

# THE BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL

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## CONTENTS

- |     |                       |  |
|-----|-----------------------|--|
| 1.  | Charles Hanson        | <i>Solemn Creatures</i>  |
| 2.  | Alan Brooks           | <i>Winter Rain</i>   |
| 3.  |                       | <i>Indra's Net</i>   |
| 4.  | Theodore Deppe        | <i>The Gatekeeper</i>  |
| 6.  | Jan Heller Levi       | <i>Baltimore</i>   |
| 15. | Stuart Kestenbaum     | <i>Angels on the Interstate</i>  |
| 16. |                       | <i>Saint Francis</i>   |
| 18. | David Citino          | <i>Believing There's No Cleveland</i>  |
| 19. |                       | <i>Sister Mary Appassionata Addresses<br/>the Psychic Research Guild of<br/>Marion, Ohio</i> |
| 20. | Simon Perchik         | <i>Again the sun . . .</i>   |
| 22. | Dorianne Laux         | <i>Two Pictures of My Sister</i>   |
| 24. | Albert Goldbarth      | <i>The Gulf</i>  |
| 32. | Sheila Hellman        | <i>Ballet Positions</i>  |
| 34. |                       | <i>Toe Shoes</i>   |
| 34. | David Denny           | <i>Holden Caulfield at the Car Wash</i>  |
| 37. | <i>Books in Brief</i> |  |

*Cover:* Raymond Gloeckler, *Big Biker*, wood engraving, ca. 1975, on permanent loan from the Wisconsin Arts Board to the Beloit College Theodore Lyman Wright Fine Arts Center.

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## SOLEMN CREATURES

The creatures that we met this morning,  
their fur tangled with thin, damp briers,  
seemed to mock us as we drove along highways  
toward the jobs we want to consider heroic.

The swirling snow-wolf with frozen crystals  
on silver hair, steaming silver-colored mist  
from his mouth, howled along the cliffs of morning sky,  
as though his breathing would explode

our gray ice-dreams of gold and silver eternity.  
We traveled back through the years, the congregation  
of miles becoming faded in time, into the swollen elk-belly  
where we have lived following the edge of sun.

The first flakes of snow moved about the car,  
descending like the rhythm of horses' feet,  
as we passed gray fog-deer, silent, swift and wet,  
standing alert beneath a wreath of trees.

All the while solemn, fat crows were making preparations  
to wed the stones, as though our guts and life were  
unwinding on the earth, and the creatures moved as we  
spilled off-wind — shadows departing, deserting.

Charles Hanson

## TWO POEMS

## Winter Rain

"Rain, rain coming" the dogs proclaim,  
crying their news across the unseen boundaries of the towns.

"Rain! Rain! Rain!" a bobcat rants from the swamp,  
intemperate as a drunk banging homeward,  
cursing the sober and sane.

"Rain, very much rain" the foghorn lugubriously booms  
from the outer head across icy miles of swell.

"Rain, cold rain" a docking freighter blares  
like the last trump testing the range.  
And again in the dank dark: "Rain!"

Then...silence. Nothing  
in all that broken and hidden terrain  
makes a sound. Nothing stirs, whatsoever,  
except, perhaps, a fussy, faint,  
hardly-to-be-thought-about motion in the trees,  
a timid complaint in the outer branches  
of certain of the trees.

And the dogs slip into their houses,  
the wild things stumble to bed,  
the Taiwanese crew of the *Eighteen Venture* turn below,  
to the yellow light, beer and smoke,

and we go upstairs and lie for a long time,  
waiting...listening...listening  
as the east wind bubbles, and foams, and froths,  
to the eaves, to the ridge, to the chimneytop,  
over the rim of the rattling cauldron of the world  
and suddenly boils with rain.

**Indra's Net**

Indra cast his net upon the dark.  
Fishing for suns, he was; many he caught.  
Fishing for stars, fishing for moons, he was;  
many on many he caught.

Indra cast his net upon the dark.  
Fishing for days, he was; many he caught.  
Fishing for seasons, fishing for years, he was;  
many on many he caught.

Indra cast his net upon the dark.  
Fishing for lives, he was; many he caught.  
Fishing for minds, fishing for souls, he was;  
many on many he caught.

Indra trawled the darkness long upon long,  
hauling up galaxies, eons, oceans, peoples,  
past and present, never and future,  
nowhere and somewhere, right here and all around.

He was done. Darkness was empty.  
The things in the net were light, all light and shining.  
They were strong, they swam, they were fast  
and they were afraid.

They saw themselves! They saw each other!  
They reflected and held each other.  
They shone forth and burned deep in each other.  
It was lovely. But they were afraid.

Indra grew sad. His sadness went into everything  
just as it came from the fear in everything.  
Perhaps he had wronged, where he only meant  
to gather the light so it could shine together.

Indra grew sorry. He cut the net open.  
With a rush, the light flowed out and was gone,  
taking its fear and sadness with it. It was free.  
Only a little fear, a little sadness, still clung,

and a little, little light, like fishscales stuck to the net.  
Indra saw this, and seeing this, hoped.  
Hoping, he mended his net. With it mended,  
hope grew large.

Indra cast his net upon the dark.

Alan Brooks

#### THE GATEKEEPER

Each year on my  
return trip home  
I pass the Quilt Woman  
outside Gnaw Bone, Indiana,  
sitting beneath her clothesline  
where the Rose of Sharon hangs

and the Ladder to Heaven  
and the Garden of Eden.

When I tell her  
that she asks too little  
she says they are just  
old scraps pieced together

nothing special.  
She offers me coffee,  
sometimes cornbread.  
But this evening  
when Highway 46  
straightens out before her house

I find her meadow crowded with people:  
groups of women setting out food,  
men laughing together while their children  
play tag in the thinning light,  
the Quilt Woman  
turning to face me,

and images of death  
moving through the gathering,  
figures in white robes  
and white hoods.

I slow the car to look  
but young men posted along the roadside

idly raise their rifles  
and wave me on.

I take with me an  
image of home  
that they wanted me to see  
but not too closely.

And suddenly I have no home  
or have one and can no longer  
recognize it  
or have one that is inextricably  
filled with evil  
and still home.

**Theodore Deppe**

## BALTIMORE

1. Never write anything, my father warned me, you'd be  
embarrassed to see  
as a front-page, headline story in the *Baltimore Sun*.

