

THE BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL

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Cover: Robert Shetterly, Jr., *Arrival of the Wizard*, drypoint etching, 1986.

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HEIRLOOM

On my birthday, my mother gave me fear
poised gently in a cotton padded box
white as my mother's bony feet.

Oh mother, I said, and stopped
not knowing how to say that it wasn't
what I wanted. I wanted a shiny
radio, a cashmere sweater. Oh mother,
if you had to give intangible gifts
why couldn't you have given courage?

I pulled it from its box
gauzy yards billowing out
like mosquito netting in tropical
wind. It smelled of ether
sickening me with trembling sweetness.

I got it cool for summer, she said.
Oh mother, why couldn't you have given me
hot heavy fear like cymbal crash
overwhelming fear like battering rams
instead of this cool webbing
this anxious gown, a perfect fit?

Dashka Slater

Three Poems

BENGAL NIGHT

When foxes sing out
behind the bamboo grove
and cranes' wings
whip the black air white
the child stops her games
and fills a bucket at the pump
and washes. Water flows through
her hot fingers like moonlight
leaching away the salt.
She plunges her face into it
opening her mouth
to its cool, rusty taste.
On the verandah the aunt
cleans the lanterns, polishing
narrow chimney-glasses with a blue rag.
The child waits, breathing in
the kerosene smell. The aunt lights
the first lantern. The child sets out
to bring the grandfather home.

One lighted lantern into the night
swinging great curved shadows on a path
red as the massy hibiscus on every side
where the child dreams green whiplash snakes
hanging like tendrils, their jewel eyes.
The claws of night lizards
skitter over rocks. Vapors rise
from the pocked phosphorus skin

(Stanza continued)

of the mosquito swamp. Water insects
cry into the hearts of Elephant-ears.
The child sets down the lantern,
its oval shell of light.
Throws out her arms and whirls
around and around in the blue
breathless air. Her skirt
flares hibiscus-red
to touch the world.
In the wheeling sky,
star-studded bats
hang motionless
on great leather wings.

THE ROBBERS' CAVE

My favorite game was the one
where the robbers
slip into the palace at dead of night
and kidnap the princess of the snowy mountains
who then becomes a prisoner in their cave
until the prince rescues her.
How I wanted to be princess.
But being seven, was always
the youngest robber
the one who carries the rope
and, once the princess is tied up,
has nothing left to do.

The princess was a girl
whose black hair, at eleven,
already reached her swinging hips.
Her breasts pushed curiously
against the tight red kameez
her mother made her. My mother
was always pregnant, too tired
to make me anything. Her hands blueveined,
her bone-bleached, bloodless face.
Father was a sour breath
exploding in sudden shouts,
punches to send you flying.
Nights I cried soundlessly
for my true father, lost at birth,
king of the snowy mountains.

The boy who was prince
had a silver sword his father
bought him at the fair. His eyes
were black lights. When he passed me
my heart leaped like a red fish
in my throat. We never spoke.

Not even on the day
the regular princess was sick
and I begged and begged until
they let me be princess
just once. I lay on the cool
cement floor of the cave
not minding the rope that numbed my wrists.
Breathed in the silent dark,
the odor of pickled mangoes
in large earth jars, waited
for the prince to roll away
the rock that stopped the cave-mouth.

He never came.
The pantry door was flung open
by Reba our maid
calling me to come home quick
mother was dying.

The bed was full of blood. So much blood.
Ninth month blood
and the baby, too, dying inside her,
trapped like a blind fish
in that black tidal cave.
Blood from her fractured skull
where he had flung her
against the stair wall.
The crack of bone, the heavy thud
of falling flesh
end over end into spiralled dark.
They tell me no one heard her scream.

In my dream I hear her. Again, again.
The scream ricochets off
the moist heaving walls
of the robbers' cave
where with tied wrists I swim
feebly against the pull
of the black tide
insidious current sucking me under
like the metallic smell of her blood
the sour burning
breath of father on me.

The prince never comes.

THE REASON FOR NASTURTIUMS

All night the white fog
leans on the flattened grass,
gauzes the cherry tree,
its magenta leaves.
Nothing stirs.
Not the racoon
the two of you fed all winter. Not
the family of deer you glimpsed
last full moon lying on the deck
from your eye-corner,
and you melting under his hot weight.
Now only his words
tumbling like drying rags
inside your smoldering skull.
You cannot breathe. You open
the back door. The world
is chill, opaque
as though a cataract had spread
milky tentacles
across your eyes.
You circle the yard, blind,
until by their pungent, crushed odor
you know you are among
the nasturtiums. You kneel
in the trampled bed and touch them,
the circular silk leaves
hollowed like your hand, the petals
thin and bruised as the skin
under your eye. You sit with them
through the long dark and
in the morning you see them,
brilliant as the great red sun
pushing past the fog,
exactly the color you imagined
all night.

A COLD RAIN THE DAY BEFORE SPRING

From heaven it falls on the gray pitted ice
that has been here since December.

In the gutter rivulets erode piles
of dirt and road salt into small countries
and the morning is so dark, in schools

teachers turn on fluorescent lights
and everyone comes in smelling of damp wool.
From heaven it falls, just the opposite
of a prayer, which I send up
at the traffic light: please

let me begin over again, one
more time over again, wipe the slate
clean, the same way after school
janitors, keys jangling from
belt loops, will use a wet rag and wipe

the school day off, so there is only
the residue, faint white on the smooth
surface. It's the same way
the infield looks before the game
begins, or the ice on a rink

between periods. All new again
for the moment and glistening.
Imagine each day you get to start
again and again. Again. How many
days does the janitor enter into the room

of your soul, wipe it clean
go out into the hallway
and push the broom
down the long corridor, full
of doors to so many rooms.

Stuart Kestenbaum

Two Poems**BUZ LOVES DONNA FOREVER, ALL IN CAPS, OUTSIDE TRENTON**

1.

