

THE BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL

Volume 38 — Number 3

Spring 1988

CONTENTS

- | | |
|------------------------|---|
| 1. Linda Strever | <i>While You Slept</i> |
| 2. Robert Lewis Weeks | <i>Political Poem</i> |
| 3. | <i>Forever, Exactly</i> |
| 4. | <i>Say Those Quiet and Humble Words</i> |
| 5. Albert Goldbarth | <i>Shangri-La: a mystery story</i> |
| 14. Christine Cassidy | <i>In Flight</i> |
| 18. David Kirby | <i>Unable to Wait for Godot</i> |
| 20. Christine Swanberg | <i>To Tend My Horse</i> |
| 22. John Allman | <i>The Planets</i> |
| 38. Margaret Aho | <i>Alyssum</i> |
| 39. | <i>Foxglove (digitalis)</i> |

Cover: Jack Yeats, "The Travelling Circus," *Cuala Broadsides*, June 1905, with the permission of Michael Yeats.

THE БЕЛОIT POETRY JOURNAL

Volume 38 — Number 3

Spring 1988

WHILE YOU SLEPT

On the white beach whales lie like boulders
set down by a glacier, all dead except
this one, breathing like a tunnel to the ocean floor.

You were a sleepwalker after the second
time of tubes and monitors. They sometimes tell children
the dead are only sleeping, and you became a euphemism.

You talked about moving to Virginia
to retire, when you got your strength back, but
you had been talking for years.

I touch the gray skin like kelp drying crusted
with sand. I want to push it back, to call
the police the coast guard the navy,
the way I wanted to save you after the first time
in the hospital, those years Mother kept thinking you were dead—
ten minutes late from work and she was at the window.

You died finally in bed, next to
Mother. She slept through it, too.

I match my breaths to its breaths, sharp
and shuddering; it is giving birth to itself.

I stay with it, until
the breathing slips away like a current.

Linda Strever

THREE POEMS**Political Poem**

what I haven't done
or don't do
is what I do best

it's like the faucet
when it doesn't drip—
that's best

but when I do
I do
then I get the whole thing
in a surge

that's good for thirsty
souls
like the evangelist

who might even run
for President

if we're not careful

Forever, Exactly

There are places that a man could live forever—exactly, literally, bending down in the numbers of history, say medieval times, a whole man in a brown robe, bending in the cold corner, near stone. Why, he is there yet. Yes, in history. But that's not living, you say; he died centuries ago and whatever he was he wasn't the one who got written down—crouched there in the damp. But I say to you, he lives as clearly as you. Do you think anybody knows except your next of kin? Suppose you had been one of those Ethiopian tribesmen, hungering in the heat, no one even knowing his name, and he's as sure to go down mentioned in the Cambridge History as you are. You think this is much? I'll remember him, in the sand, as much as I remember that monastic robesman shivering in the hallway cold and listening in the early spring for the first drip of water, looking out the high window forever exactly and seeing you far away. That's some kind of immortality, as much as anybody needs, and not as swift as the bird dipping in sunlight nearly gone. You heard his song once. Its pattern, even one time, is in your blood, in your history and the whole world, maybe just after you're gone, forever, exactly.

Say Those Quiet and Humble Words

All around her mother's house
are photographs of her
from the time she was six weeks old
until after she was married —
large and small, photo folders
and pictures framed and glassed,
over the mantel, over the desk,
up the stairs, over the stairs,
on the bedroom and study walls,
conventional portraits and snapshots,
yearbook photographs and three poses
for a dollar, the baby naked in the bassinet,
the bird over the gleeful baby,
the child in the mysterious shadows,
the sandbox child with the sunglasses,
the young woman in the arms of her husband.

She often hesitates on her mother's doorstep
to prepare herself for the panorama
of herself she will meet; she smiles
to herself before she opens the door,
she knows she's a beautiful woman,
but she doesn't know the mirage
until she dreams. Then it is like
evening sunlight on a mountain lake
with thousands of white and swan-like
geese who on the last shower of sun
mount up with her flying in their midst
in the thunderous roar of their wings
and thousands of calls, then it's a
shower of white and radiant song
all lifting, lifting tumultuously together
until she wakes in fever on her bed
and knows the reason and the severity.

