there. *I ain't got no place.*  
*To go. So I waiting.* She looking at you.  
Swallows. *You just wait she says. Just wait.*

Bruce Cutler



**TWO POEMS****The Telephone Operator**

For twenty years  
she's spent her nights  
trying to plug up the holes,  
a headset clasping her by the ears,  
holding her in place  
like the secret the priest hears  
in the confessional.  
And like the priest,  
she stays up all night  
absorbing their sins. Her  
prayers are numbers and  
she knows them by heart.  
Even in her sleep she  
rolls them over in her mind:  
police, fire department,  
all night pizzeria.  
She wonders at  
how easy it is to hold  
the city in her hand  
like the formless soul  
of a scared man.  
Even the obscene caller  
knows her as his wife.  
She is the last one he dials  
after all the others have  
taken his dark voice into their beds,  
persistent as insomnia.

She is the one who  
cannot say no. And after  
she's taken the message  
and filed it in her catalogue  
of numbers and emergencies,  
she will put him on hold  
where he'll burn before her,  
a tiny light that shines all night  
like the candle the priest offers  
for the sinner humming  
in his ear.

### The Second Wife's Lovesong

The first time you took me out  
in your fast car  
I felt the cold, the whiplike  
touch of speed, sex's awkward jitterbug  
snapping steel fingers between us.  
You warmed me with her fox-fur coat  
which lay in the backseat  
like a sleeping child.  
"It's a fake," you said,  
"don't worry,"  
But when I put it on  
I felt the fox  
still breathing inside it.

Since then I have come home  
to sleep beneath her lace ruffle,  
to be the actress whose big break came  
when the star leaped from

a window.  
I think she is my mother,  
this fox,  
the way she sings to me  
long after you go to sleep,  
the way she tucks me into the bed,  
that silk-lined coat they made  
from her hide.  
I think she is my sister,  
this star  
disappearing again whenever I try  
to learn her secrets,  
a flash of red fur  
free as fire, free  
as my breath burning holes  
in the stillness of this room.

Pat-Therese Francis

### FROG SONG

I went down  
among the frogs  
and stood above  
the barrel of their song.

From their boxes  
in the hollows  
they applauded me  
and asked my name.

The sky went moonless,  
the sky went netless above.  
I raised a shout  
and flung it in among their huts.

And they were nowhere:  
as still as slate  
they watched me with their ears,  
the immense angle of me,

moving by their green cut  
at the road's edge and up  
to the unshuttered house  
sunk in lilacs and apple flowers.

Quiet. Until, one by one,  
they began to roll  
the round pulse of my name  
along the swamp floor,

gathering it at the root  
and threading it through  
their hundred voices: my forever  
amplified divided name

became their song and I,  
proud shouter, nameless,  
will not beg  
it back from them.

Robert Clinton

## READING THE X-RAYS, APRIL,

phalanges of your left hand  
 float around the pencil  
 you're gray in the dark film  
 floating how do i read  
 when radiation floats right through  
 your flesh of any color your white  
 bones?

----- inscriptions at Persepolis  
 carbon the soft-cut clay  
 Akkadians would wedge  
 by stylus, right to left, collapsing  
 full round objects into pictures  
 pictures into outlines  
 into symbols less than pictures  
 but enduring

scraped in the rock at Hamadan  
 -----if *mouth* is a square with the tongue    >=|<|  
 lapping to the left, and *water*    ¶  
 is a rain of gentle arrows,    *drink* fills the mouth    >=|<|  
 with floating arrows  
 as the phalanges of your fingers  
 move in the dark stiff film

-----you step forward white  
 as i remember you with dark about to  
 close in from the corners  
 slick emulsion

about to cast you gray:  
 your bones, the infinitely shadowed fine  
 lines of your hair, invisible

the print of your insole here  
 in shadow  
     Cuneiform  
         the three bones of your ankle  
     jelled and swiveled in the womb  
         poised as one Rosetta:  
     the back foot  
         Demotic  
         Hieroglyphic  
         Greek  
 your footstep forward      sprung from the old signs  
     Persian  
     Susian  
     prattle of Babylon  
 -----in such a dark  
     of information, clinched  
     in the cuneate skull  
 it's how to      read      the fine susurus  
                     of your body      how to read  
     your stepping forward from the film,  
 a line of graphite floating  
     over your wrist, where the single cuneiform  
     bone  
         one delicate wedge in a surd of seven  
     gray in the maze of you, writing;  
 it's how to read  
         the single message you send  
 there being no comparison in Hamadan, Persepolis,  
     or the shadowed style of other women?

