

THE BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL

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SWIMMING THE BODY'S WATER

In the beginning, chill
I can never anticipate seeps
through bone, and more alone
than I could ever imagine, my unschooled
arms stroke the water, cold
that swells the heart, distends the tight
arteries, teases heat from opened
pores as water and skin begin
a mating

and only when I fill
with cold so natural the arms flinch
against the rasp of air, when time
measures in laps and the counting
stops, does my mouth work open
and shut with water, narrow dam
of teeth and tongue protect lungs that ache
for more than vapor, for water that slides
across my throat in search of gills

then this body drilled by water
remembers the sea that spilled
like blood toward a lifting sun
how the legs opened and closed
on brine so soft they barely sensed
the inward flow, how it emptied,
surged again, so that the legs forget
the land, the loosened hips grow wide with sea,
the body swims the sea inside

Lucia Cordell Getsi

MARRIAGE

1.

"Why doesn't Aunt Dorothy
have any children"

Mother stood
peeling carrots over the sink

"Shesnotmarried"

Back rigid
her peeler flying
across the orange skins

2.

He woke to find it on his windowsill
Where Babies Come From

No one had put it there

It told where flowers come from
and birds and certain
small animals
with lots of pictures

Near the end

Humans
briefly with one photo:
mother father holding baby smiling

He read all about the sperm and egg
and still didn't know
how women were different from men

or how the sperm could
get from inside the penis of the father
into the penis of the mother

He did discover though
what married
could mean

If people lay together
facing each other
they might make a baby in their sleep

Wanting a brother
he thought of letting his parents
in on it

They slept with their backs touching

Afraid to tell them
he remained an only child

R. Yurman

washed clean of French, English, Spanish, Polish, Russian, Japanese
and all the subtle, esperanto cruelties
of high finance; washed clean back
to his Kingston patois (at five, a street-boy conning rings
from wide-eyed island hoppers).

And leaning into my big wicker chair
with a clover smile, broad and sweet, he started to tell
how to salt the hole in a tree, so
the green monkey, reaching in and making a fist,
will get stuck fast . . . then you nab her from the back, or him;

and how, on his island, the sly gourmande
can slip the comb right out from under the bees.

Clever heart,
am I so foolish, reaching into you for stories,
or is it you who has fallen
into me

Mombassa Tale

Never met before, she
Called him by his name, "Pssst,
Mwenda!" Coral palms, slim arms
Slipped around him, "Njoo hapa,"
Come to my room, ooh those aaahs
Those sea perfumes of Kiswahili—

Next day, he woke up
At the top of a baobab tree.
No shirt, no shoes. There, he dangled,
Tangled in those branches
Like a blue-bottomed monkey,
Rubbing his big ears.

Electricity

When the bears came lumbering down into the clearings
 that first day the R.E.A. switched on the lights, when the grizzlies
 came roaring down to wrap huge arms around and squeeze,
 for countless miles, pole by pole, that frail new prairie of electric poles,
 they weren't just hungry. They weren't simply
 wondering in their big bear brains how these new trees,
 whose foliage was wire, hummed the vibrato of bees.

Lora Berg

TWO POEMS

Where Are the Birds?

—for Rebecca

Where are the birds whose feathers beat
 this pulpless air,
 Battle blue agate clouds to a sweeter space?
 Where are the birds cloned in purest light,
 Membrane startled into sound
 Lost to human ears
 Engineered in dirt & gas?
 Children crying, *where are our friends,*
the birds?
 Rustled whispers on the roof like goodnight
 kisses;
 Where are the birds that flew so free
 The world woke rapt with Peace?

Kids Calling His Name

Once the boy spent a quiet hour
head on his baseball mitt
sleeping under the vast shade
of an old hearse;
milkweed & honeysuckle
curling up to the axles; dozed
until the digging stopped,
pallbearers' shoes
shuffling in the dust

as the box bumped out
with somebody's grandfather
(embalmed in back of the furniture
store)

a nice old grandfather
fed on love & sweet cake, a friend
of the soil
to which he was returning.

The boy crawls out & runs fast as he can,
tears smearing his face
in the wind

toward cries & shouts from the ballfield,
& the kids calling his name.

Ray Clark Dickson

GALANG

*I remember the buildings are space
walled, to let space be used for living.*

—Muriel Rukeyser

Manila, where the single open eye
of a child looked back at me
from a torn basket
on pavement.

Without anger there is no hope,
so taught the great
uncle of all who hope.

In his country now the angry slay
the angry. Ports are closed.

*

Turning a corner into a street
of flowers. Behind the flowers, children
play with a sick cat, push it
into a puddle, into a pile
of flowers burning.

In their lives, no walls.

*

So you follow the teachings.
You have this treasure, compassion,
and you spread it among the poor.
Soon you get scared, like a rich man.
When it's gone, what will you do?