Fat chance. Paint blisters, bubbles and lifts, plate rusts and buckles,
Valentino flickers and fades in thin metal caskets,
Gable is gone, not giving a damn, as Scarlet snuffles—
ain't no such thing, kid, as even half a custom bucket
of Dutch Boy Forever, Dupont Eternal, Pittsburgh Timeless.
And Donna herself flakes and peels, disappears in rumors
of disgrace, disguise, disgust, disease, dispute, distress,
dis-sy, dizzy, ditzzy: Desi loves Lucy no more
so why should Buz love Donna eons down the Jersey track,
old faithful fossil of fifteen mounting steel studs
Sunday mornings, spraying his lady Donna on the back
of iron-ribbed Forties billboards, huh? Huh? It's a bust, Buz,
if you ask me, but keep up the impossible work: art
makes no designs on Time not first inscribed within a heart.

2.

Well, maybe. Maybe Buz will become eponymous, one of the Forever Brothers, with Danny, Mack and Gus. Ages hence on intimate walls and public stumps lovers will make the marks of forever in memory of Buz— Buz the Faithful, Buz the True, Everlasting Buz— and slip down together beneath the sign of Buz, him who loved without tact or ration, jealous only of the indelible—uncompromising Buz ALL IN CAPS by the side of the tracks, nubble and rust no obstacle, and where he lived or who he was of little consequence—Buz the Obscure, Humble Buz, just loving Donna like that, so very much, he must have run home that night as all the Trenton dust clung thick with lust to those white block letters of BUZ and DONNA and slept the long full sleep of one who does what has to be done, regardless, just because.

3.

Probably so. What's forever anyhow? A little salt, a little forgetting, some Ozymandias, some RNA, and wasn't Donna tickled pink as talcum by the insistent publicity of passion: she glowed, she luminesced, she shone with occult brilliance, knowing at that break of graffitic day she was *the* Donna: Donna Forever. How fine she felt! Buz could turn roach or tadpole, be prince or king or CEO, it would not matter, no, not in this long-run full-length feature called someone loves Donna Forever. In time the Buz would fade but Donna was longer, she'd outlast him, and people would read —Loves Donna Forever, then, so likely, — ——— Donna Forever; poor Buz an empty word, and Love too, but not Donna, no, no, she'd return year after year like an anxious comet, cast that spell on the back of the billboard in Standard Brand's expensive best just to make sure she was all and always there, factory white, legible as the largest news, Saint of Amtrak and signal lights, Donna of Couplings and Crossings, so they made love for the rest of us, did Buz and Donna, and felt immeasurably well.

4.

Right on. And in the Jersey afterworld
 among those afterimages of pike and bog
 there's Buz in sweats and Tru-Test t-shirt
 festive as cranberries, painting Donna on billboard skies
 over Barnegat Bay, Ho-ho-kus, the Musconetcong.

Look! And girls point for their Dutch Neck teachers
 when the letters come wet and white out of the clouds:
 there's Buz with his Paint City sneakers
 painting FOREVER: see the O, the R, the perfect Es
 over Owassa, Rancocas, Egg Island, Englewood.

And sometimes, looking down from LOVES labor,
 Buz surely waves: a white rainbow, a Glidden snow.
 There's Buz, we say, with Benjamin Moore
 on his bristles, painting those autumn flocks of Vs
 over Vauxhall, Vienna, Wawayanda and Winslow.

And boys ask: who's this Donna anyway?
 Their fathers answer: a girl I knew way back when.
 And there's Buz, True Value on his face,
 painting from here to Kingdom Come that glorious D
 over Dividing Creek, Deepwater, Deal and Dunellen.

And of course it's Buz not Donna up there.
 Who in hell ever gave you that impression?
 It's Buz and Sherwin Williams, brothers
 thick as any all-weather, painting that swashbuckling Z
 over the amazing fields of Zarephath and Zion.

You betcha: Buz. Buz who loves Donna forever.

BIRTH CERTIFICATE, TIBERIAS, '48

At his grave, which is not grand—
some stone, some gravel, bushes, sand,
a few white flowers half-wild with cheat
& devil grass, stink bugs & red beetles,
beaten lids of cans grey with ash
& the last pieties of candlewax—
there are at least some dozen trees,
token of oasis. Beneath them I sit & read,
lost among *Midnight's Children*, a fiction
of '47, '48, the Mahatma & partition,
a subcontinent of holymen, accidents,
& honking horns & yes, it happens,
a car goes off the side of the road
just across from the grave & the old
man on his folding chair counting shekels.
Three tourists sick of the historical
turn aside from Wisdom to stare
at News, at the commotion of air
in the dirt road, at the woman, perplexed,
& the other driver, a man, perplexed,
who points toward heaven or a garage,
the patient guide pulling his host of aged
pilgrims back to the ageless Rambam, back
toward the tomb, away from the dull black
coupe in the ditch, explaining how it came to be
that here in this low-down sacred city,
so low it's the lowest city on earth,
the great teacher's bones were interred—
& then off they fly in a green sedan
to watch Jesus walk on water or plant
the seeds of faith around the Galilee.
The woman, still perplexed, stands by
her car, waiting for the attributes
of God or a good mechanic, mute,
& the man, perplexed, looks up at the dry sun,
& the old keeper turns his good eye from one

(Stanza continued)

to the other, back & forth, happy
for this diversion, this calamity
which keeps us all in our place, small,
human, perplexed, putting out for candles
in memory of those who thought
years ago we might listen, might be taught
something of reason, something of peace,
& yes, now I can hear the high wheeze
of fighters streaking toward Lebanon
or Pakistan & the man & the woman
look up, the keeper looks up, but there
are no signs in the sky, the humming air
must be mistaken. Just an accident.
A tow truck appears. What has been bent
out of shape will be made right, all
in good time. It's not serious: a small
matter, the mechanic says. A day or so.
The man drives off, the woman is towed,
the keeper returns to his additions,
& across the way, walking through the gardens
of Birla House, Gandhiji meets his assassin.
No, Gandhiji says, seventy-eight & thin
from weeks of fasting, no, not now, not—
I rise. It's time to go. It's getting hot.
Arabs sandblasting a house nearby
make the air here sharp with mica.
The gun goes off. A sonic boom. Another.
Infinite, wrote Rambam, infinite are
accidents but they count for little.
I see the skid marks of Asoka's wheel,
the contrails high above, the shadows
on the path to the pergola at Birla House
where Gandhiji had meant to pray
& yes, drivers shout Fool! Get out of the way!
You're standing in the middle of the road!
No: of things. In the middle of things. No,
Gandhiji says, & he falls into the year