2. Dear Editor:

A woman is a city, and usually a harbor town.  
A century ago, hundreds like her  
lived in her, strolling to her edges,  
moving back; waiting.

3. The end of the day is two blue chairs.  
two cold, golden glasses.

The child's had her nap, her usual dream:  
someone, something invisible turning the knob—  
and she wakes—  
angry,  
to the comfortable poison of their voices  
below. Down the stairs, two at a time,  
with her milk-bottle bank,  
to the landing,  
where she shatters into blood and pennies.

Face down; inhale:  
wet wool, broken glass.

Listen: screams.

4. A woman is a harbor town, a port  
of flowers. Salty echoes lick her muslin hem.  
Children squeal and race. Free men,  
stripped to the waist and glowing,  
avert their eyes. Oh, she is a dangerous distraction:

forsythia curls, skin like Queen Anne's Lace,  
 her heart is a Black-eyed Susan.  
 A light breeze ripples the surface of the water, her wild vase,  
 a cat's paw on marble steps.  
 If she never saw the marble steps,  
 still she is  
 the marble steps;  
 the water, mop, chips of mica  
 and the morning light and all the women she never knew  
 and all the men she never was.  
 A woman is a city  
 and life is a metaphor—  
 for what?—  
 for her life.

5. My father always wore a suit at the dinner table,  
 always stained his tie,  
 barked *Damn!*  
 and blamed it on our cook  
 or my sweetly-crooked mother.

But love? Oh yes, there was love.  
 My father loved my mother,  
 and my mother loved her husband  
 and her children,  
 and the children loved  
 loved the cook,  
 and the cook loved  
 the children and the dog,  
 a long-haired german shepherd dark as a wolf,  
 crazy as a poet.

6. Adrienne Rich was right about Dickinson: Vesuvius at home,  
 protecting her genius (1700 poems stitched like an open  
 wound!):

*My life had stood a loaded gun . . .*



This image shook the hands of women who held the pen.  
It was always the glimpse of a white hem they saw, always  
                    disappearing  
down a narrow hall.

But I had her confused with someone else —  
another girl —  
equally determined and guilty

*Lizzie Borden took an ax  
and gave her father forty whacks*

and I had confused "I am in Danger, Sir—" with "You  
are in Danger, Sir—"

*When she saw what she had done,  
She gave her mother forty-one*

or even another, in a clapboard house at the harbor's edge,  
bent at the waist from her second-story window,  
to the soldiers below

*Shoot if you must this old grey head  
But spare my country's flag, she said*

Women, strolling to my edges,  
waiting, waiting.  
For what?

7. A woman is a city, not a flower.  
Or a woman is a city and a flower  
and the volcano which destroys the city  
and preserves the flower.

In Baltimore, sex and intelligence  
hindered me, dogged my days.  
Something sullen in me grew,  
something thick and wet and unladylike,  
something that shamed my parents and embarrassed their  
                    friends,

trying to smile across the vicious card table,  
their drinks sweating into cork coasters.

Their children were perfect  
monsters  
too, but no one let on.

We all slouched. Slammed doors. Toyed  
with cults and wrote a bit of nasty stuff.  
Our rooms smelled funny.  
We talked in code.

“Jan, when are you happy?,” the doctor asked,  
and after my answer,  
“Oh, but you don’t get to do that very often, do you?”

8. Late-breaking news: A woman is a city, the banks of the bay  
her thighs.

She opens wide and the ships pass in and out.  
There’s a war inside me, she sighs,  
and I can’t live without you,  
she cries,  
but don’t tell anyone; it’s a surprise.

9. Of course there was Whitman too:

*If I worship any particular thing, it shall be some of the spread  
of my body*

Of course there was maple and wheat and sweaty brooks  
and dews and  
*wind whose soft-tickling genitals rub against me it shall be  
you*

But how to put the above into practice  
in Baltimore

where beads of lust harden like rabbit pellets  
and hit their mark with the tinny ping  
we strove for in years of tennis lessons?

I went looking for wild, humid forests  
and to lay myself down in green pastures  
and found only the Roland Park Golf Course;  
better than nothing, I clung to someone's neck  
and we pounded the earth and the stars shook.  
Or was it my eyes in my flapping head?

If I can't be a saint or a sinner  
I'll grow up to be a press secretary  
or a spokesperson for a real powerful organization  
and I'll breakfast with reporters  
and say, "No comment. No comment."

10. A woman is a city and some cities are more interesting  
than others.

Baltimore is forty minutes north of Washington.  
The North thinks it's south,  
and the South thinks it's north,  
but this really hasn't mattered since the Civil War  
except to Baltimoreans  
who find it oddly pleasing to be neither too much of one  
thing  
nor too much of another.

It's a city with some charm  
and a distinguished cultural heritage:  
in the hard-heaving waters of the bay,  
Francis Scott Key wrote our unsingable national anthem;  
Edgar Allen Poe is buried there,  
Gertrude Stein studied medicine there,  
Zelda Fitzgerald was institutionalized there.

You can still find a juicy, spicy corned-beef sandwich on  
Lombard Street  
and a cup of tea and something like scones in the lunch-  
rooms of the Women's Exchange:

even the most respectable of families will chug and holler  
 for the Colts  
 and pry and suck steaming crabs to smithereens.

Four Baltimoreans signed the Declaration of Independence  
 (*Samuel Chased Paca with a Stone . . .*)

They're streets now,  
 lined with burnt-brick semi-detacheds  
 shaded by maples  
 (I was mugged on Paca)

and you've probably heard of the neat, three-tiered  
 marble steps  
 which the proud women of Baltimore scrub every Sunday  
 morning,  
 or used to.

The sun rises with a kind of mastery  
 over the suburbs, where the schools are better and dogs  
 named after Roman emperors  
 run free.

11. And that sky like butter, those kisses like butter.  
 I used to race around a grand dining-room table popping  
 those  
 scalloped balls  
 into my mouth: sweet marbles.  
 And then retire to my playroom  
 to learn all the possible combinations of color:  
 on summer nights, until my childhood was over,  
 the city fathers illuminated the lonely fountain in Druid  
 Hill Lake:  
 pink then yellow, yellow then blue, blue then misty  
 green, then silver,  
 then yellow, then pink, then misty red, then . . .

12. My brother wants the bookcase,  
 so I'll take the piano. He doesn't play.  
 He calls me up two weeks in advance  
 to warn, the truck may be too small.  
 I say, we'll cross that bridge . . .  
 You know the rest.