*

Galang, literally *grace*, is the custom of respecting the dignity of others. From the Pampango, a language of the Philippines. A carabao is a water buffalo.

Go on. Stop
at a table made from cardboard,
covered in cloth.
You smoke, so buy one
of these three cigarettes for sale.

Buy another. Light it
for the boy who counts your change.

Keep going. Step into the path
of a cop. Say you're sorry
as fruit rolls under your knees, and the one
he's chasing turns the corner.

*

I know the diamond is wrapped in this cloth,
so wrote the great lover
of God and wine.

A drunk shouts,
"Why are you laughing?"
and follows down the street.

"He has not always been one of us,"
they tell me.

First he was a teacher.
Next he was a prisoner.
Now he is a teacher
of fools.

*

In the mountains, a beggar
keeps his eyes cast down,
his cup raised, his body
crouched in its smallest shape,
and does not touch the stone
wall of the bank behind him.

For the poor are always with us,
so taught the great speaker
of riddles.

*

At a place between towns, a woman
washes herself at a pump.
She wears a bra, and washes
over, under, around it, guards
the arbitrary privacy
of two handfuls of flesh.

It is everything.

*

How simple to say life is simple
where the sucking mouth gets its share of dust.
The barrio women seem hardly to know
they are climbed on, tugged at, scratched
by all these children, precious
and parasitic as orchids.

*

Just walking around I learn—
wood is scarce, water pumped
by foot. And only two things
are done here: talk and work.
I can't do either. I sit.

And a man on a carabao, looking at me,
lets it carry him into a grove of trees.

*

An island.
Sand floats in the whiskey,
lies on my tongue
long after the ebb of talk.

—The goodness of food.
—The economics of exploitation.
—The history of revolt.

“Please, Ma’am, eat more.”

“My number one boyfriend
comes back next week
from Detroit.”

“The army kills our carabao.
They eat, but we cannot plow.”

Two tourists,
four boatmen,
and a whore.

*

But I saw the revolution, once.
It looked like a tired man
who said, “My house is yours.”

I said, “No, mine is yours.”

We kept that up—
mine, yours,
mine, yours,
mine, yours.

*

At a creek, three men are washing
—two peasants
and a builder of tunnels.

The countryside surrounds the city.
It is what he came to teach them,
yet he feels surprise

when the one he calls
No-Write-No-Read
picks up a gun to kill him.

*

Go on, but slow:
the gait

of a carabao holds the jeep
in a cloud of its own dust.

Black hair white,
white skin brown.

If you're trapped
it is not by this. The fist

that bangs the side of the open jeep
is small. A child of six—

she points to me, giggles,
and salutes.

Susan Tichy

KID PICTURES

Uncle Ty, the pro photographer,
has her standing on the steps
of a red plastic sliding board
against an arras of Crayola blue paper
while he examines the square
of her presented reality
under neutral lighting. He moves
in a photographer's crouch around her.
The Hasselblad floats in his hands.
Strobes flash in his sequence.
When his finger spreads on the button,
he's beyond control.

Lucas Carpenter

SNAILS

I love process without progress, a bathtub filled but never stepped into, a mating song without expectation. Skills of all kinds are overrated: The speed of accomplishment is still speed, a reckless leaving of things behind . . . This morning in our house

no one moved. There were shadows at work behind the drapes like plastic surgeons, giving our skins new angles to sleep in; the instruments at our disposal read no future, no past. Our distances were single cells in a satisfied beast: This was the house of sloth.

Oh, what failures we were! No bills were paid, no plants watered, when hungry we ordered in. We aged a few minutes every few minutes and night came as no surprise. Still it was sad, the passing of what could not be suspended: your unimpeachable yawn, my pajama sashay for the New York Times, the samples of the sixteen perfumes you rubbed where I'd find them.

All I pray, love, is that you oppress me and slow me. So that we struggle, so that we will never succeed.

Rex Wilder

PARABLES

Ask Peter, ask Paul: the really wicked part,
harder than healing the zanies, harder even
than walking on water—the very toughest part
was riddling out those hillbilly parables.
We caught on to the straight lines, blessed
are the peacemakers and such, but just imagine
the constant “It. Is. Like. Unto . . .”

That sent a quick freeze through all of us: we knew
there’d be a pop quiz after the lecture.

“It’s like sowing seeds,” he’d say
in that Nazarene country drawl,
“some of them fall on good soil,
others on rock.” Well, everybody knows that,
but what did he mean by it?

He’d only give us that pussycat grin
and say, “Who hath ears to hear,
let him hear.” Big help.

Or he’d say: “The little mustard seed
grows into a huge plant.” Mmm-hmm.

He’d say, “The kingdom of heaven
is like unto leaven,”

or “If a fig tree won’t bear,
cut it down,” and so on—
and then, of course, that inevitable
“Who hath ears to hear,” etcetera.