SHANGRI-LA

a mystery story

*"...forgotten Victorian objects like
the gasogene and the tantalus."*

—Cait Murphy,

"The Game's Still Afoot"

1.

People were missing.

Holmes was consulted.

People were being erased like chalk from slate,
in backs of hansom cabs.

Outside, the fresh run of a cloudburst twirled
assorted rinds and papers through the gutters

(Holmes had slept through the rain

but could gauge its intensity easily by the litter's rate)

and an urchin whistling to keep up his spirits

slipped past through the shopfront shadows

(new to the neighborhood, Holmes observed, and

filed away his likeness). Inside,

business as usual. Business, in fact (for him it was always

fact fact fact) was booming: eventually

everyone disappears. And it was simple enough,

the mariner hunkered fetuslike for 3 days

"in a fiendishly clever contraption, Watson: a keg

of pickled cucumbers, so fitted as to enable his being

dryly although uncomfortably housed, with breathing apparatus

concealed in a false stave which I noticed when..." But

what of the others? Unnoticeable, and without clues.

"Every night, Mr. Holmes, my wife she

(Stanza continued)

goes to sleep and disappears somewhere beyond our life,
 for a good 8 hours. I need to know where!" And
 he, who woke alone to see the rainslicked bricks of Baker Street
 and always had and always would, was curiously
 unfit for such investigation. People were
 un-being themselves "in every domicile in London,
 Watson, and I am powerless to halt it!"
 There were no malefactors, these were only citizens
 like you and me. Enter a parlor,
 for instance—here's this rage of all the city,
 the stereopticon. What it does exactly is take 2 printed images,
 2 people, and make them 1. And over time
 we can perfect it, we being human and time being time,
 can ultra-rarify the principle, and make
 1 person no one.

At my father's grave
 I've often hoped for an answer to this
 but there's none to detect.

2.

A woman I know isn't here any more
 though she walks and talks with the living. I've seen somebody
 rev her Toyota, chug her Bud, whoever it is
 it's not her. She's retreated, she's fled back to that zombie-point
 inside a person where all of the lines of the face converge.
 An inch? (Maybe an inch.) 100 miles? (The psyche can do that to space.)
 Now all of her friends are mourning,
 either an inch or 100 miles of mourning, depending on how they perceive
 and being inside her isn't
 sex so much as entering the streets of her skin
 at night with the only lantern I have
 and calling her name at each crossroads.

That afternoon, I worked on my Holmes poem:
 words, even the words, were disappearing—all
 those "dear" "quaint" Victorian commonplaces

(Stanza continued)

sloughing off the surface of the mother tongue.
Landau clattered by for the last time. *Brougham*
 followed close behind. These carriages
 vanished on a far rise, leaving only their horses,
 bewildered a moment, lightened of the load, then grazing.
 They'd never return to an *ostler*, never again. And he
 would never cumberously buckle into his *ulster*.
 Would people seek "lodgings" some time, announcing themselves
 by "calling cards"? And what of "jollification,"
 what of "apoplexy"—both these bisque-red
 flushings of the cheeks were disappearing from the "tradesmen."
 I was thinking of a woman I love who
 wasn't the woman I love. It was a very old story,
 older than we are. Maybe she has "brain-fever."
 Maybe I do. Watson has no nostrum
 in all of his pharmacopoeia.

That evening, I looked in the mirror.
Really looked. If the face, the actual face-of-the-moment,
 is the cross-section
 of a conduit the length of a life,
 then
 how irretrievably far back was that 13-year-old boy
 in bed with his Dell paperback edition of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*,
 living in it
 instead of his onerous *bar mitzvah* lessons...
 On how many hairslicking zitpicking image-attending missions
 must he have also languished in front of a mirror, and
 still his face remains the most wavery thing for me of all
 of 1961.

