

# THE BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL

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Cover: Alfred Cossman, *Child's Head*, etching, from the Beloit College Permanent Collection, Theodore Lyman Wright Fine Arts Center.

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## GETTING BACK

In their world, the dead  
play the slots for a shot  
at the big one. Zygote Bandits:  
three twin bunches of cherries  
and the rubber breaks.  
The glittery sperm fall  
all over themselves, racing  
for the brilliant egg.  
The dead hold out their boneless hands,  
imagine their new fathers saying *Sbit*,  
their mothers saying *Don't  
worry, nothing will happen.*  
The dead in their wigs and suits  
hope for a miracle. Dizzy  
spirits, they watch the wheel  
spinning, the silver ball skimming  
past their number. The dead  
aren't lucky. The house always wins,  
but they won't cut their losses;  
they keep coming back, lugging  
missals and crosses, waiting  
by the gold cage  
for a chance to cash in.

Kim Addonizio

## TWO POEMS

**In A Hotel The Night Before Visiting Palenque  
(A Gringa's Version of Borges' "Streetcorner Man")**

"And it came to me that in the middle of this ragweed and all these dump heaps and this whole stinking place, I'd grow up just another weed myself. What else was going to come out of this crap?"  
Borges, "The Streetcorner Man"

I hug my knees  
And balance in a chair,  
Stare till my eyes weep  
At a print beside the door.

I know I will not stir  
Or light a light.  
The jungle fan does not disturb  
Heavy, hanging smells.

The print,  
A man's left hand,  
Is blood.  
Splatters curve below,  
Extended up and right.

He must have thrown  
His hand before him  
As he fell.

He must have followed  
To the door,  
His hand against the wound,  
Until he fell.

There is no transom.  
I hear bottles break,  
Women scream.  
I am too scared

To ease the numb place  
Where my shoulder blade  
Strains against the chair.

I try to see Bonampak,  
Figures striding tall,  
Reds and whites.

I visualize instead  
A boy who witnesses:  
"All it takes to die  
Is being alive."

I see him stretch,  
Centered in his genitals,  
And act his code:

*The silent blade gone home,  
Just below the ribs,  
He slips out to the ball,  
And in the morning street,  
He and his knife look innocent.*

*He had no quarrel.  
It was that Butcher would not fight,  
Butcher, whom he walked behind  
To imitate his stride.*

*Butcher turned away.  
The stranger laughed.*

*Therefore the stranger died,  
Staggering to the wall  
Which moved in on him  
As the boy diminished sideways  
Through the door.*

**Water In The Basement**

The sump pump labors;  
Still the water seeps.  
I hear the suck and flow,  
Suck and flow,  
And feel the insistence of water.  
I know wet softens the wood of my house,  
Wears the stone,  
Licks away mortar,  
Loosens the civil lines  
Of my dry house.

Remnants from an animal feast  
Lie scattered in a corner:  
Excrement and shards of cricket thigh  
Behind a guitar.  
I lift the twelve-string to tune it,  
Scratch a loud measure.  
It was David's,  
Dead in his house  
To assert calm.  
I've been killing mice,  
and earthworms large as snakes  
Contract on my step.

All I can think to sing is  
". . . eels boiled in brew,  
Mother. . ."  
Mother of God!  
Beneath my house,  
Around it,  
In it,  
Are signs,  
Sounds.  
I keep to the middle of the room  
And listen.

## CAPTAIN DIVER'S DINNER

*October, 1943**From: The Book of Naples*

Enter a waiter, flitting between the tables  
with a platter. "Signo' —guardat' a stu bellu  
pesc'!" —sweeping it underneath our noses  
like a limp, white Stuka: elegant  
head, bluish eye, the gills just  
pink and red, the spine and flesh  
depending into sprigs of parsley, gobs

of lemon. And so much show. Fish fanciers  
would know this body doesn't match the head  
any more than frog legs would a chicken.  
A little shark is not a sea-bass. First  
they cut it into portions, arrange  
it so, garnish, then dive-bomb the customer  
with what he'll think he'll see... But even

getting here was like that—the tenements  
collapsed, heaps of rubble looming  
taller than our half-tracks, a smell ranker  
than sewer slime infiltrating the air. The busy  
lines of flies made mad by it. And then  
the cripples, the deformed, buzzing too,  
hunchbacks offering up their lucky

humps to anyone who'll buy a lottery  
ticket, cretins with enormous heads  
bobbing like boiling onions, propped  
up against the ruins of a wall. A dwarf,  
hustling cut-price coffins. Whores.  
And then those others, sweeping down on you, offering  
five and six year olds to do

your pleasure... You've come a long way from New Haven.  
And it wasn't just the ocean voyage,  
it's as if you fell five hundred years  
downward in time— back to Boccaccio,  
the plague raging, the Court of Funereal  
Miracles about to form. It was here in Naples  
Fiammetta burned into Boccaccio's eye

in the Church of San Lorenzo. And more; in San Domenico  
Maggiore, the father of theology was lessoned  
by its crucifix. And not far off, the ages  
and cycles of history came inching into nearness  
for Giambattista Vico... All these places, rubble  
now. And the elegance of Sannazzaro's fishermen  
reduced to this illusion. Dogfish fillets.

My night on the town. And Alderman, the rabbi,  
along. What to say? Cold. A brazier  
set in the corner, belching disinfectant.  
And the customers—doctors, lawyers, millers—  
*machers*, as Alderman chimed in—huddled  
around the tables, wrapped in overcoats.  
A study in olive drab, those coats

sewn up from stolen GI blankets,  
cut and tailored as if for opening night  
of a Marlene Dietrich movie. Turnips  
for vegetables, the wine resinous. Bread  
fit for the wood pile. But they sat  
with forks in hands, dreaming meals  
and talking food and waiting for their plates.