(Stanza continued)

We were always as nervous as cats in a doghouse,
John sneaking glances at Paul, Paul
dragging his toe in the sand and looking
at Thomas, Thomas looking doubtful,
all of us hoping that *someone* would understand.
But we never did, not one single time,
read Matthew, read Mark, Luke, and John — finally
he always had to explain: “The *field*
is the *world*,” he’d say, his eyebrows grim
as a tax collector, “The good seed
are the children of the kingdom, get it?”
Oh, sure, it’s easy when you already
know the answer, but
suppose it’d been you, out there
in the boonies, trying to take up
the collection, and hearing, once again,
those words like splinters under
your fingernails: “It is like unto . . .”
Bonkers, is what it drives you, finally—a wonder
that only Judas flipped out, and sold him
up the river.
The lesson of all this is:
metaphor, fable, and allegory,
like everything else out here in donkey heaven,
close on Saturday night.

Philip Appleman

KATE

i

The water runs black in the sink.
He puts the soap down, reaches
for a towel. His hat's a little
humid house. He wipes his neck.
Out by the azaleas his big pet
waits, the purring Toshiba
he rides every day in spring.
Had to come in, he says, got
too dark to see. There are
creases between his eyes from
squinting across fields, white
fingers, tender tracks in
the leather of his face. He
crumbles cornbread, sweet broken
gold, over the tough greens.

ii

In the front field the winter rye
luxuriates, the only green thing
there is. And I eat it
with my hungry eyes, this cold dawn.
You plant it for the stock,
Ray says. It saves in hay.
He would never choose his cows
for color, black and white for
contrast, brown for settling in.
But I do. Dusty ringsides I
sit by him while some prospect
dances to the auctioneer's song.
And I'll prod him. That one
looks good, I'll say. I've
taught myself the ropes, thumbing
through breeders' magazines.
Depth in the chest, the way a cow
stands. He respects me for that.

iii

I shine the light on her huge rolling
eye. Ray pumps the comealong.
We'll have to pull it, he says.
He reaches in up to his elbow
and finds the hooves. The cow's
too gone to care. He loops the
steel braid around an oak, and
draws it tight. She's lathering
at the mouth. Her eye's all the way
white. There's a blood smell.
Ray pumps. She heaves. He pulls
the calf apart, but he gets it out.
He fills a syringe with pink
liquid, finds the muscle in her
neck, slaps it. He'd say he has
cash tied up in that cow, but
that wouldn't be all the truth.

iv

On Ray's Dad's land there's a field
that falls to the river, and there
in spring the rain lilies lift
their white hands. Our first time
we came by boat, poling up
the Santa Fe where deadfalls snag
big motors and river flirts with
swamp, like a half-woman testing
limits, the thin line between
water and muck. And the bank
sucked at the light aluminum
shell we beached among the mussels.
And it was April, and the rain
lilies offered their single flowers
to hold me there, even now as I stand
lifting white cups from the dreamy
water, shining like those lilies—
fresh, unweathered,
that can only last a little while.

v

Little hurry-up whirlwinds flutter
off the field. The windows streak.
I can lick dust on my lips.
This wind's a bitch, says Ray.
He sees a sharp-ribbed stray,
snapping at newborns. I see
the other thing. I let it go.
He showers, then comes back,
combing his thinning hair.
It's all in the ground—the cukes,
the corn, the young peppers,
and the wind's stealing the ground,
a handful at a time. We've come
to hate blue sky, crocodile sky
that smiles and slaps down cloud.
We're pumping our wells dry,
trying to keep up. In the house
the taps run brown, and there's
an odd taste to our tea. Ray
does the books, stays busy,
no way to carry back what's gone,
the topsoil that coats the furniture,
the plates in the cupboard, that
gathers in the folds of our skin,
and will not wash away.

vi

Bad timing. Ray slaps his hat
to its peg, and sits down. A
green flood at the packing shed
and all our picking gone for culls,
not even paid off the crew.
Plant late, plow under.
He shrugs away my hand. It's
me he's angry at, for rolling
towards him this morning,
keeping him in bed while light
dropped off the trees,

(Stanza continued)

the same light that's deepening now
to low gold, its shadows stretching
for dark, like the long dark
in the throats of quiet men.

vii

Some days, when supper's not quite right,
when he's poked his greens and
nothing glistened, curled into its rind,
or his biscuits crumb so dry
no tea can wash them down, or the
pickles turn starved and pale,
something stirs behind Ray's eyes,
and yet, other times,
when he's been out all day mending
fences, unrolling his barb wire muff
backwards along the break,
and all my counters shine
with the dark-brown glow he keeps
on tack, rubbing his saddles to moons
in the dim system of the barn,
"We're a good team Kate", he'll say,
and outside a mockingbird launches
into joyous skat, her song
the sweeter for being stolen.