My father
 stalks to the kitchen for *visbrik*—homemade
 blackberry brandy he's sugared to critical mass
 in jars about the size of cub plane fuel tanks.
 "I-i-i-r-v..."—my mother, in her voice
 of lyric complaining that says it's half cute, half repulsive

(Stanza continued)

for recognition with a fresh gust of the after-rain.
 So, yes, he's been experimenting, "the bluish flame of the Bunsen burner"
 limning his long gray travelling-cloak,
 the Turkish slipper pouched with foul tobacco that he's holding.
 "Ah! You've come a long way I see
 —from the 20th century." "But, how...?" So
 he explains. And why, pray tell, do I disturb the great man?
 "It's a matter of direst urgency, I swear.
 A 13-year-old boy is missing."

3.

ACD, d. 1930

That afternoon, precisely between
 the dray horse and the violin, Holmes
 measured the paper, weighed it, clipped
 one corner to burn and analyzed the ashes
 under chemicals and the glass.

That night,

Jean Doyle wrote—her living hand a
 glove for a spirit's. Her brother Malcolm
 had crossed over. Once his mother appeared
 in a seance, gray and vague but "in an
 ecstasy of delight." His son Kingsley
 had crossed over, now he wrote to them,
 through them, in childish scrawl.
 And "Phineas" spoke, he was busy "connecting
 vibratory lines of seismic power," and that capable spirit
 "Walter" rang a bell in a box.
 From Yorkshire, there were photographs of real fairies
 inches high and gossamer-winged.
 A photograph of a medium, collapsed, and
 "ectoplasmic matter" drooling in a thick rope
 from her nose and sloppily coiling beside her.
 The air was loquacious
 with stories of "life Over There." In
 those days, every pencil
 a wooden sill the dead knocked on.

(Stanza continued)

“How
 could he do it? fairies!—Sherlock’s author!”
 Elementary. Holmes, that morning,
 counted the whorls in a print. Outside,
 a hansom passed, and his mind kept track
 of its shrill, specific pattern of noise
 over cobbles. There was a Queen, her
 crown and throne fit—perfect. This many
 whorls and this many grams of ash,
 Empire, empirical.

That dusk,
 somewhere hazy before utter dark, Doyle
 looked up from his negative of amoeba-like
 ghost-glow wafting a manorhouse hallway,
 from his photograph of the “psychic cylinder”
 manifested when “Margery” turned intense,
 from his page: “God’s own light must descend
 and burn...” A black horse somewhere
 passed by, or maybe stopped. But Doyle was busy,
 believing. A black horse, stopped, maybe
 waiting. Something... A whiteness, undefinable, could, really
 could, appear at the door.

“How
 could he? *How?*” But how can anyone, and
 everyone does. It was 7 July 1930. He saw the
 world in which Holmes stood disguised
 on Baker Street, the metrics in his head
 such a logical outcome the
 whole curb shimmied a moment.
 The whole street fogged then cleared.
 And he crossed over.

a day in the Jimmy Carter years

In these photographs of my father praying
 outside, in the yard of the house on Washtenaw Avenue,
 in his prayershawl, there’s a weight
 to his presence, and even to the prescriptual fringe
 of the shawl, that the light carries easily

into the camera, and through time. It makes remembering how heavy the coffin was, even more difficult. Yes, and it makes the house seem... Do you remember the “neutron bomb” one President proposed? The people would die. The people only. Disappear. Yes; but their buildings remain.

4.