That, too. Medieval. Separating out  
a moment from what's around it with such  
...*worldly lust*, Alderman chimed in again. And called up  
Saul of Tarsus to mind. But it was then  
some beggar boys, *scugnizzi*, came sidling  
through the door. No one seemed to see them.  
They moved like ragged afterthoughts among us,

waiting for the slightest show of your indifference  
before impaling with their eyes. That second  
was their please-and-thank-you. A grubby hand  
flashed out, your leftovers were gone. Disappeared.  
I marveled at it. No one took offense  
or shoved them off. We were communing  
with our food, and they were merely... the world.

It was barbarous. We nursed our wine,  
the waiter came to show dessert.  
It was a kind of marzipan confection out of stolen  
Allied sugar, made to look  
like wan and greasy filberts, pistachios,  
acorns. Then came coffee ground from chicory,  
served so sweet you hardly knew.

And so we talked of Fichte, and how idealism  
can never be a mode of thought.  
Merely a speculative point of view.  
It was something comforting, our try at making  
German idealism intelligible, asserting  
our selves in the invocation of the Absolute I

but the beggar boys came back: this time  
it was a spidery cripple staked face-  
down on a kind of skateboard that they wheeled  
inside, and while the piles of rags that were his limbs  
twitched and the mouth stammered at the filthy  
floor, the boys this time made  
off with half a loaf of bread

jamming it between his teeth, silencing him.  
Even the arrant thievery of that loaf  
distracted no one from our food or the yammer  
of our conversations. And just as quickly as the boys  
appeared they dragged him out again,  
skatewheels clicking like a tiny train  
across the tiles of the sidewalk out in front.



The tic-tic of his going barely faded  
when the doorway filled with half a dozen  
oval faces mooned by stark  
black uniforms, black boots, black stockings,  
black hair cut short as prisoners. Weeping,  
the girls stood hand in hand until it seemed  
that someone pushed them forward towards us

*Why us?* I remember thinking as the first  
of them collided with a fat man in a chair  
and the girls began to wail and pull  
at one another, their eyelids fluttering,  
and you could see the pinkish membranes  
underneath *Dear God, they're blind*  
I said to Alderman, who sat transfixed

as one let go the other and they groped  
their ways among us— and then, it was as if some other  
hand directed her to turn and feel  
her way our way, that girl young enough  
to be my very daughter: a dry  
and parchment skin, cheeks hollowed by the winds  
of hunger, two lines of sorrow running

from beside her nose below the corners of her mouth,  
the tiny muscles at the bridge of her nose  
and in-between her eyebrows, knotted with weeping.  
Like the boys, she turned her visage towards me.  
Her lips were trembling, and it seemed the tears  
were welling from the sightless center of her soul,  
her nose had told her *Here is food*

and following that dark induction towards us,  
arms and hands extended, palms  
downward, fingers rigid, it was as if  
she did in some way see. And so she came  
before me. I could see the whiteness  
of her teeth acceding to something gray,  
lips to cracks and fever blisters,

and something more: there was a ribbon  
struggling through her close-cropped shocks of hair,  
a rag of what was once a fleur-de-lys  
knotted at the crown by someone's hand.  
Just for a second, I could see her coming  
from the shadows by a stone pilaster  
her face burning like a flambeau in my eyes

before the cantilena of her hunger turned  
to howls, and it was 1943 again... Alderman  
pushed my arm; the plate with crumbs  
of marzipan. I filled a spoon and put  
it just between her lips. She stopped,  
closed them both around the spoon and licked it off,  
then raised her arms and hands in unison

to thank me. As she turned away, forks  
and spoons flashed out, the orphans' open  
mouths were filled, one from this side,  
one from that. But no one seemed  
to see... anything. And when it ended, the girls  
went groping out the door. Our meal  
went on. Whatever it was, was over.

There seemed to have drawn around me the edges  
of a darkness, and I shuddered. Yet I didn't lose  
my calm. I heard no voices. There was only  
a kind of ringing emptiness, an inwardness,  
a pregnancy of silence  
demanding nothing. I could only stammer  
*What are we supposed to do?*

but my comrade sat there, stricken. And I thought  
*those girls were weeping when they came and weeping  
when they left.* Even beyond the prison of their blindness  
this war had sentenced them to... To what? I knew  
that none of us would ever come to terms with that.  
I knew we had no way to come to terms.  
Having seen that darkness, it had made me see.

## THREE POEMS

## Juan Pico and the Acequia Madre

Juan Pico knows it's Spring  
when the *gringos* open Mother's Ditch:  
small bites of sound  
crunching like day-old tacos  
as her angry plume of clay-brown water  
    sluicing down, washing out  
old dove's pockmarked skin, daubed debris  
rushing past  
his tarpapered, tin-wood world  
    noted locally  
for lack of plumbing, heat. . .

        Juan walks to the banks  
of the *Acequia Madre*,  
takes off his *buaraches*, strips of old truck tires,  
hip deep in swirling rags,  
rusty cans,  
bottles blossoming import labels—

A drowned rabbit with pink vacant eyes,  
Condoms clinging like banana slugs—

        Without once looking back  
Juan Pico wades deeper in the *Acequia Madre*, this mothering,  
    muddy mother,  
straight into her anger  
color of pinto beans left boiling  
    on his shack's back burner.