This isn't death.  
 A house becomes its parts easily enough.  
 At least this one does.  
 Strangers finger my grandmother's dolls, haggle  
 over the mattress on which I became a woman.  
 My mother doesn't know, remains firm.  
 "You know what that costs new?"  
 She gets her price. My secret  
 is strapped to the top of a Ford  
 and whisked away.

Books move more slowly.  
 A woman taps the binding of *Being and Nothingness*,  
 turns aside. I slide it off the shelf  
 and into my bag. Later we'll track the things our future  
 is made of, but now we're selling the past  
 and I'm the one—

the prophet of this family!—

clinging to broken tie-racks  
 and costume jewelry.

"Jan, we never knew you cared—"  
 I don't! I don't! But couldn't someone  
 stop this, just for a moment?  
 Let one chip in a wine glass  
 remind us how it broke?  
 Someone would be grateful for even a cliché:  
 this shell, this husk, this  
 place, this awful place;  
 some reason for moving;  
 some pain to relocate.

13. Now why don't you write something cheerful,  
something shadowless and inspiring,  
something about honeysuckle,  
its open-mouthed baby kisses,  
the way it swept the alleys of Baltimore  
in a lazy, extravagant announcement of Spring?

Why don't you write about  
the spaceships on your bedroom wall  
in the years of the peaceful atom?  
Or the 4th of July at Lystra Meadows?  
Or those summers in Maine; the sticky pinecones  
scattered across the beach?

Or the first time you met anybody?  
How perfect he was! He used to make up songs  
as you drove him home: *I love Jan's nose,  
it grows and grows . . .*  
He loved the whole long length of you  
for a while; life wasn't so bad.

It was really rather nice, sometimes,  
wasn't it? Eisenhower, then Kennedy,  
then those beautiful May days:  
cherry blossoms and petitions.  
And why not say something about the soft,  
soft skin of your breasts?  
Those were the days:  
sex wasn't always a weeping willow.

Let's face it: you looked great in your yellow bathing suit  
with the lacey trim;  
you were the most popular girl at camp;  
you slept with every man you wanted to;  
you read Simone de Beauvoir at seventeen  
and knew how to put everything in perspective.

So now you could, if you tried,  
write about honeysuckle.  
You could. You could.

14. Okay. Hot coffee. So my mother sets up a bean-grinding roar  
that shakes the springs in my bed like a volcano.  
Who can sleep with a family in the house?

I take the stairs two at a time,  
meet Caesar at the door  
and pry the morning paper from his slobbery jaw,  
  
kiss my mother's buttery skin,  
my father's bald head, cold as marble.  
My brother disappears, the door flapping behind him like a  
flag.

The *Baltimore Sun* opens like smithereens;  
all our secrets have made the front page:  
in every home in this sixth-largest city in the country  
  
there's delight and horror: oh, look here, it says he never  
really  
loved her, or, if he did, never enough; she's obsessed with  
death  
and that's why she masturbates every day,  
  
that girl is a city and opens her thighs  
and this is what she thinks of us:  
and my father's eyes turn from blue to grey, then grey to  
black, then  
black in a circle of pink.

"Oh, was it really like that?"  
and, in all honesty, I can't answer,  
and our tears, our tears, our honeysuckle tears,  
fall like freedom and failure.

Jan Heller Levi

TWO POEMS

Angels on the Interstate

It happens after I get past Topsham  
and the traffic thins out.  
Like dragonflies they zoom up  
and appear to stand still,  
hovering even with the car,  
one in the passing lane  
one in the breakdown lane.

Like jet pilots  
they tip their wings to signal:  
pull over pull off the road.  
Pull off? I shrug embarrassed  
and already halfway to work.  
But this road can take me  
from Maine to Florida,  
it's faster than route one.

They shake their wings again, off  
the road off any road sell the car  
take a different path. Look at the asters,  
tiny blue stars, constellations  
ready to start a new universe, look  
at the crows parading on the guard rails  
ready to eat what travels this path.  
Stop the car, build wings out of  
the scraps of recapped tires on the shoulder.

I steer straight and tune in  
a different radio station, but up ahead  
I see them approaching a south bound  
tractor trailer, their wings stained  
with diesel smoke, flying  
with urgency like moths  
around a great light.



**Saint Francis**

In my backyard garden  
they are so simple in the compost  
these fat sparrows  
picking over the latest seeds  
or robins hopping around the edges  
after worms. I watch the way they hop,  
sense the air around themselves  
and fly off.

And I remember travelling in France  
in the cathedral in Senlis  
where high above the massive stones  
and people humbled by gothic dimensions,  
I noticed one pigeon had flown in  
through a broken pane of glass  
and like a lost soul sought a way out,  
throwing its body against the unreachable outside,  
the white light. And a few weeks earlier  
I had been in Assisi  
and had seen Giotto's fresco of St. Francis  
preaching to the small birds.

I would want to understand them in the same way  
if I were not afraid I would break their wings  
if I touched them, if I  
were not afraid entire flocks  
would think only of free food  
and invade my house, flying  
from piano to chairs and bannister  
and there I would be  
in a house full of birds  
not knowing how to talk with them,  
my son telling me they sing  
because they are happy,  
my cat trying to convert them  
into protein. My wife would take

the small ones maimed by the cat  
and nurse them back to health,  
feeding them through small tubes  
their frightened hearts beating so fast  
that they sound like the wind.

She would teach me her secrets  
and then one day I would heal my first sparrow  
and driven by my new power  
I would run out to the road  
and find a gull splattered on the asphalt  
and touching its windblown outstretched wing  
resurrect it and head down Congress Street  
and begin to heal school children and my house  
would fill with the souls of broken people,  
as if we ran a spiritual repair shop  
where we would hand out little checks that said  
“not responsible for items left over 30 days”  
and we’d begin to make them all over  
rebuilt and winged and able to fly home  
by themselves at dusk when the air is dusty and red  
and we look out our windows with yearning  
listening to souls murmuring  
as they fly home, listening for  
the sound of our own  
so we will know when to open  
the windows and let them in.