**THREE POEMS****Peace and Quiet Are Not the Same Thing**

At the exact moment the gay queen of Carnival  
is crowned in New Orleans, ninety miles away,  
and farmboys from the dry counties of south  
Mississippi plow down Bourbon Street, feet  
chattering through beer cans and shattered  
bottles, their eyes gleaming like disc blades—  
at the exact moment the whole raree-show goes  
wild and streamers of purple, gold and green  
winnow down from balconies through the uproar,  
I am alone, stabbing a posthole into the hard earth  
off Valley Road. The beer I drank before leaving  
last night gleams on my forearms, back, my brow as  
I rest, watch dust a pickup raised five minutes ago  
settle back onto itself. I've hit rock just inches  
down, not deep enough to stop, and the gatepost  
must go here—I did not leave to dig around stone,  
this knot beneath the flesh. I came to this dry county  
to strike this one spot, to spend muscle and will  
against buried rock, to hear my breath lunge and cough,  
then rest for only this moment and listen to the air—  
the earth draws the dust down, quiet gathers and  
tightens like a heart forcing one last beat.

**Coastal Bermuda Hay**

There, across the pasture  
laid flat beneath the sun,  
long dry hour after hour,  
round after round away,  
tucked between the roots  
of a sweet gum, within  
a round shadow circumscribed  
by the brightest light,  
a quart jar of ice water,  
the cool click and tumble  
of leaves overhead, Soon,  
soon I will be there.

**Storm Watch**

I can do little but watch. A cloud bank  
crests the dark line of scrub oak and slash  
pine to the west of our pastures, rises  
like blood up an angry man's neck. I  
fortify the land still between the storm  
and my field of drying hay with whatever  
comes to mind: a hogback ridge or two that



perhaps will head the squall, or the thick gumbo of cypress and blackwater where rain could stick and spend itself unnoticed.

Light and shadow seize and release the field. The wind spins clouds around the sun, turns weathervanes wildly on the barns, points me one way, another, another: this moment or the next may signal the storm's course.

I watch, count the seconds between lightning and thunder, count to myself, measure, as if measure were defense against those smeared charcoal skies: across the bottom, the trees have disappeared into a cobalt gauze of rain.

A mist swirls around the storm's cold center, teases at the edge of the hay field, sifts through the windrows toward me, past barriers of earth and air and self-deception. I can do nothing but watch.

Find cover, and watch.

Michael Pettit

**WHITEY**

“. . . just a line to let you know  
Mom had a heart attack yesterday.  
Hate to scare you but at her age. . . Cora.”

The words lurch on the page.

I've been expecting this message.  
My mother is eighty-five.  
She's three thousand miles from here.

I grasp these posts to regain my balance.

But I cannot eat. I cannot sleep.

It's a sweltering summer day.  
We're riding in a streetcar:  
My mother, Cora, and I.  
Mamma is scrawny and sallow,  
with frizzy taupe hair,  
and eyes so odd she pretends to look at her lap.  
Cora, who is ten, is swarthy,  
with crimped black hair and brown eyes.  
I am five, thin, towheaded, gray-eyed.

My sister and I are picking our noses.  
Mamma whacks Cora.  
Strangers twist in their seats to glower.

Mamma crouches towards the women across  
the aisle: "I don't hit Whitey.  
She hasn't got long ta live."

Home, in our little brown bungalow, I droop.  
"Don't brood," Mamma scolds.  
The sunken eyes—one brown, one gray—watch me.

I jest *said* that. I was havin a spell  
with my nerves n sumpin come over me  
n I *said* that."

Days later, I'm still drooping.  
"I *told* ya!" The witch-stare warns me.  
"I jest made it *up*!"