## Poem for Doc Ernst's Abalone Recipe

i

When surf yellows, color of light egg batter  
in a heated pan,  
Thoughts of old Doc Ernst on Monterey Wharf—  
Doc's slow smile like a drag bunt  
to third base . . . .

ii

Diving as a boy with a tire-iron, prying off  
roughred shellfish called abalone—

iii

Doc's slicing template, two wooden coathangers  
nailed on a board—

iv

Doc beating abalone with an old oak mallet, keepsake  
from a John Steinbeck movie—

v

Dipping steaks in batter color of streaky  
sienna sunsets  
Popped in sizzling oil—

vi

Clap freckled old hands three times, and/or  
swallow of beer—

vii

Turn them over, clap hands three times  
(like a Friday night magician at the Bijou)  
serve with a slow smile—

viii

Never overdone; coming out like Doc's life  
by the sea,  
A little on the tender side.

**A Night with Borstal Boy**

A key-janglin' door-bangin' night  
in a cold, wet cell—

A dark Irishman, black as a coal lorry  
who called himself Paddy

Sings old protest songs in the cell  
next to mine.

I didn't give a fish's tit for his songs,  
but what could I do?

Jasus, smoked his snout down to a butt,  
slits paper with his nail

Sprinkling tobacco like holy water.

*Is it a political crime you're in for, laddie?  
Or did you thread a girlie without her willin'?*

Outside, cutting off my answer, lombeg drums  
beatin' nearer—

(I was only in the night for poachin' a Guinness) . . .

A jailer followed by a priest unlocked his cell,  
Paddy's face is bright

Between his song; he had them pause to shake  
my hand,

*Political, sir* I said, and his dark eyes wink  
as he and the lombeg drums are gone.

Ray Clark Dickson

EIGHT SAN JOAQUIN VALLEY  
VARIATIONS ON A MIDWESTERN  
PHOTOGRAPH BY ART SENSABAUGH

—(*Midwestern Landscape* #23)

1.

Telegraph poles, we  
called them, though  
we didn't know why:  
sprouting along every  
road in our treeless  
valley, twisted grey  
sticks jabbed into the  
ground, leaning to the  
wind, a single strand  
of wire: or the tall  
poles by the railroad  
tracks, blackened with  
creosote, two crossarms,  
the green insulators  
glinting in the sun,  
a line of them walking  
out both ways from  
where I stood, in a  
straight line forever,  
shrinking to squeeze  
into the crack between  
sky and earth's edge.  
When I put my ear to  
a pole, on an August  
afternoon, I could  
hear the hum of words  
streaming through the  
wires, but I never  
could quite make out  
what they were saying.

## 2.

Riding in the backseat,  
I floated with the dip  
and swoop of the wires,  
flying along beside us,  
up to catch the crossarm,  
down and up and—two  
black crows on this pole,  
waiting for the tire of  
a car (our car, the green  
forty-nine Chevrolet)  
to catch that wildly  
leaping rabbit across  
the ribs and smear it  
over the asphalt, my  
father starting to mutter  
something in Norwegian,  
my mother, her face  
wrinkling toward tears,  
looking back, and I  
look back too, watch the  
crows come circling  
down. And then the  
lines begin to beat  
their rhythm into my  
brain again, dip and  
swoop, dip and swoop  
and I know I will ride  
here forever, lying in  
the backseat, rolling to  
the swing of the wires.

## 3.

A barn wall, streaked  
with light leaking  
between the boards.  
A splash of light  
through the open door,  
across the packed dirt  
of the yard. In the  
door, a man, hunched  
beside a cow, arms  
working as he pulls at  
the teats: blue work  
shirt, darker blue  
overalls: my father.  
A smell of new milk,  
a hot stink of cow  
piss and oats spills  
out from the barn, but  
I am outside the square  
of light. Above me,  
the barn roof sails up.  
Then a black emptiness  
that goes further than  
I can see. There is  
no sound but the sprit,  
sprit of the stream of  
milk against the side  
of the pail. The  
shutter clicks. I  
know I will stand  
frozen here forever.



## 4.

Standing in the middle  
of the tracks, I saw  
the rails squeezing  
together, trying to  
find a hole through  
the flat wall of the  
sky. And I saw the  
swing of the earth, as  
it pulled the tracks  
down into an emptiness  
I didn't want to think  
about. Steel rails,  
blackened at the base,  
tops scoured silver-  
white by the boxcar  
wheels. Hot enough  
in the August sun to  
scorch your hand. But  
I found a streak of  
shade by a telegraph  
pole, put my ear to  
the track, remembering  
the long pull of the  
whistle in the night,  
the clack of the wheels  
at the crossing, but all  
I heard was something  
happening a long way  
away, that didn't have  
anything to do with me.

## 5.

Weeds. Foxtail, the  
leaves a translucent  
tan in August, head a  
pointed brush, each  
seed tapering to a  
tail. A hook at the  
base of the seed. Back  
from a walk along the  
tracks, I'd sit on the  
step, pick foxtails from  
pantslegs, socks, all  
but one, caught in a  
cuff, to itch my ankle  
all through supertime.  
Or the one we called  
puncture vine, a tiny  
blue flower in June,  
dried to a bristled  
seed by August. Every  
hundred yards, I'd stop  
to pick the burrs from  
the soles of my shoes.  
And a plant we named  
tobacco, brown seeds  
thick along the stalk.  
I'd pull them off in  
handfulls, fill my  
pockets for Uncle David.  
So the weeds quietly  
reclaimed the earth.