(Stanza continued)

of my birth. Not things: essences, I hear
Rambam warning from within his stone.
They take dark green branches, incense, saffron,
& draw Gandhiji toward the pyre.
The card I had when young did not show the fire
but the gun firing & an old man with glasses,
called the Mahatma, falling. What passes
through a midnight child's hands is real enough:
trading cards, decals, matches, salt pills, stuff.
Accidents, essences, who can tell one
from the other, now? There are more stones
in town: Rabbi Akiva; Moroccan saints
who healed hearts, worked miracles & still may;
Roman zodiacs beside hot sulfur springs.
So many wonders, so many things
to see but only mad dogs & Americans
are out & about in this midday sun.
The flames rise from the pyre for Gandhiji,
from the tin cans for Rambam & the rabbis,
from Udampur, the Bekaa, & Kishtwar,
& I head up hill past masked men with torches
welding iron banisters & fences,
past a coven of small blank-faced children
at a fire of their own: old boxes, broken toys,
torn sandbags, packing crates. In four days
I'll be back home in the land of the brave,
land of the pilgrim's pride, where parents save
too much, & I'll hunt through deep cupboards
—a true lion of Judah—for one small card
which, years ago, I'm sure I gave away
or stuck a nail through to make a sail
for a wooden ark, or set a match to
on a summer afternoon with nothing else to do.

Two Poems

HORSE

1.

The horse thinks you are mostly spirit.
Your small body barely presses his back,
but the pull of your voice is irresistible.
The horse thinks your limbs are inventions of feeling.
They bend and float in the air as leaves do,
land on his neck like warm rain.
His skin is patient
waits for you to show more of your secret,
the two of you standing alone and full-on.

2.

At ten I look into that pond colored eye
and marvel the scene suspended there.
While my pupil is round and as deep as a well,
his is a soft blunt hedge.
How much can he know with eyes like that?
His body is a mystery.
So much weight demanding motion,
his hooves landing square as sledgehammers,
and no arms for holding.
My arms seem buoyant beside him,
not driven to the ground like grey stones.
My hands sail out to drift in his coat,
the two of us silent as twins.

SARASVATI (consonants and vowels)

My lips closed around her nipple and I hummed. I hummed and I drank and the stream of her milk was as sweet as sleep. And as I drifted between dream and liquid, liquid and dream, my eyes were mirrors on the meadow of her breast and my cheeks stilled.

But her vowels would coax me back. And I would respond with everything my mouth could give: all smacking caresses and guttural serenade. This was our first conversation, this is how it all began.

By the time we can parrot her consonants she is completely in focus. We sing then not only for milk but for love— something that almost bring us into focus. She is coaxing us, coaxing us, and while milk is the palpable realm, this realm of phonemes and ether is equally urgent. So, no matter how far back she stands, no matter how far back the memory of milk recedes, conversation surrounds us, palpable as a meadow. Look, soon we are all in focus, all of us standing with our feet in the stream, serenading.

Bia Lowe

Two Poems**CHINA LAKE**

Every spring has days the breezes jump free
of the valley's flooded groove and blow across
in just the way that lets a sailboat shoot
the narrows on a sweet beam reach.
Last May, I found a day like that
and asked along a friend I hadn't sailed with
since the first time he took sick.
The doctors thought they fathomed it:
two more months, at most. In the thin green
hospital light he took, in turn, his wife's hand,
my wife's, mine, and squeezed until the anger
at having worked his youth away, mastering
more and more sophisticated versions of the proper thing
lifted and left him free to show his love.
Those flooded moments lifted us all,
but, for me, transcendence didn't last:
I thought he was the only one dying.

He didn't then, though twice more he's been forced
to master the art, nobly
and cheerfully, and twice he's been reborn,
though the last time it took two years
to escape the disappointment at coming back.
He'd been so well-prepared. Two years
he walked among us, survivor of a war
we couldn't honor, couldn't understand.
Until this spring, we found ourselves talking
about a sail, watching for the right day.
And then we were launched,
boiling out past sunstruck hillsides
where appletrees unfurled their petals
and slower hardwoods blended forty shades of green.

Halfway down the narrows,
upwind waves went livid with whitecaps
and a puff darkstreaked down on us so fresh
the hull jerked like a child's slapped cheek
and the lee rail buried as we shipped buckets
of ankle-numbing water while the wind rose
from hums to screams in the rigging
and then a shackle exploded and we caught
each other's eyes an instant, expecting
the mast would crash, our arms held rigid
over our heads like clocks the stroke before noon
but locked the way time stops when your blood
surges—but it was only the jib that fell—not good,
but not disaster. And the gust backed down.

We both knew if a wind that strong swung back
to its prevailing groove we'd never make it
down the narrows, much less home.
I don't know why we were so sure
the breeze had done its worst
or why we gathered in the fallen jib, grinned,
and hiked straight out, shoulder-to-shoulder,
almost grazing the waves as we planed
down the narrows, past miles of pluming hillsides
towards the open center of the lake.

BACK DOWN MORRILL AVENUE

(for Natalie)

When I monkeyed with the toaster, breaking
both knobs, you merely rolled your eyes.
But I clomped out with the dog, taking
this long route, around the Vocational High.

Ralph galloped half a block, slowed to a trot, his
thoughts changing to turf and scuttling fog.
And, now, he's stopped, meditating arthritis,
dog years, eros, fidelity, feces, loss.