**Stuart Kestenbaum**

## TWO POEMS

**Believing There's No Cleveland**

I'm drowning in fields,  
inland seas of Ohio green,  
cornrows, clover, wheat and beans  
yet I can make this pen  
this moment a lodgepole pine  
just outside Red Lodge, Montana  
and the paper a valley  
of dawn snow purer even  
than the unleavened bread,  
sinew, blood and bones of God  
I'd make myself swallow  
to break childhood fasts,  
than the Medieval surplice  
I'd wear carrying the cross  
in procession down the aisle  
of Ascension of Our Lord  
breathing in distant sirens  
of mill, felony and slaughterhouse  
and the blinding sputter and hiss  
of incense from a Byzantine brazier  
as I tried to believe a body  
could become pure light, parents  
last until the end of time, tried  
to believe there was no Cleveland.

**Sister Mary Appassionata Addresses the Psychic Research Guild of Marion, Ohio**

So much that could save and solve us  
the high muckamucks won't let us near.  
At Wright-Patterson A.F.B. in Dayton  
in a maximum security hanger guarded  
by vicious pinschers and pit-bulls,  
DNA-seeking heat rays, the Air Force  
has suspended in liquid nitrogen  
three Venusians whose saucer, disabled  
by acid rain and fluctuations in ozone layers  
came down hard on Ohio route 71 midway  
between Cleveland and Akron. The Governor  
of the State of Ohio and Adjutant General  
of the Ohio National Guard know this  
yet ignore my letters and fail to return  
my calls. What are they afraid of?

Two out of every one hundred babies born  
in the U.S. come into the world wearing  
a tail; one in every ten thousand  
arrives gilled, finned and scaled,  
trailing oozy weeds from the primal sea  
like clouds of glory. Recently  
near Toledo a child was born with wings,  
a white robe and halo. All this is  
irrefutable evidence for and against  
evolution. Only art won't lie. We can read  
even after desert eons in statues and paintings  
what ailed Amenhotep IV: hyperpituitarism  
and t.b., hypergonadism, acromegaly (or perhaps  
chromophobe adenoma) and,  
it should be pointed out, many centuries  
of utter peace. Women give off  
numerous secretions which regulate life and love,  
Eastern texts assure us. In all, fifteen

have been named, but there's a sixteenth  
which has been kept secret. Why  
this conspiracy of silence? What are men  
afraid of?

Let them fluoridate our water, jam  
our brain waves with their state-of-the-art  
transmissions, abuse our weather with fly-bys  
of Io and Uranus. We're saved at last,  
each night journeying out of the body to go  
where we will, each dawn born again into flesh  
by the most human instinct,  
this frantic lusting to believe.

David Citino

\*

Again the sun leading the world by the neck  
so dizzy the leaves fall and this horse  
trying to steady the snow — this wobbling beast  
half rotted, half two by fours, rutted  
to guide the herd :flesh eating trees  
sure my thunderous saw was hunting birds  
and followed them, each log for the last time  
cries out something kept cold  
and smells like my breath.

Who will remember my shed? Without a window  
and the sun eating through wood  
till all that's left was a horse :a trap  
to wedge trees closer than fear, than bark

— I hone the saw till its pulse  
is the same as mine and my stove  
like a helmet all night brooding

— who will stroke the breeze :Pegasus again  
so quick its hooves  
are all I can see :each log  
half floats, half flies  
as if the warm air rising  
was from my arms.

You will not remember my shed  
but this dribbling horse knee deep in snow  
lets me pat its jaws :wings  
I should have painted white  
— it likes the snow, the hard link-chain blade  
draped to bridle it

— you will not remember a snowfall  
flying too close to the sun.  
Who was to know

though your lips still melt  
from who knows where  
and the splashing heart  
as sunlight always was  
before it burned to the ground

— who is to know these short logs  
as if in our stove are rebuilding for summer.  
Come! Try to remember. The arms are where?  
And the lips? Come closer.  
So will the sun and remember.

## TWO PICTURES OF MY SISTER

*If an ordinary person is silent,  
it may be a tactical maneuver.  
If a writer is silent, he is lying.*

— Jaroslav Seifert

The pose is stolen from Monroe, struck  
in the sun's floodlight, eyes lowered,  
a long stemmed plastic rose between her teeth.  
My cast off bathing suit hangs in folds  
over her ribs, straps cinched, pinned  
at the back of her neck. Barefoot  
on the hot cement, knock-kneed, comical  
if it weren't for the graceful  
angles of her arms, her flesh soft  
against the chipped stucco.

The other picture is in my head.

It is years later.

It is in color.

Blond hair curls away from the planes of her face  
like wood shavings. She wears a lemon yellow  
ruffled top, denim cutoffs,  
her belly button squeezed to a slit  
above the silver snap.

She stands against the hallway wall  
while Dad shakes his belt in her face.

A strip of skin has been peeled  
from her bare shoulder, there are snake  
lines across her thighs, a perfect curl  
around her long neck.

She looks through him as if she can see  
behind his head. She dares him,

*Go on. Hit me again.*

He lets the folded strap unravel to the floor  
and holding it by its tail bells the buckle  
off her cheekbone.

She does not move or cry or even flinch  
as the welt blooms on her temple  
like a flower opening frame by frame  
in a Disney film.

It lowers her eyelid with its violet  
petals and as he walks away only her eyes  
move, like the eyes of a portrait that follow you  
around the museum room, her face a stubborn  
moon that trails the car all night, stays locked  
in the frame of the back window  
no matter how many turns you take,  
no matter how far you go.

**Dorianne Laux**



## THE GULF

*"Smilin' Mighty Jesus!"*

*She smiled, too. She held her baby  
to the specialist like a small black bag  
of priceless goods — which it was, of course,  
in a way — and said her village doctor said  
"my girl gots Smilin' Mighty Jesus,  
yessub, praise the Lord!"*