Cora found a chum to cuff her about.  
I languished on the couch.

In kindergarten, with hands folded, lips locked,  
I was no more trouble than a trillium.  
The teacher coaxed me into motion with crayons,  
nourished me with praise.

Then another summer clamped down, like a lid,  
and again, I receded to the couch.

I think that was the summer Mamma  
jabbed a paring knife into Cora's shoulder:  
"Fer teasin Whitey! *That's* why!"

"Pray for one another," sighed our ashen father,  
and departed, dinnerpail under his arm,  
for the railroad.

"Eat!" Mamma begged me. "I don't know what'll  
b'come o ya if ya don't *eat*!"

I turned my face to the wallpaper.

"Hey!" she whispered, "How's bout some chin-pie?"  
She knelt beside me and started stroking her  
sharp chin across my cheek. "Tell me what ya hate!"  
she hissed. "Come on! *Tell* me."

that sauerkraut-breath sneaking across my nostrils,  
 that cudgel-chin digging at my jaw  
 “Nope? Then I’ll tell *you* what *I* hate:  
 It’s them high muckety-mucks.”  
 grinding at my collar-bone  
 “You know: a person that thinks their strundt  
 don’t stink. Aw, come on, Whitey. It’s *yer* turn.  
 What d’ya hate, huh? *Huh?*”  
 the chin prodding and prodding my pallor

• • • • •

I dreamed up a smooth mother.  
 I pictured her moving into the stucco house  
 across the street: a stylish lady  
 with calm light hair and bland doll-eyes.  
 “*Cora! Wilhelmina!*” she’d call in a creamy voice.  
 She’d be standing on her porch, smiling,  
 smelling like the art teacher.  
 She’d ask us to take care of her cats while  
 she went away with her husband, or someone.  
 “—*and help yourselves to lunch!*”  
 “*Eat! Whitey! Eat! Eat! EAT!*” Mamma chanted.  
 “Ya want the wind ta blow ya away?”  
 And her flatulence dittoed her distress.

Summer after summer, it was the same:  
 In August, when she had scratched away the small  
 gloss of school, Mamma would struggle up out of  
 her affliction like a wounded beast out of its lair  
 and make us board that streetcar with her “ta buy youse  
 a school outfit.”

Cowering through the shops,  
 that feral glance nabbing the customers,  
 she'd sputter, "Stuck-up Yankee!" her armpits  
 reeking panic "Ridin fer a fall!"

Steered by her clammy claw, I paddled  
 through nausea dense as pond scum.

Through a greenish membrane, I observed  
 my classmates: When Barbara's mother picked  
 her up after school for dancing lessons,  
 she fondled Barbara's long curls: "Honey! You look  
 so pretty!" After the Christmas program,  
 Shirley's mother hugged her: "Sweetheart! You  
 sang like an angel!"

One summer Mamma drove a hatpin into her wrist.

"Oh, Sisters!" my father sniveled, tucking his Bible  
 into his dinnerpail, "This is what we have to expect  
 in The Last Days." And the screendoor blammed  
 behind him.

Enter, khaki-colored, pillow-lipped Uncle Klaus,  
 on parole from prison followed by vinegar-colored,  
 bushy-haired Casey, laid off from the mill.

"It's Whitey!" Mamma bleated.  
 "I'm worried ta *death* over Whitey."

Hunched at the kitchen table, the pair  
 proceeded to dose Cora and me with the saga  
 of family-sufferings: "Nobody'd bleeve ve vuz  
 from da Nedderlunds."

"'Nigger in da voodpile!' dem Yankees vould holler.  
 'N 'touch o da tarbrush!'"

“‘Hey, Coon!’ dey’d holler. ‘Hey, Crow!’”  
 “‘Crazy-Eyes!’ dey called yer mudder.”  
 “‘Tink dat don’t jar yer slats?’”

Two uncles, mother, sister, all downcast,  
 all dusky, like Van Gogh’s potato eaters—  
 no, *duskier*—they crouched around me—  
 pristinely blonde, like my paternal grandma. . .  
 turned four gazes like beggar’s cups, upon *me*,  
 The Lily, youngest of the clan, as if the smudge  
 had at last burnt itself out in ME.