As I stoop to lift him in my arms,
a voice like tintinnabulation floats above groaning
branches, then partly clarifies in streetlit snatches of fog:
"Mountain gate...hidden sun...which way is home?"

Perturbed as the milky night air,
Ralph unstops a moan that ends aspirated
like the dream-moan you make that carries
me to wakefulness before sunrise.

I want an answer so, to Ralph, I say,
"It must be Mrs. Paradis reading to Therese."
Therese and Ralph moan and lurch together when they play.
He doesn't see she's twenty-six; she acts like three.

But Therese's mother wouldn't taunt her with the phrases
the next breeze swatch tosses our way,
"Smoke rises off the lake, suffocating
the heart...life among men, not for me."

I pass a line of party cars outside
the Sweney's house and, just before
I see Chung Wo in his jeep, I recognize
the voice as a tape of his ex-wife, Courtney Wo.

Before they left Hong Kong she won the island's
English Elocution Contest. She lilt
Chinese and then her private English versions
of Tu Fu, alone in autumn and bereft.

"White dew shrivels, wounds the maples deep
in the woods." Chung, his head hard pressed
against the steering wheel, almost too drunk too weep,
hears Ralph, looks up. The wheel has left

a deep purple line above his eyes
and she laments, "When will we lean out
the windows together and let the moon dry
the tear stains from our faces?" Happy shouts

from the party don't dilute her song.
Chung looks down and groans. In my palm
Ralph's halting, leaky heart goes thum-thum,
thum...thum, thum-thum. We hurry home

past the last few houses back to you,
thanking the streetlights and the moon
somewhere, thankful
for the porchlight, thankful for you.

Peter Harris

CONSTANZA

This strange young woman with her black dress
and olive complexion accepts the offer
to walk her home. It is clear her classmate
is interested for the right reasons, clear
as the night itself is clear, since hers
is not the face of a white boy's dream,
though endowed with a divine symmetry.
The looks the student yields are proof
he is drawn by something within her that,
were she to show it, he could know love.
The second time around her block
the young man is unaware they have
arrived at her neighborhood. Neither
does he realize they have attracted
an escort of young males, so absorbed
is he in the woman's sweet voice
flecked with nuance from her native tongue.
All the while it is he of whom she speaks,
both a sign and cipher of her pure
intentions, which he senses she is always
about to reveal, as these walks go on
all summer. Suddenly one evening
she grasps the man's forearm, standing there,
gazing skyward. There is in the faces
of those who surround great anticipation.
Constanza is her name, and it appears
she would be hard pressed to hear it
were he to speak it, even now as
she turns toward him to say goodbye,
there before the stoop of her building
where her mother and grandmother sit,

(Stanza continued)

awaiting her return, though on this night
the steps are bare, as are Constanza's wide,
angular shoulders and buoyant breasts,
for she has deftly, without encouraging
passion in him, disrobed herself entirely
to the waist. The young men, as well as others
who have spontaneously gathered, kneel
all around, crossing themselves over and over
again. For the briefest moment, then
during one prolonged gasp from the crowd,
her back turned as she ascends the stairs,
the shoulder blades twitch, then contort,
begin to stretch the lavish skin so that
the boy knows he must go to her
yet first scale wonder akin to horror.
There is pain in her face as she turns
at the top of the steps to receive him,
her arms by her sides, her hands held
before her abdomen, palms up, so that
the young man need not immediately acknowledge
she now has wings, wings like in the picture
of the sculpture with wings he has seen
in the class, marble wings all the more prominent
with the head cut off.

And the boy knows her beautiful skin too
is becoming marble, though still animate,
still human enough, still woman enough
so that before, as an old man, the boy dies,
he tells of their marriage bed, the two
magnificently healed scars like melted wax
on her back, and the pair of white butterflies
having mated to produce black offspring
to rest upon and completely conceal
the likeness of Constanza above her grave,
white butterflies that sprang one at a time
from her labia, he insists, that first
night, before they made love.

From **THE AIR WE SHARE BETWEEN US**

(Wspólne powietrze)

1981

Evening, a burning campfire, the outgoing rings of light. Beyond its edge there is nothing. Only we in the center are alive: our loud shouts, songs, laughter. Soon, the wood will burn down, the flames cough. With the same words we describe the gasps of a dying man. Always there lingers something of the fire. Only later will we realize there was nothing. Only darkness in which we make out the few things that remain: our faces, suddenly changed, bending down over this one spot of earth, the black figurines of the trees, the sky turning a little more light, and the cold glint of the stars. And no one knows why we have remained silent for so long, why when we speak our first words are whispers.

Strange evening, I sit in the garden, the pines still sharp against the sky. The neighborhood mothers call their children home. In the distance a train lumbers off, its rumble softens. Right now I think of my life as complete. The envelope sealed. I have nothing I want to return to. Nothing that needs to be altered. I am burned clean, the boundaries between me and this night erased. With my body I hear each creak of pine, the murmur of stars in the night sky, the soft clunk of wheels. Clean as if before yet another beginning, a new birth into something—I don't know what. But will there be trees there as well? Will a train's mounting rumble ignite the pleasant haze of this evening? Will there be children, mothers, will a mother call me home from where I sit in the garden now? Will there be these very same pine trees? There is no way I can go beyond what I have already known—to develop a thirst for anything other than pure bliss.

Everything

which made up that moment stays there. No other here and now. The evening, the path to the station, the cloud of crows above the park, the squeezing of two hands, the first shriek of a train in motion. Not much remains, not much at all. But enough so that years later in a cold room I gnaw my fingers to the bone. But I won't cry out, make a show of my feelings. I'll only describe: an evening, the path, a cloud of black crows and a train, everything that was there at the time. The rest doesn't exist. It's only memory. Only my memory. What happened inside is not a fit subject for words.