## 6.

A row of poplars along  
the road, three pepper  
trees beside the driveway,  
an English walnut in  
the back yard, arching  
over the tankhouse (the  
creak of the tin blades,  
turning to the wind—  
AERMOTER, the tail said).  
Trees. A little shade, a  
shield against the wind.  
A memory of Minnesota,  
seedlings from the Sears  
Roebuck catalogue. Or a  
picture postcard from  
England, oaks, lawns,  
a country house on the  
crest of a hill. So  
they dug ditches to run  
water from the river.  
Anything but the ragged  
fringe of cottonwoods,  
along the river bank.  
Anything but the fields  
of brown grass, beyond  
the last irrigation ditch.  
Anything but the straight  
edge of the horizon, cut  
only by a spume of dust,  
behind a speeding pickup.

## 7.

And men came to fence  
the land, draw straight  
lines across the valley  
floor, drive in a row  
of fenceposts (redwood  
here, though they still  
talked of cedar) and  
string two strands of  
barbed wire, enough to  
keep the cows in. And  
the butcher birds came,  
strung up their meat to  
dry. A newborn field  
mouse, ripped open by  
the probing beak, hung  
by a foot. Or a bit of  
rabbit's flesh, pulled  
loose from the asphalt.  
Men came, said, "This  
is our land." They  
stretched their fences,  
rode on. The birds  
waited for a while, flew  
up to sit shrieking on  
the wire, test the  
barbs with their beaks,  
settle, sit, watch.  
Sooner or later, they  
knew, something good  
to eat would come along.

## 8.

Last, a road. It's easy to miss it, it lies so level with the earth. Two X's on poles, to mark the crossing. A gravel roadbed, so the stones can work their way between heel and sole. A road to take you—that man, maybe, who just disappeared over the rise—out of here, toward Highway 33 and north, Westley, Tracy, San Francisco, a world of color, people jostling in the streets, but I can't get through the flat plane of this image, the train will never come clanging through this crossing, no wind will lift the seeds from these weeds, this road isn't going anywhere and I'm riding on it still, down this corridor of poles, beside the swinging wires, in the perfect black and white light of memory.

## CATECHISM

I begin as tradition advises  
with a question for the rabbi.  
How can the soul be free of its body?

But God knows they haven't ordained women long.  
Her eyes are still bright. She leans forward,  
peers into mine. Why would you want to?

Because it's there to be climbed.  
Because I'm nearly forty and it's getting harder  
to stay thin, wake rested, not weep in the afternoon.  
It says *shame*, and *eat*. It's an imbecile  
rocking itself at 5 in the morning  
as if wind had no sway, trees rising above us  
in March air so wild you know the invisible exists.

She leans back. I can't tell if she smiles  
or frowns. What makes you want to see the invisible?  
How would you know wind without flesh, hair?

I would be wind, I say.  
But now this rabbi in woman form looks hard at me:  
Then wind would change into fire.  
You torture yourself.

But the body slumps and whines.  
It's a dog, I say.

Her ears prick up. I know what she's thinking.  
So feed it, she smiles. Let it keep you warm.  
At night when its legs twitch, when a sound  
breaks from its throat and wakes you,  
listen.

## TWO POEMS

## What Doesn't Happen

A russet touch of late day, when the sun's the lowest note it knows in light's register. And so this modest Forest Preserve just north of Chicago, now, in mid-May, prints its greens with momentary rooster's-combs of red along their edges. A man might idle his car here staring through receding plane on plane of leafy vision... But listen, I'll tell you about this twistdip road in winter. I skidded. The car and my life slid sideways out of their ongoing. Death

slowed down the fatal rushing-up of a line of ice-sheathed trees to about the length of a geologic age. So this is it, I said, the breath of saying it remaining like a passenger frightened white beside me. Everything was white. The tires threw great plumes of snow on either side, as if the Angel of Death were bearing me on its back already, and why not, only seconds left. So white, so sure, inevitable, efficient: death was going to happen. And then death

didn't happen. Two lean trees gaped to the width of the car and a hair. I slowed, then stopped, and let the upflung gauze of winter settle over me, pleased with the radio still receiving schlock rock, with the mackerel-color sky, with every fucking lucky hair on my arm in its crystal of frozen sweat. Now I think back to that often. A world without me sitting here writing this didn't happen. That very possible alternate planet didn't happen. So: those ancient Chinese sages

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sucked (for luscious hours, by relays of tongue-gymnastic cult-attendants)  
 to their on-the-crest's-edge abstinence but  
 no farther: grew in will, from what  
 didn't happen. As we all do. As a cosmos never called  
 into existence—that's the opposite from dying—goes so deeply around  
 in the realm of the absolutely null, it finally touches  
 dying: and there, with the rest of the dead, becomes sustaining  
 mulch for the living. All of a cosmos—x'ed away:

the amber-and-ocher parfait of its canyons' paleontology strata;  
 its guano; its gods; the oiled revolving of chambers  
 in each of its guns, and the entry of light to the sanctum-chambers  
 of each of its sweet bell peppers; every fireplug and every  
 champing atom in a fireplug, and the tumult-thrown arch of the waters  
 therefrom;

the compote-glide of testes in their sac; the solstice sun  
 inside a megalith; the aleph-beth; the sumptuous  
 peristalsis down the throatways of a giraffe; the