1. At a certain place, in a certain season, and with a serendipitous constellating of their chemical flux, the diatoms glow in mild winking patches, and this diluvian sequinning gives a faery surface to the waters of the gulf. If you enter and dunk, then rise, you'll also be a source of light—against the night it might even seem your body is intensifying that power, as if sparkage occurs when blood and ocean call each other wildly, in a special electrolytic lust, across the massive, negligible, utterly mysterious width of human skin. I've seen it—off a 4-corner bungalowed beach town inbetween Corpus and Galveston. All that glowing, all that giving up of yourself to the wash of the genesis-mixture about you... Oh—and

there are sharks. One night, a 19-year-old woman  
on the concrete apron feeding into the jetty,  
kidneys ripped. I walked up  
after the crowd but before the medics.  
Even in pain and opened up monstrously,  
wrongly, even become an ivory locker of meat,  
with death sucking fast at her lips, those  
starlet good looks gave her  
otherwise tragic dishevelment  
an intimate, peepshow attractiveness—so  
the faces of strangers circling her established every  
partum of reaction, from an empathetic, keening grief,  
to something more like voyeuristic pleasure or,  
on the face of the teenage retarded boy, a something  
like seeing a longtime-worshipped goddess  
grabbed obscenely down to the level of mortal affairs.  
An elderly woman gags. Some guy in back  
toys suspiciously with his pocket. Maybe 20 of us.  
It lightnined once—we jumped like a single animal.  
For all our differences, equally plugged in.  
As if she were an organ, pooled in nutrient, and  
we were feeding similarly off her,  
through our respective invisible tubes. I think I've never seen  
such disparate people so close before or since.  
And then we'll read, next day, she lives; her fiancé  
donates a kidney. For a minute  
it will know the focused incandescence of surgical light  
on its paleozoic bean-sleek sides—the only  
light that it will ever know—and then  
be sewn inside a new dark. Then the papers will lose  
all interest in them. They'll marry. They'll have a  
decade of papers delivered. One night he'll  
walk the beach, beclouded, remembering spurts of when  
he made his decision and let them cut in.  
He's never been that close to her again. That ounce of him,  
kissing her blood... He's never been that close to her.

## 2. It lightninged once.

(A beautifully emphatic gash, by Kenneth Strickfaden, king of Hollywood's "Edison medicine.")  
 500 people in one galvanic jerk, and then we  
 each lapse back to a tight black capsule  
 of moviehouse isolation. Karloff  
 wears his 40 lbs. of makeup and costuming like the  
 curse it is—each lurch,  
 a penance; every successfully-rendered  
 gesture (lifting a beaker, shading his eyes  
 from slatted sun), a cause for wonder so primary, so  
 very obviously without a remembered history of beakers or  
 shade,  
 it's near-australopithecinely pure. If you  
 know only the cheap gore-larded sequels... These  
 two originals done in '31 and '35 by director James Whale  
 are immensely sympathetic, if moody,  
 studies of alienation. In the creature's eyes, we see  
 the pain of internal organs  
 expatriate from their congenial bodies, trying  
 to work, to speak a common language, but  
 dissolving, like world powers in congress, horribly  
 into clumsy lunges and misfires. He's a sack  
 of little chasms, held by scarstitches  
 so thick they look like rungs—and weeping's as appropriate  
 as terror. Finally, the chasms are externalized.  
 He's given a bride, his own kind: lab  
 fleshpatchwork. I know 500 people have watched  
 his awkward attempts to touch her  
 —all right-angle stumbles—with 500  
 separate, perfect understandings. It's  
 hopeless of course. She's repelled by him too.  
 With her grizzlepiles of hair and swatched skin,  
 with her morgue-filched innards, she's  
 repelled by him too. And I can swear at least one  
 teenager in that ommateum of 500 pairs of eyes

cried at the unbreachable distances people live  
 inside of, cried despite the horror-genre pyrohyperbolics,  
 all the walk home from the 1200 block of Division  
 where the Division Theater spent the last of its  
 old-time marquee flash, up the stairs, to his room,  
 from his immeasurably everyday reasons of silence and  
 rejection,

cried immeasurably... (If he told you his story  
 of longing for the nightshift Quick-Pick checkout girl...! But  
 really, you'd be bored.) So why  
 remember it now?—the woman tonight an opened treatise  
 on disconnection, staining the jetty? this  
 sudden sky-splitting bolt? that  
 I'm vacationing these thousand miles away from you  
 for mutual respite? but phone you anyway? something  
 in the tragedy tonight encouraging sewing back  
 the small ripped seams of marriage? remember  
 that night in my office? don't hang up! remember the first  
 lovetussles? being parts of something  
 larger we gave breath to, monstrous or not?  
 together? remember? hello?

3. It's not only that her body was perfect.

Every concentration-line or shift of her bearing bespoke  
 another realm, of Ideal Forms. But also,  
 her body was perfect. And he'd been adoring her now every day  
 all summer—the retarded boy.

—Who was raised in the Home like one more potato  
 unloaded into the bin.

—Who was told: With soap, behind your ears  
 and between your toes. Be quiet. Speak up.

If a policeman stops you, right away  
 show him the card in your wallet.

—Who washed. Who was quiet. Who spoke up.

—Who was shaved like a sheep once a month.

—Who knew what he meant. Who spoke what he meant like  
 a mouth

at the other end of the universe.

—Who never had a visitor. Who turned 16 without visitors.

—Who saw her in her tangerine bikini on a lime towel.

(She was a shout for the eyes.)

—Who every day returned and every night his dream was  
this: that he would die for her if needed, and a hundred years  
from now

they'd meet in Heaven and be in love.

—Who lived for her. Who saw her

dragged from the waters one night like a net of bloody meat.

—And the crowd. And the ambulance. And the police.

And obscenely, a carnival excitement.

His goddess. Photographers. Sirens.

—Who ran to the Hanskie Bridge in the middle of town  
and cried to God from the rail. All night.

—Who was a shabby, babbling figure.

*Get the police./They're down by the jetty./I'll go.*

—Who bayed like a hound.

—Who died in his grief.

—Who was shot to death through the chest  
by the police, who said "We told him to stop  
and raise his hands or we'd shoot."

—Who was retarded, 16, and confused.

"We saw him go for a gun."

—Who'd reached (in strict obedience,  
the only language he knew) for the card in his wallet,  
just as he'd always been told.