“Whitey’ll mount ta sumpin,” Casey wheedled.

Mamma thumbed her nose. “When it comes ta  
*backbone*,  
 Whitey can’t hold a candle ta Pickanniny.”

In school, I started confronting a compliment  
 as if it were a curse. Let a classmate exclaim,  
 “I’d give anything for your *brains*, Wilhelmina!”  
 I’d pull a wry mouth: “I’d give anything for *your*  
*health!*” Let someone sigh, “What lovely platinum  
 hair!” I’d whirl like a ballerina: “It’s *dark* in back!”

Pivoting on praise, flaunting flaws:  
 I had touched magic. I was turning into  
 a kind of peripheral princess.

But always that awful spiral of seasons pitching me  
 down from my domain, plunging me into those cauldron-  
 summers with Mamma.

My all-A report card was a diamond I had to swallow  
 on my way home. Upon entering the bungalow, I’d  
 collapse,  
 pale and dizzy, onto that couch.

My ailment accused her. Her worry wrung me.  
We marinated in mutual misery.

“*Kate Von Musson*. Is that my name?  
My mind’s slipped again. . .”  
Crazy-Eyes droned to the frying pan.  
“Katie Koenig that married that German guy?  
Am I in America? Is this 1932? Is this my house?  
Is this white-haired girl my daughter?”

that drone drilling through the stove  
“Is that black-haired girl my other daughter?  
Was my mother a nigger? Pa wouldn’t say.  
Agnes members her: brown, very small.”

the hunched form dredging the darkness  
“Sikes members her, too. Not Africa, he says.  
West Indies. Is that a country? I’m so dumb.”

Darkness spurting through the floor  
“Do my daughters have nigger blood in their veins?  
N will their children? n *their* children?”  
the bruised stare spilling riddles.

I lay there making the wallpaper bloom that  
Renoirish neighbor. *Now!* I’d pray.  
*If she comes now, it’s still not too late.*  
*Now. Let her come: This lady who likes her life.*  
*NOW. While I’m still unstained—*

But the summers came and went, came and went,  
pinch            pinch            pinch

Then came the summer that trapped me. I was twelve.  
My backbone seemed stitched to that couch.

The doctor pricked a T.B. test into my forearm.

Coffined on that couch, I sank down down down  
 through mauve mists down down through darkness  
 down into muck and stayed and stayed.

The three dots failed to swell like peas.  
 The doctor shrugged: "She'll be better  
 when school starts."

In a kind of fever a kind of delirium in an  
 awful heat I started sprouting started climbing  
 up up like a clematis up up up a snow-white  
 clematis I saw myself leaving here someday  
 for college for marriage and on a distant day  
 returning transfigured Adult Angel  
 with Radiance to heal All

I guess it was then my wraith-body started pumping  
 out those poems.

A scholarship swept me away.  
 "*—lacking Pride, they went for Pity, like a pack  
 of hyenas for left-overs—*" was a line of a freshman  
 poem.

Swoosh! A second scholarship.  
 "*—I dreaded catching my mother's madness, like flu—*"  
 went a sophomore poem.

A sequence of scholarships swooshed me away some  
 more.

Then a princely young foreign correspondent swooped  
 me  
 away for good.

Cora's letter nudges me:  
 "*—hate to scare you but at her age—*"



It's November, 1951. My squeamishness subdued  
 with tranquilizers, I've descended for a day into  
 that sooty hometown for my father's funeral. . .  
 Ducking her head deferentially as I make my hasty  
 exit, Mamma addresses my black Parisian veil:  
 "Sometimes I'd like ta see yer house, Whitey—"  
     thrusting up her palm like a STOP sign  
 "Not *company*. NO! But like a *mouse*, just ta  
 peek at yer dishes n things n yer rugs—"

*Oh, Mamma.*

*Always—In London, in Paris, in Hong Kong,  
 in Tokyo, in Amsterdam—I've paddled through  
 pond scum. For my children, often that  
 greenish membrane.*

"Dear Cora," I write.