...but enough. It's true, if just What Is is  
 infinite, with every blackly gleaming bead of salmon roe a galaxy  
 of neutron, muon, gluon in their far submatter mánaldas,  
 then What Doesn't Happen is infinite too,  
 times infinite possibility, and simply waking to watch light  
 lost in the auburn ocean of hair of the woman beside you  
 instead of another woman: opens you up to the terrible unvoiced  
 screaming  
 of a universe mourning the loss of its own first day of creation. Now



when I think of Alice's first baby, that died shitting out of its mouth and was buried before it was named, was just a fish of human flesh in a walnut shoebox casket, I know an entire existence from cathedral bells to crotchlice never happened, and the 10-speed racer Auntie Sally bought in expectation bears its cobwebbed chain in *this* world like a ghost. Because each "yes" or "no" we give each other premurders uncountable futures, then *their* futures: I'm going to weigh each redcell's oxygenating, before I give breath to either. Because

the tree of blood in my body didn't redden snow one winter, because I sat there, happy, watched exhaust take on the size and substance of a homecoming float in the clear preservative air, and then came home myself: I understand, for the while we're here, we must be tender with one another; and now if I'm a diarist of the Neverwas, that grieved beseeching tribe without a history, it helps me see how very much we are, who are composed of empty space and elemental stuff enough to be the Here and Now— and how

each crumb of sleep in the eye is a joy and each waking a special responsibility. But simply, I mean the shepherd

(in the amaretto-light of Giorgione's oil *The Tempest*, that mysterious assembling

of storm, and city, and ruins, and foliage, and the naked suckling mother and child—and yes, the shepherd "o'erlooking" it all—in almondy,

16th-century

fixative glow): he was a woman, x-rays show, once. She was cancelled, she's his skeleton now, his marrow and carbon-14, the strength a whole world means, converted to another. Or Michael, 12, and wondering

what's that bike in Sally's basement he can't touch. In a way,  
it's his motor.

By not running, it's his motor. And some day we'll tell him:  
"Once, you had a brothersisterthing. It was so quiet, and had  
the loveliness of a creature dreaming, even in the coldest  
light it didn't lose

that template beauty. Then it was nothing. Now it's  
nova'ed from nothing

to be the microscopic stars of nerve and sperm and protein collagen  
informing

your day of violin and baseball. Be sweet to it, in your sweetness.

Be empowered for it, in your strength." I'll write this poem,

explaining Michael's strength: his grapnel hold from which a  
curveball bends straight space like a pliant dowelrod, or the concentrated  
cupping of his chin in the violin's sleek black breve—the strength

we all have, really, the greenness of spring. And I'll start,

"A man might idle his car here, staring through receding plane  
on plane of leafy vision..." I will. It's May. The day

is a state park's palette of pine and poplar colors... But

now I'm telling you snow, and more snow, now I'm telling you this

is the parish uniform each least weed's wearing, white

on white, oblitative white. There is no celadon-green

or jade- or kelly- or toadbelly-green, we're whitening back

through tiretrack snow to the zeroplace, its swagged white sky,

its scattered wands of ice, there is no gardenlizard-green,

not even the sweetcream-green of its throat, and we will grow stronger,

white, and zero, here where fate made its decision, a vision of going  
on longer, and we will grow stronger, and we will grow stronger.

not from this poem but the poem that it isn't.

**Atavism/Bowl**

1.

And every night returning to the black,  
blurred rendering-vat of sleep. And factored back to bones  
in that La Brea. In a black like that, eyelashes  
can't be more than cilia  
rowing a lidlike protozoon through tar.  
Two lids. And maybe the hint of a face. And maybe a self  
by morning. I've watched her, short of waking, float  
to the surface and be a bog burial  
rising released from the black of the first bead of roe,  
the first seam of coal, the pleats of the prototrilobite...  
We were joking about our football player students  
in our condescending professorial way, the word  
Neanderthal occurring more than once. And yes, they do look  
like those waxwork huddles in fiberglass caves  
most local museums delight in. Yes,  
we did suggest a new position:  
throwback... Yes; thrown back. And if the gods  
of Egypt were publicly animal-headed or -bodied, well,  
in 1952 a 4-year-old might still be shocked like a lab rat  
at his mother's casual stepping from the bath, his  
first and unprepared-for vision of that secret thatchy  
beastmark—shocked, and thrown  
back through the mazes of his nervous system, back  
past being a blastula, back for a single impossible flash  
of time to a room where raw red offerings in flat gray bowls  
were set before the statue of a woman with a she-goat's loins...  
I wake from a dream. My wife is still asleep, and  
in the knees-to-breasts reposing of that predynastic burial  
from Naga ed-Deir in Egypt, that says this woman is  
a fetus again / a frog / a fish / a zygote.

2.

There are things we understand before we learn them.  
 So that 4-year-old (the haircut bowl atop him, and the haircut scissors  
 ready in its little leather sheath) will scream,  
 will this time scream out murder, having seen where  
 else hair covers. He will know the glazed ceramic bowl  
 and scissors (that domesticated blade) declare their origin  
 as Neolithic: time of the first true settlements, the animal pens,  
 the turning away from kinhood with the wild herds. So  
 Gilgamesh the King is given Enkidu "the shaggy one, who tussles  
 with lions for play": "and I will take him for a brother."  
 Later, Samson. RomulusRemus. Tarzan. Plaster casts  
 of sasquatch tracks and photographs of where the yeti shambled  
 to a lavender haze-line, "savage," "like an ape," "& covered completely  
 in hair." Because the body never forgets the weather-of-hair,  
 the lanugo, it wore in the womb. Because the lanugo remembers  
 better than any Victorian album of locks. A 4-year-old  
 will scream, not knowing a word for "betrayal." Because the body  
 remembers. Because when James McConnell trained his tiny  
 ticktape-like worms to fear a shine of light, then  
 snipped them cleanly so a head half and a tail half could each  
 regenerate, two new worms resulted "and both retained in equal  
 measure the fear of light. *The learning had passed in full  
 to the tail-grown worm as well.*" Because the whole body remembers.  
 Because if untrained worms were fed the ground-up  
 trained worms... yes: "There is hereditary information  
 of knowledge carried fully in the flesh." Because. The wine, the wafer.  
 Some nights, when I ate her, at those gates where the matrix is  
 closest, lushest, sex-spume on the tonguetip, I remember.  
 Because the cells of the body are honeycombed caves of ancestor rites.  
 Because there is a raw heart set on a ledge, in a flat-gray bowl.