The condor only eats meat but can't kill. Relyer on serendipity, it scouts out ground death daylong, gliding sometimes 40 miles to a feed and 40 back, so one with air it looks like the unsung mystical pigments of a thermal have darkened slightly, darkened and ever so slightly fletched... At least, it looks so for the little time it has left. There are 30 of them, that's all. When these go, the condor is gone. / But I mean people. For instance,

*

in 1924 2 Royal Air Force pilots, Stewart and Day, crashlanded in the Iraqi desert. “Their footprints were clearly visible in the sand, in an unbroken line for quite a distance—and then suddenly there were no prints, not theirs or any others. They were not heard from again.” There are thousands of cases: fresh snow, untrammelled mud... A wife buys a carton of cigarettes and no tobacco ever Gretels behind her and the rest is silence. / But

*

I mean only waking up and looking in your eyes —those zeroes. Only that, as if a simple message had been typed on a blank sheet, that and that alone. I mean the blueberry blintzes for breakfast, not the cesareanline of lightning birthing storm and confusion into the world, not angels, not the tabloids' fabled space creatures, no, I only mean being us, touch on touch, my hand here in your hand that isn't. / But, because

*

—the eldest—I've shoveled a winter-brittled ritual first portion of Chicago dirt on my father's lowered casket,

(Stanza continued)

heard it thud against the door of wherever
 he was now, I know yours isn't death, not really.
 Call it almost-death. In bed I look up. You're
 beside me, and I look up. It's dark. I see a dark circling.
 I imagine it's the ceiling fan. Midsummer and
 it's the ceiling fan, though I call it almost-condors.

5.

Well now I'm thrice thirteen.

In 1961—on September 3rd of that year— the last of the first-run segments of *Rocky and His Friends* was aired. That plucky derringdo cartoon flying squirrel (remember? in aviator goggles) and his humungous-hearted oaf-brained chum, cartoon moose Bullwinkle J. Their spinoff *The Bullwinkle Show* premiered just 3 weeks later, September 24—early Sunday evening (I believe opposite, or was it following, *Lassie*) in attempt to lure a slightly more adult audience with the twosome's droll self-referential antics. ("What NOW, Bullwinkle?" "I dunno, Rock—*sbrug*—I haven't read th' script.") —That last in Bullwinkle's half-hollow dippity voice. "I have the best job in the world," said Bill Scott in an interview: the moose's voice for all of the moose's years (plus the voice of Mr. Peabody, mild-mannered dog scientist, and Dudley Do-Right, Mountie).

They were a must for me in those days, and I know where they are today: in reruns. 39, and I can still tune in with fresh glee to the adventure with the moonmen Cloide and Gidney, or the search for the anti-gravity metal Upsidaisium. Where Bill Scott is, though, is more problematic. He died on Friday, November 29, 1985—"survived by his wife, Dorothy, two sons and a daughter" and all of that canned enthusiasm of Bullwinkle J.'s at the weekly manual launching: "Hey Rock: alleyOOOOOP!" And somebody somewhere knows the fate of the Shangri-las, as somebody knows which of the cold stones on the face of Earth once flew through the heavens on fire. And Grandma Nettie, now? The *bar mitzvah* was a success. If you don't believe me, I have photographs. Everyone's smiling. And then she died. I remember my father mottled by afternoon light where he stood alone at the lace-draped windows, staring out at the infinity-point and asking in a low voice, *why?* Well I knew why. She'd seen her grandson *bar mitzvahed* and then that life-support apparatus was unplugged.

And that boy? Where is *he* now? Here, I guess you could say,
writing this. But where did he go each night for an hour before sleep
claimed him? There might be a moment: his father glides by: the boy
he loves so much is translucent, ghostly, soaked

in

to the rained-on page
where London streets
extend through the gaslit blackness.
Yes, and soaked to the skin.
But then, his clothes are barely sloop-cart rags.
And even so, he's whistling—some
to fake a kind of grownup nonchalance,
but also some from pure high spirits.
Across the way and above,
Holmes peers out the window and takes impeccable note
of his neighborhood's newly-acquired urchin:
perhaps he can be of use some time
on a case—intrigue and danger!
Then the famed prognosticator turns away
to business—Mrs. Hudson has just admitted
a strangely-attired 35- no, 39-year-old
client into his chambers.
The boy, meanwhile, walks on. He
isn't even me by now. Let's say
I was elsewhere.
Let's say the boy kicked stones all the way
to a tidily-tended neighborhood,
shopkeepers' modest houses.
He was a little chilly by now but
adventureful enough not to mind.
He looked in a window, a beckoning
amber opening in the dark. We
didn't see him, busy with sorrow and love.
You were playing a tune on the gasogene,
I was fitting the heirloom tantalus over my head
for the last time in history.