Lola Haskins

EATING AN EEL

It's not your everyday catch, your eel.
He doesn't think so, either. From the tip
of your net he's all whip and thrust, a kind
of slippery missile on its second phase,
then it's out of your hands and into the creel,
eighteen hundred grams of him, his mottled skin
slick as a piston as he flashes the feathery
aileron of his tail and zooms and flips
and tucks in maydays of evasive action
decoded on a microdot of brain
in out around through
arrive alive survive survive

He has eaten his way through at least two lives.
Spawned in the South Atlantic, he fingers
over its alps toward El Dorado
and the Spaniards would take him then, as a chub
for supper-snacks with lemon salt.
But the ocean yawns, the nets are thin,
other plans have made him. In a couple
of years he's knocking around in pools
of sharks near Baltimore and New Orleans,
working his way upriver, taking
to fresh water like a retriever. You'd think
he was one of the Catfish-Sunfish gang

but in his heart there's a tiny tag that reads

thank god i'm italian

and he's off again, sounding

in the wake of the TN Raffaello.

At Gibraltar there's a welcome hint

of porpoises and camel-piss; farther

on the squid and octopus

are inking in. Now it's the social amenities

that count— crowds of mullet, caravans

of tuna, greening parks of prawns,

plus the insistent *marsh and sun*

and salt marsh and sun and salt

— and he's there, right in your net. Well,

not quite. There has to have been at least one

shudder in his white and tender flesh,

in the spreading of his jaws, in letting the slick

and slightly barleyed swampwater

sluice a thumb of anchovy in— in the shocks

that are the wonder of his skin which is both home

and habitat— at least one, you think, as you hold

him fast in yesterday's newspaper. Cut

his hissing head off. Gut him. Cut him

into little dancing sections . . . You see

how he lives, in all his bones? He is your meat.

Bruce Cutler

THREE POEMS

High School

What sticks in the mind
is the black slinky in physics
the twang of its wave
traveling the hall— still,
who could believe
water didn't travel,
watching the waves reach shore?

Or the formula for angular momentum,
forgotten, like the words
to the 45s we collected,
but its sense connected;

Or Mrs. McGhee in American history,
sitting on the table
chronicling the Civil War,
swinging her divorced legs
and letting us in on history's secret—
It's all in the pocketbook—
and still we believe her,

Though back then, spinning
slower and slower
to "Stardust Melody,"
feeling the wave's motion
traveling the body's wires,
we might have given her
an argument.

What Went Wrong

Was my grandfather drinking
And my grandmother nagging him
And letting her kids know
She'd leave him if she could

And my other grandma
Weeping that no one would help her
And my other grandpa
Traveling as much as he could

And your granddad dying
In the flu epidemic
Leaving your mom
Half-orphaned at twelve

And your other grandparents
Like my first, your dad
Raised to be good and sober
Who never spoke; my dad,

Who walked out one day
On all of us, my mom
Who never said a word about it
Your mom, who never shut up

How you learned not to listen
How I learned not to talk

A Circle For Morning

He calls it that
For its name is lost,
The motion of lips
And tongue misplaced
That will point another's
Eye to the east
Where rises, with waking,
A burning disk;

Constant and daily
It repeats like a gong
Its sudden striking
And he struggles to find
The sound that could be its name
And so many others
Heard ringing, fading, gone—
Its face, familiar as his son's.

R. S. Chapman

RITA HAYWORTH OVER HIROSHIMA

History's the loop of newsreel footage
screened over and over.
We mean to speak, and William the Conqueror
crosses the Channel with a boatload
of our own words, aching for a fight.
Take *plague*, for example, the one
the *Fat Boy* dropped on Hiroshima,
which still falls from the *Enola Gay*,
Rita Hayworth's photograph taped
to its pitiless girth,

(Stanza continued)

the captive Rita whistling down, down, forever
pouty, supple and uncorrupted.

At the same moment *Voyager One* moves out
from the solar system toward the end

of everything, bearing figures

of naked Adam and Eve,

and the voice

of U.N. Secretary General Kurt Waldheim

caught on a gold record, repeating

again and again in thick English

I send greetings on behalf

of the people of our planet.

Below, our parents are still bound

to their bed, performing a dance

without end, our lives

their twitching urgency,

one sperm carrying 23 chromosomes

slapping and struggling like a salmon

toward one egg containing

its own 23, merely to become us,

their breathlessness our inspiration,

panting gasps our song,

their rising and falling on the mattress

even this moment creaking out our time.

I have proof here in my hand,

a photograph taken before I was.

It's 44 years later and she's still radiant

in Father's pinup nailed to palm trunk

at jungle's edge near Henderson Field

on bloody Guadalcanal, lithely long-limbed,

coy smile shimmering like the morning star:

the incomparable Rita Hayworth.

David Citino

IN LUCIA'S HOUSE

"And besides, I don't know whether all this
I am writing means anything to you."