*In poems all these years and only  
 in poems have I occasionally  
 digested the chin-pie*

Dear Cora—

*Do I pack the black veil? And swallow  
 the sequence of pills? And descend  
 once more the zombie?*

Dear Cora—

*This salutation stains this stationery  
 like mouse turds*

Dear Cora—

*Or do I fly back to you Mamma  
 bearing your Madness like a torch?*

Karen Snow

**WEEKEND**

The relatives and guests  
have found us in our summer house,  
have invited themselves on our vacation,  
and questioned our ethics.

Soap-operatic,  
they storm and whisper,  
wagging heads in the sane, cubed light  
of their customary bedrooms.

When we go to the beach, a mother smooths our sheets.  
How can we explain we end and begin  
in our arms as in the violent sea,  
drowning. That we thrash

and are held under willingly to burst  
to the surface speechless and savage.  
That the world drowns,  
and if we aren't in love, it doesn't matter.

**Carol Frost**

**I AM THINKING OF PORTALS**

I am thinking of portals  
tonight when the air  
is sharp as a fish spine  
and trying to remember  
how to plant  
and harvest  
by moon-phase.  
Long ago, Indians  
fertilized  
hills of corn with fishes  
and taught this to pilgrims.  
The Eskimo Mother-of-All  
dropped all kinds  
of fishes from her nipples.  
Once Cadmus sowed the earth  
with dragon-serpent teeth.  
The Zuni men would masturbate  
together to seed the soil.  
The plow buries itself  
in the long furrow;  
rows of sprouts  
spring to light.  
Europe to Japan  
the neonate  
is placed on the earth,  
Antaeus-like.  
We come out of dark  
through a passage  
only to turn  
and return to the tunnel.

How deeply we dip  
when we dip into woman.  
Always before us  
waits the bony mouth,  
the shark-jaw  
of the pelvic arch.  
All our lives we sail  
toward those white lips.

Carl Lindner

## FLIGHT

The woods' emptiness tastes of salt.  
Walking, our words puff into smoke.

The cold tells us to go back, hints the  
tangle of spruce is home to something dark.

Each branch I touch bids ice splinters  
ride the cold air like witches. We stop.

The spaced Y's of a titmouse poke through  
the snow. Wander past a pine seedling.

Drop into space. Days ago he flew  
from there bearing his message.

Tonight we will make love. Dream separate  
dreams. Wake alone in the same bed,

thinking: what if our tracks, here,  
stepped into thin air.

Paul R. Lilly, Jr.

## BOOKS IN BRIEF

Here are three regional books, each intensely individual, almost documentary, suggesting tapes and snapshots. **Wendell Berry's** *Sayings & Doings* (Gnomon Press, P.O. Box 106, Frankfort, Ky. 40601, 1975, 38 pp., \$4.50, hardbound) is a good introduction to this genre. This elegantly-produced little volume contains memorable yarns and sayings that Berry has been hoarding up like verbal "found objects," including one marvelous story, "Uncle Rad Milton and the Pup." The verse form, the poet tells us, is necessary to carry the inflection and weight of the spoken words: "memorable speech is measured speech." This valuable observation helps define the difference between raw documentary material and true poems, and it helps us to appreciate the art of the "documentary" poems in the next two volumes.

**Marnie Walsh's** *A Taste of the Knife* (Ahsahta Press, Boise State University, Boise, Idaho 83725, 1976, 42 pp., \$2.00, paper) opens with 15 poems as spoken by Northern Plains Indians. In bitter relentless detail they dramatize the experience of being a Native American today, with horizons so narrow they crush. One of the poems (through the persona of Thomas Iron-eyes, born circa 1840, died 1919, Rosebud Agency, S.D.) reflects the old lost culture, with the effect of intensifying the bitterness in the other poems so as to make it almost unbearable. This group makes almost every other poem on the Indian sentimental by comparison. The second half of Walsh's sharp-edged book contains poems "like a piece of glass/ we look at each other through."

(Incidentally, the commendable Ahsahta Press alternates volumes of contemporary poetry, of which Walsh's is a brilliant example, with volumes by "modern" poets of the next generation older. In that half of the series we have a valuable *Selected Poems of Norman Macleod* and what for me was a real discovery: *Selected Poems of Gwendolen Haste*. The best of these, from the twenties, distill the bleak life of the Montana frontier woman into

lyrics that can stand without apology with the poems of Robinson and Hardy. Haste is a real poet. All these handsome Ahsahta books are an unbelievable \$2.00 each.)