3.

Or the body before the body... Mimi's potting, in the makeshift backyard studio. Outside, Devin is whapping his plastic orange bowling ball with a chartreuse plastic pin—a savvy move, I guess, if you know the game-rules of 4-year-olds. And Mimi “bowl”: a lovely rough circle of amaranth clay, of depth enough to hold a dozen golden delicious, is being shaped by slap and knead and delicate wet-fingered pettings on the wheel, Mimi mudded past the elbows. If I waxed too goopily purplepoetic over the matri- and patriarch bones in new exoskeleton form here, she'd say bah. And yet she knows, I know, intuitively what Lyall Watson's worked out as an answer to what preceded our own genes' lockstep spiral danceathon down the millennia, what shaped them, and he says: clay. Before the first gamete, before the first living skin. Because clay remembers, and passes it on, strict but not so strict: because clay evolves. Because clay is a *crystal*, inevitable, ur-duplicative, the perfect ripe mother for DNA. Mother Earth. And so the worldwide rites for mining: mine as wound, or mine as labia and sexual shaft (see cunnilingus, section 2 earlier). And so the worldwide burial rites: the corpse in bloodcolor clay so often, or folded into the wombly shape. And orthodox Jews, in Cincinnati, in San Diego, asleep with a handfull of Israel under their pillows. Ocher, hematite, cinnabar—sacred red ores. When Devin was born, Michael providing the regulatory lamaze-directed breathing at Mimi's side and Morgan couching her engorged contracting body, I took the photographs. The afterbirth, that loud carnelian ball in a bowl, attracted the feel of spirits around it, terraform and mammalancestral spirits, like—yes, crystal. We could call it a crystal ball. We could call it telling the past.

4.

Though some will always prefer Flash Gordon sleeking faster than light through the future, this poem has already called on the aegis of Tarzan, flying vinewise through the African night at the speed of dark. “Kreegah! Tarzan bundolo!” (Beware! Tarzan kills!) and then “the victory cry of the great apes” up the ladder of his throat. And his real-life feral kin: Clemens the Pig Boy, the Syrian Gorilla Girl, Amala and Kamala “the Wolf Girls of India” “found in a den like any other cubs,” “they learned to lap from a bowl but required the meat uncooked.” Or geeks: those sad drunk tramps in a sideshow pit, diapered in ratty fur, and on the hour biting the unaware head off a live chicken, maybe making an antic display of the blood-gouting body while its wings still fluster in habit or shock. The “sad” is my own reading-in. Who knows? The same thing happens in shaman initiation and it’s holy. There are fecal and gizzarded tribal rites today in direct desendancy from the rockbottom layers of Africa “the cradle of humankind” Louis and Mary Leakey encouraged, jaw by limb, but mainly carbon-14 crumb by crumb, to rise and be lovingly brushed clean and wired whole in the sun. They pushed the dot, the birthdate, back and back. As for my own, familial past—it’s a little like flinging the bone for the golden retriever. Wind-up, oomph, and pitch, but I can only get it back in the shadows so far, and that’s my limit. My grandparents huddled across the ocean in steerage: four shawls, two battered satchels of plates, and no known genealogy. The gold ring with its green stone that came down to me from Grandpa Albert—that, and the name, and no more—is the fossil that starts what I know. We say of it, like any fossil: something soft and breakable lived in here. We all do it: need to trace back. Even Flash. He lands. On “Mongo.” And what does he find? Lion People / Bird People / Tree People / Clay...

5.

I'll tell you the joke about the golden retriever's name, in a moment. It's as dumb as Koo-Koo the Bird Girl, Zip and Zup the Man-Monkeys—all of those circus humbug names, though they may speak to real needs. There were those children bought by merchants: forced to crawl, their vocal cords destroyed, their skin flayed strip by strip and the hide of a bear or a dog transplanted. (The dog, yes. Pissed on everything. So almost everybody misunderstood when we called him: "Leakey!"—retrieving all those bones.) The need, the real need, to dig inside whatever bicameral mind or bituminous vein we hearken to: in part is explained by my grandfather, Albert, landing like Flash, without language, or contacts, or shelter, or viable skills—but needing to walk out past that statue and her torch, as if whatever peddler's leatherette bag and spiel tomorrow meant, was clear already, as if Nettie in her gray print dress with the collar of paper flowers was clear already, and the tenement bed, and the small popped knuckles of wood in the oil drum's fire... But nothing was clear, of course. And so the future can be as dark as the past. Then simply waking in a new day is mysterious enough to stir the atavism up. And it *is* a new day, today, and the Most Important Day of the Year. Mimi's outside barbequeing, Devin making leaky in his plastic pants, and Michael and I inside and overseeing the tribal rites. For us, it's held in the sign of our Neolithic civilizing, safely contained. But there they are, "who tussle with lions for play." So much has been written about it... I won't say more. Hey, stop your reading. Grab a beer. The Bowl Game. Hackle, snarl, and snap.

Albert Goldbarth

## PLAYING CANDLELAND

Your kindergarten teacher says that children  
need to be yelled at. She calls you  
the little walking encyclopedia,  
who ends her game of what-is-smaller-than-that  
by saying quarks. She tells me you are silent  
and withdrawn; write your name small and crooked;  
have trouble descending the stairs.  
She thinks you should learn to play soccer.