Albert Goldbarth

IN FLIGHT

1. Sway Pole

“Two feet, four, ten, twenty, forty—
higher than that, it doesn’t much matter.”

The sway pole falls to the east, her arm
traces a clean arc. She pulls her weight west.

Biting a smile, the twelve-mile-an-hour wind
hisses through her teeth, the plastic cuts her wrist.

She arches her back, turns—a torpedo
spiraling. It doesn’t *much*

matter, seventy-five feet off the ground, a question
of weather, astronomy, the limits of human anatomy.

Clenching the mouth-grip, she spins, eyes closed,
the weight of the pole against hers.

2. Tightrope

The wire is life. I was an infant—
a warm arm and the green and white

tent billowing out over me. Mother
rocking side to side. I slept.

They handed up the chair
first. I slid step by step

to the edge of the pyramid.
A slow-moving lizard, I crawled

to one hundred feet, the last to climb
the shoulders of all my family.

I sat in the chair. I was five.

I sat there many times,

the force of concentration like a taut
wire between my focus point and my eyes.

3. Flying

Nightmare: forever falling
upward. Not even a tent floor.

"Ladies and gentlemen, Carla Wallenda..."
And the perfect dive.

As if the galaxies could suck me into
darkness. Falling away

from the terrible
flightless earth.

4. Death

I remember the pyramid
collapse. So the nightmare is not
free-falling into space, but flying skin over bone
into the earth, dust kicking up and settling
over the face of my family. So this is death:
the wire of concentration snapped.

The day Daddy died, a thousand prayers
chilled the air.

His eyes, still focused, reached with his hands
for the wire. One knee hooked to the cord
kicked and he flipped, diving,
alone, to death.

"That high up it doesn't matter."
His words reverberated like a bell, like a crash
for months. For months, my heart thundered
in fear.

5. Circus

For the love of terror, of the dead, the newsmen
replay the clips: Puerto Rico, the winds tugging Daddy's shirt.

They superpose his face on my own.
I teach my daughter, "Two feet, four..."

There are no ghosts here,
head-standing on the pole—

I see the whitest clouds, like land
under my feet. Wind reddens my thighs.

When there's no tent-corner to focus on,
no net, all the concentration,

all this life, balances inside my body,
more extreme than any philosophy.

Christine Cassidy

UNABLE TO WAIT FOR GODOT

So tonight I'm the expert
who's been invited
to Sneads Correctional Institute
to lead a discussion following
Beckett's famous play,
but only if the inmates
can keep their seats
and refrain from shouting
and throwing things
at the actors,
a small but talented troupe
dedicated to bringing theatre
to the state's prisons.
The performance is going well
under the eyes of the guards,
who hate it:
without the play, without me,
they would have had a quiet evening
of cards, cigarettes, television.
But at least the audience
is well-behaved,
with one exception,
who is now crawling toward me
on his hands and knees,
invisible to everyone else.
At first I think
he will take me hostage
with a sharpened toothbrush
or a bar of soap
that has been blackened
and carved into the shape of a pistol,

(Stanza continued)

and for a moment
I see my name in the headlines,
the gentle humanist
who defused the situation
with his calm, steady voice,
the man of words who kept his head
while all about him were losing theirs
and saved the day.
But no, my visitor wants information,
not hostages. Tugging on my trouser leg,
he wants to know who Godot is.
I tell him go back,
it's not worth a month in the hole;
besides, nobody knows.
But I can see his problem:
he is impatient, wants one-word answers.
He is not going to make it in society;
in fact, at this moment,
he is not doing all that well in prison.
I want to say look, brother,
be like the dudes in the play—
wait. It won't do you any good,
but people will respect you for it.
They'll think you're a man,
not a kid who can't control himself.
But he is not interested.
He does not want to be like me,
who is good at waiting.
I want to tell him
there are no guarantees,
not even in literature;
you have to take what comes
and keep your hair combed.