The third of the regional poets I want to recommend is David Budbill, whose *The Chain Saw Dance* (Crow's Mark Press, Johnson, Vermont 05656, 1977, 64 pp., \$2.50, paper) presents sketches of a couple of dozen inhabitants of a fictional Judevine, Vermont. Judevine is a real place, no question, and the speech of the people, many of French descent, is strong on the ear. (For \$5.00 you can get a 60-minute cassette of Budbill reading from the book.) Although Budbill's view of his neighbors is not quite as bleak as Marnie Walsh's, they are both biting, as their titles indicate. They both care, painfully, for the people they translate into their poems, but Budbill's affection pounds through in every line.

By now most readers are aware of the poetry of Greece's eloquent Yannis Ritsos, through the widely-translated *Romiosini* and the powerful settings of his work by the composer Theodorakis. There is now a volume that provides a comprehensive view of this major poet's profound and various work: *The Fourth Dimension: Selected Poems of Yannis Ritsos*, translated by Rae Dalven (Godine, 1977, 156 pp., \$12.50, hardcover, \$5.95, soft). Rae Dalven, who first introduced Cavafy to English-speaking readers in 1961, has provided generous selections from Ritsos' volumes from 1938 to 1974, together with a substantial biographical-critical introduction. Knowing the poet's history of social and political dedication and his years of suffering from tuberculosis, exile, and imprisonment, knowing how deep the roots of the poems go into particular areas of Greek landscape and history, the reader can begin to appreciate the triumph of the poet's transformation of these national and personal and historic occasions into poems that speak for all people in all times. An unexpected discovery in this volume is the section of long dramatic monologues, in which the poet's lyric imagination combines with his experience in the theatre to produce complex and moving characterizations: timeless but immediate encounters with Electra and Ismene, and compassionate contemporary portraits in "The Moonlight Sonata" and "The Window." The fourth dimension of the title is, I would guess, that inner world where the sacred

objects retreat in time of trouble, where the real man who counts escapes the counting guard ("Secret Independence"). It is the dimension of integrity and survival, and this is one of the rare books that can draw us into that dimension.

If it's a children's book you are looking for, here's one: Tamar Griggs' collection *There's a Sound in the Sea: A Child's-Eye View of the Whale* (Scrimshaw Press, 6040 Claremont Avenue, Oakland, Cal. 94618, 1976, 96 pp., 60 color illustrations, 27 poems, \$5.95, paper). Fifteen hundred children responded to Tamar Griggs' request for children's poems and art work about whales! This book presents the cream of these, including one unforgettable Eskimo myth, told by Marco Abularach, aged 8.

Leonard Nathan's *The Teaching of Grandfather Fox* (Ithaca House, distributed by Serendipity Books, 1976, 49 pp., \$3.50, paper) is a playful romp. The poems introduce raunchy Grandfather Fox and his primal Honey Girl in a leaping eclectic creation myth, bounding and squinting and fornicating through the world of Yahweh, First Gene, Dante, Ecologists, and the Lord of Toilet Training. If all this sounds a little cute, stay away, but you'll be missing a good show. Incidentally, it is good news that recent Ithaca House volumes are once again handsomely designed and cleanly printed.

Louis Simpson's *Searching for the Ox* (Morrow, 1976, 93 pp., \$5.95, hardbound) has an endearing autobiographical preface that throws an arm around the gentle, highly-civilized poems and draws the reader into the circle. Among other fine work is a haunting prose poem, "The Driving Instructor," and a broad satire, "Before the Poetry Reading," which should be required reading for all of us who arrange such events.