May, an unexpected downpour. People hole up in a courtyard entrance. The sun still shines through the rain. The air glows. The narrow passage through Cobbler Street is bathed in radiant blue light. One of the moments you cannot lose if you make this place your home. But don't waste time thinking—stick your head out the door. Let the cold drops stream down your cheeks as you watch the young girl standing a few steps away, her hair drenched, summer blouse transparent from the rain, her radiant gaze blushing when she notices you are looking. But try now not to think about anything. Just feel the fresh metallic dampness on your skin. And don't turn away your eyes. Later, it will only take a few drops of rain to stream down your cheeks, for you to conjure her up again.

Evenings I walk the town, the lit streets, the Market Square. Later, I work on a new poem—almost every night. As a poet before me said—this is happiness. I don't know. All I can do is describe the waves of people on the Square, their noise and energetic heat, how their cheeks swell up with the air we share between us, our upturned faces washed by each flake of the fall of twilight, the darkness steeped in the warmth of the human body, the lamplight glancing off a woman's hair. So how do I describe? The poet before me is silent to this most simple question. His mouth filled with dust. The dust to which everything returns.

The Sound of a bawling child through the walls each night,
the pacifying and bedside song. The tattered remains
of voices from other rooms:

“I don’t know never mother I’m already coming
keep in mind why everything will turn out okay.”
From behind my apartment wall, from behind
every wall that exists, the conversations
never die down. I can’t see any faces or eyes.
But I hear what is said. Unbelievable
the ties that strap us together, that strap
each thing with each thing. No way
to filter out. No room
for a breath taken freely
and without fault.

If someday I must describe
these times, what will I say? About
what created me, my nagging unease and crazy desire
that this unease will never be abandoned. But maybe
I can say this more simply: I’ll mention
the nightly tramps I made through the city, everything
I felt at the time. Someday the gift
of naming will come. Already understanding the meaning,
I will recall these last few days—the newspapers
voicing the latest triumphs of crime and madness, no one
realizing the stories pertain to them. Or maybe
I will select one single event—torn
out from the others, easy to catch because it is dead.
Perhaps better I keep silent. Mention only
how very, very much I was afraid
that a future would come when no one
would be by my side, would hear me
as I confided: “You know, don’t you,
how in those days
I was very much afraid.”

Glimpsed in passing from a train,
 this foggy evening, the gray band of smoke
 hanging motionless above the field, the wet
 blackness of the earth, the sun
 almost set. Faraway, on the fading disk
 around me, are two small specks, two women
 in dark head scarves, maybe returning from church. Maybe
 one says something, tells some ordinary history,
 maybe a sinful love—her words
 so extraordinary and simple. But from them
 the whole story gets created
 from the very beginning. So remember this
 and keep it with you forever. The sun, the plowed earth,
 women, love, evening, these few words
 good for any beginning. Remember—
 tomorrow we are likely
 to be somewhere else entirely.

A December evening full of noise, colorful lights.
 On the Market Square music, voices. On my glove the small star
 of a snowflake burns out. An entire world melting
 into a froth of dirty water underneath my hot breath. My breath
 fertile as it is destructive. I watch its white cloud
 blossom from my mouth. The sign
 I am alive. I watch the same clouds, the same sign of life,
 come from the people's mouths around me. A pact
 which we share between us.

Late at night I take
 the same path home. Underneath the fresh snow the Market
 looks alien and cold. There is no one out. No trail
 beaten through the snow. The squeak beneath my boots
 is the only sign of life. My life, no one else's.
 Then suddenly I feel it. Someone is looking
 on this snowy star we call the earth, a star
 surrounded by the warm cloud of human breath. And I know
 for a moment he must be holding his breath. A moment —
 the entire time we know.

Coming from their mouths, these words
are calm and strong. But only when the time has come
to say them. They will say *no*, they will say *enough*.
They will say the words *disgrace* and *truth*. These words
will not be comical or banal
when said by these tight-lipped men
who feel the need to speak up
at no other time. The women will listen in silence,
hands suddenly stopped in their work,
the children at that moment
will understand everything. And
that moment is now. There are silent women,
their arms helplessly lowered. There are children
who are no longer in the dark. There are words
which demand a mouth—when derision
is the only thing we hear.

Bronisław Maj, translated by Daniel Bourne

Bronisław Maj, born in Łódź in 1953, teaches in the Department of Polish Philology at Jagiellonian University in Kraków. He has also published *Album rodzinny (Family Album)* from the underground press in 1986 and an officially-published collection, *Zmęczenie (Weariness)*, also 1986. In 1984 he received the Kościelski Literary Prize from the Geneva-based Kościelski Foundation, awarded annually in recognition of outstanding young Polish writers, and in 1983 he received the Sęp-Szarpiński Prize for younger poets, a prestigious prize awarded in Poland. Maj is the editor/director of *Na Głos (Out Loud)*, a literary series taking place every month in Kraków under the protection of the local Organization of Catholic Intellectuals. These readings for the past several years have represented one of the "legal" literary forums available to the many Polish writers who have chosen not to belong to the government-controlled Polish Writers Union, including Zbigniew Herbert, Wisława Szymborska, Tomasz Jastrun, and many others.

SEVEN SKETCHES FROM THE TAO

1. Reclining Nude

Like the Chinese masters I wish to write a soundless poem
because I am too hurt to speak.
Dipping my brush in paint I can be Wang Wei,
who is yellow dust.
Your naked body quickly appears,
flesh glistening.
It is really there.
Your tits sag and you are heavy
because I want the dust of the world to be in my art.
Anyone can paint a pretty girl.

2. The Writing Lesson

Drunk on heavy wine Mei Yao-ch'en tells me,
"In writing poetry, there is no past or present;
The only thing is to be calm and simple."
We are in his garden at dawn.
The light the color of a plum blossom.
"Here, I will show you." He plunges his brush
Into his stomach, Samurai fashion,
And takes out two poems.
They are pretty good.
But I am not ready to write like that.