4. "...the lightning flashed along the coast"—this is from Trelawny's account—and at daybreak he continues searching for Shelley, who is "on his way home in the Gulf of Spezia." This is now Tuesday, the 9th of July, 1822. We know about the corpse he finds, "the face and hands...were fleshless." And we can guess at the immoderate distress of Mary Shelley; as if the death of her mother

10 days after childbirth; and that ever-receding interest of the dispassionate father; and Fanny's laudanum suicide; and Harriet's drowning suicide; and the death of her own first daughter "less than two weeks, only"; and Willy gone, and Clara gone, reduced to two already lustreless locks in an album—weren't enough. So now the Gulf took him, too. No wonder she needed retreating, no wonder Trelawny once joked they should seat her at table "to ice the wine." So now she's walking that shore like the only human being left, the heavens clenching vapor into small gray threatening fists, her husband's manuscripts in ribbons in the trunk, his last remaining flesh in ashes... But

it's possible to see her

6 years earlier—19, and by a friendlier water, the shores of Lake Lemman, her evening walks with him there through a light Swiss air so intimate and lucid, normal thought seemed a kind of clairvoyance, and with the other two as well, Polidori & Byron, bits of memory (a pumpkin one of them boated in from God-knows-where, a nacre-throated mandolin, ghost stories, German beer): these flock like birds about their figures now and roost in random order, often accompanied by the lake's own metronome lapping, and something of standing with him in the columns of their Villa while the rising sun gave a marmalade-glaze to the water and his hand went spidery first, then hungrily, over her unlaced breasts... And here, for once at least in relative belonging, is where she makes first notes on her "orphan of science," the "horrid thing," although it knows *Paradise Lost* and can read and write French (the movies ignore this), outcast, bag of plagiarized organs,



allowing our voices. So thin.  
So much. As if it mattered. I'd start driving back right  
now if you wanted. A thousand miles. We've all been  
abandoned

in places on Earth where custom is separate from custom,  
speech divided from speech, a person kept from people,  
by traditional colors, or callings, a marker, a border, a mound,  
the offcenter sound of a neighboring accent, a gate latch,  
some trickle the width of a wrist.

*Spinal meningitis. But  
they figured that out  
too late. And we call it a single  
English language! The baby was buried  
in a plain slat coffin about the size of a tool chest,  
where the family's always buried its dead,  
a plot of saltshot, cantankerous dirt  
under sea-wind that blows without end  
from the gulf.*

Albert Goldbarth



**TWO POEMS****Ballet Positions**

She stands in first position.  
Hair pulled back,  
an onion head sprouting shoots  
bunched in a top knot.  
She is committed —  
no liquor, drugs, or food  
that is fattening,  
and she is learning to look  
beyond men's eyes.  
She places shoulders over hips,  
a lean line,  
and the mirror mirrors back  
much pleasure.

In second position  
the body is more open to suggestion.  
The right foot points toward the kitchen,  
the left towards the practice barre,  
her mind straddling this wide base.

She yearns to be able  
to center her weight,  
but does not yet know how.  
She treats her muscles like babies,  
and wraps them in swaddling clothes.

The body is taut  
in third.  
Leg warmers, sweaters and knee pads cover  
the self-doubts she has each day.  
The line is broken  
to form a perpendicular  
away from the heart.  
She is not sure she will go  
in that direction.  
The foot is still attached to its base.

Fourth position is a step forward,  
away from old friends she loves.  
Her sense of self is shaken more often,  
a bad class ruins her day.  
There are too many demands that negate life,  
too many parts of herself left behind.  
But the ballet line is severed now  
and forms new roots.  
She must work harder to move on.

In fifth position  
both feet are brought together  
unnaturally,  
and she still questions why?  
Her face is painted without wrinkles,  
but it is imperfect, mortal.  
She has gained entrance into her temple,  
a lonely nun in a pink leotard,  
focused inside herself  
with only the feet  
pointing to the outside world.

**Toe Shoes**

Of course familiar  
as brush strokes on a scroll,  
this pain  
the dancer courts.  
An ancient Chinese mother,  
she binds five toes into  
satin shoes, two sizes small.  
Mini-bones are crushed by  
blocked forms,  
horsehair hugging toes  
whose soreness is as expected  
as temple bells,  
each blister, red pustule  
spread with iodine, powder.  
On stilts she rises  
above pain,  
ethereal in silken sleeves  
on the moon-bridge.

Sheila Hellman

**HOLDEN CAULFIELD AT THE CAR WASH**

1. These old ladys kill me.  
They really do.  
"Fill it up," they'll say,  
without so much as a glance at me.  
Well, I'm about the best  
gas-pumper you ever saw in your life.

I'm a true madman on the pumps.  
I can set the trigger on high automatic  
and flip it off on the cent.  
I'm a goddamn wizard at pumping gas.  
I really am.

But what gets me,  
what rattles my coconuts,  
are the biddys who just say,  
"Fill it up."

Not so much as a glance.  
I'd like to stick my face  
down into theirs sometime and say,  
"How 'bout the magic word, lady?  
How 'bout, 'fill it up, *please?* Eh?"  
That'd get 'em.

Naw. They'd just think I was  
a wise bastard and drive off.  
Still, I'd like to try it sometime.

2. Then there are the morons who don't listen.

They pull the car into the wash.

"Put the car in neutral," I say.

"Don't brake or steer."

Some big-shots sit there  
in their souped-up Chevys  
like they were goddamn A.J. Foyt.  
The phonies.

They drive through the wash  
at about a hundred miles an hour,  
pop their stupid tires,  
and try to make out like  
it's your fault.

That kills me.

I'm telling you,  
the world is full of these guys.  
Serves 'em right to get their tires popped.

3. It's raining like crazy  
and an old Caddy drives  
into the station.  
I pull on my goddamn hunting cap  
and run like hell to the driver's window.  
"A buck's wortha regular," he says.  
I get soaked pumping his  
lousy dollar's worth,  
then he hands me a twenty!  
I ask you,  
why doesn't the sonuvabitch  
put in five or ten bucks?  
These people knock me out.  
I'm not kidding.  
Then he tears out of the lot and  
burns the buck's wortha regular  
before he reaches the corner.
4. This old guy,  
a regular Adolph Hitler  
(ugly little moustache and all)  
is always spitting tobacco at my feet  
and blabbing about  
how many miles he gets to the gallon.  
He pulls up in a big white Olds  
and says,  
"Fill me up with unleaded."  
I'd love to.  
I really would.  
I can see myself  
grabbing him by the hair,  
yanking back his head,  
cramming the nozzle down his throat  
and filling him up with unleaded.