—Lucia Joyce in a letter to
her father, James Joyce

The Sanatorium

Nighttime is the terrain of fear.
From my bed I watch the darkness
slide under the door, loosen,
its dirt like the sulphur-black
clouds spouting from steel mills.
This room stinks without light.
It smells like my mother's house
in the winter: windows closed,
sick children, no hot water to clean
the pots under our beds.

Singing in the hallway. Italian songs.
Great, deep-voiced singing. My father
in love with language, sitting on my bed
humming while I splintered into driftwood
and slept, never far from the harbor,
from the shore where, awake,
he rocked like the sea
and composed the world.

I find my body at night and hold it.
Poor child, warm and so soft. Wordless.
Not a sound when I touch you,
closing my eyes to imagine
the whirring of the sea.
Then it happens.
The blinking, like a warning signal,
spaces of light between the blades
of a ceiling fan, the steady thumping
as the light appears then disappears,
appears, goes out.

When I couldn't sleep my father
told me stories from Dante.
How the howling bodies delighted
him, the tormented lovers doomed
to endless longing, the burning
popes. Finished he would take his glasses off
to consider their pain, his own vision
disappearing, his own pain returning.
I was awash inside him, beating
against the walls of his corpse.
I couldn't even after he left my room,
climb out.

The nurses' uniforms flicker in the corridor.
Am I here for the rest of my life
with only one body? The one
that hasn't drowned in its father's words,
the one dissolving
into a language unknown.

The Recital

My father says music cleaves
my blood, that's why I burn and float.
I never hear it.
The stage cocoons. I watch and spin,
unfold, become. How like a god

(Stanza continued)

I am to control my fate, recreating
 my life in movement nightly.
 My birth, slow and painful, childhood,
 three steps, a leap.
 My womanhood . . .

Here I am. A flash
 that doesn't disappear. A beaming
 streak and split into
 particles of air.
 The faster I whirl
 the more liquid I become, the more gas.
 Forever visible, deathless
 and gliding,
 a comet's scar on the universe.

Dinner

"We are not saints, but we have kept our
 appointment." — *Waiting For Godot*

He's late again. Probably talking with students
 or reciting Italian poetry to my father.

"That young Beckett," my father will say
 closing the door after him.

"Some good ideas. Can't take dictation."
 I'll wait. He'll be here soon.

Such love between these couples dining,
 soon extinguished after the fast dance.
 Candles dim their faces to a flicker
 of desire. How they reach and touch,
 casting smiles like shadows, blocked light
 shooting from their beautiful bodies.

He'll think back on this with regret.
 His love for me hiding in his pockets,
 the creases of his shirt, clothes he wears

(Stanza continued)

but never notices. He might send me
a scarf from our Paris, something
with memories dyed into it,
smelling of sauces and candles
because he's worn it once to dinner. No.
That couple, quiet, one small hand clutching
the other larger hand, lives with the wreckage
of their struggle daily. That's why they hold so
fiercely in the semi-dark, one boat becalmed and floating.

My love for him razors into me, scraping
the soft shells of my days clean,
leaving only what nobody can use.
Why not meet me at this restaurant
before everyone I've come to know leaves
me alone, thinking out loud, alone.

In Lucia's House

A quiet child was I
My mother made me cry
My father sang me songs
To him I did no wrong

An angry child was I
And hoped my mother would die
My father lost his sight
My name, he said, means Light

A happy child was I
Half-loved, half-feared, too shy
A vacant sky, my soul
My mind buried deep as coal

Dawne Adam

NO MORE HOT COFFEE WHEN I DIE

“No more hot coffee when I die
no more at the sweat bath
no more walk-around.

all I have to do is a devil
dragging my tail around, looking back
got the horn on, got the ears
look white, not black.

sometimes ghosts meet the devil
ghost wear black hat, black coat
black pants, black shoes, black skin
look all dirty and terrible
but the devil not wear anything
just little hair on your leg, all over
then he walk around, nice
but the ghost is pretty bad
under the cave ready to bite
ready to catch you, make you feel scared
under the cave, over there.

the ghost fighting the devil
but can't do it. The devil try
to hit the ghost but go right through.
They make the cowboy scared
on the trail at night, but the devil
makes you laugh, that's nice
dragging the tail with the horns
give you good luck, the devil.

no more hot coffee when I die
no more at the sweat bath
no more walk-around.”

Will Staple

Will Staple made this poem from phrases uttered by John Montoya, a traditional Havasupai Indian, during the yearly visits they have enjoyed for over 25 years.

APOLOGY

Sorry sorry
he gritted it out
through clenched teeth
tongue thrusting sorry
past cracked lips
his sorry puffed
across my desk
where it filtered
through my eyes
circled my ears.
I breathed his sorry
into my nose
opened my mouth
and it whooshed
to my brain
into each crevice
out through my scalp
lifting hair follicles
waves of sorry
smacked me
against the wall
I slid
to the floor
broken
by his sorry.