3. Squirrel in Winter Branches

I observe a squirrel in a tree out my window.
I can make out each stalk of curled tail fur
in winter-brittle sunlight.
The squirrel is gobbling down a chunk of snow,
held in both forepaws.
Pretty soon, I do not know if I am the squirrel
or if the squirrel is me.
But the chunk of snow is delicious,
so wet and cold.

4. The Seven-Chambered Weapon

I load my revolver with three mountains,
An ocean, a blizzard, and one chamber
For each of your breasts.
Then fire them all into my head.

5. The Floating World

I paint an epic on a plum blossom.
Then toss the thing in a mountain spring.
The paint dissolves into an ocean.
The blossom sticks to the breast of a bathing girl,
creating an extra nipple.
I happen to make love with her that night
in the floating world,
The plum blossom dissolving in my mouth.

6. Death Painting

I pick up my brush heavy in cadmium white
because it already contains
the landscape of a mountain in a blizzard
with a fat monk
making deep footsteps in the snow.

7. In Another Life I Know I Was a Fisherman

I look at a woodcut of a fisherman in night snow.
I do not know the artist's name. But
I can see where Van Gogh got lots of his ideas.
The snow looks a little like his stars at Arles.
Snow covered boats like the ones he painted in sunlight
are moored to a dock.
By the dock looms a bulky house with orange light
in the windows.
I know that is where the fisherman lives.
No longer with a chip on my shoulder,
I return to that house in the fisherman's body.
His wife greets me. The rice dinner is warm and delicious.
It feels good not to be smart, but know only about
rivers and fish.
We make love in silence and fall asleep until
one of our children wakes us with a bout of coughing.

Elliot Richman

SEPTEMBER MORN

To the boy in the barber chair
in his grandfather's basement,
the 1920's Harlowe-blonde nude
posed on a rock in a pool
in front of a calendar-blue sky,
one arm stretched coyly forward as though to lift
the swallowtail perched on it,
is a fairy. Where are the wings? The heading says
"September Morn." Her right leg bends to her left

to hide the red-gold delta.
Men, he-men, want to see that.
The boy (is he ten? eleven? twelve?)
is still free of centerfold
interests. His gaze slides like a cat's
toward anything colorful: syrups on the shelf,
the reds and ambers and greens
(a street-light blend) of Wildroot and Lucky Tiger.
His ears lap up his grandfather's gentle laugh;

he nuzzles the aromas
of witch hazel and bay rum
over fresh laundry and Bulldog bleach,
home-made elderberry wine.
We want to hold the hours we squirmed through,
not in the mind but in the hand, feel the gnarls
worn smooth, unreasonable
demand, but human. We want to see the light
glint dully on the fresh-shorn, dark, once-golden curls.

BOOKS IN BRIEF

Beauty without End?

Historians of poetry in our century will surely find a correlation between literary theory and poetry written in awareness of that theory. Following such new-critical texts as I.A. Richards' *Practical Criticism*, we had some decades of tight, ironic, polished, sharply-closed poems, poems that attracted our colored pencils. Without trapping myself in the chicken/egg argument, and without presuming to define today's influential critical theories, I would like to suggest that we are beginning to see poems that satisfy the theories of our contemporary critics. If Jorie Graham did not exist, the deconstructionists would have had to invent her. Begin with the title of her latest book, *The End of Beauty* (N.Y.: Ecco, 1987, 99 pp., \$16.50 hardbound). Is the "End" the *telos*? or the closure? or the absolute termination? The title of one poem, "What the End Is For," suggests how playfully and noncommittally Graham uses the word. *Beauty* is a similarly slippery word; for Graham it tends to be *a beauty*, which has a *shape*, a *plot*, implying a closure. Aristotle has taught us to talk about this sort of beauty. But the poet's aim (*telos*) in these poems is to swerve away from that closure, or to prolong the present so as to avoid reaching an end. I can imagine arguments about the meaning of Graham's words, the meaning of Graham's poems, while they slither out of the academic net.

Jorie Graham commands attention, whether or not one is concerned with the theories of language and art, because she is one of a small number (I don't say group) of poets today who have absolutely distinctive voices. Some of her distinguishing devices are idiosyncratic, even gimmicky, but all, I think, express her individual intellectual and emotional stance. The first device one notices, because it is unique to her, is the substitution of word-length dashes for words. I tend to read "something-or-other" or "someplace-or-other" into the dash, taking it as a way of abstracting to the generic (as in her use of "x" and "y"). Peter Stitt, writing in the Winter 1987 *Georgia Review*, sees the dashes as an invitation to reader-response criticism (Dear reader, do your own thing). Helen Vendler, in the 27 July 1987 *New Yorker*, reads the dash as a sign for "a concept not yet

conceivable." Well, not in "There is a ritual silver bowl/ found at _____ in a bog," but perhaps in this:

In the Tabernacle the veil hangs which is (choose one):
the dress dividing us from _____; the sky; the real,
through which the x ascends

Another distinctive device in these poems is frequent parentheses, suggesting asides to a persona in the poem, sometimes to the reader, a literary allusion, a *sotto voce* for instance, or a shift of tone: "and here the one (half-cup of?) breath being exchanged by the two bodies." I particularly enjoy these parentheses, which create the illusion that I am hearing the poet speak the poem to a live audience.

A third distinction is Graham's self-reflexiveness, that tilts the poem to reveal the poet at work at her invention — as Jane Austen does at the end of *Northanger Abbey*. A fourth, similarly evident in the quotations I have chosen here, is a recurring gesture toward abstraction, through the diction ("their white openmindedness"), the punctuation dashes and the verbal dashes, the *x*'s and *y*'s, the row of dots (*period* is too finite a word) trailing off into silence.