David Denny

## BOOKS IN BRIEF

## The Eloquence of the Vulgar Tongue

Leo Connellan has written an astonishing book, *The Clear Blue Lobster-Water Country* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985, 158 pp., \$15.95 hardbound). With its commercial publisher, its glossy, elegantly-designed jacket, its foreword by Sidney Lea and rave blurbs by Shapiro, Eberhart and Carruth, it appears to be an establishment publication. But it's not. Although Connellan has published twelve books of poetry, most readers are going to ask "Leo Who?" The deceptively limpid title in its classy typography may well attract buyers who expect a familiar celebration of the Maine coast as observed from a tasteful "cottage" on Prouts Neck or Hancock Point. Ha! Perhaps the cover will be the bait that tolls the casual reader into the trap. But once in, that reader will discover that the bait has a very powerful savor. The lobster of the ironic title is a wholesome scavenger, cleaning the polluted ocean floor. It is the victim of exploitation that threatens it with extermination, as a status symbol for a manipulated market. Connellan's lobster is Beckett's lobster—exploited and suffering victim. The "clear blue lobster-water country" is Yankee country, WASP country. Some of the most painfully mordant and bitterly funny sections of Connellan's book are satiric vignettes of the Yankee treatment of the "other": not just the Irish, but the Greek, the black, the woman, the child, and especially the girl child.

Connellan's protagonist is an Irish-American nicknamed Boppledock, or Bop. In Book One of this trilogy — this *commedia* — "Coming to Cummington to Take Kelly," Bop flounders through a hell of self-pity and self-justification, compulsively setting himself an imaginary task as a price for his dead father's love and respect. The short lines choke and pant, as though spoken by a man on the run. In Book

Two, "Shatterhouse," Bop endures the purgatory of Little Hope Hospital to exorcise his alcoholism. The longer lines of this chapter convey Bop's yearning identity with the mother who "went away" when he was seven, his cartoonist's satire of the hospital staff and their humiliating "therapy," and his emerging empathy and forgiveness for the abused and abusing Housekeeper of his childhood who nearly robbed him of his capacity to be human. In this section the compulsiveness of Book One is coming under control — a control through comic vision and compassion. In Book Three, Bop, meaninglessly shot while on an educational mission as observer in Central America, deliriously recapitulates the history of his family's troubles, back to the escape from County Clare in the potato famine, through a short-lived prosperity, declining into the Depression in the coastal Maine city of Bop's wretched childhood. If the self-acceptance and harmony of Bop's final contemplations as he lies on his stretcher is not exactly a *paradiso*, it is perhaps as close to one as a hard-bitten, hard biting veteran of America's twentieth century can achieve.

Connellan has shouldered a place for himself in the main tide of American poetry with this powerful and moving masterpiece. Under the scar-tissue, the gristle, and the sinew is a passion and a healing compassion. The theme is a great one: the dispossessed in search of his heritage, who must forge his own identity in the course of his wrestling to claim his father, his mother, his ethnic integrity, and his own independent psyche:

I am put together again hard, I will break  
no further, I have become me.

Among hundreds of fine competent volumes published each year, full of individually excellent but ultimately interchangeable poems, Connellan's volume stands out like a granite outcrop. He has created for his Boppedock a voice absolutely his own — a gritty, slangy, ventriloquist voice, a voice with an extraordinary range, from the choking short lines of Book One, through the self-mocking run-ons of the hospital ("duzzis soun' like th' thoughts of/ a man breakin' a'course not!"), to the pacing tercets of Book Three. In its scope, its ambition, its integrity in variety, its comedy in passion, this is a profoundly American book, American in the way that Joyce's *Portrait* is Irish. It is an important book, a true secular *commedia*.

## Not Bouquets, but Flowering Trees

Most new volumes of poetry are carefully-arranged bouquets — collections of recent poems organized by time or space or theme. But some have been conceived as a unit, every poem rising naturally from a single root of character, theme, or vision. **Bink Noll's** magisterial *The House* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1984, 56 pp., \$6.95 paper) has been growing since the sixties, ramifying and blossoming into a single complex organism that is both one very specific house in Wisconsin and the archetypal House. This deliciously matured book creates a sanctuary and a celebration of civilization. Furthermore, in displaying his Christmas tree, his *nature morte* of groceries, his chthonic god the furnace man, his lock, his most private dressing room, Noll displays as well the persona of the "homemade man," in both senses. This elegant volume is a rich and intimate portrait in a many-faceted mirror. Individual poems will be familiar to readers of the *New Yorker* and various magazines and anthologies, but it is as a group that their luminous surfaces cast their inward lights.

Another highly sophisticated, witty, luminous volume is **Felix Pollak's** *Tunnel Visions: Poems, Short Prose, Translations* (Peoria, IL: Spoon River, 1984, 44 pp., \$3.95 paper). Since the irreversible retreat of his eyesight, Pollak has been devoting his formidable honesty, imagination, humor, and poetic skill to finding language equal to the communication of the insights of blindness. In this series of brilliantly realized vignettes, with translations of related poems by Wedekind and Rilke, Pollak shares the quality of what he is learning — of terror, of intensified imagination, of deepening compassion.

A different sort of single-rooted volume is **Karen Snow's** *Outsiders* (Woodstock, VT: Countryman Press, 1983, 62 pp., \$12.95 hardbound, \$7.50 paper). A third in the series of books that includes *Wonders* and her novel *Willo*, *Outsiders* adds seventeen poems, eleven of them previously unpublished, to the story of "Willo," the "poor? shy? sad? ethereal? kind?" wisp, who, by a sort of sublime super-selfconsciousness, a genius for seeing herself as the pale star in a cosmic comedy, creates of her daily dismays a memorable and appealing character—a survivor. Like Leo Connellan, Snow is *sui generis* among poets, forging fiction out of quotidian



miseries — fiction that commands both respect and affection. May Sarton claims that Karen Snow has created a new form, “the short story reduced to a powerful essence.” Like Connellan she has evolved a distinctive personal voice for her protagonist and a new fictive form for her narrative. I hope this means we are entering into a renaissance of narrative poetry.

One final book on a unified theme: **Ted Hughes's *River: New Poems*** (Harper & Row, 1983, 80 pp., \$12.95 hardbound). The jacket blurbs from the London press are delirious with admiration, full of words like *apotheosis* and *imagistic tenderness*. And there are memorable poems here, such as “Milesian Encounter on the Sligachan,” which compels the reader through a slog and a spook, up a boggy salmon river to a big-two-hearted encounter. The language is almost equal to the terror and tension of the place. Almost. But Hughes in this volume seems too often to be straining for the words that will create the magic: “Then the pool lifted a travelling bulge” (terrific!) “And grabbed the tip of my heart-nerve.” You can understand how the rod is “heart-nerve,” but the self-consciousness of the metaphor breaks (for me) the spell. There is a delicate line between the poet’s projection of how he feels into the object of his observation and his bogging down in pathetic fallacy. Let’s see if I can define that line. In “After Moonless Midnight,” the fish

waited for me. The whole river  
Listened to me, and, blind,  
Invisibly watched me. And held me deeper  
With its blind, invisible hands.  
“We’ve got him,” it whispered, “We’ve got him.”