Barbara Hoffman

THOREAU'S CAPE COD

Death's is the long arm
that reaches across the book. Over his tramp
through the pulling sands of Nauset,
beneath his catalogues of beach pea and spurge,
the carcass lies,
tossed onto the shore.

He had seven more years. The ocean took such time
over its catch! "There is no telling
what it might vomit up" :
cods full of nutmegs,
a bottle "stopp'd tight and half-full of red ale,"
towcloth, turnip seed,
and a lost anchor
that "sunken faith and hope of mariners."

The Cape's arm reached toward something
beyond land. A fisted curve,
with the smack of the unpredictable Atlantic
coming up against its outside.
And what the fist tried to hold
fell through in grains
as every year changed
the shape of the beaches.
What if in Provincetown dexterous ladies
"emptied their shoes at each step?"
There was nothing
constant
as his own deep pond.

Massachusetts Bay
was a maw of foundered ships,
a death's cradle of immigrants,
slung back and forth with a stark rocking,
that tore from them
their poor clogs and lockets,
threw them to purify
into pale ivory on its beaches.

It was the leaping ground
of the Howling Whale
that all the little boats hounded to shore,
to render from each
a hundred-dollar barrel of oil,
then leave them,
opened and rotting,
warning off walkers with their stink.

“The annals of this voracious beach!
Who could write them?”

Against the glass
of even the Highland Light
“nineteen small yellowbirds”
broke their necks one night.

Back home in Concord, he walked always to the West,
sniffed out a new trail each day.

Here, with “all America behind him,”
a man could stumble for hours over the dunes
and die at last
in a charity hut,
one arm outstretched to the cold hearth.

Susan Donnelly

TULIP CHILD

His month of life will grow around him still.
This small boy, uncurling like a fern,
Legs barely straight, had just begun to learn
The touch of sunlight when that sudden frost
Which slows the spring stayed long enough to fill
His shallow breathing, close him to return
The long-familiar posture he had lost.

Last fall they planted tulips as a charm,
In thanks for gifts to come from earth and flesh,
To bring new color every year in fresh
Remembrance of the pressure then asleep,
And now still lingering along the arm —
For them a double garden they must keep.

As for the rest of us, each bulb or root
We hold will be less dormant, be more real,
And when we press it to the soil will feel
Firm and stirring as a newborn foot.

Clifford Wood

"I'm a child of the Depression," a friend once said, "and nobody can take that away from me." She might have been speaking for **David Ignatow**, whose *New and Collected Poems, 1970-1985* is now available (Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1986, 332+xiv pp., \$30.00 cloth, \$12.95 paper). As the impact of the Holocaust and the Nazi occupation forced Sartre and others into developing a stance for humane survival in an indifferent or cruel universe, the Great Depression had forced Ignatow to forge for himself an existential approach to reality. This dynamic world view enabled him to grow into one of the most powerful poets of our age. Like the existentialists, he rejected the Platonic supremacy of Reason, embracing instead the integrity of feeling, precisely recorded, and the subterranean corridors of the unconscious. In Williams and the objectivists Ignatow discovered a poetics of existence preceding essence. He became a responsive realist; we do not easily forget "No theory will stand up to a chicken's guts/being cleaned out, a hand rammed up"

Ignatow, again like the French existentialists who succeeded him, accepts as his subject our century's alienation — from God, from a society turned ruthlessly materialist, from the natural world, and from one's own true self. Like Sartre, he accepts the alienation from a traditional God and a money-mad society as healthy. Like Sartre, he seeks through the process of personal choice and creative composition to discover and accept his own self. Unlike Sartre, more like Camus, he has increasingly resolved the alienation from nature, becoming aware of himself as a sentient though mortal element of the cosmos. In "Behind His Eyes" he imagines a man who "has been tied to a tree and thinks he is beginning to feel something of the tree entering his body. It is hard for him to discern what it could be, but he would like to grow tiny branches from his head, and leafbuds." At the end, "He is alive and that is what counts, alive in a form he has always admired, and now it is his and he is glad, only to find himself growing more sharply stooped and losing memory of himself, as this last thought becomes the bark he has seen behind his eyes." This reconciliation with the transformational implications of mortality takes a deeper root in the beautiful "Kaddish" on the death of his mother, which concludes:

Earth now is your mother, as you were mine, my earth,
 my sustenance and my strength
 and now without you I turn to your mother
 and seek for her that I may meet you again
 in rock and stone. Whisper to the stone,
 I love you. Whisper to the rock, I found you.
 Whisper to the earth, Mother, I have found her,
 and I am safe and always have been.