A fifth distinction of Graham's style (*le style, c'est la femme même*) is her heavy use of the lyrical device of iteration. Sometimes it is of a single word or phrase, where it often has the effect of raising the emotional temperature: "shine, shine," "meet me, meet me," "No No," "yes—yes—." There is a great deal of syntactic iteration, sometimes with the effect of incremental repetition. In a poem like "The Lovers" the repetitions—verbal, phrasal, and clausal—tie the entire poem into a lyric web tight enough to engage the most "new-critical" formalist. Consider:

Draw, draw the curtain now.
You there in your seat, you there.
Here is the glance, between them, quick, the burning.
Here is the glance afloat—on the back of what, dear
nothingness?
Here it is, here—

How essential this pattern is to the heart of the poem becomes clear four lines further:

The look, the look finally free of the anything looked-for,
the hurry finally coming unstuck of the hurrying.

Here the reader is invited into a process of abstraction that is almost Hindu in its desirelessness. It is this continuing present, rigorously

isolated from the past and the future (“What the vista has fed into. What it wants to grow out of, creeping, succulent”) that represents the “*here*, the end of beauty, the present.” The angel of this moment is “a stalk, rootfree, blossomfree.” In “The Lovers” which for me represents the heart of the book, I understand the dialectic which informs most of Graham’s poems (an internalized dialectic without dialogue) as a tension between a diachronic, process-driven Nature and a time-and-space-defeating human state.

As in the work of Ammons and Ashbery, the syntax and structure of Graham’s poem simulate the motion of the poet’s mental life, so that one of the splendors for the reader is the privilege of sharing in the action of an extraordinarily perceptive intelligence. Geoffrey Hartman, in *Beyond Formalism*, has said that to “explore the transition from self-consciousness to imagination and to achieve that transition while exploring it (and so to prove it still possible) is the Romantic purpose I find most crucial” (p. 307). Think of Coleridge’s “Dejection” ode or Keats’ “Ode to a Nightingale.” Then read Graham’s “To the Reader.” I think you will find that the achievement of high Romantic purpose is still possible.

Strangely, the poem I care the most for in this volume is the one where I sense the most tension between what the poem is saying and what it is doing. This is the final poem in the book, “Imperialism,” a title that, incidentally, forces the reader to consider a political level only hinted at in other poems. It is a poem “about” possession (represented in some earlier poems by marriage). In their style, many of the earlier poems manage to elude clarity, through their silences, blanks, ambiguities, vaguenesses, abstraction, and surreal juxtapositions. But this poem is, ironically, about three synchronous struggles for clarity—a clarity which it achieves brilliantly in its structure, three nesting Chinese boxes. The outer box is an exquisite description of the movement of the speaker’s shadow as she moves down a dusty road: “I can see its sleeve flutter from torn to whole and back/ in a flash.” This narrative modulates into a question:

What I want to know, dear are-you-there,
is what it *is*, this life a shadow and a dust-road have,
the shape constantly laying herself down over the sparkling
dust
she cannot own—
What can they touch of one another, and what is it for

this marriage, this life of Look, here's a body, now here's
 a body, now here,
 here

The second box is a meditation on a conversation with an other. Every gesture betrays tension—a straining to “keep the thing clear.” They “sat in the one world” and allowed the old hag reality to seep into them, and they granted the old hag her reality by the “one deep-driven nail of point-of-view.” As a result of this intense self-consciousness the speaker is unable to articulate to the other the whole story she needs to tell: the subject of the third box, the story that will dissolve the outer boxes in its light. (This is the structure of another horror story, *Frankenstein*, where the monster's story finally blazes out through the two framework-narratives that have existed to enable it.) The central story in “Imperialism” is very explicit in its time and place and very concrete in its details. The speaker has been taken at the age of about nine by her mother, who wants her to “*know the world*,” to observe the crowds and the burning ghats and even enter the water of the Ganges at Calcutta. Later at the hotel the child becomes hysterical and needs a shot to calm her down. The mother “tried to hold me, I'm sure, //making it worse,/since her body (in particular) was/ no longer relevant.” At the end of the poem (and the end of the volume) the narrator has freed herself from her mother, in a hallucinatory passage that merges the mother into a kind of whirling fan of arms—a kind of possessive Kali—whose body becomes

a line

brought round, all the way round, reader, a plot, a
 shape, one of the finished things, one of the

beauties (hear it click shut?) a thing
 completely narrowed down to love—all arms, all arms
 extended in the
 pulsing sticky heat, fan on, overhead on, all
 arms no face at all dear god, all arms—

Thus a poem which itself has a plot, a shape, a closure (despite the dash that characteristically ends the poem) rejects clearly and emphatically the “finished things,” the “*beauties*,” the narrowing perspective of love, the imperialism of arms, of bodies, (of marriage), of anything that goes click and closes off the possibilities of the fluid

imagination. For the poet's alternative—the timeless unending present, the space generalized to field—there is in "Imperialism" a haunting objective correlative: the image of a man opening and shutting a white umbrella in the silty river, "*— first near the surface then underwater—.*"

I urge you dear Reader ("dear are-you-there") to buy, beg, or borrow this volume and see for yourself.

A.R. Ammons' *Sumerian Vistas* (N.Y.: Norton, 1987, 128 pp., \$15.95 cloth, \$7.95 paper) is a three-course banquet. The first is "The Ridge Farm," a sequence of fifty-one poems, some of sharp, mindful observation, others about "nature poetry," nature itself, and the composition of poems. The movement of mind here, sauntering, savoring, speculating on "mutability and muck," cherishing both the "unintentionality" of the natural world and the "beautiful/high suasions of language," recalls the mental explorations of Thoreau. Ammons' second section is twenty-nine crisp little poems on "Tombstones," not at all elegiac, but sharp as granite chips, their crystals catching the light of stars. Finally is a section of fifty-four short poems, under the heading "Motions' Holdings." I especially value the witty dialogue in "Dominion," the teasing dance of "Entrance-ways," and the wry drama of "Remembering Old Caves."

Anyone interested in Ammons will want to procure the Ammons issue of *Pembroke Magazine* (#18, 1986, 288 pp., available for \$3. from Box 60, Pembroke State University, Pembroke NC 28372), containing essays on the poet and his works, mostly by people who have known him personally, interviews, twenty-nine poems by Ammons himself, and a great many poems written for him by friends, former students, and other admirers. The editors deserve congratulation and gratitude for assembling so rich and diverse a collection. (It may seem ungrateful to mention it, but the proofreading is abominable.)