Readers who depend on bookstores and standard anthologies to keep up with significant developments in poetry are bound to miss a great deal. For example, no one should feel in touch with the full range who is not familiar with the books from James L. Weil's Elizabeth Press (available through Serendipity Books, 1790 Shattuck Ave., Berkeley, Cal. 94709; unless otherwise noted, \$8. in paper, \$16. in boards). Elizabeth books resemble each other in the classic elegance of the printing. The poets are similar in the

clarity and precision of their language and in the intensity of their vision that condenses and concentrates experience into crystals. No looseness or self-indulgence here: the poems have a classic control that deserves the deliciously clean format that is a Liz trademark. But there the similarity among the poets ends. Here are a half-dozen for a sampler; each one belongs in any serious library of contemporary poetry.

In Lorine Niedecker's *Blue Chickory* (1976, 80 pp.), Cid Corman, literary executor for that exquisite poet, has gathered the completed poems left unpublished at her death and added a group of previously unpublished works—a generous mixed handful of polished and uncut gems. The energy-level in even the tiny rejected bits is breathtaking. For instance:

The radio talk this morning  
was of obliterating the world  
I notice fruit flies rise  
from the rind  
of the recommended  
melon

Let that one melt on your tongue and curl around in your ear!

Another crystalizer of consciousness is William Bronk, with a power flowing in the opposite direction from Niedecker's intensity of sensuousness. She moves from the threatening vacuum to the fruit fly. Bronk's genius is to confront the menacing zero with pure mind and language: "If there were a maker I'd praise the maker but/ I think there isn't one; making is ours." This is from *Finding Losses* (1976, 75 pp.). The poet's calling is to confront the uncertainties of the outermost universe with all that he has for sure: a withering wry honesty, a human responsiveness to the urge to love and inquire, and a distinctive human voice. We treasure the rare epigrammatic poems of Landor and Frost. Here we have a whole volume to keep that dialogue of civilization going.

Carroll Arnett's *Come* (1973, 57 pp.) has all the succulent sexuality that its title suggests, in the two-dozen-plus poems of "Part One . Or Optimism." The three powerful poems in "Part Two . History as Such" divide into pounding double columns to speak out of the poet's own Native American heritage. Arnett carries this



drumming voice into *Tsalagi* (1976, 27 pp., \$5. paper, \$10. hardbound) with "The Story of My Life" and then follows this eloquent introduction with a scary little narrative "Out in the Woods," with several vivid vignettes of implicit violence—equally scary, and then seven medicine songs that brilliantly essay "a hard thing/ to trust the blood."

To savor the range of Elizabeth Press books you should have at least two more: J.D. Whitney's hard-bitten colloquial sketch of a marriage, *sd* (1973, 20 pp., \$6. paper), and Theodore Enslin's *Etudes* (1972, 89 pp.) or his *Views* (1973, 65 pp.). *Views* is outward-turning—wirey accurate sketches of brilliantly-selected landscapes, most of them in Enslin's Maine. *Etudes* is a winter book, turning more often indoors and into the moving mind. They are only two of the dozen Enslin books on the Elizabeth list, but they make a beautiful pair.

Robert Bly's excellent *Old Man Rubbing His Eyes* (Unicorn Press, P.O. Box 3307, Greensboro, N.C. 27402, 1975, 51 pp., \$10. cloth, \$4. paper) is in its second printing. Each one of these short poems involves the reader in a visionary experience, couched its own memorable music and its own pencil-point accuracy of external and interior observation. What's more (though who would ask for more) facing each poem is a haunting pencil sketch by Franz Allbert Richter—each one of someone or something I felt sure I recognized.

M.K.S.

Two verse novels deserve reading and invite comparison. One, by Ted Hughes, *Gaudete* (Harper & Row, 1977, 200 pp., \$10. hardbound) is set in an English village. The other, by Bill Hotchkiss, *Fever in the Earth* (The Blue Oak Press, distributed by Capra Press, 631 State Street, Santa Barbara, Cal. 93101, 1977, 320 pp., \$3.95 paper [sic], \$5.95 hardbound) is set in the Sierra Nevada east of Sacramento. Both are strong stuff, full of violence, gore, sex. Both involve the supernatural. Here resemblance ends. Huges is terse, dour, sardonic, sketching with grim humor a cult tale. Hotchkiss is romantic, personally involved with his materials, showing his deep feeling for the land and his vision of an idyllic world so fine that only the demonic can account for the evil he finds rampant.

D.M.S.