TO TEND MY HORSE

To tend my horse I must pass Searles Park where

Tammy Lee Tracy, seventeen, vanished
from her class car wash. The suspect likes
brown-eyed, brown-haired girls, they think,
though he hasn't yet been found. I'm his type.

Was that the place? I wonder then imagine
them walking like lovers, his arm slightly
around her waist, but wait. Her hands:

What's wrong with this picture? More likely
he'd pushed her into the car but wouldn't
that require the strength of two? Two men pushed
me against a bridge in Belize once.

They radiated liquor and one drooled a little.

Somehow I remembered that they love it
when women panic. *Take your hands off me*
I'd managed as my own nails bruised my palms.
It wasn't courage so much as luck. The accent.

And it was daylight. But where I tend
my horse they've been broken into and sometimes
at farms nearby a horse turns up missing:
the work of rustlers who lure the gentlest,
the ones who'll take sugar from moonlit palms
and follow up the ramp then to a slaughterhouse
across state lines. A woman must know
the territory or have a man, and I admit that

I feel safer with my husband who might have
killed someone trying to protect me. On a bus
in Moroccan mountains a man saddling
a television near the back played a game:

when we'd nose down he'd let the t.v. slide.
Retrieving it he'd feel my knee. By the third time

his hand was up my thigh and my husband,
who'd never laid a hand on anyone, flicked open
his Swiss Army knife. *Do that again*
I'll slit your throat he said. Sometimes
bluffing works. But alone, way out where
I canter Watson's cornfield to the Sugar River,
who knows? Last week an egret startled me:
bright white and lost, its fragile legs seared
in the icy current. Today I thought
I saw it again but it was only a feed bag flapping,
caught in a stump. One spring I found
a boot wedged in the may apples where white panties,
crumpled like a dish rag, glared from a patch
of trillium. I don't remember when
the bank's been clear of beer bottles, so why
not Tammy Lee's toe by crushed glass
or her white elbow poking through the ferns?
And if *he* were hiding in the barn today?
I'd have a chance: I'm leery now and know
where to grab the hoof pick or the rake.
But if he came at me from behind, knife to mouth,
what then? *He's wearing gloves.*
Suppose he'd studied the place and backed me
into bales. Then I'd have to bluff,
stare into his eyes and try to undermine him:
Drop the knife and I'll do anything.
He drops the knife. But then another man slithers
from behind a bale: *something black*
slung at his side. A curry comb slashed across
a face would give me time. But...*No*
masks...They don't intend to be identified.

Christine Swanberg

THE PLANETS

*Divided into terrene
and Jovian bodies
arranged in order
from the sun.*

I

What spin
what speed
what lack of darkness

Mercury's

sifted

ground

disgorging

no thirst

where dead

volcanos

mirror the moon

or Mars

a scorched

constancy

a slow

slough of retrograde

noon

where human eyes

would twist

beneath layers

of lids

where sight
would be
the penumbra
of exfoliate
stone

the heard
gray margin
of chipped
shadow
if the right seed
arrived
a semblance
cast adrift
from the dust-
mirror of a dead planet's wake

if live-oaks
without
draperies
of Spanish moss
reached thinly
in silvery
replicas of
night

and hunger
in looking
in helium
rain
were the exhausted
mouthing of a dance
the memory of bleached
gyrations
in Space
as in a window

if someone arrived
 on a Mobius
 curve
 twisting
 into
 the time-
 dream of
 helical
 pathways