Ignatow, who has faced with unflinching honesty the horrors of our century's mechanized and dehumanizing blight, has managed somehow on the rim of despair to remain unalienated from the outraged and the outrageous. One remorseless prose poem begins: "This newspaper states that Idi Amin killed over one hundred thousand Ugandans last year. How did we manage to do that, Idi? I am an ordinary man, I enjoy my food, I love to make love. How did I manage to kill that many?" The poet thus confronts the tremendous dilemma of the existentialist: the dilemma of a moral man in a universe where no absolute laws of good or evil exist. One horn of this dilemma leads to the abyss of nothingness. A poem to Robert Lowell begins:

I sit here thinking I should write,
in dread of stepping outside
the room to find nothing exists.
Here I can make something exist.
There I find myself non-existent
in doubt in empty space. Poem in hand
I can walk out of the room in safety.
I tack it upon a wall.
The emptiness gathers around it
and begins to read.

Indeed, many of the poems in this volume contemplate the abyss with half-jaunty, half-serious consideration of suicide. One of the amazing qualities of Ignatow is his ability to write whole volumes on the saddest and grimmest and most desperate subjects without once writing a depressing poem. It is his unflagging imaginative energy, which seems even to increase in his seventies, that transforms the darkest meditations. There is a psychic bravado — a playfulness — in even the horror poems. "Going Down" suggests a source of this energy. It begins: "There's a hole in the earth I'm afraid of./ I lower myself into it, first tying/ one end of a long rope to a tree close by . . ." The speaker nearly suffocates as he descends, but the poem ends: "It was this/ fear of burial that led me to climb down." I think it is this spunky existential spirit that makes Ignatow's poems such a joy to read. There is this courageous playfulness, this candid inquisitiveness, as though the boyishness that seems to have been denied the poet in his childhood had been put under pressure and made available as a life-long fuel for his imagination.

There's another concern of the existentialist that Ignatow shares — the ambiguous imperative of freedom. Here is one poem complete, one of his extraordinary "thought-experiments," to illustrate how this poet's creative imagination conceives the subject:

Thinking

I am caught in the body of a fish.
If I am the fish itself this speech
is the sound of water escaping
through my gills and like all fish
I will be caught in the mouth
of a larger one or be netted
or die of being fish. Thinking
that I am caught inside, a person
with a right to freedom as I've been
trained to think, my thought is another
kind of net because this right
to freedom is a torment like being
caught in the body of a fish.

Although Ignatow tends to deny any metaphysical concerns, a lifetime of relentless honesty in examining his feelings and observations has led him to a mature metaphysical position both healthy and subtle. A life work of small masterpieces like "Thinking" adds up to a cumulative achievement that we must recognize as a massif among the hills and mountains of contemporary poetry. I would not want to teach the poetry of our time without his work. For me he expresses one of the most productive endeavors of our age: to borrow his words, he confronts the paradox of "the perpetual search for personal happiness and freedom" in things "other than oneself." And in pushing that search beyond the human ego, he draws us, his loving readers, out of our selves and into the cosmos that is our home.

Marsden Hartley's blazing paintings have a secure and influential position in the history of modern art. **Gail R. Scott** has now enriched the history of modern poetry by editing his strong and sometimes disturbing poems: *The Collected Poems of Marsden Hartley 1904-1943* (Santa Rosa CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1987, 364 pp., \$20.00 cloth, \$12.50 paper). To read this volume through is to walk a cranky footpath parallel to the highway of modernism. The roar of the traffic of imagism, surrealism, even Dada, echoes down the path, but the poems pick their own way, inventing enjambments, rhyme-tucks, grandiloquent and slangy languages to express the artist's quirky vision. By 1918 he was composing memorable condensed lyrics (see "The Asses' Out-House," on the dreams of four flies in their cobweb shrouds) and a

pounding four-page realization of "The Festival of the Corn" at San Domingo pueblo — recalling Vachel Lindsay's boomelay rhapsodies, but without the excesses that make Lindsay embarrassing today.

Hartley was a cosmopolitan man, at home in the city, but some of the most interesting poems to me are those that articulate his ambivalence about his native Maine and the down-east maritime culture. These range from the early revulsion from the squalid provincialism (as in "Cobwebs and Ratholes") to his ironic acknowledgement of the power of "the miracle of place" in such later poems as "Fantasy and phantom" and "This Crusty Fragment." It may well be that a reader today who is uncomfortable with the old iambic grid will prefer Hartley's genre portrait of Bluenose "Blair Purves" to the more euphonious character poems of Frost and Robinson. There is a roughness to these poems, like a Rodin half emerging from the stone. They are certainly eccentric, except as they struggle heroically to find their own center.