Here I think Hughes gets away with it; I share the process of his imagination at work. But compare the sea-trout: “Their procession kneels, in God-hush./ Robed in the stilled flow of their Creator/ They inhale unending.” Or: “This evening/ The river is a beautiful idle woman . . . She lies back. She is tipsy and bored./ She lolls on her deep couch . . .” etc. In passages like these the language is just dull, sometimes inaccurate, sometimes derivative, apparently reflecting a forcing of the response.

Another forcing of the language shows up in a device that Hughes has used elsewhere for wonderful compression and sensuous impact—hyphenated phrases, which here are some-

times simply idiosyncratic. "Core-flash," "thunder-silence," "egg-film," "glint-slippered," "after-bliss," "blue-hazes," "root-arches" are all from the first two poems, and the third labors under no fewer than thirty-one such hyphens. The ghosts of Hopkins and Thomas rise up and cry, "Enough!"

But there are splendid poems here: "Japanese River Tales," sexy and spooky; "A Cormorant," humorous and well-observed; "Night Arrival of Seatrout," with its memorable ending:

And out in the hard corn a horned god  
Running and leaping  
With a bat in his drum.

And another wonderful bat, in "The Gulkana," where Hughes describes an old Indian "who smiled,/ Adjusting to our incomprehension—his face/ A whole bat, that glistened and stirred."

### Politics in Poetry

Richard Jones has done us all a service by assembling his anthology *Poetry and Politics* (N.Y.: Morrow, 1985, 320 pp., \$18.95 hardbound). Morrow would do well to issue it now in a less-expensive paper-backed edition so that it may have the widest possible sale, including classroom use. It would provide an excellent starting-point for a seminar. Jones has limited his collection to essays written since W.W. II, and he claims to represent a spectrum of views from right (Eliot) through centrist (Forché) to left (Baraka). Actually, this spectrum doesn't mean much. There is nothing intrinsically "right" in Eliot's concept of the social function of poetry, enabling a people "to be able to express, and consequently be able to feel, the emotions of civilized beings." Most of the poets in this book are disturbed — even terrified — by the general failure of their contemporaries to feel, to imagine the nuclear threat. Kinnell says "It is a fear quite simply for everything that matters." Most share Kinnell's faith in "poetry's power to articulate and inspire" though at least one (Carruth) cannot conceive of a therapy adequate to curing the "massive neurosis" of "terror, suppression, spasmodic hysteria" that stupefies American poetry.

Jones' selection (with the surprising exception of Wendell Berry's somewhat long-winded and shallow essay) seems

sound. It whets one's appetite for more: for a collection that begins with Plato and includes "Areopagitica" and Shelley's "Defense of Poetry"; for an anthology of poems to illustrate these noble issues; for an expansion of Jones' collection. For those who want more, here are some further suggestions: Kathleen Hirsch, "A Conversation with George Steiner," *Mississippi Review*, 28/29, Vol. 10 (Spring/Summer 1981), 75-84; Jacobo Timerman, "First Victims Last Hope: Publishers and Writers in the Struggle for Human Rights," *New Boston Review*, (July/August 1981), 3-6; and Baron Wormser, "Discourse and Democracy: The Terms of Poetry," *NER/BLQ*, 7 (Autumn 1984), 11-23.

#### From the hundreds . . .

and hundreds of poetry books that have come to my desk in the recent months, here is a sampling of the ones that I particularly want my readers to share. Two are just out from Alice James. This cooperative continues to set a very high standard. **Helena Minton's** *The Canal Bed* (Cambridge, MA: Alice James, 1985, 72 pp., \$6.95 paper) is a very open-eyed group of poems. The geographical range is interesting, from the Alaska tundra to the Merrimac Valley mill towns. She has an excellent ear: "Sheets soak in soapstone tubs," and from "Persephone":

My mother is still beautiful.  
Her hair has the sheen  
of an oak struck  
by lightning.

In other poems she manages an almost transparent language for acute perception always on the point of transformation:

Deer trails stopped without warning  
in clumps of spruce, as if  
at the end of a long walk  
the animals turned into trees.

**Joan Joffe Hall's** *Romance and Capitalism at the Movies* (Alice James, 1985, 64 pp., \$6.95 paper) is an interesting contrast to the Minton. Hall's poems are crusted with a sense of history—family history, economic and political history, social history. After the title poem, slangy and sarcastic, the volume darkens with precisely-reported poems of Jewish consciousness; it

broadens then ("Hawk Coming," "Raspberries") to examine a woman's role in the tense ballet of a contemporary family; and at the end it submerges these issues in complex and eloquent poems of human tyrannies over fellow creatures, both human and other: "The Sirenians" and "World Hunger." This volume is the testimony of a highly-educated, deeply rooted, profoundly concerned woman, critical of her time and seeing beyond it.

With the dwindling of poetry on many commercial publishers' lists, more and more of the important and downright delicious new work is appearing from small presses that are up against an almost impossible problem of distribution. It is a lucky accident if one discovers them. One such is the Stone Man Press (Box 149A RFD 1, Lubec, Maine 04652). Stone Man's two most recent volumes are a chapbook by Nancy Nielsen, *Blackberries and Dust* (1984, 20 pp., \$4.) and a volume of her poems, *East of the Light* (1984, 50 pp., \$6.95), the latter jointly published by *Slow Dancer* in England. Some small presses present elegant poems shoddily printed; others, shoddy poems elegantly printed. Here we have that perfect harmony of poems of great strength and purity in beautifully designed and executed format. Nielsen's poems are the distillation of alert, informed observation and an extraordinary ear — both for what it hears in the environment and for the sounds of the words. The reader can luxuriate in the progression of sounds on the palate and also trust the intelligence that informs them:

Home lies on the far side  
of the whale songs, on the far shore  
of the Labrador waters.  
This is the road home . . .  
(“High Tide, New Moon”)

Here, from “Coyote Encounter”:

Just as he reached the thicket, I called,  
“Hai, Brother—dream of me tonight,”  
and he went quickstep, surprised,  
carrying me into the spruces as I walked home.

There is no pathetic fallacy in these poems. The whales, the railroads, the coyote, the sweet sovereign sassafras are literally as she describes them. But they are not insignificant, because these are true poems, every one.