Another little magazine with a valuable special section is *Verse* (November 1987, \$3., from Henry Hart, Dept. of English, College of William and Mary, Williamsburg VA 23185, or £1.50 from Robert Crawford, Dept. of English Literature, University of Glasgow, Glasgow G12, 8QQ, Scotland). The November issue has thirty-eight pages on Elizabeth Bishop, "Essays and Recollections," guest-edited by Ashley Brown. Contributors are Donald Stanford on Bishop's 1933-34 letters, Anthony Hecht on "Wading at Wellfleet," William H. Pritchard on Bishop and Jarrell, Brett Candlish Miller on Bishop and Pound, Ashley Brown on the poet's relationship with Carlos Drummond de Andrade, and tributes by Dana Gioia and Howard Moss.

A critical article that I find wonderfully illuminating is Clayton Eshleman's review of Allen Ginsberg's *Collected Poems 1947-1980* in *The Ohio Review* (#40, 1988, \$4.25, from Ellis Hall, Ohio University, Athens OH 45701). This is an absolutely exemplary review, frank in its approach to the poet and his work, candid in its criticism of the flaccid, self-indulgent poems, and completely convincing when he makes a case for the power of Ginsberg's best work. Really discriminating critics are rare; Eshleman joins discrimination to authority. And he helpfully lists the twenty-five poems he would like to see in a mass-market paperback "Selected Poems." Some publisher should certainly take up his suggestions.

Historical Necessities

In a nation where life and liberty are taken for granted, the pursuit or happiness has become a major endeavor — and the success or (more often) failure of that pursuit has become a primary subject of much contemporary poetry. This may explain the dearth of political poetry in this country. For Dante, Milton, and Shelley there was no way to separate the political from the other elements of a poet's life. And outside the comfortable West today, in nations where poetry really affects the lives of the people, political poetry in the great tradition still appears. Stanislaw Baranczak has explained that "the circumstances of poets in countries like Poland are such that actually any poem that defends the individual's right to live and think independently is a political statement. I mean the pressures of collectivity and some

superimposed norms are so strong that virtually every avenue of resistance is closed. Even writing on, say, flowers or love can be — doesn't necessarily have to be, but it can be — a political gesture, if it's written in the spirit of defending your right to be independent. Just pure description, if it describes the world faithfully, is a kind of political act" (*APR*, September/October 1986). It is in this light that one must read the poems of Bronisław Maj in this issue.

I came to Maj after reading two volumes by his great compatriot one generation older — **Zbigniew Herbert** — and so was prepared for the quietness of the strength in these poems. One is a reprint of Herbert's 1968 *Selected Poems*, translated by Czesław Miłosz and Peter Dale Scott, (N.Y.: Ecco Press, 1986, 138 pp., \$7.50 paper); the other is his *Report from the Besieged City and Other Poems*, translated by John and Bogdana Carpenter (N.Y.: Ecco Press, 1986, 82 pp., \$8.50 paper). Some of the early poems were written during the Nazi occupation, when Herbert was a member of the underground resistance. On first reading they appear reserved and "classical." Many of the subjects are ostensibly from historical, mythological, and biblical sources. The tone is philosophical, intellectual, restrained. The Carpenters in their introduction quote the poet explaining that he "had words in abundance to express my rebellion and protest. I might have written something of this sort: 'O you cursed, damned people, so-and-sos, you kill innocent people, wait and a just punishment will fall on you.' I didn't say this because I wanted to bestow a broader dimension on the specific, individual, experienced situation, or rather, to show its deeper, general human perspectives." Rereading the early poems I began to savor the richness of the life in them — the use of history, the legendary, the literary, with irony, sometimes with satire, with wisdom and with passion, and always without self-pity or self-aggrandizement. "The Parable of the Russian Émigrés" ends:

This parable is told by Nicholas
 who understands historical necessities
 in order to terrify me i.e. to convince me.

These lines could serve as epigraph to the works of Herbert.

His prose poem "The Hen" begins: "The hen is the best example of what living constantly with humans leads to," and ends: "And in addition, that parody of song, throat-slashed supplications over a thing

unutterably comic: a round, white, maculated egg. // The hen brings to mind certain poets." Occasionally these poems are politically explicit, as in "Our Fear," a fear which does not "wear a night shirt" or "lift a casket lid," but

is a scrap of paper
found in a pocket
'warn Wójcik
the place on Długa Street is hot.'

The poems in *Report from the Besieged City* are longer, more complex, and consequently harder to excerpt. Many are in the persona of the philosophical observer Mr. Cogito. They carry farther the integrity of the individual witness, the authority of the one who was there, who did not blink, the gentle ironic voice, speaking in allusion and metaphor, but speaking accurately and poignantly, with passion but without sentimentality. I quote one short poem, "Photograph," to illustrate the power of the explicit as well as the eloquence of what is not said:

This boy motionless as an arrow of Eleata
a boy amidst high grass has nothing in common with me
except a date of birth the papillary line

my father took this picture before the second Persian war
from the clouds and foliage I conclude it was August
the birds the crickets rang the smell of corn smell of a full moon

below the river called Hipanis on Roman maps
a watershed and nearby thunder advising them to take shelter
with the Greeks
their colonies on the sea weren't too far

the boy smiles trustingly the only shadow he knows
is the shadow of a straw hat shadow of a pine tree shadow of
the house
and if there is a glow it is the glow of sunset

little one my Isaac bend your head
it is only an instant of pain then you will be
whatever you want — a swallow lily of the field

so I must shed your blood my little one
for you to remain innocent in the summer lightning
safe forever like an insect in amber
beautiful as a cathedral of fern preserved in coal

Strong on its own, in the context of Herbert's other work this poem is devastating.

M.K.S.