rhythmic chains
 of noise
 falling from sky

clashing
 like phonemes

if there were
 inertial
 intent enough
 from human
 sound

to disturb the backward motion
 of the sun

*"Cynthia figuras
 aemulatur mater
 amorum"*

in the pressure of Venus

the
 soul
 a crushed
 lens
 beneath speeding
 yellow
 clouds

a skin
 slipped loose

who would not be acidulous
 facing smooth plains
 like unfurled horizon

who would not abandon words
 where vision curves at land's edge

light
 doubling back
where metals
 melt
 and rubble in shadow
glows red

 the high continent of Ishtar
 the plateau of Lakshmi
a white ring the zero meridian called Eve

fabled
 arrays of women
with lions
and owls
 escaped from the desert

 handed down
 from the feracious
heavens

 held constant
 from the sun

 turned so gradually
 in such a circle

that the follies of our myths
 would be crucibles
 where bones dissolve

 joy
 the grave admixture of song with sulfur
 where body disappears

lungs blow to cinders

but Earth's
 iron
 could be a taste
 from the core
 beneath
 tongues
 too molten for words
 a history
 of the possible
 in layered light
 where seas flow onto fields of dust

 ardor
 and fury
 the rhetoric of salt
 rising in dawn's redness
 blood of first speech
 before the larynx
 presses its tidal bulge toward the moon
 and
 moving air
 becomes
 the mantle of rotation

 before cloud and ground
 become the image of trees
 in lakes
 pursued
 by what flies between
 what gasps
 to break
 a vegetable
 surface
 where mind

 is
 the first space
 between irregular
 crystals
 a vacancy

(Stanza continued)

urging outward
risen free
of exteriors
an inner
drawn to an outer
such
escaped
inherence
it must be surrounded
by skin
by xylem
by moist
integuments
or collapse
into hyaline negatives
not to confirm the constancy
of motion
but the outermost edge
of zero
the shape
where gas
flares into a twisting column
of fire
blackening the forest
bringing cold magma
back to igneous and outraged
identity

and what would hands do
with
red dust
the CO2
winds of
Mars

such thin air
 that tornados
 blow without force
 breath
 breaking its edge
 in clouds of dry ice
 over the polar cap
 desert without
 ozone
 where the Babylonians knew
 that
 invisible
 pounding
 from the sun
 the ultra-violet
 tides
 lapping ravines
 could be a god's
 anger
 the speechless
 voice of Nergal
 only through
 their own
 suffocating
 midnight
 wakenings
 and the polygonal
 risings
 of salt
 from a dead
 core
 the ancient rust
 like Earth's dyed
 caliche
 here without sand
 a gouged surface
 Phobos
 the moon
 appearing twice a day

roaming the landscape like a messenger
 its twin
 Deimos
 the eye of terror
 where blood
 is
 a spilled
 ochre
 drying
 in tracks of the god's
 chariot
 as if life
 had gone underground
 soaked into
 the rainless furrows
 and we fell
 through this
 horizon
 with nowhere to settle the drift of our lives

quondam waterways a dream

II

 Huge ovum
 glowing unborn
 Jupiter
 like a sun
 manque
 made liquid
 its great
 red spot a millennial
 whirlpool
 as if the motion
 in its
 sea of hydrogen
 were the current of bodies
 oozing through a membrane
 into digestion

so cold
 if entered
 our ankles would crack
 like hot
 porcelain
 while the Galilean moons
 persist
 Io
 bursts its molten bubos
 Ganymede
 grooved with ice
 the pock-marked
 Europa
 floating dead
 in its tedious
 ellipse
 what if Jupiter
 had fused itself
 into light
 if gravity had spun
 fragments into
 a balled furnace
 its heat
 melting
 frozen
 plains
 asteroids crashing toward magnetic maelstroms
 what if consciousness
 was ours
 without this present
 plasm
 and form
 neither protein
 nor carbon
 fluxion

without marrow
without organic
perimeter

our vision
no more
than a shifting
of fluids
east or west

Mars oblate between two suns
our moon's face
invisible
as we streamed in the burning sky