Stephen Mitchell's powerful poetic translation of *The Book of Job* is out in a revised edition (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1987, 136+xxxii pp., \$22.50 cloth, \$12.50 paper). Here at last is the text for all who wish to read and teach one of the greatest of all poems in a version that captures the vigor and intensity of the Hebrew. Even those who cherish the King James version will welcome the clarity and force of Mitchell's text. For example, the King James "Lay thine hand upon him, remember the battle, do no more" (41:8) becomes "Go ahead: attack him:/ you will never try it again." Scholars have debated what exactly was meant by the opening words of Job's lament (3:3): "Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night in which it was said, There is a man child conceived." Mitchell's version may use a little poetic license, but it certainly captures the desperate iconoclasm of Job's outcry: "God damn the day I was born/ and the night that forced me from the womb." More important than any specific phraseology is the driving rhythmic energy of the poetry; this is now a great English poem. Moreover, for the North Point edition Mitchell has written an exemplary Introduction and a Note on the Text that explain his principles of translation, with fascinating examples of the revelations of contemporary scholarship, and a deliciously-written essay on the significance of the poem for our time. The Introduction alone is worth the price of the book. Mitchell explains how the gentile Job becomes the hero in the archetypal Jewish saga of the Victim, making *Job* the "central parable of our post-Holocaust age." He explains the difference

between the poem and the ancient folk tale that frames it in a way that clarifies better than anyone but Blake the difficulties of the incredible ending, in which Job's children are miraculously restored. A very nice point about the ending is that there Job actually names three of his children — the three daughters — “Dove” (Jemima), “Cinnamon” (Kezia), and “Eye-shadow” (Keren-haptuch), and departs from the ancestral law of Numbers by endowing these daughters with inheritances such as their brothers lawfully received. We need the scholars to point out these radical and endearing details. We need the poets to renew our own literary inheritance. Scholar-poet Stephen Mitchell has put us all in his debt, and North Point has produced a beautifully-designed volume on acid-free paper, worthy of the endeavor.

Joe David Bellamy sifted through almost 250 published interviews with contemporary poets to find the twenty-six he includes in his *American Poetry Observed: Poets on Their Work* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984, 314+xi pp., \$19.95 cloth, \$9.95 paper). He has chosen only those that reveal significant views of the craft, content, and cultural matrix of such poets as Bishop, Merwin, Kinnell, and Ashbery. All are substantial and interesting; I especially appreciated James Randall's interview with Michael S. Harper, George Starbuck's with Elizabeth Bishop, and Ed Folsom and Cary Nelson talking with Merwin.

I'd like all my readers to check their local libraries for the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* series (Detroit: Gale Research Co.). If they don't have this valuable series, you should ask them to order it. If they do, sit down for an hour to sample the wealth of information available there. Of especial interest to readers of this journal are *American Poets, 1880-1945* (Vols. 45, 48, and 54 in two parts), edited by Peter Quartermain; *Poets of Great Britain and Ireland, 1945-1960* (Vol. 27), edited by Vincent B. Sherry Jr.; *Poets of Great Britain and Ireland, since 1960* (Vol. 40 in two parts), also edited by Sherry; and *American Poets Since World War II* (Vol. 5, in two parts), edited by Donald J. Greiner.

Here's what you'll find in Vol. 5 (1980, 866+xxii pp., in 2 vols., \$108. the set). The set covers 133 poets, fifteen of whom get “master essays.” If you look up Adrienne Rich, for example, you'll find a career chronology, a list of her books, and an eleven-page essay by Anne

Newman, covering the poet's life and work with a survey of critical comment. The essay is illustrated with a photograph of Rich and a facsimile page of a corrected proof and is followed by a selective bibliography. The essays I have studied appear to me well-balanced. It is valuable to have an even-handed assessment of all the works of a poet. The essayists appear to be evaluative without being judgmental — a delicate balance indeed. They present a generous enough selection of quotations from the poet that one gets a great deal of the impact of the original works. I find these volumes indispensable and worth the high price.

A useful companion to the *Biography* series is the *Contemporary Authors Bibliographical Series*, Vol. 2, *American Poets*, edited by Ronald Baughman (Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1986, 387+xvi pp., \$48.). This volume covers only eleven poets (e.g. Berryman, Bishop, Lowell, Olson, Wilbur), but covers them well, with primary and secondary bibliographies followed by substantial essays evaluating the secondary works. For example, Barbara Page of Vassar discusses Elizabeth Bishop in 34 pages, with an essay that evaluates the bibliographies, the biographies (major articles and book sections), selected interviews, and critical studies, the latter subdivided into books, collections of essays, special issues of journals, and major articles and book sections. Page's summaries are lucid and her evaluations fair. I am delighted to have all this work done for me, and I look forward to forthcoming volumes.

Finally, I'd like to call your attention to two new books by members of our Editorial Board:

Brian Dibble, *Analogues* (Fremantle W.A.: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1987, 104 pp., \$12.95 (U.S.\$) paper, airmail postage included, from Fremantle Arts Centre Press, P.O. Box 891, Fremantle, Western Australia 6160).

Lee Sharkey, *First Moments* (Orono, Maine: Puckerbrush Press, 1987, 30 pp., \$5.00 paper).

M.K.S.