At home you romp with the rabbit, roar  
through the yard as Tyrannosaurus Rex,  
and begin to choreograph  
the Broadway musical version of  
“Close Encounters of the Third Kind.”  
“*This* is how I am in school,” you explain,  
hunching your shoulders forward, folding in  
your arms so your face falls into shadow.

When the teacher asks what you do best,  
you tell her, “Playing Candleland.”  
She thinks this is a packaged game, the rules  
inflexible as her own. She’s never seen  
you patiently dripping wax, the slow rivers  
of color covering matchstick structures.  
Humming Mussorgsky, you erode a mountain range  
or invent a Venusian landscape of red rock.

Over here life starts, volcanoes rising  
out of a sluggish sea. Smiling, you await  
the advent of the hadrosaurs.  
Bent intently over a flame  
in this place of your own shaping,  
you have kindled the light in which  
I will always see your face. Tell her what fire  
creates—a vast and malleable country.



**SIXTY-FOUR CAPRICES FOR A LONG-DISTANCE  
SWIMMER: NOTES ON SWIMMING 100 MILES**

1. A friend asks why I swim. Why not a movie? A drink? Dinner? I answer that I swim for strength, for a rippling tricep and a dimple in my thigh. I hide the lie with a stroke: I swim for the silence of water.
2. An older woman stopped swimming and watched me. What a graceful stroke! What she loved, of course, was the mirrored beauty of her youth—the forgotten pleasure of her toughened skin.
3. The water undulates like a womb I do not remember. My fingers poke through for life. The air is unfamiliar.
4. I tell a friend that life is water. With a pretended fluidity his heart mimics the ocean—but he cannot swim. He answers that a cell full of water explodes.
5. Seventy-year old women stand naked in the locker room. Some use walkers, others have artificial hips, scarred legs and missing breasts; still, they love this morning swim with the distant sun rising.
6. In these women, I witness how I too will age. I avert my eyes, move to far lanes and other shadows.
7. I swim past men to prove my strength—after years of “throwing like a girl”; I lap them twice.
8. To gauge myself, I watch other women. Old women, pregnant women, girls without breasts who marvel at mine. The younger ones point at me, not believing that this is what their bodies will become.
9. The older women reflect the course my body must follow. My eyes wrinkle in patterns that mimic theirs. Breasts pull through water to escape the yank of gravity.

10. I tap slower swimmers' feet to pass them. Their skin startles me, as though I've come upon schools of spot running south for winter.
11. Swimming is one of the rare things I do alone. Of necessity, lap after lap, I build faith in solitude.
12. Here there is no hand to hold, no ball to return, no score to keep.
13. Swimming gives me patience to write.
14. Cells transport oxygen in a precise biochemical reaction, evolved through an expanse of time, imagined only by God, at night, while He dreamed. I test the reliability of flesh—all but breathing water.
15. I dream of water. I thrash pillows. Mistaking my struggle for a nightmare, a man grabs me to his side.
16. I dream of fire. I dream of fire and combustion. The things water does not heal.
17. How do we breathe underwater? A moment without air is magic. Through goggles, I watch the bubbles insist on my life.
18. Fifty others swim in the pool. Water molecules vibrate with our personalities. I swallow each person's breath, yet remain alone.
19. My men have gone for water. Their faces reflect the sorrow of departure. They have gone for deeper water and places where I drown.
20. I once swam competitively, pushing constantly against the limits of my body: one second faster, five-tenths for the blue ribbon, one one-hundredth for the record.
21. This — is — the — point — where I always — want to stop. Turn — legs — ache — lungs heave — arms weary — the distance — is forever — force the push — break water.

22. Every morning, two crows perch near the pool's glass doors and peck madly at their reflections. When no one watches, I jump out of the pool and run, arms raised and mouth squawking, to chase them away.
23. Then all three of us jump—the crows with fright to the sky—and me, chilled, to the diving well.
24. Every other breath my face sculpts a water mask.
25. Today the pool is too hot to even sweat. Heat curls from skin like humidity over asphalt.
26. Blood throbs, echoing the physics of water and sound. It sets up a rhythm between myself and other swimmers.
27. The echo of someone swimming butterfly is a song playing in your head all day.
28. All of it is the dull pound of a heart, blood returning to its origin is exciting as water tumbling in spring.
29. At a certain angle, the hand slices sheets of water. This requires a force the body is unaware of, even as pounds of water move away like the curtain rising over the first act.
30. What does it mean to drown in a dream? Is there the hope of bellying-up like a fish? Are we forced to forget breathing?
31. Some days there is no difference between sleep and dreams, between swimming and drowning, water and air.
32. What is unnatural is untrue.
33. My father tried to teach me to play chess. A reluctant student, one night I sleepwalked to the living room, arranged the chess board, and fell—hands first—on the queen.
34. There are sixty-four squares on a chess board! Swimming sixty-four lengths assumes the logic of a mile.

35. There is a theory that women who try desperately to lose weight also try to diminish their presence on earth.
36. After a winter of depression, inches of sadness float across the pool.
37. Sometimes, breathing, the heaviness of my own life amazes me. Sucking on air, I consume the world.
38. My best friend moves haphazardly at my side, misunderstanding when I don't pause to answer his smile.
39. He is my friend and I tell him everything—or everything I know—or everything I learn when swimming.
40. Breaststroke beads the surface like mercury on skin. I'm a skeet barely touching water, needing it only to serve my own motion.
41. I try to describe my father, but he eludes me, fast as a rock skipping the ocean. I try to describe my mother, but she is too much myself—familiar as oxygen gurgling about my waist.
42. I learned to walk because my sister was born and I knew that I would never be carried again.
43. I learned to swim because my father threw me in the deep end and shouted "Swim!"
44. I sweat in the water and my face is cooled, ice cooled on ice.
45. As children, my sisters and I linked arms with my father and ran into the Atlantic, afraid only of letting go and coming up in some other ocean.
46. A man paralyzed from the waist down swims slowly, his legs quivering with the dream of motion. In a dream that my strength reaches him through water, I swim faster, give up another length.
47. At dawn the moon fits the socket of the sky like a great white bulb.