could we then
enumerate
the seventeen
icy bodies
of Saturn?
the whirling
rings
the ancients'
farthest
edge
like Time
seen edge-on
suddenly
a thread hauling the planet

the sea
on satellite
Titan
cold and
methane

in its mid-
 day
 and laggard
 glint
 heaving
 to the rhythms of
 1 a.m. tides
 along
 the California
 coast

 all motion
 shared
 to
 mobilize
 dawn
 and dusk

 though a balance everywhere centric
 as if Enceladus
 gave back
 its fivefold
 reflected white
 as a parallel
 to solar
 flame
 as if two shepherding bodies
 exchanged
 orbits
 to be the tensive gravity
 always of a third

 so
 slow
 about the sun

 so far
 in its blue-green

(Stanza continued)

banded
 barre
regions

 large
 Uranus
 in its hot
 ocean that will not boil
 yet
 so weightless
it would drift above Earth's
 seas
 a colored reflection
 of the moon

 swelling
toward the greater
 gravity
 of a wobbling
core

 its lurid
 rotation
 on its
side

 its pink-
 hued
 pole
 and circling
 plumes
nothing but
 a silence
 in which travelers
would dream the humid
 forests
 of Oberon and Titania
phantom fritillaries at their lips

and if Neptune
 were
 solid
 if it could be
 rubbed like amber
 swirl
 with electricity
 if it drew to itself
 particles of cosmic
 straw
 Neptune would still
 remain
 dim
 telescopes would still
 search
 skies
 over the Grand Canyon
 for calculable
 accumulations of a
 self
 electro-
 magnetic waves
 symmetrical
 as the whorls
 of a conch
 inevitable
 in smallness
 as the dance
 of iron filings
 toward a child's
 magnet
 a cold sphere predicted
 like the crackling of silk on glass
 an equatorial
 tugging
 known before its shape

(Stanza continued)

could be
seen
rippling
the dark solar sea

so
there is presence
perceived
as delay
the warp of momentum
the
signature
of a witness
who does not
appear

Pluto

drawn into orbit
a tenebrous
tracing
for someone to see
where encroachment
occurs
in the stippling
of shadow
a body
once made upon a body
as if mass
as if volume
as if velocity
were three sides of a moving
frame
that approached us

as if we shed the weakness of our force
 in revolving
 mirrors
 where the voice drains
 where the past
 spreads
 in the web between fingers
 like a colorless
 mold
 nothing relative
 as oak

 sturdy
 as the grasp
 of speech
 or song
 the slow
 swirl
 out there
 of coldness
 like a net
 where
 there must be Planet X
 because a moon
 rolls the wrong
 way asteroids
 attract
 beads of water
 cling to a glass

 because
 gyroscopes
 would fly
 apart

TWO POEMS

Alyssum

Yellow is brave,
generous; it speaks first
in the garden: van Gogh's
high note—electric, jolting,
as if one chomped on foil;
even garish, this
basket of gold.
Silence lives in me
like this achievement of color.
Once more, in a dream,
someone seized the slim tubes
and all the small bulbs
of my bones
as if to squeeze from them
the stored silence.
Even now,
as I shut my eyes,
still spouting from my spine,
still spraying from my wrists:
the chrome and citron
light, the aura
of alyssum.

Foxglove (*digitalis*)

I am thinking
of an old dream:
of a dandy, a composer,
drawing on his
yellow gloves,
emerging from a hole
in the earth, announcing:
*If you had seen what I have seen ...
you could never write the words.*
I rise, walk out into the garden.
If there is a serpent in all this lushness
I imagine it electric
blue: an eel
swimming among the swords
of iris, avoiding the alyssum
with its high voltage of gold, its
gaudy silence.
I am standing before tall
spines of foxglove; here,
from every vertebra,
hang all the fingers
of the yellow gloves.
I think: then somewhere
there are hands
unsheathed, composing.
I think, fingering the leaves:
each of these
green tongues, unhinged,
harvested, ground to the whiteness
of words,
could charge,
snuff the heart.