48. I am the cog of a wheel. I turn and separate men; they never meet and nothing is ever whole.
49. I love him as though all the time in the world were contained in the four walls of our room or the four chambers of my heart.
50. An old woman wears pantyhose under her bathing suit, keeping warm beneath a layer of material thinner than flesh.
51. I walked into fifteen-foot waves, tropics, mid-March. The crystalline water shattered over my head.
52. The lover who became a lover when the old lover was not a lover has taken a lover.
53. The word has no meaning.
54. A scar defines a woman's abdomen—a red mark of all that has been and all that must follow.
55. I escape gravity in water, the way others fly in dreams to escape danger.
56. I watch my sisters and brother closely. How is it that my blood is their blood, my face is their face, but my touch is not theirs?
57. Today I am red and the bullish world tramples me.
58. In one dream, my first boyfriend drowns in the Chesapeake Bay and I retrieve his body with a crab trap. The stench of that first loss—how it permeated so many years!
59. All of it slips off, like silk in passion.
60. My goggles are amber. The grass is lime green ice cream. The sky is deep gray. The water is a crystal chandelier.
61. When I swim I am the totality of water. I am hydrogen and oxygen. I am pure strength and energy.

62. An old girlfriend marries and dreams of babies red as geraniums. I swim from commitment and dream of hope, golden as fall.
63. I've been here before and am anxious to leave. I am young enough to have learned that all things are composed of change.
64. I shed water's silk cocoon for the certain embrace of air; my body emerges from the pool, form from cut crystal.

Janice M. Lynch

## TWO POEMS

### Old Taos Pueblo; Christmas Eve

Where are the drums? No drums  
except our numbed feet stamping  
into snow tingling them alive.  
From the peaks, Sangre de Cristos, gold  
blood of Christ in the sunset.

We wait with other tourists in the plaza  
regrouping dead beliefs—flailed by wind,  
stooped under the overhang of sky. Cloud  
ponies gallop toward a vengeance of colors,  
and inside the mission, voices chant mass.

Columns of pine logs ignited one by one,  
bitter smoke greases the air, now  
the scene is full of demonic black  
as in Brueghel's winter canvases, the doings  
of men blotch the pure earth.

Horizon fire and slow dance silhouettes  
on the roofs. At the oldest doorways  
of America, elders sit tented  
in blankets, faces like pinyon bark.  
Three tribal virgins confide about dealing,  
using, and six months in Santa Fe jail.

Night closes in.

Suddenly, rifle shots explode in our midst—  
the young braves, stampeding evil spirits,  
clear the way for Mary. Spanish doors  
release the procession: buckskin maidens  
swaying, boots beating down...

Mary never moved like that.  
She is ceramic in blue and lace, fixed  
on a palanquin, carried among us.  
A hoary priest, as Nordic as Saint Nicholas,  
taller than all the Indians, follows.

Where is the Child?

Between pale god and corn Mother  
the Indians rock him, cradling the paradox.  
Old darkness, split of light,  
a new-born enters.

### **The Wrong Bride**

**In memory: Frances Pribyl, Prague, Bohemia 1888—  
Camarillo, California 1975**

I

Women did not swim then.  
They giggled, wading in up to heavy  
bloomers, or with tiny courage  
dipped naked toes.

Frances, secretly at the lake  
strips to her girlish chemise

slides in amongst the reeds  
with a feathery sound.  
Ducks barely troubling their  
wings, trail in behind her.

Grounded she is plump.  
In the water's suspension finds  
her own sleekness, arms  
in a sinuous windmill  
arching and cupping.

To swim a whole lake!  
She skims the surface  
with her nostrils, the blend  
of wind and water.

Dives, following the sunshafts  
deep to springs of green.

A mile from shore a fisherman  
in his dingy gasps to see her floating  
beatifically, long hair rippling.  
Exactly what she wants—a cool, clear life.

## II

At Ellis Island Joseph waited  
for Christie, he'd sweated for  
in Chicago steel mills. Their parents  
lied, sent Frances instead—  
the oldest sister to be married first.

His eyes always strangers.  
After the second child, she knew why.  
Yet could not stop the babies—  
seven in twelve years—each  
a grief squeezed out.

Sometimes she wandered from the house  
apron on, strudel in the oven.  
She slept under trees, on the rock  
shore of Lake Michigan  
until she was found.



She tried her longest swim  
but water was her other air  
not her oblivion—  
insanity was that.  
And for the children, an orphanage  
where no one, not even they  
could read her letters in Bohemian.

Grandmother's life the storm.  
Her madness its whorls curling in  
toward the center like designs  
on a snail. Her children  
grandchildren on the trail  
of her sticky tears.

## III

My daughters were babies  
when I taught them to swim.  
At five they dived from high boards  
swam distances under water  
vibrant, dolphin bodies.  
They're better than I am.

I have been known to swim  
a whole lake; two miles  
from shore, sportsmen in speed boats  
are alarmed to see me floating  
hair like seaweed.

A cool, clear life  
fluidity and ease.  
My own element.